

The Process of Spiritual Growth (Part 1)

As a pastor, I am most concerned about the ongoing sanctification of the congregation God has entrusted to my care. The bottom line: I want those dear folks to be prepared to give a good account at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

What, then, is sanctification (i.e., *progressive* sanctification)? It is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through mine. I used to say it is the process of becoming more like Christ. I don't say that any more, because it is confusing and, therefore, easily misunderstood. Some have abused the meaning of "becoming more like Christ," by mistakenly putting the emphasis on what man must do in the process, rather than focusing on the object – Jesus – and what we must let Him do in us. There is a difference, and it's not as subtle as it seems.

To be sure, sanctification is a process, but we need to yield to God's process, not superimpose our own ideas as to what the process should be. For example, Thomas a Kempis wrote a book in the fifteenth century called, *The Imitation of Christ*, that essentially says we need to learn to imitate the life of Christ. That is a focus on what we must *do*. It is not possible for us to imitate Christ, no matter how hard we try. Indeed, by "trying" we are injecting self-dependence.

Another example is the book *In His Steps*, written by the liberal theologian, Charles Sheldon. Many Christians have no idea that Sheldon did not hold to the fundamentals of the faith but rather promoted a social gospel; he was quite liberal. Yet, how many walk around quoting his statement, "What would Jesus do?" which has been popularized in modern culture by marketing experts who want to make a buck off the WWJD cliché, selling bracelets, necklaces, and other paraphernalia. Never mind that Sheldon was totally off base in his theology.

Sheldon's question is dangerous, for it puts man in the driver's seat (rather than the Scriptures), encouraging him to play a sort of spiritual situation ethics. Even a lost man can attempt to play this game. It is really no more than a modern spin on the old "imitation" model of sanctification as proposed by Thomas a Kempis. Both of these books, as noble as they sound, actually promote flesh-dependence.

Again, biblical sanctification is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through us. It is summed up well in [Galatians 2:20](#). As one submits to the process, he grows spiritually. If one does not understand the process correctly or refuses to yield to the Holy Spirit's working in his life, growth will be stunted. Ongoing, experiential sanctification and spiritual growth are, therefore, closely related concepts.

Incidentally, spiritual growth is not instantaneous. It happens over time. While I doubt any Christian would dispute that statement (after all, the

word *growth* implies a continuing process), some *essentially* argue the opposite. How? By looking to past, life-changing events (a decision during an invitation, a spiritual crisis that precipitated an “I surrender all” moment) as the building blocks of spiritual growth. Others equate participation in religious activities (Bible-reading, prayer, church attendance, etc.) with spiritual growth.

While events and religious activities may be catalysts toward change and growth, they certainly don't guarantee growth. Too often decisions are based on emotion and tend to fade in short time. In the case of religious activities, they can become ritualistic, and tend to salve one's conscience with thoughts such as “this activity makes me spiritual.” That is, of course, wrong thinking, and is a deadening form of legalism.

As Americans, we want it now, and we expect it now. The ninety-second turn-around time guaranteed by some fast-food restaurants is classic evidence of our cultural impatience. Unfortunately, we often carry our cultural expectations into our Christianity.

We want spiritual maturity now, and we expect it now. Oh, how our eternal God, who is not bound by time, must sigh at our impatience! He is the epitome of patience, and for that we should be truly grateful, because His eternal patience results in His not giving up on us.

Spiritual growth is actually a life-long process that starts when we are saved, and continues over time throughout the Christian life. It is gradual and incremental. The Scriptures beautifully define and describe the two key agents of spiritual growth in [2 Peter 3:18](#) and the process of spiritual growth in [Romans 5:1-5](#) (to be examined in a future article).

The Agents of Spiritual Growth

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ ([2 Peter 3:18](#)).

The First Agent: The Engrafted Word

Growth comes, in part, through knowledge of Christ. However, it is not merely knowledge *about* Him. It is *His* knowledge! We already have the mind of Christ, according to [1 Cor. 2:16](#). How, then, do we appropriate it? By His Spirit Whom He has given us. *Now we have received ... the Spirit which is of God; that we might KNOW the things that are freely given to us of God ([1 Cor. 2:12](#)).* Of course, the Holy Spirit uses the written Word of God to open up for us the mind of Christ.

I believe the Holy Spirit is the engrafted (implanted) Word, referred to in [James 1:21](#), *receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.* The phrase “save your souls,” in this context, does not mean to save from eternal condemnation. It means to sanctify. Thus the child of God is commanded to receive (i.e, accept) the engrafted Word – the Holy Spirit – Who teaches us the written Word and impresses upon our heart truths that we need in order to grow. In other words, He sanctifies us through the

Word. Jesus prayed, *Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth* ([John 17:17](#)). So the first agent of spiritual growth is the Spirit of God, the engrafted Word, who imparts unto us the mind of Christ through the written Word. Faith comes by hearing the word of God ([Rom. 10:17](#)).

The Second Agent: Grace

Grace is a marvelous spiritual concept. It is a priceless commodity, yet it is entirely free, given to us by God. Ironically, grace is the very thing we most desperately need but most often spurn.

The classic theological definition says grace is God's unmerited favor, and that is certainly true. But let's get more practical. Grace is God's divine enablement to do what He wants me to do. Grace is God giving me what I need to win in every situation – to win over temptation to sin; to win in how I respond to my trials; to win in my responses to people; etc.

We need grace every moment of every day. If the righteousness of Christ is our *provision* to win, grace is God's tailor-made *application* of it in every particular situation. He always gives a big dose – *he giveth more grace* ([James 4:6](#)). His promise to every Christian: *My grace is sufficient* ([2 Cor. 12:9](#)). The well of grace never runs dry!

If that is not your experience, then you have one of two problems (incidentally, the problem is NEVER God; it is always man). The first possible problem is that you may be spurning God's grace. How do we spurn His grace? By our pride. *God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble* ([James 4:6](#)). Pride comes in many forms, of course, but the kind that typically spurns God's grace is the kind that thinks, "I can do this" or "I will try harder." Any attitude of self-sufficiency or self-dependence will result in spurning God's grace.

The second possible problem is not knowing how to access God's grace, even though the answer is plainly given in the Scriptures. So you must learn the hard way, in the spiritual "school or hard knocks," so to speak. You get into a situation – a trial, a temptation, and you are failing because you have been depending on self. Indeed, you have fallen numerous times in the past, and you are tired of it. Perhaps by being overwhelmed with pressure and sorrow, you finally come to the end of your rope. In desperation, you cry out: "Help me, Lord!" Our gracious God, in His Providence, has allowed you to stumble upon the secret to victory: realizing the utter folly of self-reliance that always fails; turning in complete reliance on Christ Who always wins.

The most basic aspect of spiritual growth is learning to depend on the Lord, specifically, the Holy Spirit who lives within. He guides us in all truth, through the Word of God and dispenses grace as needed, to the extent we depend on Him. If only we would learn to continue depending! Is that not the essence of abiding in the vine?

In the next article we will explore the spiritual growth process as outlined in [Romans 5:1-5](#).