



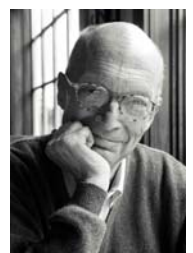
# **stop Look Listen**

## Recognizing God in Your Midst

Spiritual formation practices  
for the spiritually hungry

John Ackerman  
612-871-6377  
ackerman@visi.com  
www.johnackerman.org

stop.look.listen.



## **Church Leaders – You Can**

- \* **Affirm your unique way to stay in touch with God and learn with and from others.**
- \* **Help change the culture of your congregation to be more spiritually alive.**
- \* **Assist all of your members and attendees to become more spiritually aware, in touch with God.**
- \* **Discern with others where God is at work in your congregation, community and the world.**

One pattern of how we can recognize God in our midst is to look at the story of the two traveling on the road to Emmaus that first Easter Sunday. Two disciples headed back home to Emmaus after the crucifixion. They had thought Jesus was the Messiah to bring liberation for Israel. They and their hopes were dashed. They did not recognize Jesus when he came up to them on the road and asked what they were talking about. He shared the hope in the Jewish tradition about the Messiah. But their minds were shut, even though their hearts knew. Then there was a dynamic shift:

### **Stop**

The disciples stopped and invited Jesus into their home.

### **Look**

They took a long, loving look. They saw his scarred hands.

### **Listen**

They recognized Jesus as they listened to his words. They recognized him in the self-giving love in the broken bread. They changed the way they looked at life, suffering, and self-giving, and immediately joined the others in Jerusalem.

A pastor wrote about a similar change in him and his congregation:

*I found myself not only drained physically and mentally, but also spiritually. There was a deep hunger in my soul for spiritual renewal for myself and also the congregation I'd served for many years.*

After using the Stop, Look, and Listen process, he wrote:

*Visitors have noticed a different spirit as they have come into our worship and ministry—a warm welcome that wasn't there before. Now we are all trying to pay attention to God's work and presence in our daily personal and corporate lives.*

## Introduction

# They Recognized Him

That's the point of the story of the two disciples, who on Easter Sunday did not believe the report of Jesus' resurrection. They were going home from Jerusalem to Emmaus, convinced that their hopes about the Messiah were dashed. A stranger came up to them, asked about their conversation, and shared stories from the Bible. They invited him into their home. He shifted from being the guest to being the host, broke the bread, and

*they recognized him.* The stranger was Jesus!

Other stories record a similar sudden recognition of God. Moses was tending his sheep and saw a bush that was burning. He turned aside from what he was doing and was addressed by a voice that said his name was *I AM*. God got his attention.

Jacob was running away. He slept and woke up and said, "*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.*" He woke up spiritually.

Those experiences changed these people individually, changed their community, and in turn changed the world. God continues to take the initiative with us, giving us the opportunity to receive love, grace, communion. Many times we are blind like the disciples, wondering what do next. Sometimes we are like Moses, going about our business unaware of God. Sometimes, like Jacob, we are spiritually asleep.

Many of us are puzzled about what it means to recognize God, to be aware of God's presence. Our daily experience seems very different from the stories in the Bible. We don't usually hear a voice or suddenly awake with a sense of holiness. We haven't usually recognized Jesus as the host at our tables, in communion, or even in the generosity of life.

How can we recognize God, pay attention, wake up? Each of these experiences in the Bible stories is unique. Jesus didn't give the same word to the individuals he met. We, too, are unique in our spiritual awareness. Yet there are ways of learning together.

Here are some practices to increase our awareness, ways of paying attention that come from the Bible experience and from other historical patterns of recognizing God in peoples' lives.

### *About Me*

I have been surprised as I have recognized God many times as a person, pastor, and spiritual guide. I have put together three areas of experience that are usually learned separately, but are actually interrelated:

***Individual spiritual growth.*** I have practiced individual spiritual direction for twenty-five years, mostly with clergy.

***Changing the congregational culture.*** I was a pastor for forty years, and taught pastors in seminary, courses in conferences, and workshops. I have learned ways that individuals and the church's leaders and community discern where the Spirit is already working.

***Action in the world.*** I have discovered and practiced new ways of discerning mission to families, work, and in the world. This goes beyond recognizing and serving Jesus in the neighbor, the poor, and sick. It is more than working for justice. It is discerning, recognizing God with others in community as we let go of our previous ways of thinking and act to meet the challenge of profound change in the culture.

## Section 2

# What Does this Material Aim to Do?

**This is a process designed to help people and churches do what Jesus says.** In traditional language this is:

The kingdom of God is at hand.  
Repent.  
Believe the gospel.

A paraphrase puts it:

Give your entire attention to what God is doing now.  
Change your life.  
Embrace the good news, the reality of God's grace and love.

**The kingdom of God** is invisible but real. It is God in action. Jesus says this about the kingdom: *Give your entire attention to what God is doing now* (The Message). We are invited to recognize this reality and realign our lives. This reality is like wind, love, truth, justice. It shakes the foundations of countries and powers. It is within and among people and transforms lives, congregations, and cultures.

**Repent** means to change, to turn around, to keep being oriented to the Reality of God. Repent means that there will be observable results like:

- Basic openness to receive and give compassion
- A sense of kinship and belonging with all
- Appreciation and gratitude
- Letting go of holding onto ourselves, our defensiveness and arrogance
- Contributing to a caring community where care is given and received
- Doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God

There are historic practices, processes, that have been the means of the Spirit's changing people and churches. They have been used in both Eastern and Western traditions. They are called by different names, but they are, functionally:

**Self-examination:** inventory, looking at our behavior and God's gifts. Confession.

**Enlightenment:** receiving love, truth, grace. Our minds, hearts, and will are open and the Spirit flows through us. Forgiveness.

**Willingness:** resonating, working in synch with God's desires. Sanctification.

These practices have been used in Alcoholics Anonymous, the Jesuit practice of the Daily Examination of consciousness, and in other traditions. I have summarized them this way:

**Stop**

Intention.

**Look**

Attention. (Self Examination.)

**Listen**

Receive. (Enlightenment.) Be changed. Respond. (Willingness.)

These can be done by everyone, not just by the spiritual elite. They work for every personality type and temperament.

Congregational practices for leaders, in worship, in education and mission are similar. They include:

**Stop**

Shifting our usual way of business and planning.  
Recognizing where the Spirit is already at work rather than our vision.

**Look**

Listening together to life, community, Scripture, each other, the world.

**Listen**

Discernment rather than discussion and voting.  
Doing, practicing, a new way of living. Letting go of the old ways.  
Regular feedback and accountability.

**This approach is unique** because most of the time, programs that offer “one size fits all” don’t work for individual or congregational uniqueness. With this material, people can learn the attitude of paying attention to where the Spirit is working at many levels, and learn to identify their own unique way of recognizing the Spirit at work. In this approach, there is **mutuality** in the church system: the congregation is fed by individual renewal and supports and teaches individuals in their practice. The culture interacts with both.

### Section 3

# An Outline for Learning

Six Exercises, “Lessons,” for learning together:

#### *Exercise One*

##### **STOPPING: A SHIFT IN ATTENTION**

Where has life, God, brought you to an awareness of something greater than yourself? Where have you been loved, surprised by joy?  
How have you stopped to pay attention, recognize God?

#### *Exercise Two*

##### **LOOKING: AN OPEN MIND**

What went on throughout the day?  
What are the gifts you received? What are you not grateful for?  
Can you give thanks, ask for help?

#### *Exercise Three*

##### **LISTENING: AN OPEN HEART**

Can you listen with your heart as well as your mind?  
Can you dialogue with others, scripture, your body?  
Can you read scripture with your heart, inspired by the Spirit?  
How does God speak, touch your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

#### *Exercise Four*

##### **RECEIVING: OPEN HEART AND WILL**

Where and how do you receive deeper love? Where do you not?  
How do you receive forgiveness and healing? Forgive others?  
Where does God invite you to a change of heart?

#### *Exercise Five*

##### **DECIDING: LET GO, LET COME, ACT**

Where does Christ invite you to let go of your control?  
How can the Spirit teach you, lead you to the next step as you let come?  
Where are you invited to be a part of profound change with others in the community?

#### *Exercise Six*

##### **CONTINUING THE PROCESS**

How can you continue to take, receive, and give? Who will support you and hold you accountable, ask questions, give you feedback?  
How can you know God in, among, beyond us, and in the pain in the world?  
What helps you to wake up, live more abundantly?

## Section 4

# A Very Simple Guide for Beginning

Jesus said:

*What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so concerned with **getting**, so you can respond to God's **giving**.... Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now.*

Matthew 6, *The Message*

Here is a contemporary way of expressing this:

*There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of all that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly...*

*Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is...touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.*

Frederick Buechner, *Listen to Your Life*

How can you start? Try copying the guide below, possibly printing it on a card, and putting it someplace in your home where you will see it during the day. Some put it over the sink where they wash dishes. Others put it on their bathroom mirror or on top of their Bible or where they sit to read the paper or watch television. Then use it as a guide for your daily praying.

You may use the separate items as a curriculum for a group meeting.

### **STOP**

Intentionally shift your attention.  
Pray to be open and notice  
what is happening, where love is.  
Do whatever helps you to open your  
mind, heart, and will.

### **LOOK**

Look back and notice  
what you received as a gift.  
Ask for gratitude. Say thanks.  
Notice what you are not grateful for.  
Ask for help.

## **LISTEN**

What might God be saying in  
your life, in scripture?  
Might God be in the love  
you receive and give?  
Might you be invited to let go,  
let come, to change?

You probably will learn this in stages. Take a small bit at a time.  
You can use the separate items as a weekly guide for a group.

## **STOP.**

How can you catch your breath, the Spirit or breath of God? Jesus said

*What I'm doing here is to get you to **relax**.*

You might think of this as a mini-sabbath where you can receive the rest from God.

Is it walking, listening to music, humming a hymn? Try noticing your breathing. As you breathe in and out, whisper something like:

Relax...Spirit.  
Let come.... let go.  
Or just intentionally relax.

## **LOOK.**

How can you REALLY look? Gaze. Let your heart and mind look. Remember what has happened and pay attention to what is happening now. Jesus said:

*Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now.*  
Ask, invite, be open to God teaching, caring for you as you:  
Gather in the manna, the daily bread.  
Reflect where you been fed, loved, seen, touched.  
Remember where love flowed through you. Can you give thanks?

Where were you stuck with anger, resentment, shame, guilt?  
Can you hand these over to God, receive forgiveness, forgive?  
Where is the pain in the world? Don't turn away.

## **LISTEN.**

Listen with your heart. What is God saying in life, in scripture?  
What are people saying beyond their words? What is your body saying?

Jesus said:

*Are you listening to this? Really listening?*

As you read the Bible, newspapers, listen to TV, what resonates?

Have you heard this before? Do your friends and family agree that this is appropriate, that this is a “word” from the Lord?

**RECEIVE.**

Where is love, generosity, grace coming to you?

Can you receive Christ’s loving communion?

“Take, receive, This is my life broken for you.”

Can you stop negative self-talk and know that you are God’s beloved?

**DECIDE.**

What is wildly important for you, according to God’s desire and your wishing?

**Let go** of being in control. Where does the Spirit shift your awareness, teach you, move inwardly?

**Let come** the hints or nudges that may lead you to the next step. Pray something like “Holy Spirit, flow through me.”

**Go.** Be. Change. Ask for patient expectation. Get feedback.

**You may want to try the exercise this way:**

**Stop:** Breathe in the Spirit’s life, love, liberty.

**Look:** Look with the eyes at love.

**Listen:** Let the hints emerge.

**Go:** Let go of your agenda, drama.  
Breathe out.  
Take the next step.

Write down what you recognize God is doing so that you become more specific, and your observations become more tangible. What is “wildly important”?

**CONTINUE.**

Where can you be with others who can do this? Can you at least find one other person who can listen well? Most of us learn this best in community, observing others, receiving feedback for ourselves.

As you talk it over with others, see if you can get support for doing your version of this as a regular practice. Feel free to adapt it to fit you, now. As you listen to God in this process, what does God say, invite you to, as a regular practice? Relaxing? Being still? Letting go, letting come? Listening to God in scripture and life? Doing what you hear? All of the above at different times?

*Quit dressing your soul in someone else's piety. Your soul is not a pauper. Let it live its own life...Most of all, untie your soul, give it room to breathe, let it play, do not be ashamed of it. It is the child of the eternal and destined for greater things than you dream.*

Samuel Miller, *The Life of the Soul*

## Section 5

# Additional Hints

Many people find it very helpful to write what they hear every day, and then look back over a week to notice the patterns that come up. Can you listen to others and hear course corrections? Do some testing of your perception. Is this God speaking? Are you becoming more compassionate? Does what you do and hear fit with the stories in scripture?

### *Your prayer may be*

Shouting at God for justice, asking why.  
Adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication.  
Listening, paying attention.  
Being prayerful during the day, open in mind, heart, and will.

### *You can try practicing this through the day, in ways such as*

- Being intentional about taking in a breath and letting go. Remember to let go, lighten up, let come.
- When you are caught by something—defensiveness, anger, lust, anxiety, fear—Stop. Step back and look. Listen to God’s truth. You are loved.
- Let your brain and nervous system react for 90 seconds, and then stop, look at it, and choose to let it go, and decide what is appropriate now.
- Let your body pray. Lift up your hands to heaven, spread them out like Jesus offering himself up. Raise them up with the Spirit emerging in generosity. Kneel.
- Walk. Play.

### *There are some styles of perceiving God*

To those whose preference for noticing is with their **mind**, God may be revealed through their open mind. Not just analytical thinking, but a shift to more intuitive thinking. This pattern usually sees the whole picture. There is an “aha” moment. The traditional language for this is “the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit” – a connection between inner and outer. Our ego is in second place to scripture, a play or movie, life. They “speak.” It may also be a “small voice” within: a hunch, a glimmer of an idea.

For those who perceive with their **hearts**, God may appear in belonging, having one’s heart touched. God appears in music, passion, connection. This may be subtle or quite dramatic (usually preferred). When this pattern of knowing is in dialogue with someone else, real or in the

imagination, there is a connection, something more alive than usual. People move from the old way of knowing things from their feelings alone.

There are those who find out, learn through **action**. They “know” something as they do it. Just thinking is not enough. They know love when they are serving, giving, being cared for, literally touched. Jesus says “Take, eat.” Baptism is real and tangible. Yes, they know, upon reflection, that the tangible is simile or metaphor for an inner or spiritual reality. But God is there when they play with their dog, take a walk, dance. God may call them to step out in faith.

There are those who perceive things by **being** together. God is in a relationship of friendship or love when two people are quiet and look in the same direction. Or people may be doing something, but aware of the link between them. Sometimes this is done in silence. God “speaks” in the silence. A favorite text is “Be still and know that I am God.” Increased compassion is the result.

Most of us are aware of all of these modes. For decision-making or discernment of God’s will, this is a suggestion:

- **Open Mind:** What are the facts? What is going on? What are the ideas about reality? What does scripture say?
- **Open Heart:** How can we tell our stories and listen to those of others, go behind the ideas to the living person? What may God be saying in and through people?
- **Open Will:** Where can we let go of our preconception of reality, our feelings, our insistence that we are right? Where can we let go? May God speak through, in, the silence with a nudge, the glimmer of a new approach?
- **Open Action:** How can we learn by doing things, one step at a time? No big long-term vision, but a day-by-day walking with God, getting directions.

And for daily practice, the “Stop, Look, and Listen” encourages the use of all four styles or patterns.

## Section 6

# Introducing “Stop, Look, and Listen” to Your Church

### *In a congregation*

I recommend that you start with a small group. In this group of six to eight, invite a cross-section of your congregation: leaders, the spiritually mature, and newcomers. You will learn together as you share the six “lessons.” No one has to be the expert. As you learn to recognize God individually and in the group, you may also discern where God is already working in the congregation. You can plan together where and how to introduce this to the congregation.

Or, you may look at where God is already at work, where doors are open, and start there. Some start with a class on Sunday or during the week. Others begin with preaching.

### *Leadership groups*

Ask for the leaders in the small learning group to help you plan where and how to introduce this to the leadership. Most leadership groups are most open in retreats. Ask where they have recognized the Spirit, energy, community, God working. Then ask where they experience God now. You may use the book, “Changing Congregational Culture,” by Anthony Robinson.

In introducing this attitude to regular meetings, you may begin with shifting the “business as usual” approach. Here are a number of possibilities. Ask the group to check in; each takes the opportunity to tell the others where they find themselves. You can explain that this will help the work go faster and help them know each other better. You may begin with a Bible reflection, asking where they hear God speaking to them, and then as a group and congregation, and in the world. You may have a moment of silence for a few minutes before you vote, asking the leaders to pray that they might do God’s desire. You might ask where they noticed the Spirit, the energy, in the service last Sunday. These practices will begin to affect the culture of the congregation as leaders begin to practice this attitude elsewhere.

There is a new approach to creative change in groups called “Theory U.” It is written in business language, but similar to the patterns in scripture of surrender and grace. It is remarkably like “Stop, Look, and Listen.” An executive summary is available free on the web: [www.theoryu.com](http://www.theoryu.com).

### *Worship*

Ask the small group you learned with to meet with the worship committee to help decide how to help worshippers recognize God for themselves. There are many ways to preach about this, and to give people an exercise to do throughout the week. You may leave some periods of silence in the

prayers so that people might look and listen. Some congregations have invited parishioners to share a short story about how they recognize God.

### ***Education***

The material described above can be used even with the most formal lecture/discussion class. When individuals in the class are resistant to talk about their experience, you can ask several brave class members to share their experience with the practices.

The material has been easily adapted to mid-week classes. Teach, do the practice, invite individuals to reflect by themselves, and then ask them to share. Get some feedback about how things went.

### ***Mission***

It may be quite easy to invite the members of an outreach committee to be quiet and ask for God's guidance for them and for discerning where God is calling, already at work, in the community and the world. This is a great addition to material used for developing the missional congregation such as *We Are Here Now* by Patrick Keifert. You may even listen to and with the outsiders, rather than only doing what you want to for them.

Peter Senge's new book, *The Necessary Revolution*, elegantly teaches patterns for doing this. These patterns are quite similar to "Stop, Look, and Listen."

These are just hints of what has been done in churches already. People have recognized God, paid attention, awakened, changed. God may have other ideas to teach you.

Stop. Look. Listen.

God is asking, sharing, waiting to be invited in.