

“Baby, Baby!”

(Play the song, “Baby, Baby”, by Amy Grant)

Aren't babies wonderful! Parents are usually *so proud* when they take their newborn baby out for the first time, maybe the first time they bring their newborn to church. Everyone wants to take a peek. And you hear comments like, “Aw...isn't she dear!” “Look at all that dark hair!” “If he doesn't look like his dad!” *Grandparents* love to brag about their new grandsons or granddaughters! They'll gladly show you their pictures. (Like we grandparents had a whole lot to do with the little one being born).

Babies can be wonderful, can't they! But what if a child is 20 years old and still acts like a baby? Or a son or daughter is 45 and still woefully immature? That's not so cute or funny, is it?

The same is true in the spiritual realm. When someone comes to Jesus and is born again, that person become a new baby in Christ! This can be beautiful, thrilling, to see how a life is changed. But if a new convert remains a spiritual baby, and never matures, this is unnatural, and disheartening.

The writers of Scripture had to deal with baby Christians who never grew up. Check out what the writer of the Book of Hebrews has to say: “About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14). Here were followers of Jesus who should have progressed so they could teach and help others, but they still needed to be taught the “ABC's” of the faith (like they were in elementary school).

Look at what the Apostle Paul wrote to believers in Corinth: “And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). There was jealousy, quarreling, divisions in the church. Paul calls them “infants” in Christ – babies!

Spiritual immaturity, stunted growth, is still a problem in the church. In every church, there are Christians who just haven't grown in the Lord. For example, *people who are still at the ABC level in understanding the content of their faith.* They don't know the Bible – they couldn't find Ephesians or 1 Samuel or the Book of James if they tried. They may have little grasp of what Christians mean by “grace” or “justification.” They wouldn't know what to say if someone asked them how to be saved.

Then there are those who are immature in their conduct and behavior. I've seen Christians try

to manipulate others in the church to get what they want, or pout if they don't get their own way. I remember a choir rehearsal where a vote taken on some matter. After the vote was taken, one of the ladies in the choir, a leader in that church, got mad and left in a huff because the results were not what she wanted. I have seen Christians get upset because somebody sat in "their seat" in church. In some congregations, there is the same kind of bickering and jealousies as in the Corinthian church. Maybe we need to be like Paul and label this for what it is: we are dealing with spiritual babies!

Just as we were meant to grow physically, mentally, and emotionally, we were also designed to grow spiritually – to be maturing followers of the Lord Jesus! 2 Peter 3:18 says, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Notice, it says grow in ***grace*** – in our experience of God, our walk with God, how we act. But we are also to grow in ***knowledge*** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – to be mature in our understanding of the Bible, Christian teachings, the content of our faith.

How do we grow spiritually? How do we become mature disciples of Jesus? There are a number of ways. Let's look at some.

We grow through regular, consistent spiritual disciplines. This includes daily reading and study of the Bible – getting into God's Word. 1 Peter 2:2 says, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation." The Bible is milk for our souls! Have you ever noticed hungry babies when someone puts a bottle into their mouth? They gulp it down! What a great image of how we should want to gulp down the Word of God! Jesus quoted words from Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Healthy, growing Christians will be hungry for the Word of God!

Systematic spiritual exercising also includes daily prayer and meditation. It's impossible to grow in Christ without a consistent prayer life. This includes setting aside some time each day to be alone with God: to *pray, and meditate*. Most Protestants are not good at meditation. Silence. Just being quiet before God. The Roman Catholic tradition, and Christian mystics, can teach us a lot. "Centering prayers", for example. I once heard Tony Campolo say that he begins his day lying in bed, just being quiet, and allowing the presence of Jesus to fill him.

Practicing regular spiritual disciplines also includes ***staying in touch with God throughout the day***. When at work, school, riding in the car, working around the house. We don't have to close our eyes (especially if we're driving), but just think of God, offer up a silent prayer of thanks, pray for the people we interact with during the course of our day. There are a lot of people who say they are Christians, but don't think of God very often. Maybe when in church Sunday, or when they are in trouble or have some kind of need. So the goal is to develop a "God-consciousness" – to have God-thoughts permeate our thinking, our attitudes, our conversation, and everything we do.

So, my first point is that we grow through regular, consistent prayer and Bible study. Notice,

“regular, consistent” spiritual disciplines. We may do some of these sporadically – but it’s the daily, consistent exercising of these that makes a difference.

Secondly, we grow through hardships and trials. The Book of James tells us this. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4). James says we are to consider it “pure joy” when we face trials! Why? Because trials have a way of testing our faith, and that produces perseverance, which helps us become spiritually mature and complete. (Now you may be thinking, “O boy, I don’t know if I like that one! *Rejoice* in my trials and difficulties?”). But isn’t it true that some of the times we grow the most are when we go through trials or hardships. So instead of bellyaching and complaining and getting ticked off at God because things aren’t going our way – be joyful about it! Ask: “God, how can I learn from this? What are You wanting to teach me? How can I be better person as a result? How can this make me more usable for You?”

We also grow and mature when we push ourselves to do the difficult thing for God. It’s like exercising, working out. If we don’t push our heart rate, or stretch our muscles, we don’t build endurance; our muscles don’t grow firmer. Or, it’s like getting physical therapy – it’s only when the therapist pushes us, sometimes until it hurts, and we get exhausted, that we heal.

Most of us, by nature, prefer to stick with the familiar, and stay at our comfort level. It’s the same in our walk with God. We can take this approach, “I love you Lord, but don’t ask me to do anything I’m uncomfortable with, or feel inadequate for.” But God wants us to grow, and He has His way of nudging us to do the difficult thing. It could be getting up earlier in the morning to pray, or giving more money to the Lord’s work, or leading a small group or Sunday School class, or doing some visitation on behalf of the church. I’m not sure what this may be for you, but if we want to grow, it’s important to be open to God’s gentle (or not so gentle) push!

Then too, we grow through our interaction with other Christians. This is a big part of what the Church is here for: to help us grow in the Lord! The person who says, “I can be a Christian, but I don’t need the church,” just doesn’t get it. Biblical faith is never a Lone Ranger type of thing; it is always faith in community with other believers. Ephesians 4:11-14 addresses this matter: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” God has given each of us different roles in the church and different spiritual gifts. As we exercise our gifts in the church, notice what is the end result: We “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vs. 14).

When I was teenager, a new Christian, there was an elderly man in the church who was the most spiritually mature man I knew. He was a friend and a mentor. I once asked him, “How do you

grow?” His answer: “Pray without ceasing. Use every opportunity to meet with other Christians.”

The next verse is another key to how the church can help us grow. Ephesians 4, verse 15 says, “But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. This verse tells us to “speak the truth in love.” In other words, we are hold each other accountable.

There are times when, in a spirit of love, we need to confront each other’s immaturities! I mentioned earlier about the lady in the church choir, a leader in that congregation, who stormed angrily out of choir rehearsal when she didn’t get her own way. Sometime later I talked with the pastor who followed me at that church. He said how he had begun to confront her with some of her ploys and manipulations. I responded, “I probably should have done more of this” (and I should have!). I was also in conversation with another pastor about this issue, the childish behaviors of some in the church. He said we pastors are at fault for letting people get away with this. I agree. It does the church no good, it does the individual no good, and it’s not really loving that person in Christ, if we simply let childish behaviors go unchallenged!

We’re talking about how we can grow through our interactions with others in the church. ***We also grow through the teaching/preaching ministry of the Church.*** Colossians 1:28 says, “He (Christ) is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” It’s important for churches to offer opportunities for people to grow in their faith and their experience of God. Churches can get busy doing a lot of different things, but it’s always good now and then to stand back, look at what is done in the church, and honestly try to answer the question, “Is this truly helping us to grow in the Lord?”

I would suggest one more way to grow (and there are others). ***We can grow when we engage the world beyond the church.*** It’s true, we can mature in our faith when we *come together* and spur each on to grow, but a lot of spiritual growth takes place when we *interact with unbelievers outside the church*. For instance, we want to grow in our ability to share the gospel? This is not going to happen just by taking courses and doing studies on personal evangelism. That can help, but we grow most when we actually try to share our faith with a neighbor, or relative, or coworker. We grow as individuals, and together as a church, when we attempt to build relationships with non-Christians, and present Christ to them!

I’ve heard people in churches say, “Our congregation isn’t very spiritual. We need to become more spiritual, then we’ll reach out!” But it will never happen! We have to do both at once: help each other within the church to grow as disciples, and at the same time, reach out and give ourselves away for others.

Since we are near the end of another year, it might be worthwhile just to take a moment and ask ourselves: If I’m a follower of Jesus, how much have I grown in the Lord this year? In the past several years. In the last 5 years? Can we challenge each other to take action: What steps will I take in the New Year to maximize my chance to grow and mature in my life with God?

