

## "Going On To Maturity"

The Christian life begins when we turn from our sins and receive Christ as our Savior. This beginning of our walk with Christ is sometimes referred to as "conversion", or being "born again". The New Testament refers to new Christians as "babes in Christ". It's a wonderful thing when someone comes to the Lord and begins a new life in Christ! *But we expect babies to grow! Right?* When we've been a Christian for a while, it's only natural that we've progressed along in spiritual maturity.

This matter is addressed in the Book of Hebrews. The writer delves into the deep truths of the meaning of Christ – He is the Son of God, the great High Priest who brings us into the presence of God. In the middle of this rather weighty theological talk he breaks in with some personal comments about those reading this letter – and it isn't very complimentary!

Hebrews 5:11 says, "About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding." He has a lot more to share with them, but it will be hard to explain, since they're so "dull" in their understanding. The Greek word translated "dull" means slow moving, sluggish in mind. The writer goes on: "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" (Hebrews 5:12). By now they should be teaching others, but they still need to be taught the "basic elements" of God's Word. "Basic elements" can mean the ABC's, or elementary principles, of any field of study. They need milk, like little babies, not solid food like mature adults. Here were Christians who by now should have matured spiritually, and should have been *leading* others, yet they were still stuck in kindergarten in their faith.

How about you and me? If at some point we took that step to become a Christian, how much have we grown and matured as a believer? Young children often like to be measured to see how much they've grown. Maybe they will stand with their backs to the wall and have someone get out a tape measure and mark their height. It's a good idea for us every so often try to evaluate how tall we are in Christ. Are we on our way to becoming spiritual giants! Bill Easum talks about how churches need to raise up spiritual giants!

Jesus put it another way. He spoke of "bearing fruit." "You have not chosen me but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit" (John 15:16). "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away" (John 15:2). In other words, we should be influencing others in a positive way for Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews tells them what to do: "Therefore let us go on toward perfection" (Hebrews 6:1). The word "perfection" here does not mean to be without any faults or sins – it means to be "mature" or "complete".

*The reality is: Life demands that we grow up!* Most of us don't have much patience or sympathy for adults who act like babies! We can tolerate a 2 or 4 year olds' temper tantrums, but a 42 year old throwing one? We get annoyed with people who always expect others to take care of them or give to them, but never assume responsibility for themselves, or are willing to help others.

Let's think more about how important it is to grow and mature in Christ. ***There is growth in our thinking and understanding of the Bible and our beliefs.*** People reading the letter to the Hebrews weren't able to grasp the deeper truths of the gospel. They were stuck on their ABC's. If you're a teacher, you hope that during the course of the school year your students are going to gain some knowledge, and grow in their grasp of the subject you teach. When I was young there was a boy about my age who failed in school repeatedly. We kids used to hoot and howl over how he was so much bigger than the other kids in his class. When the students lined up, he would stand head and shoulders above the rest.

But it isn't funny when those of us in our churches remain at the elementary level in our beliefs. We may vaguely remember parts of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or may even quote the Golden Rule, or acknowledge that Jesus died on the cross and three days later rose from the dead. But that's about the extent of our Biblical knowledge.

There's a lot about the Christian faith that's deep and hard to grasp. The Bible is a hard book to understand and interpret! What does *justification* mean? What is *grace*? Can we explain *sanctification*? What do we believe about the *end times*? What about all the Old Testament laws – how many of them are binding on us Christians today? How do we interpret the Book of Revelation?

The Book of Romans is a deep, theological book. Paul wrote that letter. Paul was a brilliant thinker! In 2 Peter 3:15-16 Peter says, "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand." Tell me about it!

*To grow in our understand of the Bible and the content of our faith takes study and effort.* Study the Bible on your own. Buy a Bible commentary (I can help you choose one). There are tons of resources to help us. Seize the opportunity to study with others. Our Adult Sunday School class offers some informative and stimulating studies. When we have a Bible study, come! Get into a small group.

*I'm still learning things as we gather together to study!* Albert Einstein was once at a dinner party with a youthful neighbor. During the course of their conversation the young lady asked the white-haired scientist, "What are you, actually, by profession?" Einstein replied, "I devote myself to the study of physics." The girl look at him in astonishment, "You mean to say you study physics at your age? I finished mine a year ago!" Growing in our knowledge of Christ and His truth is a *lifelong* journey and process!

Growing in our understanding of the Bible and beliefs is kind of the "head" part of maturing, but there's also the "heart"! ***Growth and maturity in our character and conduct.***

Pastor and author John Orberg tells of a man in a church he once served, a man named Denny. Denny was not a happy man. He had attended church his whole life, but was never happy – not just about church, but life in general. Even the expression on his face was perpetually negative,

so bad that one day a leader in the church asked him, "Denny, are you happy?" "Yeah," Denny said. The leader replied, "Then tell your face!"

Ortberg at one point attempted to introduce contemporary music into the church's services. Nothing radical or outlandish, just a small step toward trying to connect with today's generation. Denny didn't like contemporary music. He came to John and complained that the music was too loud. Ortberg tried to explain to him that the church was surrounded by people in the community who didn't know God. They drove right by the church and none of the members seemed to even care. He explained that the church is called to meet people where they are, and that the new music was an effort to help people come face to face with Christ in a way that was more meaningful to them. "That's why we're doing what we're doing." Denny just looked at him and said, "The music is too loud."

Then Denny began to talk to other staff members, ushers, and even strangers in the narthex, saying, "Don't you think the music is too loud?" Leaders of the church met and addressed the issue. They thought it was all settled until a few weeks later when a man came to the church office, flashed his badge and announced that he was from OSHA. Someone had filed a complaint about the decibel levels at the church's services, and he was sent to investigate. Who complained? You guessed it! Denny! John and the rest of the staff could only laugh. When they explained the situation to the agent, he laughed too.

John Ortberg made this observation about the whole incident: "Denny is not changing. He's a cranky guy. He has been cranky his whole life. Not just about church – he does not effectively know how to love his wife, his children can't tolerate him, and he has no joy. He's been going to church his whole life, sixty years. And nobody is surprised. Nobody in the church is surprised that he stays cranky year after year. No one is particularly bothered by it. It is as if we expect it – that's just Denny. Nobody is expecting him to be more like Jesus year after year."

*God wants us to grow up into Christlikeness!* The writer of the letter to the Hebrews implies that readers were not only immature in their mental grasp of the gospel, they were morally immature – not "trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). They were suffering from *arrested character development!*

The Apostle Paul experienced some of this same frustration in his dealings with the people in the church in Corinth. The church was splintered into factions. There was in-fighting and jealousy. The root cause, he says, is spiritual immaturity. "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as fleshly, 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 fleshly. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling<sup>Ⓜ</sup> among you, are you not fleshly and behaving according to human inclinations?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

In what ways, in the way I act and live, am I more like Jesus than I was a year ago, 5 years ago, 10 years ago? Am I more forgiving? Am I more unselfish? Am I less attached to material things? Am I more determined to obey God in every aspect of my life? Am I more

concerned about people who aren't saved? If we're followers of Jesus and growing into maturity, the quality of our life will be different from our non-Christian neighbors.

There is also ***growth and maturity in developing leadership skills***. Hebrews 5:12 says, "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again." In other words, there comes the time when we move from being just takers, to being givers.

Now not all of us are gifted and called to be leaders in the sense of being a preacher, or a teacher, or the chairperson of a committee. But there are other ways we can lead and influence others. If I'm being Christ-like in whatever I do, *I'm a leader, I'm influencing others* in a positive way!

Sometimes it's important to get out of our comfort zone and assume leadership role. I'm thinking of a single lady in a church I served. She was perhaps in her 50's. She had a brother who was mentally challenged. Others unkindly whispered that Marlene wasn't much brighter. At one point we needed a Sunday School teacher. To everyone's surprise, Marlene offered to teach the class. She did an amazing job!

So, are you growing? Am I growing in the Lord? If that is to happen it takes hard work! It ain't for the lazy! We need to get off infant formula and get onto solid food!

Hebrews 5:13-14 tells us, "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have *trained themselves* to distinguish between good and evil." The word "trained" means exercise, gymnastic discipline, repeated practice. Mary Lou Retton won several gold medals as a gymnast in the Olympics. She once said, "Here's what it takes to be a complete gymnast. Someone should be able to sneak up and drag you out a midnight, push you out on some strange floor – and you should be able to do your entire routine sound asleep in your pajamas. Without one mistake. That's the secret. It's got to be natural."

It takes practice and discipline to achieve something worthwhile! Plato wrote the first sentence of his famous *Republic* nine different ways before he was satisfied. Cicero practiced speaking before friends every day for 30 years to perfect his pronunciation and delivery. Noah Webster labored 36 years writing his dictionary, crossing the Atlantic twice to gather material. John Milton rose at 4 a.m. every day in order to have enough hours to write *Paradise Lost*. Gibbon spent 26 years on his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bryant rewrote one of his poetic masterpieces 99 times before publication, and it became a classic.

*We can't be lazy, and grow into maturity in Christ!*

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