

The Maturing Process

by Ray C. Stedman

To me, the true glory of the Christian message is not the fact that it is a way to get to heaven, (though there was a time in my early Christian life when that was all important to me, and it certainly is the way to get to heaven), but the richness of the Christian proclamation to me is that, in Christ, I discover a way to become a man. That is the really tremendous thing. God is not interested in making saints, period. He is interested in making saints, but only as one step in the process of producing men. After all, that is what God is after – men and women. The goal is not sainthood, but manhood and womanhood, as God intended them to be.

All the writers of Scripture aim toward that goal. You can see this in the first letter of the Apostle John. He makes clear right from the beginning that it is impossible to become a man, as God intended men to be, without first becoming a Christian. In other words, God is absolutely necessary to the process of fulfilling our humanity. God is not, therefore, an option to life, as we are being told on many sides today. He is the most basic necessity of life. It is impossible to live and fulfill ourselves without coming to know God through Jesus Christ. Our Lord himself put it flatly, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God,” {cf, Matt 4:4}. That is essential to the full development of manhood and womanhood.

Now in this passage in First John, John has told us there are three stages in the process of becoming what God intends us to be. These he describes in Verse 12 and part of Verse 13:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:12-13a RSV}

There are three classes, three stages of growth: little children, fathers, and young men. Other Scriptures confirm this three-fold division, this three-fold step in fulfilling manhood. In our Lord’s parable of the sower he reminds us that when the good seed (which is a picture of the Word of God, the gospel itself) falls onto good ground, it brings forth in three degrees – some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some a hundred-fold. There are three stages of spiritual growth: little children, young men, and fathers. These are evident also in the three types of food the Scriptures mention as available to Christians. Both Peter and Paul speak of the “milk” of the word for babes in Christ, because milk is the proper food for infants. John describes our Lord himself as the “bread” of life, that which makes for strength in the Christian experience. Again, Paul speaks of the “strong meat” of the word. In those three you have a reference to these three stages of life.

They are evident also in Romans 12, where Paul speaks of the Christian’s experience of understanding, and knowing the will of God. He says we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice unto God, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship, and by this we come to know, he says, “what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God,” {Rom 12:2b KJV}. To an infant, spiritually, the will of God is good, but he does not see beyond that. It is not always pleasant, but as he grows he learns that it is acceptable, that it is the right way to work it out, though he still has not learned to enjoy it. Then at last he comes to the place where he understands that what God chooses for him is perfect. It is exactly what he should have. Though he is still, perhaps, not enjoying it in the flesh, yet in the Lord he rejoices in what God is doing.

You can see these stages again in the three degrees of rewards that are promised to believers in Christ. In First Peter, he says that at the appearing of Christ we shall receive “praise and honor and glory,” {cf, 1 Pet 1:7}. The Apostle Paul says that every Christian receives praise from God. And the Lord Jesus says, “If any man serve me, him will my Father honor,” {John 12:26b KJV}. While both Peter and Paul speak of the glory that awaits those who have learned to walk in the Spirit, Peter describes the Chief Shepherd who gives us “a crown of glory, which fadeth not away,” {cf, 1 Pet 5:4 KJV}.

Again these three are strongly suggested in those three abiding things that Paul mentions in First Corinthians 13, faith, hope, and love. Is it not true that to the new Christian, faith is the pre-eminent thing he is concerned with? It is the elementary factor in Christian living, believing God and doing what he says. But as the Christian goes on, hope lays hold of his heart. He sees the possibility of fulfilling all that he dreamed of being and doing. He realizes that, in Christ and by means of the life of faith, there is a way of entering into all the promises of God, and that hope makes him strong, as a young man should be. But as he goes on he discovers that the one thing, above all that marks him as Christ’s and fills his own heart with satisfaction making him easy to live with, is the pouring forth of love. “So abides faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love,” {cf, 1 Cor 13:13 RSV}.

Thus all the Scriptures testify to these three stages of growth.

Now, coming back to John, we find him addressing each of these classes again. Going back over them he adds another word, this time not to describe what they are like, but to explain what made them this way. He answers the question: “Why?” What makes them the way he has described them earlier?

I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:13b-14 RSV}

There are the same three classifications again.

Again he first addresses the little children. In the previous section they were described as those “whose sins are forgiven.” That is the most elementary thing you can say about a Christian, his sins are forgiven. Well, why forgiven? Now he makes it clear. “Because you know the Father.” That is why sins are forgiven. They have joined the family of God and come to know the Father. They have come to God through the only way any one can come to know the Father. Remember that the Lord Jesus himself said so. “No one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him,” {cf, Matt 11:27, Luke 10:22}. Or, as he puts it in that oft-quoted passage in John 14, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me,” {John 14:6 RSV}.

John does use a different word here for children than he uses in the previous verse. In the first, he used a word which means “born ones”, *bairns*, the newborn children in the family. Here he uses a word which means, “children under instruction,” students, if you like. “Now little children, who are under instruction, I write to you because you know the Father.” The first lesson the Holy Spirit teaches a new Christian is that he has come to a Father. He has not come to a stern and austere Judge, as many think of God before we know him in Christ. And certainly he has not come to a senile, sentimental Grandpa who gives him anything he wants. But he learns that he has come under the care and affection of a strong, tender, true Father, with a father’s heart. Is it not beautiful the way Paul puts that in the letter to the Galatians? “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” {Gal 4:6 RSV}. That is a baby’s word for his father – “Abba.” Even baby lips can say that. It is the equivalent of “Da Da,” and, if you would like to speak Hebrew, I suggest you start there for that is the Hebrew expression for “father.”

Certainly that is what we learn, is it not? We are not living in a cold, mechanical universe, clanking on its relentless way, and we but helpless victims of inscrutable forces which grind us up in the machinery of life. As the Lord makes clear, we are in the hands of a Father,

- A Father who knows us and loves us, who has an intense concern for our development,

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- A Father who has numbered the very hairs of our head, and without whom not even a sparrow falls to the ground;
- A Father who is aware of our deepest needs and is abundantly able to provide them.

That is the one we have come to. “I write to you, little children, because you know the Father.” What a glorious thing it is to see the birth of a new life in Jesus Christ, and to watch the joy of a babe with his Father, and the Father with the babe.

But even that joy soon turns to sorrow if the baby remains forever an infant. A major problem, oftentimes, in Christian circles is that we are constantly trying to cling to the joys of spiritual infancy. We remember the glory of that moment when we came to know the Father, the warmth of it, and the joy entering the family circle, and we are constantly trying to get back to that. That is why many of our hymns seem to look backward into the past with evident nostalgia and an obvious desire to return. But you cannot go backward, and it is wrong that you should try. To do so is to become a case of arrested development, to remain an infant in many, many ways.

But infancy is hard to live with, on a permanent basis. Any of you who have a baby in your house know that you are looking forward to the day when he begins to sleep all night through, and gets off this awful cycle of the bottle, which seems to demand attention every 20 minutes. You realize there are many problems about infants. Paul lists some of these concerning spiritual infancy in Hebrews 5. He says the mark of an immature Christian, a babe in Christ, is three-fold:

- First, he cannot tell the difference between good and evil. Therefore, he is always getting into trouble, without realizing it. He goes charging ahead, thinking he has the answers to everything, and he ends up in trouble because he has not yet learned the difference between good and evil-good, when it looks bad, and evil, when it looks good.
- Nor does he know how to apply the word to his behavior. He is “unskilled in the word of righteousness,” that word which results in right conduct. Again, he is forever getting himself

into difficulties because he does not know how to apply the word to his own behavior.

- And, third, he cannot teach or help others, but needs to be taught again himself. Paul is scolding these Hebrew Christians because they have been Christians long enough that they ought to be helping others but are, instead, in desperate need of being taught themselves.

These are the marks of infancy.

Now he goes on to the fathers. He says, “I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.” That is exactly what he said before, is it not? It is word-for-word the same, he adds nothing here. He described them as those “who know him who is from the beginning.” That is the mark of a father. Now he explains how they became that. They know him who is from the beginning! In other words, both the way to maturity and the mark of maturity are the same thing. After all, what else can one say? When someone, after years of walking in the Spirit and testing the faithfulness of God, has come to know the eternal God, the One who is from the beginning, to really know him, what else can you say of him?

I remember well in grade school that I learned the hard way that you cannot compare the word, *perfect*. I was sent to the board one day by the teacher, who gave us certain illustrations to write on the blackboard and make a comparison, as good, better, best, etc. She gave me the word, *perfect*. She did it deliberately, trying to trap me, and I fell into the trap. I wrote “Perfect, more perfect, most perfect.” She said “You’re wrong.” I said, “Well, it can’t be perfect, perfecter, perfectest.” She said, “No, it is just ‘Perfect’.” If a thing is perfect, it can never be more perfect, or most perfect, it is just perfect.”

That is the word here about these fathers. It is also translated, mature. It is the word, full-grown, perfected – not, of course, in the sense of faultless. No Christian ever comes to that place in this life, the Word of God makes that clear. But it is used in the sense of having mastered the fundamental principles of spiritual life. Having reached the end of the growing process, these come to full growth, and the rest of their life is devoted to the joy of experiencing, in a thousand ways, seeing God at work.

We use the word this way in physical life. When a child reaches the age of 21 we say he is full grown, mature. But do we mean he is ready to stop living? No, no, he is ready to start living, really. This is not the end of progress, in other ways, at all. More than anything else, it is the beginning of the enriching of his life. He has now got all the physical equipment he needs, that is the point. There is nothing he needs yet to have in the way of equipping himself. Ah, but he needs to learn a great deal in the way of using this equipment, and this is what John means here.

The fathers are those who are mature because they have learned how God operates, they have mastered the techniques of faith.

Now we come to the last class, the young men:

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:14b RSV}

I believe John placed this last for a very important reason. He has already described these young men as those who have overcome the evil one. He repeats that again, but he adds this explanation, “you are strong, and the word of God abides in you.” He put that last because here is revealed the secret of growth. What makes a child, spiritually, become a young man, spiritually? Why, the Word of God abiding in him! What makes a young man become a father? The Word of God abiding in him! That is the secret of growth. That is what will move him from one stage to another until at last he becomes a father, able to reproduce himself in others. It is by the Word of God, abiding.

Here, then, is the divinely designed instrument of growth, the Word of God. It is absolutely impossible to grow up as a Christian, or as a real man or woman, unless the Word of God abides in you. This is why the devil fights this whole matter of Bible study, the building of your life around the centrality of the Scriptures and the authority of the Scriptures, and why there is loosed a constant barrage of attack at this level. It is the supremely important thing to move us into maturity. Though the devil cannot stop us from being Christians, he can certainly keep us from becoming strong Christians, and this is exactly the way he does it. He introduces false methods of maturing. He tries to divert

our attention, and get us off onto spiritual side-tracks. He brings in certain apparent shortcuts which offer to bring us to maturity in an instant. Instant spirituality, instant maturity! That is up-to-date, is it not? That is what we are looking for in these days. He suggests that if you can just get the experience of speaking in tongues, you will be mature. If you can have visions of Christ, then you will be mature. Even if you give yourself to exploring the realms of human knowledge, this will bring you to maturity. But all these things are simply ways, cleverly designed, to arrest Christian growth.

Across the experience of years, I have watched these things prevent maturity by diverting attention from the divinely designed instrument which will bring it about, the knowledge of the Word of God.

Now do not misunderstand that. I am not talking merely about Bible study. There is a very mechanical, wooden approach to Bible study which gets you acquainted with the teachings of the Bible, but that is not enough. This passage, remember, says the Word of God “abides.” That means a knowledge of the Bible plus obedience to the Spirit. When the Scriptures speak of knowing the Word of God, it is never merely talking about the instrument of the Bible, it is always the Bible plus the Spirit. It is the Word understood in the light of the illuminating, searching power of the Holy Spirit. It takes these two, together, to produce maturity. It is not a matter merely of taking the teaching of the Word into the mind, but it is something deeper. The Word lays hold of us. We first lay hold of it, and then it lays hold of us, and thus the Word abides, it penetrates to the conscience, it lays hold of the will, it exposes “the thoughts and intents of the heart” {Heb 4:12b}, and that is what produces maturity.

Now this means, of course, that our studying must be deliberate. The knowledge of the Word must be more than a hobby with us, or a diversion, an option in life, a kind of low-calorie dessert which we can take, or leave, as we please. No, no. This demands time and strength. The exhortations of Scripture are to be diligent in this. “Grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord,” {cf, 2 Pet 3:18}. Be diligent about searching the Scriptures and studying the Word.

Notice how the apostles labored to make these things clear, and to drive this point home. When the Apostle Paul met with his dear friends from Ephesus on his last visit with that church, going up to Jerusalem, he was facing the possibility of bond-

age and imprisonment there for Christ's sake. He called them together and said, as his closing words,

“Now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up [That is what we need, is it not? What is the instrument? Why, the Word of God.] and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified,” {Acts 20:32 RSV}.

That is, to open the door of experience into the realm of walking in fellowship with Jesus Christ. What does it? Why, the Word of God. As Paul wrote to Timothy, his son in the faith,

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work, {2 Tim 3:16 RSV}.

Surely this means we must deliberately give ourselves to the study and knowledge of the Word of God. You cannot treat this as something that is nice to know if you like it, or something you can adequately get from the pulpit on Sundays. This requires opening the book and digging into it and understanding these vital things. You must be able to explain to another what is meant by justification, or sanctification, and all these other great words of Scripture. What if somebody comes up to you and says, “Well, I don't believe in the resurrection of the body,” what are you going to say? Have you worked through Paul's great argument in First Corinthians 15, so you can answer that statement like he does, saying, “Look, if you don't believe that, then this and this and this is true. You must be ready to throw those things out if you throw out the resurrection of the body.” You see, that is what makes us strong, that is the maturing process which makes us fathers.

Further, our knowledge of the Word must be permitted to govern our conduct and attitudes in the normal encounters of life. Here we touch upon the whole problem of social unrest and the moral decline of our day. What is wrong with our day? Why is this terrible tempest of violence and evil sweeping our country? Why all this tremendous spread of neuroses and psychoses and mental disturbances and breakdowns? Well, if you view it in the light of the Scriptures, it arises because Chris-

tians, who talk on Sunday about loving their neighbors, go home to build walls of exclusion and remoteness all week, from Monday through Saturday. That is why. The Word has not moved from the head into the heart. It has not laid hold of us, it is not abiding within us.

These things have come about because Christians react to the unpleasant situations that they get into exactly the same way that the world does. They do not react as the Lord says to do, but as the world does, with grumbling, quarrelsomeness, resentments, with vengeance and attempts to get even, and even with open revolt and rebellion. The result is, the salt that is in society has lost its savor and, as the Lord said, it is “good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men,” {Matt 5:13b KJV}. By and large, that is what is happening in the world today. The message of the church is regarded as useless, worthless, not good for anything, irrelevant, meaningless, trodden under the feet of men. Why? Because the word is not abiding in our hearts and there is no salt in society.

I have learned that such a condition is revealed by denouncing what is going on today. When I see Christians pointing the finger at the moral decline and wringing their hands and saying “Oh, what terrible things are happening, how fast we are going down the hill to apostasy, etc.,” I know I am listening to someone who is not allowing the Word to judge his own heart. A denunciatory attitude is a revelation of a lack of sympathy, therefore a lack of love, since sympathy is a form of love. There is no understanding of the pressures that grip men and hold them in bondage today, the awful power of these demonic forces that are let loose in our world and society. The only thing that can break through is the love of God in Jesus Christ, and the revelation of the Word of God. When someone spends their time denouncing these things, I know that they have not yet let the Word get down into their own heart and judge them.

In the November issue of *Eternity Magazine*, Dr. David Hubbard, President of Fuller Seminary with whom I have just been enjoying a few days of fellowship, has an article on the authority of Scripture that puts things so beautifully I can not refrain from quoting a few of his major points to you. He says there are five things that we Christians must be doing in this day to reassert the authority of the Scriptures, and to reestablish the power of God in human society.

- 1) First, we ought to examine ourselves, to see whether we are really living, thinking, preaching, and praying in ways that mirror God's word. As Peter says, "the time has come for judgment first to begin at the house of God."
- 2) Second, we must make clear that to us Scripture does, in fact, stand in judgment over all other tests of ethical and doctrinal truths. Scripture is the last court: when it speaks everything else must be judged in the light of what it says.
- 3) Third, Scripture must be more than a good place to find solutions to problems of life, along with Ann Landers, Tennessee Williams, and Peanuts. Scripture does more. Scripture tells us the source of these problems, and drives home to our hearts and minds problems not yet felt or thought of.
- 4) And, fourth, the authority of the Bible must be regarded as the authority of Jesus Christ. Our loyalty to the canon of Scripture is but one aspect of our sturdy commitment to the truth of Christ's witness about God, himself, and us. It all rests on him and what he says.
- 5) Fifth, the belief in the authority of the word must be harnessed to a trust in the power of the word. Where the liv-

ing church is demonstrating the power of the word, there will be little question about its authority.

Those are great words.

And this is the way we grow.

Do you want to be an immature Christian all your life, a problem to others, constantly needing to be helped along with this crutch or that crutch?

Or are you earnestly desirous, (and I know God has placed that desire in your heart), to be a strong, mature, fully God-dependent man or woman, able to walk through life and face its problems without being overthrown or tossed about by every wind of doctrine that blows, fulfilling your manhood and your womanhood in Jesus Christ?

That is what he calls us to. That is what fellowship in Christ means.

The instrument that is given to us by God is the Word of God in the hands of the Spirit of God. Without that we have no hope of fulfilling the divine program.

Now, God calls us to diligence in this. Let us begin!

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this searching word from the Spirit today to expose our laziness and our unwillingness to listen to what we read and hear and see, and our slowness to obey, and to put aside the things the Scripture says are wrong, and to lay hold of the great provision for our full development in Jesus Christ. We ask in his name, Amen.