



Churches today often focus their resources on the early stages of discipleship. While this is important, the spiritual growth of those in the second half of life must not be neglected. Through *Becoming Sage*, reimagine the challenges of midlife as an opportunity for revitalized growth in Christ.

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## CHAPTER 1

# GROW UP!

### *Maturity Defined*

I flunked my spiritual maturity test.

No, not the one that involves my everyday life. This spiritual maturity test was an online assessment<sup>1</sup> that promised to boil down my current faith practices and attitudes toward God into a tidy numerical score. I was asked to report honestly about my measurable behaviors, including how often I read my Bible, attended church, and gave away part of my income to God's work. I also had to quantify whether I had clarity on my purpose and goals, as well as how frequently I sensed God's presence in my daily life.

Taking a multiple-choice test was a modern American approach to measuring spiritual growth. The site offering the test suggested it be used as a way to quantify my current spiritual life and motivate me to make changes that might improve my score in

the future. My final grade was a sobering 67 percent—a solid D.

Does God grade on a curve?

Of course not. And while I understand that the survey developers intended to create a snapshot of a test taker's spiritual life, God doesn't use a yardstick to trace our growth. He employs something far more multifaceted: Are we growing in Christlikeness? Do we look more like Jesus today than we did yesterday?

Spiritual growth is not as simple as 1, 2, 3 . . . 67 percent. By the time we arrive at midlife, we know that the journey to maturity is as complex as our lives are.

A Barna Group survey of more than 1,000 adults found that there was great confusion around the subject of spiritual maturity. Researchers noted that though our culture has plenty of spiritual growth resources available, including churches, schools, camps, conferences, and a vast array of media options, there is a poverty when it comes to understanding what maturity looks like:

Many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity. People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process.<sup>2</sup>

The Barna survey revealed that we in the church have wildly differing ideas of what it means to become sage. When asked to define spiritual maturity, 20 percent of self-identified Christians couldn't answer the question at all. The other 80 percent offered responses that included having a relationship with Christ, following rules, choosing a moral lifestyle, practicing personal

spiritual disciplines, possessing faith, applying the Bible's principles, and being involved in their local congregation.

Despite not being able to agree on what maturity is, more than half the adults surveyed reported that they believed they were spiritually healthy. In analyzing the results of the study, Barna Group president David Kinnaman said,

As people begin to realize that the concepts and practices of spiritual maturity have been underdeveloped, the Christian community is likely to enter a time of renewed emphasis on discipleship, soul care, the tensions of truth and grace, the so-called "fruits" of the spiritual life, and the practices of spiritual disciplines.<sup>3</sup>

There have been some corporate-style efforts to help churches quantify spiritual growth in the years since Kinnaman made that hopeful prediction. For example, a church management software company suggests leaders who want to see spiritual growth happen in their local churches keep tabs on congregational involvement in weekly worship, small groups, serving, giving, and personal prayer and Bible study, then set measurable goals in order to increase those numbers.<sup>4</sup> The assumption built into a program like this is similar to the personal maturity survey I took online. If a person commits to weekly church attendance, involvement in a small group, personal devotional time, volunteering in a church ministry, and tithing faithfully, they must be moving toward maturity.

If you've been a follower of Jesus for more than twenty minutes, you probably realize that being active in the church doesn't automatically correlate to spiritual growth. Certainly, it can. But it can also mean that a church attender's calendar is simply full

of Christian-y activities. Evangelist Billy Sunday once famously said, “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.”<sup>5</sup>

### HEY, YOU! HEAR AND OBEY!

While believers are encouraged to obey Jesus’ command to go into all the world and make disciples, per Matthew 28:18–20, it’s been my experience that many translate His words to mean something like, “Probably you should consider becoming a cross-cultural missionary. If that doesn’t work, then at least tell your coworkers you believe in Jesus and maybe invite them to a church event. If they receive Christ, encourage them to get baptized. Amen.”

However, Jesus was speaking of something more fully encompassing than inviting a not-yet-believer to a church service, as valuable as that may be. He was telling His friends that their mission was to call others to turn to God via repentance evidenced in baptism, and then pattern both for and with them how to follow Jesus in the trenches of everyday life. This “go and show” command is infused with the promise of His presence every step of the journey from Jerusalem into the world He came to redeem.

Jesus didn’t innovate this sort of whole-life, learn-as-you-go style of learning. He’d been raised in the household of people who lived the *Shema*, the ancient, core Hebrew prayer found in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. *Shema* means “Listen!”, which carries the connotation of “Hey, you! Yes, you! Hear and obey!”—as if “hear”

and “obey” were a single, unbroken word. *The Message* paraphrase of this passage captures the immersive nature of this calling:

Attention, Israel!

GOD, our God! GOD the one and only!

Love GOD, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that’s in you, love him with all you’ve got!

Write these commandments that I’ve given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates. (Deut. 6:4–9)

When the resurrected Jesus told His Jewish followers to go into the world and make disciples, He was not reinventing the proverbial wheel but applying to Himself the pattern each one had known, prayed, and lived from childhood. What was new was His promise of empowerment. This promise meant they’d be free to live out His command to love God fully, heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then express this love for Him by loving their neighbors in the same way they’d been loved into His life (Luke 10:27).

Loving God and neighbor is what everyday discipleship looks like. The late Dallas Willard noted that the word “apprenticeship” better captures what discipleship is for us moderns. He explained, “In the New Testament, discipleship means being an apprentice of Jesus in our daily existence. A disciple is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under

appropriate conditions, in order to learn to do what that person does, or to become what that person is.”<sup>6</sup>

Apprenticing Jesus means seeking to remain in His company, learning from Him, and doing what we see Him doing. It enfolds every area of our lives, from cleaning the toilets and washing sheets after your six-year-old has the stomach flu to singing praises to Him during a worship service.

## HEART, SOUL, MIND, STRENGTH

We moderns have developed some popular models of discipleship that are apprenticeship-lite in their emphasis. They tend to focus on one area of our lives to the neglect of other, equally important parts. See if any of these forms of discipleship resonate with your own apprenticeship experience:

### *The Insider’s Club Disciple*

When Paul encouraged his friends at Corinth to imitate him as he imitated the Messiah (1 Cor. 11:1), he was referencing the apprenticeship model he’d experienced in his own life, first as a Jewish boy, next as a disciple of Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and finally as a follower of Jesus. But in some churches, discipleship may be little more than Christian peer pressure. For example, if most of the women in your church homeschool their children and you work outside the home and send your children to public school, at an Insider’s Club congregation, you’ll feel the spoken and unspoken pressure to quit your job and begin homeschooling too. We see the pressure to conform to the group in churches



where nonessentials like political affiliation become key to our identity among our brothers and sisters.

We all want to belong. Fear of being excluded or being branded as a problem or troublemaker trains us to perform our faith for an audience composed of imaginary Olympic judges, living for the elusive approval of the in-group. Their approval then becomes the measure for our maturity. Our heart's need to belong leads the way in this form of discipleship.

### ***The Best Life Disciple***

You may change the channel when you see a TV preacher promising health and wealth if only you have enough faith (and drop him or her a check in the mail). But because prosperity teaching tends to mirror the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps and you can succeed” language of the American Dream, we find more subtle versions of it lurking in some churches. When we hear that if we just apply these four (or six, or ninety-three) pithy biblical principles and our finances, marriage, or family will magically improve, we are hearing a watered-down version of prosperity preaching. When an attractive Christian leader's lifestyle and appearance are curated for sharing on social media, it is a way to sell the promise of a religious version of our culture's version of success. The goal of this form of discipleship is the blessing of the best life.

Though discussions of spiritual maturity usually aren't front and center in this model, benchmarks of the Best Life model have to do with a Christian-subculture approved, upwardly mobile, Instagrammable lifestyle. Fear of missing out drives Best Life behavior, but underneath that image-management lies a

deeper, soul-level concern: If “they” knew the real you, would they love you? Does God?

### ***The Bible Master Disciple***

This form of discipleship is based on acquisition and demonstration of Bible knowledge. Loving God looks like citing Bible verses, listening to and quoting sermons, being able to use Scripture reference tools, attending seminary, reading books, and winning apologetics-type debates against anyone who does not hold to the same doctrinal positions as the Bible Master and his or her favorite theological or denominational team.

None of these things are wrong in and of themselves (after all, you’re holding a book in your hands right now!), but a lopsided emphasis on knowledge acquisition means maturity will be defined primarily by intellectual aptitude when it comes to spiritual things. Those whose minds may not work in a way like this will always be treated as second-class Christians in Bible Master circles.

### ***The Hamster Wheel Disciple***

“Kathy is such a servant! She runs the nursery, organizes meals for those who are sick, folds and stuffs the bulletin every week, and runs the weekly prayer meeting.” Communities committed to the Hamster Wheel model of discipleship celebrate service and more service, usually at and for the church: “Jim is a spiritual giant in our church. He’s a deacon, in charge of the landscaping crew, leads the middle school youth group, and seems to be here every time the doors open.”

Some who run marathons of church-service-on-a-hamster-

wheel may not recognize that their need to be needed is not always the same thing as serving God. In Hamster Wheel congregations, maturity is measured in church-based volunteer hours. This form of discipleship is focused on strength, often to the diminishment of a person's heart, soul, and mind.

A person disciplined under one of these systems may be malformed in their spiritual development, similar in form to someone who goes to the gym and does only bicep curls for a solid year. They'll end up with a lopsided physique—though they may be of great help carrying heavy packages up a couple of flights of stairs.

Decades ago, I witnessed the way an unbalanced version of discipleship shaped a church culture and eventually caused it to implode. The pastor, whose discipleship fell into the Bible Master category mentioned above, held advanced seminary degrees, but sadly, his relational and leadership abilities hadn't developed along with his brilliant mind. He often used his sermons to suppress anyone who disagreed with him and rarely apologized when his anger exploded in meetings.

Although the severity of these issues wasn't detectable at first, it soon became clear there was a disconnect between what this man knew about the Bible and the kind of character he possessed. Though for a while a steady stream of new people came to the church drawn by the preaching, the congregation never seemed to grow in size because others who'd been injured chose to leave. Eventually, the pace of leavers overtook the new arrivals, and the church dissolved under the unbalanced weight of lopsided leadership.

## TOWARD MATURITY

Scripture uses the language of moving from infancy to adulthood in order to coach us toward maturity.<sup>7</sup> We will not grow in a healthy way by focusing on one area of our lives, such as the mind, while deemphasizing others, such as the soul, emotions, and body. Author J. Oswald Sanders describes the effects of lopsided growth:

The spiritually immature person meets adult situations and tests with childish and immature reactions. This always produces tension and strain with all the attendant problems. When sorrow strikes, he is inclined to indulge in an orgy of self-centered emotion. If financial reverses come, he is at a loss to know why this should come to him, and he blames God. When hopes are dashed, he loses heart and drops his bundle. When adversity overtakes him, he is swallowed up in self-pity.



*Maturity isn't a fixed destination but describes a process of growth in Christlikeness in every area of life, through every season of life.*



In domestic difficulties he indulges in tantrums or sulks and creates an atmosphere that mars home unity. When placed with other difficult people, he falls prey to censorious criticism and “gives as good as he gets.” When his will is thwarted by God or man, he becomes rebellious and bitter.<sup>8</sup>

Maturity isn't a fixed destination but describes a process of growth in Christlikeness in every area of life, through every season of life. It is marked by an ongoing increase in self-giving

love modeled in the ministry of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> It is a generative, generous existence marked by ongoing ripening of the fruit of the Spirit and a steady increase in godly wisdom.<sup>10</sup> By definition, this kind of wisdom saturates our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

Our foolish mistakes, detours, and sins as we grow can be transformed into wisdom as we submit ourselves to God. His goal for us is to be re-formed into the image of His beloved Son (2 Cor. 3:18). It is a far more comprehensive desire for our lives than becoming a member of an Insider's Club, living some version of a Best Life, winning at the Bible Master game, or running on a Hamster Wheel that goes nowhere.

Many of us don't discover how lopsided we are in our formation until we approach or enter midlife. The next chapter will discuss why that is. The good news about midlife is that God is at work for our good and His glory. No one wants us to become sage more than He does.

Midlife should unsettle us. My 67 percent score on that spiritual maturity test doesn't begin to measure the way He's been at work bringing me to completion. Some elements of that process, such as the practice of foundational spiritual disciplines like Bible reading, prayer, worship, and service/outreach don't change, no matter what our age.

But midlife also carries new gifts and challenges unique to this life stage, and our apprenticeship practices must reflect that. Why and how? Those questions will guide us as we explore them together in the pages of this book.

## FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. In what ways have you seen growth toward maturity in your life? This question may contain the temptation for you to begin by listing all the ways you see yourself falling short or not measuring up. Try to fight that temptation. Instead, in the company of your Master, reflect on the positive ways He has been at work to move you toward loving Him heart, soul, mind, and strength over time.
2. As you've listed the positive areas of growth, do you notice a lopsided emphasis in one area of your life over another? If so, why might that be the case?
3. Take some time to prayerfully reflect on Philippians 3:12–15, with special consideration of the fact that the apostle Paul wrote this letter when he was well into midlife. How would you put this passage into your own words in order to coach someone else on their spiritual journey? What might the Holy Spirit be saying to you through Paul's words right now?

## FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Reflect on which model(s) of apprenticeship may be operating in your congregation: Insider's Club, Best Life, Bible Master, or Hamster Wheel. Or is there another version? If so, describe it.
2. Are heart, soul, mind, and strength nurtured in your community in a balanced, holistic way? If not, which elements seem to be emphasized most strongly? Why might that be?

3. Who do you know that seems to reflect spiritual maturity? Why do you say so? What stands out most to you about this person's experience and character?



*Loving God heart, soul, mind, and strength is not separated into four different-but-related silos of our lives. Each is meant to be integrated so our one-and-only life is lived in growing communion with God. Becoming sage means becoming whole.*

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