

GROWING IN CHRIST: Christian Maturity

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Peter tells us, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18.) By urging us to “grow,” this verse reminds us that growth is both desirable and expected.

2. The author of Hebrews also writes pointedly about spiritual growth: “There is much we have to say about this matter, but it is hard to explain to you, because you are so slow to understand. There has been enough time for you to be teachers—yet you still need someone to teach you the first lessons of God’s message. Instead of eating solid food, you still have to drink milk. Anyone who has to drink milk is still a child, without any experience in the matter of right and wrong. Solid food, on the other hand, is for the adults (literally, “mature ones”), who through practice are able to distinguish between good and evil. Let us go forward, then, to mature teaching and leave behind us the first lessons of the Christian message.” (Hebrews 5:11 to 6:1, GNT).

3. This article will help you plan for intentional growth. It is essential to remember that it is not “growth” that makes us into a Christian. We are saved by grace through faith. By having Christ we already possess forgiveness and eternal life. We have been made spiritually alive in Christ, and it is natural for living things to grow. Since Christ has already taken care of our needs, we can direct our energies outwards toward living for God and serving others. These are areas in which we can grow.

4. The article is titled “Growing in Christ” because Paul wrote, “We are to grow up in every way unto Him who is the head, even Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). Growing up “unto him” means both that Jesus is the model, and that Jesus is the undergirding strength.

5. This article will present spiritual growth not as something to achieve by depending on our own strength, but by depending on God. In the verse where Jesus refers to the vine and the branches, He says, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Growth is God’s gift to us. Yet we also have a role to play, which this article will explain.

6. This article will first describe the desired result of growth, which is maturity. Then passages about the process of growing will be provided. There is a special section on Bible reading, followed by a list of “common misunderstandings.” At the end, the terms discipleship, sanctification, and grace are looked at in some detail.

II. MATURITY.

1. In Colossians 1:28, Paul says the purpose of his ministry is to present people as “mature in Christ.” A similar thought is in Galatians 4:19, where he says he feels like one going through the pangs of childbirth “until Christ be formed in you.”

2. The Greek word translated “maturity” (telos) has the sense of something “coming to the point of completion,” something “turning out to be the thing that it was meant to be.” Think of an acorn finally becoming a mature oak tree. A mature tree bears fruit. The Bible speaks of believers

growing toward maturity, and bearing fruit, as something that is both expected of us and possible for us, as in the following verses:

3. Hebrews 6:1 urges us to “press on to maturity,” and defines maturity in Hebrews 5:14 as someone who has been trained to discern good from evil, and as someone who can receive the “solid food” of deeper Christian insight, having mastered the “elementary teachings,” which are “milk” for “babes.”

4. Ephesians 4:13 describes a “mature” person as measured by the fullness of Christ. It lists some results of maturity: no longer being deceived by false teaching, as children would be; speaking truth in love; a similarity to Christ that in turn causes the entire fellowship to grow together in love. We could then understand maturity partly in terms of “Christ-likeness.”

5. 1 Corinthians 2:6 speaks about the “mature” person as “spiritual,” in contrast with the “natural man,” who cannot understand the things of God. In verse 3, maturity is contrasted with being “fleshly” or “carnal,” which is characterized by jealousy and strife, unlike the “growing together in love” of the Ephesians verse above.

6. James 1:4 explains that the end result of trial and tribulation is that it leads toward maturity. Knowing that God is at work can give us comfort when we face difficulties.

III. OTHER TERMS THAT INDICATE MATURITY

1. Bible verses about “learning” shed light on maturing. In Philippians 4:11 Paul tells us that he “learned” to be content. That means there was a time when he hadn’t yet learned it, and it also means that it was possible to learn it. He learned it by actually living through the difficult times and discovering that God gave him the strength to face the difficulties as he went through them. God did the teaching. We also can expect that God will teach us to cope and to endure in our circumstances.

2. Bible verses about “bearing fruit” also give us insight into maturing, since it is a mature tree that bears fruit. Fruit can mean growth in character. It can also mean that the gospel is spreading, more people are becoming Christians, and are themselves maturing.

3. For example, the purpose for our belonging to Christ is “so that we might bear fruit to God,” contrasted with “when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.” (Romans 7:4-5). Having become a Christian, we daily repress the sinful nature and grow toward bearing fruit.

4. Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit, and it is that Spirit who not only brought you originally to say “Jesus is Lord,” (1 Corinthians 12:3), but is the one who produces the “fruit of the Spirit,” (Galatians 5:22): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. You probably recognize that these are the very qualities that Jesus has, so as the Spirit works in you, the Spirit is fulfilling God’s plan to “conform you to the image of His Son.” (Romans 8:29).

5. Bible verses about “our purpose or goal” are relevant to maturing, since a purpose is achieved as the result of a process. Paul sums it up this way: “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Many verses

include a “so that,” describing the intended results of the process of growth. Paul writes that Jesus “gave himself for us “that” he might redeem us from every lawless deed, and purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:14). Peter says we are God’s own people “that” you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9 NIV)

6. There are benefits to us in maturing. We develop character qualities (such as the fruit of the Spirit) that give us a level head in problems and that make us useful to others. These character qualities of Christ are qualities that are admired around the world. Peter connects the qualities, the usefulness, and the fruit in this verse: “He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge, and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness, and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love. For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:3-8).

7. More maturity equips us to take part in the growth and spread of the God’s kingdom, to “seek first the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 6:33). We join in the fight of good versus evil: we are in a position to heed Paul’s injunction “do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21).

8. In summary, a maturing person would expect to be better at coping with difficulties, at managing behavior change, at having good interpersonal relations, and would be experiencing a degree of the fruit of the Spirit, including love -- In short, a life modeled upon the life of Jesus. That life actively introduces others to God’s Kingdom, and nurtures others in the Christian life. Maturity would not be defined by how many church activities you are in, or by how long you’ve been a church member, but by love and patience. Maturity is not the same as information, but if you are mature you’ll be able to make wise use of all the things you’ve learned..

IV. JESUS AS THE PATTERN AND POWER

1. There is a pattern for the mature person. Romans 8:29 tells us that God has already planned for you to be “transformed into the image of His Son.” We all know that the time when “we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as he is” (1 John 3:2) won’t happen until He appears at the end of time, but Jesus is the pattern for the growth God is working in us now, the mold into which we are being poured, the blueprint for our construction.

2. Jesus is not only the pattern for our growth, but also the origin of it (since he gave us life “even when we were dead in our trespasses,” Ephesians 2:4) He is the one we are to “put our roots down into (Colossians 2:5).” This “putting roots down into Christ” is a vivid picture of why Christian growth is very properly called “Growing in Christ.”

3. This centrality of Christ in our lives is underscored by the verses that use the phrase “Christ in me.” Colossians 1:27 says, “this is the mystery: Christ is in you.” 2 Cor 13:15: “do you not realize that Christ is in you.” Galatians 2:20: It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life I live, I live by faith in the son of God. “ Growing in Christ takes place as we believe these verses and depend on that Christ, who is as close as “living in us,” to bring about the growth

that we wouldn't be able to bring about on our own. Referring to Jesus, Paul says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

4. Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to keep our eyes on Jesus, and describes him as the "author and finisher of our faith." That word "finisher" is the same Greek word as the one we have been translating as "mature." According to this verse, Jesus gets us started, and Jesus brings us through to maturity. Our role is to exercise faith in this promise. (Note: the King James version and some other translations often translate that Greek word "telos" as "perfect," so as you read those versions remember that, depending on context, it does not mean necessarily mean "flawless" but rather "attaining the fleshed-out form for which you were intended.")

5. The motivating energy behind your desire to grow is from Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:1 Paul says, "the love of Christ constrains us.", That means two things: that we are motivated by the love that Christ has for us, and also that His love is actually at work within us, as Paul says in Romans 5:5, "the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit He has given us."

V. GROWING IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST.

1. The verse that began this article spoke of growing "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." This section will focus on that word "knowledge.." and the next section will focus on grace "Knowledge "of Christ" for one thing implies getting to know Him more in terms of his reality in helping us, in terms of His being with us in times of trouble.. Paul says, "all I want is to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings (Philippians 3:10). We get to "know" him in this way by discovering that he is sufficient when we are going through difficult times.

2. Knowledge "of Christ" secondly would refer to the knowledge of what he has told us. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28: Jesus explicitly tells us to teach others "all that I have commanded you." The gospels are full of these commands, one of the most famous being "love one another." In Luke 24:27 Jesus bestowed insights about himself from the Old Testament. The apostles then wrote these insights down for us in the New Testament: there are many places where an act of Jesus is identified as fulfilling the Old Testament.

3. When Paul talks about the armor of God, many of the pieces of armor consist of knowledge areas that have to do with Christ. Jesus told us that the truth will set us free, and Paul uses the belt to stand for truth. The breastplate of righteousness of course is the righteousness that Jesus earned for us by dying on the cross, where he gained for us salvation (indicated by the helmet)..

4. Jesus tells us to abide in His word, and that this is what truly makes us into disciples, which is what will result in us knowing truth and experiencing freedom. (John 8:31-32). Peter tells us that it is "the word" that helps us grow: "Like newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow up unto salvation." The section after this will provide many ideas for Bible study, to help you "know Jesus through His Word."

5. Christ who lives "to make intercession for you" (Hebrews 7:25) is praying for you. He, the light of the world, is alive in you, and that is why you can "let your light shine before men, so that in seeing your good works they will give praise to the Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

7, Paul emphasizes the importance of this dependence when he talks about the importance of “holding fast to the head (Jesus), from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Colossians 2:19).

8. The Bible explains this same process in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in you (1 Corinthians 3:16) and teaches you (1 Corinthians 2:13). It is not that we try to differentiate between what Jesus is doing and what the Spirit is doing, but rather it is that they are working together. In John 15:26, Jesus says that the Spirit will “bear witness of me,” and in John 16:14, he says that the Spirit will disclose the things of Jesus to us. Moreover, Philippians 2:13 promises: “God is at work in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

9, Paul combines all these thoughts in this prayer, where he is asking God to bring about growth in the believers in Ephesus. Paul asks that God “may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may have strength to ... know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:16-19, ESV)

VI. MORE ABOUT GROWING IN GRACE

1. The verse at the beginning of this article told us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Grace and knowledge are interdependent, in that our reliance on God’s grace grows as we get more knowledge about it.

2. The word “grace” is used in two ways in the Bible. Sometimes it refers to God’s gracious attitude toward us, as in “he gives us hope by grace” (2 Thessalonians 2:16). Other times it indicates something given to us, as in “to each of us grace was given” (Ephesians 4:7). This article will increase your awareness of both. (For more on these two uses of the word “grace,” see appendix III).

3. Growth in grace happens as you regularly subject yourself to God’s “means” of grace (that is, the “delivery system”). These “means” are “Word” and “Sacrament.” A special section on God’s “word” is found below. The sacrament at the beginning of the Christian life is baptism, and baptism has ongoing relevance for your daily Christian life. Luther describes it this way in the Small Catechism, Baptism section IV: “that the old man should daily be drowned and die, and that the new man should daily come forth and arise.” This would be done by recognizing and repenting of sin, and then asking God to strengthen your new nature.

4. The sacrament for continuing growth and nurture in the Christian life is Holy Communion. Luther explains that when we believe the “for you” in the phrase, “given and shed for you for the remission of sins,” we are worthy and prepared. Having the promise of God personalized to us, as it is in communion and in absolution, was the breakthrough for Luther in his search for God’s love. God has provided the church so you have regular access to these “means,”

5. The gospel is not only something that non-believers need to hear, not only the gospel “by which you were saved” (1 Corinthians 15:2), but it also is the message that brings sustaining power into the daily lives of Christians. Consider Romans 1:16 “The gospel is the power of God *to all who believe.*” (that it, it does not say that it is power just for those who do not yet believe, but also for those who already believe). That message about God’s love, reaching its climactic moment with Christ on the cross, reassures us every day that we are safe in God’s loving care.

And not only the cross -- also the resurrection, as in 1 Peter 1:3 which says we are "born again into a living hope *through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.*" Walther, first president of the Missouri Synod, said that the gospel should predominate, and it should predominate in our self-talk as well as in counseling others.

6. Growth in grace and faith does not require you to change to a more "spiritual" career, but rather means that you become more dependent upon God right in the situation that you are in, believing that He has placed you there. Rather than saying that our work or position in life prevents us from spiritual growth, we assume that God will use our situation to contribute toward our growth. This notion is based on faith. If we are in a position that does not seem spiritual, like "office work" or "truck driving," we remember that God is everywhere and every legal vocation is needed by society and is a vessel for God to work in you and God to bless others through you. Growth happens as you serve others. Your faith is seen to be real and practical when it motivates you to love. Growth comes in praying for strength to set aside your own pleasures in order to use that time for others. Growth comes when meeting the unforeseen causes you to lean on God.

7. One's growth in grace and faith often is associated with going through difficulties. It is in difficulties that we discover our limitations, and have no choice but to throw ourselves (by faith) upon the grace of God. It is in difficulties that we discover the truth of the verse, "my grace is sufficient for you." (2 Corinthians 12:9). Of course, at the moment of the difficulty we are least likely to think that good can come from it, but we can hold to the promise "all things work together for good to them that love God." (Romans 8:28). Growth in trust through difficulties happened to the apostle Paul: he describes the experience in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. He says things were so bad that he wondered if he could keep on living. Then he realized that through this he had learned to trust God rather than his own strength. We also sometimes look back and realize that God has brought about growth in our lives even though we weren't looking for it at the time.

8. Hebrews 12 compares God's work in our life with our childhood experiences: "We had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them ... for they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He (God) disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:9-11. NASB). It's not that God causes the difficulties – there is enough sin in the world to do that – but that God can use the difficulties for our benefit.

VII. MORE ABOUT GROWTH

1. Growth also comes from self-analysis. For example, as I pondered why I had difficulty with controlling anger, I discovered that there were certain promises of God that I was not trusting. When people damaged my self-worth, I felt anger, rather than remembering that my self-worth is given to me by God, so it cannot actually be damaged:: "Behold what manner of love the Father has for us, that we should be called the children of God," 1 John 3:1 (KJV). When people interfered with my plans, I felt anger, instead of remembering that God is in charge of my day, and that the interruption might very well be God giving me the chance to do one of those "good works that he has prepared beforehand for me to do." (Ephesians 2:10) I grew by repenting of this lack of trust, and by bringing the needed promises to mind.

2. Growth can also be explained as an expression of your "new life." You have a new life because you are united with Christ by faith and baptism. Your new life automatically, by its very nature, wants to act according to God's will. When you notice that you are disobeying God's will, you have caught your "old life" in action: your response is to repent. This relying on God for forgiveness strengthens your new life. It is not that you live for God by resigned determination, but that your new life takes over so you serve with joy. The new life cannot help but show in concrete ways that Christ is the Lord in charge of your life. When Christ is in charge your new life will be evident.

3. Growth comes as you nurture others. When others tell you their problems, you are forced to look to God's Word for ways to comfort them. As is true for any subject, you learn more by teaching it; those who have taught Sunday School have experienced this fact.

4. Growth comes in sharing the message of Christ with others. First, there is the fear that arises at the thought of talking to a person who may be hostile or reject you. Turning to God to overcome this fear leads to growth. Putting the basics of your faith into understandable terms leads to growth. When people raise objections to Christianity, you look for the answers, and this helps you grow in knowledge.

5. Growth comes as you actively fight temptation. "Resist the Devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). When we do sin, there is no need to delay repenting or to make excuses, but to turn to God immediately for forgiveness. The growing Christian is one who engages as a life style in "putting to death the deeds of the flesh by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13.) You do this by repenting: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires" (Galatians 5:24). Paul then tells us to depend on the Spirit for doing the right thing "if we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25).

6. All the growth situations outlined above are intertwined with prayer, as Paul writes in speaking of the armor of God, "do all this in prayer" (Ephesians 6:18). Paul prays for his converts, asking "that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding ... bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for attaining steadfastness and patience." (Colossians 1:11). We can pray this for others, and also pray it for ourselves.

7. The Bible provides insights into why people do not grow. In the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus highlights the activity of Satan, not being firmly rooted, the worries and cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches. (Mark 2:15-19). Jesus sometimes chides his disciples as those "of little faith," as in Matthew 6:30. Peter says one who lacks the spiritual qualities "is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins." (2 Peter 1:9). James says "friendship with the world is enmity with God." (James 4:4)

VIII. MORE ABOUT FAITH

1. From God's side, He is treating us with grace. From our side, it is faith in God and His promises that brings that grace to action in our lives. The promises of God come into our experience as we exercise faith. Therefore growing in grace also involves understanding faith.

2. Faith is trusting.. Faith means we are not relying on "sight," (2 Corinthians 5:7), that is, our personal analysis of the situation. For example, we may feel deserted, but God has promised, "I

will never leave you." (Hebrews 13:5). By believing this promise, we will overcome the feeling of being deserted.

3. We become Christians in the first place by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). We also grow by grace through faith, for Colossians 2:4 says : "As you have received Christ, so live in him." For example, you were saved by grace, so you are to live by grace; you were saved by faith, so live by faith.

4. Growth happens as we live "by faith" day by day. Living by faith means "standing on the promises of God," even when you cannot see whether the promises are coming true.

5. The root word for the Greek term for faith means "convince." The Greek term for faith is the passive form of that root – in other words, "to have become convinced." This is not something you can force yourself to do – it is something that happens to you. This after all is how faith comes about in everyday life situations. I may ask you to trust in me that I will repay you if you lend me some money, but whether or not you trust me is not a matter of forcing yourself to work up some faith. If you have seen that I repaid money in the past, and know from watching me that I am a trustworthy person, you are more likely to trust me to repay in the future. Likewise, if we want people to trust in Christ, we portray the character and actions of Christ so that they see the he is trustworthy.

6. Paul describes Abraham's faith like this : "and being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised, This is why "it [the faith] was credited to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:21-22). How can we become fully persuaded like this? It happens as we see God in action and get the evidence that He is powerful and trustworthy, and especially God in action by what Jesus accomplished by his cross and resurrection. That's why Paul also says, "faith comes through hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17)

7. We have an advantage in inviting people to have faith in God and His promises, because as we share these truths about God, the Holy Spirit is actively working to create faith. The person can still refuse to believe. But if the person does believe, the promises will spring into action.

8. For example, you may be weary so I encourage you to sit in a chair. If you hesitate, I might invite you to have faith by telling you that the chair is sturdy, that many people have sat on it in the past, and that you will obtain rest by sitting in it. You may say that you agree with what I have said, and you may tell me how much you admire the chair, and you may even praise its benefits to others, but until you actually sit in it, you are not receiving the benefits of the chair. Sitting in the chair is what we mean by exercising faith. The promises were true before you sat down, but the promises were not doing you any good until you exercised faith and sat down.

9. It's not a matter of how "much" faith we have, but of "whom: and "what" we are trusting in. It is appropriate to trust in a chair to obtain physical rest, but it is not appropriate to trust in a chair to overcome hunger pangs. That requires trusting that the food someone has placed before you is not poison. Kings in olden times had food testers, but you and I typically exercise faith in food without giving it a second thought. It is not blind faith --- we have our reasons. We did not hear of anyone dying from that meal yesterday. We know there are food standards and safety inspections. We know the food preparer would not willingly subject himself to a lawsuit. So we exercise faith, eat the food, and get the benefit, even though we did not prove that the food was safe before we ate it. Likewise, our faith in God is not blind faith --- we have our reasons.

10. The dynamics of exercising faith in the promises of God is simple. In a given difficult situation, you turn to God in prayer: "Jesus help me," or "God help me." Expressing dependence upon God in this way is expressing faith. You are expressing faith in the truth of God's promises when you say: "Jesus, I thank you that you are in me, and that you have promised to live your life in and through me." You then proceed to act based on those truths.

11. To enable us to live in daily awareness of these promises, God has given us His Word, and so the following sections provide helps for reading God's Word, first "devotional" reading, and then "Bible Study."

IX. HINTS FOR READING THE BIBLE: DEVOTIONAL READING.

1. DEVOTIONAL READING is a way for God to be in our thoughts each day. Peter says, "like newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow unto salvation." (1 Peter 2:2). Just like God gave manna to the Israelites daily, Jesus, the bread of life, is ready to feed us through His word each day. One key to devotional reading is to set aside a short enough time period so that it is likely to become a daily habit.

2. Booklets.

Many booklets are published that present a short devotional based on a Bible verse. One that is readily available in Lutheran churches is the booklet "Portals of Prayer." There is also a booklet called "Daily Light" (published by Tyndale House) that has collected a page of verses on a given topic for use each day. It is also available with verses from the Living Bible, and in that version is called "Living Light."

3. Reading plans

Many plans for reading through the Bible in a year have been published. For example, the book *The Divine Mentor* (see www.lifejournal.com) is a plan for reading from both the Old and New Testament each day. In devotional reading you will not be able to investigate every aspect of a given passage, so the book recommends that you select one point that has meaning for your life today, then write about it. (journaling).

4. Reading in sections.

One can also read the Bible in smaller segments, without the goal of finishing within a year. You can use many different reading plans in the course of your lifetime. One year you could read a Psalm first, then one Old Testament chapter, then one New Testament chapter. In other years you might decide to spend weeks just reading and re-reading a single book, perhaps from a different translation each time.

5. Reading for Faith.

In devotional reading, watch for a promise or a command. If you find a promise, ask God to bring about this promise in your life. If you find a command, consider whether you have kept it, and if not ask God for forgiveness and for power for next time you are tempted.

6. The power is in the gospel.

This approach is based on Romans 1:16, which tells us that the gospel is the "power of God unto salvation." I can relate my daily Bible reading to the gospel by asking myself "what is God telling me to do through the verses I have read today?" There may be many answers, but I

usually select one for the next step. I ask myself, "what is there about me that keeps me from living like this all the time?" This gives me insights into my sin nature. That probably sounds unappealing, but my point is that new insights into my sin nature give me a fresh appreciation of the forgiveness that I have in Christ.

7. Devotional prayer.

The prayer during your devotional time can include requests based on the verses you have just read. If I have discovered a new insight into my sin nature, I then begin to pray, first repenting of this shortcoming, then thanking God for my forgiveness, and then asking Jesus to change me in this aspect of my life. You may want to add your intercessory prayer in at the time of your devotions, but if you have a lot of people to intercede for, you may want to do it at a different time so your devotional time does not become so long that you cannot maintain it as a habit.

8. About memorizing verses.

Memorizing is advocated in Psalm 119:11 "I have hidden your Word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." As an adult, it is achievable to select one verse a week, of your own choosing, and keep it with you on a card so you can memorize it. Many of us have memorized a lot of passages simply because we needed to use them over and over again, whether to comfort ourselves or to encourage others. In many cases, though, we didn't memorize the location of the verse, and doing that is useful so that we can turn to it when try to be of help to others..

9. There are times when you want to study a topic more deeply and systematically. This might be with or without a guidebook, by yourself or with others in small groups. The following section gives you some guidance.

X. HINTS FOR READING THE BIBLE: BIBLE STUDY

1. Start with a clear idea of why you want to do this particular study. Write out your goals and the questions you are trying to answer. This enables you to know when you have finished this particular study. Write down what you already know about the topic.

2. Assemble your resources. A study Bible is very useful. Besides the notes on individual verses, it is also worthwhile to read the introduction to each book. Familiarize yourself with the helps at the back of the book. There may be helpful background essays. All these advantages can also be found online as well. A site like www.biblegateway.com includes links to a number of reference works.

3. Your study Bible may have a concordance, that is, an alphabetical list of important Biblical words, telling you which verses each word is found in. (If your Bible doesn't include a concordance, you can buy one separately, for example at www.Bibles.com) If you go online at www.biblegateway.com you obtain the same advantage by typing in a key word: all the verses that contain that key word can appear. You can gain a lot by doing word studies using a concordance. For example, look at all the verses that contain the word "forgive," or "pride." You can go a step forward and arrange what you have found in categories suitable for group Bible study material.

4. Look for key concepts. I ask myself what technical terms are being used, and I look in the concordance for other verses in which those terms are used. The appendices in this article are the result of looking at verses that used the word for sanctify and the word for grace. Looking up the concepts in a Bible dictionary is also helpful. Immanuel Lutheran has a good model for

personal Bible study in the form of the "Bring it Home pamphlet that is in the bulletin each week. This pamphlet allows you to spend an entire week on a single topic, and a wealth of verses is already selected for you.

5. Make sure you are understanding the verses in their contexts. For example, a command in the Old Testament might not be applicable today, especially if it has been specifically superseded in the New Testament. A frequently heard suggestion is to ask yourself "what did it mean then" and "what does it mean for me now?" Also, consider how the section fits into the entire scope of biblical history. I find it helpful to look at the same section in many different translations.

6. Note the intent of the verse. A verse that narrates what did happen is different from a verse that gives a specific directive. For example, it is true that Abraham had a mistress, but there is no command for us to do so.

7. Principles of Interpretation. The technical term for this subject is called "hermeneutics." Some of the well-accepted principles are:

1. Take note of context: how does the verse fit in to the larger point being made.
2. Note placement in history. For example, Old Testament ceremonial laws ended with the coming of Christ.
3. Take note of literature type. for example, "the mountains skipped like rams" is a poetic figure of speech.
4. Don't create a doctrine from one verse: first, find everything that the Bible says about the subject.

8. Notable Book: *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Postmodern World* by James Voelz (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1997). To the ideas above, adds that one must watch for "non-verbal signifiers" and "determining presuppositions" -- that is, some things are not written about because they were already known to the readers.

XI. COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS . The purpose of maturity is NOT:

1. To get closer to God. The phrase "closer to God" implies that God is far from you. However, when you became a Christian, you immediately became close to God. What people mean by "becoming close to God" might be that they wish they would think of God more often, or they wish they would see him at work in their lives. The solution is not to "do something" to get close to God, but to believe God's word: "whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." (1 John 4:15.). That means that if you are a Christian, you are close to God. God has promised you "I will never leave you, I will never forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Believing these promises that you are already close to God doesn't need to wait on you becoming more mature: it is a benefit no matter what your level of maturity. Fortunately, during the Christian growth process, we learn more and more of these promises, and so we do become more conscious of the fact that we are already close to God.

2. To get more prayers answered. Your prayers are answered because of Jesus, not because of your level of maturity. That's what it means to pray "in Jesus' name." But as you learn more promises, you will pray with greater sense of expectation, and as you learn more about God's will, you will be able to pray "in accordance with his will." When the prayer does get answered, though, it is because of Jesus, not because of you.

3. To have a good day. God will bless you, no matter where you are on the scale of maturing, because it is His nature to love you. A maturing Christian knows that when there is a bad day, you can realize that God is still with you and that He will give you strength, no matter your level of maturity.

4. To become sure that I am saved. Becoming sure does not need to wait until you are mature. Your sureness is based on God's promise, not your level of maturity. God promises, "He who has the Son has eternal life." When doubts arise, we can turn to the promises of God, like "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16:16).

5. So that God will like me. God likes you already, no matter how mature you are. God has accepted you into his family, even though he knew you would keep on sinning. When we fall, He still likes us --- that's why He forgives us. We are firmly united to Christ, from the moment we became a Christian: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:26-27).

6. To be less sinful. While you can expect to make progress against bad habits as you mature, the actual fact is that the more mature a person becomes, the more aware he becomes of the presence and stubbornness of his sinful nature. It is not that a mature Christian is less sinful. Rather, it is that he knows what to do when he becomes aware of sin. He confesses it to God right away and continues on with life, rather than putting it off by making excuses.

7. To get the gifts of the Spirit. God gives these gifts as they are needed, which means they could be given to people at various stages of maturity. A mature person will handle his gifts with love and consideration.

8. To achieve a relationship with God. In Christianity, the relationship is given as a gift at the very beginning, in contrast to many world religions, in which one gradually works up to achieving a relationship with God. However, it is true that one may have a relationship but not express it frequently. A growing Christian would be in the habit of expressing that relationship to God regularly by such things as praying to Him.

9. To get more faith. It's not so much that we get "more faith" as we mature, but that we become more aware of the competitors to faith in God. The two big ones are "money" and "self." That is, if we disobey God's will in order to get more money or to pamper our selfishness, we are putting faith in those things instead of in God. When we see a competitor to our faith coming into action, we cut it off through repentance. This is simply part of the Christian life style, and we keep doing this at all levels of maturity.). Because of Luther's frustrations with the imperfections of his own faith before he realized he was saved by God's grace, he likes us to take our eyes off our faith, because we are sure to find flaws in it, and rather to put our eyes on God's promises, like: "I love you. I forgive you." That's why Hebrews 12:2 tells us to "keep our eyes on Jesus, the originator of our faith and the one who takes it on to maturity." (author's paraphrase of the Greek).

10. To reach perfection. Understanding maturity as the end-goal of growth gives direction and motivation for growth, but does not mean that you reach a point where you stop growing. Even Paul wrote, "not that I have achieved, or am already perfect (telos), but I press on toward the goal ..." . Romans 8:29 tells us that God has planned for us to be "transformed into the image of His Son." While the completeness of the transformation does not occur during this life time, nevertheless the scripture is clear that we are expected to grow and that we are expected to

become more “mature.” This does not mean perfection: in fact, a sign of maturing is a deeper realization of our imperfection, of the stubbornness of our sinful nature, accompanied by a growing dependence on Christ.

XII. GROWING TOGETHER AS A GROUP.

1. The Bible speaks not only of individuals growing, but of the entire community growing more closely together and becoming more and more mature together. The following verses apply to the church. You can pray that these things will happen in your home congregation, and in the groups within your congregation that spend time together, such as regular Bible studies and home sharing groups.

2. Paul tells his Gentile converts, “you are members of God’s household, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19:22)

3. And he tells them in chapter 4 that God gave various workers to the church for the purpose of “equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith ... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects until Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body ... according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” (Ephesians 4:11-16).

XIII. CONCLUSION

Christ has made us spiritually alive, and Christ provides the growth that comes with being alive. Unlike a plant which cannot help but grow, we are able to refuse to grow. Growth increases through the “knowledge” of God’s “grace” which comes into action by “faith.”

APPENDIX 1: THE WORD “DISCIPLESHIP”

1. The word disciple is often used in scripture as a synonym for a believer. For example, in Acts 6:2, “the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples.” In this sense, you are a disciple already.

2. When we hear “the twelve,” we recognize it as referring to the men who associated with Jesus and learned from him. They became disciples when they responded to Jesus’ call, “follow me.” Thus a disciple is also called a “follower.” By that we mean someone who associates himself with a master, for the purpose of learning from the master’s teaching and way of life. [The Latin root of the word “disciple” means “pupil. Greek uses a different word but the meaning is similar: “learner.”] Socrates had disciples (Plato was one of them); John the Baptist had disciples; Paul had disciples (Timothy and Titus were among them). We are disciples, but this article on spiritual growth has hopefully prompted you to want to be active and growing as a disciple, and has given you some biblical directives for doing so. Jesus has given us important teachings about what it means to be a disciple:

3. In John 8:31 Jesus tells us that a disciple is one who abides in His word; this results in knowing the truth, which sets us free. This article has stressed above the importance of God's Word to the growing process.

4. In John 15:8, Jesus says, "by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." This article has quoted the vine and the branches illustration to emphasize that this "bearing of fruit" is possible only because of our being united with Christ, and his ongoing work in and through us. Bearing fruit is an indication of maturity in the plant world, and so is a good picture for us to understand spiritual maturity. The verses do not say what the fruit is, but in various contexts it can be regarded as visible behavior improvement, bringing others to Christ, and achieving a God-given task.

5. In John 13:35, Jesus says, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This article has brought up love as the goal of the growth process, as a characteristic of Christ-likeness, and as a quality produced and poured into us by the Spirit.

6. In Luke 14, Jesus makes three statements, and for each of them says that without it, "you cannot be my disciple." In verse 26, He says one cannot be a disciple if he "does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life." God does elsewhere command men to love their wives and not to provoke their children, so the verse cannot be understood in a way that would violate those commands. This verse then is typically explained in terms of the middle-eastern custom of making comparisons through dramatic emphasis, so that the verse in effect means "God must be given a higher priority than family members." You cannot use family members as an excuse to disobey God. When God comes first in life, you will be able to treat your family members responsibly and lovingly.

7. As far as hating one's own life, the idea of putting God above one's own desires is well expressed in Romans 12:1, where we are told to present ourselves to God "as a living sacrifice." Our body is not our own, says 1 Corinthians 6:19, but "a temple of the Holy Spirit." We are expected to be good stewards of our body, since it does not belong to us, but to God. Putting God first is foundational to growing in Christ.

8. Luke 14:27 tells us that a disciple must "carry his own cross and come after" Jesus. Commentators have explained this in a variety of ways, and rather than select one of them, perhaps you will find, like I do, that each explanation has some practical value. "Your cross" is sometimes taken as the difficulties and challenges of your life, which you are not to escape from, but rather see them as reasons to depend on God more completely. Others explain "your cross" as the place you are supposed to crucify your own sins, as expressed in the passage "those who belong to Christ have crucified the old nature." Both these concepts have been mentioned above as parts of the growing Christian's way of life.

9.. Luke 14:28 tells us to give up all our possessions. From Acts 4:34, we see that "all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales." Yet as Acts continues, we see several references to meeting in people's houses. In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul urges the believers to give generously, "not as a command," but as an indication of love.

Consequently a way to apply the verse about possessions to life today is to treat the verse by analogy to treating our life as a living sacrifice. We treat all we own as God's possessions, and see ourselves as stewards of them on God's behalf. This is echoed in 2 Corinthians 8:5, talking about the donations provided by the churches of Macedonia: "they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God."

10. Throughout the ages, Christians have been noted for generosity. It is an outward indication that God is at work in them. At our church, Immanuel, we call generosity one of the "marks of discipleship."

11. The word "mark" as used here is a behavior pattern that shows God is at work, an effect brought about by the Spirit. They are the ways that the Bible describes a normal, growing Christian. They are habits of a growing Christian that lead to maturity. The other "marks" our church has identified are: daily Bible reading; daily prayer; weekly worship; serving, both in the church and outside; tending to relationships; intentional growth including group bible study participation; helping to disciple someone else.

12. Discipling is the central command in the Great Commission: "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:18-19) Here the word is used on a global scale, and in effect is telling us to "spread Christianity." The verse tells us to do this as we are going about our everyday life, and that it involves intentionally helping to bring someone to the point of baptism, and after that continuing on to urge them to carry out all that the Lord has commanded us.

13. To "disciple" someone then would mean "to help someone else to grow in Christ." If you do this intentionally and systematically, the process is similar to what we now call "mentoring." The early stages, right after your friend has become a Christian, are sometimes called "follow-up." Your pastor's preparation for baptism process is an early stage in discipling. After that comes the life-long process of Christian nurture, making use of the church's programs of "Christian education."

14. If you are privileged to help someone continue to grow in Christ, that is, to help in "discipling someone else," part of your approach would be to introduce them to the "marks" listed above, and mentor them in their practice of these "marks." The resulting way of life is sometimes called "the Christian life-style." The Christian life style is a life of growing that leads to maturity.

15. As a parent, when you are socializing your children into the Christian way of life by example and precept, you are "discipling" them. Grandparents are part of this picture, too, because the verse in Deuteronomy 4:9 that tells us to make the things of God known to our sons also includes the phrase "and your grandsons."

16. When you teach Sunday School, you are discipling. The Biblical instruction and method of discipline in a Christian school constitutes "discipling." Husbands and wives can "disciple" one another. Gathering in small groups to ponder the Bible together is an example of "discipling" one another.

17. Even if you are not walking with someone all the way through the discipling process, you can still be part of the Great Commission every time you engage in a meaningful discussion with someone, for you can be looking for ways to help that person along the spectrum from becoming a Christian on towards Christian maturity. You might also consider whether you know someone you could ask to mentor you in your own discipleship.

APPENDIX 2: THE WORD “SANCTIFICATION”

1. The term "sanctify" means "make holy." The term "holy" means "set apart," so when referring to believers, it means that God has set you apart, for Him. As a theological term, "sanctification" refers to the changes the Holy Spirit works in your life.

2. It is essential to know the difference between "justification" and "sanctification." The term "justification" (declared just) is associated with the status of a Christian: "therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1) Through faith and baptism God declares us holy and so Christians in the epistles are appropriately called "saints" (holy ones.)

3. The term "sanctification" (being made holy), on the other hand, is associated with the growth that commences at the moment of justification. The terms have different definitions, but wherever you have one, you have the other. Justification means that God "pronounces" you to be just. Sanctification means that God is changing your behavior so you look more and more like someone who belongs to Him. Someone has said, "God loves you just as you are, but he loves you so much that He does not leave you as you are." Justification and sanctification are both God's gifts to you, and are both received by faith, which is also God's gift to you.

4. Sanctification is firmly based on justification. (but justification is NOT based on sanctification.) In practical terms, this means that when we have a moral failure, we don't say, "what must I do so God will accept me again," but rather, "since I know God has accepted me because of Jesus' death, I know He forgives me, and I ask Him and trust Him to work in me to overcome this behavior problem."

5. While God justifies us without any contribution on our part, we do have a role to play in our sanctification, that is, in our growth and maturing. We know this because of verses that tell us to grow. The Lutheran confessions say that even though before we become Christians, we can do nothing to make ourselves into Christians, but after we are Christians, we "cooperate" with the Spirit. (This teaching is in the "thorough Declaration" Part II.) Scripture does urge us toward maturity, and also does urge us to avoid thwarting the work of the Spirit in us: "Do not quench the Spirit" 1 Thessalonians 5:19).

6. The term "sanctification" is used in two ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it is used with the theological meaning explained above, to talk about the growth process after one has already become a Christian. An example is 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "This is the will of God, your sanctification," because the verse then goes on to define sanctification in terms of good moral behavior. Sometimes the word "sanctification" is used as a synonym for justification, telling us that God has set us apart for Himself. An example is Hebrews 10:10: "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (ESV)

7. One way to distinguish these uses is to list the verses that use the Greek words involved. Those are the Greek words that start with the letters "hagio -." Those words correspond to the English words that have to do with holiness and sanctity.

8. Here are the verses using "hagio-" words I found that correspond to justification, that is, they clearly refer to God declaring you holy, irrespective of the amount of purity of your behavior:

John 10:36, John 17:7, 1 Cor 1:30, 1 Cor 6:11, Eph 1:4, Col 1:22, 2 Thess 2:13, Hebrews 2:11, Hebrews 10:10, 14, and 29, and Hebrews 13:10.

9. Here are the verses I found that use those Greek words starting with "hagio -" that give us insights into our growth in Christian behavior:

Submit your members to righteousness, leading to sanctification. Rom 6:19
Being set free from sin, you receive the fruit of sanctification. Rom 6:22
Abstaining from immorality is part of God's will for your sanctification. 1 Thess 4:3 and 7.
Paul commends charity and holiness in behavior. 1 Tim 2:15.
Paul prays that God would sanctify you wholly, 1 Thess 5:23, summing up a section that was talking about good behavior (verses 13-15).
A believer sanctifies himself for use. 2 Tim 2:21
Like the sanctifying done by the OT sacrifices, Jesus' blood purifies us to serve. Heb 9:13
How to be holy in body and spirit. 1 Cor 7:34
growing into a holy temple. Eph 5:27
no immorality, as suitable for saints. Eph 5:3
Be holy in your behavior. 1 Peter 1:15, 16
Live lives of holiness and godliness. 2 Peter 3:11
He who is holy, let him be holy still. Rev 22:11
God disciplines us so we share his holiness. Heb 12:10
Perfecting holiness in the fear of God. 2 Cor 7:1.
Increase and abound, to appear in holiness before Him. 2 Tim 1:14

10. It is this second set of verses that is the subject of this article about Christian growth. These verses use sanctification in the sense of behavior change. This change is based on the fact that God has "declared" us righteous (justified), and has "declared" us holy in his sight (the first use of the word "sanctified.") Because they are declared holy, the New Testament calls all believers "holy ones," customarily translated as "saints." Many other verses use the word "holy" when describing believers, such as the phrase "holy brothers." In 1 Cor 6:19, Paul says that believers are a holy temple, and uses this as a basis for telling them that this status should be reflected in their behavior.

11. Here are verses using "hagio-" that I was not sure how to categorize:

John 10:19, Rom 12:1, Eph 5:26, 1 Cor 7:14, Heb 12:14, 1 Peter 1:2.

Other uses of Greek words based on "hagio-" include descriptions of God as holy, the Holy Spirit, holy angels, and descriptions of objects as holy (like the holy city, holy commandments)

12. Notable Book: The classic Lutheran book on Sanctification is *The Quest for Holiness*, by Adolf Köberle. © 1936 by Augsburg Fortress.

APPENDIX 3. THE WORD “GRACE”

1. In the Bible, the word "grace" is sometimes used to express God's loving attitude toward us, and in other places to refer to something given to us by God. The first usage is usually related to justification, and in fact is key to understanding salvation by grace alone. It is not that God gives us grace so that we become worthy of salvation, but rather that God, because of His attitude of grace toward us, accepts us even though we don't deserve it. . This definition of grace has been summed up in this acronym: "God's riches at Christ's expense,"

2. There are some verses that use the word grace to refer to something God gives us. This usage is related to sanctification. God is giving us strength to follow his will. Here are some of those passages:

God gives grace to the humble. James 4:6.
Everyone is given grace (referring to the various roles in the church). Ephesians 4:7.
Paul refers to his ministry as the gift of grace that God gave him. Ephesians 3:2, 7, 8.
In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God tells Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you,” explained in verse 10 as “the power of Christ dwelling in Paul.”
In 2 Corinthians 9:8 Paul says God will “make all grace abound to you,” so that the people will have enough material goods for their own needs and more.
In 2 Corinthians 8:1, the grace of God bestowed on the church allowed them to be generous in the midst of affliction.

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KJV, King James Version (Authorized Version). Public Domain.