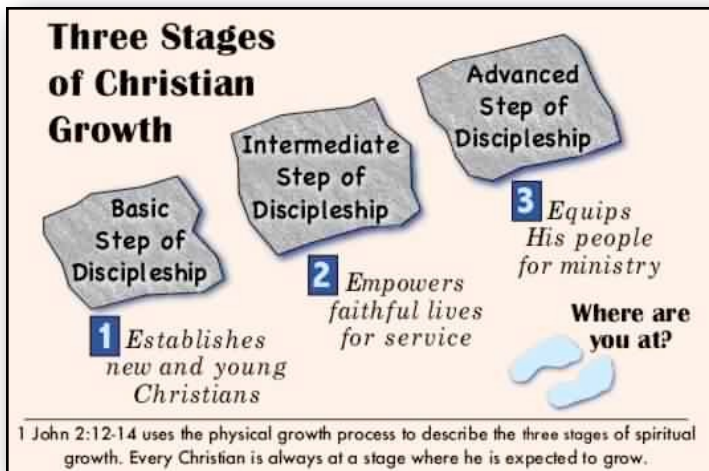


# Basic Concepts of Discipleship

## Introduction to the Stages of Spiritual Growth



A bold statement, perhaps, but this concept of three stages of Christian growth comes from Elder John. He compares the nebulous growth of our spiritual lives with what is very visible and clear – our own physical growth. Sociologists have done all sorts of studies on the physiological development of a child. Why don't we more seriously analyze this spiritual development? We have found that as we use this physiological model, many new insights into discipleship excitingly come into view.

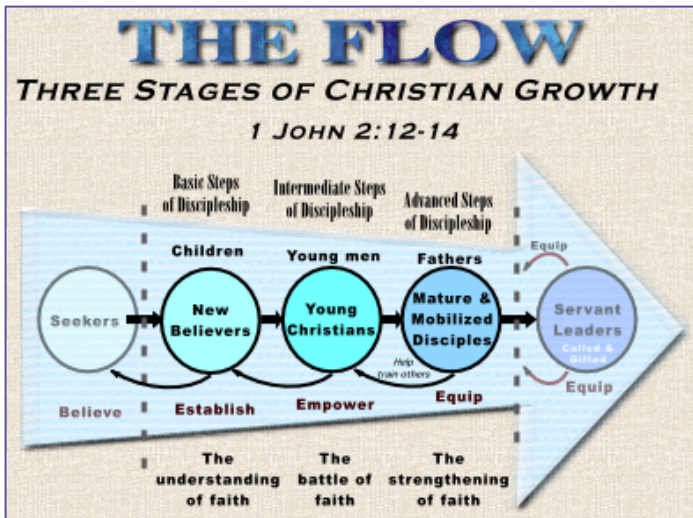
In the following pages, we will trace some of those things which we have learned. This is by no means a final analysis, but it has tremendously helped clarify three aspects: discover what is expected

at each stage of discipleship, analyze the means those things happen and perhaps most importantly, see how they relate to the



other stages of discipleship. This, then, becomes something that is very communicable. Charts like the one above help disciple makers and disciples see where we are at, where we are going and how to get there.

The key to growing churches is the effectiveness in which they train others to live and serve like Christ.



## Introduction to the Flow Diagram

We must recognize that the three spiritual stages of growth are closely related to the other stages. Just as a person cannot be born a young adult, neither can he spiritually bypass certain spiritual stages. That being said, physical growth largely depends on the maturing process of time. We are all aware (some painfully!) how we grow older with time. Spiritual growth, however, develops as God's truth is implanted into our hearts and minds so that it shapes what we think and do.

If everyone in the church was dressed in their spiritual clothes, our churches would look utterly ridiculous. We would see 10-year-old Christians dressed as infants. On the other hand, we might be very surprised to see some very young Christians wearing a suit. Time is not the key factor for maturing but the entrance of light. We cannot discount the factor of time in the process of acquiring truth, however. This is the reason the Apostle Paul says that we are not to anoint into eldership those who have been Christians for a short time.

In the adjacent 'The Flow' chart, we notice two significant differences between this and the prior diagram.

(1) The Flow diagram has an arrow. This helps us to see how God's grace like a current pushes us 'downstream', so to speak. God is working behind the growing process. He wants us to grow. He carefully helps us to grow. We can see this in the way God has equipped the world with parents and the church with teachers and pastors. God has designed the means for the truth of God to enter our lives. The faster this process is, the quicker we grow. This is just the beginning of the magnificent orchestration of the Holy Spirit's work.

Unfortunately, we do not have the time to elaborate on this. God is constantly causing us to grow.

(2) The diagrams differ in that the different stages have lines drawn between them. These are lines of connectivity. If one looks carefully, the lines are going in both directions.

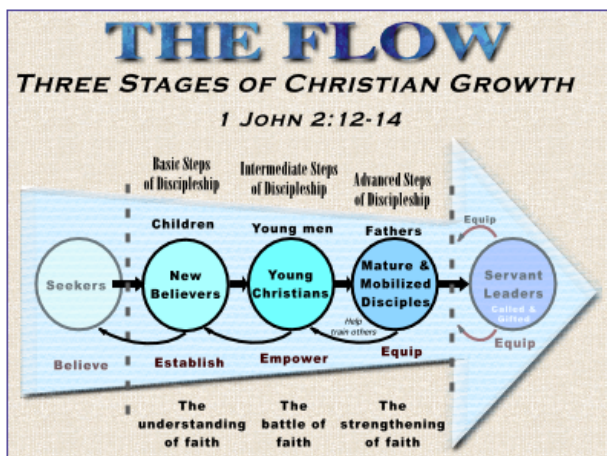
The right arrows are more obvious. They show the order in which we grow. As said before, a Christian who has new life must go through each stage of life in order. Each stage requires certain entrance of truths into a person's heart and mind so that the person is shaped or established by it. Special things need to happen in the New Believer's stage before they can rightly belong to the Young Christian's stage. Likewise, those in the Young Christian's stage must go through certain training before they can belong to the third 'father' stage. This training might informally or formally occur, but most Christians no longer live in such contexts like strong Christian families where there is much informal training.

Needless to say, if those things which are most needed are neglected, the Christian ends up with rather predictable problems. Just like a baby needs certain nutrients to grow properly, the new Christian also does. This is what John talks about in 1 John 2:12-14 which we have discussed elsewhere.

The natural question is "What stage are you at?" In almost every form that one fills out, one's age is asked for. A person's age speaks volumes on his or her interests and needs. As we discern where we are at in the spiritual growth process, we are able to better see what our present needs are. In fact, just defining what characterizes each of the three stages initiate special insights into our lives. After introducing "The Flow" diagram a bit more, we will give a brief introduction of each of the three stages of spiritual life.

The diagram is a smaller and partially adapted FLOW diagram. We have deliberately shaded out the means that people enter this flow of life in Christ (the Seeker stage—the left side) and the branch off stage at the end (the Servant Leader—the right side). They are important. We need new people in the Christian family. We also

need to understand how this spiritual life relates to those in full-time ministry. These are discussed elsewhere.



This diagram is powerful because it helps us understand this dynamic of spiritual growth on both a conceptual level and a practical level in how we can use it in our local churches and individual lives. Each of the three stages has its own distinctive features but is interconnected to each other. This insight into how they interrelate to each stage quickly clarifies what has confused Christians for many years. For example, we see how important discipleship is to each part of the Christian's life. We learn what each Christian should focus on in their lives. And perhaps most importantly, it helps us realize that Christians always need to be growing. This diagram has motivated me to grow and help others grow.

The Holy Spirit helps each of us through the various stages of the Christian life. One area is not more important than another. Each, however, has its own context where different foundational truths are being put into our lives so that we can more effectively worship and serve.

# The Three Stages of Discipleship

Christians are designed to grow. Whenever a Christian is stagnant, something is drastically wrong.

Each of the three stages of discipleship is developed from 1 John 2:12-14 where John uses human growth to describe the stages of spiritual growth. We could break these down further, but we are happy to retain the three categories that John utilizes: infant/child, young man, and father.

John's own words tell us that each stage has its special characteristics. Because the person is going through such a stage, he has special needs and special opportunities to grow. A child and an adult's growth patterns will have similarities. We must not be ignorant of them. Within this general understanding of life principles, however, there are special needs of each group. We know this physically. The infant needs much to be done for her whereas the teenager is learning to live out her life in a whole different context. This is true spiritually too.

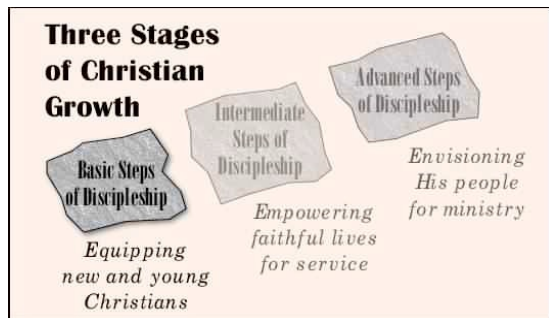
It is urgent to formally disciple God's people. This is Jesus' command, "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20). To disregard His summary of our duty as said in this Great Commission is utter folly. And yet, few Christians are making disciples. Once we understand the importance of discipleship, we need to start thinking of how we disciple God's people. Most pastors think of doing this through a sermon. They are observing the general principles of life. We all should be learning at worship services. God will meet us there, but it is not sufficient. We need to formally disciple others so growth comes easy and enjoyable without much stumbling due to ignorance and hopelessness.

## The Basic Stage of Discipleship

Basic discipleship focuses on training new or very young Christians. Like small children, new Christians are unstable and need security.

Who would labor nine months to have a child only to neglect him after he is born? But this is precisely what many churches have done.

The strong Christian culture in many places has disguised the need for this training for a long time. The members would receive much of their Bible and



character training at home. This is not the case anymore. To make things worse, the culture has been able to use the media to shape the thoughts and moods of God's people. People can sing the lyrics of many ungodly songs more than quote the Holy Scriptures. The church needs to quickly jump back into the race of equipping their people. No wonder there is a prevailing lack of commitment in today's church. God's people have not been trained. As the church takes on its task to disciple (train) her people, families will again renew their task of training at home. This brings about a stable society.

Every church should professing Christian form of basic disciples should be burdened to train level. In this way, any new Christian, home, workplace or simple and helps the Christian fulfill his or her obligation to make disciples. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples."

**Love means we disciple others.**

make sure every has gone through a discipleship. We such a way that these equipped and others at this basic God's people can train whether it be at their gym. The training is

One pastor who uses this training concept recently had an evangelistic outreach. About thirty people raised their hand. This

was exciting, but not anywhere as special as the thirty people from the congregation (that is a big number for that church) who got up and counseled them. They would not only help the person understand whether they are saved but over the next few months regularly meet with them one-on-one and lead them through basic discipleship material. Notice that these thirty have not only been trained but trained to serve. We must train the Christian to participate in the training from the start.

Those who have been a Christian a longer time but have not received basic discipleship training need special attention. If at all possible, they should start afresh here at the foundational truths and move on quickly to the next stage. Unless the foundation is firm, one cannot safely build upon it. One can almost guarantee that these same individuals have already picked up a number of wrong thought patterns and bad spiritual habits. More mature Christians need to disciple these individuals. If these Christians want to grow, they will easily adjust and grow. If they have a dull heart, much patience is needed. Certain bad concepts have to be taken down before a new building is erected.

Biblical Foundations has a lot of materials discipleship at each of basic level, the advanced levels. They the start to the finish grow and serve in our

**God  
brings  
victory  
through  
His  
Word.**

for Freedom (BFF) discussing the three levels: this intermediate and take a Christian from where we continue to life and service.

BFF has two sets of materials that can be designed to train the new or immature Christian in today's modern context. There are other discipleship materials out there but it is largely designed for student groups and not centered around the church as they should be. We have written elsewhere on how basic discipleship material works.



Basic discipleship is the place that immature Christians are watched over and cared for by right teaching and modeling. My wife is planting seeds in the garden. We know from experience that when the beans start growing, birds come by and snatch the top of the sprout virtually destroying the plant. So we cover them. We also pay much more attention to watering at this stage because the soil at the top gets dry and the roots haven't reached far down.

In the same way, we watch over a new Christian. Basic discipleship training materials provide the opportunity to pass on this kind of needed nurturing. By caring for these questions of assurance and providing good basic teaching about Christ and salvation, the 'child' Christian can in a short time of three months grow into the Intermediate Stage of Discipleship.

## **The Intermediate Stage of Discipleship**

The intermediate stage of discipleship, like the basic stage, is also a temporary stage. We learn this through John's teaching model. No young person stays young for long. They grow up. Each young person goes through a series of physical and emotional changes that challenge his values in life. He wonders who he is, what he wants to do and how he is going to do it. If he avoids these questions, he gains an adult body with an immature personality. Healthy discipleship training brings all the growth that these people need at this stage.

Growth needs to occur in many areas of one's spiritual life. The most appropriate training really depends on where one is at in their life. What do they know of God's Word? Are they married? What sins do they struggle with? Once these questions are answered, they need to start seeing how God's Word helps them grow in those areas.



As they grow in the knowledge and trust of God's Word, they can overcome all sorts of former problems. Step by step, they become more like Christ. It is here, at this intermediate stage, that a lot of rough spots are removed from the Christian. "Take away the dross from the silver, And there comes out a vessel for the smith" (Proverbs 25:4). As they are removed, the Christian grows in his faith. The advanced stage of discipleship naturally follows the Intermediate.

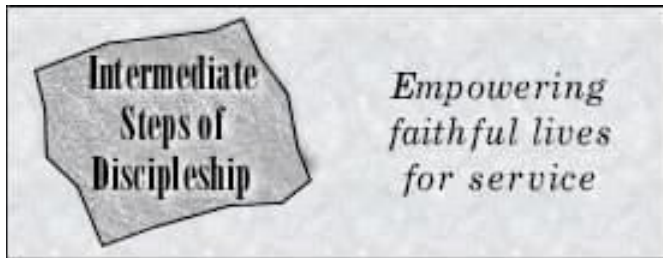
Intermediate discipleship is for those who have received basic spiritual training. Most Christians, sadly to say, never get beyond that point. Without foundational truths that are well placed, the Christian is prone to easy attacks from the evil one. It is like adolescence, a temporary stage involving tremendous growth. The phrase 'Never grew up' can aptly be used to describe many Christians who never received training at the intermediate stage. Perhaps one can call them worldly, but the common problem is that they are ensnared by all sorts of problems. What difficulties? Worry, bad relationships, bitterness, lack of patience, loneliness, sickness, lust, gambling, bad health, addictions, poor marriages, problems raising children and tempers are just some of these troubling points. God has a much better and rewarding way.

Elder John knew Jesus Christ as the river of life. He knows that as Christians grow, they go beyond these difficulties step by step. He describes Christians in this intermediate stage as overcomers (1

John 2:13-14). We have written more on this elsewhere, but please note that the Christian in this intermediate stage is learning how to successfully overcome temptations. He is gaining a grasp of how to live a victorious Christian life through the power of God's Word.

Most Christians, unfortunately, have no clue that they can overcome these things. God makes them aware of their problems that they might seek Him for answers. But all they hear are things like, "What do you expect? You are human, aren't you?" And so, they just accept these problems as normal rather than as areas needing a breakthrough.

Many Christians today do not have the stamina or motives to serve. They would rather pop some drug down their throat and just believe, "That is the way they are. They can't change anything." They end up fighting, without success, their own personal problems that they have no ability to serve in the local church. They simply lack the faith to step into service because they feel insecure about their defeated Christian lives. This is, perhaps, all they know and feel. Who can blame them for lack of commitment?



John the Elder knows that God wants to bring every Christian through these different problems that they face in their lives. As the Spirit uses God's Word to bring them to victory over their sins, the Christians begin to grow in faith. They learn how to use God's Word to overcome problems which can then be used to help them in other areas of their lives. And, of course, they can share what they have learned with others. Do others want to hear? Sure, they do. They share a personal testimony on how the Lord led them from

defeat to victory. And so with each victory, they are touched more and more by God's love and find freedom and desire to serve others.

This intermediate stage is a process. Many different things are happening over a period of time. The basic training can take place in just a few months, but this will take a few years depending on their previous training (such as through godly parents) and hearts. But the changing point happens when they can see how God has led them to victory over their sins. Their faith gets strong. They discover in a whole new sense how God is their Savior. He rescues them from the world, its temptations and the power of sin in their lives.

There is so much more to share about how God helps us grow and how we actually use God's Word to find that victory. Worship for the new Christian is based on forgiveness of sin through Jesus. But the Christian in this stage will find a fuller sense of worship because they are constantly reminded how their loving Lord led them out of their personal sins that once brought pain and despair. The materials that we share are powerful because they show how God's Word, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, brings His people into victory where there was only defeat before.

The confusing part is that there are so many areas in our lives that we need to grow in and learn how to apply the power of God's truth. The key is to focus on one area at a time and keep pursuing growth in that area by using God's Word. Once a man or woman has been brought through this stage, they are not easily defeated by the evil one. Of course, there are temptations as long as we are on earth, but they are of a different nature. This is discussed more at the advanced discipleship stage. Those that have seen the powerful work of the 'sword of God' (the Word of God) are not easily cowered into a corner. They have learned to fight!

Biblical Foundations for Freedom (BFF) has a lot of materials discussing discipleship at this intermediate level. These materials are free of charge on the web. We do not charge for the use of these materials. Our burden is to equip Christians to grow. We recognize

that many around the world do not have such materials that unlock the power of God to our lives. They are designed to train the Christian on how to use God's Word to have victory in each area of their Christian lives.

We have mentioned God's Word several times. As Elder John has said, it is key to gaining victory. BFF also has many resources on getting to know God more through His Word. This is a lifetime pursuit. It is essential to make Bible reading, study, and meditation a regular part of your lives. We suggest that after you read a passage or book of the Bible, go to our Bible resources page. Take your own notes of how God is speaking to you through His Word. As we grow in God's Word, we will be more able to grow strong in battle. Spiritual growth is not possible without the Word of God.

## The Advanced Stage of Discipleship

The advanced stage of discipleship is where the mature Christian is refined over a longer period of time.



refined over a longer period of time.

When has one entered the advanced discipleship stage of Christian living? It is hard to tell. The one thing for sure is that not enough

Christians have reached that stage!

John compares them to the father. The father is mature. He is a leader and works with other younger ones so that they can be protected, guided and properly cared for. These spiritual fathers still have a constant need for growth just like the younger ones. This growth might not be very visible from the outward. Their battles are often on a deeper level causing their spiritual roots to grow deeper as they grow closer to God.

Everyone who has been a Christian for five to seven years should be at this advanced stage of discipleship. The things that mark off fathers from children is their having wrestled and gained victory over various personal struggles by God's Word and found God ultimately faithful, good, holy and loving. The fathers, by no means, have bypassed temptation but instead have gained a special faith that gives discernment and comfort in difficult times. The storm might rage on the surface of the sea, but deep down everything is the same.

The father is also a father because he has his own children. If a Christian is not yet bearing significant fruit, then he or she is not yet at this stage. The mature Christian bears fruit. We should not think of this fruit simply as new Christians. This fruit will show itself in the ways it strengthens others in numerous areas of life: more Christ-likeness, serving others to help them grow, use of their spiritual gifts to equip the body of Christ, careful stewardship of possessions, teachings, sharing the protection from false Word, leadership to those who are experiencing difficulties. These fathers have experienced trials in their pasts and, through this experience, know how to comfort others.

**Our roots need to keep getting deeper.**

In a spiritual sense, we should look for many blessings on our ministry at this stage. Although the advanced stage is the last stage mentioned by John, a Christian never graduates from it. God is the Eternal unsearchable One. Our joy is to always grow in our knowledge and service of Him.

God would like to equip every one of His children to reach this stage. We should not think it as being exclusive to a few Christians such as the leaders of the church. Just as we normally expect boys to

be fathers one day, so we should expect that every young Christian man will become a godly Christian leader. Please remember that this stage is not limited to men even though John uses the term 'fathers.' The scriptures have, however, set the context in which women grow and lead. They lead other women and help in the training of children (Titus 2:3-5). Perhaps a few words need to be said about spiritual leadership as it is so closely tied to this stage.

## Life Application

### • Helping me grow

(One helpful thought, warning, encouraging word, illustration, suggestion for my personal life.)

### • Helping others grow

(One helpful thought on how I could better care for or treat others.)

## The Advanced Stage & Leadership

The advanced discipleship stage is interconnected to leadership, service and ministry. In one sense, everyone at this stage is a leader. A father leads his family. A mother trains younger women. In the church context, the man is to train and produce productive Christians. Full-time pastors are equippers. Whatever the person is busy doing, individuals at this stage are those you like to be near when they speak and pray.

Elder John understood spiritual leadership. He described the mature Christian as a father (1 John 2:13-14). Every father should be at this advanced stage. The things that mark off fathers from children is their having wrestled and gained victory over various personal struggles by God's Word and found God ultimately faithful, good, holy and loving. The fathers have by no means

bypassed temptation but have instead entered a special faith that gives discernment and comfort in difficult times. The storm might rage on the surface of the sea, but deep down everything is the same.

Once when presenting a discipleship seminar in an Asian country, I introduced the three stages of discipleship. I asked the attendees to help me think through those they knew who were in full-time ministry or preparing for it. This was my question, “Were these leaders or leaders-to-be in the intermediate or advanced stage of Christian living? To their chagrin, they saw that the majority of these individuals were still in the intermediate stage. They were still battling on how to overcome personal sins and maintain good personal relationships. Some major work had yet to be done in their spiritual lives. These Christian leaders could instantly see why there were so many problems and strife in their churches.

# Discipleship: Growing God’s Way

From the beginning, God has sought the growth of His people. He has made growth easy, fast, strong and good all through discipleship. Why is it that God’s people, generation after generation, has neglected such a precious tool?

*Discipleship: Growing God’s Way* compiles a number of articles to theoretically and practically demonstrate the amazing power given to those who will dare to obey Jesus and make disciples.

The reason there are so many problems in the churches today is because the spiritual lives of these Christian leaders have not been properly cultivated. We think the solution is to take more classes or obtain a higher degree. But from the scriptures, it is clear that those pursuing leadership and wanting to teach His people should have already overcome many of these personal problems at the intermediate stage. We are not speaking of a person’s physical age,



here. Even the young can speed ahead in knowing God and cleansing their lives from all sorts of sins for use by the Master.

I recently had a great conversation with a pastor. He stated that our spiritual lives are like a well. The well is the life waters (symbolic of the Holy Spirit) for all the needs of our spiritual life. There is plenty of water for what one needs. But as we meet different things in life, we begin to note that the waters are insufficient. God's living waters are sufficient, but we need to go deeper to reach the portion of water that we need to be protected from drying up. In other words, we need to keep growing in our knowledge and love of God. This is the goal of the spiritual father.

Biblical Foundations for Freedom has provided many sets of free advanced discipleship training materials as well as many individual articles to help the mature Christian to keep on growing. Growing should never stop. These materials are geared to help mature Christian step deeper into fellowship with God, to explore more about how God's holiness ought to impact personal lives and how they can more skillfully minister to others. This is explained more thoroughly in the Advanced Discipleship Training (ADT) seminar. Because of lack of clarity and challenge, many men and women drift at this stage when they should be bearing much fruit.

This stage's articles are very relevant to those faithful and growing Christians as well as those going into full-time ministry. As Paul says, the qualifications are not any different. These articles not only help articulate what it means to go into full-time ministry but on how to reach that point.

## **Conclusion**

If you are a Christian, then you are in one of these three stages. It behooves you to take a moment and think where you are, where you should be and what you need to be working on.

Each step of training results in a tangible positive change in a person's life. God is at work. His desire to work in us goes far

beyond what we would ever think. This is because we are His children, and He cares for our needs. The way that He cares for us is rather predictable. We know the general direction He wants to grow us. As we begin to observe how the Lord grows us, then we can be God's fellow assistants in helping others grow. This is what the Great Commission is all about – making disciples.