

**CAN WE FOLLOW WILLOW CREEK'S *FOLLOW ME*?**  
**AN EXAMINATION OF THE LATEST REVEAL STUDY**

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## Introduction

Willow Creek's *Follow Me* explores the processes of spiritual growth by analyzing a data set of 80,000 church-goers. It identifies which spiritual activities and beliefs are associated with various stages of spiritual growth. In this article, I examine the methods of *Follow Me* to gauge how much confidence we can place in its findings. I identify inconsistencies between *Follow Me* and its predecessor, *Reveal*, as well as address methodological issues that commonly arise in church surveys.

Willow Creek, one of America's largest, most influential churches, has started surveying Protestant churches in the U.S. with an eye toward making them more effective. It terms this initiative "Reveal," and it first made a splash with the book *Reveal: Where are You* (2007) which summarized a survey of seven different churches, including Willow Creek (for a discussion of this book, see Wright 2008). Less than a year later, the Reveal team has published *Follow Me: What's Next for You?* (2008) based on data collected from several hundred churches. The Reveal ministry aims to "advance the Kingdom by putting 'facts', generated by the finest research tools available, in the hands of local church pastors" (Reveal Blog, 2008). In this article, I examine how well *Follow Me* has accomplished this laudable goal.

To be clear, this is not a critique of Willow Creek as a church. I've had a chance to visit their church, read books by their pastors, and attend their annual Leadership Conference, and I'm impressed by the good work that they are doing. I know that Willow Creek has its share of critics, but I do not count myself as one of them. Rather, I write this article to

help readers of *Follow Me* to understand better both its findings and issues that frequently arise with church surveys.

It appears that church surveys are becoming increasingly common, for not only is survey data remarkably easy to collect via the internet, but also high-profile groups such as Reveal, The Barna Group, and Lifeway Research have modeled the use of survey data in studying the Church. As a consequence, a pastor wanting to stay current with advances in church growth needs some understanding of the basics of social research. I don't mean statistical equations with lots of Greek letters but rather issues of cause and effect, research design, and measurement. This article aims to make pastors and other church leaders more informed consumers of studies such as *Follow Me*.

### **Summary of *Follow Me***

*Follow Me* used a similar methodology to the original *Reveal* but with far more respondents. *Follow Me* collected data from a convenience sample of about 200 churches with 80,000 respondents. Respondents filled out an on-line survey with hundreds of questions. (Incidentally, I happen to attend one of the churches selected for the study, and so I am one of those 80,000 respondents.)

*Follow Me* employs many of the same concepts as *Reveal*. For example, it uses what *Reveal* termed a “spiritual continuum”—a four-stage progression of spiritual maturity

ranging from being a seeker to living a Christ-centered life. Like *Reveal*, *Follow Me* links this continuum to spiritual attitudes and behaviors such as reading the Bible, praying, attending church services, and theological beliefs. However, as I discuss below, it does so rather differently.

*Follow Me* adds several useful concepts to the discussion of Christians' spiritual maturity. One is "movements" (p. 28), and these are the spiritual beliefs and attitudes that move a person from one stage in the spiritual continuum to the next. So, for example, whatever moves a person from Stage 1 (exploring Christ) to Stage 2 (growing in Christ) is termed "Movement 1". Another concept is the "gap", which is a measure of church expectations and satisfaction.

*Follow Me* analyzes its data to identify factors that catalyze spiritual growth. These factors include having orthodox spiritual beliefs, attending organized church activities, praying and reading the Bible, and participating in spiritual activities outside of the church

Overall, *Follow Me* is about 50% longer than *Reveal*. It presents more data than *Reveal* did, and it also makes use of poetry and extended metaphors, such as the lead author's efforts at weight loss, Michael Jordan's basketball skills, and the various instruments in an orchestra.

## **Strengths of *Follow Me***

*Follow Me* asks: What moves believers to spiritual growth? This question should be on the mind of every church leader—where do they want their church members to go, and how do they get them there? While obviously not a new question for the Church, *Follow Me* reminds us of its importance. Furthermore, Willow Creek Church demonstrates its commitment to answering this question by launching the Reveal project.

*Follow Me* demonstrates both the potential value and the relative ease of large-scale data collection. There are limitations, of course, to what the Church can learn from survey data, but we are still far from those limits. In fact, many of the questions routinely asked by church leaders about their churches can be answered, or at least informed, by collecting survey data. I foresee a time when local churches routinely survey their members. Not that information collected in surveys is more true or valuable than other forms of information, but it is useful and easily collected.

*Follow Me* demonstrates the ease of data collection. To date, the Reveal team has collected data from over 150,000 respondents using a web-based survey. Even just a decade ago, such a survey would have required 150,000 printed surveys manually entered into a data base. Now, with the advent of Web-based surveys, such as SurveyMonkey.com, survey collection is exponentially easier. Church leaders are perhaps behind the curve on this one, but once they realize the ease and low cost of

survey collection, surveys might be as common in American churches as newsletters, pot-lucks, and parking problems.

In addition to collecting a lot of data, *Follow Me* collects interesting data—information that most pastors would want to know about their own congregation. For example, what do their members want in a church? *Follow Me* shows how to do this. Church surveys can also identify which groups in a church are most or least satisfied with the church.

Once satisfaction data are collected from all church-goers, it's a simple matter to compute satisfaction scores for separate types of people in a church—young, old, male, female, white, racial minority, small group members, new members, and long-time attendees.

Once church leaders have this information—what people want and who is satisfied—they can act on it in various ways. They can use this information to create new programs designed specifically for the needs and wants of their church members. Or, they can alter existing programs to better fit with what their members want. Or, they can keep their programs the same but better explain their motivation in doing them, to clear up any concerns or misunderstandings. Regardless of how church leaders use this information, it seems worth knowing.

I have personally witnessed the usefulness of *Reveal* data for a local church. The church that I attend took part in *Follow Me*, and I met with the leadership while they discussed the resulting data. The church leadership found the information helpful in planning for the coming years, especially knowing which members were satisfied or dissatisfied with

various aspects of the church. I came away wondering if perhaps the discussion about the survey findings was more valuable than the findings themselves, for it involved a wide-ranging self-reflection about the life of the church. As such, the very process of taking a survey provided an opportunity to question our church's assumptions, traditions, and procedures.

### ***Follow Me versus Reveal?***

Given that *Follow Me* is a follow-up to *Reveal*, it's worth asking how the two books are different. While *Follow Me* has the same look as *Reveal*, with similar graphics and layout, it reads somewhat differently. *Reveal* was parsimonious in presentation and told a controversial story—church activities don't work well. *Follow Me*, in contrast, meanders somewhat, being less focused. It presents two “breakthrough” discoveries: Christians can do better, and reading the Bible prompts spiritual growth (Chapter 5). Now, I'm not an expert in church history or theology, but it's not clear to me that these ideas are new to the church, for I've encountered them in countless sermons and books. Still, it's good to be reminded of their truth.

As I understand the chronology of the Reveal ministry, they collected data for several years before publishing *Reveal* and then they published *Follow Me* a year or so after *Reveal*—maybe just months after collecting the data used in *Follow Me*. I wonder if the book would have benefited from additional time to assimilate and process the data, for the book felt somewhat rushed. Not only did it lack the tight focus of *Reveal*, but it

had some duplicated sections. For example pages 47 and 77 contain similar discussions about the linearity of spiritual growth, and pages 19 and 26 present the same figure.

Methodologically, *Follow Me* uses a much bigger sample than *Reveal*, but it's not clear how much value is added by this increased sample size. Here's why: Samples are useful (for this kind of research) if they accurately represent a larger population, not just because of their size. For example, suppose that we wanted to predict a forthcoming presidential election. We would do much better taking a random nationwide sample of 100 voters than drawing a sample of 100,000 voters from a particularly conservative or liberal region of the country. Succinctly put: Who is sampled is far more important than how many people are sampled.

The original *Reveal* study had 5,000 respondents and *Follow-Me* had 80,000. Both samples are plenty big for the types of analyses that they are doing (i.e., using statistical power to detect differences between groups). Also, both *Reveal* and *Follow-Me* drew convenience samples, meaning the researchers took easily-accessed churches rather than drawing a random sample of nationwide churches. According to *Reveal* (2007, p. 93), its seven churches were selected to be geographically and culturally diverse. *Follow Me* chose 200 churches out of 1,700 that applied at Willow Creek's Annual Leadership Conference. Perhaps, and maybe even probably, the 200-church sample better represents American Christians than does the 7-church sample, but we don't know for sure. At the very least, *Follow Me* studies a certain kind of church—those with leaders who attend Willow Creek's Annual Leadership Conference and apply to be in surveys, and this type

of church probably doesn't represent American churches as a whole.

The real value of such a large sample is that it enables researchers to compare across churches. *Follow Me* describes its churches as varying along a number of dimensions, including region of the country, congregation size, denomination, and worship style.

Why not examine differences between these types of churches? For example, does the spiritual continuum work differently for Baptists versus Lutherans? Does satisfaction with church services matter more in mega-churches than small churches? These types of findings would test if *Follow Me's* findings hold for different types of churches.

Somewhat ironically, a message of the Reveal team is that church programs are not “one-size-fits-all,” and yet their analyses of spiritual formation have assumed similarity for all churches— “one-size-fits-all.”

### **Cross-Sectional Data & Causation**

Given the methodological similarities between *Reveal* and *Follow Me*, it's no surprise then that they share some of the same weaknesses. Here I amplify issues raised in my article on *Reveal* (Wright 2008). Fundamentally, the conceptual framework of *Follow Me* is one of movement. It asks “what moves a person from one stage of spiritual growth to the next” (p. 27)? However, it uses static, one-point-in-time data to answer this dynamic question, and this disconnection causes problems, for the data collected by *Follow Me* are not well suited for answering the question that it poses.

Here's an illustration. Suppose that we went to a track meet and took a photograph of a race in progress. This photograph would describe the race at one point in time, so it could tell us who is winning the race and by how much. It would not describe, however, how the race is changing over time. So, just from the photograph, we can not tell if the second-place runner is catching up to the leader or is falling back, we do not know how the runners' relative positions are changing over time.

Similarly, the analyses of *Follow Me* describe the respondents at one point in time, but they do not capture change over time. While the cross-sectional study design used by *Follow Me* has its uses, it does not lend itself well to the study of stages, catalysts, and movements over time—the substantive focus of *Follow Me*. Applying cross-sectional data to longitudinal processes often results in confusion about cause and effect. This is observed in *Follow Me* and *Reveal* as they use similar data to tell two different causal stories.

*Reveal* portrayed the spiritual continuum as a powerful predictor of long-term spiritual growth (pp. 33-37). In other words, the more that people identify Christ as central in their lives, the more likely they are to do things reflective of spiritual growth, such as tithing, evangelism, serving, loving God, and loving others. As such, the causal story of *Reveal* was:

A) Spiritual continuum ? change in spiritual attitudes and behaviors

In *Follow Me*, however, the same authors, using nearly identical data, reverse the causal interpretation. In discussing what moves people along the spiritual continuum, *Follow Me* identifies spiritual attitudes and behaviors, such as tithing, evangelism, love for God, love for people (p. 27, 31-35). As such, the causal story of *Follow Me* is:

B) Spiritual attitudes and behaviors ? change in spiritual continuum

Taken together, the messages of *Reveal* and *Follow Me* give a circular logic about spiritual growth that we might represent as:

C) Spiritual attitudes and behaviors D change in spiritual continuum

So, for example, if you want to become closer to Christ, you should read the Bible more (as per *Follow Me*). How do you read the Bible more? By becoming closer to Christ (as per *Reveal*). It's not clear how useful this conceptual model is for church leaders.

As I've discussed previously (Wright 2008), I think the most helpful model would be one that combines spiritual attitudes, behaviors, and the spiritual continuum and asks what increases all of them. In other words, treat them as facets of one, underlying concept—e.g., growing as a Christian, and test for what increases all of them:

D) ?? spiritual attitudes and behaviors and the spiritual continuum.

## The Spiritual Continuum

In my discussion of *Reveal* (Wright 2008), I wrote at length about the spiritual continuum, and, overall, I find it somewhat problematic. Here I raise two additional issues. One issue regards whether spiritual growth is linear. *Reveal* assumed yes; I have suggested no (Wright, 2008). *Follow Me* changes course and states that spiritual growth is not linear, but in reading its explanation of linearity, I'm not sure that it has it quite right. On page 77, *Follow Me* presents a graph illustrating its idea of non-linearity. It shows silhouetted figures walking down the spiritual continuum. Sometimes they are propelled forward by their spiritual beliefs and attitudes, sometimes by church activities, sometimes by spiritual practices, and sometimes by spiritual activities with others. However, this still assumes linear spiritual growth, because the figures are always going forward—from stages 1 to 2 to 3 to 4. (This is actually illustrating what we might call multimodal growth—that different inputs matter at different times, which is a reasonable assumption.) Contrary to *Follow Me's* illustration, it may well be the case that spiritual growth is non-linear: Sometimes we go two steps forward and one step back.

A second issue regards the measurement of the spiritual continuum. I've had the chance to study the survey instrument itself, and as far as I can tell (and I may well be wrong), the four-stage spiritual continuum used in *Follow Me* comes from a single question with seven possible answers. I'm not sure how these get translated into a four-stage process, for it certainly isn't obvious looking at the question itself. As a courtesy to the *Reveal*

team, I am not reprinting any of their survey instrument (though I believe that one can reprint excerpts from even copyrighted material as part of a review). I do, however, strongly encourage them to be more forthcoming with how they collect data. Survey research works best with full disclosure—informing readers about how you do things. (Other Christian researchers, such as the Barna Group, likewise are guarded about their methods.)

### **Do Church Services Matter?**

*Reveal* made a splash in the Christian world by concluding that church attendance doesn't promote spiritual growth, and, by implication, the Willow Creek model wasn't as effective as advertised. "Involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth" (Reveal 2007, p. 33). This finding was confirmation for critics of Willow Creek and consternation for its supporters.

*Follow Me* tells a very different story about church activities, for it identifies them as influential at every stage of spiritual growth. In fact, it points to church activities as one of the four main catalysts for spiritual growth. "The church is the most significant organized influence on spiritual growth, so the activities of the church naturally emerge as important catalytic factors" (p. 36). Included in these activities are weekend services, small groups, adult education, and additional teaching and worship services (p. 37).

In fact, it's possible that *Follow Me* has even underestimated the impact of church attendance. It suggests that weekend service attendance matters most for those earliest in spiritual development. A chart on page 58 presents church attendance rates as they vary by the four stages of the spiritual continuum. About 65% of stage 1 respondents routinely attended weekend services, 85% of stage 2 respondents, 90% of stage 3 respondents, and 95% of stage 4 respondents. At first glance, this appears to support *Follow Me's* contention, for there is an increase of 20 percentile points in the first transition (i.e., from 65% to 85%) but only 5 percentile points in the third transition (90% to 95%).

The problem here is that attendance rates can't go above 100%. As such, it's useful to talk about percentage change. Here's what I mean. Thirty-five percent of the stage 1 respondents did not attend services weekly, and 15% of stage 2 respondents did not, so going from stage 1 to 2 reduced the non-weekly-service attendees by 57% (i.e., 20/35). Similarly, going from stage 2 to stage 3 reduced non-weekly attendance by 33%, and going from stage 3 to stage 4 reduced it by 50%. Weekly service attendance thus corresponds with all three transitions between stages, and it appears, by the logic of *Follow Me*, to be a catalyst of spiritual growth.

*Reveal's* initial finding about the apparent ineffectiveness of church activities was termed a "brutal" and "shocking" discovery. Then, *Follow Me* comes along and contradicts *Reveals* findings. Perhaps *Reveal* would not have received such widespread attention had it made a similar conclusion as *Follow Me*.

## The Gap

Perhaps the most intriguing new idea in *Follow Me* is what it terms “the gap.” This concept refers to the difference between what church members think is important for a church to do and how satisfied they are with how their church is doing it. For example, on page 38, *Follow Me* reports that 87% of its respondents reported that it was very important for their churches to help them to understand the Bible in depth but only 62% were very satisfied with how their church did this. The difference between these two numbers, 25%, represents a gap. Presumably, the larger the gap, the greater the unmet spiritual need, and churches can help their members grow by meeting these needs.

It seems worthwhile for churches to know what their members want and how they view the church; however, the concept of a gap is probably more complex than presented in *Follow Me*. For example, sometimes a church would want to create gaps by changing its members’ values. Suppose a church had 20% of its membership who thought serving the poor was important, and these 20% were satisfied with their church in this area. There is no gap here, but still the church’s leadership might want to move forward in this area.

They could do so by first convincing church members of the importance of this issue and thus, at least initially, creating a gap.

Furthermore, gaps might exist even when they do not appear in the calculation presented above, for the people who think that an issue is important might not be those who are satisfied with it. For example, suppose one-half of a church reports that it’s important for their church to do a particular activity, and one-half reports that they are satisfied with

what their church is currently doing with that activity. According to *Follow Me*, there is no gap here, and all is well. It could be, however, that these are different halves of the church, in which all the people who think the issue is important are also dissatisfied. This is actually a gap of 50%. As such, it would make more sense to compute the gap at the individual, rather than church, level of analysis. That is, how many people want something and are not satisfied with it.

(As a caveat, *Follow Me* conceptualizes “the gap” in two different ways. One is described above. Later in the book, however, the concept of a spiritual gap is the difference between a church’s ideal situation and its actual situation (e.g., p. 110). This is computed by comparing how many members are participating in a behavior (the actual) versus complete participation (the ideal). Both conceptualizations are potentially useful for the church.)

### **The Church and Academic Research**

Tucked away in an appendix, *Follow Me* offers a brief summary of its research orientation:

“This is ‘applied’ research rather than ‘pure’ research, meaning that its intent is to provide actionable insights for church leaders, not to create social science findings for academic journals” (p. 148).

I would say that this approach is half right.

Let's start with academic journals. Academic researchers, who are usually college professors as well, mostly publish their work in academic journals. These journals are found in university libraries and almost never in a popular bookstore such as Barnes & Noble or Borders. The best known journals for the sociology of religion are the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociology of Religion*, and *Review of Religious Research*. Never heard of these? You're not alone, and that's why I'm glad that the Reveal Team isn't aiming to put their findings into these journals.

Academic studies of religion are read by few church leaders because they address theoretical and empirical topics having little to do with the day-to-day workings of the church. In contrast, the Reveal team has chosen questions that really matter to the practice of faith.

Here's where I think that the Reveal Team has it wrong. In answering their questions, academics usually (and hopefully) use strong research methods, and we academics spend a lot of time discussing the strengths and weaknesses of any given method. We also submit our work to anonymous review process for further examination. The Reveal team might do well to emulate academic research—not in its research topics but rather its use and understanding of research methods. The research question of Reveal coupled with stronger research methods would make for a powerful combination.

*Follow Me* rejects academic research for what it calls “actionable insights”—empirical information of practical use to church leaders. Reveal's desire for relevance is laudable, but the best actionable insights would be those rooted in the strongest research methods. In addition, the most useful empirical findings would be those with clear,

defensible causal assumptions—something not always found in *Follow Me*. Without a strong causal understanding, there probably isn't a true actionable insight.

To be fair to the Reveal team, they are planning more rigorous studies in the future, and it's quite reasonable for them to have started with the easier-to-conduct cross-sectional studies. My point here is that they need to temper their conclusions to reflect the inherent weaknesses of their research designs.

### **Breakthroughs?**

Both *Reveal* and *Follow Me* describe their findings in bold, dramatic terms—"brutal truth", "provocative discoveries", "surprising findings", "breakthrough discoveries"—and these statements are from the book covers alone.

It's worthwhile, then, to step back and put their endeavor into perspective. Both books explicitly seek the causes of spiritual growth among Christians with an eye toward building the Church. This is a noble goal, but we should realize that the Reveal team is not alone in pursuing it. Other Christian organizations, such as the Barna Group and Lifeway Research, have produced a steady stream of empirical information aimed at improving church life. Some sociological studies, especially those of American Christian congregations, are also applicable to church growth.

Thinking more broadly, some of the greatest minds in the past 2,000 years have struggled with the questions posed by *Follow Me*. It is unlikely, then, for the Reveal team, or anyone else for that matter, to generate easily true "breakthrough" or "revolutionary" discoveries. This is not to imply that we shouldn't study the processes of spiritual

growth, but rather empirical studies, such as *Follow Me*, will provide incremental gains in cumulative knowledge—not the big brand-new-finding-that-changes-everything.

In writing about *Follow Me*, Andy Rowell (2008) makes this point well:

“There is a rich literature on sociological study of congregations (Mark Chaves, Nancy Ammerman, Stephen Warner, Scott Thumma, Rodney Stark) available but "secrets" and "solutions" are rarely found there--generally their conclusions explode easy answers. There is no substitute for a wise leadership team who continues to experiment and pray and consult with the congregation on how to see the formation of better and more disciples.”

### **Summary & Conclusion**

*Follow Me: What's Next for You?* is Willow Creek's sequel to last year's surprise big-seller *Reveal*. *Follow Me* presents data collected from 200 churches, as opposed to seven churches in the original *Reveal*. *Follow Me* emphasizes the movement from one stage of spiritual growth to the next, and it uses the concept of a “gap”—the difference between what church-goers want in a church and how satisfied they are what they have.

*Follow Me* demonstrates the relative ease of collecting data, for in a relatively short period of time it surveyed 80,000 people.

As with *Reveal*, *Follow Me* used a cross-sectional study design, meaning that it collected data at a single point in time. This type of data is a reasonable starting point for a research program, but it doesn't lend themselves to studying spiritual growth. As such, while *Follow Me* asks what changes people over time, its methods are not well suited for

answering the question. The analyses presented in *Follow Me* are open to multiple causal interpretations and as a result are not always convincing.

Surprisingly, *Follow Me* makes different causal assumptions than did *Reveal*. While *Reveal* assumed that progress on the spiritual continuum changed spiritual attitudes and behaviors, *Follow Me* turns this around and portrays spiritual attitudes and behaviors as predicting movement on the spiritual continuum. This causal ambiguity speaks to the need for a clear conceptual model guiding such research, a model not yet fully developed in *Reveal*'s research.

Another surprise regards the impact of church attendance. *Reveal*, for the most part, concluded that attending church services had little impact on spiritual growth, and this finding, as much as anything, attracted interest to *Reveal*. In contrast, *Follow Me* concludes that attending church activities increases spiritual growth. While the authors do not explain why the two studies came to different conclusions, *Follow Me*'s finding suggests that rejections or even substantial reforms of the Willow Creek model of ministry based on the findings of *Reveal* were premature.

It doesn't take much exposure to Willow Creek Church to know that they do a lot of things very, very well. Willow Creek has a passion for excellence, and it's a good bet that this passion will manifest itself in the work of its *Reveal* ministry. I expect that within a decade, if *Reveal* keeps on going, they will be producing true actionable insights by asking relevant questions and answering them with powerful research methods.

In the meantime, however, I would caution the authors and readers of *Follow Me* to temper their conclusions. The data presented here are open to multiple interpretations, and it would be premature to use them to reform substantially the American Church. More broadly, the issues discussed in *Follow Me*—what produces spiritual growth—are not new to the Church. Countless studies, sermons, and books have covered much the same ground, and while *Follow Me* is a potentially useful addition to this body of work, it certainly doesn't preempt what we have learned previously.

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