

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**What is Discipleship?**

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by

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## Introduction

At the heart of the Christian faith is a basic question: To obey or to not obey? Sadly, many Christians have opted not to obey God's commands at least according to recent statistics. These statistics show that when it comes to morality and lifestyle issues, there is little difference between the behavior (and one can assume condition of the heart) of Christians and non-Christians.<sup>1</sup> This is to say that if one was to compare for example the divorce rate, sexual immorality, corruption of Christians and non-Christians, they would not find any meaningful difference. In addition, Jim Putman observes that American Christians are considered to be more than two times as likely to have racist attitudes as non-Christians.<sup>2</sup>

All these disturbing statistics point to one thing: lack of discipleship. It appears that many church leaders are not interested to develop disciples who conform to the image and likeness of Christ. And many others are reluctant to put the effort to equip their congregants to be disciple makers.

Therefore, this paper seeks to inform the reader the stages of discipleship, what each stage entails and what can be done to enhance the growth of a believer from one stage to the next. Also, it focuses on areas of life that the believer ought to grow in. And finally, it explains what it means to submit to the Lordship of Jesus.

## Stages and Spheres

The first stage of discipleship is known as *spiritually dead*. It is a stage that refers to all people that do not have a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul calls them in Ephesians 2:1-5 as those

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Putman, Bob Harrington & Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleship: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 20.

who are “dead in [their] transgressions and sins.”<sup>3</sup> Of these people are those who do not believe there is God, those who believe The Bible is a myth and those who believe that there are many ways to heaven. The bottom line is that they have not come to a point in life whereby they recognized their sinful state, need for a savior or asked the Lord Jesus for forgiveness.

The second stage of spiritual growth is called infant. People in this stage have just come to the knowledge of Christ as Savior. Nonetheless, as Jim Putman observes, they lack knowledge of what Jesus taught. “They are not unintelligent; they are simply uninformed and in need of truth.”<sup>4</sup> This stage is quite messy. Paul writing to the Ephesian church describes this stage as when people are tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every word of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Though the holy spirit is working on these Christians, they tend to make decisions or choices based on what they want or how they feel. As they are not grounded in the word of God, they also tend to falter here and there or accommodate many divergent views. Sometimes they will ask many questions because they do not know how to go about their Christian walk. As Adrienne Von Speyr observes, they do not envision a practicable path.<sup>5</sup> Instead they are anxious or unsure of their salvation.

After infant is the child stage. People in this stage could be relatively new Christians or be persons who have been Christians for many years. They know some truths of God’s word and are growing in their love towards God and other people, but they are overly concerned about themselves. Jim Putman describes them as “still quite self-centered, not yet fully oriented to the focus on others that marks people who are living in maturity in God’s kingdom and family.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Jim Putman, Bob Harrington & Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Von Speyr, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Putman, Bob Harrington & Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 65.

Simply, everything revolves around them. Bob Sjogren and Gerald Robinson in their famous book, *Cat and Dog Theology*, use the analogy of a cat and a dog behavior to describe the focus and priority that Christians give to God and themselves: “A dog says, ‘You pet me, you feed me, you shelter me, you love me, you must be God. A cat says, ‘you pet me, you feed me, you shelter me, you love me, I must be God.’”<sup>7</sup> Though it is not their intention to describe this stage, Bob and Gerald, somehow describe Christians in the child stage. Spiritual children’s emphases and priorities in life are towards what benefits them, what serves them and what brings them satisfaction. God’s glory is not their highest priority. Often, they are the kind of people who would say for example, “I don’t know if this church is meeting my needs anymore. Maybe I should go to a different church that does.”<sup>8</sup>

The fourth stage of spiritual growth is known as the young adult stage. Spiritual young adults unlike spiritual children recognize that the Christian life does not revolve around them. Bob and Gerald would compare them with a dog which does everything to please his master.<sup>9</sup> They want to serve other people. And when they serve, the motive is not to gain from their service but rather for God to be glorified.

Spiritual young adults are not shallow in their understanding of scriptures. Neither are they weak in their ability to apply it. First John 2:13-14 describes them as people who have overcome the Evil One and the word of God abides in them. Nonetheless, it is possible that there are few pockets of their lives that they have not fully surrendered to the lordship of Christ. Though they are

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<sup>7</sup> Bob Sjogren and Gerald Robison. *Cat and Dog Theology: Rethinking Our Relationship with Our Master* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Putman, Bob Harrington & Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Sjogren and Gerald Robison. *Cat and Dog Theology: Rethinking Our Relationship with Our Master* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 5.

orienting their lives around Christ and his perspective, they still hold on to some few elements of carnality. For instance, they may want to serve but not when it means death.

Finally, there is the Spiritual parent stage. Just to make it clear, God is the one who births people spiritually and not Christians. A spiritual parent therefore only guides and disciples a newborn believer from infants to children to young adults, and then finally to be parents themselves.<sup>10</sup>

A spiritual parent does not only have a solid understanding of the word of God but he or she also has a deep relationship with God. First John 2:2:13a describes a spiritual parent as one who has evidence of a deep relationship with God that has been tested over time. Because of this, this parent out of experience is qualified to teach others on what to expect when they join the faith. “Their principal concern is to remain free—that is, to be always at God's disposal.”<sup>11</sup> He or she may not know everything about the faith, but because they continue steadfastly on the word of God and subject themselves to accountability by others, they are able to help others grow in their dependency on God.

Moving on, there are four spheres that intentional believers ought to strive to grow in. According to Jim Putman, in each of these four spheres, a disciple understands God's commands and submits to his authority.<sup>12</sup> This signals that the whole discipleship process is in God, by God and for God. Nothing ought to be called discipleship if it is not centered on Christ.

To begin with, a disciple's first sphere is his or her relationship with God. A relationship with God is the engine that drives all other spheres. Without it a disciple could never know how to relate with God's church, their families and the world at large. Discipleship is not about

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Putman, Bob Harrington & Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleship: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Von Speyr, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Putman, Bob Harrington & Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleship: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 78.

accumulating information but it is a process in which the life of Christ is fused into the life of a believer. Often it is misunderstood by many Christians that getting saved is uttering the salvation prayer. It could be true, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes that it is more than that. He opines, “the disciple's answer is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus. Instead, it is the obedient deed.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, salvation experience happens when a believer out of love and respect, obeys God. This is what the first part of the greatest commandment implores disciples to do, to love God with all their heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37).

The second sphere of growth is in relationship with other believers. In John 13:34-35, Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another. By this, he told his disciples, people will know that they are his disciples. Therefore, as a disciple grows in Christ, his or her love for fellow believers increases. Just like the early church in Acts 2, they begin not only to give their possessions but also, they give themselves in service to the course of the church. Paul writing to the Corinthians implores them to use their gifts for the edification of the church. He goes further to encourage them to earnestly desire spiritual gifts that build the church more than self (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1,4).

Thirdly, a disciple must grow at their home. How they treat their children, spouse and even pets, should be testament of their walk with the Lord. Paul writing to Timothy asks him to warn those in church who neglect their homes. He sternly portends that anyone that neglects to take care of their family repudiates the faith (1 Timothy 5:8, MSG). God expects Christians to be Christians at home. Ephesians 5 and 6 states that husbands should love their wives, wives should respect their husbands, parents should raise their children in the Lord and that children should obey their parents.

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<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2001), 57.

The final sphere of growth is in relationship with the world. Disciples of Jesus Christ do not belong to this world. Their citizenship is in heaven. Therefore, how they relate with the world should reflect the desires of God who has sent them as ambassadors. How they marry, how they work and how they live should clearly be a witness of the heavenly home. Jesus said that they should live their lives in such a way that if someone was to observe them, they would see their good deeds and glorify God (Mat 5:16).

### **Application**

Taking stock of my life, I realize that God has been gracious to me enough to let me go through the discipleship process with the help of great men who led by example. I am unrelievedly happy to have learned under a missionary who instilled in me the fear of God. Of the five stages of discipleship, I can say that I am at the parent stage. From my youth, I have learnt to trust and depend on God. I started making disciples when I was in high school. Though I did not have as much understanding of discipleship as I do now, somehow it worked. I had parents bring their teenagers for me to disciple them. Over the years, I have walked with young people and sometimes even people older than me and by God's grace guided them in the things of God.

Perhaps the major thing that makes me think that I am in the parent stage is my career abandonment few years ago to follow God's leading into missions. Since then, I have always felt that I died to self. Nothing means much to me anymore except that I please my God.

This is not to say that there are no moments that I feel I should turn back. The truth is there are. For instance, sometimes I have confrontations with church members which leave me thinking of quitting. I have to learn again to lay self to the altar of sacrifice and forgive. Once in a while, I become anxious and doubtful of God's provision. But nevertheless, mostly I think I try to emulate the character of Christ as much as possible.

## Conclusion

Often people submit well if they have a defined relationship with whoever is commanding. Paul writing to Timothy appeals to him to join him in suffering like a good soldier. He goes further to remind him that when it comes to fighting for the course of the gospel, he should not entangle himself in civilian affairs. Instead like a good soldier, he should try to please his commanding officer who is the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3-4). Basically, Paul is saying that when it comes to submission, a disciple's relationship with Christ is like that of a soldier and his commanding officer. What the commanding officer says goes. The soldier only follows orders. He does not question. He does not complain. He just obeys. Things must go, not according to his understanding but above his understanding.<sup>14</sup> He follows Christ not in order to do something valuable but simply because of the call itself.<sup>15</sup> This can only happen if he has already denied self and taken up his cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Just as in denying Christ Peter said, 'I do not know the man,' those who follow Christ must say that to themselves."<sup>16</sup>

According to Mark 8:34, submission does not stop at denying self. It goes a decision further. taking up one's cross. In the book *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis says, "Christ does not just come to torment the natural self. He comes to kill it."<sup>17</sup> In taking up the cross the old self is crucified (Romans 6:6). It is not just denied.

In conclusion, submission is hard and easy at the same time. It is hard in the sense that a person has to deny self and take up the cross. It is easier because Christ himself avails his grace to help the believer to undergo these acts of suffering.

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<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2001), 91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1952), 94.

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