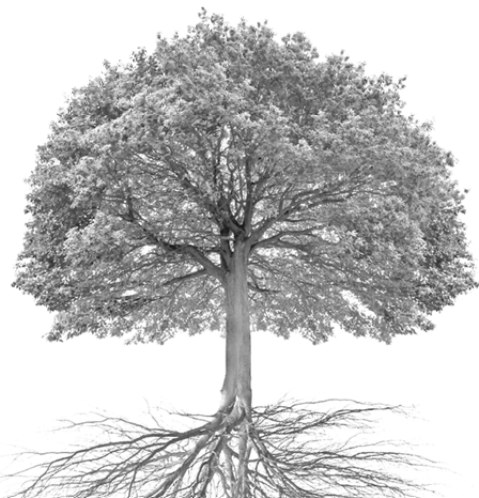


TWO CONVERSATIONS THAT WILL
CHANGE YOUR LIFE

LIFESIGNS



HOW ARE YOU? REALLY.

SCOTT C. WATSON
FOREWORD BY CHRIS FREELAND

Third Edition

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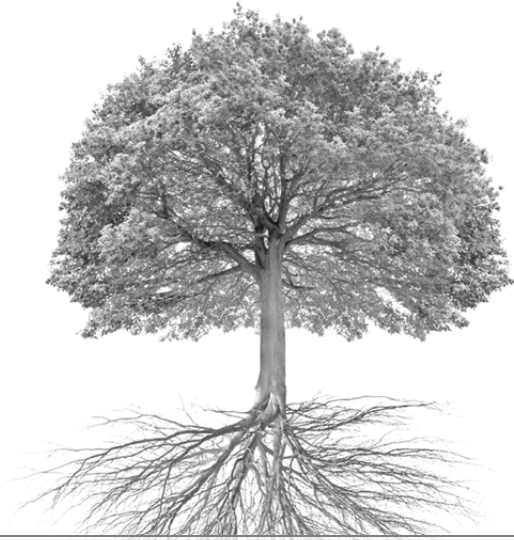
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WHY TAKE YOUR LIFESIGNS?

“The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

- God speaking to Samuel

SCENARIO #1: If you see me at church Sunday morning, the conversation will probably go something like this:

“Hey Scott, how are you?”

“I’m fine. Good. How are you doing?” I’ll say.

You’ll reply, “I’m great. Busy! Lots going on. So how’s work and the kids?”

I’ll smile, “Oh, business is finally looking up. And the kids are growing up so fast!”

“Well, it’s really good to see you,” you reply.

“You too. Take care!” And off we go.

HERE’S SCENARIO #2:

Now let’s say you’re someone I trust, like my friend Paul Miller, who knows me and still loves me. We’re sitting at breakfast, making small talk, and the food has just arrived.

Paul leans forward and says, “Okay bro, we haven’t talked in ages. You’ve been avoiding me, haven’t you? I want to know, how are you? Really.”

“I know, I know. I’ve been busy. You really want to know?” (long pause...) “To be honest, it’s been the most difficult year of my life.”

Paul looks me in the eye and says, “Listen buddy, I care about you. What’s going on? Just shoot straight with me—no pat answers allowed.”

Slowly at first, I test the waters. “Well, the recession forced us to lay off most of the employees, and my business partner left, so I’ve assumed his share of the corporate debt. I’m putting in some long hours at work. Then I blew-out my ankle, so I have not been running and I’ve gained about 20 pounds. Okay, it’s closer to 25 pounds.”

Paul’s eggs are getting cold and he doesn’t even notice. He’s totally locked-in and listening. I take a deep breath, and the flood gates slowly begin to open.

“Okay, here’s where I’m at today. You may have heard that after 20 years of struggle and counseling, my marriage is over. So now I’ve got the kids much of the work week. I haven’t figured out how to juggle client projects, cleaning the house, laundry, kids’ homework, and business travel. Most of the time, I just feel totally on my own: I’m alone at work, alone on brutal deadlines, alone raising the kids, alone with all the debt, and . . . I’m alone every night in that big empty bed. Life is really hard right now.”

Paul says, “I’m sorry buddy. That explains a lot. So what I really want to know is this, how’s it going with you and Jesus?”

Does he see my hand shake as I take a sip of coffee? “I wish you wouldn’t ask me that question.”

I swallow hard and tell him, “I know that Jesus will never leave me or forsake me, and He’s an ever-present help in time of need. But to be honest Paul, on most days I can’t seem to find Him. I’m sure He’s there, but we just don’t connect like we used to. I’m kinda in survival mode right now. Sometimes at night, instead of reaching for my Bible or the phone to call you, I grab a beer or two from the fridge and hit the couch. The gap between what I believe and how I actually live is painfully large. I know all this stuff about Jesus is true, but as I continue to struggle, I get the feeling there must be something deeply wrong with me. Sometimes I don’t think I deserve His grace. My life feels broken, and I can’t seem to fix it. That’s how I’m doing. Really.”

In both scenarios, you’ve asked the same question twice *and received two radically different answers*. What’s the deal?

It’s not that deep conversations don’t happen at church—they happen all the time. But right before the service, when everyone is in a hurry, it’s difficult to go deep, especially if you’re hurting.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFESIGNS

The purpose of LifeSigns is to help you figure out how much you’re *experiencing the new, amazing, and abundant life of Christ*. That’s it. The challenge is that we all get busy, distracted, or wounded—so we become isolated from God and from those around us. LifeSigns is designed to reconnect you with Christ and with people who love you.

We know that “the Lord doesn’t look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). God sees beneath the surface. He’s intimately acquainted with all your ways. He

knows your thoughts from afar. Before there’s even a word on your lips, He knows it all (see Psalm 139).

Faking it doesn’t work with God. So why do we fake it with each other?

That’s why LifeSigns is essentially about two candid conversations: with God and with someone you trust. LifeSigns conversations may seem dangerous because they fly in the face of our culture, one that highly values an outward appearance of polish, professionalism, and success. LifeSigns is about authenticity. It’s about dropping your guard and being real in a way that is deeply biblical and totally safe.

A VISIT WITH THE GREAT PHYSICIAN

In many ways, taking your LifeSigns is similar to taking your vital signs—we’re using an intentional analogy here. Your four physical vital signs (temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, and respiratory rate) are outward indicators of your inward health. Those four objective, physical measures can tell a doctor a lot about what’s going on *inside your body*.

The Bible contains hundreds of the “signs of life” in Christ. LifeSigns simply puts key scriptures into the familiar context of your everyday world, and encourages you to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart...” In this way, LifeSigns provides you with a set of reliable, biblically-based indicators of your spiritual health. Since your spiritual health is no less important than your physical health, at least once a year it makes sense to meet with the Great Physician and ask Him to examine your spiritual health and wellness. When you do, you’ll learn a lot about what’s going on *inside your heart*.

Just as your doctor can spot a problem and prescribe specific steps to greater health, so too with LifeSigns. *It’s both descriptive and prescriptive*. You’re getting both a snapshot of your current

spiritual health, as well as specific, biblical recommendations so you can take the next steps in your walk with Christ.

WHERE DID LIFESIGNS COME FROM?

Back in 2008, in an effort to help people at my church grow in their walk with Christ, pastor Michelle Attar collected assessments from leading churches from around the country. Several hundred survey questions were put into a big database. While thoughtful and biblical, none of these surveys felt like an intimate conversation with God, or a “Starbucks conversation” about real life issues with someone you trust. So the design team started from scratch.

As far as we know, there’s nothing quite like LifeSigns available today—and it’s got Jesus’ fingerprints all over it. Let me explain. You’ve heard that only God’s grace can take something dead and make it alive. As with Joseph in Genesis, only God can take something evil and use it for good. Only Jesus can take something lost and broken, and turn it into something new and useful. Only Him.

So where did LifeSigns come from? *A broken life made new.*

As you may have already guessed, everything in the two scenarios at the beginning of this chapter is true about me, Scott Watson. Several of my pastors and I had a long discussion about whether I should share parts of my history with you, or just write a generic book with generic examples. Obviously, we’ve decided to include some carefully selected parts of my story.

That said, this book isn’t about me. *It’s about you, and it’s about the redeeming work of Christ.* There are three good reasons we think it’s both appropriate and helpful to be candid—they’re the same reasons we’re encouraging you to fully embrace the LifeSigns process.

REASON #1: WE NEED AUTHENTICITY

First, as they often say in *Celebrate Recovery*, “God never wastes a hurt.” Unfortunately, I’ve got first-hand experience with a difficult marriage, divorce, business and financial struggles, past abuse and addictions, poor choices, and even doubts about the goodness and grace of God. Many of those experiences show up in the LifeSigns questions. Perhaps you can relate to one or two of those issues?

The struggles and failures in my life have driven home the critical need for authenticity with God and with people I trust.

While it’s embarrassing to share my stuff with you, we know that God’s redeeming grace “causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him, and who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). Once the initial version of LifeSigns was created, many people at my home church allowed God to use their “issues” to make LifeSigns even more practical and relevant. If God was not in the business of miraculously turning our trials into His treasure, LifeSigns as we know it wouldn’t exist. We’d have just another church survey.

Have you felt disconnected or isolated when you struggle? Then LifeSigns will help.

REASON #2: WE NEED CHRIST’S POWER

Second, God’s strength is often revealed in our weakness. Once the apostle Paul figured this out, he said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Okay Paul, let me get this straight. We’re to “gladly boast” of our weaknesses? I’m still wrestling with that one. But it’s amazing how God seems to enjoy using the “foolish things and weak things, the lowly things of this world” for His glory (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

Is it possible that your greatest area of struggle, the thing you’ve been avoiding in shame, or hiding from the world, may

really be your greatest opportunity to fully experience His grace? This has been the case for me with LifeSigns.

Consider for a moment: *What if God wants to impact the world through you, not in spite of—but because of your struggles?*

REASON #3: WE NEED HUMILITY

Third, God’s grace is unleashed in humility. More than once the bible says in effect, “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5). With LifeSigns, we’re just trying to practice what we preach. How could we offer you a book about authenticity without being authentic? How could we ask you to humble yourself without practicing humility ourselves?

So let’s be honest. LifeSigns is a humbling experience—if you do it right.

No, you don’t have to spill your guts to everyone you meet in the church lobby. *That’s not appropriate.* But when you take the risk and humble yourself with God and someone you trust, there’s a magnificent response directly from the throne of heaven. The Bible says that after a season of struggle and suffering, “the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will *Himself* perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10). That’s a powerful promise.

Think about it: When the walls of pride are toppled, the God of all grace sits up and takes notice. When you choose to humble yourself, God personally leaps into action in your life. As you’ll see, this spirit-enabled cycle of humility and grace is one of the reoccurring themes of LifeSigns.

LIFESIGNS IS ABOUT REAL LIFE

Real life isn’t neat and tidy—so let’s not pretend that it is. Thank goodness that McKinney Church is a place where you

don’t have to put on a happy face and act like everything is just peachy if it’s not. You can be yourself.

Pete Briscoe loves to remind us, “Life is too short to pretend.” Besides, pretending is exhausting.

So it really doesn’t matter if you know about some of Scott’s embarrassing junk. That’s not who I am. My failures don’t define me. My identity lies elsewhere, *and so does yours.* While I was born Scott Charles Watson in Cleveland, Ohio on July 11, 1966, the bible says that I have been “crucified with Christ and it’s no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). God has made me a new creation, holy and blameless in His sight, justified, sanctified, renewed, and redeemed by the blood of the Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Hey, that’s not spiritual gobbledy-gook, it’s rock-solid truth. A radical transformation has taken place in my life—I’m still just learning how to walk in it. So I’ve made up my mind to stop pretending and hiding because, as the apostle Paul discovered, Christ’s power is unleashed in my weakness.

So let me ask you: *Are you hiding?*

If you’ve bowed your knee to Christ as Lord, you’re new too. It’s safe to come out now. Your true identity is defined by Christ, not by your foolish choices, wounds, or messy circumstances.

God has exchanged your hurts for His holiness. That’s how this Jesus thing works.

The phrase “abundant life” is more than a clever punch line used by preachers to woo the unconverted; it’s the very essence of why Jesus made the trip to earth—and to the cross. He said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). It’s His mission—and it’s McKinney Church’s ministry.

The McKinney LifeSigns team is fervently praying that you’ll place yourself in the loving and gentle hands of the Great Physician. God will lead you through this process to deeper

LIFESIGNS: HOW ARE YOU? REALLY.

places, to broken places, to all the hidden stuff that's been buried in your busy life.

You can trust Him, even if you're not quite sure about trusting other people yet.

One more thing: *LifeSigns isn't just about analysis, it's about action.* You'll find that God will nudge you out of your comfort zone. Please just follow Him. Make up your mind right now: You'll do whatever He tells you to do. Make difficult phone calls, have difficult conversations, tell people you're not okay—even if it's scary and humbling. Dealing with important stuff always is.

As you uncover your true identity in Christ, I promise—better yet—God promises on the precious blood of His only Son, you will “experience Life” like never before.



THE LIFESIGNS OF RELATIONSHIPS

*"Bubba was my best good friend."
- Forrest Gump*

Remember the vivid scene from the movie?

Forrest Gump and his platoon are ambushed in the dense jungles of Vietnam. As hot lead rips through the air inches above their heads, deadly mortar rounds fall directly on their position. Clearly out-gunned and overwhelmed by enemy fire, his friend Bubba yells, "Run Forrest, Run!" So Forrest grabs his rifle and runs for his life, jumping over limbs and weaving through the dense undergrowth, dodging death with every step. He says: "I ran and ran. I ran so far and so fast, that pretty soon I was all by myself, which is a very bad thing."

Yes Forrest, being alone in the jungle is *a very bad thing*.

It reminds us that, "No one should do life alone." That's especially true when you're under enemy fire and running for your life.

THE DANGERS OF ISOLATION

One of the enemy's favorite tactics is isolation. He wants to separate you from God and from people who can help you. When shame or guilt makes you want to pull away from people, you're as vulnerable as an injured calf separated from the herd. Remember, our enemy is a prowling lion who is constantly seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

What causes isolation? It could be that you're too busy and just don't have time for deeper relationships. Or, if you're carrying deep hurts and wounds, it can feel awkward to be around "normal people." Perhaps you've been wronged in the past, and the fear of rejection paralyzes you. Or perhaps you've felt, as Adam and Eve discovered after the fall, that sin has created an urge to hide that is powerful and overwhelming (see Genesis 3:8-9). Or you could simply be a strong and independent person who doesn't want to lean on other people. You can handle life on your own.

Do any of these reasons for isolation ring true for you?

Unfortunately, I can relate to just about all of them. Running a start-up company squeezed out most non-essential relationships; the pain of a failing marriage made it difficult to be around happy couples. My intermittent struggles with addiction and depression were carefully concealed, and a natural inclination to be strong and responsible made me reluctant to ask anyone for help. Yet in the darkest moments, I yearned to "become known" to someone I could trust and who could help. (For more on dealing with hurts, see Conversation Eight: Healing and Grace.)

CONVERSATION ONE – RELATIONSHIPS

Look, there's no such thing as the lone wolf Christian. You were created to be connected.

"But people can be messy," you say. "Relationships take time and effort. Even then, people don't always respond positively, or worse, they can take advantage of you."

All true. So why bother?

LIFESIGNS INSIGHTS: A CASE FOR COMMUNITY

If you've attended church for some time, it's easy to develop an indifference to "churchy things."

For example, you may not think a small group could make a big difference in your life. After all, participating in a church-related small group represents a relatively meager slice of your weekly pie. You may assume that attending a Community Group or Bible study is nice, but couldn't possibly impact the rest of your modern, jam-packed, highly caffeinated life.

And you'd be wrong.

The LifeSigns results about relationships are stunning. People who are plugged-in to an authentic, loving small group are doing better at work, at home with the kids, in marriage, in their walk with Christ, and even in their finances. In fact, it was found that those in *healthy* small groups scored higher on 53 out of 58 LifeSigns (91% of the items).

Let's first clarify what we mean by a "healthy" small group, versus a less-than-healthy small group. While there are many dimensions to a vibrant group, the primary differentiator we used is *relational depth*—the degree to which it's safe to deal with real life issues. The healthier the group, the more "real life" they're willing to tackle together.

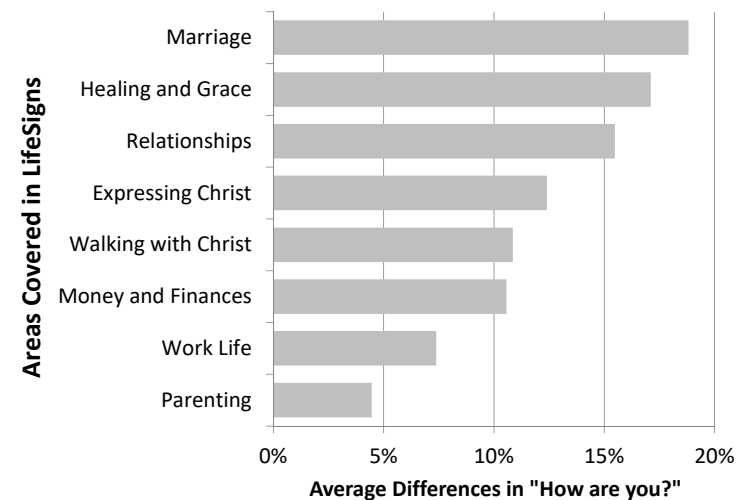
A LifeSigns sample of 1,287 people indicated that about 60% are in some kind of small group, the remaining 40% were either looking for a group or not interested.

Of the 60% who are in a small group, here's the breakdown: 35% are in "healthy" groups, 16% are in "shallow" groups where they don't feel connected, and 8% are in groups that they rarely attend.

"What's the point?" you ask, "I don't do statistics."

Here's the bottom line: People in a healthy small group are doing better than just about everyone else, in just about every area of life that we covered in LifeSigns (see below).

Comparison: What's different about people in a "healthy small group?"



However, there's a wrinkle to this story: We found that shallow groups are actually bad for your spiritual health. The people who said, "Yes I'm in a small group, but I don't feel connected" are doing the *worst of anyone* across 17 different LifeSigns. To be clear: People in shallow small groups are hurting, but they're hiding. It's not safe, and they know it. Their LifeSigns scores are lower than for people who are not in *any* small group, and lower than those who only attend a small group infrequently.

Upon seeing this, one pastor concluded, “It looks like being fake is more dangerous than being alone.”

RELATIONSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR GROWTH

Intimate biblical relationships are the fertile soil in which you’ll grow. God uses relationships to lift you up when you fall and to teach you how to love people through thick and thin. While solitude has its place (we’ll discuss it much more in the next chapter), God never intended us to go it alone. Whether you’re the life of the party (extroverted), or more reflective (introverted), relationships with other believers are essential.

LIFE IN THE JUNGLE

Think back, for a moment, to Forrest Gump caught in the fire fight in Vietnam.

As soon as Forrest realized that he was clear of enemy fire, he froze in his tracks and said, “I gotta find Bubba!” He turned and ran back into the smoke and chaos, only to discover other wounded members of his platoon along the way. So, one by one he carried his comrades to safety. “I started to get scared that I might never find Bubba,” he said.

Then, moments before an air-strike incinerated the jungle, and in the face of warnings by Lieutenant Dan, Forrest plunged into enemy territory *yet again*.

What a powerful picture of true friendship: Running back into the fire to save a friend.

Years ago, we’d show that six-minute clip from *Forrest Gump* to hundreds of men entering an intensive, nine-month discipleship program called Top Gun.¹ A lot can happen in nine months, and often less than half the guys would graduate from

the program. So each year, I’d stand up and challenge each of the groups: “*Make the commitment right now. You’re not going to leave anyone behind.*” We’d remind them that Forrest risked life and limb to find Bubba, not because he was the designated leader of the platoon, not because he was some kind of superhero, but because he knew something terrible had happened to his friend.

Forrest had to find Bubba. *Nothing else mattered.*

Even if it’s just a Hollywood movie, I get teary-eyed thinking about that kind of friendship. It’s powerful and deeply moving, perhaps because it reminds us of the real thing.

Jesus risked life and limb in order to have a relationship with you. He didn’t just create the world, watch the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, and then simply shake His head in dismay from the safety of heaven’s throne room.

Jesus came back for you.

He personally led a divine search and rescue mission in order to “seek and save that which was lost” (John 3:17). He knew something terrible had happened to you. You were lost deep in enemy territory. He saw that you’d been mortally wounded by sin, and nothing short of God’s direct intervention could rescue you.

I know, maybe you’ve read this passage in John 15 before, but read it again. Slowly. *He’s talking about you.*

Jesus said: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:13-15).

Jesus deliberately chose you. He wanted a relationship with you so badly that He was willing to suffer utter humiliation on the cross to get it. By laying down His life, Jesus provided the ultimate example of friendship under fire. He went back for the wounded. *It cost him dearly, but He had to find you.* “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

¹ Search YouTube for “Gump and Bubba in Vietnam” to see the clip. Just be aware, it’s full of colorful language and may not be appropriate for kids.

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”
(1 John 3:16).

That, my friends, is true, biblical friendship in action.

Here’s the cool part of the story: Every day, you have a chance to do the same thing. In the power of Christ, you can help rescue the walking wounded all around you. Not just in your church group, but with your spouse, with your kids, with your neighbors, or even with someone you notice silently weeping in their cubicle at work.

You see, Jesus is still in the serious business of rescuing people from the clutches of the enemy.

And He’ll use you to do it.

If you let Him.



 ENGAGING YOUR WORLD

“For Christ’s love compels us...”

- 2 Corinthians 5:14

You see, I just couldn’t help it.

When I first met Jesus half-way through my freshman year at college, a radical transformation took place. In just one semester, I went from chasing women and racing cars, to pursuing Christ with the same zeal. Pretty soon, I had a new set of friends (who knew how to have fun sober), a new set of priorities, and new direction in life. My grades even improved.

With that first summer break came the 12-hour drive from Lubbock back to Houston. Somewhere north of Abilene, in the

middle of nowhere, my conversation with God reached a fever pitch: “Lord I love you! Take my life, I’m all yours!”

In the distance, I see a handful of people working the rows of a vast cotton field. “Lord do *those* people know you?” One quick U-turn and one quick prayer later, I’m parked alongside the field. The workers lean on their tools and stare with puzzled expressions as I scramble across the dusty furrows towards them.

“Hi. Um, I just wanted to ask you guys something” I say. Uh-oh. “You don’t speak English?” It doesn’t matter, I hand them a gospel tract and tell them, with frantic and incomprehensible gestures, that God above loves them and sent His son to the cross for them. They smile and nod. I smile back. Not knowing what to do next, we all shake hands and I scramble back across the field to my car.

Like I said, I just couldn’t help it.

In the small town of Giddings, I stop at a local bar and hand gospel tracts to three bewildered cowboys nursing their beers. Later outside Austin, I visit a Psychic who informs me that her powers do, in fact, come from God, as she quickly ushers me out of her shop and onto the sidewalk. At a gas station in Brenham, I fervently pray from the parking lot as I watch the clerk inside read the entire track I’d given him. Needless to say, it was an interesting trip.

During that first summer, many of my high-school drinking buddies, two old girlfriends, and a kid I met fishing on a dock all accepted Christ. One afternoon we had a Bible study by the pool where we studied John 3:16. Why? It was the only verse I knew. My best friend David said “Yes” to Jesus that day.

For the next four years, I lived in a non-air conditioned dorm on campus just to build relationships with guys who needed Christ. It was great. One night after a bible study in my room, we baptized half-a-dozen guys in the fountain at the main entrance of the university (while keeping a lookout for the

campus police who probably would not understand). One time, I even stood outside the student union and preached to a crowd of about six people.

All these years later, *something has changed*.

Today, if I'm honest with you, I can't remember the last time I told somebody about Jesus, except for our kids. It's been *years*. What happened? Of course, there's been marriage and graduate school, a real corporate job and a mortgage, two kids, three dogs, and everything that comes with a busy life in Dallas, Texas.

But that doesn't really explain it, does it?

Over the years, I think the sparkle and wonder of my new life in Christ has faded to familiarity, and with it, the desperate desire to share the riches of Christ with people who are far from God.

WHAT DRIVES YOU? GUILT OR GRACE?

I have two otherwise delightful children who, like most kids, seldom eat a vegetable or share a toy of their own free will. Simply yelling commands from the couch is not a good parenting strategy. So I'm forced to deliver a vivid description of starving masses in Africa along with each serving of broccoli, or a sobering reminder that Jesus gave His life for them—so they can darn well share the remote.

I think it worked exactly once.

Unfortunately, I've seen frustrated pastors do precisely the same thing. It's not surprising. Church leaders must constantly find new ways to lift us from our pews and deploy us into noble and needed ministry. Guilt and shame will work—maybe once. But then what?

Try this: *The outrageous love of Christ*.

People in the Corinthian church were questioning the Apostle Paul's true motives, some even suggesting that he was "out of his mind" (2 Corinthians 5:13-14). In response, he

offered a powerful explanation: "Christ's love *compels* me." Another version says, "the love of Christ *controls* me." Paul is using a heavy-duty Greek word, *sunecho*, that loses some of its punch when translated into the more civilized word "compel." The original word literally means to be gripped, pressed, or besieged on every side by something vastly more powerful than yourself. In this case Paul is saying, "Guys, you just don't understand what drives me. *I'm completely overwhelmed by the love of Christ*."

In other words, he just couldn't help it.

Since God is supremely powerful, think of all the ways He could control your behavior: earthquakes and lightning bolts (fear), plague and pestilence (pain), threats of condemnation (punishment), or even a voice thundering from the sky (direct supervision). Nevertheless, God doesn't deploy any of these methods to move us.

He uses grace.

The reason grace is such a powerful force is revealed in the second half of the verse in Corinthians: "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all..." Are you ready for this? "...that those who live *should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again*" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Paul is speaking from deep, personal experience. This murderous rebel, this persecutor of Christ himself, was radically redeemed by a grace that defied all human reason. Paul's enemy had showered him in a flood of mercy. What drove the apostle Paul to the ends of the earth? Grace! What stoked the fires of his passion to burn white-hot, year after year, even in the face of horrendous trials and hardships? Grace!

Through it all, I think Paul *never got over the staggering truth of the gospel*. So much so he said, "I am *compelled* to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

CONVERSATION THREE

It's easy to intellectually grasp why we "should no longer live for ourselves" in light of Christ's love, but sometimes in the middle of my busy, messy life, I just don't feel very "compelled" to do much of anything. Yes, I've got some guilt about that.

If you're in the same boat, keep reading.

ENGAGING YOUR WORLD: FRUITS AND ROOTS

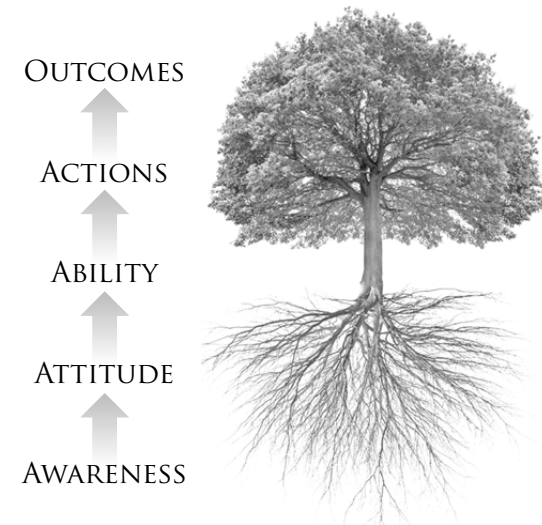
Images of planting, watering, pruning, and harvesting are used throughout scripture to describe our spiritual life and growth in Christ. Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit" (John 15:8). But when your LifeSigns pinpoints a gap between your beliefs and behaviors—between your good intentions and daily actions—it's easy to get discouraged. You may be tempted to draw up a spiritual self-improvement program and get busy "living for Jesus."

Don't do it. While various spiritual disciplines are certainly important, remember that "it is the Lord who is at work in you" and it is "God that causes the growth." (Philippians 2:13, 1 Corinthians 3:6).

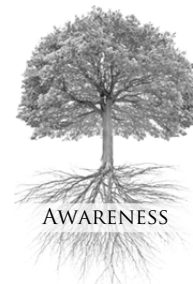
So how, exactly, does God *cause* you to grow?

The idea of "fruits and roots" isn't new. I'll let Jesus explain: "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit...A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:43).

Notice it starts with your heart. As you cooperate with the Spirit's work, He changes you from the inside out: your awareness is expanded, your attitudes change, your abilities grow, new behaviors sprout, and ultimately your life bears good fruit (see graphic on the next page).



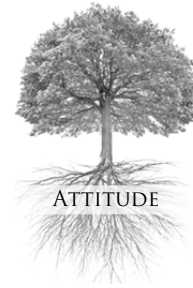
This entire process, while probably not as linear and logical as our lovely graphic would suggest, is the exclusive domain of God's handiwork in your life. Before you discuss your LifeSigns results from this section with a friend, let's first briefly consider how the "compelling love of Christ" can look in action, starting with your roots and ending with your fruits.



COMPELLED BY CHRIST – A NEW AWARENESS

Do you have new eyeballs?

One of the first steps in trusting Christ as your savior involves a brand new awareness of your true spiritual condition. "Wow," you say, "I'm completely lost to sin, and He wants me back." But God doesn't stop there. When He takes up residence in your heart, the Spirit begins to reveal the world around you from His perspective, and you experience first-hand how "the Lord opens the eyes of the blind" (Psalm 146:8).

COMPELLED BY CHRIST – NEW
ATTITUDES

I listened patiently for over an hour as a new Christian friend sat on my sidewalk detailing all the “big issues” in her life. Each sentence began with, “I’m just so…” and left me feeling more frustrated. When I finally realized that this self-absorbed exercise was getting us nowhere, I said, “Come on, I want to show you something.”

In those days, the largest honkey-tonk for 250 miles was called Midnight Rodeo; with a capacity of well over a thousand people, it had acres of dance floor, six bars, pulsating lights and really loud music. Before we went in, I gave my friend an assignment: “I just want you to look at the people and ask yourself this question: Where are they going? Not just tonight, but for eternity.”

We breezed through the front door without paying a cover charge and were hardly noticed by the distracted bouncers. Now I’ve spent plenty of time in noisy nightclubs over the years, but when you’re saved and sober, it’s a completely different experience.

As you’d expect, we saw people dancing, yelling, and spilling beer on the floor. But one young lady in particular caught our attention. She was drunk as a skunk and practically throwing herself at multiple men. The nearest guy propping her up had a menacing look, his hands wandering freely as he exchanged knowing nods with his buddies. We stopped. “Look at her long and hard,” I said through the din. “Where do you think she’s headed?”

For ten long minutes, we stood and watched helplessly from across the room, reminded that God was there, watching His child, too. It was utterly heartbreaking.

When former atheist C.S. Lewis finally accepted Christ, he got a new pair of eyes—and he couldn’t believe what he saw. Everyday people were cast in a vivid new, eternal light.

He said, “Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if only in a nightmare. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”²

Let that soak in. *There are no ordinary people.* All of us are destined for one of two eternities: immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. That is biblical reality.

The Apostle Paul knew only God could provide this kind of new awareness. That’s why he prayed, “that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:18-19).

If you’ve trusted Jesus, your hope for the future is totally secure. The more fully you grasp the magnitude of your sin and the riches of His grace and love, the more aware you’ll become aware of people who face a horrible future without Christ. What’s worse, every day you’re surrounded by people who are oblivious to their spiritual poverty and of God’s abundant love.

Their ship is sinking *and they don’t even know it.*

That can really start to “bother” you, if you let it. And that’s a really good sign.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Harper Collins, New York, New York, 2001), pp. 45-46

After a while longer, we retreated to the fresh air of the parking lot to debrief and pray. The very next day, a story on the front page of the local newspaper helped to explain why the club staff seemed so distracted when we entered at about 10:30 PM.

The paramedics had just left.

Evidently a different woman had passed out in a bathroom stall, was found by her friends, and rushed to the hospital. She was pronounced dead upon arrival.

That day, my friend’s attitude began to change about her “big issues” and her identity in Christ. Years later she attended seminary, became a licensed counselor, and spent the next ten years working with addicts. Christ had completely transformed her attitude—and her life in the process.

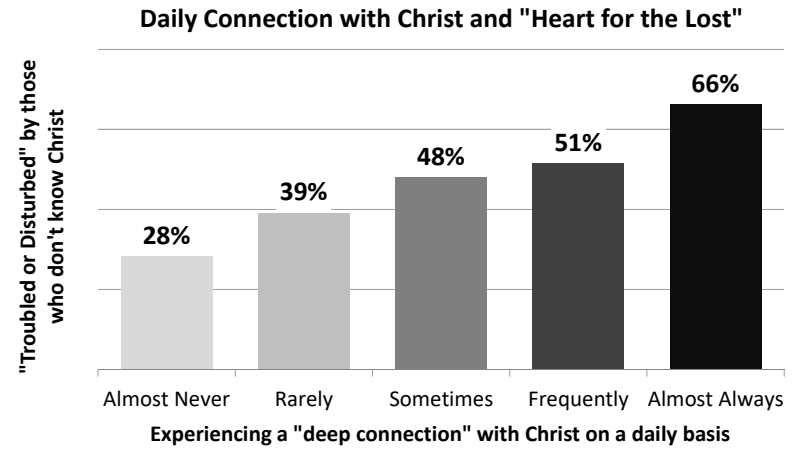
COMPELLED BY CHRIST – A SURPRISE FROM THE LIFESIGNS DATA

We wondered what’s so different about people who have a “heart for the lost.” You may remember the LifeSigns question, it reads: “How often are you ‘disturbed’ by the thought of those who don't know Christ? (i.e., seeing people in light of eternity, as God sees them – rather than just as they exist today).”

Out of 55 different factors, the number one difference among those who “frequently” or “consistently” have a heart for the lost is *not* Bible study, *not* small group attendance, *not* serving in the church, or even being willing to reach out to strangers.

The single biggest difference is *daily intimacy with Christ*. Here’s the LifeSigns question verbatim: “On a daily basis, how often do you experience a deep connection with Christ? (i.e., being fully aware of His presence, in conversation with Him, experiencing Him in a fresh way, etc.)”

To help you wrap your brain around this phenomenon, we put “connecting daily with Christ” and having a “heart for the lost” on the same graph (see next page).



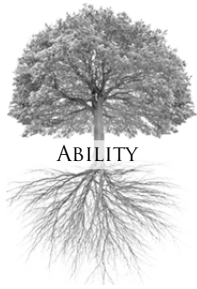
I don’t know about you, but that graph is fascinating. Let’s consider the practical implications.

What if you don’t have a “heart for the lost?” Don’t beat yourself up. Connect deeply with Jesus, day-in and day-out and your attitude will begin to reflect what’s on His heart. That includes being “disturbed” by the thought of those without hope. For example, you’ll begin see that drunk college kid or obnoxious co-worker with a new set of eyes.

Because the closer you get to Jesus, *the more you’ll think like Jesus*.

The LifeSigns data shouldn’t have surprised us, especially since Philippians makes it clear, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.” What kind of attitude is that? “In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Philippians 2:3-5).

And the “interests of others” encompasses much more than sharing the gospel. It covers the entire spectrum of physical, spiritual, and emotional needs among God’s children. That’s why, as you’re compelled by Christ into action, your abilities will also be transformed.



COMPELLED BY CHRIST – NEW ABILITIES

The Bible is not just a divinely inspired self-help book. It’s not merely an dusty old collection of sanctified success principles. It’s so much more. With the Great Commission to “go and make disciples” still ringing in their ears, the New Testament authors like Paul, Peter, James, and John wrote to people who were investing their lives in serving, leading, and building the church. Whole books like Acts, Timothy, and Thessalonians were written to guide and equip ordinary people who were, quite literally, following Christ to the ends of the earth.

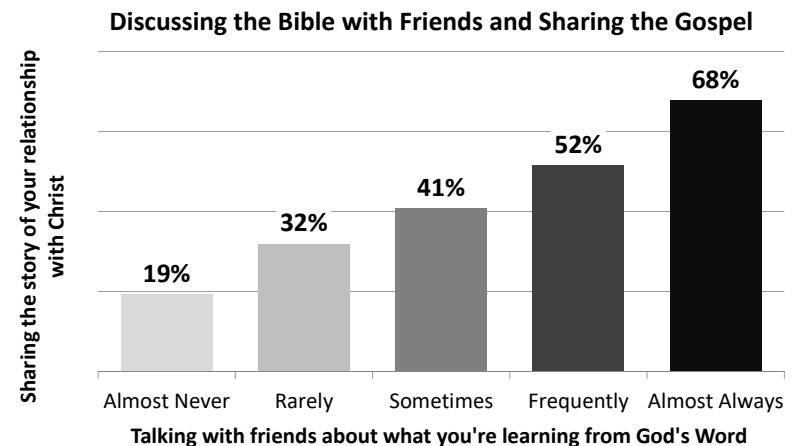
Yes, scripture can teach you how to be happy and healthy, but that’s far too limited. *It misses God’s grand, sweeping mission to redeem all of humanity.* In my experience, the Bible takes on a whole new perspective when you’re actively engaged in the wild adventure of ministering to broken people. Why? Because as you express the life of Christ, you will face many of the same issues that believers faced 2,000 years ago. When your faith is stretched, whole sections of Scripture will come alive for the very first time; they’ll become fresh and relevant like never before.

We sometimes say to expecting mothers, “You’re eating for two, so eat well.” The same is true for you. As the love of Christ compels you to engage with messy, broken people in your everyday orbit, you’ll find that you’re “eating for two” every time you open your Bible. That’s one of the most important ways Christ develops new abilities in you. When you get in over your head; when you come face-to-face with deep spiritual poverty, you’ll scour the scriptures in search of answers.

“Okay, so I need to read my Bible more,” you say, “big deal.” No, this isn’t about cramming your skull full of theology; it’s

about a vibrant relationship *with Christ* and *with others*, fueled by the high-protein, non-fat truth found in the living word of God.

Want proof? Our LifeSigns data shows the number one difference among people who “frequently” or “consistently” share their faith is they are constantly, “Talking with friends about what they’re learning from God’s Word (i.e., sharing personal insights, asking tough questions, finding practical applications from the Bible, etc.).”



As a researcher, I can tell you the graph above represents a massive, statistically significant, linear correlation. In plain English, when you see that nearly perfect “stair step” graph, it means that *these two things almost always go together.* What’s more, these two questions were placed at completely different sections of the LifeSigns tool. In my opinion, our little LifeSigns experiment has, inadvertently, uncovered one of the Holy Spirit’s methods of spreading the good news of Christ.

It happened with Peter and John too. Within a few short weeks of Pentecost, more than 5,000 people had “heard the message and believed.” The Jewish authorities arrested Peter and

John, threw them in jail overnight, and then put them on trial. When these religious experts “saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:1-13).

I absolutely love that! *Unschooled, ordinary men.* More precisely, two former fishermen “astonished” the high priest and his erudite entourage by speaking with courage and conviction about the mysteries of God. How did they do it? Where did all this newfound ability come from? For one thing, they had talked with—and about—the Living Word (Jesus) for three years straight. Their boldness wasn’t a momentary fluke; it flowed from hours and hours of conversation with Jesus.

What’s more, when the religious “experts” commanded them never to speak again in the name of Jesus, Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

You see, they couldn’t help it either.

All the stats, and more importantly, the scriptures make it clear. Talking with friends (who are safe) about what you’re learning from God’s Word enables you to talk with non-Christians (which is scary) about the wonders of the gospel. The two are intertwined as Christ lives through you.

We also found the number one Growth Priority in this section was to “become more confident in sharing Christ.” That’s good, but you don’t need to be an expert in apologetics to share your story of walking with Christ. Do you know Jesus? Then you could do it today. That first Bible study I led by the pool—when John 3:16 was all I knew—proves that God works mightily in spite of our limited knowledge and abilities.

Nevertheless, Paul tells young Timothy to, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not

need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Bottom Line: *God isn’t looking for scholars, but surrendered servants.*

As you allow Christ to express His life through you and get involved in the heavy-lifting of ministry, you’ll have real-life opportunities to develop your knowledge and skills. That applies to more than evangelism; it’s true for the whole wide world of Christ-enabled ministry: teaching kids, counseling addicts, leading a small group, and yes, introducing someone to this incredible guy named Jesus.



COMPELLED BY CHRIST – NEW ACTIONS

Your behavior doesn’t just spring forth without cause. Your actions—the things you say and do—are a reflection of your heart. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life.” That’s why we began with the “roots” of your behavior, including your awareness (heart) and your attitude (mind).

Now the rubber meets the road. How does the love of Christ compel us to act differently?

Two thousand years before Oprah popularized the idea of “Random Acts of Kindness,” Jesus was curing leprosy, healing the lame, and washing smelly feet. But today, some pastors worry that our secular “culture of consumerism” has infiltrated the church. They know that some people “consume” Sunday services exactly as they would a movie or a ball game, and then move on to what’s next in their busy schedule.

Unfortunately, the most recent LifeSigns data backs this up. Only one in three people serve weekly *after they’ve attended for*

6-10 years. Less than one in ten people serve weekly in their first year. The old 80/20 rule of thumb says that eighty percent of ministry is done by twenty percent of the people. In reality, it may be closer to 90/10. The stats on financial giving are even more sobering, but I won't share them here. So what's to be done?

My old college pastor liked to put it in painfully simple terms, "How do you know if you're called to serve? The answer is, when you see a need." Although you probably can't end world hunger or cure cancer, this approach is a good place to start. As you're compelled by Christ to "no longer live for yourself," every day presents dozens of new opportunities to take action, *both inside and outside the church.*

Our LifeSigns data showed the biggest difference among people who "frequently" or "consistently" respond with action to the Holy Spirit's nudge is this: They've "allowed God to shift their focus from themselves to become more 'others oriented.'" That's one reason Christ starts with your heart.

As my worship pastor constantly reminds me, "All of life can be an act of worship." He's right. In Romans it says, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1).

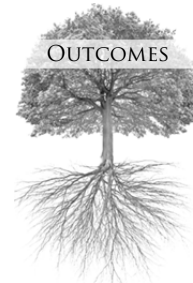
I used to wonder, "So I'm supposed to offer my *body* as a *living sacrifice*? What's up with that?"

Since God provided His son as the ultimate sacrifice for sin, today our sacrifices are purely an act of worship. This text explodes the boundaries of worship beyond what happens on Sunday morning. It means you can worship God with your time and energy, with your intellect and creativity—with everything you are and everything you do. When you discover the true meaning of worship, becoming more "others oriented" is natural and easy.

I've noticed that as people mature in Christ—as they worship Him with their whole life—at some point a clear transition takes place. They begin to "take off the bib, and put on the apron." They move from being fed, to doing the feeding. They've made the transition from being served, to doing the serving. And underneath it all, *they're really just worshiping God.*

What's more, this kind of Christ-compelled action is one of the most reliable indicators that you're maturing in Christ. It's the unmistakable fruit of a redeemed life in the hands of the master gardener (see John 15).

So here's the big question: *Are you seeing the transition from self-focus to others-focus in your life?* If you have, it's a powerful sign of Christ living in you and through you. Keep going!



COMPELLED BY CHRIST – NEW OUTCOMES

At the end of Jesus' explanation of the vine and branches in John 15, He reminds us that, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Notice that you've been chosen for a purpose: to bear fruit that lasts forever. That means that your choices, those daily decisions you make in the ebb and flow of ordinary life, will echo for all eternity.

If you've seen the stunning production of *The Bema*, a story about meeting Jesus face-to-face in heaven, you know that some outcomes are temporal and some are eternal (check out www.thebema.org). As you review your LifeSigns results from this section, try asking yourself the Bema question: *Am I living for "the day," or just today?*

When Christ rules your heart and His grace compels you; when you get so close to Jesus that you start seeing the world with His eyes; when you listen for His voice, and follow His lead—then you will see new growth from the “roots” all the way to the “fruits” in your life.

You won't be able to help it.

If you'd like to learn more about “The Bema”
watch the introduction at
www.thebema.org





LIFESIGNS METHODOLOGY

“HOW WAS LIFESIGNS DEVELOPED?”

Chapters 1 and 2 include a few hints as to how LifeSigns was developed. For those interested, here’s a little more of the backstory.

In the fall of 2008, a spiritual assessment team at Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in Carrollton, Texas, led by pastor Michelle Attar, reviewed surveys conducted by leading churches from around the country. After careful review, analysis, and much prayer, it was determined that none of the existing surveys would accomplish the primary objective: To enable every person to deeply explore their life with Christ.

In February of 2009, a total of 141 Bent Tree staff and volunteers completed a LeaderView® profile to help identify “the hallmarks of a maturing disciple.” The results provided the basis for creating the first generation of the LifeSigns® tool and

process. A project team that included pastors, leaders, and members of the church provided written and verbal feedback on the early versions of LifeSigns content and flow.

Three pilots of LifeSigns were conducted with members, leaders, staff, and non-church members. The current version (v8.1) of LifeSigns went through seven major revisions and dozens of minor revisions to the content, flow, layout, and language. LifeSigns truly is a product of believers working together as a body.

Additionally, McKinney Church leaders and pastors poured over LifeSigns to ensure the language and emphasis were clear, the focus was consistent with McKinney Church’s culture, and that LifeSigns was fully aligned with McKinney Church’s philosophy of ministry.

You’ll find that the LifeSigns questions are almost always worded as positive attributes, rather than negative statements. This is intentional. For example, we use a positive question like, “Do your relationships feel safe, where you can be authentic and talk about real life?” rather than its negative equivalent of, “Are your relationships shallow?” This keeps our focus on the signs of life, instead of the consequences of sin. Negative descriptions are only used to create a sense of contrast in some of the examples provided after the questions (e.g., “...you feel safe sharing your struggles – rather than putting on a happy face and pretending that everything is fine.”).

LifeSigns questions are often a hybrid of both affective (emotional) indicators and behavioral indicators. For example, we ask “How often do your relationships *feel* safe?” This enables participants to more accurately reflect on their actual experience, without feeling condemned or judged by the survey process. This hybrid technique also addresses the preferences of a broader range of personality types (thinkers and feelers).

Finally, we resisted the temptation to preach via the survey, and we've avoided the use of theological terminology wherever possible. Our goal was to translate the purity of scriptural truths into everyday language, accessible to a large number of people.

Questions about Spirit-lead worship, evangelism, or sanctification are placed into a familiar context of everyday life situations, such as handling money, work, and marriage.

Behind every LifeSigns question there are specific Scriptures, and in some cases, whole chapters of the Bible. Once the LifeSigns survey data has been collected, the individual LifeSigns profiles place each question back into its appropriate spiritual category, complete with the related Scripture reference. This book also contains many, but not all, of the scriptures behind each LifeSigns question.