



## The 7-Stages of Disciple Making

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### Abstract

The modern church faces a crisis of discipleship, characterized by declining engagement, wavering faith, and a loss of clarity regarding what it means to follow Jesus faithfully. Despite unprecedented access to resources, there is growing confusion regarding Christian doctrine and the necessity of spiritual practices (Barna, 2025). Furthermore, churches often substitute programs and events for intentional disciple-making. This proposal presents a conceptual framework for a biblically grounded, theoretically informed model of discipleship that integrates servant leadership and followership theories. The 7-Stage Disciple Making Framework offers both theological conviction and practical application for discipleship development in diverse contexts. With this framework, leaders can be equipped to develop disciples and address wavering faith and declining mental health, thereby contributing to human flourishing. Many Christians struggle with spiritual development and overall disengagement with the Church (Barna, 2025). There is also a growing misunderstanding regarding Christian doctrine and what it means to follow him. Leadership studies have often regarded Jesus as a model leader, particularly in the context of servant leadership (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). However, direct, one-on-one disciple-making, from a followership and servant leadership perspective, is often neglected within the literature. This framework aims to address key questions in discipleship through a sequential series of steps. The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework is both conceptual and practical, drawing on scriptural exegesis, theological writings, leadership and followership theory, and lived ministry experience. Disciple-making goes through seven stages: Surrender, Self-Denial, Submission, Stewardship, Service, Sacrifice, and Suffering. Each stage enables disciples to assess their spiritual journey and development. By integrating this framework into the disciple-making process, Christian leaders are better equipped to develop disciples.

*Keywords:* servant leadership, discipleship, sacrifice, suffering, mentorship

The modern world is marked by rapid cultural shifts and increasing spiritual apathy. The church faces a crisis of discipleship. Many believers find themselves caught in cycles of wavering faith, spiritual confusion, and disengagement from the local church (Barna, 2025). Despite widespread access to resources, programs, and theological training, the core mission of the church – to make disciples – has often been reduced to merely attending events and consuming content. The result is a growing number of professing Christians who lack clarity on what it truly means to follow Jesus.

This article addresses the urgent need for a more robust, transformational discipleship framework. The proposed framework moves beyond surface-level engagement toward lifelong formation. Rooted in both theological conviction and practical application, the proposed 7-Stages of Disciple Making framework offers a path forward. The example of Christ, paired with leadership and followership theory, forms the seven stages: surrender, self-denial, submission, stewardship, service, sacrifice, and suffering. With a firmer foundation in these stages, practitioners will be better equipped to gauge their spiritual maturity and foster others' spiritual growth.

## Theoretical Background of Servant Leadership

The term *servant leadership* was coined in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf, an AT&T executive, in his seminal work *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf described a servant leader as "servant first," highlighting that authentic servant leadership begins with a desire to serve others before seeking to lead (p. 6). This perspective represents a significant shift from traditional leadership models that have customarily focused on authority and control (Northouse, 2019). Spears (1998) further clarified this concept by outlining the 10 key characteristics of servant leaders, as outlined in Greenleaf's essays: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people's growth, and community building. This provided the foundation for servant leadership.

Building on Spears, Patterson (2003) introduced seven additional servant leadership qualities: love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. These highlighted that servant leadership stems from love at the core. One cannot truly serve without coming from a place of love. Servant leadership continues to gain popularity and is being implemented in companies worldwide (Sendjaya, 2015).

However, servant leadership was not invented by Greenleaf. More than 2,000 years earlier, Jesus Christ provided the perfect example of servant leadership (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). His leadership challenged cultural norms by embodying service, humility, and sacrifice. In Matthew 23:11, Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant" (*New International Version*, 2011 [all scripture cited in this paper come

from this version of the Bible). This stemmed from a place of love, which is apparent in his command to love God and love others (Mark 12:30-31).

Despite its biblical roots and growing academic interest, the literature reveals a gap in exploring the process of Jesus' discipleship. Through his intentional development of his followers and close relational approach, leaders today can be informed on how to make disciples. Few studies have examined how this discipleship framework, through a leadership lens, can be structured and practically applied to cultivate servant leaders, representing an important area for further research and practice.

## Conceptual Development

The 7-Stages of Disciple-Making Framework emerged in response to the challenges of modern discipleship, specifically the lack of a clear, progressive framework for spiritual growth and multiplication. In both formal and informal contexts, I observed that many Christians lack self-awareness regarding their spiritual maturity and do not undergo a disciple-making process that resembles that outlined in Scripture.

To mediate these challenges, I developed a conceptual framework that identifies seven stages of discipleship: surrender, self-denial, submission, stewardship, service, sacrifice, and suffering. Though this framework is not yet substantiated through empirical research or systematic theological exegesis, it is grounded in four key sources: (a) direct study of the scriptures and application of exegetical analysis, (b) theological and pastoral writings on discipleship, (c) contemporary followership and leadership theory, and (d) personal spiritual formation and real-life ministry experience as both being discipled and discipling others.

The framework is intentionally conceptual, providing a structure while offering an adaptable approach to spiritual formation and multiplication. Each stage represents progression in the discipleship process and is designed in a reproducible manner to help leaders develop more deeply committed followers of Jesus. The goal of this framework is to be founded in both theology and contemporary research, while remaining highly applicable to various faith-based situations (e.g., churches, families, workplaces, organizations, teams, and personal relationships). This framework is both science and art.

With each stage beginning with the letter *s*, this provides a memorable design that can be easily understood in all contexts. For example, this framework is to be presented in both the United States and the Dominican Republic. It will also be shared in both conference and church settings. The universality and simplicity of the framework provide application in various settings.

## The Seven Stages of Disciple Making

In this framework, seven stages build off one another. However, as disciples develop through each stage, particular areas of their lives may be closely aligned with a previous stage. This reflects the dynamic nature of life and the constant struggle and fluctuation of one's faith. However, as a disciple matures, their overall disposition will progress through the seven stages of development.

All the stages are reflected throughout scripture and are generally accepted as spiritual truths of the Christian faith. In congruence, each stage is supported in psychology, philosophy, business, leadership, and followership theory. For the sake of this article, and the focus of this conceptual development, scripture, followership, and leadership theory are used to support each other. The stages are divided into two parts: following (Stages 1-3) and leading (Stages 4-7). Disciples begin by following God and then other faithful followers of Christ. Only after they have followed can they lead others through their spiritual maturity.

### Surrender

Discipleship begins with an initial surrender. A person must have an openness to Christ and believe in their heart that he did in fact die and resurrect to pay the penalty for the world's sin (Rom. 10:9). Any attempt to live out one's faith, without undergoing this initial surrender, results in a false faith (Matt. 7:21-23), which in turn results in a poor product of one's work on earth (Matt. 7:16). Jesus said that many will come to him and recognize Him as Lord, yet he will tell them that he never knew them (Matt. 7:22-23). Jesus requires more than lip service; he requires a genuine, heartfelt belief in him as savior.

Before anyone can lead others, they must surrender themselves to a cause. Many people are motivated to acquire wealth. Some individuals attach themselves to a particular cause, such as global warming, racism, or world hunger. Jesus asks for a complete surrender to him. Everything else will follow. This initial step is referred to as salvation and can only come from the grace of God through faith alone in him. Salvation is the ticket to heaven, and those who genuinely believe in Christ surrender their life to him.

### Self-denial

Once someone has surrendered themselves to Christ, the next step is to deny themselves. This means forgoing all personal wants and desires and instead desiring God only. Jesus stated that everyone must first love God with their entire heart, mind, and soul (Matt. 22:37). To do this, they must deny their desires (Matt. 16:24). This is a difficult task that is undertaken throughout a lifetime. Paul referred to this as sanctification—the ongoing process of working out one's salvation. It is the willful

surrender of one's life and choosing to shed away the sinful nature of a person and grow more like Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). If someone truly believes in Jesus Christ, their natural reaction will be to strive to become more like him (Bonhoeffer & Metaxas, 1995). It will be the believer's only true desire and will consume their entire life to achieve. This step is unique in that it occurs throughout the entire discipleship process. Every step of the way, the disciple must continue to deny themselves and choose God.

## **Submission**

The disciple has surrendered their life to Jesus and begun the journey of denying themselves. The next step is to submit to God's will. This means adopting a posture of obedience. There are three areas of life where scripture requires submission: to God (James 4:7), to godly leaders (Heb. 13:17), and to the Christian community (Eph. 5:21). The first is more obvious; disciples are to submit their lives to Jesus and follow his commands. Next, they are to follow those entrusted to lead. Some people – mentors, teachers, and pastors – have faithfully dedicated their lives as disciples and walked this journey longer; these are the people disciples will submit to. Finally, disciples are called to submit to the Christian community – the church. The church is the body of believers, and the disciple submits to the needs of the community. They no longer live for themselves but for Christ and others. This is the second half of the great commandment: "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:39). Any effective follower, whether it be in faith or for an organization, must be willing to submit to the leader (Chaleff, 2009). This is not a blind submission but a willful submission to follow with care.

## **Stewardship**

Now begins the shift from following to leading. The first half was inward; in the second half, disciples begin to share the light they have received with the world (Matt. 5:14). This begins by stating what the believer already possesses – the three key components to this of spiritual gifts, vocation, and relationships. Each person has particular skills, but spiritual gifts go beyond human ability. Spiritual gifts are bestowed by God to the believer in the initial surrender. The disciple must discern which spiritual gifts they possess and how to develop them (DellaVecchio & Winston, 2015). Spiritual gifts are given particularly to serve the body of believers and give glory to God. The next is vocation, at this point the disciple has committed themselves entirely to God, and part of this may require a career change (Witherington, 2011). By submitting to God's will and the guidance of godly leaders, the disciple can determine their true vocation. They may be called to stay where they are; however, their work will change as a result. They are no longer working for themselves but for the kingdom of God. The disciple must also steward their relationships. They will lead others to God and raise their families in the faith (1 Tim. 3:4-5). It may mean they must remove some relationships from their life if needed (Matt. 19:29).

This step requires action and marks the beginning of the disciples' leadership journey. It starts right where they are. Stewardship is one of the 10 characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 1998). Furthermore, stewardship can be defined as "to hold something in trust for another" (Block, 1993, p. xxiv). In this sense, the disciple is now holding their life in trust for God. The possessions, jobs, people, skills, and spiritual gifts that are given to the disciple are not their own but God's, and they have been entrusted to hold and use those in trust.

## Service

The next step is to lead by serving. Jesus did this when he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13). This task was reserved for the lowest members of society, and the fact that Jesus did this for his disciples was blasphemous. However, he was setting an example for the disciples on what it meant to lead. After loving God, the goal of disciples is to serve others. By serving, they lead. They help them grow and, in turn, accomplish what Greenleaf (1970) stated as the true test of servant leadership: "The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 6). By serving others, by serving the church, and by serving God, the disciple spreads love to others, lifts them up, and produces people who, in turn, will serve.

## Sacrifice

The next stage for the disciple is sacrifice. It is one thing to serve others but another to sacrifice. Sacrifice has two components: need and cost. The need refers to the need being served. There is something that someone else, or a cause, needs. The cost refers to what it costs the disciple to fill that need. Many people will serve others when it does not cost them anything, but this step comes when something needs to be sacrificed by the disciple. Ultimately, this is reflected in the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross (Matt. 27:32-56). Jesus gave his life so that we could be purchased as a ransom (John 3:16-18). It cost Jesus a lot, but it was for something greater. Disciples will also be called to make sacrifices. This may be their job, their relationships, or their dreams to fulfill some need in the world. God will call believers into places they never thought they would go, and disciples must follow, no matter the cost. The first disciples, Andrew and Peter, were fishermen working on their boats when Jesus came and asked them to follow him (Matt. 4:18-22). Matthew was a tax collector (Matt 9:9). Each of them sacrificed their career to follow Jesus. Matteson and Irving (2006) pointed out that servant leadership falls short in the area of sacrifice. They highlighted another theory, self-sacrificial leadership, as a means to fill this gap. For organizations, a leader's sacrifice can yield positive results for both the followers and the organization.

## Suffering

The final stage is suffering. It is also the least enjoyable stage, yet unavoidable. All Christians will suffer at some point – some to a greater degrees than others. Disciples must not shy away from suffering but rather rejoice in it (Rom. 5:3). This is not a patronizing term. What Paul meant when it comes to rejoicing in hardship is that the disciple knows that all things work out for the glory of God (Rom. 8:28) and that their suffering will be rewarded in heaven (Matt. 5:10-12). All people will suffer at some point, but the disciple is assured that there is a reason behind it, though it may be unknown. What is known is that God will be glorified through it. Every one of the apostles, except John, was brutally murdered for their faith (MacArthur, 2002). They suffered greatly, yet it is their death that gave meaning to the faith. Many people believe in God today because of the Apostles' faithfulness despite their suffering, which, in turn, glorified God. The primary difference between sacrifice and suffering is that sacrifice is undertaken to gain something else. Suffering is just suffering for no apparent reason. It is the enduring of persecution, hate, and abuse. Jesus could have died peacefully and then risen from the dead; instead, he was brutalized, horribly, before being crucified. He suffered dearly, yet he did not stop loving the Father with his whole heart, mind, and soul.

Leadership theory does not address suffering much, especially in the sense of it being a positive outcome. However, servant leadership theory suggests that leaders must heal others (Spears, 1998). If a fellow disciple is suffering, the disciple must help them if possible. They must come alongside and help. Where can they help heal and raise the spirits of their followers? This is the most challenging stage of the process and takes the most effort from the Christian community to combat.

## Application

The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework aims to facilitate practical application in various settings, with a focus on one-on-one discipleship mentoring. Too often, churches, colleges, and workplaces focus on development at scale, through sermons, classes, and programs. These have their time and place. However, intentional one-on-one engagements provide greater depth to development (Hamid & Rasheed, 2022). Practitioners, whether pastors, lay leaders, mentors, or kingdom businesspeople, can use this framework to assess themselves and others on their spiritual growth journey.

## Conclusion

Servant leadership, when understood through the lens of the discipleship framework, becomes more than a theory; it is a transformative journey. The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework offers a biblically grounded and theoretically informed path for disciple-making, progressing from surrender to suffering. The 7-Stages of Disciple

Making Framework is founded on scriptural insights, paired with contemporary leadership and followership theory, empowering believers to grow as both faithful followers and impactful servant leaders.

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### About the Author

Joshua Clark blends ministry, business, and education into a unified perspective with a single purpose – making disciples. He helps individuals, teams, and organizations navigate the tension between following and leading, recognizing that both are essential. Faith and work do not have to clash; together, they can fuel greater productivity and fulfillment.

His expertise is grounded in experience, education, and results. Over the past decade, Joshua has done everything from scrubbing toilets to owning a business. He's helped organizations expand from local to national operations, built a marketing department for a digital media company, and facilitated millions in revenue for a Fortune 100 company. These diverse roles have shaped his understanding of Customer Experience (CX) and Organizational Development (OD).

To complement his business experience, Joshua earned multiple degrees and is currently a doctoral candidate at Regent University, specializing in Servant Leadership. Also taught as an adjunct professor for 5 years. His message on leadership and discipleship has been shared internationally through academic publications, conferences, pulpits, and online platforms, reaching thousands worldwide.

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