

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

79 How Do I Grow as a Christian?

Scripture: Ephesians 4: 11-15

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by the waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming, but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from which the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Church growth is often measured only in terms of attendance, membership, staff, and the increase in budget from year to year. This kind of growth is well received and in the eyes of many people is a good barometer of the way things are going in the life of a given congregation. There isn't anything wrong with measuring growth in this way, after all, God has caused it to be recorded for our edification that the early Christians were *"adding to their number daily (day by day) those who were being saved."* (Acts 3:47) However, there is a word that sets this kind of evaluation moving in the wrong direction. It is the word "only." These are not the only criteria by which the growth of a body of believers is to be measured. God's people are to grow spiritually as well as numerically, financially and in their capacity for outreach. I guess we know enough about church life by now to know that you can attend the largest church in the area and come out with your spiritual teeth chattering because the atmosphere was cold and unfriendly. No, there is much more to the growth than the numbers and names which we are certain never to leave out of the annual reports.

All of this is by way of introducing our study of the question and passage of Scripture before us which has to do with this matter of spiritual growth. A good way to approach this is to say that we naturally expect things which are alive to grow. People who are planting gardens at this spring of the year look for growth

as often as every day. Babies are frequently weighed by their eager mothers who maintain a record of every ounce and inch of growth. God does the same thing with His children. He implants a new dimension of life within the experience of a human being and then He looks for indications of growth in that new life.

Most Christians are familiar with the conversation Jesus had with a man by the name of Nicodemus, who was a religious leader of the Jews. The teaching, *“that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”* is well known by people who have heard and studied the gospel message of the New Testament. (John 3:6) Jesus was telling Nicodemus that his physical birth gave him physical life, and that there is a spiritual birth which will make him alive spiritually. He has the potential of being a twice born person. Millions of people have experienced this second birth, which is actually a spiritual regeneration and which brings the very life of God to dwell coincidentally with physical life. Herein lies a sharp distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian. It is certainly a characteristic which has been overlooked by the masses of intelligent people who feel that Christianity is just “another religion.” To them the Christian faith is a struggle not unlike every other religion where a person aspires to be something better than he is, but all too often must settle for just doing the best he can under the circumstances. With such an outlook it is easy to understand why so many have adopted a take it or leave it attitude.

I repeat, when a person is regenerated by the Holy Spirit he is given new life, the life of God within him. As a new born one the Christian possesses life which may be retarded, stunted, harmed, damaged or undernourished, much the same as any other living thing. Good conditions will produce expected growth while bad conditions will retard growth. In the 19th chapter of the Book of Acts we have an example of stunted Christian growth. Christians were living after Pentecost never having heard that the Holy Spirit was given so as to have been received by men. (Acts 19:2) Paul took these disciples of Apollos and led them into a greater baptism than that of John's. We might do well to underscore the seriousness of this passage and just imagine the consequences of a whole generation of Christians who are unknowingly the recipients of poor teaching or instruction which is entirely unscriptural. Can you imagine a person moving through the years from the time he became a Christian to the time of his going to be with the Lord yet in a spiritual state of protracted infancy, and without even knowing it?

You may recall in our study of I Corinthians 3:1-3 I mentioned the things which characterize a physical babe which parallel the spiritual infant. Literally, the

word here is "*nepios*" and means "*not speaking.*" It is found in Matthew 11:25 and Hebrews 5:13. It might be well for us to recall some of these qualities. Bad conditions will produce the following kind of Christians, Christians who are retarded and stunted in their growth.

I. The Physical Babe Is Completely Dependent:

Actually, he can't do a thing. If you sit him up, he will fall down. If you give him a spoon, he will drop it. In the training there is repeated failure because of the babe's lack of ability. The spiritual babe, likewise, will never be known for his ability to stand as a believer before others. You will never see him doing a thing on his own for the Lord. He needs help every step of the way.

II. The Physical Babe Is Self Centered:

This infant is happiest when he is getting his own way and most miserable when his way has been thwarted. His greatest delight is to be the center of attention. He will employ various tactics to insure having his way. He will throw a tantrum, pout. Threaten, withdraw, or give you the silent treatment. It is as true with a congregation of spiritual babies. I suppose we would be amazed at the cross currents of emotional vibrations existent in a given congregation, because certain people have not had their way. Some Christians cross the street when they become believers, but they operate the same businesses they had when on the devil's side. Self centeredness is a deadly foe of spiritual growth.

III. The Physical Babe Is Useless for All Practical Purposes:

Babies are loveable and fun to cuddle, but they can't be called upon to do things. Spiritual babes may be fun to be with but they are not going to have the work of the Lord on their minds. Their interests will lie in other things. Such a person is a convert to an effete brand of Christianity which skirts the clear teaching of Scripture that we are to be unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. If it is to be our business to reproduce ourselves spiritually, the person who is at ease in Zion can only look forward to facing his Lord empty handed. But, it is the way with the babe.

IV. The Physical Babe Is Incoherent:

Whatever sounds are made are disconnected and hardly intelligible. The babe is unable to string together a pair of thoughts that make much sense. People who are babes in Christ are not unlike that. They very often have a kind of lockjaw to begin with and are incapable of speaking at all about the things of the Lord. On

the other hand, they might speak but they are the same noises they made years and years ago. A person may be a Christian for many years and still not be able to verbalize his convictions in a reasonable and informative way to those who may be listening to him. Going on with the Lord, growing up, maturing in the faith means being able to talk about what you believe in a way that is understandable.

V. The Physical Babe Is Undependable:

The babies in our family were like this. They would sleep through the night one time and we would think that we were well on our way to normal sleeping habits in the house again, and the next night would be the same old thing. Babies are not dependable. You change one and you think you are all set, you are safe for a few hours and the next minute you are in trouble again. There is little pattern. They, are inconsistent. It is the same spiritually. Up and down, on and off, spiritual babes are like neon signs and basketballs. Footballs too, you can't tell which way they will bounce.

These are a few of the marks of the babe in Christ. There is one other I failed to mention. **The physical babe's diet is very, limited.** Babies don't live on steak. They live on strained baby food and milk, but there comes a time when they will take on hard foods. No adult would be satisfied with a jar of Gerber's strained peas for supper. The mature believer looks for the mature diet. There is an important relationship between teaching and maturity.

The passage before us from Paul's Ephesian letter is very instructive because it will help us chart our own growth as Christians. Paul does this by calling our attention to four goals of the believer. We find them in verse 13 where we read about, *"the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."* A sure sign of spiritual maturity is when believers are loving one another, that is what the unity of the faith is. You don't have to be around Christians very long to realize they are not all cast from the same mold. The apostle is not talking about uniformity. We enter the Christian life as babes and we may not all grow at the same rate, but in spite of the differences there is a precious unity in things or beliefs we all hold dear. The second goal is the knowledge of the Son of God. I believe this is a knowledge out of personal experience, an increasingly larger awareness of Jesus. How easy to reduce our faith to a code or a formula, to some rules we keep, to a performance rather than an experience. People may raise

their eyebrows at us when we say that we met Jesus today, but we can just smile back because this is the way with grown up people, they are capable of having a relationship with one another.

The third goal of growth is maturity. You notice the words, *"to a mature man."* This maturity is measurable negatively and positively. Negatively, verse 14 describes childlike behavior in terms of continual vacillation from one thing to another. There is perhaps no area of life where there is a constant parade of fad and fascination more than in the area of religion. The immature Christian is greatly attracted by the new thing. He is also very naive and vulnerable to the *"trickery of men."* Positively, the mature or growing Christian *"speaks the truth in love."* (Verse 15) The original word has to do with *"truthing in love."* The expression is forced to us but it has the implication of showing love which goes beyond speaking. It makes maturity exciting and very interesting because it means acceptance. The fourth goal is growing to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. When we think of maturity we must look at Jesus, it will not do to look elsewhere. God's desire is to produce people in this world who are like what Jesus was when He was here. He is not out to make plastic saints no one can identify with. God desires the Christian to grow into the likeness of the loving, refreshing, complete person Jesus was. These, are the goals of growth according to this passage. How are they to be attained? How are these spiritual targets to be hit? We can make some suggestions from the passage.

I. SEARCHING OF THE SCRIPTURES:

You will notice the provision God has made for growth following the ascension of Jesus to heaven. The provision was in the form of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. (Verse 11) It would seem to me that these offices all had in common the handling of the Word of God. These were verbal gifts given to counsel, train, teach, preach, exhort, and rebuke. These men assured that the truth handed down was of God until such time as this truth was recorded in Scripture form.

II. SUBMITTING TO THE HEAD:

The head of a physical body is indeed the most conspicuous part of the body, at least that is, when everything else is the size it is supposed to be. It is therefore not unusual that Paul has chosen as He was guided by the Holy Spirit to refer to Christ as the head of the body which is the church. He (Jesus), is to be the most

conspicuous part of fellowship within the church. He is to be the most noticeable one. Furthermore, all of the members of the body take their instructions from the head. It is the brain which activates the legs and the arms and everything else with them. What God has done in this passage of Scripture and many others is to teach His people that His desire is that Jesus be absolute Lord and Head of His church. He is to direct all of the affairs. The pastor is not to be the head, nor is any board which sits in authority and responsibility. This is true not only of the body of believers corporately; it is to be true of the individual Christian. There will be no growth in the Christian life until there is submission to the Lordship of Jesus. Believers have a head just like a physical body.

III. SHARING IN THE MINISTRY:

In our physical bodies the failure of one part to function properly can bring distress to the whole system. A person can feel sick all over. We read in verse 16, "*...by that which every joint supplies.*" The teaching here is that growth has to do with meeting some one else's needs, just as the parts of the body are put together. This introduces the dynamics of service by which we grow in the Christian life because we are willing to be to others what God wants us to be and has equipped us to be. We ought to be willing to look at this matter of growth the way God looks at it. There should be no doubt about our goals and how we expect to achieve them. If we expect to see the Lord one day and to receive His good word, we better not let anything interfere.

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