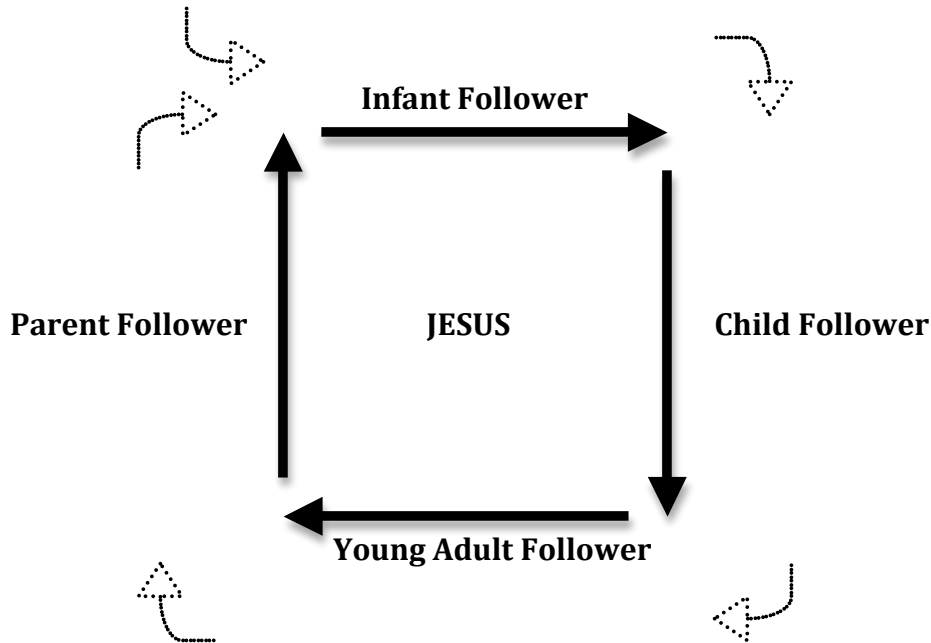


Discipleship

Basic Overview:



Discipleship – being and making

Jesus called some simple fisherman to be his first disciples, saying, “Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people” (Mark 1:27). All are called to be disciples – coming to Jesus and committing to follow him, growing through several developmental stages as we become more like Jesus. All are also called to make disciples – to help others to become followers of Jesus, as well, and guide them towards maturity.

Notes:

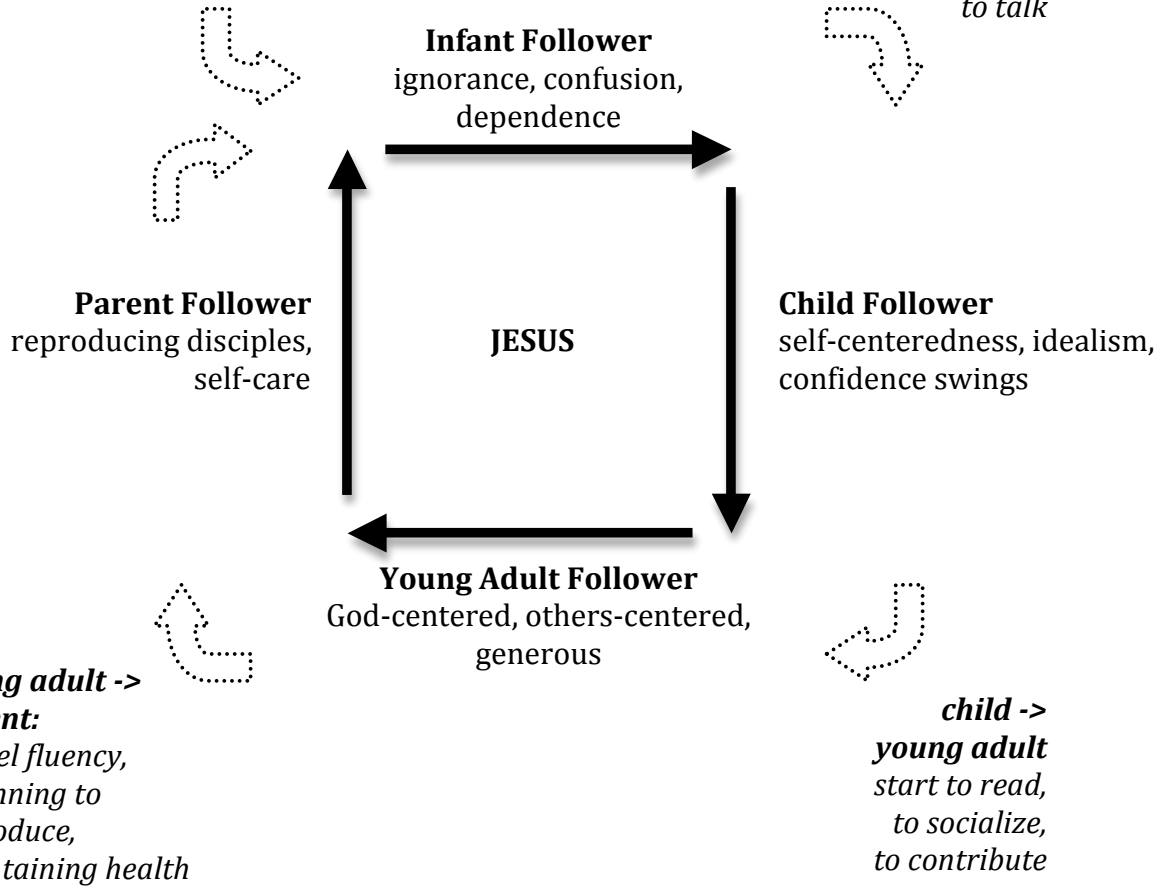
- Stage ≠ value! All are equally valuable, equally made in the image of God. But not everyone is at the same stage, which is OK! In order to see growth, we must help people determine where they are at and what they need to do in order to move to the next stage.
- All people start as infant followers (regardless of age, education, experience).
- The goal is the same for all people – to become mature followers of Jesus who help other people to become followers and grow as followers.
- Just as in human development, there are developmental milestones that need to be reached in order to move to the next developmental stage.
- People progress at different speeds and occasionally regress. In identifying what stage someone is at, look for consistency over time.
- People don’t naturally progress on their own. It takes time and intentional effort and usually requires investment from a spiritual parent.

Discipleship

Stages and Transitions:

starting the path:
relationship, sharing,
inviting

infant -> child:
learn to walk,
to feed one's self,
to talk



Discipleship

General Parenting tips:

Discipleship is hard work! But it is very rewarding and, according to Jesus' universal command to go and make disciples of all nations, it's non-negotiable. The following information is intended to help you understand how to come alongside someone and help them to grow. This starts by identifying what stage they are currently at (again – without any judgment or sense of greater or lesser value).

Note: The metaphor of human developmental stages is a very powerful one to illustrate the process of maturing as a follower of Jesus. However, it can be confusing. In general, we are referring to the stage the disciple is at (i.e. infant follower, child follower...), not the physical age or development stage of an actual infant, child, young adult or parent, which are used (without 'follower') only as illustrations.

The Four Stages

The four stages (as well as those who are not following Jesus at all) are introduced and described below. For each stage, a number of 'phrases from the stage' have been given to help us accurately locate someone's current stage.

Note: Even if someone is generally at a more advanced stage, you may find that they have not developed a key skill or reached a developmental milestone from an earlier stage. Until this is identified and dealt with, they will struggle to advance spiritually.

TRANSITIONS: Milestones and Turning the Corner

Moving from one stage to another doesn't simply happen. It takes intentionality and effort on the follower's part and direction and encouragement from the person investing in them to 'turn the corner.' To that end, specific milestones have been identified that they can be reaching for at the current stage, which will also help you to determine when they have reached the next stage.

There could be a lot more added to these simple instructions. In addition, each person may have particular inclinations, strengths and weaknesses, and baggage that will all play into their development. It is expected that people will progress in understanding and practice of all of our shared practices over time, but certain ones are identified as most critical at specific stages.

For example, when working with an infant follower, it is helpful for them to learn how to pray to God by using the hexagon to teach them the Lord's Prayer. After this, the shared practice of presence isn't specifically addressed again in later stages, though it should be expected that their prayer life will continue to grow and deepen (though the Lord's Prayer remains a reliable guide and is not something we simply outgrow and leave behind).

Discipleship

Stage 0: Those Who Aren't Following Jesus (yet)

Description: those who are not following Jesus are characterized by unbelief and rebellion.

- **Unbelief** – may not have heard the gospel or may have misunderstood it. Or they may say they believe, but their lifestyle shows that they are not following Jesus. Or they are agnostic, uncertain and unwilling to say believe without certainty.
- **Rebellion** – may have refused to be subject to anyone, including God. Or they may be following someone or something else as their god or idol.

'phrase from the stage' (identifying those who are not following Jesus):

"I don't believe there is a God."

"The Bible is just a bunch of myths."

"God is just a crutch."

"I am not a Christian because religion is responsible for most of the wars in history."

"There are many ways to get to God."

"I have been a good person, so I will be okay."

"There is no absolute right and wrong."

TRANSITION: Helping people to start the path

A person is either following Jesus or not. You might not be following well or consistently, but you are either following Him or you are choosing not to. If you're not following Jesus and being formed by the Spirit into his likeness, you are following someone or something else and being shaped into that image. If someone is not following Jesus, this does not mean that God is not at work in their life – they may be somewhere along the journey of coming to receive the good news and live as a follower of Jesus.

"The time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). People who are not yet following Jesus need to hear, see, and experience the gospel and receive it – turning their back on other masters or ways of life and choosing to believe the good news that God loves them and calls them to follow Jesus.

Turning the corner - starting the journey:

- **Relationship** – we cannot have a lasting influence on anyone if we don't have a relationship with them. We need to build honest, authentic, caring friendships, proving that we want to be with them and that we want what's best for them.
- **Sharing** – we need to share life and share the gospel in engaging and winsome ways through word and deed.
- **Inviting** – we need to invite them to respond to God's grace in Jesus, entrust their lives to Him, and set out on the journey of a follower of Jesus.

Discipleship

Parenting Tip: Only God Gives New Life

“I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. - John 15:5, 16

Choosing to follow Jesus is such a radical change that it’s spoken of as being born again or becoming a new creation in Christ. This is not something that is done apart from the Holy Spirit’s work of grace in one’s heart, revealing the gospel to us and opening our hearts to respond with saving faith.

We can build relationships and seek to influence others, but we are not God. We cannot make someone believe, we cannot give them new life. Which means that we can’t take credit or blame for whether or not someone chooses to follow Jesus.

So we must pray – pray for others to come to faith in Jesus and pray for the disciples we are privileged to walk beside as they grow.

Also, we must always remember that they are Jesus’ followers, not ours. He calls them. He leads and works through the Spirit to bring them to maturity. Even as we lead others, we must be careful to follow Jesus ourselves.

Discipleship

Stage One: The Infant Follower

Description: The infant follower is characterized by ignorance, confusion and dependency.

- **Ignorance** – don't know much about biblical truth, may mix in other cultural beliefs or religions because they don't know any better.
- **Confusion** – don't know how to replace old, familiar habits with the habits and attitudes of a disciple.
- **Dependence** – cannot grow on their own any more than a baby can feed and care for itself immediately after birth.

'phrase from the stage' (identifying infant followers):

"Why do I need to go to church regularly?"

"I've been hurt by a lot of people, so it's just me and God. I don't need others."

"I don't need anyone else, just me and Jesus."

"If I pray and read my Bible, will I be good enough?"

"I gave my life to Jesus and I go to church, but I don't need to be close to other people."

"I provide for my family. I don't have time to be in relationship with another Christian."

"What should I do about my old friends who don't believe?"

"I didn't know the Bible said that?"

TRANSITION: Helping infant followers turn the corner to become child followers

All people start here – they have been reborn and made new through accepting and believing the gospel, but they are brand new as followers and must learn to crawl before they walk. Like newborn babies, infant followers need a lot of intentional time energy. With the help from more mature followers, they grow in their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus and how to begin to take care of themselves in basic ways.

At this stage, the role of the parent follower helping an infant follower to grow is largely defined by 'I do, you watch.' The parent follower models and shares while the learner is primarily watching and receiving and beginning to take baby steps in each area. Breen and Cockram describe people at this stage and what is required of those investing in them:

Infant Follower

- high enthusiasm
- high confidence
- low experience
- low competence

Role of Parent Follower



- high direction
- high example
- low consensus
- low explanation

The infant follower is excited and perhaps over-confidence, but everything is new and they are not sure what to do or how to do it. Those investing in infant followers need to give

Discipleship

clear direction and a clear example. Only later will they be more involved in self-direction and be able to understand why we do what we do in the way we do it.

turning the corner (milestones):

- **Learning to walk** – learning the basic practices of the Christian life (an introduction to Threads’ shared practices) and how we structure our life together (worship gatherings, MCs, CPR, MTs)
- **Learning to feed one’s self**– able to articulate who God is and what He has done for them in Jesus and able to recognize the big picture of the biblical story (the six story circles) 
- **Learning to talk** – the basics of prayer, worship, presence 

Parenting Tip: The Hot Lesson

One lesson that is often learned at this point is the ‘hot’ lesson. When kids were little, the parents have to be constantly vigilant, keeping them away from dangers they don’t recognize like hot ovens or electrical sockets. A parent might pick up a child and take them away, saying, “You don’t want to learn the hot lesson right now.” But at some point, they will have to experience pain and learn to recognize these lessons.

When you are working with an infant follower, you must try to keep them safe. But a parent follower can’t always protect a younger follower and they will inevitably get burned. Then the mature follower must help them process and learn from the pain.

Parenting Tip: Potty Training

Newborns can’t control their bodies or clean up after themselves and rely on their parent to change their diapers. Some people, when they first start following Jesus, have a lot of stuff to clean up – their own past sins and sinful habits, bad past experiences in life or specifically with God or with His less-than-perfect people, the church.

A parent follower needs to help the infant follower to deal with some of the mess in their lives. But they can’t just constantly clean them up, they need to train them so that they can know how to handle their own mess in the future – learning how to confess their failures and hurt to God directly, as well as how to pursue forgiveness when they are ready and reconciliation if it is possible.

Discipleship

Stage Two: The Child Follower

Description: The child follower is typically self-centered, idealistic, and prone to struggle with a balance in their confidence.

- **Self-centeredness** – children are the center of their world and interpret everything from the perspective of “me.” Child followers are often more concerned about their needs than the needs of others.
- **Idealism** – inexperience results in black-and-white thinking. They can view non-believers and other followers in legalistic and judgmental ways.
- **Overconfidence or under-confidence** – move back and forth from excessive pride to self-loathing or defeat.

‘phrase from the stage’ (identifying child followers):

“I believe in Jesus and my church is in the woods, just Him and me.”

“Who are all these new people coming to church? The church is getting too big.”

“I love my missional community; don’t add any more people to it.”

“My missional community is not taking care of my needs like they should.”

“I don’t have anyone who is spending enough time with me. No one is discipling me.”

“I didn’t like the music today. If they only did it like . . . “

“I am not being fed in my church, so I am going to a church that meets my needs.”

TRANSITION: Helping child followers to become young adult followers

Child followers, like young children, are by nature self-centered. They are figuring out the world and their place in it. A key milestone at this stage is learning to relate to others in healthy community. This stage also involves the child follower gaining a deeper understanding of their identity in Christ and beginning to offer their gifts, time, energy and resources to God and to others.

Child followers are also idealistic, seeing the world in simple black and white. As they gain understanding, they learn to discern more subtle shades of gray and how the gospel comes into the very specific circumstances of our lives, beginning to gain ‘gospel fluency.’

At this stage, the parent follower’s role is largely defined by ‘I do, you help.’ There is still a need for the parent follower to take the lead, particularly in specific tasks and learning particular skills. But the child follower is ready to participate and contribute alongside. They are gaining independence throughout this stage.

Discipleship

Child Follower





- low enthusiasm
- low confidence
- low experience
- low competence

Role of Parent Follower

- high direction
- high discussion
- high example
- high accessibility

During this stage, many can get discouraged and stop maturing. It takes a lot of intentional time and effort from the parent at this stage, to continue to direct and teach, but also to encourage and support as they grow through fits and starts.

turning the corner (milestones):

- **learning to read** – this includes a growing knowledge of God and the Bible, but more specifically it involves gaining gospel fluency – particularly the ability to tell one’s own story framed by the gospel and with Jesus as the hero. 
- **learning to socialize** – entering into and balancing relationships in healthy, three-dimensional community. 
- **starting to contribute** – identifying gifts and abilities and offering them for the good of the family and to extend God’s purposes in the world through mission.  

Parenting Tip: Navigating Puberty

This stage of life can be very turbulent as they move into young adulthood. Think of the wide range of growth from 1st – 8th grade (particularly the physical and hormonal changes that come in middle school!). It is normal to see someone acting very mature and selfless in one situation and then quickly reverting to more childlike behavior. This can be discouraging, but parent followers can help point out the signs of positive growth and encourage them until they become more consistent as young adults.

Discipleship

Stage Three: The Young Adult Follower

Description: The young adult follower is characterized by a change from being focused on self to being focused on God and others.

- **God-centered** – becoming more secure in their identity in Christ, intentionally seeking to live for God’s glory.
- **Others-centered** – coming to understand that God has shaped them for a purpose, looking for ways to use their abilities and gifts.
- **Generous** – eager to serve, willing to sacrifice and more able to overlook the faults of others.

‘phrase from the stage’ (identifying young adult followers):

“I love my missional community or CPR group, but there are others who need a group like this.”

“I think I could lead a group with a little help. I have three friends with whom I have been building a relationship and going deep, and we all share a common passion for _____.”

“Look how many are at the worship gathering - it’s awesome! I had to park down the street.”

“Randy and Rachel missed missional community and I called to see if they are okay. Their kids have the flu, so maybe our group can make meals for them. I’ll start.”

“In my devotions/reading, I came across something I have a question about.”

“I noticed that we don’t have a missional community centered on the elderly. Do you think I could be involved in making that happen?”

TRANSITION: Helping young adult followers become parent followers

In human development, young adults look a lot like full-grown adults. They are able to do almost everything they need to – learn, work, drive, take care of themselves, be in relationships. (Some are even better at some things – having more energy, more time and being in peak physical condition – now they are the ones taking it easy on their parents, not the other way around!). What they lack is only experience and the opportunity and responsibility to raise their own children

Young adult followers are growing and deepening their relationships with God and with others. They know their gifts and are developing them and using them in the context of the family of believers and for God’s Kingdom in the world. Their perspective and priorities are being changed as they get to know Jesus better and are being shaped into his likeness. But they will stay in this stage indefinitely unless they accept the challenge and call to come alongside others, to help them become disciples of Jesus and mature as his followers.

At this stage, the role of the parent follower shifts to ‘You do, I’ll help.’ Young adult followers are able to take responsibility for their own growth and living out their faith. But the parent follower is there to monitor and actively help when needed.

Discipleship

Young Adult Follower





- increasing enthusiasm
- growing experience
- intermittent confidence
- growing competence

Role of Parent Follower

- lower direction
- higher consensus
- high discussion
- high availability

Over time, the young adult follower needs less and less support in making their own choices and playing their role in the family of God. For the most part, they look and act like fully mature disciples and many stay at this stage. The one thing that is missing is the intentional choice to be involved in making other disciples.

turning the corner (milestones):

- **Gospel Fluency** – the ability to recognize how the truth of the gospel impacts the specific situation and circumstances in our lives and the lives of others. 
- **Beginning to reproduce** – building relationships with those who aren't following Jesus or younger followers, intentionally investing in others growth. 
- **Maintaining health** – establishing and adjusting a set of rhythms and relationships for continued personal growth and support, indicating a healthy interdependence and God-sufficiency  

Parenting Tip: Having 'The Talk'

By the time a follower gets to this stage, they should already know that the goal for all followers of Jesus is to make disciples of others. There should not be a surprise at this stage that they are supposed to become parent followers themselves. Even young children know that babies come from somewhere, “when a Mommy and a Daddy really love each other...” However, as kids get older, parents need to explain the details a little more clearly when their kids are ready (and hopefully before they learn it all from media or peers).

As a follower reaches the young adult stage, the parent follower needs to help them to understand the hard work involved in helping others to become followers of Jesus and grow. A parent follower can review how they have walked alongside the new disciple over time and help them to see how they also can and must be involved in making disciples themselves as parent followers. Then the parent follower needs to equip the maturing disciple by sharing these same principles that they have learned and attempted, however imperfectly, to use in helping the new disciple to grow. The parent follower's joy is not only to see the new disciple grow to maturity, but to see them become parents themselves. In some ways, the parent's role moves to that of proud grandparents even as the parent continues to go about the work of making more disciples. Indeed, part of this transition might be modeling this process as the parent follower begins to invest in other new and growing disciples, releasing the new disciple to start the parenting process.

Discipleship

Stage Four: The Parent Follower

Description: The parent follower is characterized by the motivation and ability to make disciples.

- **Reproduce disciples** – follow Jesus' command to make disciples, building relationships with others and inviting them to follow Jesus and grow to maturity.
- **Self-care** – know how to stay connected to Jesus in healthy ways: able to read and understand the Bible, able to listen and speak to God in prayer, and able to remain in healthy community with others for support, encouragement and accountability.

'phrase from the stage' (identifying parent followers):

"This guy at work asked me to go explain the Bible to him. Pray for me."

"We get to baptize someone from our missional community this week. When is the next meeting for those who want to learn more toward signing the participant's vow?"

"As our missional community is going "on mission" I have given each person in the group a different responsibility."

"I realize discipleship happens at home, too. Will you hold me accountable to intentionally disciple my kids?"

"I have a person in my missional community who is passionate about children. Can you give me the contact information for the person organizing volunteers for Kid's Community?"

On-going needs of Parent Followers

Just because someone we've invested in becomes a parent follower and begins to lead others to follow Jesus and grow to maturity, doesn't mean that our role with them ends. It does change significantly, however. In some ways, it is like becoming a grandparent.

At this stage, the parent follower's role has shifted to 'You do, I watch.'

New Parent Follower

- high enthusiasm
- high experience
- high confidence
- high competence

On-Going Role of Parent Follower

- low direction
- high consensus
- low example
- high explanation

While remaining available for on-going support and encouragement, as needed, parent followers who have reached this phase must be careful to let new parent followers establish themselves as disciple-makers. It's always good to check in regularly, to offer wisdom and encouragement and to challenge them to keep investing in others. But the parent follower needs to make sure to get involved only at the new parent follower's invitation.

Discipleship

Sources:

Much of this material has been sourced from the following works and adapted to fit the language and culture at Threads Church.

Putnam, Jim, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches that Make Disciples* (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2010).

Breen, Mike & Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipleship Culture, 2nd Edition* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2011), 115-132.