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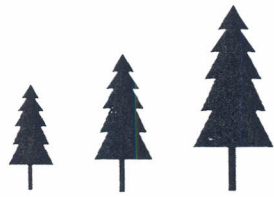
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# Faith Development Theory

## Handmaid to Biblical Discipleship

BY RICK GROVER

*Editor's note: This article is adapted from the author's Doctor of Ministry project entitled "The Discipleship Journey: Developing and Reproducing Disciples in the Local Church Through the Cell Model of Ministry" (Emmanuel School of Religion, 1998), for which he received the Calvin Phillips Award for Excellence.*

In an article on biblical scholarship and preaching, C. K. Barrett noted, "Scholarship waits upon preaching as its handmaid. Preaching is a vital and indispensable activity of the church, and scholarship must assist it, not dominate it."<sup>1</sup> In preaching, one delivers the Word to achieve life transformation; the preacher uses biblical scholarship to assist that delivery. In the process of biblical discipleship, life transformation begins from the Word; *faith development theory* serves as a tool to aid that transformation. Church leaders wrestle with the process of discipleship, not because we misunderstand the nature of discipleship, but because we fail to employ a significant tool to guide us in making disciples. The local church can develop a discipleship program based upon faith development theory.

### Discipleship Revisited

Much disagreement over discipleship has been evident in Christian literature over the past forty years. Writers have examined the recurring and fundamental ques-

tion of Christian discipleship in the history of the church: What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ, not only as an attitude toward life in general, but also in terms of daily living and existence? Fernando Segovia suggests, "The proposed answers have been considerable, to say the least, and indeed quite often at variance with, if not in direct contraction to, one another."<sup>2</sup>

Some Christian writers have focused on the technical understanding of disciple as "learner,"<sup>3</sup> whereas others have emphasized the classical meaning of discipleship as an individual commitment to a great master or leader.<sup>4</sup> The Gospels and Acts use the term *mathetes* 'disciple' more than 250 times, 200 times in a way that extends beyond reference to the twelve. In order to understand the meaning of this term, we need to see its usage in Palestine during the time of Christ. A familiar word in first-century Palestine, *mathetes* described those who studied Torah under the tutelage of the rabbis. The term also referred to pupils of the Greek philosophers throughout the Roman Empire. But Jesus' concept of discipleship added a new dimension to *mathetes*. His application radically differed from the sole meanings of pupil or learner.

Harold Bender writes:

The rabbinical students, like the disciples of the Greek philosophers, were attached to their masters' teaching or tradition, but the disciples of Jesus were



attached first of all to His person, radically and completely. . . . When He called upon His disciples to learn of Him, He was not speaking about ordinary learning, but about acceptance of His spirit and way of life.<sup>5</sup>

In Palestine, the concept of discipleship emphasized the teacher-pupil relationship, whereas for Jesus, it emphasized commitment to a person and service to others based on that commitment. This understanding of discipleship seemed a “*new thing*, at all events, something that *did not fit in*, or was not on all-fours, with usual Rabbinic customs or with customary Rabbinic phenomena.”<sup>6</sup> Discipleship such as that which Jesus demanded and inspired incorporated *following*, not for study alone, but for service to help the master in his mission, to carry out his instructions, and to live out his teachings in love within the community of his other disciples. Discipleship according to Jesus embodied a lifelong journey of commitment to him in every area of life.

### Faith Development Theory

In 1978, James W. Fowler and Sam Keen published *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*. This volume contained Fowler’s first book-length consideration of faith development theory. Since then, a windfall of articles and books published on stages of faith, faith development, and the process of Christian growth has emerged. Many evangelical discipleship programs and their literature, however, omit faith development, even though the New Testament clearly directs it. Organizers structure most discipleship programs for new believers only, and thus contribute to only one part of the process of developing the mission and character of Christ in all believers. Fowler’s theory of faith development in particular has become a positive tool in aiding the church in the discipleship process.

A psychologist by education, James Fowler came under the heavy influence of Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, Erik Erikson’s growth and crises of healthy personality, and Jean Piaget’s cognitive structures of the whole through four stages of development. From these influences, Fowler developed his own theory of faith development based upon the following stages of human development: infancy, early childhood, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and maturity. When we apply human development theory to the study of dis-

cipleship, we need not expect a direct one-to-one correlation between the two processes. Human beings do not develop in exactly the same way; neither should we compartmentalize the development of faith. We can, however, gain insight into the discipleship journey when we uncover basic components of spiritual growth. Fowler reminds us that

the faith stages . . . do not represent educational or therapeutic goals toward which to hurry people. Seeing their optimal correlations with psychosocial eras gives a sense of how time, experience, challenge and nurture are required for growth in faith.<sup>7</sup>

The stages of faith developed by Fowler begin with the “pre-stage,” or stage of infancy and undifferentiated faith. This stage of faith initiates the journey of discipleship through conversion. Conversion begins with a faith distinguishable from religion and mere “belief.” From the “pre-stage” the newly converted believer enters stage one, which Fowler defines as “intuitive-projective faith.” This stage is characterized by imitative faith, in which the new believer becomes permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions, and stories of the faith community. Stage two, the “mythic-literal faith,” represents that period of Christian growth when “the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community.”<sup>8</sup> “Synthetic-conventional faith,” stage three, defines a person’s experience of the world that now extends beyond his or her immediate spiritual family (or church). In this stage, the Christian begins to experience a broader understanding of faith that includes people with differing views and opinions. Stage four, “individuating-reflective faith,” moves the believer into a phase of spiritual responsibility and interdependence. Fowler describes the emergence of stage five, “conjunctive faith,” through the analogy of seeing light as both a wave phenomenon and particles of energy. Conjunctive faith involves the integration of one’s outlook with those components suppressed or unrecognized in the interest of self-certainty. Many Christians may never reach the sixth and final stage in the discipleship journey, “universalizing faith,” for this stage brings about complete reconciliation. Stage six bears total acceptance and love demonstrated completely and with no reservations toward all people.



## Benefits and Cautions

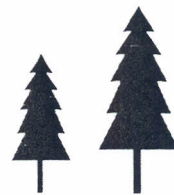
Understanding faith development and the discipleship journey in this light has several emergent benefits. First, it provides a framework by which we can understand spiritual growth and development. As Fowler puts it, we gain “normative directions of development.”<sup>9</sup> Second, it allows us to interpret our own faith journeys in light of the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. He becomes the standard of “universalizing faith,” which enables us to measure ourselves in a positive way next to him. Third, it approaches the study of faith development as an interactional process. We do not make this journey alone, and much of our growth comes interdependently. Dennis Bushkofsky writes, “Some indications of faith maturity will be the degree to which people are involved in a local Christian community, and the extent to which they act out their faith commitments within their community and among the world’s oppressed.”<sup>10</sup> Fourth, it guides us in the possibility of recapturing a catechetical form of discipleship focused on cognitive learning, life-skill growth, and affective development.

However, along with these emergent benefits come several cautions. First, as Fowler himself identifies, “Scientific inquiry (especially that of Piaget) does not always correspond with the kind of knowing involved in moral reasoning.”<sup>11</sup> Second, and closely related to the first, is the danger of a subtle form of gnosticism: the more you know, the more you develop spiritually. This caution suggests, not that disciples should avoid intellectual development, but rather that spiritual maturity includes more than the mind; it includes Christian love, service, hospitality, peace, and kindness. Third, we must avoid compartmentalization of believers. No one likes to be “pigeonholed”; thus, our approach needs to extend great care and sensitivity to believers in their various stages of growth. The objective of using faith development as an aid to discipleship focuses on reflection for further growth, not classification for preprogrammed Christianity.

## Faith Development in the New Testament

The stages of growth described by Fowler (following his initial classification of human development: infancy, early childhood, young adulthood, adulthood) are applied to the Christian life in the pages of the New Testament. In the epistles we find references to Christians at various stages of faith, beginning with *nepios* ‘infant’ in Heb 5:13; 1 Cor 3:1; 14:20; and 1 Pet 2:2. New Testament writers

identify a second stage, *teknia* ‘young child’ or simply ‘child’, as seen in Phlm 10; 2 Tim 1:2; and 3 John 4. We find a third stage, *neanias* ‘young adult’, in 1 John 2:13, 14. A final stage of spiritual development recognized in the New Testament is *pater* ‘father’, or one who has matured in the faith. The term *pater* describes the general sense of biological fathers, but also those who have “infused their own spirits into others . . . , those to whom pupils trace back the knowledge and training they have received.”<sup>12</sup>



*[Faith development theory] provides a framework by which we can understand spiritual growth and development.*

We can identify other examples of the stages of faith development in 1 John 2:12–14 and Matt 8:18–22. In the latter passage, we read of followers of Jesus who had not yet fully committed to him. Second, we see an inquirer who approached Jesus and testified that he would follow Christ everywhere, yet found the cost too great. Then “another of the disciples” approached Jesus with some reservation about following him. This passage uses the term “disciple” to depict an individual who has not yet grown in the commitment of yielding to Christ in every area of life. Finally, when Jesus got into the boat, his “disciples” followed him, which gives account of the committed core of the twelve.

## Putting the Tool to Work

So how does this understanding of faith development guide us in developing a discipleship plan for the local church? First, it helps us see discipleship as an ongoing process rather than an isolated one-on-one program for new Christians. Second, it helps us structure our goals around the stages of spiritual growth. Third, it guides us in creating a curriculum for each phase through which people will journey in the Christian life.

Practically speaking, within the local church discipleship becomes the matrix for all ministries rather than a separate department that some may or may not choose to enter. For this approach to function biblically, the elders



and ministers must commit to the discipleship of all members through preaching and teaching, small groups and Sunday school, and one-on-one mentoring. The process begins with the leadership and filters throughout the congregation as the leaders set and implement long-term goals and objectives. The following example of a discipleship plan is built around these stages of faith.

Evangelism denotes the process of guiding people into a committed relationship with Christ within Christian community. Once a person steps over the line of faith, the discipleship process has begun. In the infancy stage of faith, the new believer needs encouragement, support, and nurturing. The first stage of discipleship centers on *relationship*. This stage does not use a curriculum, a plan, or a program, but people. Discipleship at this point means making sure the new Christian has a connection to the body of Christ through tangible, meaningful relationships. In this stage, the new believer comes under the direction of a mentor or small group who can assist, befriend, and guide the new Christian in the newfound faith. Elizabeth O'Connor writes, "This is a time when that relationship is deepened and the [mentor] has an opportunity in a relaxed, structured time to find out [where the person is] in his or her spiritual life and to help with questions or misgivings he or she may have concerning the step that is about to be taken."<sup>13</sup>

Within the first three months, the new believer seeks biblical information and understanding of the call of Jesus Christ. This second stage corresponds with the "mythic-literal" stage of faith, where the new believer begins to develop the basic ideas of Christian teaching and doctrine. Thus this stage focuses on *knowledge* as part of the developmental process of Christian growth. Through a mentor, Sunday school class, or training program, church leaders provide resources for biblical understandings and experiences of worship, evangelism, edification, and equipping. Bushkofsky describes the needs of the new Christian:

At a minimum, [new Christians] who have never before been members of a church need to learn (1) some of the major stories of the Bible, (2) something about prayer, (3) the church's traditions and practice of worship, and (4) forms of Christian service and stewardship through life in the community, on the job, and as a member of a congregation.<sup>14</sup>

He further describes discipleship in its ancient form as a type of apprenticeship in faith. The young in Christ would receive instruction from a catechist, gain accountability through a sponsor, and "demonstrate faithful action in some form of Christian service."<sup>15</sup>

The third goal in the discipleship process fits the young adult phase or "synthetic-conventional" stage of faith development. This stage depicts the goal of *ongoing growth* in the areas of spiritual disciplines and gifts. Although the new believer can develop the first two stages of relationships and basic knowledge of the faith within one year, this third stage becomes a lifelong process. To work toward this part of our journey, we place the growing Christian in ministry opportunities, continue the development of faith within the Christian community, and emphasize the slow, gradual process of becoming like Christ through spiritual disciplines. During this stage, we encourage and equip the believer in ongoing use of spiritual gifts for building up the body of Christ and ministering to the hurting and those in need. Furthermore, we encourage relationships with nonbelievers to show genuine care for those outside the church fellowship.

The fourth stage, *spiritual maturity*, includes discipleship reproduction. Like the third stage, this part of discipleship encompasses a lifetime. The disciple expresses spiritual maturity in a lifelong process of bearing the fruit of the Spirit, living consistently according to the model of Christ, and having an increased awareness of the needs around him or her—that is, living out kingdom values. This final stage corresponds with the "individuating-reflective" and "conjunctive" stages of faith. We have intentionally excluded Fowler's "universalizing" faith, since that stage describes an end result more than a process of growth. If the Christian has not led someone else to the Lord by this time, personal evangelism becomes a point of focus in discipleship training. For the disciple gifted in the area of leadership, this stage guides the individual in leadership development for more shepherding and discipleship.

In order to implement this plan, church leaders may include the following ingredients: (1) enhancement of Christian community for close, meaningful relationships, (2) an evaluation process for church members to identify their stage in the faith process, (3) ongoing follow-up for assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach, and (4) commitment to a long-term strategy of

making disciples. Jesus Christ, the Model for completion of the faith journey, compels us to go and make disciples, and the church must see its ongoing role in this process and not become sidelined by distractions that keep it from its task. To that end, we cultivate faith development theory as a helpful tool in the discipleship journey.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Biblical Problems and Biblical Preaching* (Swanwick: Fellowship of Kingdom Conference, 1956), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando F. Sergovia, *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Keith M. Bailey, *Care of Converts* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1979), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 93.

<sup>5</sup> Harold S. Bender, *These Are My People: The Nature of the Church and Its Discipleship According to the New Testament* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1962), 77.

<sup>6</sup> C. G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (n.p., 1939).

<sup>7</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 114.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis L. Bushkofsky, "Making Apprentices in Discipleship: The Baptism of Adults," in *Word and World* 14 (1994): 52.

<sup>11</sup> Fowler, 101.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1886), 473.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment: An Attempt to Embody the Essence of Church* (Washington, D.C.: Servant Leadership Press, 1994), 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> Bushkofsky, 52.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.