

“The 5 Stages of Discipleship” – A Spiritual Formation Grid

Introduction by Pastor Tim Trudeau · Grace Community Church, Boone

At the time I am writing this, I have had the joy of serving as the Senior Pastor of Grace Community Church in Boone, Iowa, for 21 years. While there have been plenty of challenges along the way, it has been my delight to see so many come to faith in Christ, and grow in relationship to Christ. Many have told me how, since they came to Grace Church they have, through our ministry, grown significantly in their faith.

For example, I recently preached a textual-topical sermon series on Christian character. At the conclusion of the series, one of our members posted these encouraging words on Facebook: “I have so enjoyed the Character Counts sermon series at our church. It has inspired me to live a more Christ focused life: our marriage is better, the relationships with my children are better, and life is more peaceful. I am forever grateful to my church family for the encouragement and support they have blessed our lives with.”

Wow! Pastors lay in bed at night dreaming they would hear such things. Praise God! Our goal has been to make disciples, and we have witnessed many evidences that our members have been growing in faith and conformity to Christ.

But I have recently been convicted of a reality that leaves me a little embarrassed. Yes, by God’s grace, we have made disciples, but we haven’t made disciples that make disciples. Our ministry has been one of addition, not multiplication.

I’m not sure how I missed it, since I was well trained as a disciplemaker early in my Christian life (bless you John Grunditz!). I have tried to practice making disciples, I have taught overseas on discipleship, and I always believed at the heart and soul of our calling is to “Go and make disciples.” And yet at our church, while making disciples, we have not intentionally made disciples who make disciples.

It was Will Mancini who recently convicted me of this reality. In preparation for a Grace Church leadership retreat, I was reading *Future Church*, and was challenged by these words: “When a person develops a disciple, the disciple grows into a person who develops disciples. But when a program develops a disciple, the disciple grows into a person who services programs...Jesus’ method is not to add people one at a time at a steady rate. It is to impart His own life into multiple people who each would impart it to multiple others” (*Future Church*, pgs. 157-158). I realized programs developed disciples in our church, who serviced programs. There was, with notable exceptions, little multiplication.

Mancini refers to Jesus’s model, which was also Paul’s model. I was recently struck by Acts 20:4. Paul was about to leave Greece and set sail for Syria, first passing through the churches he had planted in Macedonia. We read, “Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.” Everywhere Paul went he made disciples. And each place, he identified certain individuals who would be “with him” like Jesus (Mark 3:14), continuing their training, and growing in making disciples.

David and Paul Watson tell us how we know we are a multiplying church: “Success is easy to spot. There will be four generations present. I will be present. The ones I am training will be present. The ones my trainees are training will be present. And the ones the trainees’ trainees are training will be present. We want to see four or more generations of leaders present, or we have failed. So, we say to leaders we work with, “Tell me about the people you are mentoring, and tell me about the people your mentees are mentoring.” (*Contagious Disciple Making*, pg. 36).

The reference to four generations is not arbitrary, but exactly what we have in Paul’s instruction to Timothy in II Timothy 2:2: “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”

Being burdened to call our congregation to make disciples, I preached a series on discipleship. I wanted to distinguish between disciples (who they certainly were, commendably), and disciplers, who I had not challenged them to be. I defined the terms this way:

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- **Disciple:** One who follows Christ unreservedly, whatever the cost, ever growing in conformity to Him and joyfully walking in obedience to His commands
- **Discipler:** One who calls others to follow Christ, modeling and instructing them in Christlikeness, that they may become and grow into mature disciples of Christ who bring others to maturity in Christ.

In the definition of a “discipler” we see that the discipling process includes “modeling” and “instructing.” In other words, there is a formal and informal aspect to discipleship. The informal aspect is modeling. The discipler lives in relationship with the disciple, because conformity to Christ is as much caught as taught. Paul regularly calls his disciples to follow his example (Phil. 3:17, I Cor. 4:16, I Thess. 1:5-7, Phil. 4:9), and disciplers should not be ashamed to say the same. But this requires life-on-life. It is an investment of time, as a discipler pours their life into another person.

This means discipling takes place as the disciple and discipler worship together, play together, pray together, work together, and share meals and special occasions together. It takes place in the classroom or living room, kitchen or workshop, car or coffeshop, hallway or highway.

But discipleship also includes instructing. And to that end, I did not want to lay this burden upon the congregation without giving them a practical, measurable, intentional tool to guide and assist them in the discipling process. Combining what I had learned years ago from James Engle in Contemporary Christian Communication, and what I read more recently in Putman & Harrington’s Discipleship, I developed the following scale:

Spiritual Formation Scale		
Scale	State	Individual
0	Level I	Conversion!
1		Understand the New Nature
2		Practice Regular Worship
3		Write Your Personal Testimony
4		Make a Small Group Connection
5		Share Your Personal Testimony
6		Know Your Identity in Christ and How to Walk in Victory
7	Level II	Practice Spiritual Disciplines
8		Discover Your Spiritual Gifts
9		Find Your Place of Service
10		Develop Godly Character
11		Be Equipped for Evangelism
12	Level III	Lay a Theological Foundation
13		Accept the Cost of Discipleship
14		Practice Financial Stewardship
15		Understand Missional Living: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself
16		Understand Basic Discipling Essentials
17	Level IV	Begin Discipling
18		Recognize Various Worldviews, and Form a Christian Mind
19		Embrace God's Design for Marriage, Family, and Human Sexuality
20		Recognize the Importance of Bringing Gospel to the Nations
21		Identify Your Life Purpose, and Possible Leadership Role
22	Level V	Mentor Other Leaders

The “levels” are simply an acknowledgment that there are various stages in the Christian maturity process. Levels I-IV are similar to the four stages Putman & Harrington identify: Infant, Children, Young Adult, and Parent. Since some could come to faith in Christ later in life, but are still “newborn babes” as Peter calls them, the “Infant” designation may be correct, but potentially demeaning. So I simply acknowledged there are “levels” to our growth process. We stand before we walk, walk before we run.

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Level V, the Mentor level, was added by me in recognition at some point we may not need to be “discipled,” as in taught by someone else who helps us take the next steps in our spiritual growth. But at that point we still need relationships. Proverbs 27:17 tells us “As iron sharpens iron, one man sharpens another.” We all need someone in our life to encourage us and hold us accountable. And at this stage, it may be desirable in a church setting for the Mentor to focus on discipling those whom God may be raising up as future leaders in the church, rather than new converts, so that there is an intentional pipeline of new leaders being developed.

The individual 21 steps before the Mentor level are intended to be sequential. You may or may not agree with the sequence, or the 21 steps. You are welcome to adapt the steps as you desire, adding, deleting, or moving them up or down the spiritual formation scale.

As you will see on the attached larger, more complete Spiritual Formation Scale, at each step I have identified the practical step to be taken by the “disciple,” and the accompanying encouragement and support to be provided by the “discipler.”

For example, in step one, “Understand the New Nature,” here are the two tasks:

- **Disciple’s Personal Action Step:** Be able to articulate what it means to be “born again,” and the implications for life now and eternal life
- **Discipler Role:** Tell them how the Gospel has changed you, and about your confidence and hope of eternal life after death.

My goal was to be as specific, measurable and practical as possible, in order that the discipling process may be intentional and transferrable, as both the disciple and the discipler understand their role.

At each step I have also suggested a variety of resources. For step one the resources include John Bunyan, [Pilgrim’s Progress](#); Tim Keller, [The Prodigal God](#); Elyse Fitzpatrick, [Found in Him](#); and John Piper, [Finally Alive](#).

There are various ways a discipler may make use of the resources. In many cases, it could be that you will pick a book listed, like in this case Fitzpatrick’s book, and read and discuss a chapter each week with the disciple. Or you may want to select chapters from a book, or from several books, and read and discuss them together. Or simply pass on to the disciple highlights of what you read, along with your own experience. In some cases the resources may be a website, like step three, which refers you to a practical guide to writing a personal testimony. Or it may be a Bible app (step 7), or a test you can take to help you discover your spiritual gifts or your place of service (steps 8 &9). In most cases it is not intended for you to make use of all the resources. You are free to choose, or find others of your choosing.

Or there is another possibility. One of the simplest ways to accomplish the discipleship process would be to study together the Scriptures also given as a resource for each step. For step one you could choose some or all of the Scriptures listed, and you and the disciple could read and study the passages together. The texts in bold are the ones I would personally use as the “primary” text to study each time I met with a disciple. If you studied one emboldened text each week together, you would work your way through the Spiritual Formation Scale in less than a year.

I have also attached to this document a ten question “Scripture Study Questions” worksheet, which we have used at our church. You may want to simply ask the 10 questions of the passage you are studying together each week, or the other possible study questions suggested. If so, be sure to get practical in the application section, and ask the disciple at your next meeting about an occasion where they applied what they had learned. Once you have finished the Spiritual Formation Scale texts, you could use the worksheet to study your way through books of the Bible.

I am always ready to make additions or changes to improve the Spiritual Formation Scale. Feel free to email your thoughts or suggestions to timtrudeau58@gmail.com, or contact me with questions you may have.

Of course there are other discipleship training materials available, such as the Navigators “Design for Discipleship” or “2:7” series. But regardless of your approach, may God build His church through the multiplication of disciples, and may the gates of hell not prevail against it!