

## **“GRACE CAN!”**

### ***A Vision for Growing in the Love and Life of Jesus Christ***

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**© January 2014**

#### **Preamble:**

The bottom-line for Valley Church is that we desire to be a body of believers who are growing “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Implied in the word “grow” is the idea that every believer be learning to walk by the Spirit as a disciple of Jesus in the grace of His New Covenant. Our newly refreshed vision statement is one that I am thrilled to introduce for several reasons:

For starters, it is a vision that every single member of Valley Church, young and old alike, can easily put to memory. It is only *two words long*, and yet it encompasses the essence of what we believe about the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it speaks to the common but unfounded “concern” of some who are new or resistant to grace-based teaching and living. That concern is one that Paul dealt with soundly in Romans 5:20-6:14. In essence, it is the fear that living by grace will somehow lead people toward a life of sin or spiritual apathy. As will be shown in the pages that follow, nothing could be further from the truth. Simply put, “*Grace Can*” implies action...not apathy.

Thirdly, it distinguishes our intentional focus on the power of grace from the temptation to rely upon lesser powers and motivations in our quest to walk with God. In essence, this concise vision statement reminds us that...

- Whereas Law can show us God's holiness but can never empower us to live holy lives, *GRACE CAN!*
- Whereas Law can point out where we fall short but can never produce change in our hearts, *GRACE CAN!*
- Whereas Law can create feelings of failure but can never enable success, *GRACE CAN!*
- Whereas Law can mandate certain behaviors but cannot give us the desire to walk in righteousness, *GRACE CAN!*
- Whereas Law can command us to love God and neighbor but can never inspire us to do so willingly, *GRACE CAN!*
- Whereas Law can reform our behaviors but cannot transform our hearts, *GRACE CAN!*

Essentially, we know that the law is good and holy, but also that it lacks the power to *enable* us to perform that which it demands of us. We believe God designed it this way on purpose. This is why Scripture tells us that the Law has two basic functions: 1) to show humans our guilt before a holy God by stopping our excuses, minimizations and justifications of sin, and 2) to point humans to our need for salvation and freedom from that guilt and sin, which can only be received by grace through faith in Christ (Romans 3:19-26; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Once we have heard the gospel and received Christ on the basis of grace through faith, we have become children of God (John 1:12) and we no longer have need of the Law (see scriptures below). When the Law has finished its brief but powerful work in our spiritual journey, it becomes "obsolete" (Hebrews 8:13) because it cannot provide the basis for our new life in Christ...but GRACE CAN! Consider the following realities about law-based living for a better understanding of why we seek to avoid law-based mixture in our teaching and understanding of discipleship:

- The Law is for the *unrighteous* – not the righteous (1 Tim. 1:8-10)
- The Law cannot justify a person (Gal. 2:16)
- The Law cannot impart life (Gal. 3:21)
- Now one will ever keep the Law (Matt. 5:21-29; James 2:10)
- The Law actually arouses more sin (Rom. 7:5,8; compare with 6:14; 1 Cor. 15:56)
- Jesus already completely fulfilled the requirements of the Law for us (Gal. 4:4-5; Matt. 5:17-18; Rom. 8:3-4)
- Law and faith do not mix (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:24-25; 5:18)
- Those who are in Christ have died to the Law (Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 2:19)
- We are not to look to the Law as a source of sanctification (Gal. 3:1-3; 5:2-4)
- Grace (not Law) teaches us to live godly lives (Tit. 2:11-14; 2 Cor. 12:9)

Based upon these realities, we offer the following overview of what grace-based discipleship looks like under the blessings of the New Covenant life...

### **Introductory Thoughts:**

At Valley Church we desire to see every believer in Jesus Christ growing toward spiritual maturity in everyday life. This process is commonly referred to as "discipleship" and is part of a process that the New Testament calls *sanctification* (living a life that is "set apart" for the Person and purposes of God).

In the classic sense, to be a "disciple" is to be a *learner* or *apprentice* of someone else. In ancient Judaism, a disciple would become a student of a particular rabbi (teacher), and would embark upon a journey of trying to conform his life to the qualities and characteristics of that particular rabbi. Discipleship under the Old Covenant required a willingness to discipline oneself to "become more like the teacher" in whatever sacrificial ways might be required.

Many approach Christian discipleship in a similar manner. They read passages in the Gospels about "denying" oneself, "taking up one's cross" and "following Jesus" – or commands to "be imitators of Christ" – and they assume that this implies a costly, works-focused commitment to rigid spiritual discipline, morbid introspection and self-denial.

To be sure, there are times when maturing as a believer may involve discomfort and sacrifice, but at Valley Church we believe that the discipleship process under the New Covenant is designed by God to be joyous, liberating and full of real freedom. As we attempt to articulate our views about New Covenant discipleship, we will further unpack and illustrate, where possible, how and why discipleship is different under the New Covenant than it was under the Old.

### **A New Paradigm:**

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, the Bible says that He took a cup of wine and used it as a symbol to announce the arrival of the New Covenant. This New Covenant had been promised for centuries through prophets such as Jeremiah<sup>i</sup> and Ezekiel<sup>ii</sup> - given to the nation of Israel but also to include Gentiles as its additional beneficiaries<sup>iii</sup>.

After this inaugural announcement by Jesus, He explained to His disciples that a new kind of relationship with the Holy Spirit would soon begin to manifest<sup>iv</sup>. After this, He apparently pointed them to a nearby vineyard and began to illustrate what spiritual growth and life under this New Covenant would look like.

Jesus began to teach them that the relationship His disciples would enjoy under the New Covenant would be analogous to the relationship between the grapevines and their branches that were so abundant in the vineyards of that day. Jesus commanded them to abide in Him and said to them, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man abides in me and I abide in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*<sup>v</sup>

Jesus' illustration of the Vine and the branches cannot be overemphasized in our understanding of what grace-based, New Covenant discipleship looks like. Clearly, Jesus was introducing a brand new paradigm for understanding the power, process and product of spiritual growth in a believer's life.

Under the Old Covenant, the best a rabbi could offer his disciples was to say "follow me" and then try to mentor the student in his way of life. In other words, "Fix your eyes closely on the way that I live and operate, and then try your best to copy me." But in John 15, Jesus is now introducing His disciples to something far greater! In effect, He is re-wiring the system so that spiritual growth and maturity are no longer about the disciple striving to "live like Jesus." Instead, the focus is upon Jesus living *through* the disciple. This is of critical importance when understanding the difference between works-based and grace-based discipleship, since the power, process and product is focused on Jesus rather than the disciple. Let's think through this more closely for a moment...

**New Power** – Most Christians have been rightly taught that they are now indwelt by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and therefore have a new source of power by which to live from. However, many believers do not properly understand and embrace the reality of their new *nature* in Christ. We will develop this more later, but suffice it to say that it is inaccurate to believe that we as Christians possess a *dual-nature* within us.

Many of us have been led to assume that while something new has occurred within us, we still are simultaneously dragging around our old, sinful nature. Only when we embrace the truth about our single, new nature in Christ will we learn to live from the source of God's power in its fullness. In relation to Jesus' illustration, a branch shares exactly the same DNA as the vine. It is not a separate entity with a different "nature" – but is in perfect union with the vine itself and wholly united in its core essence with the vine.

**New Process** – Rather than striving to “become more like the teacher”, New Covenant discipleship affirms that at the core of our new nature, we are already “like the Teacher.” We are united with Jesus, inseparably connected to His being and sharing wholly in the same “spiritual DNA” that Jesus has. Our spirit has been joined with His Spirit and we are “one with Him.”<sup>vi</sup> In essence, grace-based discipleship is about “*becoming in practice what we already are in personhood.*”

A good illustration from nature is that of the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. If a scientist were to examine one DNA sample from a caterpillar and then another DNA sample from the butterfly it later becomes, the DNA would prove to be identical. Internally, the caterpillar is equipped *from birth* with all of the qualities and tools necessary to become a butterfly. That process from crawling to cocooning to cruising through the air is a natural process that happens by divine design.

In becoming a butterfly the caterpillar does not become an essentially different creature from what it once was. Rather, over time it manifests outwardly what it was designed to be inwardly from the moment it first existed. Whereas law-based discipleship tends to look more like trying to get one species to evolve into another through rules, regulations and rituals – grace-based discipleship is about understanding who we *already* truly are at the core and “abiding” in that reality through the ups and downs of life, trusting Jesus to develop our external into what is already true of our internal.

**New Product** – As a branch abides in the vine, it bears fruit. At Valley we think of spiritual maturity in terms of fruit-bearing rather than rule-keeping. Paul said that the fruit of God's Spirit in us is “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*”<sup>vii</sup>

It is not the job or function of the branch to produce fruit. The branch simply bears the fruit that is produced as the nourishing sap of the vine flows in and through it. Never does Jesus command His disciples to “produce” fruit. The command is to “abide in Me” – and the promise is that as the disciple abides in Christ, he or she can trust that the Vine will produce fruit in and through them to bear.

Simply put, the “product” we desire for God to manifest in our church is believers who are bearing *much fruit* (love, joy, peace, etc...) as they learn to continually “abide” in Christ. And this brings us to the next question: *What does it mean to abide in Christ?*

### **Abiding in the Vine:**

To “abide” literally means to “live restfully or securely” and to “make oneself at home in.” When Jesus was pointing the common folks to the new way of life He would offer them under the New Covenant, He said it this way:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is *light*.<sup>viii</sup>

As amazing as this invitation truly is, far too many believers seem to experience more than their share of “unrest” and “heaviness” in their Christian experience. This is problematic because it means one of two things: Either Jesus didn’t know what He was talking about when He made this offer – or many Christians are failing to come *to Him* in the way that He intended.

Many people seem to enjoy the thought of having a seemingly clear-cut pathway toward spiritual maturity, complete with multiple steps, lofty goals and various disciplines to abide by. While not all of those things are necessarily bad in and of themselves, often there is a tendency to put the focus on formulas and processes rather than on Jesus.

For example, when someone is desiring to “grow” in a particular area – perhaps in gaining victory over a sinful attitude or behavior – the natural tendency is to say, “*Just show me what I have to ‘do’ in order to experience victory over this or that thing.*” This attitude is then carried into what becomes a sincere but largely fruitless search of finding the right book, program, group, etc. in order to assist them in “becoming a better Christian.”

For many, the idea of abiding/resting in Jesus alone seems too simplistic, too easy or too good to be true. Surely the complex nature of our struggles requires more than some passive notion of “learning to relax,” they say. Yet, the Book of Hebrews is one of many New Testament letters in which Jesus’ call to abide is emphasized strongly. In that book, the author is addressing the need that each believer has to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” so that we can run the race well in our journey with God.<sup>ix</sup>

Later in the chapter the author further discusses the reality of our struggle against sin and our call to endure hardship. But before any of that he sets up the path of victory in a profoundly simple way. The author does not give us an elaborate multi-point plan or multiple-step process. Instead he says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”<sup>x</sup>

It’s not that there is a total absence of wisdom in some of the points and steps that well-meaning ministries have structured in order to help people grow. It’s just that these kinds of things only really work in so far as they help direct our gaze toward Jesus – who *alone* is the author and perfecter of our faith.

In essence, New Covenant discipleship is not about us learning to become something we are not. Rather, it is about increasing our capacity to demonstrate outwardly that which is *already true* about us inwardly because Jesus has given us a new spirit and a new nature. Far from a “self-help program” or multi-step process – Christian discipleship is about learning to allow the Lord Jesus to live the otherwise impossible Christian life *through* us, uniquely accented by our individual gifts, personalities and diversity.

Abiding in Christ is another way to say what Brother Lawrence articulated in his coining of the phrase “practicing the presence of God.” It involves training our minds to be conscious of God’s presence in the midst of life’s highs and lows, events and routines.

The late Brennan Manning described this life of discipleship as living in the power of the “present risenness of Christ.”<sup>xi</sup>

Because abiding is a command, it is also a choice. It is entirely possible for a legitimate, born-again believer to choose *not* to consciously abide, *not* to fix our eyes upon Jesus, and as a result...*not* bear abundant fruit.<sup>xii</sup> For this kind of believer, their caterpillar DNA remains the same as that of the butterfly believer, but their feet never leave the ground because they remain caught in a web of lies from the world, the flesh and the devil.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Renewal of the Mind**

At the beginning of his section on discipleship and fruit-bearing written to the ancient Roman believers, Paul exhorts them not to “conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”<sup>xiv</sup>

We understand from Scripture that we are three-part beings, consisting of body, soul and spirit.<sup>xv</sup> We understand our body to be that corporeal, physical element of our being. We understand our spirit to be a facet of our non-corporeal being – the innermost part of our composition which is now brand new, has been made the righteousness of God and is in union with the Spirit of Christ Himself.<sup>xvi</sup> At the moment we receive Christ through believing the gospel,<sup>xvii</sup> our old, flawed human spirit that we inherited from Adam is “crucified with Christ.”<sup>xviii</sup> Not only is there a crucifixion of our old spirit that occurs, but also the creation of a brand new spirit by the power of our joint resurrection with Him.<sup>xix</sup>

So here is the overall picture of our condition as New Covenant believers: At the moment of salvation by grace through faith, our spirit becomes completely new and righteous.<sup>xx</sup> Our bodies still await their redemption into immortality.<sup>xxi</sup> But there is a *third* aspect of our existence known as the *soul* from the Greek word *psyche*. In essence, our soul is our psychological component consisting essentially of our mind, will and emotions.

Our minds are different than our brains. Whereas our brains are the complex physical organs within our skulls, our minds are the metaphysical seat of our thought-life and where our essential beliefs are formed. Our thoughts and beliefs are incredibly important because they greatly impact the state of our emotions and can affect our volition as well.

There is much teaching in the New Testament about the power of a transformed mind. When Paul told the Romans to be *transformed* by the renewing of our minds, the word “transformed” is literally *metamorphosis* – the exact word we use to describe the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly in nature.

If we are going to “become in practice what we already are in personhood,” our journey must be squarely based upon accurately believing what God has said about our new nature in Christ. Wrong beliefs lead to wrong thoughts. Wrong thoughts lead to negative emotions. Negative emotions lead to a weakened will. And a weakened will leads to sinful behavior. This is why the renewing of our minds is so critical to the process of “abiding in Christ.”

To abide or rest in Christ is to “come to Him” and “learn from Him” at His invitation. Many models for discipleship are based upon the Old Covenant paradigm of “trying our best to behave more like our Rabbi (Jesus) would.” But that is not the basis for Christian discipleship. When Jesus invited us to come to Him and learn from Him, He wanted us to take special note of His relationship to the Father. When we focus on the way Jesus behaved – as though that were the major point – rather than focusing on the way Jesus *abided* in the Father, we turn discipleship into a merit-focused, works-based system of trying to become something different than what we fundamentally believe we are.

For example, most Christians are taught (implicitly if not explicitly) to see themselves as “sinners saved by grace” – complete with images of an unworthy beggar longing for a few scraps from the Master’s table. And while it is theologically true that all sinners are indeed saved only by grace, it is equally true that the moment a person trusts in Christ, he or she is no longer identified by sinfulness, but *sainthood*. In reality, the new creation is no longer a “sinner saved by grace” but a “saint who sometimes struggles with sin.” This is the clear and consistent teaching of the New Testament and we believe that apart from this theological under-pinning, real spiritual growth will be stunted at best, and prevented at worst.

The Bible says that we tend to become outwardly whatever it is that we believe about ourselves inwardly.<sup>xxii</sup> If a person sees themselves as a dirty, rotten sinner – then in the grand scheme of things, what is one more sin thrown on the pile? But on the other hand, if a person truly sees themselves as the righteousness of God – pure, holy and new at the core – this renewal of the mind has the power to bring about transformed living. Suddenly we begin to embrace the reality that sin no longer belongs in our life and we naturally begin to look more on the outside like the new creation God has made on the inside – resurrected, righteous children of God with a seat at the Master’s table rather than begging for scraps from it! This is where grace-based spiritual growth receives its power in distinction from law-based models attempting to mix law with grace.

### **Defining Spiritual Growth**

If our human spirits are now entirely “new creations” and are fitted for heaven’s glory from the moment we believe, then what do we mean by “spiritual growth”? As we alluded to earlier, this term that we throw around could more accurately be labeled “soul growth.”

As three-part (body/soul/spirit) beings, we experience battles in the soul (the realm of our mind, will and emotions). When we are confronted with the daily challenges of living in a sin-scarred world (through temptation, disappointment, frustration, fatigue, etc.) those confrontations are also opportunities to train our souls to reflect the righteous nature of our redeemed spirits – or to reflect the values of the world, the flesh and the devil.

The *world* refers to the humanistic world-system which prides itself in finding strength, security and significance apart from dependence upon God. The *devil*, of course, is the fallen angelic being who hates God and His people, and is always trying to distort, deny

or destroy the work of Jesus in the world through His people. The *world* and the *devil* are fairly well-defined in most churches and Christian circles. However, the *flesh* is often where it gets muddy.

Biblically, the word *flesh* can have two different primary meanings depending on context. The flesh can refer to our physical bodies, but it can also refer to something metaphysical. When the New Testament refers to the metaphysical idea of *flesh* it is referring to the basic appetites generated from old ways of thinking and acting that we have stored in the recesses of our minds. In essence, a fleshly appetite is any appetite that lures us in a direction of independence from rather than dependence upon God. As Dr. Andrew Farley rightly points out,

A study of the term “flesh” reveals that it's a way to *think* (Rom. 8:6) and a way to *walk* (Rom. 8:4 NASB) – it's the leftover programming we have from before salvation. This is why we need our minds renewed. We have fleshly thinking that needs reprogramming over time.

Before salvation, we had an intricate web of strategies for coping with life, dealing with pain, and getting what we wanted. But now we have a new way to think and a new source to draw from – the Spirit of God. If we fall back on the old way of thinking, it doesn't mean our old spirit has risen from the grave. No, it just means we're still getting our minds renewed.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Although our human spirit has been crucified and resurrected as a new creation with Christ, our soul (mind, will and emotions) is similar to a mirror that can reflect either what is spiritual or what is fleshly at any given time. So “spiritual growth” (or more accurately “soul growth”) is grounded first and foremost in learning more about who we *already* are by grace through faith in Christ.

In this process, we can begin to allow our thoughts and behaviors to reflect this reality more and more each day and season of our lives. Yes, we still struggle with old attitudes, old ways of coping and old paradigms that were programmed into us – but that's no longer the *real* us. That's the flesh. When we choose to walk in the flesh, it doesn't change the fact that our nature is new. It doesn't mean that we're no longer spiritually alive in Christ. It means that we're acting like someone we are not – which will never ultimately satisfy us.

Spiritual growth then, is really “soul growth.” Our spirits are mature, righteous and heaven-ready from the moment we receive Christ. But our psyche is in the process of being renewed day by day in the truth which Christ promised would set us free.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Grace-Based Motivations**

It is important to realize that “abiding in Christ” is not a static or passive way to live. Resting indeed takes some “work.” This is why the author of Hebrews says that we are to “struggle to enter into His rest.”<sup>xxv</sup>

What are some New Covenant motivations for walking by the Spirit rather than the flesh? We might assume that we are to walk by the Spirit because we want to “be



pleasing to God." We hear this kind of language all the time in Christian circles. The problem with that mentality is that it misunderstands a very critical reality about Christ's finished work on the cross. For many – even those who have been believers for a long time – it comes as a real newsflash. The newsflash is simply this: *Because of Jesus, we are already as pleasing to God as we will ever be – even on our very worst day behaviorally.* In the words of the Apostle Paul, we have "become the righteousness of God in Christ."<sup>xxvi</sup>

By Jesus Christ living the perfect life in our place and thus fulfilling the requirements of the law<sup>xxvii</sup> - every qualification required to be pleasing to God has been fully met in us as well!<sup>xxviii</sup> This miraculous declaration of righteousness and transfer of Christ's purity to us is part of the miraculous gospel of grace that we seek to faithfully declare and demonstrate at Valley. Because of this gift of righteousness by grace through faith, we have been set free from a law-based system of rules and regulations in favor of a grace-based system of walking by the Spirit.

Some will suggest that while the ancient civil and ceremonial laws of Moses have been fulfilled in Christ, believers are still required to live under what they call the "moral law" – which is commonly thought to be the Ten Commandments. However, as sincere and well-meaning as this idea may be, this is not what the New Testament teaches concerning followers of Christ.

For example, James says that the law is an "all-or-nothing" proposition. To violate *any* portion of the law in *any* way is to become a lawbreaker and thus, to live under its condemnation.<sup>xxix</sup> Paul told the Corinthians that the law of Moses is a "ministry of condemnation" that brings death and that this ministry was always intended by God to "fade away" when the ministry of the Spirit came under the New Covenant.<sup>xxx</sup> As Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary wrote,

Since law and grace are opposed to each other at every point, it is impossible for them to co-exist, either as the ground of acceptance before God or as the rule of life. Of necessity, therefore, the Scriptures of the New Testament...directly teach that the law is done away. Consequently, it is not in force in the present age in any sense whatsoever. This present nullification of law applies not only to the legal code of the Mosaic system and the law of the kingdom, but to every possible application of the principle of law.<sup>xxxi</sup>

As we've pointed out in the Preamble portion of this vision document, Paul further clarified that the two purposes for which God ultimately gave the law were to

- 1) show every person that they have violated God's standards, and
- 2) point us to our need for God's grace expressed through Jesus.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Once the law has accomplished these holy purposes in a person's life, bringing them to admit their need for Jesus, it has served its purpose and is no longer needed for Christian discipleship or as a format for being "pleasing" to God. Again, believers are now eternally pleasing to God, regardless of their performance – based upon the merit of Jesus Christ alone through His death, burial and resurrection.

Whenever people invite us to try and “balance” grace with law, we recognize that ironically, this is an invitation to a *greater* (not lesser) dominance of sin in our lives. Paul taught that the power of sin is the *law*<sup>xxxiii</sup> and that sin actually *gains* strength when we are living under law.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This means that the surest way to remain in bondage to sinful passions, addictions and life-dominating behaviors is to live under law rather than grace. This is the ironic but painful reality of every person who has ever attempted to live under law.

So if striving to live under any part of the Old Covenant law is essentially a waste of time and will never produce truly righteous works in our lives or make us more pleasing to God, then what *are* some of the motivations and empowerments we experience under the New Covenant life of grace?

First and foremost, we get to live in a *response of gratitude and joy* rather than obligation and indebtedness. The Bible says that we love because He first loved us.<sup>xxxv</sup> In other words, God is the initiator and we are the responders in this amazing grace-based relationship. God's kindness is what leads to repentance in our lives.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The more we experience the love of God, the more we love Him, others and ourselves rightly.

Another powerful motivation as we walk by the Spirit is the personal satisfaction we receive when we know that we are *living in a singleness of mind and heart*. Because of our new nature in Christ, we recognize that He has made us clean and holy vessels – and we therefore understand that we are made for so much *more* than the temporary pleasures and false promises of sin! When we live in accordance with our new nature in Christ, we are internally “in balance” and are not “double-minded” in our approach to life.

Finally, there is also the motivation of *avoiding earthly consequences*. We realize that even though we are eternally forgiven and made right with God through Jesus, there are still costly earthly consequences that can result from living to please the flesh rather than walking by the Spirit. Quite frankly, sin is unwise. It only ends up hurting us and others in ways that God does not want for us to needlessly encounter.

We are free from the law – and the beauty of that reality is that this also means we are free from the power of sin as well! Although we will never be totally free from sinful behavior – because we have the world and the flesh and the devil in this life to tempt us – our freedom means that we no longer *have* to sin!

Think about it. An unbeliever has no other choice but to sin – because their sin nature is still alive within them. Just like it is a dog's nature to bark and “mark its territory” – it is a sinner's nature to sin. Sinners have no real power over sin, but *saints* do! Our sin nature has been crucified with Christ! It is no longer our nature to sin, because our nature is now righteous from the core!

And the more we *abide – rest*, make our *home* in, settle into our life in Christ – the more we experience greater freedom from anything outside of Jesus that might seek to control us!

### **Becoming a New Covenant Disciple:**

And so we ask...what is the key to New Covenant discipleship? Is it hard work and striving in our power to become better-behaved individuals? Is it striving to tap into the power of positive thinking? Is it learning to "name and claim" whatever it is we somehow feel that we are lacking? Is it putting on our WWJD bracelets and trying our best to mimic what we think *He* would do in any given circumstance? NO!!!

It's all about ABIDING in Him – in who we are in Him and who He is in us! You see, this is the foundation of greater Christlikeness and all "spiritual growth"! This whole idea of being an "imitator of Christ" has become so misconstrued for so many! Many Christians think: "Okay....since Jesus was loving, I need to be more loving!" Good luck with that!.

Many Christians think: "Jesus acted this or that way, so I've got to figure out how to do that too!" NO! NO! NO! To imitate Jesus is not to get focused on trying to be more loving or to act more like you think Jesus would act. To imitate Christ is to learn to ABIDE – to REST – in Him in just the same fashion that HE rested in the Father!

Jesus was constantly saying things like...

- The Son of Man cannot do anything in and of himself.
- I only do what I see the Father doing.
- He is in me and I am in Him.
- As the Father has loved me, so I also love you

To imitate Jesus is to *abide* in Him for *everything* in the same way that He abided in His Father for everything! Now think specifically about how this applies to our everyday lives. There is a very serious move toward formulaic living in the body of Christ today that says: "If I just do these certain things, God will bless me..." or "If I avoid these certain areas, my life or my family or my business will flourish."

But the author of Hebrews says, "Struggle to enter into His rest." Now ask yourself this question: What if the toughest thing you will ever "do" is learn to fully, totally, and completely immerse yourself in His rest? What is Jesus doing right now? He is *seated* at the right hand of God. This is a picture of *rest* in the ancient mind. The arduous work of the ancient priesthood is now over! He has already done it all! The pressure to perform is *off*! You are completely and totally approved of by God! You are *in Him* and He is *in you*! Everything you truly need you already have in Christ. He has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. You are a partaker of the divine nature – and you have everything you need for life and godliness!<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **Discipleship B.A.S.I.C.S.:**

We recognize that Christian discipleship is not a "one-size-fits-all" experience. God is gracious and patient to work with each of His children to use and redeem their unique spiritual "SHAPE."<sup>xxxviii</sup> While we certainly expect a great deal of diversity in the spiritual growth of Christ's followers, we also desire to see the following basics evidenced in the lives of believers at Valley due to the power of God's grace at work within us:

**BELIEVE** in Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord

In other words, Valley's members trust Jesus alone for salvation as well as for power to live as a New Creation. As a member of a local Church, it is important first and foremost to have an assurance of membership in Christ's global, interdenominational, universal Church by grace alone through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Receiving Christ personally is the beginning of this new life in Christ we've been describing in this document.

Secondly, we desire that each member...

**AFFIRM** Valley's statement of faith

As members of a local church family, we want to strive for unity in the essentials. We are committed to reflecting the heart of Jesus by walking in grace and truth (John 1:14). That is why we want Valley's members to be maturing in their ability to hold passionately to Scriptural perspectives without being divisive in non-essential areas of doctrine.

For example, we believe emphatically that Jesus Christ will return one day to establish His kingdom on the earth. We don't all have to agree upon exactly how every single event will transpire and exactly what it will look like. The Bible is very clear on some matters pertaining to the return of Christ – and there are other matters that we must hold on to humbly without being divisive.

But make no mistake about it that we believe Jesus is coming for His church – perhaps one day very soon – and that in the meantime it is our honor and privilege to represent Him in increasing measure upon the earth until He does return!

There are many other examples. We allow for differences of opinion on certain issues pertaining to the use of spiritual gifts – and pertaining to roles in ministry – and pertaining to various social and political views.

But on matters of first importance – the kinds of matters highlighted in our statement of faith – we want all of our members to be able to say “Yes, I stand with my brothers and sisters on these important Scriptural issues...”

The next thing we would desire for our members is to...

**SERVE** in the ministries of Valley and our community according to their gifts

Valley's members are co-equal ministers and missionaries. Because we are ALL priests before God, the membership is no less important to the mission of the church than the vocational ministry staff. Organizational authority and accountability does not suggest spiritual hierarchy. There are diverse callings, gifts, ministries, and offices - but the same Spirit, Lord and baptism (1 Cor. 12).

Because we believe in the priesthood of all believers, we reject the notion that a vocational pastor has a more “direct hotline” to God's voice or favor or giftedness than anyone else. Some of us have roles that are very visible. Others have roles that are very

much behind the scenes. But every role is critically important.

Using the analogy of a football team, it is common for a quarterback to receive a disproportionate amount of attention for the work that he does. Yet no matter how well he can run or throw – without a great line, great receivers and great running backs, he can't do very much at all!

Sadly, a local church can take on a similarity to a football team – where the pastors and leaders can become like the quarterbacks in the eyes of some, while the linemen go largely unnoticed. We must be mindful of the fact that along with every successful quarterback are fifty-plus other players succeeding on that team as well – along with coaches and trainers and support staff!

This naturally leads right into the next desire we have for our members, which is to...

**INVOLVE** themselves in the direction and decisions of the Body

*Valley's members are committed to collectively guiding the church under Christ. This includes participation in church membership meetings, voting on items like our budget, pastoral staff, property decisions, constitution and bylaws, board members, etc. As a congregational church, members have the privilege and responsibility to influence and lead appropriately (1 Cor. 12).*

This ideal goes back to the earliest church in Acts chapter 6, where the Apostles told the congregation to "choose from among (them)selves seven men, full of the holy spirit" who could provide leadership in various areas that the Apostles needed help with. Again, this is not an overly-burdensome kind of responsibility, but it is definitely an important one. We believe that God often speaks and confirms His direction through His people.

The next thing is that we ask our members to be sure to...

**CONNECT** relationally with other believers in the Body

*Valley's members are connected relationally through small groups. Members realize that life in Christ is and always has been a communal experience. Early believers met regularly in homes for fellowship, learning, worship and service together (Acts 2:42-47). Isolation is the path to spiritual defeat, and as such, we realize in humility that we need each other to grow into greater maturity.*

And last but not least, we ask our members to...

**SUPPORT** Valley in prayer, financial giving and inviting others into the Valley family.

*Valley's members view their local church as one of Christ's primary ways of honoring God with the time, talent and treasure He has blessed them with. Believing that Christ established the universal and local Church as His Body, our members agree that we are more effective corporately than individually. (1 Cor. 12).*

We ask that each member pray sincerely and regularly for the church – that by God's grace we would reach our full redemptive potential as ambassadors of Jesus Christ to this culture and the world around us.

We also ask our members to help support what God wants to do through the Valley family by giving financially to the work God is doing based upon whatever the Lord would lead them to give, motivated by grace, gratitude and generosity.

Finally, another way to support the Lord's work through Valley is to speak positively about what God is doing here throughout the community, telling others why we're excited to be part of this unique expression of Christ's Church.

### **Metrics on Spiritual Growth and Discipleship...**

Galatians 5:22-23 says that the fruit of the Spirit is "...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Given these scriptural qualities, we would desire to see Christ's New Covenant followers evidencing this fruit in the following kinds of ways...

**Love** – There is absolutely no doubt that love is the pre-eminent quality of Christlike character. Jesus said that the world would know His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). In addition to love for those who are also followers of Jesus, disciples are repeatedly called to love those who are outside the faith as well, including even our enemies (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:14-21). Some of the most obvious evidences of the fruit of love in a person's life include:

- treating other believers and non-believers with grace
- giving of our time, talents and treasure to the kingdom of God joyfully
- recognizing our interdependence by committing to membership in the local church
- living missionally by allowing God to redeem our routines as daily opportunities

**Joy** – The verb form of the root word "joy" is "to rejoice". A rejoicing attitude is one which reflects thankfulness and gratitude in response to God's grace poured out in our lives. Joy is simply a response to the conscious awareness of God's goodness toward us and transcends our external circumstances. While human happiness can be unpredictable and dependent upon our circumstances, joy is a fruit of abiding in Christ for the assurance that no matter what trials we may face, we can "take heart and be of good cheer, for (He) has overcome the world!" (John 16:33). One of the evidences of a believer who is growing as a disciple is the fruit of joy even in the midst of grief or tribulation.

**Peace** – Now that we are rejoicing in the peace Christ has made between God and ourselves, we can be conduits of peace in our human relationships. Paul instructed the Roman believers – who were facing incredible stress under the threat of persecution to "live at peace with everyone as far as it depends on you" (Romans 12:18). Cultivating peace can only be experienced as a disciple is intentional about nurturing existing relationships and building new ones inside and outside the body of Christ. Some examples of these opportunities include:

- Plugging into a small group
- Speaking well in general about people wherever possible
- Building bridges in the community through serving and volunteering
- Loving people in a “no-strings-attached” way and trusting God to open doors to communicate through earning the right to be heard in their lives

**Patience** – Because of God's great and awesome degree of patience with humanity, even holding off the return of Christ so that as many as possible may be saved,<sup>xxxix</sup> we are motivated to be patient with others and with the uncontrollable circumstances of life. Patience evidences that we are walking by faith, trusting God's sovereign oversight of a situation rather than seeking to control it through inappropriate human means. Patience (sometimes called “longsuffering”) is an attitude of willingness to wait upon God for the results as we make the investments He enables us to make.

**Kindness** – Because it was God's kindness toward us in Christ that originally led us to repentance (Rom. 2:4), we can in gratefulness reflect that kindness toward other people. Kindness is the supernatural ability to decide not to repay evil for evil<sup>xi</sup> and to be proactive in looking for ways to encourage, bless or otherwise invest in the happiness of others. When we are operating from the perspective of confidence and completeness in Christ, we can bestow kindness upon others without expectation of anything in return. The act of giving itself becomes the tangible blessing to us rather than receiving.<sup>xii</sup>

**Goodness** – Paul said that there was nothing “good living in me, that is, in my flesh.”<sup>xlii</sup> But the corollary was that because of the new heart through spiritual rebirth, we have become “good” from the core. Our hearts, which were once “desperately wicked and deceitful above all things” are now made new by grace through faith.<sup>xliii</sup> Because of the new heart, we now possess an inherent “goodness” that we once never had. Our new hearts actually desire the things of God and are in full alignment with His will. This is why born-again believers feel terrible when we persist in sin, because we are not living in congruence with who we truly are at the core. Because of this new internal goodness, we can reflect the goodness of God toward others in a myriad of outwardly creative ways.

**Faithfulness** – To be faithful is to be full of faith. This does not imply behavioral perfection (although God's perfect faithfulness is that way), but it has to do with walking by faith rather than by sight. Even when we sin or fall short of God's glory, faithfulness means pressing on in the assurance that Jesus Christ is our righteousness and that we can move forward without condemnation.<sup>xliv</sup> As we learn to walk by faith in the all-sufficiency of Jesus, keeping our eyes fixed on Him as Author and Perfector, we more naturally shed the weight of sin which so easily entangles us.<sup>xlv</sup> As we've already covered, the way to live more faithfully is not to focus on obeying more rules, but to fix our eyes upon Jesus.

**Gentleness** – Gentleness is related to meekness and humility. Jesus Christ, having all the sovereign power in the universe as the Son of God, did not consider His equality with God something to be used to His own advantage but instead, willingly took on the nature of a servant.<sup>xlvi</sup> Gentleness, meekness and humility do not imply weakness. Quite

to the contrary, gentleness is a quality of the Spirit that implies real strength under the control of God. The more we meditate upon the gentleness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, complete with biblical metaphors such as Father, Husband, Shepherd and Lover, the more we are released to respond in gentleness toward those around us.

**Self-Control** – This quality of life was never really available to us until we received the new heart. Certainly before salvation, we had the ability to employ self-discipline – but often for self-preserving reasons or self-interest rather than for the true freedom of it. The quality of self-control produced by the Spirit is one which enables us to not only avoid the indulgence of the flesh for self-preserving reasons, but to find joy in doing so because we see it as reflecting the character of Christ. In a world that is constantly telling us to spend, collect, use and worship things for our own benefit, self-control enables us to be free from the worries and encumbrances brought on by addiction and slavery to sin.

### **Why These Metrics?**

Why do we desire to base the evidence of our spiritual growth on this kind of fruitfulness – and in what sense do we do so? Let us first be careful to observe that even grace-based goals and motivations can easily become fleshly forms of legalism. If we're not careful, we may unknowingly allow the life of grace to become proverbial "eleventh commandment" as we rack our brains with neurotic self-absorption. "Am I abiding in Christ enough?" "Am I bearing enough fruit?" "Am I...Am I...Am I...?"

What we mean by allowing the fruit of the spirit and the Valley B.A.S.I.C.S. to be used as our "metrics" simply means that we desire to celebrate Christ's transformation in our lives in real, tangible ways. Again, the goal in mentioning these aims is not to get us thinking "Okay, here are nine qualities I've got to perform better at." Rather, these are qualities that we get to learn to trust God for on a daily basis, even as the ancient children of Israel were invited to trust Him for their daily bread.

### **Conclusion:**

The amazing grace of God is our consistent foundation and "lens" through which we see the process of discipleship taking place under the New Covenant. Our desire is that as a result of becoming a part of Valley Church, you will experience an unprecedented level of growth and transformation that is free from manipulative legalism, high-pressure coercion or other abuses found in some spiritual movements.

We desire for you to discover the real, transformational power of what missionary Hudson Taylor described as "the exchanged life" based upon Paul's stunning reality to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Rest assured that if you join us for this journey, you will likely experience resistance of various kinds. Some of this will come from your flesh, causing you to become impatient



with your growth process and feel like this “trusting God for the fruit” stuff is not quite concrete or structured enough.

Other forms of resistance will likely come from some of your Christian friends or family members who may question whether your radical commitment to the gospel of grace is going to breed laziness or apathy in your life. They may suggest that you're not “hard-core” enough. Like the ancient Israelites walking through the desert, they will tempt you to believe that trusting God for His daily manna is too passive. As they did at the base of Mount Sinai, they will encourage you to revert to rules over relationship: “Just give me some stuff to do, and I will do it.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

However, if you will embark upon this journey with the full confidence that “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus”<sup>xlix</sup> and that “it is God who works in you both to will and to act according to His good purpose,”<sup>l</sup> we believe that over the long term you will look back on a life well-lived and well-invested – abounding in the fruit of righteousness and kingdom impact.

Your own best efforts cannot enable you to live the Christian life....but GRACE CAN! We welcome you to join us on the adventure!!!

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<sup>i</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>ii</sup> Ezekiel 36:24-26

<sup>iii</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:6

<sup>iv</sup> John 14:15-31

<sup>v</sup> John 15:5

<sup>vi</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:17

<sup>vii</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 11:28-30

<sup>ix</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>x</sup> Hebrews 12:2-3

<sup>xi</sup> Manning, Brennan, *Abba's Child* (Navpress: Colorado Springs, 1994, 2002), 97-114

<sup>xii</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

<sup>xiii</sup> 1 John 2:15-17

<sup>xiv</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>xv</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12

<sup>xvi</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; 1 Corinthians 6:17

<sup>xvii</sup> John 1:12

<sup>xviii</sup> Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:1-7

<sup>xix</sup> Romans 6:8-14

<sup>xx</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

<sup>xxi</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:42-55; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

<sup>xxii</sup> Proverbs 23:7

<sup>xxiii</sup> Farley, Andrew, *God Without Religion* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2011), 144

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- xxiv John 8:32  
xxv Hebrews 4:11  
xxvi 2 Corinthians 5:21  
xxvii Matthew 5:17  
xxviii Romans 8:4  
xxix James 2:10-11  
xxx 2 Corinthians 7-11  
xxxi Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1922), 215  
xxxii Romans 3:19-31  
xxxiii 1 Corinthians 15:56  
xxxiv Romans 7:7-25  
xxxv 1 John 4:19  
xxxvi Romans 2:4  
xxxvii Ephesians 1:3; 2 Peter 1:3  
xxxviii S.H.A.P.E. is a tool we use to help people discover their uniqueness as believers  
(Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experiences)  
xxxix 2 Peter 3:9  
xl 1 Peter 3:9; Romans 12:17-21  
xli Acts 20:35  
xlii Romans 7:15-25  
xliii Jeremiah 17:9; Ezekiel 36:26  
xliv Hebrews 11:1; Romans 8:1  
xlv Hebrews 12:1-3  
xlvi Philippians 1:5-9  
xlvii Galatians 2:20  
xlviii Exodus 19-20  
xlix Philippians 1:6  
l Philippians 2:13