

LYNN H. PRYOR

THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

TRANSFORMING YOUR DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRY

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INTRODUCTION

Discipleship is important. *Very* important. No one would disagree with that; in fact, I am confident we would all agree that discipleship—the process of growing in Christlikeness—is a foundational part of the church’s mission and ministry.

But how do we go about discipleship? Answers to that question will vary. Many methods of discipleship overlap with one another, perhaps emphasizing one aspect of discipleship over the others. There are many good ways to disciple individuals in their walk with Christ, but which is the best approach?

This booklet is going to look at research gleaned from churches on what a mature follower of Christ looks like. We’ll identify key marks of a mature disciple and work backward to see how we can lead others to maturity in those same areas.

Are you ready to take this journey with me? Because a journey is what this is all about.

THE JOURNEY

It's common in our churches to talk in terms of having a "personal relationship with Jesus." Certainly, a good term but that phrase never appears in Scripture. The most common word to describe the Christian life is "walk." Jesus invited His disciples—and us—to follow Him (Matt. 4:19; 16:24) and following implies walking.

- "Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received" (Eph. 4:1).
- "So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him" (Col. 2:6).
- "This is love: that we walk according to his commands. This is the command as you have heard it from the beginning: that you walk in love" (2 John 6).

I like that picture. We're not being asked to run or jump. Just walk. Walking carries the idea that, even as I am walking *toward* Jesus (becoming more like Him), I am walking *with* Jesus. Furthermore, walking means the Christian life is a journey. No one who comes to Christ in one moment is a fully mature Christian in the next. John Bunyan captured this well in his classic book *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In this novel, Bunyan explores both the joys and challenges that face Christians as they seek to lose their burden of sin and enter the celestial city. The book is about the Christian journey, the progress we make as we follow Christ.

Walking is the life of discipleship. It is walking in the right direction and is quite different from the way the world walks. The task of church leaders is to help Christians walk this journey. As believers walk step by step on this journey of discipleship, leaders should walk alongside them on the pathway of discipleship.

But what exactly does that pathway look like?

Good pathways include a clearly delineated path to walk. My wife and I occasionally go for walks in some of our state parks. We love the nature trails, and I am thankful for both the clearly marked path and the occasional signpost showing us we're heading in the right direction. When I see these signposts, I know we are making progress.

Similar signposts can surely help us as we journey toward Christlikeness. Even when we face challenges—the uphill climbs or rocky terrain—we know we're still progressing in the right direction.

Let's consider what those signposts look like and what they tell us.

THE SIGNPOSTS

Lifeway Research conducted a significantly large research study around the subject of discipleship. This survey involved pastors, professors, and church leaders from a variety of backgrounds. The study included a survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors in the United States to discover the type of discipleship ministries being used in churches and the satisfaction level they had with them. The study included additional surveys of 6,500 Protestant churchgoers regarding their personal practice of discipleship.

As the research was culled through, they identified eight areas of the Christian life that lead to spiritual health in a believer. Looking at these eight attributes of discipleship, Lifeway realized these should serve as signposts on the pathway of discipleship. In other words, these are the characteristics that ought to be present, in increasing measure, in the life of someone who is growing toward Christlikeness.

As you read these eight markers of a maturing believer, keep in mind that they are in no particular order. A Christian does not master one before moving on to another. Rather, these eight characteristics are present in some form, and the believer is growing more and more in these areas as they mature.

- **Engage with Scripture.** Transformation can be recognized when we regularly interact with God's Word. Our mind is sharpened by the Bible, our perspective is shaped by the Bible, and our actions are directed by the Bible.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

- **Obey God and Deny Self.** Discipleship is the process of obedience to the One who is in authority over you. Transformation can be seen when we progressively set aside what we want, live under the lordship of Christ, and pursue His kingdom's priorities.

"If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

- **Serve God and Others.** Transformation is evident when personal needs and even dreams are set aside for the needs we see in others. We understand our service to God is reflected in our service to others.

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

- **Share Christ.** Living out the effects of the gospel is certainly important, but maturing believers know speaking about the message is also important. Transformation is evident when we talk about the Source of our changed lives.

“But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

- **Exercise Faith.** Transformation is seen in believers when we increasingly choose to trust and obey God, regardless of any inner risks, outward risks, or tugs from others to choose a safer path. Our lives are characterized by faithful obedience to God’s will.

“I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

- **Seek God.** Transformation is seen when our desire is to know God more deeply and experience His work more fully. As we mature, we seek to deepen our communion with God.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you” (Matt. 6:33).

- **Build Relationships.** Faith is personal but it is not intended to be private. Our horizontal relationships should develop just as our vertical relationship with God does. We are meant to live in community with other believers, where we can mutually love and encourage one another. As we build relationships with those outside the community of faith, we reflect Christ to them.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

- **Live Unashamed.** Transformation is evident when we are unashamed to present our own lives as being aligned with Christ. Mature believers do not hesitate for their lives and words to be on display for all to see Christ in them.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).

As the signposts of the discipleship pathway, these are the statistically validated marks of transformation that show believers are on the right track. Let me show you one proven and practical way you can build these markers into the lives of those you lead.

A PLAN OF DISCIPLESHIP BUILT ON THE SIGNPOSTS

Bible Studies for Life is a Bible study curriculum and resource that centers on the eight markers of a growing disciple. The studies release quarterly, providing thirteen sessions within each quarter. Two of the markers are specifically addressed in two six-week studies.

Over a year's time, then, all eight signposts are addressed in the six-session studies. So what happens at the end of the year? We cover the eight signposts again—but this time we approach them with different passages and a different emphasis. This is important, because our journey toward Christlikeness will never be complete until we are face-to-face with Christ. For example, spending six weeks in a study related to “Serve God and Others” doesn't mean we're fully versed in or living lives that perfectly serve God and others. And this means the studies tied to “Serve God and Others” are far from repetitive, because there are so many aspects of serving God and others we can address.

As the Bible Studies for Life team prepares to develop new studies, we begin with conversations with church leaders. We ask questions like:

- What issues are adults in your church facing?
- What issues are those in your community facing?
- What areas of discipleship need addressing among those in your church?
- What doctrines or topics from Scripture are those in your church asking about?
- What study or topic would you like for those in your church to dig into?

We also “keep our ear to the ground” throughout the year. As we cull through the responses and feedback, it becomes clear the studies, passages, and issues we need to address under each of the eight signposts of a maturing Christian. You can see how we've considered each of these signposts in recent years and in the studies that are coming up.

Seek God

- A Name Like No Other (2023-24)
- The Heart of Worship (2024-25)
- God Is: Understanding the Character of God (2025-26)

Share Christ

- Confident in the Face of Hard Questions (2023-24)
- Looking Forward to Christmas (2024-25)
- How to Share Christ in a Post-Christian World (2025-26)

Engage with Scripture

- Promises We Can Count On (2023-24)
- All Signs Point to Jesus (2024-25)
- The Greatest Truths of All Time (2025-26)

Live Unashamed

- Staying True in a World Far from God (2023-24)
- Thrive: Living on Purpose (2024-25)
- Seize the Day: Life on Mission (2025-26)

Exercise Faith

- Owning a Faith That Matters (2023-24)
- Risk-Takers: The Adventure of Walking by Faith (2024-25)
- Little to Give (2025-26)

Serve God and Others

- Being an Authentic Church (2023-24)
- Elisha: Seeing the Hand of God at Work (2024-25)
- Essentials for Christian Living (2025-26)

Build Relationships

- More Than a Sidekick: Serving Alongside Others (2023-24)
- Navigating Family Conflict (2024-25)
- How Jesus Related to People (2025-26)

Obey God and Deny Self

- It's All About Jesus (2023-24)
- Character Counts (2024-25)
- How to Handle Life's Interruptions (2025-26)

At first glance, you might think many of these studies may sound topical—but far from it. We do not pick a verse here, pick a verse there. Each week's study stays in a single passage or chapter of the Bible, and most of the full six-week studies are devoted to one book of the Bible or one individual's life. And through it all, we are committed to teaching biblical truths that build toward discipleship.

For Bible study groups that use Bible Studies for Life year-in and year-out, they are walking the pathway of discipleship with the guidance of these eight signposts. Their group leaders are striving to see that those in their groups are growing in Christ and becoming mature believers.

Note: The study plan for Bible Studies for Life is regularly updated and can be viewed at biblestudiesforlife.lifeway.com/adults.

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE AND THE PROCESS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Bible Studies for Life is designed to facilitate this discipleship process. Let's consider how that process is carried out in the lives of those being disciplined and in those who are leading the discipleship process (the group leaders).

The disciple. Discipleship happens best when the believer is personally invested and engaged in Bible study. Participation with others in group Bible study is important, and we'll come back to this in a moment. Equally important is the time the individual spends with God and His Word. Bible Studies for Life offers two approaches to the personal aspect of discipleship.

1. Using a *Personal Study Guide*. Group participants are encouraged to read a section of the *Personal Study Guide* prior to coming to the group. This practice gets the participants thinking on the passage and considering questions they might want to discuss with others. Reading and studying beforehand leads them to greater participation with others in the group.

2. Using a *Daily Discipleship Guide*. Group participants come to the group first. After a group discussion facilitated by the leader, the individuals go home and engage with the Scripture through five daily readings. This approach gets the person engaged with the biblical passage throughout the week.

The *Daily Discipleship Guide* also offers some ideas and questions participants can discuss with one to two others, as a way for further engagement.

Notice that both approaches call for the group participants to do something outside the group time: personal study and reflection. Group interaction and personal interaction go together, and by engaging in both disciplines, believers more readily process biblical truth and consider how they are to live it out.

The group leader. Discipleship happens best when those being discipled interact together around God's Word. Lecturing and expecting group participants to simply "sit and soak" is not our approach. People learn best when they get an opportunity to discuss the passage and its implications for their lives. Relaying information about the biblical text is included, but the group plans in Bible Studies for Life lead the group leader to ask a handful of questions. These are not simply questions to be answered (as though they were taking a test); these are questions to be *discussed*. We learn best when we discuss and interact with the passage *together*.

The group leader is provided a leader guide that walks them through the steps of facilitating the discussion.

- It shows the leader when to ask the discussion questions found in the *Personal Study Guide*.
- It points to different elements in the *Personal Study Guide* or *Daily Discipleship Guide*.
- It provides extended commentary on the passage and instructs the leader when to best share that content.
- It provides creative options to enhance the group experience.
- It points to supplemental posters and handouts found in the *Leader Pack* that enhance the group experience.

For group leaders who want even more content, *Advanced Bible Study* is a supplemental resource that provides more commentary. We even offer a supplement to the supplement! *Advanced Bible Study Teacher Guide* includes a teaching plan that builds on the commentary in *Advanced Bible Study*. While it, too, encourages discussion, it leans more toward a master-teacher approach to group Bible study.

OPTIONS IN USING BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Using the resources in Bible Studies for Life will facilitate a group's growth in Christ and in maturing around the eight signposts of a growing disciple. We also recognize that your group is unique, and we provide some age-group options and translation choices.

Bible Studies for Life	Adult	Young Adult	Senior Adult	Advanced Bible Study
Personal Study Guide	✓		✓	✓
Daily Discipleship Guide		✓		
Leader Guide	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leader Pack	✓	✓	✓	✓
CSB translation	✓	✓	✓	✓
KJV translation	✓	✓	✓	✓
NIV translation	✓		✓	

Each of these resources is offered in three formats.

- [Print](#)
- [eBook](#)
- Digital Download (PDF). The digital download is a subscription-based model for churches using [Ministry Grid](#).

QUESTIONS?

I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you about this approach to discipleship and Bible Studies for Life. I hope you'll reach out to me. You can also reach out to my colleagues on the Church Solutions Team at customerservice@lifeway.com or 1-800-458-2772.

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