

The Path to Maturity

Big Idea: Spiritual parents help disciples grow through stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. We all need spiritual parents when we are new in the faith, and we all can be spiritual parents.



Thus far, we've observed two features of our identity as followers of Christ. We are *strugglers* and *insiders*, sent to live among other strugglers in order to help them meet Christ and grow in Him. Another way to say it—we are broken people helping broken people.

1. How do struggling people help other struggling people grow?
2. What are some of the things that helped the characters in the video grow in Christ?
3. Why do babies and children need parents?
4. What do parents do?

5. What impression of spiritual parenting did you get from the video?

“(B)ut we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

6. Read 1 Thessalonians. 2:7-12. According to these verses, what does a spiritual parent do?

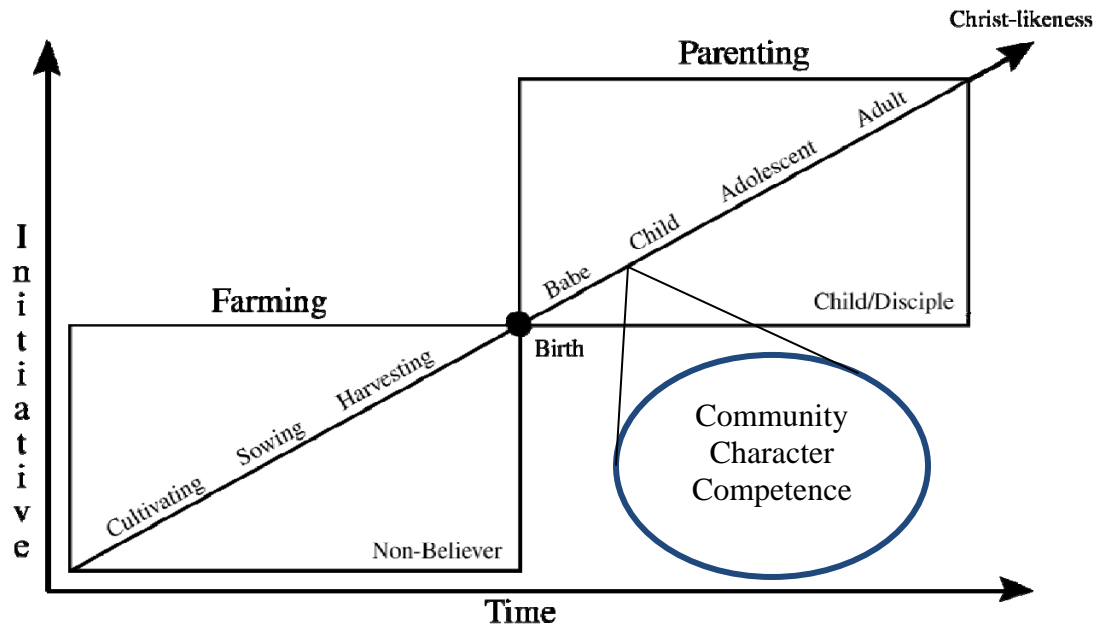
7. What are some of the traits of an effective spiritual parent as distinct from a teacher?

The image [in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-10] is of a nurse-mother, tenderly fostering her own children. She is not concerned how to correct every mistake. She doesn't load her children with information. Rather, she is busy making them feel secure in her love and acceptance....

If we want new believers to assume the habit of going to the Scriptures daily, we need to be doing it ourselves. If we want them to take their needs to God in prayer, they must see us doing it. Whatever it is that we want new believers to do, we must be doing it ourselves. At the newborn/little child stage, our chief means of influencing is modeling.

(Jim Petersen, Lifestyle Discipleship, pg. 58)

8. Read “The Ages and Stages of Growing Up” (see page 12). What stage are you?



9. The characters in the video said parenting others was a key factor in their own growth. Why would helping someone else grow be important to your growth?

Our goals for our spiritual offspring are to see them:

- *Understand Christ and the truths about Him in such a way that they are secure in their faith, and are being empowered and transformed in all areas of life.*
- *Develop in faith, hope, and love as an outgrowth of their intimacy with Christ and interdependence in a community.*
- *Assume their share of the responsibility that is intrinsic to the gospel. That is, that they, as ones who receive this message, begin to participate as message-bearers to the rest of the world.*

(Jim Petersen, Lifestyle Discipleship, pg. 51)

Suggested Additional Reading:

Read chapter 3 and 4 of *Lifestyle Discipleship*

The Ages and Stages of Growing Up¹

Birth/Infancy (“Help Me”)

Newborn babies are fragile, dependent, innocent, and completely incapable of discerning danger. They would just as readily grab a red-hot poker as a baby rattle. In the same way, indiscriminating infant Christians will often grab for appealing false teaching, not realizing the risk. Believers in this stage cry out, “Help me!” Just surviving is their main focus. And until they begin to walk on their own, more mature Christians must spoon-feed them God’s Word and give them constant attention.

Childhood (“Tell Me”)

In the second stage, childhood, the focus is learning. Believers in this phase are just beginning to feed themselves God’s truths, and their joy of discovery is electric. “Tell me!” is their cry, and their energy and curiosity seem boundless. The danger, however, is that they are very impressionable and their discernment is limited. Easily persuaded, they can be tempted to follow any strong authority figure. This stage eventually ends when they are able to reproduce their faith in others.

Adolescence (“Show Me”)

Believers passing through this phase are capable of reproducing their faith but are sometimes reluctant to do so. Their level of discernment is not always reliable, and they are often critical of others yet unwilling to contribute anything themselves. They focus on challenging others, saying “Show me!” or “Prove it to me!” They don’t settle for pat answers and the way things have always been; instead, they challenge us to rethink our beliefs and prove the integrity of our lives. They are often idealistic, intolerant, and independent. When they eventually shift their focus to the needs of others, they are ready to enter the next level.

Adulthood (“Follow Me”)

This is a period of stability and balance. Adult Christians can easily spot a spiritual fraud because they have developed great discernment (see Hebrews 5:14). With their focus on serving others, their cry is “Follow Me!” as they follow Christ. They don’t grasp at every Christian fad that breezes by. They know maturity is a lengthy process that requires what Friedrich Nietzsche termed a “long obedience in the same directions.”²

¹Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Growing Up in God’s Family* (Anaheim Calif: Insight for Living, 1994), pp. 16-21.

²Friedrich Nietzsche, as quoted by Eugene H. Petersen in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1980), p. 9.