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How does spiritual life grow?—Part 1

Dan M. Appel (<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/authors/appel-dan-m>)

Life in all aspects—physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual—develops in stages, and each stage, successfully negotiated, affects subsequent ones. Signs of growth from one stage to another are clearly observable. This article deals with spiritual development and its observable stages.

The ultimate goal of spiritual development is spiritual maturity—when we “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13 (<http://biblia.com/bible/niv/Eph.%204.13>)).* That growing up, Paul further states, is to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (4:15). Peter challenges us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” and “like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation” (2 Pet. 3:18 (<http://biblia.com/bible/niv/2%20Pet.%203.18>); 1 Pet. 2:2 (<http://biblia.com/bible/niv/1%20Pet.%202.2>), 3 (<http://biblia.com/bible/niv/1%20Pet%202.3>)).

We often talk about how spiritual growth occurs in our lives but rarely identify the process in detail. When a person fails to progress beyond a stage in spiritual life, he or she freezes at a particular stage of spiritual development. This arrested development leads to spiritual atrophy and eventually spiritual death.

What does the spiritual growth process look like? How can one determine where one is in the process? A Christian’s spiritual maturation may be seen as taking place in six stages. Understanding these stages helps us be aware of where we are in the onward journey of spiritual growth and strive to move toward the fullness of maturity that the New Testament speaks about.

Stage one: Seek reward, avoid punishment

As followers of Christ, we all begin at the first baby stage. Just like baby children, baby Christians begin their spiritual journey focused mainly on themselves. Their focus in this infant stage of development is obedience:

"How can I avoid punishment?" Their predominant theme is the direct negative consequences of their actions or attitudes on themselves. They measure the degree of good or bad by the amount of reward or punishment that follows what they do. They defer to those of superior power, prestige, or experience when defining right and wrong.

Because the focus is on avoiding punishment, people at this important beginning stage of spiritual life see everything in black and white. People at this stage tend to draw up lists of rules delineating what is acceptable and what is not for a Christian, and their Bible knowledge consists mainly of proof texts to defend their positions.

In this stage, people are inclined to "create God in their own image," and define what God wants or likes in terms of their own likes and dislikes, their own definition of what is right and wrong, or areas where they have been victorious and areas where they have not. When it comes to God, they relate to Him primarily on the basis of how He will react to their obedience or disobedience: they are concerned with reward or punishment.

Commonly, those in the baby stage define themselves by what they are against as opposed to what they are for. The moment Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they slipped back to this elementary stage in their walk with God. Suddenly they were most concerned about getting punished for their transgression and hid themselves, afraid of God's reaction to their rebellion.

While this first stage is a common starting place—"the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom" ([Prov. 9:10](http://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov.%209.10)) (<http://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov.%209.10>), emphasis added; see also [Prov. 1:7](http://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov.%201.7) (<http://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov.%201.7>))—those who fail to grow beyond this point remain severely stunted in their spiritual development. As long as they remain at this level of development, their spiritual life will be a burden—an obligation, not a joy and a pleasure—something they do because they have to or are afraid not to, not because they desire to.

Stage two: What's in it for me?

The second stage in the development of a person's spiritual maturation also revolves around the external consequences of their actions, but now the question is, "What's in it for me?" Persons at this stage feel little or no interest in the needs or interests of others, and they focus on their own needs and interests. There is very little patience with those whose interests or developments differ from their own.

While stage one is characterized by fear, stage two is built on greed. The emphasis is on what is mine or what will be mine. An analogy would be a toddler who obeys because Mom promises him or her a cookie if the child does or does not do something. But at play the child wants the toys, all of them he or she can get, and is not terribly interested in what others want.

To people at this stage of spiritual development, God is somewhat like a spiritual "favorite grandfather" who will reward their good behavior. The only time they are really interested in the opinions or needs of others is when it might further their own interests or support their own position; otherwise, respect for others and their interests does not exist.

People at this stage have very little empathy or concern for the struggles of others. They are impatient with those whose spiritual development or interests may be different from their own. Their understanding of spirituality is lockstep: *Everyone should like the same cookies that I like; all should see or do things just like me. If not, you are wrong or at least in some way spiritually inferior.* They know what it takes to get to heaven, and they are certain that they are going to make it because of what they do or do not do.

Where stage one focuses on the consequences of sin, stage two focuses on the rewards of being good/obedient.

If stage one is focused on the "lake of fire," stage two is focused on heaven when it comes to the motivation for spiritual actions and attitudes.

Here comes the first major transition in spiritual maturation. While stage one and stage two followers of Christ are focused on themselves, stages three and four are more identified with the group. People at this stage of spiritual maturation judge the morality of their actions by comparing them to the church's—corporate or local—views and expectations. They define right and wrong by what the important group, in

this case the church they identify with, thinks is right or wrong. Rather than being concerned with the consequences to themselves for obedience or disobedience, they are concerned with what the group will think of them and how the group defines right and wrong; in other words, whether they are orthodox or not in their beliefs and actions. Doctrines, statements of beliefs and/or creeds, and rules are adhered to rigidly with little thought of whether they make sense or are fair or appropriate.

Again, morality is predominantly dictated by some earthly authority or force outside of the individual.

Stage three: Seeking to meet group's expectations

In stage three, the position as a church member becomes very important, and people judge rightness or wrongness based on the approval or disapproval of those in the particular church or denomination in which they are members. Their definition of a good follower of Jesus is how well they fit into the church's expectations. The relative morality of what a person does is evaluated by how this morality will affect the person's relationships with the rest of the group; in other words, seeking to meet the group's expectations and obtaining their respect.

Stage three followers of Jesus want to be liked and well thought of by other members of their church. They recognize that not conforming to or living up to the group's expectations affects how others feel about or accept them. This, in turn, determines the place they find themselves in the hierarchy of the group—hence the need to conform to their particular church's ideas and norms.

As long as the individual is seen as meaning well and desiring to conform to the group's expectations, he or she is generally accepted. So appearances and appearing to be sincerely trying to conform, even when a person struggles, are very important to a stage three Christian.

Stage four: Group becomes more important than the individual

In the fourth stage of spiritual maturation, the group, or in this case the church, does not just influence the person, it becomes more important than the individual. Obeying God's commands as understood by the church, the traditions developed by the church, creeds and statements of belief, extrabiblical authorities, and church leadership become the predominant motivating force. The "good of the church" and conforming to the good and the mission of the larger group becomes the defining purpose of the life of the individual—thus a person becomes subservient to the group's needs and good. Statements of belief, creeds, and traditions and church policy prescribe what is right or wrong. An individual's response, behavior, and action must comply with what is defined by the church, and that response is essential to protect and preserve the church. Violation of the church's norms becomes "right" or "wrong" rather than a matter of preference, and people are labeled as "bad" or "good" accordingly.

Tragically, many churches prefer to keep their members in the early stages of spiritual maturation because they are easier to influence, channel, and control at this stage. Rather than encouraging, sustaining, promoting, and protecting the individual's personal relationship with God, the tendency, for a whole plethora of reasons, is to keep them beholden and subservient to the group.

Many, if not most, people who call themselves followers of Jesus never grow beyond the fourth level of spiritual maturity in their walk with God. In part 2 of this series we will consider stage 5 and stage 6 of spiritual maturity, which can lead to a place of joy, peace, and closeness with God that transcend anything we have ever imagined or experienced.

* Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture is quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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How does spiritual life grow?—Part 2 of 2

Dan M. Appel (<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/authors/appel-dan-m>)

In part 1 of this series, I suggested that there are six possible stages in a person's spiritual maturation. Just understanding those stages helps us understand where others are and determine where we are in our spiritual growth. In part 1 of this series, published in January 2016, we considered the first four stages. Many, if not most, who call themselves followers of Jesus never grow beyond the fourth level of spiritual maturity in their walk with God. Those who do grow beyond the fourth level almost always experience a profound paradigm-shattering crisis. In such times, everything they have believed and accepted—including their relationship with God and what it means—is reexamined, held up to scrutiny, redefined, expressed, and personalized. Such times can lead to spiritual depression, a journey into a valley of shadow and death from which they fear they will never emerge. If a person is willing to allow God to mature him or her beyond the first four stages of spiritual development, such a maturation process can create a place of joy, peace, and closeness with God that transcends anything they have ever imagined or experienced.

Stage five: Internalizing God's law

In the fifth stage, there is a tectonic shift in what motivates an individual as a follower of Jesus. Morality is determined by how an attitude or action impacts their relationship with God and fellow humanity, and this is determined on a totally different basis from rules, roles, creeds, or the expectations of religious authorities or group.

While at first glance this stage may appear relativistic and based on situational ethics, it is really the beginning of the stages that have characterized the lives all of the spiritual "greats" throughout history. Suddenly, a greater law becomes the governing principle of a person's life: the law of loving God supremely and one's neighbor as one's self. Now, the life of a follower of Jesus becomes my desire because the law is written on my heart.

Often the person ends up doing or not doing many of the same things that a person might do at another stage of their spiritual development, but for totally different reasons. Instead of living one's life by a list of forensic dos and don'ts on a guilt-righteousness continuum, now things such as whether an action or attitude will bring shame and reproach or honor and praise to God or my fellow man becomes important. And whether something will defile or adulterate my relationship with God or another person becomes the motivating principle, and whether an action or an attitude will cause me or those around me to fear God or empower them to live rich, full, satisfying, love-filled lives in Him and with each other become of greatest importance.

Stage six: Loving God and others genuinely

In the sixth stage, the important issue for the follower of Jesus is whether or not something brings pleasure to God and grace to others. This is spiritual altruism at its best. Jesus said that the two great commandments are to love God supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In this stage, the focus of a person's life becomes spending time with God, being conscious of His presence while proceeding through the day, and listening for His voice as He guides. A person begins seeing those around him through the eyes of Jesus. The heart rejoices at that which brings Him joy and breaks in the absence thereof.

In this stage, the church exists to provide loving accountability in the relationships in our lives. The church provides a place of fellowship with those who are also on their walk toward an increasingly deeper relationship with God, while at the same time holding up the mirror of God's Word so that we can clearly see how to love and where we may not be loving. The church becomes the place where we come together to accomplish loving deeds for God in concert with others who share our passion for Him; the place where we go to have our spiritual fires rekindled and our flagging spirits raised, and where we join with others of like passion for God in worshipping Him.

In short, in this stage neither punishment nor reward factor into the equation. Bringing pleasure, glory, and honor to someone we love—human or divine—is all that matters. That is what the angels and unfallen beings live to do. It is their greatest joy. And, it is what will consume us for eternity. It is the highest stage of spiritual growth.

Reaching higher ground

God's desire and purpose for each of us is to lead us beyond the certainty of a rules- and creeds-based religion to the adventure of a relationship based on following Jesus every day. This walk, while rooted in the past stages, focuses forward and constantly strives to move beyond the letter of obedience to the life of a new heart guided and nurtured by the Holy Spirit as we revel in God's presence and meditate day and night on the meaning of His Word. How can we make this journey of faith through each stage of spiritual maturity?

1. We must be willing to make the journey. We all naturally shy away from chaos, especially spiritual chaos. But the life of the Spirit is intrinsically chaotic. This life follows the guidance of the one Jesus likened to the wind that blew in unexpected places and directions. Following Jesus, one cannot relax in the comfort of a settled existence; instead, one constantly experiences the adventure of new life, vistas, and experiences. In the footsteps of the radical Rabbi from Nazareth, we make new relationships based on a new openness to loving and accepting others where they are. We begin to see things outside of the confines of a comfortable orthodoxy and to discover that the life of a follower of Jesus is a constant evolution of understanding God's will. We see people through new eyes that look beyond the external or immediate to the hidden and what they can be through His grace. The understanding of right and wrong based on creeds or statements of belief is shattered by a morality based on listening to Him through His Spirit and Word in the moment. If we are to grow to become all that God wishes and desires for us, our preconceptions have to be fractured until we emerge from our traditions and settled patterns of living into the glorious light of His constant ongoing presence in all areas of our lives.

2. We can't be afraid of the journey. The One who promises to never leave us or forsake us promises to be with us as we journey into increasingly intimate stages of spiritual growth. Even when we cannot see the path or where it leads, we know that He is our guide. The adventure of faith means trusting God so much that wherever He leads by whatever path He chooses at whatever pace and time, we would not want to be anywhere else with anybody else.

3. *We have to be grounded in the earlier stages of growth.* Children do not become adults at birth. Healthy, balanced adults are such because they have successfully navigated each stage of human development. The term makes it plain—*development*—moving through stages to other places. The human body is not ready for adult activities at birth. The human brain is not ready for abstract thought in early childhood. Human emotions are not ready for romance at puberty. Each stage of a person's development and education is built on successfully making it through those that precede it. In the same way, a person's spiritual development is grown on the stages that precede it.

4. *We cannot be afraid of the naysayers.* Rarely do we find a child who understands or even begins to comprehend the thinking of those in later stages of their growth. In the same way, it is a rare person indeed who is comfortable with the lives of those in later stages of their spiritual journey. Just as children will often exhibit their insecurity with temper tantrums or manipulation in order to control their parents, so people in the initial stages of spiritual maturation will react, often violently, against what they see as the liberality of those in the later stages of their spiritual journey.

Jesus, the radical Rabbi whom we claim to follow, was rarely understood or appreciated by the orthodox spiritual leaders and people of His day. He suffered violent reactions to Himself and His ideas. He went in new directions. He made friends with those whom the traditional church wanted nothing to do with. He went places where good followers of God were not supposed to go. He said things that offended and caused negative reaction. He worshiped in ways that few understood—all in the service of God.

5. *We must be committed to growth.* It is so easy, so sinfully natural, to want to settle down at every comfortable place in our spiritual journey. Growth can very often be painful and unsettling, but it is absolutely necessary for life. Whatever does not grow is dying—even if it imagines that it still lives. Spiritual growth means intentionally exposing myself to new ideas and experiences and then evaluating them by God's Word; it means allowing the Spirit to replace the dry, unstretchable skin of my preconceptions and traditions with a new spiritual skin, flexible and usable by God.

6. *We must act on our stated desire to grow.* It is much easier to live a life based on rules and commands than to listen for the still, quiet voice of God's Spirit as we move through our daily lives. It is also much more comfortable to have a checklist posted on the wall of our minds than to feel for the gentle wind of the Spirit on our hearts. We feel more comfortable to break down the people we meet and interact with, and the circumstances we encounter, in shades of black and white than to come to terms with the fact that virtually every person and circumstance is a gray mixture of the two.

Like petulant children, we do not want to grow, to give up our childish things and ways of thinking and interacting with God and others. But we must grow if we are to become all that God want us to be.

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