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Introduction to Spiritual Age as a Disciple Development Lifecycle

First, let's understand two important definitions:

1. A disciple is someone who has consciously committed to receive the free grace of God through Yeshua and has determined to learn, live and share the teachings of Yeshua as their standard to live by.
2. Discipleship is the process of making and maturing disciples. Mature disciples' investment in new and young disciples is called discipleship, the act or process of making and maturing disciples.

This Disciple Development Lifecycle is a roadmap for the development of disciples. The commission of Yeshua is to make disciples of all nations. This document outlines the stages of disciple development using a concept called Spiritual Age.

Spiritual Age is intended to measure the spiritual growth and development of Christian disciples. It is a subjective measurement because it is not possible to know all of the factors that impact spiritual development and lifestyle. The measurement will be more effective based on the information that is available about past experiences and current levels of consistency and commitment to the kingdom of God.

The disciples in scripture developed at a faster pace than has been documented in this process. This could be attributed to the fact that they resigned from all other activities and responsibilities to solely focus on discipleship which most Christian disciples are not in a position to do. Disciples have to learn how to balance school, work, family, and social involvements while developing as disciples of Yeshua. This means that development will occur at a slower pace than the disciples in scripture and development will look different than other disciples in the community.

Everyone should begin their Disciple Development Lifecycle at the point of accepting Yeshua as their personal Savior and Lord. However, this is an idea but does not address the reality that many of us have been committed to Yeshua as Savior and Lord without a roadmap like this. Therefore, it is important for disciples to know and understand the stages of development that they must experience and what disciples can expect from the community of disciples.

The assessment of Spiritual Age must be completed by your spiritual leader. The assumption is that your spiritual leader is directly connected to the vision that you have been positioned to assist and has observed your development and commitment to God's kingdom. Your spiritual leader should know the role you can have in the advancement of God's vision so that their determination of your Spiritual Age will assist in designing a development plan for you to grow in your discipleship community and the kingdom of God. These stages are generalized. The spiritual leader is not bound to any of this information and must trust their wisdom and calling to ultimately determine a Spiritual Age.

Using human development stages as a basis, the following spiritual development stages have been established in order to provide context for Spiritual Ages. It is key that you understand **servicing** in the discipleship community **must be a result** of spiritual growth and development.

Disciples must mature in order to serve in certain ministry roles. Growth and maturity must be the factors that determine your level of service to and for God.

Prenatal Development (Spiritual Age is 0)

This is the stage of life before yielding to the grace of God through salvation. In this stage you are receiving ministry, but have not yielded to receive salvation. Just as with a fetus, this stage is important to how a disciple will grow and develop later in their spiritual life. Events and decisions in this stage have great impact on the rate of growth a disciple will have. It is important to understand the impact of prenatal care and events. Many disciples struggle to understand the actions of the discipleship community (church) during their prenatal stage. It is important to know that salvation is a clean start. God does not intend for disciples to hold to the prenatal events in life; especially those that are negative and ungodly.

Ministry Level

There is no service in this stage. These are Seekers. They need to be exposed to the teachings of Yeshua and the love of the community. It must be clearly understood that Seekers are not yet disciples. They have not made a confession to salvation nor a commitment to discipleship. Their involvement with the community must be closely monitored to ensure that they understand that a confession and commitment are necessary to become a member of the community. Attendance and participation without confession and commitment are meaningless. The spiritual leader and community must understand that their focus and objective is to make disciples not increase attendance and participation.

Infant Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is Day 1 – 2 years)

This is the stage when you have yielded to the grace of salvation. This stage of development is possibly the most important. This is the stage where the building blocks for growth are laid. It is important for the new disciple to invest in reading scripture and praying continually. One of the mistakes that is made in this stage is to rush the new disciple into the next stages before a strong foundation is developed. The struggles of the prenatal life must be addressed and defeated during infancy. Disciples struggle with behavior and events of their prenatal life because they were not given time to form a meaningful foundation and receive release from the impacts of their prenatal life.

Infancy development should take 18 months to 2 years. Infants should be very limited in the role they are given. Infants need structure and discipline in order to form the necessary foundation for further spiritual growth. Many disciples did not develop appropriately in this stage therefore they struggle with consistency and commitment while believing they are growing spiritually. This stage is directly related to the time invested in salvation. The spiritual leader should not give any consideration to ability or performance. It is important to allow this stage to take 18 months to 2 years so that the Infant Disciple learns to pray and read scripture regularly and continuously.

Ministry Level

Infant disciples are students. In this development stage understanding and consistency are formed. Grace and prayer are the focus. Infant disciples are taught what grace is and how grace has destroyed their past and opened the possibilities of their future. Infants are given opportunities to testify about their transformation by grace. They are taught the elements of prayer. They are also assigned a mentor or placed in a group with other infants so they can start to demonstrate a willingness to share the Gospel and pray openly for their spiritual community. Correction is key for infants because they are learning how to be committed disciples of Yeshua. Correction of infants must be executed with love and patience. Remember, their foundation is being laid therefore they must learn to embrace correction, but not be defeated in the process. As these disciples are nearing the end of infancy they can start to participate in ministries that have a very controlled environment such as media, custodial tasks, lawn care and maintenance. Infants must be supervised at all times so that mistakes and deficiencies can be addressed and corrected. The mentors and supervisors must have patience and be consistent mature examples that the infants can imitate.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Complete a Prayer class
- Complete a New Disciple Study
- Get involved with an Accountability Group

Early Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is 2 – 5 years)

The new disciple has been saved for 2 – 3 years. This is the stage where the disciple starts to assist others in ministry. In assisting, observing how scripture is implemented in the life of a disciple is vital. Observation is a key tool for the young disciple. The examples and information received during this stage will strengthen the focus of the young disciple. In addition to observation, the young disciple is to start to learn how to understand scripture. Good study habits must be developed in this stage. Because observation is a key component in this stage the young disciple should be involved in a study group at least once a week. This will allow the young disciple to observe how mature disciples study the word. The young disciple should not be challenged to interpret scripture. They are learning how to study scripture. Bible Study is not a study group. A study group comes together to leverage tools (e.g. commentaries, books, articles) to understand what a scripture means. The investment in prayer must steadily increase. The young disciple should start to develop spiritual language as a habit. Calling on the Lord should become second nature. This will allow the young disciple to remember God and their kingdom commitment unconsciously. In this stage the young disciple knows that they are a child of God and that God will always love them and keep them in righteousness. The young disciple develops confidence in their relationship with the loving God.

Ministry Level

The young disciple must start to demonstrate reliability and responsibility. They are not supervised closely. They must demonstrate accountability for their actions. Correction is still very important. This is a good time to allow the young disciple to assist in ministry. They should experience the work needed to do ministry. They should assist by making sandwiches for mission activities, setting up for classes and events. They must see these opportunities as a privilege because of the growth they have demonstrated understanding they are first mimicking the mature in the community. They must be exposed to good leadership and learn what it means to invest in doing the work for successful ministry outcomes.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Start taking the Teachings of Yeshua classes
- Start being involved with a ministry team and volunteer to assist with events

Middle Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is 6 – 12 years)

The young disciple has been saved for 4 – 5 years. This is the stage where the young disciple must start to demonstrate the ability and willingness to make sound spiritual decisions. There is a direct investment in learning and demonstrating sound decision making skills. The young disciple should be challenged to demonstrate that they can follow the teachings of Yeshua through the decisions and choices they make. The young disciple must be supervised, but they have to demonstrate that they are fulfilled and energized to be a disciple of Christ. The young disciple is not ready for leadership, but they should be a reliable team member or volunteer. They should demonstrate willingness to be engaged in the work of ministry without much prompting. If the young disciple is unwilling or unable to demonstrate the heart and passion for the things of God then they must spend more time in Early Disciple Development being exposed to good leadership so they understand what it means to invest in doing the work for successful ministry outcomes. It is important that the young disciple not progress back to the Middle Disciple Development phase until they have demonstrated the ministry level at the prior phase. This Middle Disciple Development stage is where the young disciple demonstrates their love for God and their commitment to be a good steward in all aspects of life without prompting.

Ministry Level

For the most part there can be an increase of responsibility for the young disciple, but there should be little to no change in their level of ministry involvement.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Continue taking the Teachings of Yeshua classes
- Continue being involved with a ministry team and volunteer to assist with events

Adolescent Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is 13 – 20 years)

The young disciple has been saved for 6 – 7 years. Based on the strong demonstration of commitment and focus that was displayed in the Middle stage, the young disciple is ready to demonstrate the responsibility to care for others. The Adolescent Disciple should not be given the responsibility to teach younger disciples. The Adolescent Disciple should care for the sick and elderly. The Adolescent Disciple must demonstrate the willingness to manage their schedule and commitments in order to execute their responsibility of caring without prompting or reminders. The Adolescent Disciple should be fully aware that they are being prepared to lead. The Adolescent Disciple should be exposed to spiritual gifts and acts of power through the Holy Spirit. This should also be visible in the community by the mature disciples. At this point they have a strong prayer life and are ready to demonstrate gifts and power. An Adolescent Disciple can be trusted with some limited leadership responsibility keeping in mind they are at an impactful stage of development. They are still being trained, so they must be supervised and held accountable for choices and decisions.

Ministry level

The Adolescent Disciple can be trusted to function independently but need consistent supervision. There should be scheduled supervision so that the Adolescent Disciple knows that they will be held accountable for their tasks and lifestyle. Their ministry focus should be demonstrating care. In partnership with mature disciples, they should visit the sick and elderly to care for them and provide transportation, cleaning, or anything to assist the sick and elderly. They must learn the importance of the spiritual community through their demonstration of care. They must know that the community must care for its members.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Enroll in the Pathway to Spiritual Maturity sessions
- Serve in Outreach Ministry by assisting the sick and elderly
- Server as an assistant to a Director

Early Adulthood Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is 21 – 34 years)

Early Adulthood Disciples are leadership assistants. They have demonstrated the tools of spiritual strength and commitment. At this stage they are being fully exposed to ministry and the responsibilities of demonstrating Christian witness in order to draw others to Christ. The Early Adulthood Disciple needs to learn what leadership is and how to manage the responsibility of nurturing other disciples. They are able to aid Adult Disciples (next development phase) by carrying some of their weight. The Early Adulthood Disciple should be eager for their opportunity to lead and make disciples. With their demonstration of power and commitment, this is the stage where 1) hunger and thirst are present in zealously, and 2) an unquenchable passion for more of God and responsibility in the discipleship community, are evident. The Early Adulthood Disciple is held accountable and developed by the Adult Disciple they are assisting.

Ministry Level

The Early Adulthood Disciple can teach in a controlled environment and may lead at an introductory level usually under a broader leadership responsibility. They can be sub-leaders to demonstrate their responsibility. They must evangelize. Now that they have experienced caring for others, it is important for them to merge the power of grace, the Gospel and the love of God into evangelism. They must experience witnessing to produce a confession of salvation with a commitment to discipleship.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Be assigned to teach and mentor new disciples (supervised)
- Participate in evangelism training and activities to learn how to share Christ with the world
- Complete Pastoral Development Class
- Complete Old and New Testament Survey Class
- Complete Minor/Major Prophets Class

Adult Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is 35 – 69 years)

The Adult Disciple is a leader. They have been spiritually developed and now they are a committed disciple maker. They are ready to carry the full responsibility of nurturing others through their life example and knowledge. They have a disciplined lifestyle and have the kingdom of God as their sole priority. They are confident in their development and preparation to represent Yeshua to the world. While the Adult Disciple has responsibility for the development and protection of the discipleship community, they also need encouragement and guidance from the Senior Disciples. They must remain humble and open to the anointing and experience of the Senior Disciples for their continued development. The Adult Disciples learn from each other through sharing of experiences and revelation. There must be a mutual respect among the Adult Disciples. They must demonstrate a willingness to be disciple makers and protect the community's integrity at all cost without compromise. Adult Disciples must interact with each other for encouragement and direction.

Ministry Level

The Adult Disciples are the teachers, proclaimers of the word, and developers of disciples. They do the work of ministry. They train and supervise the discipleship community.

Note – There is no separate group called ministers. The ministers in the community are the spiritually mature. The ministry level is not determined by calling. It is determined by maturity. All Adult Disciples should be willing to teach others and proclaim the word of God to the community of disciples and the world. Leaders in the community must be a result of spiritual growth and maturity. Those who lead the community must be the product of their development in the community. These are the pastors, bishops, apostles, teachers, evangelist, and elders. These are the leaders of the community of disciples.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Become a leader at some level, if an opportunity is available
- Complete Biblical Exegesis, Preparing for the Word, and Delivering the Word – every disciple must understand how to interpret, apply and communicate the word of God.
- Become a mentor/supervisor of younger disciples
- Become a Journey Guide for an Accountability Group

Senior Disciple Development (Spiritual Age is 70 – 80 years)

The Senior Disciple has served with distinction and is no longer actively making disciples as their primary focus. Based on their anointing, knowledge and experience in disciple making, the Senior Disciple is an advisor and counselor to the discipleship community especially the Adult Disciples. The Senior Disciple is a teacher, mostly of advanced level teachings. The Senior Disciples must be respected because it was earned through the example they set for the community and sought after by the community. This is the only stage where physical age can be a factor. It cannot be that every elderly person is a Senior Disciple, because physical age can impact the ability of a disciple to serve in some capacities. Transition from active ministry allows the Senior Disciple to become a counselor and teacher to the community to aid in nurturing other disciples. The Senior Disciple is to be honored through adherence to their teaching and imitation of their life and commitment to God and the community. The Senior Disciple learns by allowing the community to care for them and honor them continually for their service. The community must rely on the Senior Disciples because the Adult Disciples cannot/do not know everything.

Ministry Level

The Senior Disciples are teachers, mentors and counselors to the Adult Disciples. They will also teach the community, but will always correct and mentor the Adult Disciples – the pastors, bishops, apostles and elders. They do not have to serve in these roles, but there should be some who do.

Expectations at this stage

Disciples at this stage should:

- Mentor disciples at all stages especially Adult Disciples
- At this stage the community should serve their needs and appreciate their life of commitment and service.

What is needed to be a community making disciples?

1. Evangelists are interacting with prenatal people who need to:
 - a. Acknowledge Yeshua as their Savior and Lord
 - b. Commit to become a disciple who is being prepared to be a disciple maker
 - c. A person who has already acknowledged Yeshua can start at the commitment to discipleship (b)
2. Teachers who focus on grace, prayer and scripture reading for infant disciples. These teachers will not mention or apply exegesis. The infant disciple must learn to be consistent in prayer and scripture reading. These teachers will lead the New Disciples Study and live along side of the infant disciple to help them address life issues. The Bible Reading plan on the mobile app should be used for scripture reading. A record is to be kept with the starting date so we will know the completion date. These teachers are to progress the infant disciples through this development stage. In order to be a teacher of infants they must demonstrate a firm knowledge of grace, forgiveness, prayer and consistency in scripture reading.
3. Mentors for the Early Development stage. The infant disciple is promoted to early development where they are assigned a mentor. These mentors will have the most direct interaction with the new disciple. The mentor must have a plan that exposes the new disciple to living as a disciple. The new disciple must observe the life of their mentor. They interact spiritually and personally. These mentors need to be trained and have a consistent plan for interaction with their assigned disciples. Mentors are to be supervised and required to give regular updates on their progress. There should be a monthly meeting where the mentors report and are evaluated to ensure they are managing their relationships successfully.
4. When the young disciple is ready to be promoted to be a Middle disciple they will start to assist their mentor with disciples who are promoted to the Early disciple stage. This will give them limited responsibility while allowing the mentors to work with more disciples in the Early Development stage.
5. For the Adolescent disciples there must be a care team for the sick and elderly. This care team should be part of outreach. They must visit and address the needs of the sick and elderly in the community but can also do this for people outside of the community. The Adolescent disciple will be able to contact their mentor when needed but they have been promoted from needing regular interaction with a mentor. They are now implementing what they have learned by caring for the sick and elderly.
6. Facilitators for the Pathway to Spiritual Maturity.
7. There must be evangelism training and opportunities for the Early Adult Development stage. The Early Adult disciples must demonstrate an eagerness to reach the lost. While they are still growing they must start making more disciples through evangelism. The evangelism training and experiences must be structured and informed. The leaders in evangelism must understand the methods of evangelism the community employs and be able to demonstrate them to the Early Adult disciples. The teachers of evangelism must remember the Early Adult disciples are being trained for evangelism. They must be taught and allowed to serve along side an experienced evangelist.

8. Seniors who have agreed to mentor the Adult disciples with their experience. The Adult disciple must use the Senior disciples to share struggles and the weight of their responsibility in the community. These Senior disciples must maintain confidentiality and understanding that disciples are not perfect. They must mentor the Adult disciples as they lead the community in various ways.