

Climate Control: Understanding Spiritual Transformation

John Gerig
December 2025

The spiritual life is all about change. We exchange our old, sinful lives for new ones made in Christ's image: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!' (2 Cor. 5:17 NIV)

Many verses in the Bible talk about making changes: ridding our lives of sin (the process called 'sanctification'), becoming like Christ, putting off the old self, etc.



But who is responsible for this spiritual transformation in the lives of our students? Is it only the work of the Holy Spirit? What role does the student play? What about parents, or us as youth leaders?

We know that the Spirit reminds us of Scripture and helps us understand it. He convicts us of sin, reveals God's will, bears witness to the Son, and more. As we study the Bible together with our kids, He is right there with us, empowering the Word (especially if we have invited Him into the process). There is no real transformation without the work of the Spirit.

We also know that prayer plays a supernatural role. You probably feel my favorite quote coming: 'When we work, we work; when we pray, God works!' I once offered to pray regularly for a relative struggling with a serious muscular disease. A while later, I asked how she was doing, and she said, 'I'm really not doing any better, but since you started praying my bitterness is gone.' Praise the Lord! If we want to see spiritual change in our kids, we need to be praying for them, asking God to do His work even if we don't know what that is. He knows.

While God himself is the power source in this change process, he has also asked us to be involved. What can we as student leaders do to help create a climate where His Spirit is free to transform the lives of our kids?

I attended a seminar where the speaker shared about an interesting study involving heart patients. These people had very serious heart conditions and if they did not change their lifestyles, the result was very likely death. How is that for motivation?

All the patients initially changed their eating habits, activity levels, and made other important changes. Over time, however the researchers noticed that while some continued these new healthy habits, 90% of the patients slipped back into their old,

unhealthy ways. As they studied the differences between groups, they found that some motivators produced only short-term change, while others led to a long-term transformation.

Short term factor #1: Information

The patients all received lots of information about the changes they should make, but it did not motivate them for the long-term. Similarly, the Bible gives us lots of great information related to spiritual transformation, but we can't just assume our students are going to go out and do everything they learned in our Bible study.

Short term factor #2: Fear

It's hard to think of a greater motivation to change than, 'You will die!' And it did motivate for a short time. The patients, however, minimized the personal danger over time, with an 'it won't happen to me' attitude. In teen psychology, this is called the 'Superman Syndrome.' Teens see themselves as the exception, invincible. For this reason, 'fire and brimstone' messages and other warnings about danger don't always produce long-term effects.

Short term factor #3: Force

When someone is forced to change in a way they don't want to, they usually revert back to their own ways as soon as the pressure is off. We normally don't have the power to force change on teens in our group. But parents, for example, can force their child to attend church. Odds are, when the student finally moves out of the house, church will be a thing of the past.

Our goal, of course is to see lasting change in the lives of our kids. The study with the heart patients found three encouraging factors that seemed to pave the way for real transformation.

Long term factor #1: Relationships (relate)

The patients that did not slip back into their old, unhealthy habits had people in their lives that encouraged them in their efforts. They could have been family members or friends who cared about them, or friends in a support group with similar challenges. Without these relationships, it was too easy to slip back into their old habits. In the same way, we all need connections and transparency within the Body of Christ. For our kids, that might mean other teens, small group leaders, youth pastors, and other adults in the church who know them well and encourage them through their struggles.

Longterm factor #2: A New Perspective (reframe)

The heart patients who changed their view from avoiding death to embracing a more meaningful life, had a greater chance of long-term success. In the same way our students can view difficult situations not as negative, but as positive: not as problems, but as opportunities for God to work or as experiences that can help others.

One helpful curriculum I have been using lately focuses on four things: 'God knows me,' 'Jesus loves me,' 'the Spirit leads me,' and 'I am a child of God.' This is much more motivating than the message, 'You have to change your behavior.'

Long term factor #3: Habits (repeat)

The heart patients that successfully changed submitted to new eating, sleeping and exercise *routines* in their lives. Their changes were not haphazard. In the spiritual life, when the spiritual disciplines become a regular priority, we are much more likely to grow. These may include time with God in Bible reading or prayer, worship, gathering with believers, areas of service, etc. We don't consider, 'Will I read my Bible today?' or 'Will I go to youth group tonight?' We just do it because it's become a spiritual healthy habit.

God is at work in our students, making them into the image of His Son. But we can work *with* Him in creating an atmosphere conducive to His work by:

- building positive, trusting relationships within our group among the kids and leaders and with other adults from the church
- helping kids embrace their identity as children of God
- encouraging the spiritual disciplines in their lives (and our own)

For more on the study see: *Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life* (2007) by Alan Deutschman