
PREFACE

WHAT A PRIVILEGE to be called into God's family—to have our eyes and hearts open to God's gracious provision of His Son as the perfect sacrifice for your sins and mine! What a life of hope we can lead as we look forward to eternity with Him, where Jesus will reign and there will be no more sorrow, pain, or tears! But what are we to do in the meantime, between naming Jesus our Savior and Lord and going to be with Him?

Thankfully, we aren't left on our own to figure that out. Instead, we work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowerment. One way He guides us is with the truth of God's Word, and 1 John 2:12–14 is an example. Those three verses, penned by John the apostle, offer a path toward Christlikeness, the ultimate goal of our salvation, and that path is the focus of this book.

Why This Book?

Over the years, I have observed some serious shortcomings in how we, the church, disciple and educate people for spiritual growth. I have been a youth pastor and a pastor of adult ministries and discipleship; I served seven years on staff with a disciple-making and church renewal organization. I have enjoyed the world of higher education at Biola University, where I was the director of

the Adult Degree Completion Program. Eager to learn, I earned a Ph.D. in Educational Studies at Biola (1997) with an emphasis on spiritual development, during which time the idea for *The Path* was conceived. Additionally, I am hard-wired to focus on those believers who, like the world-class athlete, want to excel and go farther than the ordinary. Finally, my twenty years of teaching both the workbook *Stages of Faith* and the ideas in *The Path*—in small groups, churches, and a Christian university—have shaped this work and compel me to tirelessly advance it.

This book needs to be in the hands of men and women who will help change the way we think about spiritual growth and the way we guide others in the faith. The curious, the small-group leaders, the professors at evangelical undergraduate and graduate schools, the pastors of churches large and small—why not accept the challenge to lead the way? It will take God-loving, passionate leaders to get this work into the mainstream of discipleship tools.

Starting with You

- Every church needs a disciple-making strategy. *The Path*, with its companion workbook, *Stages of Faith*, provides a clear path and describes the key milestones by which a believer's progress can be measured. In churches today, however, spiritual growth is too often talked about in terms of *more*—more study, more commitment, more memorization, more service, more attendance, etc. This focus on external behavior and performance leads to discouragement and disillusionment. *The Path* provides an alternative approach that is simple, comprehensive, and transformative.
- *The Path* provides skilled guidance to pastors who are committed to investing deeply in the lives of a few people, and the *Stages of Faith* workbook enhances any disciple-making efforts.
- The teaching pastor in the pulpit as well as Sunday school teachers and leaders of numerous other ministries speak to a range of people: some are in their Childhood stage of faith, others are in the Young Adulthood stage, and still others are

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in the Parenthood stage. Every individual in the congregation is unique in his or her level of spiritual maturity, and pastors will be surprised to learn what stage of spiritual development their people are at and what is slowing or even preventing their growth. These pastors and other church leaders will then be better able to help people move forward to the next stage of spiritual development.

- Individuals assigned to oversee and train small-group leaders as well as the directors of mens' and womens' ministries should be armed with this text and the *Stages of Faith* workbook. Both books also belong in every small-group leader's toolbox.
- Spiritual formation courses at colleges and seminaries are increasingly popular. The current trend in spiritual formation looks to the Desert Fathers, ancient wisdom, and spiritual paradigms provided by medieval mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross, and Theresa of Avila. *The Path* and *Stages of Faith* step in to provide a clear, biblical path and the promise of sure footing for every believer.
- Countless disciple-making ministries are doing God's kingdom work across the United States and around the world. Each staff member will benefit from *The Path* text, the *Stages of Faith* workbook, and the Spiritual Growth Profile as they disciple and mobilize believers. Furthermore, the staff of these ministries will come to care for one another more effectively as they better understand how the story of their spiritual growth has been shaped.

I Commission You!

Accepting this invitation to walk the path John outlines in his first epistle means setting out on an adventure that may surprise you with unexpected discoveries and impact you with some unforgettable experiences. In fact, you may never be the same after this journey!

—Don Willett
July, 2012

CHAPTER 1

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UNCOVERING A NEGLECTED PATH

MAYBE YOU'VE NOTICED it too. And you may have noticed it years ago or only recently. You may have seen it in your church as well as others, or maybe the issue has come up when you've done some reading on church history or Christian growth. I'm talking about the serious shortcomings in the way we—the church, God's people—disciple, educate, and prepare believers for spiritual growth.

Many Christ-followers are like world-class athletes: they want to excel and go farther in their faith walk. For them, mere proof of membership and an official gym bag won't do. And that's where *The Path* can help. While other books claim to bring a fresh insight or new challenge to today's followers of Christ, *The Path* is truly one-of-a-kind. It's not another initiative in spiritual formation or a novel spin on how to grow spiritually. It's not another disappointing ten-step, how-to program for becoming more like Christ. Instead, taking an entirely different approach, this book is designed to change the way you think about the Christian journey and to offer ideas about how believers can grow, as well as how they can guide others in spiritual growth.

Surprisingly fresh and different, *The Path* provides clear direction to guide you on your journey. Based on 1 John 2:12–14,

The Path identifies three dynamic stages of spiritual development and the eight milestones that comprise those stages. Believers will discover how far they have come as they explore how the process of sanctification—of becoming more like Christ—happens in predictable stages over a lifetime. The unique Spiritual Growth Profile provides a map to help believers determine what stage of faith they are in, what may be slowing their spiritual growth, and how they can tailor a plan to get in better shape.

And the church desperately needs believers who are in good spiritual shape, believers who are mature Christ-followers. According to Richard Foster, however, that goal is quite counter-cultural. Commenting on the value our society places on immediate gratification, a value that opposes long-term, deep spiritual progress for the Christian, Foster has insightfully observed that “superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for more intelligent people nor gifted people, but for *deep* people.”¹

Addressing this need, *The Path* is an invitation to think about your journey of faith in a distinctively different way, a way probably unfamiliar to you and not much like your experience. This path to deepening spiritual maturity, rooted in the New Testament writing of the apostle John, has been left largely unexamined, neglected, and for many believers, quite hidden. May this study inspire further exploration of this model and benefit readers like you who are looking for a path that gives proven direction for their own journeys of faith.

One more reassurance: *The Path* doesn't urge you to jump through prescribed hoops, practice certain disciplines, or outline specific formulas, all of which can emphasize *more*—more commitment, more Bible study, more surrender, more memorization, more service, more prayer, and more attendance. Through the years, we Christians have likely prescribed these for ourselves, with the expectation that we would grow spiritually. Despite our good intentions, however, what eventually resulted was undoubtedly a weary admission of disillusionment and disappointment. Any call to *more* is sure to leave you guilty, discouraged, and exhausted.

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And *more* doesn't heal or transform a believer. There is a better way—and that is the biblically grounded but largely unexamined path to spiritual maturity we find in the New Testament. Again, as stated above, John the apostle offers a perspective by which you can chart your course for the lifelong journey of spiritual growth.

Like the cords of a rope, three intertwined factors reveal why reading and applying the principles of *The Path* is a worthwhile and significant assignment. Each one of these three components will help you to find sure footing on a path that will be rich and rewarding. These three aspects of *The Path* will also make your personal journey more direct and your ministry to others more focused.

1. A Biblically Grounded Path

Too many of us have not discovered this biblically based path that can guide our lifelong journeys of faith, and that is exactly what the apostle John offers. He describes three stages of spiritual growth—the Childhood stage of faith, the Young Adulthood stage of faith, and the Parenthood stage of faith—and notes the distinguishing characteristics of each stage. First John 2:12–14 sets forth an entirely different way of looking at one's spiritual progress. How will you benefit?

- Christian travelers can determine the distance they have already traveled as well as plan for the distance yet to be covered. Specific, biblical milestones will be identified to help believers ascertain their strengths, note their progress, identify their weaknesses, and attend to those and any other factors that slow spiritual growth.
- *The Path* offers insights as to why many adults need to enrich the three vital aspects of the Childhood stage of faith; suggests why too many adults plateau or stall in the borrowed, secondhand faith of the Young Adulthood stage; and describes the deep and seasoned Parent in the faith.
- Younger believers will get a look at what is ahead and save themselves lots of time, uncertainty, and discouragement.

- Older believers may realize they need to revise their assumptions about how spiritual growth occurs.

As pastors, small-group leaders, Christian educators, and disciple makers, we hope to see Christians grow and mature throughout their lives. We want to facilitate their transformation into Christlikeness. That, in fact, is God's job description for us as leaders in His church, and we know that conversion marks the beginning of one's progress toward spiritual maturity and Christlikeness. Needless to say, some believers are more mature and farther along in their progress than others, and all these people will hear and respond to any message according to their stages of spiritual growth.

That is one reason why *The Path* is a valuable addition to your ministry toolbox. As you become familiar with both *The Path* and its companion, *Stages of Faith*, you will become more skilled at discerning where others might be in their spiritual growth, helping them identify what is holding them back, and pointing them forward on their own journeys. Whether you are a pastor or a lay leader, the biblical principles set forth in these resources will, ideally, become part of the fabric of your church's discipleship process. Sermons and teachings on the 1 John stages and on how spiritual growth occurs can also help that happen.

Various denominations, however, offer distinctly different paths for believers to follow and different milestones by which to measure one's progress to spiritual maturity. As a result, rather than a consensus, much confusion about spiritual growth exists. In *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, author Don Alexander observed that the ongoing debate about these divergent paths and distinctive emphases leads to confusion. He concluded that these paths are a "riddle of sanctification" and a "dilemma of the call to personal holiness."² The apostle John's model of stages described in *The Path* enables us believers to see beyond what appears to be a riddle and a dilemma so that we can more confidently navigate our way to personal spiritual growth. Furthermore, *The Path* and *Stages of Faith* work well with the various denominational traditions represented in a church.

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In addition to the various denominational perspectives, also clouding a believer's understanding of the Christian's journey is James Fowler's model of faith development, in which he sets forth a different destination in his universalizing stage of faith, which very few ever arrive at—other than Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Fowler's view of faith is different from a biblical understanding of faith. Also, slowing down the spiritual growth of many believers is the conventional model of discipleship, with its focus on the content of the Christian's belief system and its neglect of the process that results in a deepening, maturing faith. Yet the renewed and widespread curiosity about the Desert Fathers and Catholic spirituality (Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, among others) leaves us insisting on a biblical vision of a transformative relationship with Christ. Setting forth yet another scenario, *The Path* describes the apostle John's path of sanctification and a destination that is holistic and restorative. This paradigm will be easy to understand, biblically faithful, and sophisticated; yet it will remain user-friendly.

The Path identifies and describes stages of faith in a Christian's journey so that each of us can better understand where we are in the process of spiritual growth and better cooperate with God as He works in our lives.

We will develop the model of stages of faith from the Word of God in the following chapters:

2. The Case for Stages of Faith
3. Evidence Beyond a Reasonable Doubt
4. An Aged Apostle's Ideas About Spiritual Progress
5. The Childhood Stage of Faith: The Birth of Faith
6. The Young Adulthood Stage of Faith: The Ownership of Faith
7. The Parenthood Stage of Faith: Empowering Faith

2. A Developmentally Informed Path

A second noteworthy aspect of *The Path* is its integration of developmental theory with the biblical model of stages of faith. What might John's model of stages of spiritual development look like

when informed by three developmental perspectives? The answer is a compelling description of the *how* of spiritual growth that enables us to better understand the process, sequence, rhythms, tempos, and patterns of spiritual development over the whole of the adult's life span. This section also describes the range of possibilities, the boundaries of the process, and the mechanics of development and change. The distinctive structure and content of John's model begins to come alive. As *The Path* outlines the various dimensions of the stages of faith model, what emerges is an unique, heuristic, and holistic model of a journey toward Christian maturity, a model that is firmly derived from Scripture, grounded in God's truth, and then enriched by human development theories.

Believers today are more accustomed to thinking about faith in terms of *what* people should believe, but healthy spiritual growth needs to look farther than the content of faith. Perry Downs explains:

Historically evangelicals have attended to content but have ignored structure. We have been so concerned with guarding what people believe that we have failed to listen to how people believe. We have ignored the possibility of stages of faith, striving only to make faith stronger without being concerned with making faith more mature. We have tended to police its content and tried to strengthen its power, but we have neglected its maturity.³

Downs then describes the advantages enjoyed by the Christian educator and caregiver who employs a model of stages of faith that attends to the *process* of faith, not just the *content* of faith:

As Christian educators become sensitive to the stages of faith they will be able to hear the structure as well as content, and maturity as well as strength. They will understand people more deeply and have a more realistic perspective on the health of their congregations. Moreover, they will have better possibilities for designing educational approaches fit to the level of maturity of their people.⁴

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, maybe you've noticed that discipleship materials often fail to address how the

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journey of faith progresses over a lifetime, especially through adulthood. The longest period of life, adulthood, offers us an unique opportunity to experience in ever-deepening ways the profound truths of our Christian faith as well as a spirituality that is genuinely transformative. After all, we shouldn't expect our experience of faith in our younger years to suffice in our later years—and that's not God's plan either.

But back to the *how*: Exactly how does faith grow through these three stages of spiritual development? As mentioned above, this focus on the process is noticeably absent in literature addressing Christian growth. Instead, discipleship books are largely content and information driven, and they emphasize disciplines to master. So *The Path* and *Stages of Faith* offer readers a refreshing and challenging alternative.

As we examine twelve specific characteristics of spiritual growth, we'll find vital clues about how to provide, care for, give direction to, and disciple fellow believers. Ideally, we will then be better able to listen to *how* people come to believe, and believe more deeply, even as we pay attention to *what* they believe. We can be concerned about making faith more mature, not just stronger. Two chapters explore these twelve conclusions of how spiritual growth occurs:

8. The How of Spiritual Growth, Part 1
9. The How of Spiritual Growth, Part 2

Then, in Chapters 10–12, each of the three stages of faith—Childhood, Young Adulthood, and Parenthood—and their particular milestones are integrated with human development theories. Building on ideas from Chapters 8–9, John's model now invites the believer to follow a journey of spiritual growth that is both clear in its direction and compelling in its process.

10. The Journey of the Childhood Stage of Faith
11. The Journey of the Young Adulthood Stage of Faith
12. The Journey of the Parenthood Stage of Faith

3. Skilled Guides for the Journey

Third, *The Path* offers important insights about spiritual growth to spiritual caregivers and leaders, pastors, educators, missionaries, Sunday school teachers, parents, Christian counselors, and disciple-making organizations. This biblical model for spiritual growth enables church leaders to appraise the health and growth of those they are shepherding. *The Path* can also help leaders determine what to do to shape spiritually mature Christians—whether their programs are effectively fostering spiritual growth or what are delaying growth in their people—and what they can do to enrich their ministry and encourage movement toward spiritual maturity. Based on what they learn here, spiritual caregivers can then tailor a plan for a specific individual's growth.

The identification and training of such skilled guides is essential if the Christian church is to be a center of spiritual formation. Said another way, the success and longevity of any discipleship plan will depend on the quality of the shepherds and guides—and, sadly, there is a dire shortage of such skilled guides. In *Soulguide*, Dr. Bruce Demarest notes this crisis:

Where can a disciple who is eager to grow spiritually find a person who will listen, discern, keep his feet on the fire, and point the way home? Where can one find a supportive spiritual companion endowed with wisdom, compassion, humility, and grace? Advice givers and problem solvers are as common as coal in Newcastle.

But where are the godly and competent spiritual guides—those who to a significant degree reflect the pastoral qualities exhibited by the Lord Jesus? There may be a shred of truth in the opinion that “Good spiritual directors are as rare as hen’s teeth.”⁵

Richard Foster’s plea that believers become “deep” is a timely one, and the existence of divergent paths of sanctification that lead to confusion must be remedied. Believers in Christ need to become familiar with a way forward and upward that is biblical, sensible,

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and compelling. And there must be a cadre of spiritual guides to help lead the way.

It is indeed a lofty statement to suggest that *The Path* can help believers—seminary trained and lay alike—understand more clearly how to develop increasingly deep, mature Christian adults. It is indeed a lofty statement to claim that *The Path* will be of vital, practical, and broad importance to the Christian community, Christian educators, counselors, disciple-makers, and mentors. But, by God's grace, neither one is an impossible goal. May He use these tools for His glory as well as for the good of His people ... starting with you.

Questions for Reflection and Action

1. Consider the ideas set forth in this chapter. What point about spiritual growth did you find especially intriguing? Why?
2. Where did you see yourself or your faith journey described in this chapter? What statements accurately describe your church?
3. When have you attempted to do *more* of something—more Bible study, more commitment, more Scripture memorization, more service, more church attendance, etc.—in hopes of becoming more spiritually mature, more like Christ? Describe your efforts, the outcome, and your reaction to that outcome.
4. Richard Foster has made this observation: “The desperate need [in the church] today is not for more intelligent people nor gifted people, but for *deep* people.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. What nudge to action, if any, did you sense as you read this chapter? Going on to read the next chapter counts!