

# ADVANCING TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY

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“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

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Brethren, if growth in numbers and in quality of service is to take place in the church of our Lord, Christians must be consistent in their spiritual growth and development. Where Christians are growing and maturing in faith and service, local congregations are enlarging the borders of the kingdom and people are being converted to Christ. But in places where saints have not grown in faith and love or developed their talents for use in the work of the Lord, there is an embarrassing shortage of qualified leaders and a corresponding lack of zeal in the churches. It takes both good leadership and enthusiastic fellowship for a congregation to grow as it should.

Usually, when we think of growth we think of the development of a child. Both physical and mental development is necessary for a child to reach an ultimate high degree of usefulness in life. So it is with a babe in Christ. The spiritual development of one who is born into God’s family is essential to his usefulness in the Lord’s church. But many babes in Christ are so neglected by church leaders that they are allowed to waste away; they are denied the proper elements that are essential to their growth and development in Christ. Spiritual growth is necessary if a new convert is to develop into a mature soldier of Christ.

## I. THE NEED TO GROW

*Spiritual growth in Christ begins when we become a Christian.* Peter said, “Seeing ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth unto unfeigned love of the brethren, love one another from the heart fervently: having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but

of incorruptible, through the word of God, which liveth and abideth” (1 Peter 1:22, 23). When one hears the message of the gospel, believes, repents of sins, and is baptized into Christ, he emerges from the grave of baptism as a new creation in Christ, having been born anew of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Paul said, “Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold they are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is thus that the Lord delivers one out of the kingdom of darkness and translates him into the kingdom of the Son of His love (Colossians 1:13). Living the new life, he is expected to grow, develop, and produce good fruit.

The growth of a child of God is not in terms of getting material wealth. One may make a million dollars and still be a spiritual pauper! It is not in terms of obtaining mere intellectual development. One can be an intellectual wizard with a string of college degrees, yet be ignorant of the fundamentals of New Testament Christianity. *The growth of a Christian toward maturity in Christ is the gradual, consistent increase in knowledge of God and His will, in faith, love, devotion to God, and consecration to the responsibilities of a Christ-like life.* Growing toward maturity in Christ is one of the most important aspects of the new life. Everywhere in the brotherhood there is a crying need for spiritually mature Christians.

Biologists tell us that in the growth and development of a human being there is a climax followed by an anticlimax. In other words there is a point in life where physical growth reaches a peak, and then gradually begins to deteriorate. But in the growth of God’s people there should

not be an anticlimax. Paul said, "Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). "Day by day" renewing is the way the Lord wants us to live and grow.

Brethren, take a look at some of the feeble, dwarfed members of the body of Christ today who cannot be depended on to assume the most elemental responsibilities. Not only will they not do some of the important works that need to be done in the church, they cannot! They have not grown and developed in the Lord to the extent that they can assume some of the important tasks that are necessary for the efficient functioning of the church. For example, why are there so few men who are good leaders? Why are there so few who are qualified to shepherd the flock? Why so few truly good teachers? Why so few truly good song leaders? Why so few who can lead a public prayer and do it well? Why so few who are adept at teaching non-Christians the way to become a Christian? I can tell you why. Because so few have grown and developed spiritually to the extent that they can do these good works. Of course, this is a sad index to the failures of the Lord's people to provide the proper elements that are essential for the development of new Christians.

Those who do not mature in Christ are the ones who cause most of the problems in the church. They are the troublers of spiritual Israel. Those who are growing and maturing in Christ are the backbone of the church. These good people are the ones who lead and do the work that must be done.

## II. THE ELEMENTS ESSENTIAL TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The children born into your family and mine require certain elements that are necessary for physical growth to maturity. A child must have proper food in proper quantities, a certain amount of exercise, an environment conducive to growth, and freedom from harmful and crippling diseases.

The same is true of a plant. Our garden vegetables and flowers must have nutrients, proper cultivation, and freedom from cumbersome weeds and blighting diseases and insects. This also is true in the case of a Christian's growth toward maturity. In order to develop spiritual

strength and do what God has designed for us to do, we must have *the right kind of spiritual food in sufficient amounts*. Peter admonished young Christians, "... long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

In Hebrews 5:13, 14, the writer explains that "... solid food is for fullgrown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil." Infants partake of milk before solid food. Babes in Christ need the spiritual milk of God's Word before being ready for the strong meat of the gospel.

*Plenty of exercise is essential* for the growth of a Christian just as it is for a growing child. Paul said, "... for bodily exercise is profitable for a little; but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). A newly converted Christian should begin to participate in good works for Christ as soon as he is converted. There are so many activities in which he can take a part! He can visit the sick and minister to their needs. He can participate in any organized visitation program in the church. He can speak to others about his faith and the blessings he has found in Christ. He can begin training for greater service by enrolling in Bible classes and training classes, thus preparing for the opportunities that are sure to come in the future. He can use the special talents such as a good singing voice and a good speaking voice that he may have. If he sharpens his sword and keeps it sharp, the Lord will find a place for it to be used.

All Christians, especially those recently converted, have to *be careful about the people they associate with*. Not all people are interested in our spiritual welfare. Some could care less whether we go to heaven or not. Some will want to drag us down into a quagmire of moral filth. Paul said, "Be not deceived: evil companionships corrupt good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33). It is impossible to associate with our fellowman without being among some who are evil. Paul said, "For then must ye needs go out of the world" (i.e., to another planet). Instead of allowing them to influence us for evil, we should try to influence them for good. It is easy to "follow a multitude to do evil" (Exodus 23:2), so Christians need to associate with other Christians. We

should be selective about the people we associate with, but at the same time we must remember that it is necessary to associate with people in order to convert them to Jesus.

I enjoy making a vegetable garden each spring. It is an enjoyable and profitable diversion from the pressures of my work as a preacher. In order to have healthy and productive plants, I have to keep them free from blighting plant diseases and insects. And the same is true of a Christian. Christians must *be free from destructive spiritual diseases that destroy faith, love, zeal, and hope*. Garden plants must be cultivated or they will not grow and be productive. Uncultivated plants are soon choked by grass and weeds and devoured by hungry insects. A Christian must be cultivated, too, and schooled and trained in a life of righteousness and godliness in his progress toward spiritual maturity.

A growing Christian should *spend a lot of time in prayer*. Communicating with God is the main-spring of our daily fellowship with Him. We are taught to “be sober unto prayer,” to “continue steadfastly in prayer,” and to “pray without ceasing.” Intimacy with our heavenly Father is a sacred heritage. I sincerely believe that prayer is our much neglected source of spiritual power.

*God has oceans of blessings available for us, but too often we merely sip rather than drink deeply. Jesus taught us to “Ask, seek, and knock.” God promises us the wealth of the universe, and we should ask for more than just peanuts.*

### III. THE OBSTACLES TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

If we scan the list of elements which are essential to spiritual growth, and take the antithesis of each one, we will have a good cross-section of obstacles to a Christian’s growth.

For example, *the wrong food will affect the spiritual man in the same manner it affects the physical man*. A person who feasts upon trashy, pornographic literature, watches X-rated movies, and hungers and thirsts after the things that are designed to stir up the base passions of the body is sure to be a spiritual weakling. A diet like that will kill! Occasionally some smart-aleck will try to defend such practices by arguing that there is also some good in them. I ask, “Why should one rummage around in a garbage can for bread when he can get a fresh loaf from the grocery

store?” The saints of God do not need to rummage in literary garbage for spiritual nourishment. Everything we need for nourishing and strengthening the inner man is found in God’s Word. I might add that there are several excellent gospel papers available which are designed for the instruction and spiritual growth of Christians. *Engaging in activities that are wrong and questionable, and succumbing to such soul-shriveling diseases as jealousy, hatred, doubt, and indifference also will block the spiritual progress of a saint. Blindly following the crowd and letting one’s passions run wild will certainly invoke the wrath of God.* This type of exercise is nothing short of spiritual suicide.

### CONCLUSION

*None of us will reach maturity in Christ overnight. It takes time.* Helen and I have three children and three grandchildren. Their growth was so gradual that we could not detect it with our physical eyes, yet we knew they were growing because their clothes soon became too tight and too short. Measurements on the mark on the door facing showed they had grown another inch or two. *The saints of God can tell they are growing when they “outgrow” childish things, trust implicitly in the Lord’s promises, and begin bearing fruit to His glory.* Peter said, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Paul thanked God for the growth of the Thessalonian saints: “We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, even as it is meet, for that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth” (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

*Several attributes of Christian character indicate that we are maturing in Christ: faith, zeal, hope, love, knowledge, humility, and steadfastness.* All of us grow toward maturity in proximity to the way we imitate the example of Jesus. It is a lifetime process. Paul said, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). *It takes an attitude of determination to reach the pinnacle of maturity in Christ.* Paul said, “Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward

to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13, 14).

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