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GROWING UP IN CHRIST

MINI BOOK

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I think most of us are familiar with the fact that children have a pattern of development that can be observed. And, if you've raised children yourself or are a teacher, you've probably noticed that children go from one stage to another in a fairly normal pattern until they reach maturity.

Now some would say that you never stop growing, but I think most would agree the formative and early years in a person's life are the times when the changes are most critical and noticeable. Studies in human development have helped us to describe certain key stages in a child's growth and these provide assistance for the ones that are slow in their progress, or stimulate others who seem to be progressing at a faster rate.

I say all of this because I'd like to make a comparison. It has been my experience as both a father of four children and a minister of a congregation of over 400 souls that the interest and anxiety experienced by parents over the proper development of their children is the same as the interest and anxiety felt by ministers and elders as they observe the proper

growth and development of each church member. Of course I am not a child psychologist or other type of expert to be able to give a competent lesson on the particular stages in the normal development of a young boy or girl. I am, however, qualified to talk about normal spiritual growth. And so I'd like to share with you what the Bible describes as the normal pattern of growth for a healthy Christian life.

BIBLICAL DEVELOPMENT

I know that when it comes to children, no two children are alike. They are unique, each with special gifts and abilities as well as weaknesses and challenges which need to be addressed or overcome. It is the same with Christians, no two are the same:

- Some grow up in Christian families
- Others become Christians when they are adults

Each person has emotional, social, and spiritual baggage that they bring into the life as a disciple of Christ. However, just as in the development of a child, where there comes a time where each has to attain a certain level of intellectual and social skills regardless of their background, there also comes a time in every Christian's life (regardless of their history) where certain abilities and levels of maturity need to be acquired if a proper rate of growth and spiritual health is to be maintained. Of course with children we tend to rate their growth curve in years: e.g. Read and write by this age, certain social skills by another age, or the ability to handle advanced material and ideas by yet another age.

With Christians, on the other hand, because they are converted at different ages, the growth curve is measured less by years and more by character. In other words, we can tell if a person is experiencing a normal pattern of spiritual growth if the following elements begin to appear in their character – in the following order:

Stage #1 - Obedience

Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

- Matthew 28:20

In His instructions to the Apostles about their task of spreading the gospel and making disciples, one of the first things Jesus instructed them to teach was

obedience. No further growth in Christ is possible without obedience. It begins with the first step of obedience we take when we obey the gospel. Repentance and baptism are the first true acts of obedience in Christ, not our last.

Some people might think that faith is the first stage of Christian growth and in a way it is, but faith is stillborn without obedience, because without obedience faith has not been fully realized. James says,

...show me your faith without works and I will show you my faith by my works.
- James 2:18

Obedience is the visible sign that your faith is legitimate, sincere, and operational. We can always tell, by obedience, who has reached and mastered the first level of Christian growth:

- Obedience to the Lord in matters of personal conduct.
- Obedience to the Word in our response to the world when under pressure to conform to it.
- Obedience in matters of faithful worship, bible study, and fellowship.

One of the reasons we are so careful to track regular attendance to Bible Study/Worship in our congregation is because neglect in this area is a sure sign of spiritual weakness and risk of falling away.

After all, if a person can barely manage to handle this simple thing (regular worship) which is part of the elementary level of Christianity – how will he/she handle the more difficult and challenging things to come? If you can't even come to church regularly, do you really think your faith will be able to handle more demanding pressures? And so, the first stage of Christian growth is obedience; and not just obeying the Lord, but truly desiring to do His will in every situation. You know that you have arrived and surpassed the first level when knowing and doing the will of the Lord is a priority in your life.

...The next stage in spiritual development...

Stage #2 - Service

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

- Ephesians 4:14-16

We begin by disciplining ourselves to obey the Lord and His Word in order to allow

the spirit to rule over the flesh (what he means by being tossed about). Soon we realize that this is only a preparation for the next stage of development which is service to the Lord and His kingdom.

Learning and practicing obedience is like spiritual boot camp – eventually we are trained enough and knowledgeable enough to join the battle for the souls of the world. Eventually we realize that we've been saved to serve, not just saved in order to improve our morals and character.

Paul summarized this process in II Timothy 3:15-16:

And that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All

Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

Note the development pattern for Timothy:

1. He learns the Word of God that brings him to obedience/salvation
2. Through the Word he is trained to know/prove what is good, what is true, what is Godly.
3. Finally he is trained for good works, service.

This is the point where Christians begin to get their eyes off of themselves and begin to see and feel a responsibility for the needs of others – in and out of the church. It usually starts with small things, like acts

of service that can be done when we get together to study and worship. Eventually it grows to a point where the person is seeking the Lord in prayer for their own particular ministry, a way they can use their own skills in the service of the Lord. One thing that is noticeable however, once a Christian is busy serving and cultivating others in service – obedience becomes less of an issue. Of course there are always challenges to overcome and tests to our faithfulness, but once you've reached a maturity level where serving is your focus – these challenges are fewer and easier to handle.

...Stage 1 - Obedience; Stage 2 - Service...

Stage #3 - Love

You see, once you're committed to obedience and involved in service, your

character will begin to change because of the various challenges you will face. In the end, God is recreating you into the image of His son and the essence of His character is love. Jesus established this ultimate spiritual goal by His own example and teaching:

Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friend.

- John 15:13

Jesus taught the principle and lived it. He also passed it along to His disciples as the objective to try for in their spiritual lives.

By this all men will know that you have love for one another.

- John 13:35

In the mature Christian we can actually see obedience born out of love for God, not just fear or guilt, but a submission of will based on genuine love for the Lord and His Word. We can see effective and dynamic service based on a sincere love of the church, the lost, and a love of giving oneself to God. Finally, in the mature men and women of God we can see Christ in their words, their reactions, their approach to things, their willingness to seek after the good of others and not just their own self-will.

John said that:

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

- I John 4:8

In the end it can be said to the mature Christian, the one who has grown up fully

in Christ, that he or she truly knows God, because they have mastered the art of Christian love.

SUMMARY

As I close, I encourage each one reading this mini book to measure themselves, and honestly determine where they are at in the process of Christian growth.

In order to have proper spiritual development we need to know the stages so we can measure where we are at. We also must consciously be moving from one stage to the other (imagine how boring and confining it would be to remain in kindergarten class until you're 18 years old).

Well, that's what we do when we remain at the "learning to obey" plateau of our spiritual lives without moving on. No

wonder church gets boring. No wonder the world and sin look so appealing.

We've been stuck at the elementary stage of Christianity for so long that we've become bored with it, and tired of doing it. If, on the other hand, we learn to obey the Lord, becoming focused on being faithful to worship without being wishy-washy and double-minded. If we learn the spiritual ABC's that the elders, ministers, and teachers are trying to teach us, we could then be trusted to move on to the next, and more satisfying level which is service. And once we learn to serve and minister, we will finally begin to experience the great rewards that come from cultivating a loving Christ-like character that Christian service and only Christian service can shape in us.

I repeat again - measure and take stock, look into the mirror of the Word and see where you are:

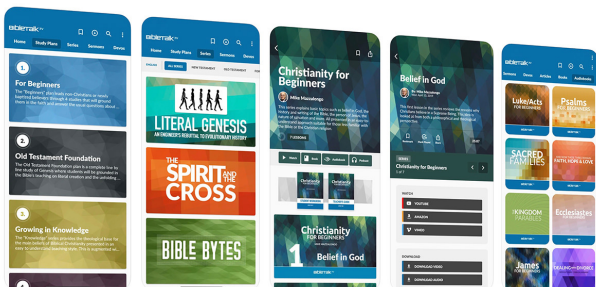
- If it's time for you to obey the Lord, whether it's through repentance or baptism or being restored or simply making up your mind once and for all that you will try each day to obey Christ – then just do it!
- If, on the other hand, you've gotten the hang of this Christianity thing and you've been in training long enough – then find some way to serve:
 - Volunteer
 - Sign-up
 - Keep your eyes open for an opportunity

Obedience, service, love – these are the stages. These are the objectives we need to strive for to complete our Christian growth. Make no mistake, each one of us must develop along these lines. No one is exempt. There is no other way.

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