



THRIVE

SMALL GROUP SERIES

Session 1 – Transform Your Nature Using Jesus as Your Example

Hello, and welcome to this small group series, where we'll be exploring the New Apostolic Church USA's membership expectations, THRIVE. To "thrive" means to grow or develop vigorously, to flourish. To be a thriving Christian means that you have a strong faith and connection to God, healthy relationships with those around you, and a passion to serve. This verb was chosen as the acronym for our specific expectation statements because God wants us to THRIVE and grow in our ongoing, lifelong relationship with Him. In John 10:10, Jesus said, *"I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."*

But what does this mean? Sometimes, it can feel like a deepening relationship with God seems theoretical or abstract. Perhaps we want to, but we don't know what to do in order to thrive. That is why all of the expectation statements that comprise the THRIVE acronym are verbs; actions we can, and should, take in order to THRIVE in our spiritual walk. The phrases are: transform your nature using Jesus as your example, help spread the gospel, respond to the call to serve, invest in your spiritual health, value the church, and embrace the promise of Christ's return. As you can see, there is nothing passive about being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

For this session, we'll focus on the first phrase, "Transform your nature using Jesus as your example."

Jesus isn't just one of many examples we should strive to model our lives around; He is THE example. Prior to His arrival on earth, God spoke to people through prophets and through Scripture. Jesus doesn't just say what God wants us to do; He demonstrated it. The characteristics of Jesus that we want to model can be found in Galatians 5:22-23 as the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus perfectly exhibits love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In our lives, we will undoubtedly have situations when it is common, or even tempting, to act or react with an emotion or behavior that is the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit. But, Jesus, as true God and true Man, proves that we too can exemplify the fruit of the Spirit, and the more we embody them, the more we transform our nature.

Another beautiful example that Jesus set was His full and unconditional forgiveness. One of the most famous instances of Jesus forgiving others was when He pleaded to the Father for the forgiveness of the very people who were killing Him. Human reaction and understanding could be to seek revenge, or perhaps defame or slander somebody with a rumor or negative post on social media. Jesus offered forgiveness to even the most vile offenders. Regardless of the size of the offense someone may have committed against us, our nature transforms to be more like Jesus' when we seek forgiveness and reconciliation, in addition to not holding grudges and forgiving those who have offended or wronged us.

Exuding the fruit of the Spirit and offering forgiveness as Jesus did requires focus, strength, and endurance, which lead us to another way we can transform our nature using Jesus as our example. We want to be fully engaged and present when celebrating Holy Communion so that we can maximize the sacrament's transformational power. Jesus told His disciples, in John 6:53, *"...most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you."* We don't just want any life in us, we want His life! Since Holy Communion is the one sacrament that we celebrate repeatedly, it can be easy for it to become routine or feel mechanical. It is important to be aware of what is happening in these moments when Holy Communion is celebrated. The Catechism explains that, "Through His body and blood [in the celebration of Holy Communion], Christ shares His nature with the believer – a nature which is distinguished by perfect strength to overcome – thereby allowing the believer to live in Christ" (CNAC 8.2.20).

In order for anyone to fully follow an example, they must know what the example is demonstrating and embodying. For someone to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, they must know what He did. They must know what He said. We learn about the nature and characteristics of Jesus through the preached word in the divine service and through our studying of Scripture. And, more than just studying actions and words, a disciple must know the mind of Christ. Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..."* (Philippians 2:5).

When we strive to exemplify the fruit of the Spirit, which Jesus flawlessly demonstrated, when we forgive unconditionally and fully, like Jesus did, and when we are engaged and present to fully experience the

transformational power of celebrating Holy Communion, we will be best positioned for the ongoing transformation of our nature as a disciple of Christ.

Session 2 – Help Spread the Gospel

Welcome to the second session, where we will continue to take a deeper look at the THRIVE acronym. In this session, we'll be exploring and discussing the significance of the letter "H" within the acronym, which stands for, "Help spread the gospel."

In Mark 16:15, Jesus gives the following command to His disciples: *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."* Even though this command was addressed to Jesus' first disciples, it very much still applies to us today. As disciples of Jesus Christ and members of the New Apostolic Church, we are called to help spread the gospel. The beginning of our Church's mission statement highlights that our calling is to reach out to all people in order to teach them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before we can share or proclaim the gospel, however, we must first have a solid understanding of what it is. So what exactly *is* the gospel?

The word "gospel" is literally translated as "good news." What is the good news? Paul provides an answer in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: *Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures.* The gospel is the good news of Jesus' life, His sacrificial death, resurrection, and His promise to return, thus resulting in our hope for eternal life. It's the message of the grace, love, and reconciliation that God grants us in Jesus Christ (CNAC Q&A, question 137). John 3:16 provides a beautiful summary of the gospel: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* Recently, Chief Apostle Schneider also summarized it in three words: "God loves mankind." The good news includes, and is founded upon, God's love for us, shown most clearly in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

What should we then do with this good news? It's certainly too good to keep to ourselves! How can we help spread the gospel?

A foundational way of spreading the gospel is by being a disciple of Christ. To be a disciple of Christ means that we are disciplined in the ways and teachings of Jesus Christ. We daily decide to follow Jesus Christ, and encourage others to do the same. We study Him. We become more and more familiar with how He responded to things like hatred, injustice, and suffering. We take His words and teachings to heart, and we seek to imitate His example in every area of our lives. We see how He always desired to help and serve others, and we desire to do the same. Through our being disciplined in Christ, we help share His teachings and example with the world. His motivation of love and peace becomes our motivation.

In addition to making sure our motivations are in line with Christ's, we also help spread the gospel through our conduct and interactions with others. The Bible says that we are to be the "fragrance of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:15). Do we exude Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters? Can others tell that we have a relationship with Him? Do they experience Christ through their interactions with us? When we are striving to reflect our Savior's love in what we do and say, then we are sharing His gospel with others and helping to spread the good news of His salvation and love because we are genuinely concerned for those around us.

So, our motivations need to be correct, our actions and conduct should be representative of what Christ would do, and the final way we'll explore of how we can help spread the gospel is through our words and by simply sharing with others how God's plan of salvation has affected us personally. Tell others about the salvation that you have in Christ. How has this changed your life? Tell them of the undeserved yet abundant gifts of grace and mercy that are new every morning, and how you've experienced both. Tell them of God's overwhelming,

uncompromising love and of His desire to save all mankind. The power of our words and sharing cannot be understated, especially as it relates to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We won't be able to explain to others why they need the gospel message if we ourselves haven't recognized our dependence on Jesus Christ, and embraced the hope that He offers us.

Certainly, there are many other ways that we can fulfil our calling and Christ's command to share this good news. In your small group, please be encouraged to discuss additional ways that we can help spread the gospel.

May we always share the sentiment that Paul so powerfully expressed in Romans 1:16-17: *For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.*

Session 3 – Respond to the Call to Serve

Welcome back! This week, we'll continue looking at the THRIVE acronym, which outlines the expectations of our members. Our focus for this session is on the "R," which stands for, "Respond to the call to serve."

As we reflect on Christ – His life and teachings, His sacrificial act on the cross – we see that everything comes back to His love for the Father and being obedient to His will. Out of our desire to transform our nature with Jesus as our example, everything we do also comes back to this. When God calls us to serve one another, we respond to His call because of our love for Him.

What does our response to this call look like?

God does not make us figure this out on our own. He has given each of us a unique set of gifts and abilities so that we are able to respond to the call to serve. But this is just one aspect of the purpose of these gifts. As Paul outlines in Ephesians 4, these spiritual gifts are *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...* (Ephesians 4:12-13). Ultimately, as God leads us to salvation, we are called to serve and use our spiritual gifts to bring glory to Him, to mature in Christ, build each other up, and experience unity among all believers.

As we discover our spiritual gifts, which can be done through the small group experience entitled, "Spiritual Gifts: Discovering God's purpose for you" (information available on NDI), we then have to put them to use. We can engage these gifts not only in our congregations, but also in our families, professions, and communities. No matter what the act of serving involves, we want to continue to be good stewards over the gifts that God has given us, using them for His purposes, not our own.

If you do not already know your spiritual gifts, or are unsure of how to engage them, we can look to Jesus for some practical examples of how to respond to the call to serve. In a parable that Jesus shares with His disciples, He said – *"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me"* (Matthew 25:34-36). Jesus is the focal point of our serving. It is out of our love for Him that we are inspired to serve others in the ways mentioned in Matthew 25 – feeding the hungry, offering kindness to strangers, and visiting the sick and lonely. These acts do not require a higher education or a large income. We are simply spending time with those who God has created, caring for and fulfilling basic needs.

As we dedicate more time to serving others, whether it is through using our spiritual gifts or in other capacities, we'll often work alongside or witness other people doing the same. In these moments, we can respond to our call to serve by acknowledging and appreciating the gifts that others have and use.

Their gifts and talents may be different than ours, but through this diversity, we can see how believers are truly able to work together as one body. Paul expands on this in 1 Corinthians 12 - *There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ* (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12). In recognizing the gifts of others, we have a better understanding of the body as one whole. We are able to see that each member is valuable and that together, we are working for the glory of God.

It is God's love that calls us, and it is our love for Him that motivates us. Out of a longing to fulfill His desires, we become inspired to discover new ways to reciprocate His love and share it with others through responding to His call to serve.

Session 4 – Invest in Your Spiritual Health

Welcome back! This week we will consider the “I” in THRIVE, “Invest in your spiritual health.”

The dictionary definitions of the word “invest” are a good starting point for our discussion of investing in our spiritual health. They include: a commitment of money in order to earn a return; a focus on future benefits, and; to involve or engage oneself emotionally.

Fundamental to our relationship with the Lord is the commitment which we make to Him, and which He makes to us, through the sacraments. In our relationship with God, we must be willing to engage with Him on a deeper level.

Relationships are built on communication. Wonderfully, we are well aware of the “communication tools” that exist for investing in our relationship with the Lord. These include spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and studying Scripture, and attending divine services.

First, let's consider prayer. As we read in Genesis 1:26, God created humankind in His image. This means that He provided human beings with capabilities that are unique, including the ability to communicate. Although the Fall made it impossible to be fully with God, as Adam and Eve were in the garden, God's desire for souls to speak with Him did not change. Prayer has become an important vehicle for human beings to communicate with God, and He with them. In human relationships, it is normal that we are happy to hear about the lives of those who are close to us. When a child expresses his or her thoughts and feelings, they can unburden themselves of that which is confusing or difficult to carry, and an opportunity opens for the parents to provide guidance and comfort to their child. So it is with our prayers. In Matthew 6:8, the Lord Jesus stated that “...*your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.*” God doesn't need for us to enumerate the details of our life to Him. But by opening ourselves to Him in prayer, we are strengthened and comforted because we can unburden ourselves to our almighty Father and He can respond to us.

In Mark 9:14-24, we read about the man with the epileptic son. He had a discussion with the Lord about his son's condition. In response to Jesus' statement about belief, the man responded by saying, “Help my unbelief.” This discussion with the Lord led him to recognize something that was previously hidden from him – his faith needed strengthening. So it can be in our own prayers. We bring our petitions to the Lord, and when we allow the Holy Spirit to be active, He reveals things to us that we were previously unaware of.

Now let us consider how reading the Bible can serve as an investment in our relationship with God. When someone falls in love, every new detail that they can learn about the other individual is special. A great deal about the nature of God is revealed in Scripture, particularly when we read the Gospels. As Christians, we recognize that we have made a commitment to grow in the nature of Christ. When we are truly in love with Him, that which helps us learn more about Jesus' nature, His way of thinking, acting, and reacting, should be of

great interest to us. Studying Scripture on our own, in small group discussions, or with our family, serves as an investment in our relationship with Him.

Actively participating in the divine service experience can serve as another important investment in our relationship with the Lord. Through the word, He speaks with us. This communication can, at times, be very personal. I hope that every one of us has had the experience in a divine service where the Lord has spoken directly with you, addressing your secret petition or need. But this can only happen when we have invested ahead of time, by preparing for the divine service and presenting our petition to the Lord in prayer. When we put the word into practice in our lives, we can experience that we are changed – we become more like Christ.

There is another way in which our attendance in the divine services can positively affect our spiritual health. When we gather together for the divine service, we have the opportunity to observe the effect of the word on the body of Christ. In our fellow believers, we can see that true change is possible, and that it is worth it to remain true to our commitment to God. When we gather together, we are also strengthened, supporting one another, as we read in Ephesians 4:16, *He makes the whole body grow and build itself up in love. Under the control of Christ, each part of the body does its work. It supports the other parts. In that way, the body is joined and held together* (NIRV). However, this requires an investment. We must invest humility, recognizing that we need grace just as much as anyone else, and that God's grace is a gift, not something that we can earn or deserve. We must invest love, making the effort to love souls as Jesus does, without discrimination or judgement.

In connection with our natural body, it could be said that health is not something that one possesses, rather, it is something that one must constantly pursue. So it is with our spiritual health. As we read in 1 Timothy 4:8, *For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.* We must continue to invest in it through an active prayer life, regularly reading the Bible, and participating in the divine services.

Session 5 – Value the Church

Welcome! Today, we're going to explore how we THRIVE by valuing the Church.

"Value," as a verb, means to consider someone or something beneficial, to esteem, cherish, and appreciate. It sounds obvious, but in order to properly value the Church, we need to recognize and experience the Church as valuable. When we recognize what treasures we have received in the Church – the teaching of the gospel of Christ, the sacraments dispensed through the ministry of apostles, a community of believers in which we have opportunities to serve and be supported – we become humbly thankful.

The understanding of "Value the Church" urges us to respond. We value the Church by praying for the mission that Jesus gave the church. We intentionally engage with and contribute to the community. And, we value the Church by giving in response to and out of thanksgiving for what God has provided.

Our God is a wealthy God! Consider that He is the Creator of all things, things seen and unseen. He is the Creator of new life and of a perpetually existing universe. He is eternal, outside of time, Alpha and Omega. And, He is love!

When we respond with giving, in sincere humbleness and gratitude, we recognize that everything we have is from God. Through worship, we continually come to the realization to express – *How great Thou art!* What does this motivate us to do? We must do something; we want to give.

Many times, our first reaction is to measure our giving based on what we realistically have at our disposal: time, energy, money, and resources. It could be easy to slip into an attitude where we think that we are giving a considerable amount to God and that His blessing should be bestowed upon us in relation to what we give. We might even think we do more than others in the congregation or in our community. Really?

We then return to our senses and realize that God is rich and provides all that His creation requires, abundantly and eternally. What I give doesn't even "move the needle" for God's plentitude. I cannot compare myself to others to determine if they do less or more than I do.

The perspective that we must grasp is that giving transforms our relationship with Him; it "moves the needle" for *me!* We give joyfully, without measurement, whatever we can, without any need for recognition, without expectation for return. We understand that we cannot barter with the Almighty with our giving! By giving and contributing to the mission of the church, I feel more a part of the body of Christ, closer in my relationship with Him, and recognize that all I have is by His grace.

Now I want to share an experience. I once spoke to a minister who was wondering about his "forgetfulness." He said that members were always retelling special experiences that he and his wife shared together with them, and he doesn't remember any of it. They both had given liberally of what they had for the glory of God, no tally, no record book, just a beautiful result of the joy of glorifying God. It reminds me of the parable that Jesus told where the righteous asked the Lord, "When did we do all these things for You? When did we give You food or drink, or take You in?" And He said to them, "*Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me*" (Matthew 25:40). Giving had simply become a natural part of their lives, a part of who they were. It is a beautiful example of transformation.

We could think, "My resources are so limited and God's are so abundant, what does it matter how much I give? I only have so much time, energy, money, and resources compared to what God has." However, it matters to God, and it should matter to us as well! God looks at the heart, which we see in Jesus' teaching on the poor widow *...this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood* (Mark 12:43-44).

Because God looks into our heart, perhaps what is more important is not how much you give, but rather, what you keep. Naturally, this doesn't mean that we give away everything we have that God has given us and live in poverty. But, it does mean that we intentionally assess what we are doing with what God has given us. Are we being good stewards of His gifts? Everyone can be a good steward of what God has provided, those who have much and those who have less, young or old, healthy or not, the strong or the weak.

A Christian lives a life of generosity, sharing with others and giving some portion of what God has given us back to Him in humble thankfulness, because giving changes us.

Session 6 – Embrace the Promise of Jesus Christ's Return

We've come to our final session on THRIVE, where we've learned that as followers of Jesus Christ, we have been called to thrive, to grow and develop, to flourish. In this session, we'll focus on the last letter of the acronym, "E," which stands for, "Embrace the promise of Jesus Christ's return." How does knowing that Jesus will fulfill His promise to return affect the way we live each day? How does that knowledge drive us to grow, develop, and fulfill our calling?

The promise of Christ's return should always be on our mind because it changes the way that we live and approach situations of life. When Jesus told the disciples about His return in John 14, He did so to comfort and encourage them. His promise continues to do the same for His disciples today. Jesus' words in John 14:1-3 are, "*Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.*" After He ascended back to the Father, the angels spoke these words, "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:11). It is as certain as the sun rises each morning that Jesus will return. This knowledge should comfort us during life's most difficult moments and enhance our joy during our greatest days because we know that a greater celebration awaits us when we will see our Savior face to face.

How do we embrace the promise of Jesus Christ's return?

First, we embrace the promise of His return by preparing ourselves for it already now by applying the gospel to every part of our life. That means that in all the places of our life, we strive to glorify God. We will spend eternity in the presence of God, glorifying Him, and the best way to prepare ourselves for that eternity is to already glorify Him today in all that we say and do. We can glorify Him by loving others, friends and enemies, and in doing so, share the love of the Lord. That means we have to be willing to give up our own desires in order to show kindness and love to someone else so that they may experience the love of God. Do we glorify Him in our daily work, in our marriage, in the parenting of our children, in our friendships, in our free time, in our caring for one another? This is not an easy thing to do because we are in a constant battle with our old nature, and to glorify Him in all we do means that we are willing to surrender our will to His at all times. It means that we are focused on loving Him above all things, that we don't allow anything or anyone else to take His place in our heart. Our God is our life. When we embrace Him as the treasure of our life, we can glorify Him.

The gospel is salvation for those who believe. When the gospel is applied to our lives, it changes our approach to each day as we live mindful of the Lord's return. As children of God, we already perceive elements of His kingdom today because when we are near to Jesus, we are near to His kingdom. One day the kingdom will come in its fullness. Until that time, we are to be a prefiguration of the kingdom, opening the eyes of others to the glory of God.

That leads us to our second way of embracing the promise of Christ's return, which is to be eternity-minded, future-oriented, and focused on His promise. Apostle Paul focused on what was to be in the future as he went forward with his mission to share the gospel with the Gentiles. In Philippians 3:8-14, he writes, *Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith....* Pausing here for a moment, I'd like to underline what Paul is saying about faith. Recognizing that his own righteousness cannot earn him salvation, he surrenders himself to the faith in Jesus Christ that he has been given so that the righteousness of Christ would become his. Only after the righteousness of Christ has been shared with us through faith, can the way to His eternal kingdom be opened to us. Paul then continues, *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold on me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* How did Paul go about focusing on the future? He pressed forward with a desire to know Jesus and the power of His resurrection, to share in His sufferings, and to become like Him, hoping to attain a resurrection like His. He did that by forgetting the things that weren't going to be helpful in this pursuit, and sought after knowledge of God. He was constantly moving forward, pressing on toward the goal, the prize of the upward call of God. Paul was aware that he was moving toward a finish line, and just like a runner in a race, he leaned forward with an earnest desire to take hold of the prize. He, like us, didn't just happen upon this way; we are all called to it! Therefore, it becomes our daily joy to fulfill the will of God and take hold of the prize – to glorify God in His kingdom for all eternity.

We THRIVE when we press forward and keep our eyes on the goal that is before us. Our future drives our life and fills us with great joy because we know that our calling is from God and it is unchangeable (Romans 11:29).