

# Scriptural Discipleship

## Principle No. 1: Maturity Is The Goal<sup>1</sup>

If we don't set a goal for spiritual growth, we will not achieve it.

ED STETZER

### A Discipleship Deficit

Lately there's been a lot of talk about spiritual formation and discipleship, and rightfully so. I think we can all agree there's a discipleship deficit in evangelicalism. Perhaps the elephant in the room is that there isn't a whole lot of discipling going on, even though that's precisely what we, as Jesus' followers, were commissioned to do.

So leaders are asking questions like, "What should we do?" and "How should we do it?" There are plenty of successful models that have been tried in a variety of contexts. But how can we best make disciples right where we are?

What if, before buying the latest discipleship book, we looked to Scripture to find out what God says about discipleship? In this series of articles, we'll look at four discipleship principles found in God's Word:

Maturity is a goal for disciples.

- God wants you and your church on a clear path toward spiritual growth.
- God involves us in our own growth, as well as our church's growth.
- God calls you and your church to be spiritual leaders.

### Moving toward Maturity

First, we have to recognize that maturity is the goal of discipleship. Keeping people spiritually immature is never a stated goal, but we seem to be achieving it.

Part of the problem is in the way we sometimes see the maturing process. We should not treat depth and maturity as an enemy. Being deep in the faith is not about being full of obscure details or minutia. Being spiritually mature does not mean you have graduated out of the daily grind of faith, grace, and mercy in a fallen world.

True spiritual depth is about understanding the Word of God and living out its truths. That should be the goal for all of us.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/january/scriptural-discipleship-principle-1-maturity-is-goal.html>

## **Fear of the Deep**

I'm sure there are some who are afraid of maturing too much—to a point where there's a chasm between them and the lost. We always want to communicate at a level that is accessible to the unchurched, but that doesn't mean we should remain immature or shallow for the sake of connectivity.

If we have low expectations for discipleship, we end up with churches that are an inch deep and a mile wide. Our task is to keep things simple without engaging in "simplism," which is when we make something so simple it loses its essential value.

After "leaving the elementary message about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity," the author of Hebrews tells us (6:1, HCSB). That doesn't mean we should become better Bible bowl contestants. This isn't about gauging our walk with Christ by how many cities we can locate on a map of Israel. It is about becoming more complete disciples.

So our challenge is to keep the communication simple while not passing on a simplistic approach to the gospel. It is a balancing act for sure—but more than a balancing act. It is only through depth and maturity that we will truly find better methods for communicating the gospel.

A truly deep experience will not move us away from the ones we are trying to reach. It will move us toward them.

We can't be too deep in the faith, but we can be too shallow. God will not bless shallowness when a deeper walk is available. An elementary approach will not produce mature disciples.

## **Measuring Maturity**

A LifeWay Research study on discipleship ([Transformational Discipleship](#)) found that of the people we studied, only 3.5 percent of the people surveyed over the course of a year had any measurable growth. In other words, only 3.5 percent of people reported that there was something different in the way they engaged the Word of God, shared Christ, or served others.

But over 55 percent had perceived that they had growth spiritually. Now, I'm not saying they didn't grow. But I think a lot of people think they're growing spiritually when they are actually stuck at those elementary teachings and need to move on to deeper things.

As a person grows spiritually, they will be more active in the ministry of God, not less.

In the area of discipleship, as in other areas of life, we sometimes want something so much that we begin to think we're doing better than we are. Therefore we must be vigilant to regularly evaluate and measure where we are in the growth process if we are to be serious about our own discipleship.

This isn't a new problem, nor is it simply an issue for the American church to consider. The early church had to deal with the same thing. In 1 Corinthians 3:1–2 Paul writes, “I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, because you were not yet ready for it. In fact, you are still not ready.”

How do we help people move on and move forward from milk to solid food? We see this theme over and over again. In Hebrews 5:11–12 we find that the believers still “need milk, not solid food.” In that passage, we also find laziness at play in those who are immature.

As a person grows spiritually, they will be more active in the ministry of God, not less. If you find a person who is not interested in being part of the mission of God, you have likely found a stalled disciple.

### **Reaching the Goal**

So, we want to move people from spiritual immaturity to maturity. That's the goal. And we want to know that growth is actually taking place and is not just imagined.

How can we make sure we are going deeper? It starts with culture. Be a church that wants to go deep with God. Provide ever-increasing opportunities for people who want to go deeper in spiritual formation.

I'll give you an example: I had a gentleman in my church recently say to me, “I'd like to go deeper.” And in our church, I think we try to preach in a way that's both accessible to the unchurched and theologically robust. But he wanted me to go deeper, and I love that.

Be a church that wants to go deep with God.

“Let's do this,” I said. “Why don't we start reading a systematic theology together?” And so we broke out Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology. He bought a copy. I bought a copy. We started reading.

There are many things that go into a successful discipleship ministry, but one key is that spiritual maturity must be a goal. And if we don't teach the goal and preach the goal, we won't reach the goal.

Don't shy away from maturity. The enemy wants us to remain like babies, never strong enough to be about the mission we've been given. Embrace the shovel. Go deep. And remember, there is no need to exchange numerical growth in our churches for the spiritual growth of its members.

What distractions are keeping you from setting and achieving the goal of spiritual maturity? How do you measure spiritual success in your own life or in the lives of others?

# Don't Miss These Three Markers for Discipleship

It is not fair to be frustrated that people do not reach a destination if we do not give them clear directions.

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## A Pathway to Maturity

If we can agree that spiritual maturity is the goal for disciples, how do we achieve it? How does God expect us to disciple?

Though essential (and actually a gift from God), having a desire for spiritual growth is not enough in the Christian life; we must be on the path. That's one of the reasons why we call this a "spiritual walk."

Having a desire for spiritual growth is not enough in the Christian life.

If you're just hoping disciples will somehow find their way through the spiritual jungle, you are fooling yourself. There are many distractions and pitfalls. Jesus had warnings about those who make it difficult for seekers to find their way.

And while you as a pastor or leader will have to break out the machete at times to clear overgrown paths, others have already blazed a trail and left us some good markers. Paul was such a trailblazer, making more than just a few disciples. So I think we can learn from his process.

## A Path to Growth

We have found through Transformational Discipleship research that there is a progression, a path involved in making disciples. But, that's just a reflection of the biblical realities showing up in our research of churches.

Paul writes of this path in his letter to the Colossians:

"For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God" (1:9–10, HCSB).

**Here are three things that mark the path of spiritual formation:**

### 1. Knowing

Being filled with the knowledge of God's will is a vital part of becoming a disciple of Jesus. We can tell people to be more like Jesus all day long, but if they don't know Jesus, they won't be like him. This knowing happens individually, and through relationships.

We don't learn about God to become theological encyclopedias.

Reading the Bible is obviously essential here.

Show me someone who isn't reading the Word of God, and I will show you someone who isn't growing deeper as a believer.

The psalmist says to God, "Your word is a lamp for my feet<sup>[1]</sup> and a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105). The path to spiritual maturity is lit by the Word.

Historically, there were people employed to carry lights so that others could see the path at night. On the community level, pastors and leaders are to facilitate the walk by carrying the light—the Word—out in front.

This involves teaching and mentoring.

Then people have to see that light at their own feet—as the word they carry lights their individual path.

Learning facts found in the Bible won't make you a Christian, but if we ignore the light of Scripture, we won't be able to stay on the path to spiritual development.

## **2. Being**

We don't learn about God to become theological encyclopedias. Rather, we learn and know so we can be. That's learning to walk worthy by being, increasingly, who we are in Christ.

There is a mysterious transfer of spiritual DNA that occurs as a believer walks the path of discipleship. It is a becoming.

It's true in every area of life. The more time you spend with a mentor, read a certain author, or listen to a certain speaker, the more you will begin to think like that person.

The same is true when we walk with the Lord—the very nature of walking with the Lord helps us to walk worthy. Walking with him shapes us to be like him—to walk worthy.

In Romans, Paul talks about this kind of being in our spiritual walk—being who we are in Christ.

He says, "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). We begin to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord when we take on his traits as his children.

We cannot please God while walking our own path.

Scripture tells us that Adam, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham walked with God. They knew God well, and that affected how they lived. We need to make it clear that this spiritual path can be walked.

Disciples can, by and in the power of Christ, walk with God into a deeper spiritual life.

### **3. Doing**

Just as our mindsets are formed by our training and belief, our actions flow from who we are.

Knowing who you are in Christ, then being who you are in Christ (by walking worthy), leads you to doing the work of God. (Getting them in the wrong order is a problem... )

Everyone looks forward to the day a baby can walk. But that development is not the end of their journey.

We were designed to produce spiritually.

After they walk, they are expected to contribute in other ways, from chores around the house to getting an education, and eventually a job. When they produce in these areas, it is a sign of maturity. It means the child understands the path he or she is on.

It is one thing to be told to clean your room. But when the child starts cleaning their own room and also volunteers to clean up the neighborhood, you know they get it.

Bearing fruit in every good work is an indicator of development. Just as no one becomes a believer by knowing more about God, no one is redeemed by doing good things for God. But being a disciple will inevitably result in doing the work of a disciple—not just doing good things but also bearing fruit.

Works don't save you but saved people work.

We do good works not just so good things are done, but as Jesus taught, “So that [people] may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). That is bearing fruit.

If being a disciple is about taking on Christ’s traits, producing fruit is about exhibiting the presence of Jesus. We were designed to produce spiritually. He is the vine. We are the branches.

Paul tells the church at Ephesus, “For we are his creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Fruit is a sign that a tree is maturing. Fruit in a believer’s life is a sign that a disciple is growing.

### **Walking (and Inviting Others to Walk) a Clear Path**

No one wanders into spiritual maturity.

There are no accidental disciples—God gives new life in Christ. Then, disciples learn to know, be, and do what the Christian life is.

No one wanders into spiritual maturity, and you and your church need to know that truth. You need to have people walk the path.

Do you want a clear path for spiritual growth in your church? Faithfully lead believers into the knowledge of God's will so that they can walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, doing good works that produce fruit in their lives and in the lives of those around them.

What would you say is the biggest roadblock on the path to spiritual maturity? Of the three things I mentioned here (knowing, being, doing), where do we most often drop the ball?

## Discipleship Works—What a Lot of People Miss About Our Role in Our Discipleship

God could mature his people on his own, but he has decided to bring us into the process.

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I Know . . . I Know . . .

As we start, let me just say what we all know: only God can truly grow anything. God doesn't need anyone to do anything for him, or for anyone else. He is quite capable of doing everything that needs to be done all by himself.

We were called to make disciples, but there seems to be a discipleship deficit in evangelicism.

We cannot grow ourselves or anyone else. We cannot do what only God can do. Only God can grow us individually, and only Christ can grow His Church. Jesus said, "I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18, HCSB).

And the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3, "So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (v. 7).

So as we move forward, it is understood that God causes growth.

How can I suggest, then, that a key biblical principle for discipleship is that God involves us in our own spiritual growth, as well as that of our church?

Because God chooses to use us, and that makes our involvement important.

### **Why God Involves Us**

Even though we know that only God can make a tree, the first job God gave to man was to tend a garden. Adam took care of trees, and he took care of himself as he took care of the trees.

He didn't replace God. God used him in the process.

God gives work to us not because he needs the help, but because we need to be developed. When he calls us to invest in our discipleship process he is fulfilling his promise in Romans 8:29, "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers."

He created humans in his image, and he wants us to join him in his work in order that he can shape us into his image, so he brings us into various aspects of his mission.

Paul explained that when we become new creations in Christ, we are drafted into service. We go out on God's behalf and offer reconciliation to the people in our lives. We don't replace Christ, but we do join him in the grand plan of redemption.

On multiple occasions Jesus challenged the faith development of his disciples. As they followed him, he instructed them. There was much he did on his own. But as time went on, he expected them to step out in faith and believe with more consistency. He expected them to step out of boats with greater confidence.

God gives work to us not because he needs the help, but because we need to be developed.

He commissioned them to go out, show compassion, teach others, and perform miracles. When they failed, he didn't take blame for not growing them. He called them out for not faithfully becoming who they were called to be.

### **How God Involves You in Your Growth**

When we talk about God involving us in the process of our own spiritual development and the development of those around us, we must start in the right place. Our posture is important.

When we are surrendered to God's hand and will, we are in a posture that accepts intentional spiritual change. God opposes the proud, but will exalt the humble. When we are submissive to the Lord, he involves us in a work that is much greater than any we could accomplish on our own. Our surrender opens up the door of opportunity.

Philippians 2:12–13 says, "So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out his good pleasure."

It doesn't say work on your own salvation. It doesn't say work for your salvation. But, we do work out God's gift of salvation.

Those who obey God will grow in maturity over time. Spiritual growth does not suddenly show up in a gift box one day. Like slowly walking into a lake, God leads us into a deeper experience. This is the journey of faith. We grow as we walk.

We walk by opening the Scriptures, engaging in prayer, and focusing on spiritual disciplines. That's one way we work out our own salvation.

### **How God Involves You in the Growth of Others**

Discipleship is not just a solo effort—though it takes personal action and engagement in spiritual disciplines. Discipleship is a group sport—best done in community!

God has given various gifts to the Church. Each person has something to offer and offering that is part of their growth and discipleship. Paul was constantly telling the early believers that the health of the whole body is impacted by how each one uses their God-given gifts.

There are no Lone Ranger Christians. (And even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.) We are responsible for and to each other. It has been said that the gift God gave you is not for you. Instead, it is to be shared with others.

When we truly believe that our actions will impact the spiritual development of others, it will change the way we live. We are responsible before God to be involved in discipleship—ours and others. Gifting brings even greater responsibility.

### **Make Disciples**

There are no Lone Ranger Christians. (And even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.)

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them.

That's personal and communal.

Maybe baptism is a good example—it is both personal and communal, but it first is about Jesus.

Baptism recognizes the work of redemption that can only come by God—it is a symbol of Christ's redemptive work. Then, it is a personal profession of faith by the individual. Finally, it is a community experience.

Baptism is a picture of Jesus' work, a step for the believer, and a part of the community. That's why baptism is a first step of discipleship.

We are responsible to be involved in our discipleship and to make disciples wherever we go.

That's how discipleship works.