

Session 6: Understanding how we Grow as Disciples (The 'How' of Discipleship 1)

Head

Heart

Hands

PRACTICAL

"Christians grow when we have practical and realistic plans and practices to prioritise our spiritual growth".

ENVISIONED

"Christians grow when we have a clear vision of God, ourselves, and everyday faith that has spiritual growth as an obvious and desirable consequence".

Session Aims

- To understand what kinds of images of Christian maturity we find in the Bible.
- To understand some of the common patterns by which people grow as disciples.
- To understand some of the key factors which lead to growth in discipleship.
- To introduce several simple frameworks for enabling growth which can be used in various small group and church contexts.

Key Bible Passages

- Hebrews 5.7-6.3
- John 7.37
- Romans 12.2
- 1 Corinthians 9.25
- James 2.2-6

Main Session Content

When asking 'how do people grow as disciples?' we need to untangle three questions which are related but not exactly the same:

- What kinds of **images** of Christian maturity do we find in the Bible?
- What are the common **patterns** by which people grow as disciples?
- What are the **factors** which cause us to grow?

There is so much wisdom to draw on here that it's impossible to cover it in such a short time. I will come back to the biblical images of Christian maturity in the next session. And there's a separate 'Going Deeper' piece looking at common patterns of growth. So in today's video I would like to concentrate on some of the factors, which cause us to grow. As with the previous session, I'll start by offering something relatively simple and memorable, and then build out from it.

Two important things to be said at the beginning:

- First, we're all going to be formed by something - our family, friends, society, workplace, social media algorithms, what we watch and what we listen to. The question is not whether we are going to be formed by something. The question is what we are going to choose to allow to shape us. As Christians, we will want to be shaped by God, and grow in the ways that God desires.
- Second, whilst growth in Christ shares many common features with other kinds of human growth, Christians believe there is an additional special ingredient: the Holy Spirit. Everything else we say about how we grow as Christians needs to remember that our growth is the Spirit's work. It's a reminder, as Rowan Williams has said, that 'the timetable of grace is not up to us'.¹ This doesn't mean that we sit back and wait for it to happen. Instead, the heart of discipleship is about co-operating with the Holy Spirit by seeking to pay attention and respond to God's prompting. We'll explore that 'paying attention and responding' more in a future session.

Discipleship Story

'Anyone wanting to learn to play a brass instrument, please go down to the library at lunchtime', said the teacher. It was a spur of the moment decision. After all, the recorder had been pretty easy to learn. Playing a cornet wouldn't be rocket science, would it? Two hours later he was off home with a rather battered old cornet to start what he assumed would be a glittering musical future.

The reality was rather different. Learning the names of the notes was OK; translating them into music was much harder. My lips quickly seemed to tire quickly and I struggled with the high notes. My teacher was an excellent trumpet player and covered all the basics of music. But he could also be impatient with pupils' mistakes. I wasn't making as much progress as expected. Even when I hit the right notes, it still sounded like someone blowing a raspberry down a drainpipe. And who was I performing for anyway? My early enthusiasm waned. I still liked the idea of playing an instrument, but sometimes practice was forgotten for days.

Then several things happened which made all the difference.

- First, I got a new teacher. He was equally strict on practice, but also more encouraging and offered a wider range of music. He set me a challenge: could I attempt grade 3 by the end of the year? We worked through the pieces together for some months before I was ready.
- Second, my dad found a brass music programme on the radio, and suggested I listen. I quickly fell in love with the music and the superb playing I heard. Listening became a weekly fixture, and I began trying to imitate the sound and technique of the musicians I heard.
- Third, the school music teacher brought his own band to school for a concert - I was blown away by their sound. If I practised hard, I wondered, could I even join that band one day? Two years later, I went along for my first rehearsal. It became a hugely important part of growing as a player: playing with great musicians, the discipline of regular practices, concerts and contests, the mutual challenge and encouragement to play one's best, maintain the band's standard and perhaps win a trophy.

¹ Quoted on a Diocese of Exeter Facebook post, 15 June 2026.

- Fourth, as I began to improve as a player myself, a different band asked me to teach some of their newbies. This encouraged me further. But I also now had to think about how to help others play and to set a good example of musicianship. This sharpened my own playing too.

I'm still playing. I'm never going to be a professional, but it's enriched my life hugely. My practising routine waxes and wanes, my tone and technique go up and down in quality. But I still try to imitate the great players I hear on YouTube, enjoy the camaraderie of my local band, learn from its best players, and stretch myself to play a solo now and then. Solos used to terrify me, but with practice, it gets a bit less scary each time. I hope my eight year old self might be surprised at how far I have grown.

Note to enablers: here are a few questions about the story, if it offers a helpful way into the topic. But these are totally optional.

- What different things helped Ian learn to develop as a brass player?
- Think of a time when you have had to learn something new - a job, a skill, or how to manage a situation? What made the difference there?
- From Ian's story and your experience, do you see any parallels with how we grow deeper in Christian discipleship?
- In what ways is growing in Christian discipleship *different* from something like learning to play a musical instrument?

Biblical Reflection on Discipleship Story

We can see all four of these elements in the life of Jesus - and they provide a good way into our theme for today.²

- **Learning and Teaching is Important.** Even those who do not accept Jesus recognise that whatever else he was, he was a teacher. Jesus' teaching makes up a significant part of the Gospels. He left a body of teaching which his disciples absorbed: think of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, his parables, and the two 'greatest commandments'. These helped to shape the minds of Jesus' disciples - to understand the relationship God wanted with them, and the mission they were invited into. Our growth as disciples also requires knowledge and understanding. But in an information society, it's also easy to become overly focused on just knowing more stuff about Christianity. Ultimately, information and knowledge alone don't change us. Jesus's criticism of the Pharisees and teachers of the law was exactly this: even though they knew every word of the Scriptures, they continued to miss what God was doing and how this might transform them.
- **Imitation and Modelling is at the heart of discipleship learning.** Jesus invited his disciples to live life as he lived it and demonstrated everything he taught – how to pray, to heal, to teach, to love enemies. They learnt by observing him. Most famously he did this at the last

² This reflection on four principles of Jesus' approach to discipleship is abridged with kind permission from: Guy Donegan-Cross, *Discipleship: Walk this Way* (BRF, 2025), chapter 2. Discipleship 'always' involves transformation in the sense that there isn't a form of authentic discipleship which doesn't involve transformation. But not 'always' in the sense of 'happening all the time' - sometimes there are periods of wilderness, 'stuckness' or sheer perseverance. These too can be spiritually important times.

supper, when having washed his disciples' feet, Jesus said, 'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you' (John 13:14–15). Discipleship is more caught than taught. Discipleship can often become focused on programmes, but to really grow we need to be alongside people. That's why sharing together in a group can help us so much. In a previous session we shared about the important people who modelled the Christian life for us. We can do the same for others. People don't need a perfect example; they just need a real and honest one.

- **Practising is vital.** Jesus taught his apprentices, he demonstrated that teaching, but, crucially, he also sent them out to do the things he had been teaching and showing them. They learnt on the way. It is interesting how quickly he trusted them to start putting into practice the things he was teaching them. The best way to learn how to pray, serve, listen to God, read scripture, seek justice or share faith is to start to do it. This is common educational wisdom in action. As the saying goes, 'Tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I'll remember. Involve me, I'll understand.' Also, Jesus by no means taught his followers everything they needed to know before sending them out. Whilst knowledge and understanding is important, we also don't need to wait until we have got everything neatly pinned down to start living out our faith.
- **Being accountable.** One of the greatest things we can do for each other as disciples is to ask how we are *really* getting on. Accountability is an often-neglected ingredient of change and growth. Some people respond negatively to the term 'accountability'. This is totally understandable if they have experienced accountability as a one-way relationship of power, manipulation or coercion.³ But offered in the right spirit, it is a precious gift.⁴ People who genuinely love and support us the most are those who are able to ask us questions which help us grow. We see accountability in the life of Christ, who was unafraid to ask his disciples searching questions. We see it too in the way that the disciples came and shared with Jesus how they were getting on - for example, in Luke 10. Here, Jesus sent his disciples out to put into practice what he had been showing them. He gave them instructions, they go out and pray powerfully for others. Then they report back to let him know what has been happening and Jesus encourages and continues to teach them.

As discipleship enablers we need to be careful that we don't put ourselves in the place of Jesus here. We mustn't act as if we had all of Jesus' authority, divine insight and perfect judgement. In fact, that's highly dangerous. But we CAN practice voluntary, mutual accountability with people we trust and feel safe with. Conversely, a lack of proper accountability often leads Christians (including church leaders) to come unstuck through temptations, not least concerning money, sex and power. Safe, accountable friendships with a small number of trusted people can help protect us from this. We will look at the value of safety, support and challenge in a future session.

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³ We are aware of the need to 'guard our hearts' carefully when offering accountability. To reflect on the nature of spiritual abuse and how to avoid it, read: <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual/safeguarding-children-young-people-and-vulnerable-adults/section-42-spiritual-abuse>.

⁴ In Christian terms accountability is usually mutual, and/or that at very least everyone is accountable to someone. As Ephesians 5.21 says: 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'.

These four principles of growth – teaching, modelling, practice and accountability – are not complicated. They are rooted in common educational wisdom and demonstrated in the life of Jesus. Often the challenge in growing as disciples is not that we lack knowledge, but that we are unsure how to translate what we know so that it becomes part of our lived experience. In this journey of discipleship, it's more important to grasp a few key things and let them change our lives, rather than know many things and but never change at all.

For Reflection/Discussion:

- In your experience (thinking of yourself and/or others) what do YOU think helps people grow in Christian discipleship?
- Do you recognise the influence of the four elements above (learning/teaching, imitation/modelling, practice and accountability) in your own Christian journey?
- Have a go at the *What Helps Disciples Grow?* Survey from St Peter's Saltley Trust. How did your results compare to others?

A. Growth in Discipleship requires VIM!

How do we build on that foundation? I've often found a really helpful next step in the writing of the US Christian writer and philosopher Dallas Willard (1935-2013). Willard strongly believed that growth in discipleship was not only desirable and possible, but that we can also identify some of the practical things that actually help us grow. Drawing on his philosophical training, deep immersion in the Bible and 2000 years of Christian experience, Willard suggested three key ingredients to growth:

- **Vision:** First, it's important to have a clear sense of what the object of our growth is. Who is the God we are wanting to grow towards? What is God's mission in which we are called to participate? What does maturity of faith and life look like? What kind of a journey should we expect to be on?
- **Intention:** Secondly, in order to grow we also have to *want* to grow. This isn't just about feeling that growing as a disciple would be nice. It's about a conscious intention to seek out what can help us grow as Christians. It's a matter of will or choice.
- **Means (or Method):** Third, we need to understand something about *how* growth and formation happens, and what helps it happen. What sorts of personal spiritual rhythms, church cultures, practices and behaviours seem to help people grow as Christians?⁵

What happens if one of these elements is missing? Without vision, we may want to grow but not know who or what we're growing towards. Without the intention, we can understand the goal and how to get there but lack the passion and commitment to make it happen. Without the means, we may want to grow closer to God but remain unsure how it happens. Interestingly there's at least some research with churches which suggests that people are more

⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (2002). VIM is also unpacked in three talks given in Scotland here: <https://dwillard.org/resources/audio/v-i-m-renovation-of-the-heart>

likely to say they are growing spiritually if they have a clear understanding of what they're growing towards, and how they get there.⁶

So if it helps, you can remember that growth in discipleship requires VIM!

Discipleship Questions for VIM (Vision, Intention, Means):

- How far do you have a clear (enough) vision of the life into which God calls us?
- How far do you want to grow as a follower of Jesus? How far is this reflected in your choices?
- How far do you understand what helps growth in discipleship? Which practices, rhythms, behaviours and conditions help you?
- If one or other of these elements are missing, what do you think might get lost?

⁶ Sally K. Gallagher and Chelsea Newton, 'Defining Spiritual Growth: Congregations, Community and Connectedness', *Sociology of Religion* 70.3 (2009), 232-261

B. **Head, Heart, Hands and Feet.**

Let's build a bit further on that idea. 'Vision, intention and means' can sound a bit abstract, a bit academic, so how could we express this in simpler, everyday language? Here Steve Kelly, an experienced Anglican vicar, suggests we can think about Christian growth in terms of 'head, heart, hands and feet':⁷ This also echoes several of the key things about Jesus' own ministry and approach discussed earlier.

Type of Growth	Summary	Key Words	Everyday and Biblical Examples
Heart 	We love Jesus. We grow through our experience of/contact with God, and through contact with/inspiration and encouragement from other Christians.	Love Experience Relationship Community	Growth through contact: Growing in discipleship is partly like spreading and/or catching (good!) germs (growth through contact) <i>'Come to me all you who are thirsty' (John 7.37)</i>
Head 	We learn from Jesus. We grow through study, experience and reflection, and this gradually changes our mental architecture, shaping our minds more into the mind of Christ, as we understand more of what following Jesus means. This shapes our behaviour too.	Study Education Teaching Reflection	Growth through study and reflection: Growing in discipleship is partly like going to school (growth through learning) <i>'Be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Romans 12.2)</i>
Hands 	We imitate Jesus. We put into practice the ways in which Jesus maintained a faithful walk with the Creator and taught others to do the same. We learn from his model and put it into practice in our lives.	Imitation Practices Disciplines Character	Growth through method/process: Growing in discipleship is partly like baking a cake <i>'All athletes are disciplined in their training' (1 Cor 9.25)</i>
Feet 	We share Jesus (in word and deed). We grow by living out Jesus' calling and commands, and are changed in the process. As we go, stepping out in faith, putting into practice what we have learned, we become the people God desires.	Going Doing Stepping Out Living	Growth through doing: Growing in discipleship is partly like riding a bike (theory will only get you so far; you mainly learn by doing it) <i>'Faith without actions is dead' (James 2.26)</i>

⁷ Steve's work is used with kind permission.

Steve Kelly suggests that for many people, there is a natural progression of growing here: loving Jesus, learning from Jesus, imitating Jesus, sharing Jesus. But whether this is your experience (or your group/church members' experience) or not, the important thing is that rather than choosing to focus on only one or two of these, we actually need all four.

Head, Heart, Hands, Feet Discipleship Questions:

Using 'head, heart, hands, feet' as a simple framework for reflecting on your growth in discipleship...

You...

- What has helped you grow in each of these ways?
- In which of the four (loving Jesus, learning from Jesus, imitating Jesus, sharing Jesus) do you see signs of growth or fruitfulness currently?
- Is there one of the four you are sensing an invitation to explore further?

Your group or church...

- Which of these four approaches to growing disciples are most obvious in the life of your own church/group?
- Which of these four are less evident?
- What practical steps could you take to address any gaps you see?
- How would you create a simple discipleship programme that enabled people to grow in 'head, heart, hands and feet'? (If this question prompts you to create one, please share it with other group members!)

[**Note to Enablers:** If you want to dig into this deeper, it's worth knowing that each of 'head, heart, hands and feet' also roughly correspond to four main schools of thought about how we grow as Christians. These in turn reflect some of the most common understandings of how people learn and grow more generally.⁸ But knowing the theory alone won't help - putting it into practice will].

⁸ Some approaches to growing in discipleship adopt an '**educational**' approach (focusing on head knowledge). Others are '**epidemiological**' in nature (i.e., they suggest faith grows and spreads most importantly through direct experience of God and contact with other Christians, and so focus on the heart). Some approaches are more '**process-driven**' - it is about following a process which new disciples can then go on to replicate with others (hands). Others seeing growing in discipleship in more '**praxis-oriented**' terms (feet): we grow and change primarily through 'doing'. We become what we choose to do, more than through what we learn with our heads. I am grateful to Steve Kelly for identifying these four main approaches, and for permission to share them here.

C. Eight (or Nine?) things which enable Growth in Discipleship

‘Head, heart, hands, feet’ is likely to be simple enough to be memorable by most groups and congregations. However, if you want to dig a bit deeper as enablers of discipleship, here’s some recent research which might help flesh out our understanding of growth in discipleship a little further.

As part of its commitment to become a community of missionary disciples, the Church of England recently commissioned some research from the Eido organisation to understand what helped young adult Christians grow in discipleship.⁹ They interviewed a range of people and compared the results to a review of a wide range of newer and older writing about Christian formation. The two pictures were strikingly similar!

Here are the eight things which the research identified. You’ll notice that one or two of them are listed at the top of every session handout. This is because Discipleship Enablers is roughly structured around them (with kind permission of Eido and one of the report’s key authors, Philip Sital-Singh). The original report identified eight themes. In conversation with Philip, we’ve added a ninth (‘active’). Each description is accompanied by some questions (mostly written by Philip, who is a trained spiritual director) for personal or group reflection and a link to ‘head, heart, hands, feet’.

Pathway to participation	Invitations for reflection
Vision (head) Christians grow when we have a clear vision of God, of ourselves, of the gospel, and of an everyday faith that invites us to spiritual growth.	• How has my image of God influenced my choices recently? • How has my image of myself influenced my choices recently? • How has the gospel influenced my experience of life recently?
Repentance (heart) Christians grow when we have a clear-minded, personalised awareness of our sin-affected nature and God’s will and power for us to be transformed.	• Where did I make a decision or react in a way that was turned away from the character of God recently? • In what specific ways have I fallen short of being a person of love recently? • Where has my life least aligned with Jesus’ description of Kingdom life (Matthew 5-7) or Paul’s description of love (1 Corinthians 13)? • Where do I most desire God’s help to grow or change?
Relationships (heart/hands/feet) Christians grow through committed relationships of safety, encouragement and challenge.	• Which interaction with another Christian has most encouraged me in my life recently? • Which interaction with another Christian has most challenged me in my life recently? • Who am I encouraging recently? How might I offer (appropriate and gentle) challenge to others?
Attention (head/heart)	• How well am I paying attention to God in the daily activities or

⁹ Eido Research/CCX/Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, [Five practices, one experience, and the Holy Spirit: Exploring spiritual growth amongst 18- to 35-year olds in the UK church](#) (2024).

Christians grow through being intentional over the thoughts, experiences and feelings that influence our character.	busyness of daily life? ● In what situations have I sensed God seeking to get my attention? ● When recently have I made a choice to divert my attention away from something <i>unhelpful</i> to something <i>helpful</i> in your obedience to Jesus?
Practical (<i>hands/feet</i>) Christians grow when we have practical and realistic plans and practices to prioritise our spiritual growth.	● What practice, discipline or behaviour have I found most helpful this week in encouraging my spiritual growth recently? ● Given what's happening in my life at the moment, what are specific and realistic ways I could commit to participating in my spiritual growth?
Submission (<i>heart</i>) Christians grow as we continue to choose to lay down our will for the sake of God's.	● Where in life do I trust God the least at the moment? ● Where have I recently chosen to do what I thought God wanted in a situation over what I wanted to do? ● Where recently did I face confusion or pain? Did I bring it to God with both honesty and trust?
Psychological (<i>heart</i>) Christians grow when we address personal traumas and difficulties that hold back deeper spiritual growth.	● Where are my most common sources of anxiety, stress or pain at the moment? ● How am I communicating with other safe people about those? ● How am I communicating with God about those things?
Cultural (<i>all four</i>) Christians grow when we spend time in church cultures that are designed for spiritual growth.	● How am I being nurtured and nourished by my church community and/or small group at the moment? (This could include both formal learning and the quiet, informal shaping of my habits and character by our life together). ● In the areas of church/group life I can personally influence, how have I encouraged or modelled a stronger focus on discipleship and spiritual growth? How might I?
Active (<i>feet</i>) Christians grow when we put into practice what we are learning, taking part in real-life activities to bring in the Kingdom, sometimes at the invitation of others.	● How have I taken part in God's mission to the world recently? In what ways do I sense this has shaped, stretched and changed me? ● Am I sensing an invitation to step further into a particular area of God's call to all Christians? ● Given what's happening in my life currently, where are opportunities for taking part in God's Kingdom work opening up? And closing off?

For Reflection:

- Overall, how far does this ring true for you about what helps people grow as disciples?
- There's nothing fixed or magic about eight (or nine) pathways. Can you think of anything missing from this list?
- Which one (or two) of these are you sensing an invitation to explore further?

Enabling Tips

- There's no simple, single answer to the question: what helps people grow in Christian discipleship? (If there was, we would be in a very different position!). So it's important not to go looking for simple 'six easy steps to Christian perfection' quick-fixes. Authentic, fruitful discipleship is the slow work of a lifetime.
- A lot of different ideas have been offered in this session. Some people love to grapple with concepts, theories and frameworks, but it's perfectly OK if these aren't for you. The best place to start is simply to take the one or two insights which you have found most helpful, and seek to apply them to your own life and context (always remembering that growing disciples never boils down to a quick fix). You can always come back to the other insights when you're ready.
- VIM, head/heart/hands/feet and the 8/9 pathways are offered as a framework for developing discipleship in yourself, your group or church. They don't, in themselves, tell you exactly what this should look like in your own church. They are not off-the-peg solutions. Instead, they identify several things that seem to be widely helpful in growing discipleship. They are relevant to how we help people explore faith, as well as for accompanying those who have already found faith. But only you can judge how they shape and guide your group or congregation's actual discipleship activity.
- If any of the ideas presented here leave you feeling tired or burdened, relax! The point here is to provide you an introduction to some helpful thinking and experience of discipleship growth, not to give you a long list of new things to tick off. Remember what was said in an earlier session about Jesus' invitation being to 'fulness of life', and the under-rated quality of joy in discipleship. So, take what you find helpful and life-giving here, and relax about the rest.

Further Resources

A place to Start

- Guy Donegan-Cross, *Discipleship: Start this Way*, and *Discipleship: Walk this Way* (2025)

In-Depth Books and Research

- Sarah Brush, *The Way through the Trees: An Introduction to Faith Development* (2026)
- Eido Research/CCX/Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, [*Five practices, one experience, and the*](#)
- [*Holy Spirit: Exploring spiritual growth amongst 18- to 35-year olds in the UK church*](#) (2024).
- Simon Foster, *What Helps Disciples Grow?* (St Peter's Saltley Trust, 2014) - available from publications page of Trust website

- Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (2002)

Websites and podcasts with helpful talks, articles, etc.

- www.renovare.org
- www.conversatio.org
- www.formationpodcast.com

There is a huge amount of material about how we grow as disciples out there! In addition to resources mentioned in the footnotes and those above, further suggestions to be added - please ask for ideas!