

# The Child–Stage # 1

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The promises of spiritual growth are hidden in the descriptions of what is to happen at each stage of the Christian life. In this chapter we look at what God promises to do for the new believer, the little child.

## **Growth markers**

Each of us has started his or her life as a baby, grown through his or her preteen/teen years and then, assuming the reader is older, has stepped into adulthood. The age when one transitions from

one stage to another is not all that clear, but the process is.

There are two key growth markers to help us keep track of our growth. The first is when we are born,, and a celebration ensues. A new baby has entered the world! Proud parents send out an announcement and photos of their new treasure.

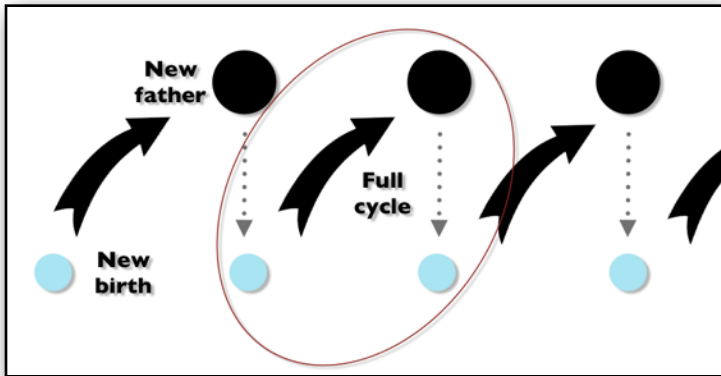
The other clear marker is when one has become, in the terms of 1st John, a father. This once small person is now fully grown and has a child of his own. A complete cycle has occurred, one generation producing another.

The modern world has tried to redefined adulthood as simply being older and independent, with no requirement for parenthood and its inherent responsibilities. Unfortunately, the church in many ways has also adopted this mentality. This leaves both the society and church distressed because more mature believers do not act accountable for the training of younger believers.<sup>3</sup>

A true, full cycle calls the believer not only to become an adult but also to bear fruit and take responsibility for the next generation.

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<sup>3</sup> So-called 'family planning' should be renamed for what it is 'barren planning'. Societies along with the church are suffering ever so much because of this anti-biblical mindset.



*One full cycle: Birth to Fatherhood*

This current lesson focuses on the all important first stage where new life begins. John the apostle uses the analogy of our physical development in the family to help us understand our development in God's spiritual family. Like Jesus he uses what is familiar to teach the unfamiliar. In previous chapters we discussed the importance of new spiritual life. The new believer has a new life and is therefore likened to a baby.

### **The baby grows**

Just as a baby must grow through the steps of physical development—crawling, sitting, etc., so God has the new believer learn many basic lessons during this first stage of spiritual development. The stages of life are important because at each, the individual is learning or growing in many different ways.

My ten year-old Rebekah convinced me last week to take her and her older brother, Isaac now thirteen, to the playground. They wanted to go to a

certain park to play for it held fond memories from previous years. So off the three of us went. After playing for about five or ten minutes, they decided it was not too interesting anymore. I overheard them saying, “I guess we are too old for the park, now.” They suggested taking a nature hike instead and then they greatly enjoyed climbing the hills in the park. People change as they grow.

The little child has just come to know the Lord. This might be a fifty year-old person, but it doesn't matter. Spiritual birth ushers every believer into the world as a new member of God's family.

Older believers in Christ should grow through this first stage a bit quicker, but it is important to remember they still go through this basic developmental stage. If not rightly cared for, the chances are slim of properly growing in their spiritual lives.

### **Caring for new believers**

When you first became a believer, were you cared for? Did someone give you personal attention? These questions might seem inconsequential, but they are not. Notice the special attention that the baby gains after birth. It is during this time that person, usually the parent, gives this wee little baby one-on-one attention.

Not only is the baby being breast fed, but the baby is being loved, washed, dressed, etc. The schedule might be repetitious and tiring, especially late at night, but it is critical. But notice what is

happening. Close to the Mom, the baby has the opportunity to hear loving words, sounds and expressions occur. The baby is not only learning how to respond and communicate, but through hugs, fun and little games the child feels loved.

What happens when the baby is scared and starts crying? The Mom rushes to the baby and while holding the baby close to her gently says, “All is well. Don’t cry. Mommy has you.”

The child is not only mechanically gaining the physical food and attention he or she needs, but just as important, receiving emotional love. This is the ideal situation. On the other hand, if the mother is absent or aloof, the result will be a scarred child who feels unloved. God passes all this love, care and nurturing on through older believers. If an older believer cares for the new believer as God has planned, that one will grow strong, but if not, the foundation for that new believer will be weak.

### **Lots to learn!**

The new believer has many things to learn. Peter also uses an analogy to help us understand new believers. He uses the newborn’s desires to help us understand how the new believer loves to acquire the Word of God. It is likened to the believers’ milk.

“Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2).

Almost nothing compares to an infant's desire to eat. The baby will cry and cry until that mother's milk reaches his or her mouth. But when the baby begins to suck and they feel that milk, contentment comes (along with some interesting sighs and other sounds). The same is true with a new believer. The new birth has a great hunger to know God's Word. We must be there to 'feed' them His Word so that they can grow.

Life starts at the spiritual new birth (called "regeneration" in theological terms). Growth occurs when the believer acquires God's Word, just like when an infant receives nutrition.



This need for God's Word will be true throughout our lives. We need to eat to live, but something changes as we grow. At the early stage, the food and nutrition is in milk form and must be provided by the Mom. God designed this feeding to foster intimacy. When breast or even bottle feeding the baby, the Mom and baby can and do often look at each other.

As we think about spiritual new life, some basic elements are coming to the forefront: intimacy, bonding, love, the Word of God, care and attention. There are obviously other necessities when caring for an infant but nothing is as important as these basic aspects of nurturing.

### **A great need**

For years the church has had a healthy focus on bringing people into the kingdom of God, but many of these new babes have suffered post-birth trauma. They have not received the care they needed because they were never personally nurtured and cared for by other believers. They were not disciplined. A baby cannot feed himself and neither can a new believer. He needs to be fed and only later after a period of growth can he learn how to feed himself.

Although we may already know these basics, the problem is that we as the church have not been faithful to carry out what we know, and thus the body of Christ is suffering terrible consequences. I regularly ask believers, “How many of you were personally cared for and taught as a new believer?” Few respond positively.

God’s heart must be so broken due the lack of care we have for His precious children. Why isn’t our heart equally broken? Why isn’t the church repentant over its unwillingness to invest in raising up the next generation?

## **Lesson**

- The new follower of Jesus Christ is likened to a little child, a baby, because he (or she) has similar needs that only can be provided by a caregiver.
- God wants us to care for new believers as a Mom gently and patiently cares for her little baby.
- God teaches new believers basic truths from God's Word during this early stage, bringing growth.
- The Lord wants the new child of God to sense His love and care through the personal attention of a disciple maker.

## **Memorize & Meditate**

1 Peter 2:2

## **Assignment**

- ➔ Were you disciplined as a new believer? Explain what did or did not happen.
- ➔ How do you respond to new believers around you? Do you disciple them? Why or why not?
- ➔ If you were not disciplined early on, what do you feel that you missed out on? If you were disciplined, what things have you gained?