

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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HOW, THEN, SHOULD WE BE LIVING? (Part 3)

In the spring of 1970, I was drafted into the U.S. Army. My whole world suddenly changed, as all of you who have experienced military life can attest! I learned very quickly that my personal agenda and happiness were not a priority with my superiors. Their only concern was to train me to be a well-disciplined and effective soldier who was about to be sent into combat. After all, that was why I was called into the service. So it is with the calling of God. Although there is, of course, great joy in the Christian life, God's primary purpose is not to make us happy but to make us holy. We are called to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3). The calling and the training belong together. In common with the rest of mankind, we may be called upon to suffer illness. As Christians we may have to endure persecution. But God uses these experiences to make us obedient and well-disciplined servants (Romans 5:3), to prepare us for the glory to come. Indeed, just as suffering was the only way to glory for the Lord Jesus, so it must also be for His followers (Romans 8:17). But, as Frank Allred has noted, since about the middle of the twentieth century, the mass of Bible teaching on the subject has been all but ignored. The idea is abroad that God's primary purpose in the gospel is to make us feel good about ourselves; that we may enjoy perfect health and feel happy and fulfilled all day, every day. This is a most grievous loss – leading as it has done to the blunting of our distinctive witness in the world. It is doubtful whether anything has contributed to the eclipse of the gospel more than this. Evangelicals of past generations did not make this mistake. They saw holiness as the will of God for every believer (1 Thessalonians 4:3). For them, to talk about the life of holiness was virtually the same as talking about the Christian life. The seriousness of the situation created by this omission cannot be overstated.¹ Peter's closing admonition, "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," is an apostolic imperative. If you are not growing, then something is terribly wrong. How does this growth happen? God does influence our minds directly, but His primary method of bringing about growth is through what are commonly called "means of grace." This is how the Westminster Larger Catechism states it: "Question 153: What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us by reason of the transgression of the law? Answer: That we may escape the wrath and curse of God due to us by reason of the transgression of the law, he requireth of us repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and the diligent use of the *outward* means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation (see Shorter Catechism, Question 85, for virtually the same answer). Question 154: What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation? Answer: The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his redemption are *all his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation* (see Shorter Catechism, Question 88, for virtually the same answer). In these means we are not passive, but must participate actively. Even though God indeed works in us both the willing and the doing of His good pleasure, we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12-13). There are usually *five* areas in which grace and the duties of growth in the Christian life coincide. Together these constitute the means of grace: Scripture, prayer, trials and afflictions, the church, and the Sacraments. These five "tools of the Spirit" are indispensable to

Christian growth. “But though they are equally available to all, not all Christians mature at the same pace.”² Robert Reymond makes this helpful observation: “Before we consider these means of grace separately, however, I would like to make three general comments. First, these means of grace are instruments not of common but of *special* grace, specifically, of that “grace of God that brings salvation [and that] teaches us to say *No* to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11-12). Second, these means of grace do *not* work, as Roman Catholic theology contends, *ex opera operato*, as long as the recipient places no obstacle (*obex*) to their working in the way. Nor does the Word have in itself the intrinsic power to convert men and to produce holiness in them, as Lutherans contend. To the contrary, God and God alone is the efficient cause of all salvific grace. Accordingly, he must do his saving work by and with these means immediately in the hearts of men if they would in fact become instruments of grace. Third, saving grace is not so integrally or inexorably related to the sacraments that there can be no salvation without them. In no sense is saving grace, either in kind or degree, denied the Christian who in God’s providence never has the opportunity to receive baptism or commune with the Lord at his table (see, e.g., the penitent thief on the cross). God can and does convey his saving benefits to men in and by the Word alone, the sacraments being obligatory only in view of the divine precept, and their willful neglect resulting in spiritual impoverishment in the same way that all willful disobedience carries with it destructive effects upon the soul.”³ My former professor of theology, Sinclair Ferguson, writes, “The Word of God is the principal means. It is to be hidden in our hearts as the preservative from sin (Ps. 119:11), and those who keep its precepts know the liberty of God’s children (v. 45). God’s Word is the instrument of both the initial cleansing which takes place in regeneration (Jn. 15:3) and the sanctification which continues through the whole Christian life (*Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth* [Jn. 17:17]).”⁴ The attitude we bring to the Bible is the focus of this study. We recognize that these are larger numbers of people with all sorts of weird ideas that appeal to the Bible to substantiate their beliefs. It is possible to be a keen student of the Bible and remain completely untouched by the Scripture’s central message of redemption.

- I. **THE EXHORTATIONS CONCERNING THEIR SPIRITUAL MATURITY** (vv. 17-18a). Peter now completes his exhortations to his beloved readers, whom “ye” (*humeis*). “Therefore” (*oun*) looks back over all that has been said; these concluding appeals summarize the contents of the epistle. They are urged to beware of falling (v. 17) and to maintain continued growth (v. 18a).
 - a. **The exhortation to beware of falling** (v. 17). An introductory participle, rendered “knowing *these things* beforehand” (*proginōskontes*), precedes the epistle’s final warning. There is no expressed object of what they know beforehand, but clearly Peter is referring to the danger from the false teachers. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The known danger and the resultant duty go together: “beware lest, being carried away with the error of the wicked, ye fall from your own steadfastness” (*phulassesthe hina mē tē tōn athesmōn planēsunapachthentes ekpesēte tou idiou stērigmou*). “Beware” (*phulassesthe*), a present middle imperative, conveys the meaning “keep on guarding yourselves.” “The word is not only a notice against dangers from without, but an admonition to watchfulness within.” Let them be alert to the possibility of falling. “Being carried away with the error of the wicked” names the danger, “Being carried away” (*sunapachthentes*), an aorist passive participle, points out the danger of being led astray from the right path by keeping too close company with the false teachers. It is the very term used in Galatians 2:13 of Barnabas’s being carried away by the impact of the wavering Jewish believers during the crisis at Antioch. Perhaps Peter recalled that humiliating occasion when he himself was carried away by the error of the Judaizers. Peter reminds his readers that “what we needed on their part was an habitual sense of their own weakness and danger, and the spirit of a perpetual vigilance.” “With the error of the wicked,” naming the source of the danger, stands emphatically forward: “with the error of the wicked being led astray.” The articular designation constitutes Peter’s final evaluation of the false teachers whose work receives such severe castigation in chapters 2

and 3. The noun rendered “error” (*plane*) means “wandering, roaming.” One may refer it to the misleading teaching of these men, as the rendering “error” implies, but more probably it has an active connotation of “leading astray,” counseling alertness against the deceptive influence of these men. The genitive, “of the wicked” (*tōn athesmōn*), placed attributively between the article and the noun, depicts the intimate connection between this awful danger and men of this character. The term stamps them as individuals who are rebellious and unprincipled in conduct, defying the restraints of law and custom. In 2:7, Peter used the term of the men of Sodom; these deceivers belong to the same category. “Lest . . . ye fall from your own steadfastness” (*hina mē . . . espesēte tou idiou stērigmou*) declares the danger against which he is warning them. The statement implies the possibility of such a tragic occurrence. The compound verb depicts an act of falling away from, or out of, a desired into a less desirable position or condition (cf. Gal. 5:4). “Your own steadfastness” (*tou idiou stērigmou*) marks the distinctive character of the readers. This noun, which occurs only here in the New Testament, points to a condition of firmness or stability; their own security lies not in their own strength or perseverance but in their unswerving adherence to the Lord Jesus Christ.

- b. **The exhortation to continued growth** (v. 18a). “But grow” (*auxanete de*) states the counterbalancing positive duty. Continuing spiritual growth is the effective safeguard against falling. The present imperative, “keep on growing,” implies the prior implantation of new life and resumes the duty already developed in 1:5-11. The Christian life cannot be static. Continued growth is “the unfailing panacea for all spiritual ills.” The command to keep on growing is an appeal to the will. But growth, in the spiritual as in the physical realm, does not arise from an assertion of the will. Yet the human will does play a decisive part in the experience of spiritual growth. For effective growth we must will to remove the hindrances to growth while actively fostering the conditions which promote growth. When the individual maintains the conditions for spiritual growth, the divinely implanted life will assuredly grow and mature. “In the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” depicts the areas of growth. The command to “grow *in* grace and knowledge” (*auxanete en charity kai gnōsei*), not “*into* grace and knowledge,” implies that the readers are already within that sphere; but they need further increase and development. “Grace” (*chariti*) has its usual meaning of the free and unmerited favor of God bestowed upon guilty man in and through Jesus Christ. One appropriates it and enters into it by faith (Eph. 2:8-9). As believers we grow in grace as we “apprehend it with ever increasing faith and keep it, and thus we are privileged to enjoy it more and more richly.” This promotes an increasing development of divine grace manifested in our life and character. In the Christian life, growth must also take place in the realm of “knowledge” (*gnōsei*), for knowledge plays a vital part in the development of Christian conduct and character. This knowledge, as set forth in 1:5-6, is personal and is capable of expanding and deepening. Christian knowledge fosters fellowship with God and deepens a consciousness of the believer’s obligation to live a life worthy of His grace.⁵

NOTE: Bauckham makes this helpful observation. “The phrase *of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* could be taken with both *chariti* and *gnōsei* (*in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*), but with *chariti* it would have to be a subjective genitive (*grace given by Jesus Christ*), whereas with *gnōsei* it is most natural to take it as an objective genitive (*knowledge of Jesus Christ*). That the same phrase should be taken in both ways is not impossible, but it is awkward. Some do take *gnōsei tou kuriou amōn* to be knowledge *given by* Jesus Christ, on the grounds that our author preserves a distinction between *gnōsei* and *epignōsis*, and reserves the latter for knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, the distinction between the two terms, as used in 2 Peter, is that *epignōsis* designates the fundamental Christian knowledge received in conversion, whereas *gnōsei* is knowledge which can be acquired and developed in the course of Christian life. Both can be knowledge of Jesus Christ. Here *gnōsis* is that deepening experience of Christ and understanding of the

truth of Christ which should continue to increase until the Parousia brings a full revelation of him (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-9, 12). There is no allusion to heretical *gnōsei*, of which 2 Peter is not aware.”⁶

CONCLUSION: Martin Lloyd-Jones asks the obvious question: How does one know that one is growing in this grace? He writes: “Now there is a false way and a true way. One false way is to compare ourselves with other people whom we know to be worse than ourselves. To say that is to sound almost childish, yet I think we shall have to admit that it is one of our most constant dangers. We none of us like to end the year with an adverse balance, and a very simple way of avoiding that is to compare ourselves with somebody worse than we are. And it is a very simple thing indeed to do that in this modern world. It is a very simple thing to see all the sin round and about us, and to read the morning newspaper and say, *Well, I am not like that, and therefore I am all right*. The standard is so low that of necessity you are satisfied. That is an utterly false method. The second great error, I suggest, in this matter of self-examination is to measure our growth in grace in terms of activity – what we do. Here again is a great danger, the danger of assuming that much activity is of necessity a sign of growth. Let me dismiss this point by putting it like this. You see an illustration in the natural realm which surely ought to put us right on that once and for ever. The child is generally much more active than the adult person; so that if we estimate our growth merely in terms of activity we are setting up a characteristic of childhood and the childish state as the measure of growth. Well, turning from that, what is the true method? There is only one answer. The way to measure growth is to come to the standard measure, and that is this Book – the Word of God – the Bible. The only way to discover where we stand is to read what the New Testament has to say about the Christian man. That again sounds obvious, and yet I suggest to you that it is an easy thing to read the New Testament without examining ourselves at all. One can read this Book so mechanically that one is never tested by it at all, and yet here is the only test. There are amazing pictures of the Christian man in the New Testament; there are delineations of the Christian life and of the kind of people we must become. There are the biblical characters – you look at those Old Testament saints, and the Apostles; you look at the first Christians and the kind of life they lived, the things they said, the ambitions they had. Now the way to test ourselves is to look at these people, then to look at ourselves in the light of these pictures and these great principles that are here enunciated. Then you can, if you like, go on to read the lives of the saintly people who have lived since the end of the New Testament. There again is something that is most valuable, though it can be dangerous, dangerous in the sense that we may try to imitate and recapture their experiences instead of just contemplating their faithfulness to the New Testament pictures. So we can look at it in that way, but above all, and beyond all, we must look at our Lord Himself. Think of the frequent exhortations to do that, as for example, *Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus*. That is the test – our likeness to Him and our conformity to the kind of life He Himself lived.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹F. Allred, *The Eclipse of the Gospel: An Assessment of the Gospel in Today's Church* (Grace Publication, 2001), p. 179.

²J. Robertson McQuilkin in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Zondervan, 1987), pp. 180-181.

³R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 913.

⁴S. B. Ferguson in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* ed. D. C. Alexander (IVP, 1988), p. 68.

⁵I am indebted to D. E. Hiebert for this analysis cf. his *Second Peter and Jude: An Expository Commentary* (BJU Press, 1989), pp. 176-178.

⁶R. J. Bauckham, *2 Peter: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1983), p. 337.

⁷M. Lloyd-Jones, *Expository Sermons on 2 Peter* (Banner of Truth, 1983), p. 245.