LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Stages and Spheres in Discipleship

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by

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**Introduction**

Believers in Jesus Christ have worked hard over the centuries since He walked the earth to show themselves worthy to be called disciples. Unfortunately, many were taught poorly, and they followed ritualistic service models and were not motivated by their love of Christ, but by their fear of failure or rejection by the church.

This paper describes the journey that all men follow as they become disciples of Christ. The paper will review the five stages of a disciple and the four spheres of relationships that all believers must develop as they mature as believers. The paper will also consider why Christ must be central to the efforts of the disciple to meet the definition of a disciple that Jesus provided.

**Analysis of Five Stages**

In week three of the liberty Online Discipleship course, Dr. Rod Dempsey presents the premise that there are five stages to discipleship.[[1]](#footnote-2)  He offers that stage one is where an individual is in a spiritually dead condition. They often will share that they don’t believe in God or that they don’t know God. If this person does not hear the gospel and accept the free gift of salvation, then they are doomed to eternal separation from God.

In stage two, the individual has become aware of God and has accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.[[2]](#footnote-3) This person needs to be taught the value of Scripture, how to read Scripture with understanding, and to have Christian love demonstrated to them by other believers. They are often excited to learn how to please God and to take in information voraciously. Dempsey defines these believers as Spiritual Infants.

Stage Three is described as being a Spiritual Child.[[3]](#footnote-4)  They are continuing to learn about Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Father, but display a self-centeredness. They will often complain about church life that doesn’t meet their expectations. If a mature believer doesn’t engage them

Stage Four is described as being a Spiritual Youth.[[4]](#footnote-5) These individuals display knowledge of the Kingdom of God and are eager to accept a role in expanding the Kingdom. They develop the skills to be self-feeders from the Word of God and have an active relationship with God.

Stage Five is when a person becomes a Spiritual Father or Mother.[[5]](#footnote-6) They become active in discipling others in the other stages and still maintain their own relationship with God and serving others.[[6]](#footnote-7)

**Analysis of Four Spheres**

Dempsey continues to define discipleship by describing four spheres of relationships that a disciple must be adept at developing. Sphere One consists of the relationship between God and the disciple. This relationship is of primary importance and empowers the other relationship spheres.

Sphere Two is defined by the relationships the believer has with other believers. Jesus explained to His followers that “they would be known by their love for one another (John 13:35)[[7]](#footnote-8) Believers have to learn to prioritize their relationships with each other and to learn to love each other well.

Sphere Three involved the relationships within the disciple’s home. These family relationships are another important place for a believer to learn how to value others, give and accept forgiveness, and develop the ability to selflessly serve others.

Sphere Four involves the relationship that we develop with the world around us. We are supported by the relationship skills we developed in the other spheres and by the power provided by God to honestly love those outside our family and the church community. That love motivates us to care enough to invest in the relationships to gain their respect so that they can trust us when we share the gospel with them.

**Assessment of Writer’s Status**

As I consider the stages, I believe I am in Stage Five. As an executive pastor, I spend most of my time seeking to influence others to value the Kingdom of God and to help others find their place of service to expand the Kingdom. At times, I teach large groups scriptural truths, and at other times I give biblical counsel on how to apply God’s Word to individuals. I also have the opportunity to invest in my children, even though they are now adults, and to share what I have learned about God with them. I seek God to hear His direction for my life and to align my actions toward those that He wishes me to take. His power is needed to heal my wounds that I suffer in service to Him and those that He loves.[[8]](#footnote-9)

**Spheres in Need of Submission**

As I consider the four spheres that Dempsey presented, I can honestly say that I have more to learn about being competent within each sphere. I am very aware of my need for God and His presence, yet at times, I grow weary and rebellious. During those times, I simply do not spend the time in His Word or praying to Him. It is my hope that these “down times” will become very infrequent in my life.

I believe I have become a champion to encourage others to truly strive to “choose each other” in Christ. Even as I encourage others, I have to continue to discipline myself to engage with other believers and encourage them with my demonstrations of concern for them.

In each stage of my life, I have been challenged to be a good son, husband and father in my family. I am moving to a new stage as a grandfather and am learning how to lovingly support my adult children, my bride of thirty years, and my aging mother and in-laws. As my daughter has married, I now have the opportunity to pour into my son-in-law as well as my new grand-daughter. I love them all dearly and have to make room for them in my life so that I can invest in them.

As a pastor, I have many opportunities to invest in those that are part of the church community and I often come in contact with those that are in Stage One as they visit the church. My challenge is to make room in my schedule to allow me to move about in the community and create relationships that will allow me to develop trust with others so that I can share the gospel with them. This is a difficult challenge for me currently and I am working at delegating duties to others and streamlining some of my tasks so that there will be margin in my schedule to work on this particular relationship sphere.

**Meaning of Submission**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer shared “Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Rod Dempsey stated that “the church of Jesus Christ is in the business of preaching the gospel and then helping those people who respond to the gospel grow spiritually strong.”[[10]](#footnote-11) The idea that we can serve as disciples without living in fellowship with Jesus and work to serve Him without seeking His Lordship is ridiculous. Our work as disciples should always be a love response rather than a religious duty. Such a duty would become empty and burdensome to pursue. A love response is based upon an ongoing relationship with a loving Savior who wishes to involve us in God’s plan. He generously involves us and empowers us. Each day, we can sit and listen to His plan for our lives and we can choose to join Him in His work. Obedience is the surest measure of whether we are disciples. When we become self-guided, we become rouge workers in the Kingdom and our results will often be poor. When we fully submit to His plan, we get to stand close by and see miracles that He performs. Simply put, that should be enough for our lives.

Jesus loves humanity and gave everything He had to redeem men. He desperately loves and He asks us to follow Him in loving others. Our love should look foolish to others. It is given because we have been given the same gift, not because others deserve our love. The Cross signifies Jesus’ love of men and His power over death. This symbol motivates disciples to imitate their Lord and to follow His commandments so that others will know to whom they follow.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented the five stages of the development of a disciple and the four spheres of relationship that a disciple must consider becoming effective in their ministry. The paper also proposed that a disciple should be motivated by their love for Jesus to serve others. The love they received is the reason for their service and obedience to the commandments that Jesus gave to those that wished to be His disciples. The paper also reflected upon the writer’s current status in the five stages and the four spheres of relationship. The ability to set aside personal achievement and to simply serve in obedience is a key still that believers have to learn to implement to be effective in their ministry to others.

**Bibliography**

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1. Rod Dempsey, Liberty University. (2019), *Presentation: What Did Jesus Say About Being a Disciple?* Retrieved on March 3, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. David Earley, and Rod Dempsey*. Discipleship is … How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence,* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Rod Dempsey, Liberty University. (2019), *Presentation: What Did Jesus Say About Being a Disciple?* Retrieved on March 3, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Discipleship (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*). Fortress Press, 2001. Kindle Edition., p.56. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Dave Earley & Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is . . . (*B&H Publishing Group. 2013), Retrieved from https://app.wordsearchbible.com. p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)