

THE CHALLENGE TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 22, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One of the most widespread activities in all the universe is that of growth. It seems that the whole universe is alive and growing. Our children grow far faster than most of us parents would wish. Through the years I have been impressed with the suddenness with which the tiny babies of this congregation develop into the little children who sit on the front row on Wednesday evenings. Then, almost overnight, they are in school. Almost overnight, again, they are in high school and college. This growth is natural and beautiful to watch. Many of our families also have pets. A wobbly-legged little puppy is a full-grown dog within a few short months. Trees grow. Flowers grow. Institutions grow. Nations grow. Growth is universal. But more important than any other growth is that which takes place in man. Man grows physically in body, intellectually in mind, and spiritually in soul. It is the last of these that is supremely important.

In most instances growth is almost automatic. In the physical realm, for example, we eat because we are hungry, we sleep because we are tired, and we exercise because we like to be active. Then, growth just happens. It is unsought and inevitable. Occasionally something goes wrong and growth is interrupted. This means tragedy, as most of us have seen occasionally in some dwarfed child. In some areas, however, growth is not automatic. In the spiritual realm, for instance, growth does not take place without plan and effort. It can be achieved only by conscious desire and diligent work.

As Christians, our greatest desire should be to grow into the likeness of Christ. We often sing the beloved hymn, "O, to be like Thee, blessed Redeemer, This is my constant longing and prayer. Gladly I'll forfeit all of earth's treasures, Jesus Thy perfect likeness to wear." Much of the time this is our desire, but at other times it is crowded out by the trivia of the day. We find ourselves striving for the same goals and in much the same manner as non-Christians. Our problem is that we live in an increasingly secular age, and often the sheer mass of secular, non-spiritual activities crowds out the deepest longing of our hearts.

The Bible Emphasis

The Bible often emphasizes the importance of soul growth. In the only chapter of III John there are these impressive opening sentences, "The elder unto Gaius the beloved, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that in all things thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. For I rejoiced greatly, when brethren came and bare witness unto thy truth, even as thou walkest in truth. Greater joy have I none than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth." (III John 1-4). In this passage the aged apostle is writing to a younger Christian who is growing and developing spiritually in the way which the apostle had hoped. He commends him, and then expresses the wish that he may prosper and be in health to the same degree that he is prospering spiritually. What a wonderful wish! What a fine compliment!

There is a negative warning in the Hebrew letter, "For when by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that someone teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God; and have need of milk, and not of solid food. For everyone that partaketh of milk is without experience of the word of righteousness; for he is a babe. But solid food is for full grown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil. Wherefore leaving the doctrine of the first principles of Christ, let us press on unto perfection ... And this will we do, if God permit." (Heb. 5:12-6:3).

A positive emphasis on this same theme is found in Eph. 4:11-15, as follows, "And he gave some to be apostles; and some prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we may be no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the slight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error; but speaking truth in love, may grow up in all things unto him, who is the head, even Christ,"

Still another admonition to spiritual growth is found in II Peter 1:5-7, "Yea, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply virtue; and in your virtue knowledge; and in your knowledge self-control; and in your self-control patience; and in your patience godliness; and in your godliness brotherly kindness; and in your brotherly kindness love."

The Early Christians

We are all aware of the spiritual giants of whom we read in the scriptures. By what means did the early Christians achieve their spiritual strength? The answer is a very simple one. They grew by association. Take the apostles for an example. They were very ordinary men, fishermen, tax collectors, and the like. Yet, after three years of close association with Jesus they were the great apostles who established the Lord's church. The book of Acts has this very revealing sentence concerning the reaction of some of the enemies

of Christ, "Now when they beheld the boldness of Peter and John, and had perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13).

This little band of men accompanied Jesus wherever he went, observing him under stress and strain. They watched him react to angry critics and answer their questions in love. They observed him in nights of prayer. They ate with him; they traveled with him. A typical scene is this one from Mark 6:31-32, "And he saith unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while. For there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desert place apart." These apostles grew spiritually through their association with Jesus.

But, we might ask, "How did the apostle Paul grow to be such a spiritual giant?" We remember that he came too late to know Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul spoke of himself as "a child untimely born," meaning that he was not a part of the original band of apostles. The answer, however, is the same. Paul grew through association with Jesus. In Galatians 1 the apostle tells of his early experiences as a Christian. He said, "For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through the revelation of Jesus Christ ... but when it was the good pleasure of God, who separated me, even from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles; straightway I conferred not with flesh and blood; neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me; but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned unto Damascus ... Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and tarried with him fifteen days." (Gal. 1:11-12, 15-17).

Alone With The Lord In The Desert

In other words, after his conversion, Paul spent three years in the deserts of Arabia communing with the Lord, and during this time the Lord directly revealed to him the message which he should preach throughout the remainder of his life. Paul, also, grew through this intimate relationship with Christ. He could later write, "I know him whom I have believed and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12). The extent of his conversion is seen in another of his statements, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me." (Gal. 2:20). Without any sense of egotism at all he could also say, "Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ." (I Cor. 11:1).

Nor was this method of spiritual growth by personal association limited to Christ and his apostles. It is interesting to note in Acts 20:4, where the apostle Paul is returning from his third missionary journey, that he is accompanied by eight different men. The text reads, "And there accompanied him as far as Asia, Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and of Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus." When the name of Luke, the writer of the passage, is added there are eight men who are traveling along with Paul. All of these men were learning how to preach through observing the apostle Paul. They were growing into the great evangelists that helped to spread the kingdom during the first century.

We Also Grow

In this twentieth century we also grow by association. We grow by association with Christians of our own day. By being with fellow Christians in our homes and in our recreation and at other times we develop spiritually. By worshipping and studying together we mature. It is a fine experience when young couples meet together for a dinner or even for an outing. The conversation often turns to spiritual matters, the church, the world's need of the gospel, and what they can do about it. They are growing through such association and such conversations.

We also grow spiritually through association with those in need--the sick, the disturbed, the bereaved, the poor, the young, and others. By knowing of the problems and needs of others, and by helping them with those problems we grow and develop. We grow as we share in the suffering of others.

We also grow spiritually by association with Christians of other generations. Through reading from such men as T. B. Larimore we develop spiritually. One cannot read his writings or those of David Lipscomb, without being drawn closer to the Lord. Through the means of reading we can associate with many of the great Christians of other generations.

We also grow through association with people of the long ago whose lives are described in the scriptures. Instead of reading chapters, or spending just so many minutes a day in reading, let us associate with the characters in the Bible of whom we read. Through our mind's eye let us actually be part of the crowd, feeling the tension of the crisis, and participating in the events about which we are reading. In such a manner we can make the story of Joseph's life become real and its lessons meaningful in our own lives. By living with Moses, with David, and with the prophets, we can drink in their spiritual strength. As we read the New Testament we can travel with the apostles, feel the yearning of their hearts, and be built up by their examples. Think of what it means to associate with Timothy, with Titus, with Mary, with Dorcas, with Lydia, and with the rest.

We also grow spiritually through our association with Christ. As we live with him through the events of his ministry, we, like the apostles, grow spiritually. II Corinthians 3:18 says it beautifully, "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.” In the Roman letter Paul had this to say, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Rom. 12:1-2).

We also grow spiritually through our association with God. Through periods of prayer and times of meditation on his word we develop spiritually. Likewise, we grow in inner strength as we contemplate the works which he has created in our world and our universe. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” (Ps. 19:1).

Conclusion

The Greek traveler Ulysses returned home to say, “I am a part of all that I have met.” How true! Our associations in school, at work, in marriage, in reading, in recreation, and in worship will largely determine what we shall be. All of us are part of all we have met. Our lives are so full of the wrong kind of associations--people, influences of the mass media of radio and television, sensual music, and the like--that it is no wonder that we often do not grow spiritually. We need to remember the words of the apostle Paul in I Cor. 15:33, when he said, “Be not deceived; evil companionships corrupt good morals.”

Fortunately, the whole matter of spiritual growth is ours to decide. We can grow spiritually, if we want to. The formula for such growth is very simple--carefully choose our associations. Let us then desire this greatest of all virtues. Let us arrange our associations accordingly. Let us begin by becoming Christians and letting Christ be our constant companion and guide.