

Spiritual Life & Growth



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"Explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words."

1 Corinthians 2:13

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PART I

Spiritual Life

Great theologians like Augustine, Calvin, Wesley, and others studied many years and wrote many volumes on the subject of initiation into spiritual life and the process of spiritual growth. They share general agreement on much, but also have differences on some of the specifics. But, in reading their writings, I have been impacted by their intensity of study and depth of thought on these matters. This indicates to me that this subject matter is significant and important for the authentic Christian life.¹

In this message, I'll share some biblical perspectives on the initiation of spiritual life and the process of spiritual growth. The nature of spiritual life is an immense subject, but I'll offer this briefly:

Jesus said that He had come to give life.² He was speaking to people who were already alive – men and women who could come together and produce more life. He was obviously referring to a life that they didn't already have – not physical life, but spiritual life.

Jesus said: “You **must** be born of the Spirit.”³ He also said: “God is a Spirit. Those who worship Him **must** worship in spirit and truth.” In both of these statements He used the word “must” because that is the nature of the case – spiritual life is **spiritual** life.

¹ “FOR FURTHER READING”: Pages 20 & 40.

² John 10:10

³ John 3:3-8 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

Spiritual life is the life of God, Who is a Spirit. Spiritual life is eternal life - the life of the Eternal One. Spiritual life is a life which will seamlessly continue on into eternity.

Spiritual life is essentially an internal life. Some of its effects are externally visible – this is what the scriptures refer to as “glory”.⁴ While spiritual life can be nurtured by external activities like church meetings, times of praise and worship, fellowship with Christians, Bible study classes, prayer meetings, etc.; these activities are not spiritual life itself. Spiritual life is an inner life – a hidden life. These external activities may **nurture** spiritual life, but they do not **give** spiritual life. Only the Holy Spirit can **give** spiritual life. Jesus said:” It is the Spirit who gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing.”⁵

Spiritual life takes place “in the Spirit”⁶ – in the spiritual dimension. Human beings have the ability to change their outward, external behavior – this is the “human effort” Jesus referred to. But the glory of God – the authentic external effects of inner spiritual life comes only from the Holy Spirit’s work in the human spirit. The life of the Spirit is transformative – bringing change from the inside out. The spiritual life of God coming through the human spirit, transforms the heart, will mind and emotions. When the inner life is transformed, only then is the external life truly transformed. This

⁴ Hebrews 1:3

⁵ John 6:63 *New Living Translation*

⁶ Ezekiel 37:1; Revelation 1:10

is the essential difference between biblical Christianity and every other religion practiced by Mankind.

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is a process – a process which begins, but never ends. There are various aspects regarding this spiritual growth process. While there are different perspectives on the matter, I personally see these aspects as stages in this spiritual process – chronological stages, but stages that also over-lap one another, and as I said, stages which begin, but never end. I see a clear chronological pattern in the scriptures. The idea of there being a chronological pattern not only threatens some religious traditions, but also calls into question the veracity of many “conversions”, and even causes us to reconsider our understanding of what it means to “be a Christian” according to the scriptures. This must be the explanation of why relatively little is preached or written on this subject in the modern Church. Never-the-less, there are certain essential aspects of spiritual life and growth for there to be authentic biblical Christianity and assurance of salvation.

The various aspects regarding the spiritual growth process can be related to two broad categories:

- 1) The normal Christian birth⁷ into spiritual life**
- 2) The normal Christian life of ongoing spiritual growth**

⁷ This term has been used as a book title: *The Normal Christian Birth*, David Pawson: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989

In this message, I will attempt to give an overview of the plan of Redemption by explaining:

- 1) The normal Christian birth into spiritual life as **the process of salvation resulting in assurance of salvation**
- 2) The normal Christian life as **ongoing repentance and recovery from sin**

There can be no spiritual growth unless there is first spiritual life. So, let's firstly look at the normal Christian birth which can be explained as a process of salvation resulting in assurance of salvation.

The Normal Christian Birth

Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life...." But how does the Spirit give life? Well, Jesus said that we may not be able to fully understand how He gives new life to an individual: He said: "... you must be born again. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."⁸ – or as another translation says it: "... you must be born from above. Only God's Spirit gives new life. The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going."⁹ So, Jesus said we may not be able to fully understand how He gives new life to an individual; but regardless of our understanding, still we **must** be born of the Spirit.

The apostle Paul said some important things about the Holy Spirit and you:

"However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to

⁸ John 3:7-8 *New Living Translation*

⁹ John 3:7-8 *Contemporary English Version*

live according to the flesh — for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.”¹⁰

Here the apostle Paul makes a number of startling points. He says:

- If our minds are ruled by our personal desires, it leads to **death**.
- If our minds are ruled by the Holy Spirit, it leads to **life**.
- If we follow our personal desires, we cannot please God.

He also says:

- People who **do not have** the Spirit of Christ in them **do not belong** to Him.
- People who **do have** the Spirit of Christ in them **do belong** to Him.
- If we receive and follow God’s Spirit, He will give us **life**.
- We can be assured of our salvation when “the Spirit testifies with our spirit”.

It must be pointed out that Paul did say, **if you do not have the Holy Spirit, you do not belong to Christ and do not have spiritual life**. Paul did stipulate: “**if you have the Holy Spirit**”.¹¹ Receiving the Holy Spirit or being

¹⁰ Romans 8:9-15

¹¹ The *New Revised Standard Version* translation of Romans 8:9 is inaccurate. As attested to by the Greek scholar, Kenneth Wuest, all the literal translations have the word “if” appearing twice in that verse. (Greek) *eiper*: “provided that”: *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* by Kenneth Wuest.

born of the Spirit is a **pre-requisite** to having spiritual life. Receiving the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with being a “special elite class” of Christian. Not having received the Holy Spirit doesn’t mean you are a “second rate” Christian – it means you aren’t a Christian – yet. Receiving the Holy Spirit is a **pre-requisite** to being a Christian and being a member of the Body of Christ.

Jesus said, “You **must** be born of the Spirit....” You **must know if you are born of the Spirit**. According to the biblical accounts, when someone received the Holy Spirit, they **knew it**, as did everyone present. If you stop and think about it, you cannot receive the Spirit of the Creator of the universe and not be aware of it. According to the biblical record, it is not a matter of just “accepting it on faith” that you have received, but actually experiencing the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Now, it is true that “if you **believe** you will **receive**....”¹² And actually, Jesus instructs us to **ask, believe and receive**.¹³ But, if you have not experienced the Holy Spirit, it is most likely because you have not **asked, or believed or received**.

¹² Matthew 21:22

¹³ Matthew 7:7-11

Aspects of Spiritual Growth

Now, let's consider the specific aspects of spiritual growth. I believe God has clearly revealed specific aspects regarding spiritual growth in both the Old and New Testaments. Along with this, I see two main passages in the New Testament where these aspects are clearly listed. One of the passages is Hebrews 6:1-2, to which I will be referring. The other passage is Acts 2:36-41, which we will read and discuss now.

Acts 2:36-41

36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.” 37 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ 38 Peter said to them, ‘**Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** 39 For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.’ 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘**Be saved from this perverse generation!**’ 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.”¹⁴

¹⁴ *New King James Version.*

This scripture passage contains the conclusion of the sermon which the apostle Peter preached in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. This day, with the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is commonly held to be the birthday of the Christian Church. As we read about the response of the people to Peter's sermon, I believe we see the Holy Spirit establishing in the early church a precedent – a model, a pattern, a standard - aspects of the normal Christian birth” – an explanation of how “the Spirit gives life”. Let's go through the passage again, starting with Acts 2, verses 36 and 37:

36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. 37 Now when they heard *this*, they were **pierced to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men *and* brethren, **what shall we do?**"

So, after hearing the gospel message, the people were “pierced to the heart”. This means the Holy Spirit convicted them deep in their hearts. These people had their spiritual eyes opened. They began to realize that behind the events in normal everyday physical life, there is a spiritual reality – the God dimension. And in realizing this, they in fear and desperation asked the apostles: “**What shall we do?**” What we are about to read next in Peter's response is actually the response of the Holy Spirit – what the Holy Spirit **desires to do** in the lives of people and what we can **expect the Holy**

Spirit to do in our own lives. What the Holy Spirit **did** that Day of Pentecost is a model, a pattern, and a standard for the normal Christian birth. In other words, this is what the normal Christian birth should look like – **how** “the Spirit gives life”. You see, we have an advantage over the early church: We have the advantage of being able to read the New Testament scriptures and see what the Holy Spirit **did** and **wants to do** in our lives. I would think that seeing this and knowing this, would make it easier for us to co-operate with the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, in response to the people’s question, “**What shall we do?**”, Peter gives a very clear and simple explanation of **how** “the Spirit gives life” - how to experience the normal Christian birth. Verses 38 reads: “Then Peter said to them, ‘**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**’” I will comment just briefly on each of these aspects of the normal Christian birth:

Repentance & Faith Towards God

“**Repentance**” is always coupled with “**faith**”. The writer of Hebrews speaks of the foundation stones of the Christian life and places these two aspects together: “repentance from dead works and of faith toward God”.¹⁵ This is so, because the concept of “repentance” means “to turn around” and “to turn toward”. It means to turn **from** something and to turn **toward** something. It means to turn from **a life being lived independent of God**, and to turn toward God **to live a life dependent upon Him**. “Repentance” means to “think again” – to face reality – to get in line with the way things really are: He is the Creator, and we are the createes. The Greek word translated “repent”¹⁶ means to **change** the way we **perceive** life – the way we **look** at life. When we are “cut to the heart”, when the Holy Spirit convicts us deep in our hearts, when we have a **change of heart**, our spiritual eyes are opened, and we begin to perceive differently – we begin to look at life differently – we start seeing from God’s point of view. We realize “It’s not about me.” – it’s all about God. Repentance is changing from a **self-centered point of view** to a **God-centered point of view**. It is a change from living life **independent** of God to living life **dependent** upon God.

¹⁵ Hebrews 6:1

¹⁶ (Greek) *metanoeo* = *meta*: change + *noueo*: to perceive. *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, W.E. Vine.

This is **“faith towards God”** – living life dependent upon God. We begin to realize that in Him all things hold together – that in all things, He has the pre-eminence.¹⁷ We realize that just as the apostles and prophets said, He is: **“a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”**¹⁸ – we can’t ignore Him – we can’t get around Him - He can’t be avoided – we must do business with Him – He is Lord. This realization revolutionizes our whole life – every aspect of our life comes under His Lordship. We read Peter’s sermon where he said: **“...know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, (who was) crucified, both Lord and Christ.”** Lordship implies submission. Christ offers **salvation** as an unearned gift to be received. But from the beginning to the end of that process of **salvation, submission** to terms of the Savior is required. For Him to be able to act as **Savior** in our lives, He must first be allowed to be **Lord** of our lives. This revolutionizes our whole life. When we have a **change of heart**, we change the way we **perceive** things, the way we interpret things, the way we evaluate things, and this changes our **attitudes, our responses, our choices, our behavior patterns**, in short, it changes our whole life.

¹⁷ Colossians 1:17-18

¹⁸ Isaiah 8:14, Romans 9:32-33, I Peter 2:8

Baptism & Receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit

The second aspect of the normal Christian birth mentioned by Peter is: **“Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”**. Baptism is a public declaration of the “repentance from dead works” and “faith toward God”, which we have just been discussing. Jesus said: “The one who has **believed** and has been **baptized** shall be **saved**; but the one who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”¹⁹ A believer’s baptism is a public declaration that one **repents from the dead works of sin** and has **faith toward God** – that is, **believes** in the forgiveness of sin, salvation, sanctification, and redemption made available in Christ.²⁰ Peter said that **baptism with this kind of faith toward God saves us.**²¹

The overall usage and significance of baptism in the scriptures is that of **washing** – the washing away of sin.²² And as the apostle Peter declared to the Jewish religious leaders: “Only Jesus has the power to **save!** **His name is the only one** in all the world that can **save** anyone.”²³ This is because nothing can take away our sins except the blood sacrifice of “the

¹⁹ Mark 16:16

²⁰ I Corinthians 1:30

²¹ I Peter 3:21

²² Acts 2:38, 22:16, I Corinthians 6:11, Hebrews 10:22, I Peter 3:21

²³ Acts 4:12 *Contemporary English Version*

Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.”²⁴ Therefore we are **“baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins”**.

Verse 41 says that: “...those who had received (Peter’s) word were baptized....” The word which they “had received” was the gospel message - that Jesus was **crucified, buried, and resurrected** on their behalf.²⁵ Being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is also publicly **identifying with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection**. Paul writes to the disciples in Rome: “... do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His **death**? Therefore, we were **buried** with Him through baptism into **death**, that just as Christ was **raised** from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in **newness of life**. For, if we have been united together in the likeness of His **death**, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His **resurrection**.”²⁶ But the Christian life is not only **believing** this message; it is **becoming** the message – **daily identifying with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection** - “a living baptism” – “taking up our cross daily, (**denying ourselves**), and following Him”²⁷ – “knowing Him in the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His **death**, knowing Him in the power of His **resurrection**”.²⁸

²⁴ John 1:29

²⁵ I Corinthians 15:1-4

²⁶ Romans 6:3-5 also Colossians 2:12

²⁷ Luke 9:23

²⁸ Philippians 3:10

Baptism is also a public identification with the lordship of Christ – We identify ourselves to the world as disciples of Christ, submitting to His Lordship in order to “observe all that He commanded”.²⁹

Again, verse 38 reads: “Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; **and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**” **Baptism is always closely connected with the “receiving of the Holy Spirit” – that is being baptized in³⁰ the Holy Spirit³¹, in order that we may be born anew of water and the Spirit.³²**

²⁹ Matthew 28:19-20

³⁰ The Greek word, *dia*, can be translated *in, by, or with* .

³¹ Matthew 3:11 & 16, Mark 1:9-10, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:33, Acts 1:5 & 8, 2:38, 19:1-7, Titus 3:5

³² John 3:3-5, Titus 3:5

Assurance of Salvation

I am not unaware that the way I am presenting these aspects of spiritual growth not only threatens some religious traditions, but also calls into question the veracity of many “conversions”, and even causes us to reconsider our understanding of what it means to “be a Christian” according to the scriptures. But I maintain that there must be the fruit of certain essential aspects of spiritual life and growth for there to be authentic biblical Christianity and assurance of salvation. Preaching Christ can be “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”.³³ The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he realized the ministry of Christ “is perceived differently by those being saved and by those perishing. To those who are perishing (it is) a fearful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved (it is) a life-giving perfume.”³⁴ In other words, it would be disconcerting only to those who do not have **an assurance of their salvation**. Paul did tell us to: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?”³⁵ Surely, this CAN BE a disconcerting verse! Let’s hear it in a more modern translation: “You should be looking at yourselves to make sure that you are really Christ’s. It is yourselves that you should be testing, not me. You ought to know by this time that Christ is in you, unless you are

³³ Isaiah 8:14, Romans 9:32-33, I Peter 2:8

³⁴ II Corinthians 15b-16a *New Living Translation*

³⁵ 2 Corinthians 13:5

not real Christians at all.”³⁶ Paul’s intention – and my intention - is that we would all have an assurance of our salvation. These things – repentance, faith towards God, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit - can happen quickly in a crisis conversion; or they can happen over a period of time in a process. But the assurance of our salvation depends on them happening.³⁷ And we can be assured of our salvation when “the Spirit testifies with our spirit”.³⁸

Verse 39 reads: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” This is a wonderful statement. “God calls” – we don’t really find God, He finds us, and He draws us. In Jeremiah, the Lord says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, with loving-kindness I have drawn you.”³⁹ In Hosea, He says, “I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love....”⁴⁰ *The New American Standard Bible* translates the Hebrew in an interesting way: “I led them with the cords of a man....”⁴¹ In other words, He draws us in very human ways – in ways that we can relate to and understand. The

³⁶ *The J.B. Phillips Translation of the New Testament*

³⁷ I think it may be encouraging to know that this issue of the **assurance of salvation** was of major importance in the personal life of John Wesley. Wesley was born into a very famous Christian family, highly disciplined in the Christian faith by his mother Susannah Wesley, the son of a Church of England clergyman, Samuel Wesley, and he himself was an ordained minister in the Church of England. But none of this was enough to satisfy his need for **an assurance of salvation**. Wesley was impressed by the **faith** he saw in a band of Moravian missionaries while traveling on a ship from England to America. Later, a Moravian preacher, Peter Bohler, had a part to play in Wesley’s conversion experience at the meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, where Wesley said: “**I felt** my heart strangely warmed. **I felt** I did **trust in Christ for salvation**; and **an assurance was given to me** that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and **saved me** from the law of sin and death.” Wesley’s experience perfectly matches “The Normal Christian Life” described by Peter on the Day of Pentecost.

³⁸ Romans 8:15

³⁹ 31:3

⁴⁰ 11:4 *New King James Version*

⁴¹ NASB

apostle Paul asks: “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that **God's kindness leads you toward repentance?**”⁴² Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me **draws him**,” It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who **listens** to the Father and **learns** from Him comes to Me.”⁴³ So, God calls, but we must answer that call.

Verse 40 reads: “And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘**Be saved** from this perverse generation!’” This is in the imperative tense. To have **the assurance of our salvation**, we have to **do** something. The apostle Paul gave us some understanding of this **mystery of salvation** when he wrote: “... (You) **work** with fear and trembling to discover **what it really means to be saved**. **God is working in you** to make you willing and able to obey him.”⁴⁴ To be **assured of our salvation**, we must **do** something, realizing that **God is doing** something within us making us willing and able to respond to His **drawing**. And we can be assured of our salvation when “the Spirit testifies with our spirit”.⁴⁵

At the end of Peter’s sermon, the people asked the question: “What shall we **do?**” Essentially Peter’s answer was this: “You have to make some decisions and act on them:

- Repent: Turn to God and have faith in God to save you.

⁴² Romans 2:4 *New International Version*

⁴³ John 6:44-45 *New International Version* (reference: Isaiah 54:13)

⁴⁴ Philippians 2:12b-13

⁴⁵ Romans 8:15

- Be baptized: Make your change of heart public and identify yourself and your life with Christ.
- Then ask, believe, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- We can be assured of our salvation when “the Spirit testifies with our spirit”.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Romans 8:15. I realize that I have only mentioned and not attended to the aspect of “the Spirit testifies with our spirit”. This very rich subject would in itself require another article(s). I could highly recommend the following: *Wesley’s 52 Standard Sermons*, Numbers X, XI, & XII, which deal specifically with this subject. These sermons are available on the Internet: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-10-the-witness-of-the-spirit-discourse-one/> & <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-11-the-witness-of-the-spirit-discourse-two/> & <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-12-the-witness-of-our-own-spirit/> There are two other articles I could recommend which are also available on the Internet (www.Bible.org) : <http://bible.org/seriespage/witness-spirit-romans-816-interpretation-and-implications;> & <http://bible.org/seriespage/witness-spirit-protestant-tradition>

FOR FURTHER READING

Regarding Salvation

(Viz. Justification & Sanctification):

- *Wesley's 52 Standard Sermons*, Schmuel Publishing Co. (1988)
- *Wesley & Sanctification*, Harald Lindstrom, Zondervan Publishing House (1980)
- *Christian Holiness Restudied and Restated*, J. Sidlow Baxter, Zondervan Publishing House (1977)

Regarding Aspects of Spiritual Growth

(Repentance, Faith, Baptism,
Receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit):

- *Laying the Foundation*, James Lee Beall, Bridge-Logos (1976)
The Normal Christian Birth, David Pawson, Hodder & Stoughton (1989)

PART II

Review & Introduction

The various aspects regarding the spiritual growth process can be related to two broad categories:

- 3) **The normal Christian birth into spiritual life**
- 4) **The normal Christian life of ongoing spiritual growth**

In this message, I am attempting to give an overview of the plan of Redemption by explaining:

- 3) **The normal Christian birth into spiritual life as the process of salvation resulting in assurance of salvation**
- 4) **The normal Christian life as ongoing repentance and recovery from sin**

In Part I, I dealt with the process of salvation and assurance of salvation. In Part II, the aspect of the normal Christian birth into spiritual life will be assumed. An aspect of **the normal Christian life** that will be mentioned here but would require its own message(s) to fully develop is that of the individual and corporate devotional life of the Christian. I summarize this with the phrase **“revelation and relationship”**. Growing in **revelation of Christ and relationship with Christ** is the essence of spiritual growth. Without this,

there may be a form of religion, but for authentic spiritual growth “the reality, however, is found in Christ”.⁴⁷ **Revelation** comes primarily through **doctrine**, or scripture study; and **relationship** through the practice of the various spiritual **disciplines**. This individual spiritual growth is meant to take place in the context of the corporate community of the local church. Again, the Holy Spirit established for us in the early church a precedent – a model, a pattern, a standard for the **normal Christian church life** where the individual’s spiritual growth took place in the midst of a community of believers who “were **continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.**”⁴⁸

We could refer to these as the “positive” aspects of spiritual growth. But in Part 2, I will be dealing with what we can call “negative” aspects of spiritual growth. By the phrase, “negative” aspects, I simply mean that, if these aspects are left unaddressed, there will be a negative effect on spiritual growth. I believe that the avoidance of these “negative” aspects is the explanation for lack of spiritual growth, or at least hindrances in spiritual growth for most Christians. I am broadly referring to these aspects as:

- 1) ongoing repentance of sin
- 2) ongoing recovery from sin

⁴⁷ Colossians 2:17 *New International Version*

⁴⁸ Acts 2:42 For more on spiritual growth through the “normal Christian church life”, as well as on the principle of “Revelation and Relationship”, see some of my other booklets: *The Foundation of the Church, Apostolic Teaching, and Breaking of Bread*.

Briefly: **The condition of our hearts and souls determines the spiritual fruit we will bear.**⁴⁹ Sin and the consequences of sin are hindrances to spiritual growth. The removal of sin through repentance and forgiveness, and the recovering from sin or the healing of the consequences of sin, are therefore necessary aspects of spiritual growth. In the past, I have addressed this matter in detail through a number of different but related teachings⁵⁰; but here I am attempting to merely encapsulate these teachings and present a very concentrated treatment of the matter.⁵¹ I'll be touching on "life in the flesh"⁵² - the human condition of being "dead in sin"⁵³, but primarily focusing on "life in the spirit"⁵⁴ - spiritual growth in **the normal Christian life** after regeneration.

⁴⁹ Cf. Matthew 13:18-22.

⁵⁰ Unpublished teachings: *The Heart of Man, Holiness & Humanness, Holiness & Wholeness, Holiness How?*, and *The Process of Transformation*.

⁵¹ Being limited to this one message, out of necessity, this will be presented with very "broad strokes" as it were. I've tried to reference some details and scriptures in footnotes.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 2:14

⁵³ Ephesians 2:1-6

⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:15

What Are We?

A place to begin is this question: What are we? We will answer that question from a biblical worldview: We have a body, which is “fearfully and wonderfully made”.⁵⁵ We have a soul⁵⁶, which consists of a will that makes choices, a mind that perceives and reasons, and emotions that feel. There are both conscious and unconscious levels to our souls. The unconscious part⁵⁷ acts as “the control center” and can be referred to as the “heart”.⁵⁸ The Creator gave us a “conscience”, by which we instinctively know right and wrong, although it can become *calloused*.⁵⁹ The conscience can be understood to be a type of “heart valve” opening the human heart to God’s Spirit - a type of “transformer” transmuting God’s spiritual influences into the human soul. And lastly, being created “in the image and likeness of God”⁶⁰, we have a spirit.

⁵⁵ Psalm 139:14

⁵⁶ Hebrew: nephesh; Greek: psuche

⁵⁷ Psalm 51:6; 1 Peter 3:4

⁵⁸ Hebrew: leb; Greek: kardia

⁵⁹ Romans 2:15; 1 Timothy 4:2

⁶⁰ Genesis 1:26-27

A Matter of Life and Death

Before the Fall into Sin, human beings were connected to the life of God – that is, eternal life – through the spirit. After the Fall, human beings were born “in sin” – that is, separated from the life of God. This separation from the life-giving Spirit of God is what God calls “death”⁶¹. In this condition, our spirit, heart, soul, and body are separated from the spiritual influence and inspiration of God⁶². Fallen human beings function independently of the Creator and have only the influence of the spirit of Satan⁶³, “the spirit of this age”⁶⁴, and the “law of sin” now at work inside the soul and body.⁶⁵ This is what is meant by the phrase “life in the flesh”.

Regeneration of the spirit, reconciliation of the heart and soul, and redemption of the body, reconnect us back to the spiritual life of God. This is what is meant by the phrase “life in the Spirit”. But, just as the external influences of Satan and the world are still active, the “law of sin” is also still active within. However, the new creation⁶⁶ is “not under obligation to the flesh” because the Spirit of Christ dwells within”.⁶⁷ Yet, this causes a constant *war* between the flesh and the spirit within us.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Genesis 2:17; 3:24

⁶² What has been cut off is the spiritual influence and inspiration that had been resident within human beings prior to the Fall into Sin. The “drawing” of the Holy Spirit is still at work in the world. See my booklet entitled *The Drawing of the Holy Spirit*.

⁶³ John 8:44

⁶⁴ Ephesians 2:2-3

⁶⁵ Romans 7:23

⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15

⁶⁷ Romans 8:1-14

⁶⁸ Romans 7:14-25

Influences

The “players” in this battle are a multitude of internal and external INFLUENCES. These INFLUENCES are PERCEIVED, INTERPRETED and EVALUATED by the heart (on the basis of past experiences), and then CHOICES and RESPONSES are made by the soul and body. Through CONDITIONING⁶⁹, ATTITUDES and STRONGHOLDS are formed in the heart and soul⁷⁰, and BEHAVIOR PATTERNS are established in our lives.

INFLUENCES

- **PERCEIVED & INTERPRETED & EVALUATED**
- **RESPONSES & CHOICES**
- **CONDITIONING**
- **ATTITUDES & STRONGHOLDS**
- **BEHAVIOR PATTERNS**

⁶⁹ Through repetition of experiences, as well as, through reflection and “self-talk” i.e. consciously “bringing up the file” and rehearsing and re-enforcing the perceptions, interpretations and evaluations which form strongholds and attitudes (which can be either “Beatitudes” or “bad attitudes”).

⁷⁰ Compare: A human “data bank”, including experiences which have been recorded and repressed, or sublimated, or alternatively, denied and projected onto others.

I will define what I mean by “INFLUENCES” in this way: Influences are forces which can affect one’s life, personality, and character for either good or bad, healthy, or unhealthy⁷¹ (depending upon our response), which come to us through people, places, things, events, and experiences.

INFLUENCES are both internal and external; but all the INFLUENCES are “internalized”⁷² in the heart and soul.

Again, what differentiates the unregenerate from the regenerate is that they are internally separated from the Spirit of God, and therefore have no other options except those INFLUENCES from the fallen angels, the “elemental principles”⁷³ of the fallen world system, and the fallen human nature. Scripture describes them as “having no hope and without God in the world”.⁷⁴

Before listing the various INFLUENCES, I’d like to reiterate that **the normal Christian life** includes not only the principal INFLUENCES and powerfully transformative inspiration of God’s Spirit upon the human spirit, heart, soul, and body⁷⁵ coming through the devotional life of the individual and church community⁷⁶, but also all the same INFLUENCES the non-Christian receives from “the world, the flesh, and the Devil”. In a manner of

⁷¹ The presupposition is that “good” and “bad” are as defined by the biblical worldview.

⁷² i.e. through perceptions, interpretations, evaluations, which are conditioned and then manifested in responses, choices, attitudes, and strongholds.

⁷³ Galatians 4:3 & 9; Colossians 2:8 & 20

⁷⁴ Ephesians 2:12

⁷⁵ Cf. The spirit: 2 Corinthians 6:16-20; Proverbs 20:27; Ephesians 5:8-14. The conscience: Romans 2:15. The heart: Ezekiel 36:25-27; Proverbs 4:23 & 23:7; Matthew 12:34. The soul: James 1:8 & 4:8.

⁷⁶ See footnote # 2.

speaking, it is this *war* which makes the normal Christian life seem so “duplicitous”. Here is a suggested list of INFLUENCES:

1. Pre-Natal

- genetics
- iniquities⁷⁷

2. Family Examples & Values

- parents
- siblings

3. Peer Groups⁷⁸

4. Worldview⁷⁹

- Media & Technology
- Pop Culture
- Education
- Church⁸⁰

5. Life Experiences

- wounds & losses
- rejections & acceptances
- special times & places

⁷⁷ Inherited sinful patterns

⁷⁸ Peers are probably a stronger influence than siblings.

⁷⁹ Under “Worldview” I’ve listed sub-categories according to their measure of influence. The order is most likely the reverse of the order it should be in a Biblical worldview. Media and technology, without a doubt, have been the most powerful influence shaping perceptions in the 20th & 21st centuries.

⁸⁰ (Or absence of church). For the unregenerate, church community has little influence. For the regenerate, church may possibly have a major influence.

- successes & failures
- sexual & emotional ties

INFLUENCES bring EXPERIENCES (positive and negative).

EXPERIENCES, through repetition and conditioning, form ATTITUDES⁸¹ and establish STRONGHOLDS. ATTITUDES and STRONGHOLDS are fixed perceptions, interpretations, evaluations, responses, choices, and behavior.

⁸¹ In Philippians 4:8 Paul' encourages us to think (Greek: logizomai: reflect, meditate) on “these things” to help maintain positive attitudes. Cf. Proverbs 4:23

Spiritual Growth as Transformation

We are considering spiritual growth as ongoing repentance of sin and ongoing recovery from sin. I believe these processes can be summarized and described by the term “**transformation**”. “**Transformation**” is a biblical concept which is a useful way of defining spiritual growth. Transformation is mentioned twice in the New Testament scriptures. The one passage tells us that transformation happens as the Holy Spirit enables us to behold Christ – “the glory of the Lord”: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, **are being transformed** into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”⁸² The other passage, which we will focus on here, tells us that transformation comes by way of “**the renewing of your mind**”.⁸³ Let’s read in the *Amplified Bible* what Paul wrote about transformation by the renewing of your mind:

“Do not be conformed to this world (this age), [fashioned after and adapted to its external, superficial customs], but be transformed (changed) by the [entire] renewal of your mind [by its new ideals and its new attitude], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God, even the thing which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His sight for you].”⁸⁴

⁸² 2 Corinthians 3:18, cf. 4:6 I believe this supernatural phenomenon is the God-ordained purpose for spiritual growth through the various spiritual disciplines mentioned earlier.

⁸³ “Revelation of Christ” and “renewing of the mind” are obviously two facets of the same process.

⁸⁴ Romans 12:2 *Amplified Bible*

According to A.T. Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, the Greek tense of the verb "conformed" is the present passive imperative, and therefore is literally translated, "do not continue to be conformed". In other words, **we have already been conformed**, fashioned, and adapted by these INFLUENCES, and now our need is to have the word and Spirit of God change and transform our perceptions, interpretations, evaluations - our attitudes and behavior patterns - according to the will of God.

The Greek word translated as "prove [for yourselves]"⁸⁵, means that God wants us to "examine" and "approve" for ourselves what His will is in these areas. "Examine" and "approve" what? What His word and His Spirit have to say about the matter, rather than what the world has to say about it. This **ongoing repentance** is the stuff of spiritual growth. Where the effects of negative INFLUENCES remain and go unattended to, our responses, choices, attitudes, and behavior go unchanged; and spiritual growth does not occur in those areas of our lives.

⁸⁵ *dokimazo*

Ongoing Repentance of Sin

Repentance is essentially a change of perception which results in a change of heart, a change in behavior and a changed life. Repentance is a **change to God's point of view** – examining, approving, adopting, and implementing God's will in a matter. This is spiritual growth.

To repent of sin, we need to understand the origin and nature of sin: **God created us with various needs**. If there is life – biological or spiritual – there are needs. When the Holy Spirit re-creates us, we still have those same needs. In the Garden, the choice was made for Mankind to **try to live independently of God**. Living independently of God, Mankind has no other option but to try to meet their own needs. Motivated by self-preservation, we “do our own thing”, and **attempt to meet our own needs our way**. This is the origin and the ongoing principle of sin. It requires the ongoing repentance which produces spiritual growth.

Some Christian writers⁸⁶ refer to psychologist, Abraham Maslow's “Hierarchy of Needs”:

- 1) physiological
- 2) self-preservation
- 3) emotional
- 4) self-esteem
- 5) self-fulfillment

⁸⁶ *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* by Engel and Norton.

Christian psychologist, Larry Crabb, puts all physical and emotional needs into two categories: **security** and **significance**. Men and women both need security and significance; but for women, the primary route to personal worth is security; and for men, the primary route to personal worth is significance.⁸⁷

However, we want to list our human needs, we do have God-given needs in EVERY AREA OF LIFE. I believe ALL SIN is the result of insisting on **meeting our needs our way – according to the way of the world –** instead of God’s way. Spiritual growth happens when we recognize and repent of this.

“The wages of sin is death.”⁸⁸ From the beginning, **living independently of God has resulted in sin, sickness, pain, and death in EVERY area of life.** This applies not only to the physiological areas of life, but also to the emotional areas, such as family and marriage relationships. **This is the explanation for suffering. This is what needs to be transformed.** The pain and sorrow, the “issues”, the “baggage” we carry around, are all the *“deathly” results* of **attempting to live independently of God and meeting our needs independently of God.** So, we are in need of the Holy Spirit to **pull us up out of pits we have dug for ourselves**⁸⁹. Isaiah said of God’s people: “But this is a people plundered and looted, all of them trapped

⁸⁷ *Effective Biblical Counseling* by Larry Crabb, p. 62

⁸⁸ Romans 6:23

⁸⁹ Psalm 7:15; 9:15

in pits or hidden away in prisons. They have become plunder, with no one to rescue them; they have been made loot, with no one to say, “Send them back.”⁹⁰ We need recovery from sin. We need to be healed and made healthy and whole – **in point of fact, transformed**. If we are not, spiritual growth is stunted in those areas of our lives. When these self-inflicted wounds are left unattended to, they infect areas of our lives, and are “easy targets” for our Adversary, Satan, to attack.

To state the obvious very simply: **ongoing repentance of the sin of living independently of God, allows God to meet our needs His way⁹¹ and bring healing and wholeness – in point of fact, transformation into our lives**. This is spiritual growth.

⁹⁰ Isaiah 42:22

⁹¹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20; Ephesians 1:3, 3:20.

Ongoing Recovery from Sin

There is another dimension to this matter: Along with the “*deathly*” *results* of being “born in sin” and the results of the “pits we have dug for ourselves”, there are **the effects of sins that have been committed against us**. There is a recovery from sin that comes through repenting of our own sin, but there is also a recovery – a healing and wholeness – **in point of fact, transformation that comes through forgiveness of those who have sinned against us**.

REPENTANCE IS NEEDED FOR OUR SINS.

FORGIVENESS IS NEEDED FOR THE SINS OF OTHERS.

To be a human being is to be “damaged goods”. We are all damaged by the Fall into Sin, damaged by life in a fallen world, and damaged by sinners. All relationships – in families, marriages, friendships - carry the results of the Fall, and therefore carry the potential to inflict “death” – unmet expectations, rejections, hurts, wounds, etc. through transgressions. “It’s a fact of life”. So, we all need recovery – we all need a measure of healing – **in point of fact, we need transformation**, because of various negative life experiences.

If we do not find God’s grace to forgive those who have sinned against us - be it parents, spouses, siblings, friends, authority figures, etc. – there is

the danger of that unforgiveness developing into a “root of bitterness” which will “cause trouble” and “defile” relationships. The writer to the Hebrews warned us: “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.”⁹²

⁹² Hebrews 12:15

Ongoing Transformation

“Recovery” and “Healing” are large and diverse subjects. I would like to attempt to make just one essential point: I have been using the terms “recovery” and “healing”; but I believe redemption in Christ goes deeper and further than recovery and healing. I think the term **“transformation”** more accurately describes things from a biblical perspective. “Recovery” and “healing” speak of restoring something back to its original state, which was being “dead in sin”.⁹³ **Transformation** speaks of a change in the very nature of the thing that has been healed. When the Spirit of Christ attends to a hurt or wound in the heart and soul, it is not merely “restored”, it is **“transformed”** - **something of Christ infuses it.**

One of Christ’s parables, in which He teaches about the difference between the Old and New Covenants, correspondingly also demonstrates the difference between “healing” and transformation: “And He was also telling them a parable: ‘No one tears a piece of cloth from a **new garment** and puts it on an **old garment**; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.’”⁹⁴ The “new” garment represents the New Covenant. The old garment represents the Old Covenant. The Greek word translated “new” is *kainos*. There is another Greek word, *neos*, which means “new” in the sense of recent. But *kainos* means “new” in the

⁹³ Ephesians 2:5

⁹⁴ Luke 5:36

sense of **different in quality and nature**.⁹⁵ The two covenants represent two different systems of operation. Jesus doesn't put a new "fix" on an old heart and call it "healing".

Transformation is not a "fix" – it is a death, burial, and resurrection. **"The word of the cross"**⁹⁶ – the gospel of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection⁹⁷ – is applied to the heart. It is not so much that the hurt or wound is "fixed" and restored back to its original condition (viz. "dead in sin"), but rather, that "body of sin" is crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, raised with Christ, and the heart and soul is "no longer a slave to sin", and can "walk in newness of life".⁹⁸

I have just made a reference to Romans 6:4 which actually reads: "Therefore we have been **buried** with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was **raised** from the dead through the glory of the Father, so **we too might walk in newness of life**." The Greek word translated "newness" is *kainotes*, from *kainos*, meaning "new" in the sense of **different in quality and nature**.⁹⁹ So this gospel – this living baptism - doesn't just bring a "healing" in the sense of renewal and restoration back to the original condition of the heart (which remember was "dead in sin"); it brings something new in quality and different in nature – "divine nature"¹⁰⁰ - it

⁹⁵ W.E. Vine: *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

⁹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:18

⁹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

⁹⁸ Romans 6:4-8 This is the New Covenant reality which surpasses "restoring the soul" (Psalm 19:7; 23:3)

⁹⁹ W.E. Vine: *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

¹⁰⁰ 2 Peter 1:4

brings something of Christ Himself - “the spirit of life of Christ”.¹⁰¹ As the apostle Paul said: “But we have **this treasure** in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of **God** and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body **the dying of Jesus**, so that **the life of Jesus** also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that **the life of Jesus** also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”¹⁰²

The normal Christian life then is daily death, burial, and resurrection. In this process of spiritual growth, **our human weaknesses become manifestations of Christ’s grace and miraculous power**. So, when Christ says to Paul, “My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak”, Paul responds, “So if Christ keeps giving me his power, I will gladly brag about how weak I am. Yes, I am glad to be weak or insulted or mistreated or to have troubles and sufferings if it is for Christ. Because when I am weak, I am strong.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Romans 8:2; 1 Corinthians 15:45

¹⁰² 2 Corinthians 4:7-11

¹⁰³ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 *Contemporary English Version* (I’ve replaced “kindness” with “grace”.)

The Heart of the Matter Is the Matter of the Heart

Spiritual growth is ultimately a matter of the heart¹⁰⁴. It is with the **heart** – not the mind - that we understand the things of God.¹⁰⁵ The heart is the unconscious part of the soul¹⁰⁶ - “the control center”. This is why the Lord said, “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart.” The Sh’ma was given: “You shall love the Lord your God with **ALL YOUR HEART.**”¹⁰⁷ We are to worship God **whole-heartedly**. Sin “divides’ our heart between self and God.¹⁰⁸

~ A Prayer from the Psalms ~

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me and lead me in the everlasting way.” (Psalm 139:23-24)

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 15:18-20

¹⁰⁵ Isaiah 6:10, Matthew 13:15; Ephesians 1:18

¹⁰⁶ Psalm 51:6; 1 Peter 3:4

¹⁰⁷ Deuteronomy 6:5-6. Cf. Psalm 119:2, 34, 58, & 69.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Psalm 86:11-12 NIV & NRSV.

Some things of which the heart needs to repent:

- Lust (Ezekiel 33:31)
- Insanity (Ecclesiastes 9:3)
- Pride (Jeremiah 49:16; Ezekiel 28:17; Daniel 5:20-22)
- Deceit (Jeremiah 17:9; James 1:26)
- Insensitivity (Isaiah 6:10)
- Slow to believe (Luke 24:25)
- Troubled and fearful (John 14:1 & 27)

Some things that need to be transformed in the heart:

- Bitterness (Proverbs 14:10)
- Brokenness (Psalm 34:18)
- Being wounded (Psalm 109:22)
- Being overwhelmed (Psalm 61:2)
- Deadness (1 Samuel 25:37)

FOR FURTHER READING

Regarding Needs

- *Effective Biblical Counseling* by Larry Crabb, Zondervan Publishing House (1977)

Regarding Transformation/Sanctification

- *The Common Made Holy* by Neil Anderson and Robert Saucy, Harvest House Publishers (1997)
- *Victory Over the Darkness* by Neil Anderson, Gospel Light (2000)

Bill & Frances Furioso
~ At Christ's Table ~



Bill Furioso and his wife, Frances, have been married for more than 40 years, and have two children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Bill and Frances served as missionaries in South Africa for thirteen years making disciples, establishing churches, and training church leaders. Over a span of 40 years, they also traveled extensively in an itinerant Bible teaching ministry which took them to hundreds of gatherings on four continents ministering in churches, conferences, spiritual formation seminars, and home gatherings. They have shepherded several churches, discipled many to Christ, and mentored church leaders in the USA and abroad.

Being an avid student by nature, Bill has done both formal and informal study in various fields including Education, Music, Philosophy and Theology. As a writer, he has authored many publications which are distributed worldwide. Because of Bill's disabilities resulting from a spinal cord injury, he can no longer travel, so their ministries of writing, recording, distributing, mentoring, and correspondence are now shared primarily via the Internet... www.AtChristsTable.org

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