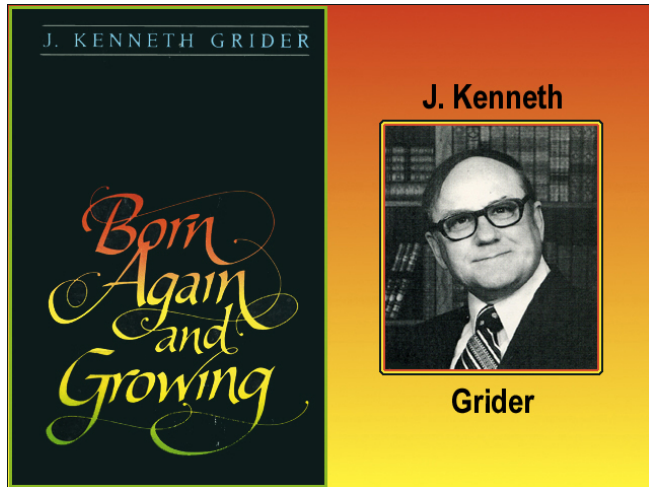


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BORN AGAIN AND GROWING

By J. Kenneth Grider



**Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City
Kansas City, Missouri**

**Copyright 1982
Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City**

ISBN: 0-8341-0758-9

**Printed In The
United States Of America**

Cover design: Royce Ratcliff

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DEDICATION

To Zachary, my grandson

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PREFACE

This book's purpose is to help new Christians and others to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18, KJV). It assumes that the reader is already a born-again Christian -- a new one, as part of the recent evangelism explosion, or perhaps a longtime one who has been taking his or her faith too matter-of-factly.

As I wrote the book, I often had in mind what a wife said to her husband who was reluctant to go with her to hear an orchestra:

**Come, Dear, and be content,
For we shall be taller than when we went.**

The volume begins with chapters on growing through prayer and through Bible reading, and then proceeds to various other how-it-happens matters.

The last chapter will help the born-again Christian to measure his or her own progress in spiritual growing.

*** * * * ***

01 -- GROWING THROUGH PRAYER

Prayer is one of the priority matters in a born-again Christian's growth toward spiritual maturity. To pray to God might be even a more deeply felt need than to read the Scriptures--which matter we will soon discuss.

As we think about growing through prayer, several matters clamor for our attention. One is what initiates the whole process.

The Initiative Is With God

The initiative, in our praying, is with God. He bids us to commune with Him. He holds out the offer of our enjoying audience with Him wherever we are, whatever we might be doing, whatever the time of day or night. It is He who creates in us the desire to commune with Him. Without His creating in us that desire, it would not be there. For, apart from His grace, as many denominational creeds state, we are inclined to evil and that just about continually.

How To Address God

Another matter that we might consider early is how we are to address God. Should we address one of the three Persons of the Trinity specifically? If so, which should it be?

Not many people address the Holy Spirit. Since He is divine, and a person, He can of course hear prayers addressed to Him. Some denominations as the Anglican, in their liturgies, address prayers to the Holy Spirit.

Much more often, we address Jesus Christ in our prayers. We might be prone to do this because He is the Person of the Godhead who most identified with us. He visited us for our salvation. He sojourned among us, as one of us. He is now the one Mediator between God the Father and us -- our go-between. He is a friend who sticks closer to us than a brother might.

Something to think about, however, is the guidance Scripture gives us on the One to whom we are to address our prayers. Perhaps, ideally, we are to address our prayers to God the Father. All of Jesus' prayers are addressed to the Father, and He taught us to address our prayers to the Father in His name. The apostle Paul and other writers of New Testament books address all their prayers to the Father.

In the Old Testament, also, the prayers are addressed to God, called by several names, and this probably means God the Father.

Except for one or two one-sentence prayers, such as Stephen's in Acts 7:59, who addresses Christ with one sentence, all New Testament prayers are addressed to God the Father.

Prayer to the Father is to be made in Jesus' name or for Jesus' sake. This means that we admit that in ourselves we are not worthy of approaching the Father and are not deserving of His help. It means also that Jesus is worthy, and that it is through His mediation that we hold audience with God the Father.

The Holy Spirit's office is to prompt us to pray and guide us in what to say to the Father. St. Paul writes, "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

Posture In Prayer

We may pray while standing on tiptoe, or on our heads, but these are not usual postures for prayer. They might not be the most advisable postures.

One widely practiced posture is to kneel. In kneeling, many of us feel that we thereby acknowledge God's greatness and our creatureliness. It is quite often the posture of people who pray, according to Scriptures, accounts of prayers.

To stand while praying is also widely practiced. It too is often the posture for prayer, according to Scripture. If a lady enters a room, well-mannered men stand as a courtesy to her. The same men would also stand if a man entered the room, but only if he were in some way a little bit distinguished, in relation to the others. A

group of lawyers might rise if a Supreme Court associate justice were to enter a living room. A group of Supreme Court justices might themselves stand if the president of the United States would enter. It is expected that a regular soldier will stand in order to greet a military officer. Even as we stand to show respect for certain persons, we sometimes stand as we address God in prayer in order to show our respect for God. Actually, in the case of God, it shows more than honor; it indicates awe.

It must not be supposed, however, that to kneel or to stand are the only proper postures for prayer. Since the Bible speaks often of the fellowship we have with God, as though it is more or less friend to friend, we may feel free to commune with God while seated, or while lying on our bed, or while fishing or jogging, or at any other time when turning our attention to Him is natural to us.

Praise Precedes Petitions

After addressing the Father, in beginning a prayer, it is good to worship Him and praise Him and adore Him for His past and present helps before making any requests. As a Christian matures, he might find that his entire prayer is a praise of and an adoration of God, without any petitions at all.

When petitions are made, they will often be requests for His help more adequately to glorify His holy name instead of requests for a more pleasant life for ourselves. Friendship with another person would be better fostered by our showing appreciation for him, and letting him know that we are genuinely interested in him. Friendship would shrivel up and die if we were to make requests for favors from a friend just about every time we met. God is a person, with intellect, feeling, and will. And although He is infinite, His expectations in personal fellowship with us are not in nature unlike what a human person's expectation would be.

We Pray To A Person

As we pray, we might need to think of God, consciously, as a person. He is not simply an abstract idea of the Good, as He was for the ancient Plato. We correctly say that God is good, or God is love, or God is truth. Some people, who do not understand that He is a person, turn those statements around and say, "Goodness is God," or "Love is God," or "Truth is God." If those abstract ideas or ideals are God, then God is not a person. If He is not a person, He cannot hear and respond to our prayers.

It's Like A Gentle Nudge

Prayer is not simply to bend God's will to our wills. Often its purpose is the opposite: to bring ourselves into alignment with what He wants. And we are out of order, surely, if we try to pressure Him into acting on our behalf for selfish requests. We are not to corner Him and try to finagle something from Him.

If we have prayed a whole half hour about something, we might feel that God ought to act as we want Him to. We might find a promise God has made in the Scriptures and remind Him that He, who cannot lie, has said He would do thus and thus. We realize, however, in our saner moments, that there are always conditions to be met before we receive what God has promised. God forgive us for sometimes telling Him we have met His conditions when we have not. Actually, we cannot be all that sure that we have met His conditions. We must pass muster with Him, not simply with ourselves. Our attitudes or spirits or motives in the requests might not be what they ought to be. Who can be sure that he knows his own heart at its bedrock level, or down under the bedrock?

It is for reasons of this sort that this writer got rid of a book he once owned entitled *The Law of Prayer*. It encouraged the reader to remind God that he had met the Father's conditions and that God was obligated to act as requested to do. The great evangelist Charles G. Finney talked about the law of revivals; he fostered in many people this understanding that God becomes obligated to us by reason of promises in Scripture. I have heard many people say that God has to do something, or is obligated to do something, because of what a Scripture passage states. The mature Christian will flee all such attempts to manipulate the Father, to control Him, to corner Him, to suggest that He has obligations toward us. In other words, prayer is not for pressuring God, but is more like a gentle nudge.

The Question Of Fleeces

This writer is not much of a believer in "fleeces," in which we arrange with God that if thus-and-so happens, we will know that this-or-that is His will. Gideon used that method, but that was long before Bethlehem and Pentecost, and before we came to have the Bible as our Guide as we now have it. We are not necessarily to put out a fleece just because a person did who lived long before God revealed himself through Christ and through the New Testament Scriptures. Since we are all human, the fleeces we set up might be staged toward our own interests. We might be anxious to be permitted of the Lord to do something, and we might tell Him we will know it is His will if a certain thing happens. But that thing might be something that would happen anyway, as that the sun would shine, or that a person would speak to us before we would speak to him, or that January 1 would follow December 31.

Similarly, Christians often say that if "the door opens," they will take it as a sign that they are to walk through it. It might be a job offer; but so what? The Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, the counsel of other Christians and even non-Christian professionals, our own best thoughts, and other factors all figure importantly in such matters as to whether we should accept a job offer.

Regularity In Our Praying

Some kind of regularity in our praying, as we seek by this means to grow in grace, is also a significant factor. Most seasoned Christians have found regularity in prayer to be important.

Daniel seemed to pray with regularity, for he "continued on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had done previously" (Dan. 6:10).

In regular prayer times, we might find ourselves praying in much the same way each time. If a prayer is more or less one that we have devised, or if it is one devised by others and we find that it suits us, it may not be simply vainly repetitious to pray it more or less the same way on a daily basis.

Jesus' teaching His disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer suggests the validity of this. As for the prayer He taught them in Matthew, Jesus instructed, "Pray, then, in this way," (6:9), as though it would be a sort of prayer formula. But when He responded to the request of His disciples at another time to teach them to pray (as in Luke), He seemed to suggest that they use more or less the same general wording in their prayers, because He prefaced it by saying, "When you pray, say..." (11:12).

To pray early in the day in a regular way is also helpful. It has been the satisfying practice of many, on waking in the morning, to have an early devotional time. These believers will reach for their Bibles and prayer lists, then read, pray in a general way, and intercede for persons and varied concerns on the lists. This could well include denominational and local church leaders, fellow workers, members of a prayer group, relatives, friends, and, as needs arise, causes and institutions.

Silent Or Aloud

We can pray either silently or aloud -- even loudly, for that matter.

Sometimes we might like to relax in an easy chair, or on our bed, and think out a prayer, when silence is as priceless as a good name. According to some medieval and modern piety, to pray silently is to pray magnificently. We'll be getting into this a bit later, when we discuss meditation.

There is something to be said for praying aloud, however, if such would not disturb other persons. One psalm writer said, "Hear my voice" (Ps. 119:149). Another said, "My voice rises to God, and I will cry aloud" (77:1).

By praying aloud, some of us, at least, might do just a mite better at engaging our entire being in the prayer. It would help keep our minds from wandering. Also, the words we use might better express our praise to God and our petitions than when we are merely thinking out a prayer. If that is so with some of us, it might make praying more fulfilling and more satisfying than otherwise.

When we are talking with a school teacher, most of us try to put our best words forward. We try to use proper English, realizing that she or he will notice it if we drag out the wrong word or insert the wrong tense of a verb or whatever.

God, of course, does not cock His ear just so as to hear any small defect in the words we are using as we pray to Him. If to use clear and more or less proper words in our prayers is indeed particularly satisfying to some of us, it might be so more from our standpoint than from God's. Since we respect God far more than we do any schoolteacher or other professional person, to speak a prayer as well as we are able to might be a way of implementing our feeling of respect and honor toward God.

While most of us might like to pray aloud but not very loudly, a person should not feel that he is altogether weird if he likes to pray quite loudly, when he's sure that such would not bother other persons. For some people, that might have the kind of therapeutic effect that many psychologists say we get from "letting off steam" and exaggerating our feelings.

The Place Of Intercession

Intercession for others is profoundly important. There is much reference to intercession in the Old Testament. Abraham interceded for Sodom (Gen. 18:23-33). Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons is of this nature (48:8-22). Moses was often in the office of go-between for the idolatrous Israelites (Exod. 32:31-32). Samuel, grieved, but tender, prayed all night for Saul (1 Sam. 15:11).

Intercession is often urged and practiced in the New Testament. Christ said we should pray for those who use us badly (Matt. 5:44). He said to Peter, "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). In John 17 we have the sustained prayer of Jesus for His disciples. In Acts, the young church prayed for Peter (12:5-12) and for Barnabas and Saul (13:3).

Christians prayed for each other in New Testament times; and they often asked for the prayers of others, and assured people they were praying for them. Paul reminded his readers he was praying for them in just about every Epistle he wrote. And he often asked them to pray for him in turn. It is not a sign of weakness if we ask people to pray for us. Nor is it automatically a parading of our spiritual life if we at times let people know that we are praying for them. The issues at stake warrant our encouraging one another in this way.

Why We Pray So Little

Jesus, who presumably needed to pray so little, prayed so much; while we who need to pray so much, pray so little. We deeply yearn for fellowship with God in prayer, and yet we do not give prayer the attention it should be given.

Many of us born-again Christians tend to pray too little. This might be in part because we find it difficult to visualize the extent to which our praying is so crucial to our spiritual growth.

We might also tend to pray too little because we do not adequately visualize what a privilege it is. It has been called a princely privilege -- similar to the access a country's prince has to its king.

We might tend to pray too little, further, because we do not adequately conceptualize what is occurring when we pray: the two-wayness involved, and the individual attention given us by the Creator of the universe.

We might even tend to pray too little because for lack of practice we have not become very proficient at it. In order to become good competitors or even experts at various indoor or outdoor sports, we have to give them a great deal of attention. It is then fulfilling and satisfying to play them because we play them well. On the other hand, we play those games we are deficient in only when we are socially forced into them. When we become proficient at prayer, understanding what is going on, realizing how strategic it is, and knowing how to speak our praise and our petitions, we will find praying more satisfying -- and we will more readily engage in it.

These, then, are a few thoughts on prayer from one who does all too poorly at it, but who finds that not to pray, even with some regularity and with some planning, is not to be fulfilled as a Christian. To truly pray is to be on the way to spiritual growth and to a fulfilling relationship with Jesus Christ, our Savior, Lord, and coming King.

* * * * *

02 -- BENEFITS OF PRAYER

We read in Job that it is the impudent person who asks:

Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him, And what would we gain if we entreat Him? (21:15).

The profits from entreating God in prayer are actually numerous.

Creates Oneness With Others

Prayer gives us a sort of oneness with others. When we "pray for one another," as James (5:16) instructed us to do, we can almost feel each other's hurts.

Notice Jesus' use of the word "our." He had a special reason for telling us to begin praying by saying, "Our Father." He no doubt had in mind this oneness with others that is among the benefits of praying.

The ancient Christians felt vividly that when they prayed, "Our Father," instead of, "My Father," they were including all other Christians in the petitions they were making to God. This was so, even if they were praying in private.

Increases Our Love

Another benefit of prayer is that it increases our love for God. Thus a psalm writer stated:

**I love the Lord, because He hears
My voice and my supplications (Ps. 116:1).**

To love God more, as He responds to our prayers, is only natural. It is only to be expected. When we love a human companion, the Love is nurtured when we are able to visit with and in other ways commune with that person. That is why we have courtships before engagements, and engagement periods before the marriage. It is why we plan for honeymoons. It is why husbands and wives usually take vacations together and otherwise put being together into the planning of their lives.

Stabilizes Our Lives

Prayer also helps us to stabilize our purpose to live as Christ's disciples. It is after prayer and because of regular prayers that the psalm writer quoted above says: For Thou hast rescued my soul from death, My eyes from tears, My feet from stumbling (v. 8).

Makes Us More Optimistic

In this same prayer psalm, another benefit of prayer is noted by the Psalmist: Prayer makes us more optimistic about other persons. He admits:

I said in my alarm, "All men are liars" (v. 11). Perhaps the Psalmist knew about some political mess. Perhaps he knew of cases where bribes were being paid to government officials. And because of these instances of deceit and treachery he had been prone to universalize before he had prayed. After he prayed, however, the implication is that he received God's help on his tendencies to mistrust everyone because of what a few had done. He saw "the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (cf. v. 9).

Deepens Fellowship With Christ

Significant also is the fellowship with Christ that we have when we pray. We read some things in First John that bolster our confidence of this. We read there that Christ existed "from the beginning" (1:1); and yet that He came right down here to this "spoilt and fallen world" and entered into life as we know it. John the apostle, who had been perhaps the nearest to Christ, having leaned upon Him affectionately, wrote in 1 John 1:1-2 that "we have heard" Him, "have seen" Him, have "handled" Him with our hands -- for He was "manifested" among us. John knew a blessed fellowship with the Christ who came among us.

Today, we do not have communion with Christ in the same way that John did in the days of the Master's enfleshment. But to faith, or through faith -- the high, creative confidence possible to us -- we can see that the Christ who indwells us is even closer to us than He was to John at the time of the Master's sojourn on earth. And the fact that Christ was "inhumanized" among us at that earlier time gives our present fellowship with Him a certain special blessedness.

Provides Fellowship With The Father

A most significant benefit of prayer, also, is fellowship with God the Father. First John 1:3 states that "our fellowship is with the Father." True, it was the Son who came among us. But the Father sent Christ and planned that the eternally begotten Son should go to the Cross for us. And the Father wants us to pray to Him -- to commune with Him. Indeed, normally it is to the Father that we do pray. So in prayer we have fellowship even with the high and holy Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Is Spiritually Therapeutic

I once got my tongue twisted, as I often do, and instead of "prayer and meditation" said, "prayer and medication." Actually, what was a slip of the tongue is actually true: Prayer is medication. For the troubled person, buffeted by ill winds, taut to the breaking point, unnerved sometimes by changes in his life situation with which he cannot cope in his own strength, prayer is indeed like receiving a medication.

In prayer one's heart catches up with his mind as he more and more intellectualizes his faith.

In prayer, one keeps at least somewhat of a balance between his increasing Christian knowledge and his devotion.

In prayer, one sees things it is not given a person to see otherwise. In prayer, one ventures and soars.

In prayer, one meets with his fellow believers at the foot of Jesus' cross to be instructed by Him, to be fired by Him with hidden flames.

In prayer, social, cultural, and financial status disappear the way sugar disappears when poured into water.

In prayer, one receives tempering for the springs of his deep resolve to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in authentic and costly and useful ways.

In prayer, one sees the glory and the wonder of donating his life to Christ, the Sovereign Lord.

* * * * *

03 -- THE CHRISTIAN'S "HOW TO" BOOK

We who have been born again, and want to be growing Christians, will probably feel a yearning to read the Bible. We feel that yearning because we know that the Bible is supposed to be the main "how to" book for living the Christian life.

Even as just-born babies, in the biological sense, need a hundred and one helps, and even feel those needs, so do we who are born again spiritually. We need helps, and we know we need them. And we're pretty sure that, if we begin to read the Bible and apply it to our lives, we will be at least on the road to begin growing. We are "becomer" Christians.

It is a question whether we ought to race through the Bible, to get a given number of chapters read, and finally the whole Bible. Some people might find that satisfying. A teacher or preacher might have urged it and gotten people into such a program. It's all right. Others of us like to read it slowly and let it speak to our life situation.

Interpreting Its Meaning

If what the Bible says runs counter to the way we had understood things, we should then ponder what it says. We could read it in another version, or see what a commentary says on a particular passage. We can thus let it correct our thinking.

If the Bible seems on the surface to contradict itself, we should just read on, being confident that it will finally explain itself. Passages in the Bible that are clear in their meaning, we can be confident, will help us to understand the passages that are not clear.

We also understand that if we just stay right in there, thinking those faith-filled thoughts, we will do some growing, and then we might see what the Bible means at a given place.

As born-again believers, the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts. We are born of the Holy Spirit. Indwelling us, He is our Guide. He promises to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). He especially sees to it that we are guided to the truth about Jesus Christ. So we read the Bible prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us in understanding it and in applying it to our lives.

We take into account that it was written a long time ago by people who lived in a different kind of setting than we do. It talks about a sheepfold, and the only "fold" I have to do with is five or six cars, some of which are broken down half the time.

The Bible talks about riding on a donkey, and the newspapers tell us about people riding in spaceships at some 17,000 miles an hour.

It talks about people who heard God speaking to them directly and audibly, sort of word for word, when we may feel that now God only makes impressions on our minds. Perhaps that is because we now have the Scriptures to guide us in that word-for-word way.

We know all that about the Bible. We know it was written a long time ago, a long way off, by people almost weird in their spiritual wizardry. We know it was written by people who had close-up revelations from God.

It was written long before we developed scientific medicines and surgeries, and when sheer miracles might have been more often required than now, if cures were to happen at all.

It was written at a time when women, in those cultures, were not expected to become well educated, nor to work outside the home, nor to vote, nor to hold property, as they may do in so many parts of the world today. As far as I know, women could not attend college anywhere in the world until they were permitted to do so in America by a few colleges beginning a little while before 1850.

We expect, therefore, to have to interpret the meaning of the Bible, as regards the place of women, according to those times, and according to what God says in Scripture to people of all times.

Also, if, in the Book of Job, we find that God permitted Satan to bring about Job's troubles, we don't necessarily need to universalize from that one book and say that every time a trouble befalls us, God is permitting Satan to do that to us. Maybe God is, and maybe He isn't. Maybe there are other teachings in Scripture which show that there are other reasons, also, why the world sometimes seems to tumble in on us.

The Bible more than once tells us to greet each other with a holy kiss (e.g., Rom. 16:16). Well, that was part of their culture back there. Some writers suggest

that men were to kiss men; and women, women. I don't do that. Not many Christians do today. Russian Christians do on Easter. Perhaps we can fulfill that command when we shake hands fondly with someone or embrace a Christian friend with appreciation. We need not get hung up on things like that as we read our Bibles.

The same is so with the apostle Paul's enjoinder to Timothy to drink "a little wine" for his frequent illness (I Tim. 5:23). God has helped us, now, to develop medicines that will have the good effects of wine and few, or none, of the possible bad effects. A taste of wine, even as medicine, seems to be too much for some alcoholics. And many of us born-again Christians believe we should not drink wine, even as medicine. God helps us not to get hung up on the fact that we have a Bible enjoinder to Timothy to drink a little wine for his frequent stomach upset.

Forgetting possible hang-up matters, therefore, we come to Scripture with a positive attitude. We are not looking for this or that possible problem that it poses; we are looking for what is there that we can feed on. Our cups are right side up as we come to the Bible, and we expect to get them filled to the brim with things helpful to us.

This can happen, sometimes, in the strangest passages of Scripture. It might even happen as we are reading a genealogy and come upon a given name. Judah, son of Jacob, for example, is in Jesus Christ's genealogy. That Judah is as despicable a character as we find in the Bible. He bought a sexual "privilege" from his disguised daughter-in-law; and when she was to have his baby, he would have, in his "righteousness," put her to death, except that she proved him to be the father because of the three gifts he had given her for the "privilege" (Genesis 38).

He, Judah, in Jesus' lineage? Most of us, if we were tracing our roots, would like to quit if we found such a person in our family tree. But in Jesus' roots, how marvelous it is to have Judah there! To me, it means that Jesus did not come into some sort of antiseptic humanity; He came into real humanity, in a lineage that had awful, flagrant sin in it. And Judah doesn't by any means exhaust the sinners in Jesus' roots.

What Version To Read

The matter of what version or translation of the Bible to read is of some importance. Almost any of them will be all right. Some versions and translations, however, will suit us better than others.

If we feel that the language in which God speaks to us ought to be pretty lofty, we might want to opt for the old standard -- the King James Version, sometimes called the Authorized. Its "thees" and "thous," and out-of-date expressions like "verily" instead of "truly" or "actually," might appeal to us. If they

do, perhaps because we associate that language with our childhood religious teachings, we might want to read the King James Version.

If we as born-again Christians feel vividly that the God of Christmas is still close to us, we might want one of the up-to-date, down-to-earth, plain-talk versions. One of them is J. B. Phillips' translation. Phillips was an English pastor who began to translate small portions of the Bible for his church people. They found his translations so helpful that he finally completed the entire New Testament and published it.

Another of these is The Living Bible. It is plain, readable, interestingly written. Its translator, Kenneth Taylor, often takes a thought that is a bit obscure, and makes it clear. The trouble is that he, and Phillips as well, just might at times take too great a liberty with the meaning of what is there in the original language, in order to make it read plainly. This is why some scholars call their versions "paraphrases."

If someone who loves us wrote us a letter, and it had to be translated into our language, we would want the translation to convey to us what the loved one really was saying to us. It wouldn't be enough that we could understand it clearly, if the meaning was missed.

That's why a Bible version as such, done by a large group of persons, is less likely to miss the meaning, than is a one-person translation or paraphrase. In a version, various translating committees must vote on each word and each sentence. And it's not very likely that the majority will agree on an incorrect meaning.

That's one reason why versions such as the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible are good. The New American Standard Bible (the basic translation used in this book) and more recently the New International Version were both done by scholars who all testify to being born again by God's grace. These versions read clearly, and one can pretty well depend on their being correct translations.

One of my friends wrote on a blackboard, at a midweek prayer meeting service, the following: "The King James Version was good enough for the apostle Paul, and it's good enough for me." He asked the congregation what was wrong with the statement, and no one seemed to know.

If two or three things are wrong with the statement, and no one recognized what they are, it might be because some of us Christians have the feeling that the King James Version is the Bible, and that it has been around since Century One.

The King James has been around only since 1611. And now, thankfully, a number of other versions and translations are available to us.

Whatever the Bible version I am reading, I feel that I am hearing God's voice. I sometimes imagine that I am almost feeling God's breath as I read. I am sure that I am viewing God's marvelous works. I feel that I see God's footprints all through the Bible's history, His heartbeat in its devotional books, His redeeming intentions in its countless references to, and offers of, salvation.

Recounting Its Contribution

Said Dr. Harold A. Moody, founder of the League of Coloured Peoples: "Without this comfort from the Bible, my people would long since have lain down and died." What it has been to blacks, it has been to whites and yellows and reds and browns: healing for our wounds, comfort for our trying times, directions for our quandaries. It is more than what Robert Browning thought it to be: "the best of books." It is the Book that points the way to Christ and to heaven.

No wonder we Christians have seen to it that at least one of the books of the Bible is now translated into well over 1,700 languages of the world. The leaves of this Book are for the healing of all our nations. The Gospel of Mark has appeared in more languages than any other Bible book. More copies of the Gospel of John, however, have been printed than any other Bible book. As I read these Gospels, I can see why they have been devoured and appreciated by so many Christians. Indeed, I can see why they have helped many people to become born again Christians.

Some years ago a new Bible translation in Japanese was declared the Book of the Year in Japan. The Bible is that and more. It is the book of every day, for each of us Christians, for every last country on this planet.

The Bible books were written by such people as prophets and apostles, persons who knew God, as we born-again people feel that we know God. God seems to have intended that this written-down Revelation would be a guide to all of us. Thus the apostle Paul, speaking no doubt of the Old Testament, said what we Christians now believe about the New Testament as well: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). The believers at Berea, interestingly, "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily" (Acts 17:11).

A long time ago a young man named Ezekiel at 30 years of age was just getting started as one of God's special prophets, and in a vision he was given something to eat that would be a help to him. Since he was a poet, he describes the experience with vivid words.

A voice -- it must have been God -- said to him, "Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak" (Ezek. 3:1, RSV).

And Ezekiel tells us, beautifully, "So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey" (vv. 2-3, RSV).

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04 -- THE PSALMS ARE SPECIAL

While the Bible in its entirety contains helps for growing Christians, we will discuss the Psalms in particular in commenting further about using Scripture for Christian growth.

The Psalms are simply intoxicated with God. The psalm writers acknowledge God at every step. They quest for the living God, and they help us likewise to reach out to God. In their questing there is often the dimension of wonder. Stretched out and yearning, the psalmists never fully comprehend God's genius in creation nor His loving-kindness toward us.

If our era, with its hydrogen bombs and its East-West divisiveness, tends to give us earth dwellers the jitters, the Psalms will surely give us balm and poise.

What we find in the Psalter is a distilled piety. Right in the heart of the Bible, about in its middle, we find the Bible's most special heart literature. What our hearts are to our physical bodies, the Psalms are to the Bible.

The Psalms find us in the deepest parts of our existence, and they speak a kind of universal heart language to mankind. The Psalms contain perhaps the deepest, truest, most luminous insights ever expressed as to the way in which we ought to look upon our creaturely existence. They contain sustained, steady, in depth looks at life lived under God's gracious sovereignty. John Calvin was referring to such matters as these when he called these bits of glory "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul."

Doubts, fears, penitence, confidence, thanks, praise -- we find all these in this heart literature. And our souls may well run together with the souls of those psalm writers. Their joys become ours, as do their distresses, their confidence, and their moans of contrition. Pens dipped in divine inspiration point right at us. We may go forward for prayer in Psalm 51, water our couch with tears in Psalm 6, recount our blessings in Psalm 103, pant after God as does a thirsty hart after the water brooks in Psalm 42, and pillow our heads in Psalm 23.

Whether a given psalm originated within the soul of David, Moses, Solomon, or someone else (and many of them seem to have come from King David), these songs are alive with the consciousness of God.

Their Help Through History

The Psalms were used in ancient Temple worship for about a thousand years, often being sung by a 150-voice choir, accompanied by numerous rams-horn trumpets. After that, these popular songs came to belong to the whole world -- and to us evangelical Christians in a special way.

At the Last Supper, just before the departure to Gethsemane, Jesus received strength for His gathering storm by singing a psalm with the 11 apostles.

It is very probable that these Hebrew songs helped Paul and Silas, jailed securely in Philippi. At midnight they broke out with "hymns of praise" (Acts 16:25), possibly based on some psalms, and God broke in with release for them.

The early Christians, dauntless amidst persecution, hid the Psalms away in their hearts. The people who wrote the New Testament quoted them frequently. Of the 287 quotations from the Old Testament appearing in the New, 116 are from the Psalter.

Martyrs through the centuries were often bolstered by the Psalms during their last moments. In the Early Church, young and old faced lions in Roman arenas singing,

**I will bless the Lord at all times;
His praise shall continually be in my mouth (Ps. 34:1).**

John Hus, a Protestant before there were any, condemned to death in 1415 by the Council of Constance for what were said to be incorrect teachings, walked to the pile of wood on which they burned him to death reciting Psalm 31. A part of it reads:

**For Thou art my rock and my fortress;
For Thy name's sake Thou wilt lead me and guide me....
Into Thy hand I commit my spirit;
Thou hast ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth (vv. 3, 5).**

And there's Savonarola. Mutilated in body, but with his right hand left him so that he could write a confession of conformity, he lay in his cell and composed a meditation on Psalms 31 and 41.

And take Martin Luther. As a professor in the University at Wittenberg, he lectured for many years on the Psalms. He also preached from them often in the church he pastored in that city. He considered them to be the Bible in miniature. How he relished these pantings after God! He adapted several of them for a "New Churches" hymnal. Many people have not realized that he first found justification by faith in the Psalter and only later saw its full-orbed teaching in such New Testament books as Romans and Galatians.

Luther, as founder of Protestantism, had his share of persecution. It's exciting to read about it -- about his strength in the midst of it. After his excommunication he was fair game for anyone. And the Diet of Worms in 1521 added its civil-ecclesiastical authority to his death sentence. With the German populace four to one on his side, it was thought unwise to execute him. But until his natural death 25 years later, it remained. In his trying times, Luther turned to the Psalms and there found his strength "renewed like the eagle's."

During the 100 years after Luther's time, about 100,000 Protestants were martyred. As they went to their deaths on the scaffold or in the flames, many of them sang,

This is the day which the Lord has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps. 118:24).

These Hebrew songs that open up our souls on their Godward side are a legacy left by the Hebrews to the whole wide world. In F. B. Meyer's book on the Psalms he writes, "In palace halls, by happy hearths, in squalid rooms, in pauper wards, in prison cells, in crowded sanctuaries, in lonely wilderness -- everywhere they have uttered our moan of contrition and our song of triumph; our tearful complaints, and our wrestling, conquering, prayer" (p. 7). Samuel Terrian, in his book *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*, summarizes his wide studies as follows: "No other book of hymns and prayers has been used for so long a time and by so many diverse men and women" (p. vii). And in *The Poetry of the Old Testament*, T. H. Robinson wrote, "No other part of the Old Testament has exercised so wide, so deep, or so permanent an influence on the life of the human soul" (p. 107).

Luther and Calvin fostered psalm singing, along with hymns such as Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." But English-speaking Protestants long sang only the Psalms, considering that in worship services all words sung should be from the Holy Scriptures. They made metrical versions of the Psalms, for something had to be done to align them with the requirements of their developing sense of music. That way, there was rhyme. More important, there was definite meter, so that the Psalms could be fitted to tunes.

With Isaac Watts, however, a new practice developed: that of singing paraphrases of the Psalms. This was done so that more New Testament teaching could be included in them.

Soon Watts, Charles Wesley, Toplady, William Williams, and others were writing hymns. These hymns were often based on Scripture, and frequently on these psalms. For example, Isaac Watts' Jesus shall reign where'er the sun / Does his successive journeys run was inspired by Psalm 72:

May he also rule from sea to sea,

And from the river to the ends of the earth (v. 8).

Mention should also be made of Watts' "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Psalm 90 helped him on that one. Watts had read, "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" (v. 1).

A psalm prepared Methodist John Wesley's heart for his conversion. It was "strangely warmed" as he heard the reading of Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. But in his Journal, in the paragraph preceding the account of his conversion, he tells us that that afternoon at St. Paul's Cathedral he had heard an anthem from the Psalms which had contained these words: If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with Thee (Ps. 130:3-4).

Their Help To Me

In the Psalms I read words that have soul in them and that lift up my soul. I read words that have music in them and that set my spirit to soaring. I read words that have tears in them and that talk it out with me when I have dark days.

The thoughts in the Psalms seem to me as warm as sunshine, as human as a baby, as personal as my next door neighbor's greeting. They are living experiences written out with incandescent words. People sensitive to God's marvelous works are stirred to their depths so that they think high thoughts about God as One who cares and is a refuge.

With the whole heart the poor in spirit here seem to enter right into God's secret place and lose themselves in wondering adoration. They adore Him as one many-sided in mercy, ready to help us all when we pass through deep waters.

It is not the shallow, fat-witted optimism that looks at troubles and laughs them off that we find here. Here are candid camera shots -- people as they are, sometimes in their midnights and sometimes in their noon- days. In their midnights I see them deeply distressed, disturbed to the core so that they hurt out loud. Not with forced smiles do they look up, but with tears and sobs and anguish. They cry out to God; they cry out with wailing. And the Lord hears and delivers. He hears and succors them, hears and shepherds them, hears and sets them singing. They seem to sing out of real victory and not out of a conjured-up mental attitude that knows deep down it is not actually so.

In the Psalms, surely, we have the heart of Old Testament religion. In them deep calls to deep, souls speak out in their dark nights, hearts wonder their way into deep piety. From the apostles to Wesley and onward we have rightly cherished this heart history of Israel as an integral part of our Christian heritage. Let the modernists such as Hegel and Schleiermacher discard them if they will. I will keep them near, even in physical proximity to my New Testament in one of my pocket

editions. For I find in them a language of tears and music and vision, of which hallelujahs and amens are born. I find in them a history of the Israelitish heart which speaks with peculiar relevancy to my heart as a 20th-century Christian who would grow and flower and bear fruit.

The psalm writers are so open before God, so confident of God's grace and power, so sure that God is their God, that they have helped me toward growth in personal confidence -- to which matter we now turn.

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05 -- GROWING IN CONFIDENCE

"You're the young man I'm expecting to become a U.S. senator." That's what I told a standout fellow who was just entering a university with plans for a law career.

Without a second's hesitation, and with complete seriousness, he said, "That will be a little while yet."

He did not say, "Don't expect too much of me"; or, "Not many people can become U.S. senators"; or, "I don't have that kind of potential."

My compliment even shocked me, for I had not intended to say just that.

The fact that it did not shock him made me glad I had said it. And it occasioned my musing on the wholesomeness of an attitude of that sort.

My mind raced back to the time when, as a college freshman, on being elected president of a student organization, I walked to the front of the group and said, "I stand before you in fear and trembling."

It was about the last time I was elected president of anything in that college. My own confidence in my leadership ability would have properly been evaluated at about F-triple-minus, and it is no wonder my fellows estimated it in just about the same way.

I used to think that to be humble is to be self-deprecating, and that to be meek is to be mild and weak. Now, I'm pretty sure that a humble person can be a person of strengths, but who knows that his strengths are not self-derived -- that he has them by heaven's mercies and because of helps given him by parents, teachers, and friends.

The meek person is not one who is bland and spineless; he is a person of quiet strengths that are not paraded but that are as obvious to an observer as if they were.

I told a group of students recently that if I had my life to live over, this is the one way in which I would most like to change it. I would appraise myself as a person whom God made, who was remade by grace, to whom were given special gifts for confident use in Jesus Christ's Church. I would laud and applaud God for His helps, and I would stand straight up and use them every one. I would admit to myself, and perhaps to others, what I believe my strengths to be, and I would employ those strengths in the Lord's service with a highborn confidence.

God helping me, I would accept serious compliments with poise, realizing that the appraisal of others in Christ's Church is one way in which we find out what our gifts are.

If a Christian is a few bricks short of a full load in the department of personal confidence, there are several ways to bolster that self-assurance. One way is to do one's homework well. Whether our work is to speak, or to write, or to counsel other persons, to operate a machine, to wait tables, to conduct sales meetings, to defend a client in court, or to operate on a patient, we can exude confidence when we have prepared adequately for what we are to do.

Another way in which we can bolster our self-confidence is simply to act confident. If we do with precision and finesse whatever we are to do, people associated with us will tend to pick up the feeling that we are doing it well. And our doing it well will tend to build up in us a feeling that we do our thing with expertise.

If what we are doing at a certain time is not something we particularly want to do, we might go ahead and do it in our hit-and-miss way, but still with confidence. We know deep down that, while we are not really good at this, we are good at the things we want to be good at.

The really important factor in our feeling of confidence stems from our knowledge that we are accepted of God. Redeemed through Christ, we born-again Christians are no longer alienated from God. God as Judge forgives us, gives us newness of life, cleanses us from the tendency to sin. God also is reconciled to us, and we to God. And God welcomes us into a family of faith-filled and love-filled and hope-filled persons who make up the Church, over which Christ is the great Head. Besides all this, as we live out our Christian life, intending to obey God, we are cleansed by the blood of Christ of all our faults. If we Christians will more and more form in our minds this kind of understanding of what God does for us, it should help us toward the confidence I am speaking of.

If I were 20 again, therefore, a young Christian freshly embarked upon adulthood, and someone would say, "I expect you to write for millions, and for generations not yet born," I hope I would respond similarly to the young man, whom I expect to become perhaps a senator some day: "That will be a little while yet."

Writing is only one among countless ways for us Christians to serve. Whatever our way of serving Christ, the serving is a way of spiritual growing.

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06 -- GROWING THROUGH SERVICE

"When does the service begin?" A visitor whispered this to the person beside him when the Spirit did not seem to move anyone to break the silvery silence of a Quaker meeting.

Came the hushed answer, "The service begins when the meeting is over." So it is -- or should be. The service to the least and the lost of this world begins after the worshipper, with the sinews of his soul flexed by church attendance, leaves the church and walks out into the busy ways of people.

Those who enter the chapel of Goshen Seminary in Indiana see the words, "Jesus is Lord." As they leave, they are faced at the back of the chapel with the command, "Go make disciples of all men."

The Lord wants salty Christians who will carry the tang of Christ to the world.

One translation of Acts 8:4 has it that the early Christians went everywhere "gossiping the Gospel" making Christ the talk of every town. Why not? He is the captivating, compelling Savior who draws sinners to himself.

Saint Paul likes to call the Church the Body of Christ, which means that it is Christ's way of being embodied in this present world. On Sundays (and at other times) the church, Christ's embodiment, comes together. On Mondays, at about seven o'clock to eight in the morning, it is breakfasting in homes. At midmorning it is coffeing in offices, factories, schools.

True, the church is the building on the corner of Wayward Road and New Haven Drive. More importantly, it is individual Christians, growing Christians, on weekdays, out there in the big and bursting world, rubbing thoughts with two or three or four persons who are trying to find their way from the city of anywhere to the city of somewhere.

Many Christians have enough religion to make them decent, but not enough to make them dynamic. It is said that organizations, including churches, tend to pass through three stages: (1) when those connected with it work for a dream; (2) when they work for the organization itself; and (3) when they work to preserve their place in the organization.

The continued growth of Christians in the Church is imperative if the dream stage is to be maintained. And the dream stage obtains when the church members see that the church exists in the main, or at least importantly, for those not yet in it.

Needed, then, is the costly understanding that "the service begins when the meeting is over." And serving Christians are growing Christians.

Thinking of my own need to grow in grace through service, I found myself praying that the Lord would pass me around to wherever human need smarts. I prayed about as follows:

"Father, I am Your bread. Break me up and pass me around to the poor and the otherwise needy of this world.

"I am Your towel. Take me and dampen me with tears and with me wash the feet of people who are weary with walking and with working.

"I am Your light. Take me out to where the darkness is thick, to where it is blacker than black, to where no light can be seen beyond the present gloom, there to shine and let Christ shine. And to keep on shining and letting Christ shine even if no one seems to be taking note.

"I am Your pen. Take me up in Your hand and, with me, write whatever word You wish written, and placard the word where the least and the lost of this world will see it and read it and be helped by it.

"I am Your salt. Sprinkle me on all the things which You want for people so that Your purposes will taste better to them. If people around me do not savor their lot in life, sprinkle me upon them so that my faith and my love and my hope will flavor their experiences. Spread me out like a thick blanket over the people whose faith is about to spoil, even if there is then no part of me remaining to be used up for myself.

"I am Your water. Pour me into people who thirst for You but do not even know that it is You for whom they thirst. Pour into them the trust that You have helped me to place in You. Pour into them the inward witness that is in me. Pour into them from me the promise that soon the summer drought will pass and refreshing rivers of water will gush down over them, and they will both drink of it and swim in it.

"I am Yours, Lord God. Use me up in what You will, when You will, where You will, for whom You will, even if it means that I am given responsibilities that are considerable."

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07 -- THE POWER IS FOR LOADS

The huge truck-cab I saw on the street looked so sawed off I hardly realized it had two sets of axles and wheels. It was just a huge cab, with a driver, but without a load. It was not even toting an empty trailer.

At the back end, which came so soon the way a rabbit's end does, I could see the large, circular, greasy steel plate designed to accommodate the front end of a trailer with a load capacity of many tons. But no load was there.

This scene reminded me that sometimes we Christians are like that truck: we possess a source of gargantuan power, so that we could carry huge loads, and be a real help to many people; but we carry no actual load at all. We might carry a few things with us, designed mostly for personal use, as the truck-cab would if it carried some tools and some bedding. But we carry no real other-people cargo.

The power we are connected with can transform a lecherous person into a loving person, a selfish person into a selfless individual, a scoundrel into a saint. It can transform a persecutor like the apostle Paul into a propagator, an unfulfilled monk into Luther, a slave trader like John Newton into the writer of "Amazing Grace." It can make a quite ordinary shoe salesman into a Dwight L. Moody, a baseball player into a Billy Sunday.

"You shall receive power," we read, "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). After our Pentecost, we have a source of power for hooking up to loads in local churches, in a denomination's institutions, in service to a community or an entire city or nation.

It is still possible to move about without using the power we are connected to. But that has about it the look of the ridiculous, even the pathetic. The more natural, normal, expected thing for a power-filled Christian to do for Christ and His Church is to carry some kind of a cargo (unlike a trailerless truck-cab), a cargo appropriate to the power.

The Matter Of Membership

One thing this indicates is that the growing Christian will probably connect himself with a local church and become active in its ministries. In the New Testament, it is taken for granted that any given person, when he becomes a Christian, becomes added to the Church at the same time. It does not teach that one becomes a believer and later "joins" the Church. There were added to the Church daily "those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). To be saved was itself to be added to the Church. People did not become believers and later join a membership class and talk with a pastor about church membership.

Today we need to join a church in a formal way in part because there are so many denominations and so many creeds which define Christian beliefs for the people in those many organizations.

Since a believer today has so many options as to which kind of church to join, he needs to give that matter a full consideration. Having done that, with prayer for guidance, and perhaps consulting with Christian acquaintances, he should join some local church and invest himself in its ministries. In it, he will receive baptism if he has not been baptized. In it, he will receive the Lord's Supper periodically. He will hear the preaching of the gospel. He will have fellowship with other believers.

The Church, like its Lord Christ, its great Head, is human as well as divine, so one needs to make allowances for its foibles and fumbings, its mannerisms and murmurings. Yet it is the way Christ still has embodiment in this world; it extends His 33 years of enfleshment. Thus 20 times Paul calls it the Body of Christ.

It is an organization, as well as an organism, and the growing Christian needs to realize this. As an organism, the Church is developing by transformation from within, the way a body does when it ingests food. But the church as an organization has various human authorities figuring in it with various human offices. It grows in part by the same methods which business firms use, and it sometimes struggles or fails in a given local community. At times, this is from failure to use what in businesses are good methods. A person working in the church, growing in it, needs to be understanding of ways in which the church as an organization falls short of the ideal. One is neither to throw up his hands and quit if it seems to fail as an organization, nor to become smug if it succeeds overwhelmingly as an organization.

Serving According To Our Gifts

Something else indicated by the fact that the power given us is for pulling loads is that a growing Christian should find out what his gifts are and serve in the local church according to his gifts.

The gift (singular) of the Spirit is a synonym for the baptism with the Holy Spirit which is sometimes (as in Acts 2:4) the same as being filled with the Holy Spirit. The gifts (plural), however, are different from the gift. The "spiritual gifts," or the gifts of the Spirit, are perhaps eight or nine in number though some seem to delineate many more from various scripture passages. One of the best known lists is that given by Paul in Rom. 12:6-8 where he notes seven such gifts (see also 1 Cor. 12:8-10 and Eph. 4:11). These gifts are special helps the Holy Spirit gives certain persons for service in the church. These gifts usually work in and through natural talents and naturally acquired abilities (as in playing musical instruments), but they may be special endowments.

We find out what our own special gifts are by following obediently the promptings of the Holy Spirit to do service for Christ in the church. As we follow these promptings to engage in specific activities, we might find that we are persons through whom God does certain kinds of services particularly well. The gifts seem to have an order of priority about them. For example, the gift of prophecy seems to be just lower than being an apostle.

One way in which a Christian can find out what his special gifts are is to take note of what the body of believers who know him ask him to do in the church. If the other believers, seeking always to be guided by the Spirit, ask a Christian to help supervise something, or to teach, or to preach, or whatever, it is an indication that one's gift or gifts might lie in that direction.

Paul's admonition to the Corinthians must be remembered, too, that to love other persons in a self-giving way is more to be desired than even the best gifts. After listing various gifts and discussing them, Paul adds, "I show you a still more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31). Then follows the great hymn of love contained in 1 Corinthians 13. Early in it he says, "If I have the gift of prophecy," even the greatest of the gifts, "but do not have love, I am nothing" (v. 2). Love seems to have a place similar to faithfulness in marriage. If a person were to do all kinds of things for his mate, it would not give him any standing in the marriage if he was unfaithful to the marriage vows. If a person were to work ever so much in the local church, yet do so without love, it might profit the church somewhat, but it would not profit him. That is why Paul says, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity [love], it profiteth me nothing" (v. 3, KJV).

Collegiality With Others

Within the local church, working through it and growing by means of it, it is good for a born-again Christian to nourish his feeling of collegiality with other Christians. The ideal collegiality is a feeling of oneness not only with other Christians of the local church and the denomination with which it is affiliated, but with other Christians whatever their "given" names might be: Baptists, Methodists, or whatever other labels true Christians use. All who are born-again Christians are Christians, whatever the segmenting that has occurred. And any Christian has a oneness in Christ with all Christians. Paul says in Gal. 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV).

A oneness with other Christians exists at the point of the faith's underpinnings. It is a oneness because we are built upon the foundation of prophets and apostles with Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20, KJV). It is a oneness in which we all drink from the same fountain.

It is a oneness because we are all in the apostolic succession. We are in this succession because we have experienced Christ by firsthand encounter, as the

apostles did. We are in it, too, because we have been sent, as they were -- sent to speak of Christ to the ends of the world and to what is sometimes called the end of time (better, "the end of the age," Matt. 28:20).

We are in the apostolic succession also because we teach the doctrines taught by the apostles. The importance of sound doctrine can hardly be overemphasized. Any churchman, regardless of his title or branch of Christendom, has no right to lay claim to such a holy calling when he denies such teachings as the Virgin Birth and the Deity of Christ. If he does, he is hardly in the apostolic succession doctrinally.

In the kind of apostolic genealogy that counts, all authentic Christians are in it; and this is an aspect of the collegiality with other Christians that we enjoy.

All Christians Are Ministers

All the while, the growing Christian, exercising his gifts through the local church, needs to understand that according to the New Testament all Christians are in ministry -- not just the ordained Christians. The work of an ordained Christian might be different only in function, and not in kind, from that of his lay brother or sister.

The lay-person's work is also called "ministry" in the New Testament. For example, in Eph. 4:11-12, some are made "apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for work in his service" (NEB). The KJV and RSV translate the word for "service" as "ministry," and they may do so, for it is from the usual word for ministry. The point here is that whereas different functions are mentioned, all the people of God are in ministry.

The ordained Christian and the lay Christian are both priests, for the whole Church of God is a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:5), even as they are both ministers. Both enjoy the office of bringing the needs of others to God in prayer. Both intercede between the estranged parties, God and rebels, toward their reconciliation -- the world to God, and, yes, God to the world.

The special growth of the New Testament Church occurred, in large measure, because there was little distinction between ordained and unordained Christians. All Christians were ministers, and most of them acted like it. They all served committedly and consumingly. All were more or less professionals. At least it was not left simply to the ordained ones to do the church's ministry. No wonder they turned the world upside down. Read First Thessalonians and see. The so-called lay Christians there spoke of Christ to all and sundry -- so much so that Paul, the professional in the full sense, hardly needed to do anything. He writes:

"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your

labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Brothers loved by God, we know that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia -- your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead -- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess. 1:2-10, NIV).

A life of service to Christ does not mean that there will always be easy sledding. Although God is a God of both providence and miracle, the Christian who serves might also have to suffer.

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08 -- INCHING TALLER IN THE PINCH

I liked the man I read about some time ago who was fishing from a gable of his house as it floated down a river during a flood.

I also like the optimism in the man who is said to have built a rock fence six feet wide and five feet high--so that, if it ever did get turned over, it would stand higher than before.

It was in the pinch that the sterling quality of Joseph's mettle was proven. And Daniel's. And Job's, of course. Several of Paul's New Testament Epistles were written as letters from jail.

John Milton couldn't see what he was writing because he was blind, but a lot of other people have seen what he wrote. They have seen it and liked it for over 300 years.

Beethoven, writing the sounds of music, was too deaf to hear them, but we've all heard them. And we're all richer for having heard them. Fanny Crosby wrote hymns about seeing many things, when physically she herself could see nothing.

Not many of us have suffered a greater setback in our work than Thomas Carlyle did. His massive history of the French revolution completed, he loaned it to a friend for that person's comments. The friend read it into the night, lying on his

bed, languidly dropping the pages in a heap at the side of the bed. The next morning he left the room, and the housekeeper destroyed them as trash. And it was the only copy Carlyle had. Undaunted, he worked two years reproducing the material, and the work stands today as a standard in the field.

Think too of Enrico Caruso and how he was underestimated as a young man. His voice teacher told him he had no voice. The next 12 years he worked to support himself, studying voice all the while. Eventually he became the most noted singer of his generation.

Then there was that World War I veteran who returned from "over there" unable to march his way proudly. He had no legs left. He had no eyes left. He had only one arm. Yet there came the day when The Johns Hopkins University arranged a special graduation to confer upon him the Ph.D. degree.

To inch taller in character and in accomplishments through suffering or in spite of suffering, has happened all kinds of times.

Jesus Christ "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8, RSV). Finally, when He suffered death on a Roman cross, the Just for the unjust, the sinner's vicarious Substitute, He softened the Father's holy wrath against sin and provided for the redemption of the human race. That is no small accomplishment of suffering.

An inmost kernel of truth in Christianity is that suffering is, or can be, redemptive. This Man from Nazareth, this God-Man, was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, beaten for our healing -- on a hill outside the gate.

Paul, who knew that suffering is, or can be, redemptive, told the Philippian Christians, "To you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (1:29).

And he told the Colossian church that when we Christians suffer, we make up what is lacking in Christ's suffering (1:24). Something lacking in Christ's suffering, Paul? He's fully God and fully man, and sinless; so He is guiltless, not deserving of death. But He died on our behalf. And something is lacking in it? Something is lacking which we supply when we suffer on behalf of others the way Christ did?

That is right. Something is lacking in Christ's suffering, but only in a sense: It is that He did it a long time ago and a long way off. We Christians today make up what is lacking in Christ's suffering by standing right up in front of people in the now, in flesh and blood, and suffering on their behalf.

That is what the Christian wife does when an erring husband drinks away or gambles away much or all of the Friday night paycheck. That is what the parent

does when an erring son or daughter goes his own sweet way, parent or no parent. That is what an employee does when a fellow worker drinks a mite too much, doesn't show up at work on Monday, and his fellow employee ungrudgingly doubles for him.

All who have done their share of suffering can be sure they have grown in grace as a result of it.

Since the time when the long arm of God's grace reached out and drew me to himself, I have had a number of occasions for testing those promises about how the Lord will stand by His own in their times of heaviness and loss. Our firstborn had to be taken out to a cemetery and buried. At that time the Lord was nearer to me than breathing -- a healing balm for my brokenness, a pearl of great price for my time of loss. He was all that also to my wife.

There was the time when the doctors could not break a high fever, and I seemed to be in God's Privy Council chambers as I wrote and hid a letter of esteem and instruction which my wife would find on my passing.

Another time, too, I thought I had not known such a feeling of nearness to God as when two ear specialists had given me a dim diagnosis: The eardrum was perforated; some bone structure was missing; it sported a tumor that "could get to the brain." I had to know, they said.

Right then, my journey upward became a journey downward, full speed ahead. I began to let go of my wife, our children, my teaching and writing -- my life. For several hours, immediately after the verdict, I meditated and brooded, trying to be accepting of what perhaps was to be.

In facing possible death or insanity, I began a process of turning over to God each main area of my life interests. The children were in their attention-demanding years, all three under five. Employee pensions are paltry when you haven't put much into the kitty. The things I had meant to do with my life were mostly undone -- things I could now do because the Ph.D. degree had just been finished.

I don't know why I didn't ask God to heal me. I just didn't. Not for a couple of weeks. Perhaps it was grace that kept me from this kind of immediate reaction. I did a little brooding and a lot of abandoning, and the closeness to God seemed barrierless.

Thirteen days later, according to a plan of months' standing, the president of our seminary spoke in chapel on divine healing and invited the ill forward for anointing and prayer. Only then did I feel I should ask God if He might heal me.

As the message had progressed, the ear had hurt more and more acutely. When I was anointed and prayed for, the hurting ceased entirely, although there were traces of the pain about an hour later.

The next day, after a full examination, the specialist declared, "This ear is nice and normal now. There is no perforation, and the tumor has disappeared." Two weeks later the report was similar, as it was two months after that.

Whereas my watch had scarcely been detected when placed to that ear, the hearing became normal. In fact, when I tested the two ears at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, both functioned considerably above average, but the healed one distinctly better than the other.

God does not directly will every illness, but He has a will in every illness. His will, surely, is that we react creatively to such trying times. Perhaps He will choose to heal, perhaps not. He might use medical science to get us mended. It is for us to submit to His will, confident that "the Lord is righteous in all His ways" (Ps. 145:17). Those who so submit, whether healed or not, are pretty sure to inch taller in the pinch.

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09 -- GROWING BY FASTING

Unlike such matters as prayer and Scripture reading, fasting is much more take-it-or-leave-it. All Christians are to commune with God and read the Bible, but fasting is not enjoined in Scripture in the inclusive way that, say, prayer is.

Some of God's people fast, while others don't. Paul often did (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27, KJV). And others did also (Acts 13:2; 14:23). Yet in the case of some of the New Testament's honored characters, it is not known that they fasted.

In Old Testament times, the fasting that was done might be to acknowledge an acute national or personal peril such as in the Book of Jonah. Devout people did fast, however, as recorded in 1 Sam. 7:6; Neh. 1:4; Joel 2:12.

While Jesus himself fasted once for 40 days (Matt. 4:2), He did not fast regularly. He was even accused of being a glutton (11:19). He did not expect His disciples to fast while He was with them in the flesh -- stating that they would fast later (Mark 2:20).

John and Charles Wesley included fasting or partial fasting (which they called abstinence) as one of the general rules for the early Methodist societies. Of fasting, John Wesley says that God "hath, in all ages, appointed this to be a means of averting his wrath, and obtaining whatever blessings we, from time to time, stand in need of" (Works, 5:351). Wesley himself often fasted on Wednesdays and

Fridays, not taking any food until after three o'clock in the afternoon -- as the early Christians often did.

You might expect that Martin Luther, who had found the road of monkish piety to be a dead-end street, would have nothing to do with fasting after becoming justified by faith. But the man from Wittenberg did not go to the other extreme and say that fasting is pointless. It is not a means of a person's being justified, Luther felt, but it is a means of a justified person's growth in the Christian life. He gave one qualifying word, however: Fasting should not be forced, but undertaken only in a voluntary way.

Purposes Of Fasting

What are the purposes of fasting? We fast because Christ and others, of biblical times and later, set us an example in this form of self-denial. And can it be a mere coincidence that the three persons of Scripture who fasted 40 days and 40 nights -- Moses, Elijah, and Christ (Exod. 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Matt. 4:2) -- are the persons who became transfigured one day on a mountain in northern Palestine before three enthralled disciples?

We fast sometimes because it is a way of assuring God that we regret some happening. Thus during the Exile in the sixth century B.C., when the Jews were deprived of their homeland, they instituted four special fast days each year to commemorate events connected with their becoming subjugated to Babylon. When the world tumbled in on them, they took to fasting.

We may fast when we need special guidance. After Cornelius had fasted, he was told to send for Peter -- who helped him (Acts 10:30). We might fast as we pray for the effectiveness of those whom the church is sending forth into Kingdom work. The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending Paul and Barnabas into missionary work (Acts 13:2). The King James Version links fasting with prayer also in Matt. 17:21 and Mark 9:29. But the oldest Greek manuscripts do not contain references to fasting at these places, causing Nestle's Greek text to omit them, along with the ASV, RSV, and NEB.

We fast as a way of desecularizing ourselves in the midst of a secularized society. It dramatizes the fact that we place more importance upon the there-and-then than we do upon the here-and-now.

We fast, too, as an aid to prayer. John Wesley calls this a "weighty reason for fasting," adding: "It is chiefly as an aid to prayer, that it has so frequently been found a means, in the hand of God, of confirming and increasing, not one virtue, not chastity only., but also seriousness of spirit, earnestness, sensibility and tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, and consequently the love of God, and every holy and heavenly affection" (Works, 5:200-201).

Besides these so-called spiritual benefits of fasting, with their biblical and historical bases, the physical benefits must not be forgotten. Weight loss in overweight persons is an obvious advantage. And to keep a more-or-less correct weight is certainly a proper interest of Christians who are seeking spiritual growth.

Added to the benefit of weight loss is the general rejuvenation of the body's functions which many health authorities believe results particularly from fasts of three days or more.

Caution In Fasting

Even though there are commendable purposes in fasting, this means of Christian growth needs to be undertaken with cautions and safeguards, especially with respect to motives.

Fasting is not to be undertaken as a way of putting on display our special brand of devotedness to Christ. When we fast, in fact, we are to freshen up so as not to appear to be fasting (Matt. 6:16-18).

It is not to be undertaken as a way of building up a status of meritoriousness for ourselves.

It is not to be undertaken as a way of putting God into a corner, pressuring Him to perform simply the whims of the likes of us creatures.

Fasting is futile if it is done in order to "beat the record" of others who have fasted or who have failed to fast.

Fasting is worse than futile if it is undertaken for the sake of suffering, for the God who made us and who remakes us is not interested in our suffering in that way. That is the way the servants of Baal suffered. They "cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them" (1 Kings 18:28, KJV).

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10 -- GROWING THROUGH DISCIPLINE

When my long-time teaching colleague Richard S. Taylor, author of *The Disciplined Life*, retired, I said in a public service that if he were being martyred for his faith and were offered any food he wished as a last meal, he would probably order a low-cal lunch! He is not actually that extreme, but he does emphasize properly the matter of discipline in the Christian life. Surely a born-again Christian will want to be a disciplined person.

For one thing, we need to discipline our bodies. The apostle Paul testified, "I keep under my body" (1 Cor. 9:27, KJV). He must have been talking about disciplining it. While the human body is quite evidently a product of God's creative genius, and while it is God's intention to resurrect it, it often occasions a Christian's less-than-Christian actions. Its desires for food and for sex, for example, require disciplining.

Most Christians would readily agree that sexual desires need to be disciplined. Yet many do not pay very much attention to discipline of the body in its desire for food.

As I grew up in the Ozark hills, I heard dozens of preachers in brush arbors and country schoolhouses-and almost to a person they were obese. I learned to expect obesity in country preachers. Many of them lived at our home while they conducted protracted meetings, and these men were all out-sized. What I mean is, they were not simply overweight, they were fat.

It is a fact, of course, that in rare instances a person's obesity is due to glandular, metabolic factors. It is also a fact that some persons, including Christians of course, have developed poor eating habits that are not easy to break. But when all proper allowances are made, a Christian who yearns for spiritual maturity ought to count appropriate weight a matter of spiritual importance.

While the preachers I knew as I grew up had rich meals set before them in the homes where they were guests, their kind of work was not sufficiently demanding physically to burn up those extra calories. They even joked about their fat bellies. But since many illnesses and earlier death result from obesity, it is not a light matter.

Obesity might be a trifle more objectionable in women than in men. If a woman is not pretty or lovely because she is obese, she denies herself at the point of an exceedingly deep need: the need for a good appearance.

Almost all the by-products of Christian faith are desirable ones. Christian faith contributes to sobriety, marital fidelity, integrity, responsibility in business affairs, etc. One would be hard put to give much of a list of undesirable by-products of the Christian life. But we can be sure that the weight problem is one frequent undesirable by-product of our present affluent Christianity. It is also widespread. Both husbands and wives may be inclined to let down at this point as Christian marriage partners because they feel that their spouses are locked to them in marriage since they do not believe in divorce.

In the case of men perhaps they more often err in other ways. They might not be sufficiently neat in their personal habits, or they might not be as courteous and gentle to their wives as they would be if they felt that divorce was an option to their women.

A husband's lack of neatness or lack of gentleness can be a serious matter from a wife's viewpoint. But a wife's obesity, from a husband's viewpoint, is utterly serious. It is the difference between hamburger and T-bone steak.

This matter of being overweight, significant though it is, is not the only area of discipline for the Christian, however.

Another is the discipline of our speech. The maturing Christian will not express every thought that crosses his mind. He might think that he is treated unfairly, but he will not necessarily say so. He might think that a person has betrayed him, but still he does not need to say so. He might think of a story that, if told, will hurt a friend, or denigrate women, or deprecate a race or a religion, but he learns to be discriminating in his humor, and not to repeat such stories. Curse words might come to mind in the moment of a sudden pain or disappointment, especially if he used such words habitually prior to becoming a Christian. But through disciplining his tongue, such expressions will increasingly be less likely to escape from his lips.

Another is the discipline of our moods. Some people, by temperament itself, but also by a pattern set in earlier life through the influence of others, are prone to highs and lows on the emotional scales. They overact and overreact. The loss of a friendly table game can upset them. To be ignored or slighted by another person can cause a low mood that is hard to shake. The opposite is also true of them, that they look for and hope for small reasons to feel elated. Yet, as we Christians mature in God's grace, becoming more and more adult in our spiritual life, even if we have had a proneness to high and low moods, we will be enabled more and more to control our emotions. We might allow ourselves the luxury of emotional highs, at least when there is a fair degree of warrant for them. But when troubles enter, we will flee to God for help. He is our Refuge and Strength, an ever present help in time of trouble.

I am not meaning to be simply moralistic in this discussion of growing by discipline. It is of little help to a person to be reminded that he ought to be disciplined in his eating, in his speech, in his moods, and in other ways not discussed here, unless that person is willing to change his habits. He probably already knows that he ought to be disciplined in these ways. But as a Christian avails himself of the many means of grace discussed in this book, he will be more and more enabled to grow toward the ideal of a disciplined life.

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11 -- WE ARE THERE AND HE IS HERE

Goethe once observed that "the highest cannot be spoken; it can only be acted." Perhaps that is why the groom does not state his love for all to hear at the

close of the wedding ceremony, but instead kisses his bride. At this moment no words are adequate. Only a dramatizing of their affection for each other will suffice.

Job's friends empathized with him for seven days, without saying a word to him (see Job 2:13). This was more meaningful than when they later tried to help him with words. Their words were not very sensitive, they misfired, and they disclosed more of unlove than of love. Goethe was right: The highest cannot be spoken.

A psychiatrist I know urges pastors whom he trains in a Lutheran seminary to see how long they can keep silent when they first visit a person who has lost a loved one. The sober expression, the handshake, the eyes holding for a moment the eyes of the bereaved person -- this dramatizing of care is what the psychiatrist urges. At a time like that, the highest cannot be spoken.

If I am overwhelmed by the impact of a speech or sermon of a close friend, and I really want him to know how special I felt his word was, I make my way to him, offer my hand, and hold his eyes a few seconds with my eyes, without saying anything. If I say, "I appreciated that," or "Thank you," or "What a significant word," or anything else, I feel that I do what is less meaningful than when I go to him and say nothing at all. I am pretty sure, too, that my friends have felt more impact from such a contact than when I have spoken my appreciation.

In numerous ways, actually, we act out, without words, what Goethe means by "the highest." The handshake itself, even though it is used frequently, dramatizes human camaraderie. A man's courtesies to a woman, in tipping the hat or letting her precede him (it isn't necessarily because he's afraid to go first!) dramatizes his appreciation of and respect for women. Our standing up to salute the flag and to sing the national anthem is also acting out "the highest."

When we Christians receive the Lord's Supper, the highest is acted out. We are prepared for the highest by a Communion meditation, by liturgy including audible prayer and Scripture reading. But when we come to the very highest, we do not say anything. We place the bread into our mouths and lift and drink the wine in silence, acting out our faith in the redemption from sin provided for by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are there, at the Cross, when we seal with a ritual act our confidence in the event which provided for our salvation.

Not only so, but in the supper He is here! Not only do we go back and stand with the faithful at Calvary, viewing the Lamb of God as He hangs there on our behalf, but the Christ of Calvary, risen and ascended, sits with us in the congregation. There He is companioning us, strengthening us for life's struggles, dynamically entering into our life situation to help us in whatever kind of specific needs we happen to have.

It is not that the substance of the bread and wine becomes transformed into the literal body of Christ, as in Roman Catholic teaching. It might not be that Christ's bodily presence is in and with the symbols as heat is in a red-hot poker, as Martin Luther taught (although the Lutheran churches do not necessarily follow their founder on this point). Communicants of the Reformed, Anglican, and Wesleyan traditions, as well as many Lutherans -- a large proportion of Protestants -- understand that Christ is spiritually (dynamically) present when the symbols are received with an open heart. He is present to faith or through faith.

If it be asked why music, say the music of Bach, will not suffice to make all heaven break loose upon our souls and mend us at the depths, it must be admitted that for many, at least, great music is of distinct benefit. But if such music had been ordained as the specific means whereby the faithful would receive periodic sacramental renewal, several undesirable factors would have obtained. The great music would have had to be written, and played well, on proper instruments, to people who could comprehend its meaning. In this there would not have been the universality of obtainment and the simplicity of rendition that the faith has in what was established as its means of special, sacramental renewal.

Bread and grape juice or wine can be obtained even in remote places of the world, and thereby communicants can observe this means of grace. Some in Christendom, such as Roman Catholics and Anglicans, believe that fermented wine only should be used. Many Protestants prefer unfermented grape juice -- partly so that an alcoholic person would not even taste, in a religious service, that for which he has an almost uncontrollable desire. Many Christians mix water with the wine and grape juice to symbolize the water which, along with blood, flowed from Christ's side at the Crucifixion. And no doubt God is understanding if, say, on a battlefield, substitutes for bread and wine must be made when either or both of those two common foods cannot be obtained.

Another reason why we do not substitute something like music for the sacrament of Communion is the Christian faith is rooted in history, in a certain history connected with one Jesus Christ, who was God's Son enfleshed in Palestine 2,000 years ago. It was while tabernacling among us that this Christ chose for us these symbols -- this kind of continuing means whereby special grace is conveyed to the believing sacramental recipient. Music by Bach will not suffice, nor paintings by da Vinci, nor some Passion Play presentation. Ours is a living tradition with Jesus Christ as its living Head, and elements already chosen for us are what symbolize the historical events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

It is not to be supposed, of course, that growth in grace occurs, whether or no, when the elements are received. A person in a drunken stupor, or asleep, would receive benefit from a vaccine inoculation. Not so with the Lord's Supper. In it, nothing so automatic is involved. But, to faith, spiritual benefits just as real can accrue to the believing communicant. Christ has ordained that the supper be a most

special periodic means to the taller growth of the faith-filled and hope-filled Christian.

The Lord's Supper is usually received in a worship setting. So let us now consider worship in a more general way as a means of a born-again Christian's spiritual growth.

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12 -- WONDER IN OUR WORSHIP

This is an age when we have stretched ourselves. Our voices can be heard around the world. Our bodies can be transported at 17,000 miles an hour and more. We can split and fuse certain kinds of atoms. Most of the microbes and viruses that have beaten us so badly in the past have been found out. It used to be that everything that went up came down. That has been changed with our one-way, space-probing vehicles. And it is often a very long time before things come down that we put into space orbit around the earth.

Name the task, and we have a machine for it these days. With automation we have constructed devices which can do more in a day than thousands of human beings could in the same length of time. Large companies pay huge sums just to rent lightning-fast computers to handle their accounting. What man has wrought!

Nobody fully understands the top secrets in all the areas of our technological advance. Most of us understand very little about them. But what happens when you display amazement at something on which man has stretched himself? Someone says, "Oh, it's easy to understand." The person takes you through the scientific process involved, and it often does seem rather simple when explained. Or someone else responds, "Well, I don't know how the device works, but there are people who could explain the entire process to us." Someone, at least, knows how it works.

This ability to explain -- what does it do to us human beings? Does it not often transfer itself into the realm of religion and tend to rob many of us of our sense of wonder?

When we worship, we are recognizing "worthship" as inhering in a being far higher than ourselves -- the word worship in our present English language being a shortening of worthship. When we worship, we are in awestruck contemplation of the Persons of the Trinity. When we worship, we express our religious instinct in penitence, praise, and the uplift of holy joy before God, our Creator-Redeemer. When we worship, we make an attempt to laud God for His loving-kindness. When we worship, we reach upward with a glad, sure trust; we venture and soar. Worshipping is often as someone has said, a "swift, resolute motion of the soul, intense as leaping flame."

The principal word for worship in the Old Testament denotes the idea of bowing down or prostrating oneself. This is so in Exod. 4:31 where folk "bowed their heads and worshipped" (KJV). A similar idea is also found in at least 94 other Old Testament passages. The main New Testament word for worship, found numerous times, also carries the idea of bowing down or prostrating oneself upon the ground.

Since worship is all this and more, and since our times tend to minimize the sphere where there is mystery and wonder, we need to take care lest we try to bring God down to our size and seek to find Him out completely. That's what the people did long ago who began to build the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).

There is a sense in which the God of Bethlehem is no more than a heartbeat away from us who are Christ's. But with all those precious thoughts about God's nearness to us and likeness to us, engendered by the Son's taking flesh, God is still God. It was after the Son's first advent that Paul could still speak of "the exceeding greatness of his [God's] power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ" (Eph. 1:19-20, KJV).

There is a barbed-wire area surrounding God's being, beyond which we creatures, in our contemplation, cannot pass. If we were to be invited within that area, we would not have this same sense of mystery in meditating upon the Father.

And without unfathomable mystery there is no high faith. That is why Paul asked, "For what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" (Rom. 8:24, KJV). This being so, we need to keep in mind that there are some important senses besides the usual five, and that one of them is the sense of wonder. With a deepening of this sense will come a deepening of footage from which the soul will grow just a little taller.

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13 -- THE PROMISED PRESENCE

Particularly in the southern part of the United States, people often say they are "going to meeting" when they are going to a church service. In some areas the word "meeting" refers to a series of evangelistic services.

When the word "meeting" is used of individual church services, most people think of it as referring to the meeting of the people with each other in order to share together in religious services. Growing up in the South, that is what I and my acquaintances meant by a "meetin'."

It is exciting that the expression has another special dimension in it, as used in Scripture. In the Old Testament, before the Temple was built, the nomadic people

of God worshiped in a movable Tabernacle. In the King James Version the Hebrew is translated "tabernacle," but in other versions it is often translated literally as "tent of meeting." The Tabernacle was a "tent of meeting."

The Scriptures themselves tell us why the place was thus named. According to Exod. 29:42-43, 45, the Tabernacle was to be known as the "tent of meeting" because the Lord said, "I will meet you, to speak there unto thee. And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God" (KJV).

Exciting, isn't it? The tent of meeting does not merely refer to the structure where the people meet with each other. They do meet there with each other, and there is something fine and wonderful about that. But when God tells us what it is to be called, He says it is to be so named because He will meet there with His people. A "meeting" is where we Christians gather together and God meets with us.

When Jesus came, He taught the importance of meeting God in spirit wherever the place of worship may be. To the woman at the well near Sychar in Samaria He said, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24, KJV).

The time had come when people could be taught an internationalized faith, and Jesus taught such at this time. Not just at the earlier movable Tabernacle nor at the later stationary Temple at Jerusalem would people worship God. Wherever two or three would meet together in Christ's name, they could worship God. They would do so "in spirit" (in a spiritual way) and "in truth" (in a way that could make a real difference in their lives). And Christ would be in their midst (Matt. 18:20).

According to both the Old Testament and the New Testament, then, God has promised to meet with us when we congregate for worship. We may still understand that God will meet with us when we go along with a joyful heart to keep holyday with others of the faith. The worshipper meets with the others, of course, at the church service. But according to a pledge of long-standing veracity, fulfilled on countless occasions, God meets with the worshipper.

Worship is a two-way street where the living and loving and reciprocating God, who is the kind of God the growing Christian needs, proves himself to be the kind of God the growing Christian has.

In a Roman Catholic worship service, usually called a mass, there might or might not be a sermon. This is so, whether it is a high mass or a low mass. We Protestants might guess that the masses that include a sermon would be the high mass, but this is not so. What makes a mass "high" is the ritual's being "sung" at places, as by a choir.

In Protestantism generally, we would feel we had been robbed, or at least shortchanged, if we received no sermon when we joined other growing Christians in a worship service.

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14 -- THE SERMON AS A MEANS OF GROWTH

The story is told of an usher in a fashionable church who would take a broom handle and, with the end of it, tap the heads of persons in the congregation who fell asleep during the sermon. When he tapped one man, there was no response, so he tapped a little harder. The man roused and said, "Hit me a little harder. I can still hear him." That legendary fellow would prefer to be knocked out cold rather than listen to that particular sermon.

At the opposite extreme is a story I heard about how much worth a sermon has. Three boys were bragging about how much money their dads earned in a brief period of time. One of them, a physician's son, said, "My dad can cut open a person's stomach and earn \$500 in half an hour." A lawyer's son said, "My dad can talk to a judge for half an hour and get sometimes \$1,000 as his part of a settlement." The third lad, a preacher's son, said, "That's nothing. My dad can sit around all week, then talk 30 minutes on a Sunday morning, and it takes a dozen ushers to collect all the money the people give him."

Seriously, the sermon is an important means of our Christian growth. Preaching is surely "through and through an office of grace." It is this because the Holy Spirit designates certain ones as God's spokespersons. It is this because the Holy Spirit guides such persons through years of preparation. It is this because the Spirit directs the church as it authorizes the prepared person. It is this because the Spirit charges God's spokesperson with a hidden fire. It is this because He indwells our hearts as we sit in the sanctuary and hear the Word of God declared.

To such extent is preaching an office of grace, that within Protestantism it has often been called sacramental. That is, even as the Lord's Supper conveys grace to believing persons, so does preaching. And as the supper ordained by Christ does this in a special way, so does that preaching which is Christ-ordained. Martin Luther stated very early after his break with the Roman church that if a person is prohibited from receiving of the Lord's Supper, hearing the Word of God preached would be to him a sufficient means of grace in lieu of that sacrament.

From Luther onwards, within the many Protestant denominations, preaching has been considered indispensable to worship. At the Roman Catholic mass as was mentioned, sometimes there is a sermon and sometimes there is no sermon. It can be omitted without the congregation's feeling they have had an incomplete worship experience. Not so in Protestantism. Whether the pulpit is in the center of the

Protestant sanctuary or at the side, preaching is not peripheral, not a mere addition, not something which can be dispensed with and still retain a full-orbed worship experience. In the many denominations the kinds of things said in the sermon will vary a great deal. In some of them, such as in some Friends and Brethren congregations, preaching is a sort of lay vocation. But always -- or almost always-- someone stands to the audacious office of declaring to the gathered congregation the things he believes God would have him say to them.

Usually the sermon is based on a passage from the Holy Scriptures. But it deals not only with a message written long ages ago; it applies the age-old Word to the present age and to those of all ages who are present.

Robert Schuller, of Garden Grove, Calif., whose Sunday morning sermons have been nationally televised, is unusual in feeling that there should be little or no direct reference to Scripture in those sermons because he is directing them to persons outside the church. Even so, he applies the teachings of Scripture to human life. That is what he is doing just about all the time.

For many centuries, preaching has had a significant role in society as a whole. The Old Testament prophets were the earliest preachers, and several of them were more important in their times than the kings were. The policies of the kings were often based on guidance given by these spokesmen for the Lord. When their advice was disregarded, things often went bad for the kings and the nation.

In New Testament times church people heard sermons in a more formal sense than people had in the Old Testament era. And in the post-New Testament centuries, the sermon was heard and respected, based as it usually was on the apostolic authority of New Testament writers.

In medieval times, Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi were heard appreciatively by many Christians--as were others, such as Savonarola. Luther and others established the Reformation, importantly, by preaching to gathered groups of Christians, even if the newly invented printing press did figure more significantly. In the 18th century, still larger groups of people heard John Wesley and George Whitefield, through whom the church was revived. Many historians believe that their sermons prevented in England the kind of convulsive revolution that France suffered.

Sermons heard by church people in America around the middle of the last century figured prominently in the movement that abolished slavery in the South.

Since the sermon has been so important and still is, it needs to be listened to in such a way that it will best obtain its objective. For one thing, the listener conceives of the preacher as called of God, as sanctioned by the church, as spokesperson for God and the church at this particular time and place.

Also, the listener needs to expect that through the preacher he is going to hear from heaven -- even as he hears from Washington and Moscow when the newscaster speaks.

The good listener, moreover, thinks positive thoughts as he sits among the congregation of the Lord. He reminds himself that the preacher has felt led, while in prayer, to use the subject being treated; and that the Holy Spirit's anointing has been sought, for delivering the message effectively. The listener reminds himself that the person who is speaking in Christ's stead has spent years to become a specialist in interpreting the Bible, even as a doctor or a lawyer has prepared well before he practices medicine or law. The preacher might be viewed as one whose message is authentic because it is given from firsthand encounter with Christ, the Living Word -- as well as with the Word which has been written down in a book.

If what the preacher says seems to be a bit theological, the listener might remind himself that it ought to be that way -- even as professional help from a doctor might sound "medical," or as help from an attorney might sound "legal."

Instead of taking a pitchfork and throwing over my head what the preacher says, that it might land instead near my worst friend, I at least try to use a rake to pull it right in to where I am. I think I want to let it disturb me or judge me or give me other needed help. It might be earmarked by the Holy Spirit for the very person who thinks he has the least need of it.

We as listeners, surely, are to sit in some such way as this, submitting ourselves to the sermon. God, then, will be the real audience; and we, along with the preacher, will be the active participants. The public service, with the sermon at its center, or close to its center, will help us Christians to make growth strides which otherwise it would be impossible for us to make.

The growth strides achieved through such means as hearing sermons need to be augmented by the growth that can occur when we meet with others, especially with other Christians, in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. To this "means of grace" we now turn our attention.

* * * * *

15 -- GROWING BY CONFERRING

Another way in which we can grow as Christians is by conferring with others, perhaps on a one-to-one basis, but especially in small groups.

Man, in the generic sense of both male and female, is basically a social creature, even as God is basically social. God is not a bare monad, not an eternal solitary, but an eternal society of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This might be why man, made in God's image, is basically a social being. Some sociologists

suggest that we are not even humans, in the fullest sense, unless and until we are interacting with other human beings.

There are numerous instances in Scripture of people conferring with others or consulting with them. Egypt's Pharaoh conferred with someone about a dream he had had. That someone was a youthful prisoner from a quite different culture from his own. But immense good of historic significance came out of the king's conferring with the young man, Joseph by name, who knew God.

Another heathen head of state, King Nebuchadnezzar, also conferred with a young man named Daniel, who could see much farther on his knees than Babylon's wise old men could see on tiptoe. Again, tremendous good of great import resulted from that consultation.

Many of the Israelitish kings conferred with the Hebrew prophets, especially on whether or when to traipse off to war. And when the kings listened, things usually came out much better than when they disregarded the advice given.

As early as a couple of decades after Pentecost, the early Christians got together at Jerusalem in a special conference to talk things over. The question was whether Christians would be expected to keep numerous Jewish regulations along with being followers of Christ. The conference helped very much, because it was decided to expect only a few duties of Christians which the Jews had an interest in - most of which regulations the Christians were glad to keep. Without that conference some authorities feel that Christianity might have reverted back to becoming merely a sect of Judaism instead of the world-girdling Christian faith.

Even Jesus found strength in conferring with and fellowshiping with small groups of friends. He had, of course, the 12 apostles. And 3 men out of the 12 -- Peter, James, and John -- were His most special helpers, the closest of all. We're not to forget, either, that there was a little house near Jerusalem where Jesus liked to relax and visit with Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

While in Georgia as a missionary, prior to his conversion, John Wesley purposed to go to Germany to confer with the Moravian Christians. He writes, "I hoped the conversing with these holy men who were themselves living witnesses of the full power of faith . . . would be a means, under God, of so establishing my soul, that I might go on from faith to faith, and from strength to strength" (Works, 5:510). Wesley did go there later, although not as much came of the visit as might have. It influenced him not to merge his Methodist societies with the Moravians. That in itself, something negative in a sense, might have been, actually, a positive good that came out of his encounter with them.

John Wesley's small classes that he divided his Methodist societies into is one of the most notable examples in the church's history of Christians seeking to grow spiritually through conferring with each other in small groups.

Many leading writers in recent years have fostered small groups as ideal settings for Christians to grow in. Though the popular sensitivity groups have admittedly at times occasioned too much opening up, too much embarrassing personal disclosure, they nonetheless helped many Christians to grow in grace through interaction with others.

Ministers of a town or city meet to confer with each other. Pastors of a given denomination in a given area or state often meet at least annually with their leader to confer. Lay leaders of local churches meet in weekend retreats, in one way or another to share and discuss mutual concerns.

And professional people outside the church's work meet together: teachers, physicians, dentists, lawyers. Businesses also know the value of getting their salesmen and others together. The purpose is to help solve problems, incite new enthusiasm, and establish goals.

The Christian who would grow in grace, who would move along in the Christian life toward spiritual adulthood, would also do well to get together with other Christians to talk with them about the Christian life, about his experience and theirs.

This goes beyond getting together with others in public worship. It means getting together with others to share with them, to discuss matters of the Christian life, to talk through mutual problems, to express fears and hopes, to learn about new discoveries that some Christians might be making.

To confer with other Christians on important decisions is wise. Others are often able to view the whole matter with more objectivity than is possible for us, who might be too much mixed up in the matter to make a sane, mature judgment. For example, another person might be able to see that someone we are inclining to as a marriage partner would be particularly unsuitable-or, particularly suitable. The same might be so with such important matters as career decisions or investments, or much less significant matters such as what we are to wear.

Discernment seems to be one of the gifts of the Spirit that certain Christians have been given. Such persons are gifted by a Christian wisdom that is sort of supernatural. It is wise to confer with them.

To seek advice from others is even a mark of Christian humility, the practice of which will help one to grow in grace. When we ask another's opinion, we admit that we just might not be thinking and acting -- and reacting -- in the most commendable of ways. We admit that we are not self-sufficient and that we need the help of others.

The New Testament states that right after Pentecost, as the early Christians were striking out on their pilgrimage as disciples of the recently crucified and newly resurrected Christ, they had "fellowship" with each other even on a daily basis. In Acts 2:42 we read of them, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship." This was done simply "from house to house," where they were also "taking their meals together" (v. 46). This suggests that they met as small groups. No doubt their "fellowship," including eating together, was a time of conferring with each other on an individual basis.

A camaraderie developed which helped them to be firm in their faith and to be used of God to impact their world. They were referred to as folk "who have upset the world" (17:6).

The other side of the coin will be considered in the next chapter as we discuss the advantages accruing to us from being alone. The two are not inconsistent. To meet with others is important, but solitude is, at times, to be sought.

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16 -- SILENCE IS SILVER

"I must confess something, Dr. Whiston," I said to the leader of the National Prayer Tryst. The weekend of total silence was over, and we were packed and ready to leave the forest-enveloped retreat center near Washington, D.C.

We were not to say anything to anyone from Friday to Sunday. We were not even to nod to show we recognized a friend if we met him on one of our solitary walks. We were not to catch another person's eye if we met him in a narrow hallway.

Trouble was, on the very first morning I was listed for dish washing duties, and I ate our leader's breakfast. He had read aloud to us silent eaters and was to take his breakfast later. I should have been able to figure that out, but I'm often not good at all in the field of native intelligence. Weren't the bacon and eggs on that plate some breakfasters' leavings? Wouldn't it be almost a sin to throw them into the garbage? I did the sensible thing; I ate them.

I soon observed our distinguished retreat leader searching for his breakfast, and there I was, under his rule of silence. Furthermore, I knew that he believed so little in fasting that in 12 years as the leader of our retreats he had never once even hinted that fasting might be used as one of the means of our spiritual enrichment. My confession was delayed for more than a day.

It seems to me quite open to opinion whether silence is so golden that we are to observe it in unnatural ways.

Even so, I doubt not that, along with our spiritual development through fellowship, it is also cultured by solitude with the accompanying silence. Our fellowship with others develops character. Solitude develops imagination.

The poet Thomas Gray felt that it is when we are in solitude that we can be "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife."

It was good for me as a lad to have to walk seven miles a day, much of the time alone, to go to high school. God did some major dealings with me as I would walk along. Once in a while I had to kneel for a time, hands lifted toward heaven to let the Lord speak to me more or less unhindered.

It was good for me later, as I attended the quadrennial gathering of my denomination, to sleep under the tiers of seats in the aloneness of a large auditorium which poured its people out each night until no voice was left except the Lord's. In a hotel with friends I might have talked of trivia. Alone in the auditorium, I would review the glory of the day and thank God for the privilege of being there.

Not in Ephesus did John receive his visions of things to come as recorded in the Book of Revelation. Not in that bustling city with its worshippers of Diana, its citizens bent on sin of many sorts. It might have been, of course, and it has no doubt been that way for many extrovertish persons. But it was not that way for John. The vision came on an island so barren that few persons were around to clutter it with chatter. There John received the sight and the insight one memorable Lord's day.

During the early centuries of the Christian era, people who yearned to live a devout life, such as Antony of the fourth century, lived as hermits in solitary places as a way of communion with God without hindrance. They felt, actually, that in solitude they were least alone -- that the strongest person is the one who stands most alone. They preferred, above all else, the companionship of solitude. They sold all to gain that pearl of special price.

John Wesley liked his solitude. Go to Bristol sometime and sit in Wesley's anteroom off his study. There in solitude from four o'clock till six of a morning the Savior spoke with a saint. Through the years that man with the warmed heart avoided long conversations with friends, finding that lengthened talks often gravitated to the unprofitable or even to gossip. Even if a friend was most distinguished, Wesley would still dismiss himself after not more than one hour.

My sounding out for solitude is not intended as a call for antisocial living. To be with others has its necessary place. We are social beings in basic ways. We need comradeship.

The first man, Adam, was not meant to live alone, so God gave him a helpmate. Beyond that, God has always blessed the family, the school, the church,

the nation, and other groupings of people. But He still likes to get at us in the solitary place at least once in a while. There, listening to His quiet voice, we might well hear things which otherwise we would never hear. We might hear things which we would be stunted for not hearing. There, our genius can flower.

Jesus knew the importance of solitude, for we read, "In the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed" (Mark 1:35, KJV). Much earlier the Lord God had told the Israelites through His prophet, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15, KJV).

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17 -- WE KEEP OUR EARS ON

We moderns, activists that we tend to be, go-getters and go-fretters, can learn something from the medieval Christian saints. One important reason why Transcendental Meditation is making such strides in America just now is because, within the church, meditation is almost a lost art.

We have done so little meditating for so long that we have practically forgotten how. And a philosophy from the East, with a nebulous view of God and a nothing-is-wrong-with-me view of man, has offered to show us how. And many within Christendom, some of them clergymen, are being duped into alien and cultish usages when the real thing, meditation in the historic Christian sense, is waiting to be used.

We might tend to think these days more about how we can travel to some distant yonder than of how we can claim the presence of God here and now. We tend these days to contemplate on matters such as how we might get two paydays every Saturday night, two cars for every garage, or two chickens for every pot. It has become foreign to us to sit loose and quiet and contemplate Christ, the one Way of access to God the Father. W. L. Walker, in an article on meditation in the old International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, wrote, "The lack of meditation is a great want in our modern life."

Long ago a psalm writer prayed, "Let... the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord" (Ps. 19:14, RSV). In another psalm we read, "Let my meditation be pleasing to Him" (104:34). Well known to Christians is the passage in Psalm 1 where we read of the righteous person that "in His law he meditates day and night."

In meditation, we are not looking for answers, as we might be in prayer; we are looking for God. We are looking to God. We are listening, too, which is important.

In meditation, we are not as specific as we are told in Scripture we ought to be when we pray, so that we will not pray amiss. Big generalities of human needs are not so good in prayer as such. But unspecified yearnings for God are appropriate in meditation. They open up our souls on their heavenward side so broadly that the living, personal God above is able to reveal facets of himself to us that He would not be able to if we were not opened up to Him with such gaping yearning. When we only open up to God in ways that we can define and control, we are not sufficiently open to receive the really new and the really special revelations from Him. We restrict what He can reveal of himself to us when we open up to Him only in ways that we can already describe with words, as in prayer.

When the medievals said that the heart makes the theologian, they were meaning in part that unless the mind is opened up to God more broadly than strict reasoning about God will allow, the person will think hackneyed thoughts about God. Run-of-the-mill Christians are already thinking those kinds of thoughts. A real, creative theologian must go deeper (or higher) than this.

It is something similar that Pascal had in mind when he said that the heart has its reasons which the reason knows not of. The heart of the Christian who is practicing the art of meditation opens up to God so broadly that revelations from God are received which reason does not know how to handle, because it is restricted in what it can grasp. Its use of syllogistic logic is limiting. Its requiring causes for all effects is limiting. Its use of Aristotle's principle that there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses is limiting. God might, in a direct way, Spirit to spirit, reveal things to us by means outside the avenues of the five senses. Concepts might not all come from precepts; many of them might be direct revelations from the living God. Such revelations come only to opened-up persons who have receptacles for receiving God's disclosures that reason does not know anything about.

When these special disclosures are authentically from God, they will be congruent with the special disclosures other opened-up Christians have received. That is, they will not conflict with what the Scripture writers have told us. Neither will they be in conflict with disclosures God has given to earlier saints in the church's history. If they are, they are suspect. They might have as their source a spirit or spirits alien to the living God. That is why John tells us that we are to try the spirits to see if they are inauthentic, or indeed authentic (see I John 4:1-6).

Even as it often helps to keep our mouths shut and our ears open when we are talking with friends, the same is often a help when we are talking with God. If prayer is a two-way street -- and it is -- we need to keep meditatively quiet sometimes to listen for what God will say back to us by impressing thoughts upon our inmost consciousness.

Thus, in meditation, we are listeners, receptive to sounds, however faint, that are beamed from heaven to our alert openness. In it, indeed, we keep our ears on. It is an important means to a Christian's growth in the spiritual life.

The saints of medieval times, who knew so much about meditating, often took a vow that they would live in poverty. They felt that it would help them not to be too much entangled with the things of this life. They remembered that Paul had written to young Timothy: "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs -- he wants to please his commanding officer" (2 Tim. 2:4, NIV). "No fuss" is what a monk once told me the vow of poverty meant to him -- for, of course, Roman Catholic monks still take the vow.

The vow of poverty is far too extreme. A born-again Christian can be wholly Christ's without such a world-denying way of life. Yet in the next chapter are some cautions in this regard. They are not as negative as the reader might tend to feel they are. Rather, they caution us as does the proverbial preacher who uses his index finger to point at his audience, while the other three fingers of his hand are pointing at himself.

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18 -- IT COSTS AND COSTS AND COSTS

Button! Button! Who has the button? That game used to be played when families got together. It is a sport of our times also.

We ask each other who has the button, the pressing of which will open the garage door or lower the car windows. The Joneses seem to have an orchestrated array of buttons, and the Smiths and Browns yearn to possess as many or more. Preferably more. Luxuries become necessities for the Smiths when the Joneses get them.

The Smiths can have more, they figure, if they go all out to be among the "haves." According to one study, they spend each month on the average, what they will be making after their next two raises. By missing one payment on the TV or stereo and two on the dishwasher, they save enough to make a down payment on a central air-conditioning system. That is gain. They have gadgets -- and gadgets have them.

One of my friends from college days had drunk at this fountain. Not having seen each other for seven years, we shook hands and sat down together on a sofa. His first question revealed how materialistic his thoughts were. He leaped over possible questions on small matters, such as what it had been like for me to study in a British university, or what I thought about some social or political or religious issue, His first question was "What kind of car are you driving?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged by Hitler's order April 9, 1945, has captured the admiration of many Christians because of his own following of Christ in costly ways. Author of *The Cost of Discipleship* and other books, he spoke against "cheap grace" and urged Christians to serve Christ in ways that might cost them their very lives. Being pacifistic earlier, he finally decided he should join a group that was to make an abortive attempt on Hitler's life. Some two years in prison, and finally death by hanging, are his own witness to a Christian faith that is costly. At 39, he had not got around to marrying, although he was engaged.

While John Wesley's philosophy about money was to "earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can," the money philosophy of many today is to (1) get all you can, (2) can all you get, and (3) keep all you can. People of this kind seem to wonder what good happiness is if you cannot buy money with it.

When John Wesley was about to die, he asked that the little money he had in his pockets and in a bureau be divided between four poor preachers; and that no horsedrawn hearse be used to take his body to the cemetery. Instead, six poor men were to be asked to carry his body, each of them being given one English pound for his labor.

Wesley had one of the highest incomes in all England, but he himself lived frugally and used nearly all his money for Christ's work. After his income had become large, he still lived on just about the same amount he used when his income was meager.

Along with this reference to Wesley's stewardship, let me mention that in July of 1974, at Lausanne, Switzerland, the Covenant that was issued by the Evangelicals who had met there from 150 nations of the world urged that Christians adopt a life-style commensurate with the need to help the poor of the world and to evangelize the world for Christ.

Right now, something like a half billion people in our world are starving. Far more than that are starving for Christ's salvation and do not even know it. At the same time, voices are heard in the Church which bless us in our affluent living.

These facts should be put alongside certain teachings of the Holy Scriptures. For one thing, Daniel "ate no delicacies" (Dan. 10:3, RSV) for three weeks, after which he was granted a special vision and a special revelation, when, as he says, "a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees" (v. 10, RSV).

As regards the poor specifically, we read in James, "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas. 2:15-17, RSV).

And Jesus said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself" (Matt. 16:24, RSV). This should not be interpreted that a person should deny himself only for a while, until he might be able once again to live in ease and affluence. It means that we Christians are to deny ourselves right on through life, even if we become wealthy or high salaried or whatever.

Just now a cult of affluence is emerging right within the Church. It is affirmed that, if Jesus were here, He would wear the finest clothes and drive an expensive car.

This is a distortion of the biblical portrayal of the lowly Carpenter from insignificant Nazareth. I do not see anything in Scripture to suggest that Jesus would do this, nor that the 12 apostles would, nor the other early Christians.

In this cult of affluence it is also similarly suggested that if one receives a considerable income, he is at liberty to spend money lavishly on first-class travel and first-class hotels and restaurants, for example, as long as he also gives considerable sums to Christ's Church.

This cannot be reconciled with Jesus' teaching to deny oneself, with His commendation of the widow who had given all she had (Luke 21:1-4), nor with the fact that Jesus had "nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:20).

In these days when millions are actually starving to death, and when the world is largely unevangelized, and when far more persons are being born in the so-called non-Christian nations than are turning to Christ, whom should we listen to? Should we listen to the voices that advocate a cult of affluence, or to such voices as those of Jesus and the biblical writers and John Wesley, who served God in concretely costly ways right through life until death?

We can be confident that, if Jesus tarries, future generations will count as saints from our era, not the prophets of affluence, but the prophets who urge a discipleship that costs and costs and costs, all the way through this pilgrimage from our towns of nowhere to the Town of Somewhere. William Wordsworth was right when he wrote as long ago as the early 19th century, "the world is too much with us."

Ezekiel, that seer who saw things in their symbolic meanings, talked about wheels -- big ones and little ones. Up in the air, he saw them.

We see wheels, too, in this our 20th century. Some are "way up in the middle of the air" -- the wheels of our giant jets. Some are higher than that, in satellites manned or unmanned.

Here on the earth planet, too, there are wheels. On our wrists, on our rails, on our roads, there are wheels -- whirling, swirling wheels. Round and round they go, either serving us or enslaving us.

Of a truth, they serve us. Who would not appreciate fast-turning wheels when it is time to have a dentist do his drilling? The wheels in our watches keep us punctual; at least they are designed to do that. On our cars, wheels take us forth to serve God and people. At river dams they create for us electric power.

The trouble is, whirling wheels can also enslave us. Outside Philadelphia in the industrial town of Chester, a large-lettered sign reads, "What Chester makes, makes Chester." Making the myriad machines of our technological times can also tend to make a certain kind of person. What Detroit makes, makes Detroit. The Mary who drives on Detroit's busy streets or on any city's streets is a different Mary from the one who lives, for example, in a rural, Amish community.

Some years ago we Americans were closing our eyes dreamily in order to see a beautiful, lovely, wonderful tree made of money. The song has died out; the interest enhances, if anything. If people so minded admit that money is not everything, they often figure nonetheless that it is a long way ahead of whatever is in second place.

Two centuries ago Goethe observed that "the spirit tends to take itself a body." He was talking about us.

Of Mr. Average after the two world wars, Henry Steele Commager wrote, "His culture was still predominantly material, his thinking quantitative" (The American Mind, p. 410). Goethe comes to mind again. In his Faust, Mephistopheles describes the "quantitative" person: What you touch not, miles distant from you lies; What you grasp not, is naught in sooth to you; What you count not, cannot you deem be true; What you weigh not, that hath for you no weight.

High on the front of the art gallery in Kansas City the following words are chiseled in the stone: "The soul has greater need of the ideal than of the real."

Those words are not chiseled deeply enough on the front side of our minds.

In his In One Ear, Eric Sevareid suggests that the real threat to humanity is not Communism or insects or even singing commercials, but things. Day's fine devotional book, Discipline and Discovery, delineates how we are tyrannized by things. Georgia Harkness, in some of her popular books, suggests the same thing. She feels, for example, that Communism itself is symptomatic of a broader malady: secularism. Arnold Toynbee feared for the present cultures because of it. Albert Schweitzer said on his 82nd birthday that modern man is "homeless, drunken, mercenary."

Nobody in our day wants simply to decry the things which make for comfort - at least not many want to. The Amish, sure; some others like that do, too. Ghandi did -- the great Ghandi. But not many of us would want to stump the country trying to turn back the wheels of scientific culture. Needful gadgets can be used well. Automobiles are rather required. People do live by bread, if not solely by it. Bread is even to be prayed for daily. One is not sure he would agree with that line in a poem by George Herbert: "For gold and grace did never yet agree."

Archbishop William Temple might have been just a little right in his claim that Christianity might be the most avowedly materialistic of the great religions in the sense that it has an interest in concretized, particularized, individual lives, right in this world which God made, into which Christ came. It is Platonism that made monks of us and pillar saints, not the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures, not the authentic in Christianity.

What is being objected to herein, therefore, is the crassness in which the things of this life are given such a place of priority. If 800 could be enrolled in business administration in a large American university and 8 in the humanities, something must be askew in the soul of the nation.

The error of the times shows up all about us. It is written large in red neon, hung right across our way. What we are to do about the error is not written in neon. It is, however, written in a Book, here and there -- not in fully treated detail, point by point, but strung out all through it. Picked out and put together, what this Book says adds up to one main point. If it is our habit to give priority to the horizontal, we need to develop a vertical perspective.

In seeking to develop the vertical perspective, we stumble upon wonder after wonder, and are quite sure that every wonder is true.

Paul had the imperative of this vertical perspective in mind when he admonished, "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above . . . Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:1-2, KJV). Such seeking, such a perspective, is the growing Christian's antidote to an uncouthly Christian faith.

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19 -- CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

Recently I negotiated some of Colorado's most tortuous mountain highways. That was a silly thing for me to do because I'm the chickenest mountain driver of them all. That is what I was while driving 12 miles up the Grande Corniche in France some years ago; down California's Tiogo Pass before it was widened; and recently on Highways 50 and 550 in Colorado with a tent camper, a motorbike, and family of five.

Perfect love casts out fear, so wrote the apostle John. I believe God has given me the perfect love John is talking about, but it does nothing at all for my fear of driving on the precipitous edge of narrow mountain roads. My wife knows I'm chicken, but I do my best to disguise it. That is why I alternate between my trouser legs and my sport shirt to dry the palms of my hands.

My wife and children all peer right over those great gorges, and I peer straight ahead -- my hat cocked so as to cut off my peripheral view on the precipice side.

Driving those roadways, passes and all, I found myself observing that Christian growth is in several ways like driving on a mountain highway.

Trials One At A Time

For one thing, in mountain driving as in Christian growth, we usually experience our trying times one at a time, without knowing ahead of time what the next trauma is to be.

On this Colorado trip I did not know I would be driving up and over four passes. The man in the restaurant had mentioned only one -- the 11,000-foot-high continental divide Monarch Pass. He had said that it was not bad -- and it really wasn't except that rain and darkness were falling both at once as we made our ascent (which is for me more traumatic than going down).

Soon, however, we found ourselves ascending Red Mountain Pass, which is quite another matter. Had I known that this pass of over 11,000 feet was in my future, or that two others of more than 10,000 feet were, with their special brands of hairpin curves and ledges, I would not have even considered taking that particular route, beauty or no beauty.

It is that way as we live out our discipleship to Christ and seek to grow in grace. If we knew ahead of time each hurdle we would be called upon to negotiate, we might well become bewildered and despair of the way. If we knew ahead of time that a close friend would turn back from following Christ, or that our local church would experience a schism, or that people we had won to the Lord through great travail would turn back, we ourselves might despair of being disciples of Christ-- although we know of the countless benefits of the Christian life.

Progress Might Be Slow

Also, in mountain driving as in the Christian life, progress is attained at times only by slow degrees and after spinning many wheels. Going up a mountain pass, you take a sharp hairpin turn and come back nearly to where you were before, only a little higher on the mountainside.

In the Christian life, we also find that progress is sometimes by slow degrees. We wish that we might attain to the maturity of a saint who testifies with glory on his or her face, but such is not attained in a short time. We must often take a hairpin turn and inch higher. Not every single thing the pastor says in his sermons will apply in a special way to a given listener, so we often listen a great deal in order to make a slight gain in maturity. Even in reading the Bible, we must often read a considerable time before something leaps out at us that is peculiarly helpful towards our spiritual growth. In prayer, also, the same often occurs: We might pray in a disciplined way for some time before all heaven opens up and we know that we have truly communed with the God who cares.

We Use The Labors Of Others

Mountain driving, further, is like the Christian life in that one makes use of the labors of many other persons. What human investment has been made in a mountain road over which one travels! On such a road ingenuity and brawn and taxpaying have combined. Perhaps some loss of life was involved. Such a road makes me think about what risks workers must have taken to build it. If I feel risk in simply driving over it when it is level and smooth and has guardrails along the drop-off side, what must have been the risk of first dynamiting and bulldozing two miles high on the side of a mountain? To install the road's foundation so that the road itself would be level, would require risk, as would installing the guardrail.

It is that way in the matter of our growth in the Christian life. For one thing, many of the doctrines have already been hammered out. While the doctrines were being hammered out, many people, with altogether good intentions, taught a given doctrine in a way that was declared heretical by a church council, and such persons were often ostracized and even exiled from their homelands. Many of them were burned at the stake on the theory that a heretic is worse than a murderer -- that he robs people who follow him of their soul's salvation, whereas a murderer only robs people of their lives here in this temporal existence. Sometimes the ones who held views later declared orthodox, suffered over those views. Athanasius, the great fourth-century defender of Christological orthodoxy against Arius, was himself exiled four or five times because of his orthodox views. This was at times when it was felt that if the Arian view was made official, it would better cement together politically the various areas of the empire.

Once a given doctrine was agreed on within the church, theologians would elucidate it with lengthy treatises, and we today have the use of those treatises.

Some of the saints, such as Thomas a Kempis, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, and Fenelon, wrote about how to grow in grace, and a Christian today may read their rich and helpful insights.

We Protestants feel that we are inheritors of good things because Martin Luther in the 16th century reformed the church after the New Testament pattern at the risk of his life.

Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and countless others wrote the great hymns of the church which are steady and sturdy to us when we sing them.

Handel hardly ate or slept for 20 days or so and created for us The Messiah which we sing and hear sung as a means of our Christian growth.

John Bunyan's Pilgrim climbs a number of mountains, and at last a very steep and high one, as he journeys from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. We, too, have our mountains to climb, but the reward is entrance into that city.

Every Christian making this journey to heaven, and hoping to grow in grace along the way, should realize that books -- good books -- are his friends. Let's think about that in our next chapter.

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20 -- BOOKS ARE PEOPLE, WISE AND GOOD

Professor John Faulkner of Drew University loved his books. They were stacked ceiling-high against all the walls in the large library room of his home on the campus. He used to bring armloads of them home from bookshops in nearby New York City. A next-door neighbor, wife of another professor, used to see him sneak them into his house -- for Mrs. Faulkner thought he had plenty already. The world-famed church historian would hide them in a hedge, go into the house to make sure all was clear, then get them and shelve them. And there were not always shelves for them. Chairs sufficed, and the floor.

As Faulkner neared death, he asked to have his bed put into his library. The day before his passing he told a faculty wife, "I don't mind dying, but I hate to leave all these wonderful books."

Faulkner acquainted himself with even the rather extraneous details about books. Of course he knew their publication dates and their publishers. He knew even the various editions of particular volumes.

Drew's caretaker was once called to the Faulkner home to fix the furnace and found the professor in his basement inspecting the surface of the ailing unit. The distinguished scholar said he was looking for its publication date.

Books on his mind, he took his wife to a faculty gathering at a campus home and asked to be excused to do some reading. Hours later he called a friend to inquire of his wife's whereabouts, not realizing he had taken her to the party.

Liking to read to such extent himself, he thought the Lord in heaven must surely read also. In class he once prayed, "O Lord, as you must have read in the Times this morning, the world is in a mess."

Admittedly, Faulkner was an extremist on books. As a young man pastoring in Wyoming, so the story goes, he read so much he hardly gave any time to sociabilities with his parishioners or with his own family. Told of his too great absorption with books, he determined to be more fraternizing. So when he met a lad on the street one morning, he asked, "How is your mother keeping, Sonny?" To that the little fellow replied, "Aw, stop your kidding, Dad." He must have been like the father who, when asked how many children he and his wife had, replied, "Three or four."

Books are people, real people -- wise and good. They are people who speak only when they are asked to talk and who are willing to sit for months and years without intruding upon your time unless their word is needed. They sit self-effacingly wherever you suggest, never grumble about their neighbors, never complain of overcrowded conditions.

Their needs are few: an infrequent dusting, a bit of Scotch tape if their backs have been overworked or mistreated, an altogether new dress if perchance they have worn themselves out for you.

You can pencil arrows and long lines and brackets on them as they talk with you, and they never flinch. You can even doodle on them as you think over what they have said. They don't mind, for they never think of themselves. They seek only to communicate to you what you need in mind and soul and heart.

You sometimes fuss about what they say to you. You fuss because what they say is too hard for you, or because deep down you see it quite otherwise. But what they say, they say. No retracting after you disagree, for theirs is an unvarying integrity. They say it once for you, and twice if you will listen again, but without changing to suit you. That is hard for you to take, but you accept it from people who are too solid to be people pleasers. And often you are thereby deepened in your devotedness, broadened in your sympathies, heightened in your capabilities.

If books are all this, and they are, they are more to be desired by growing, born-again Christians than our era's many fine things. If books are all this, time to spend with them is more to be desired than time to spend with trivia of this sort and that. One may be a Faulkner or a fool, as he chooses.

The usual word for fool in the Hebrew language means "empty fellow." The Christian who does not read will be empty in many ways. To be full of the Spirit and of knowledge and of wisdom and of goodness, one needs to read and read and then

read some more. Therein will be one of the indispensable secrets to his growth in the grace of God.

As our Christian lives become informed by books, and as we mature as Christians through the many means of grace discussed in this book, we will be minded to emulate Christ's life. The very word Christian, by which we are known, means in part that we want more and more to approach the ideal of the human life as it was lived by Christ.

One thing about Christ is that as people knew Him better, they esteemed Him more highly. If this can be at least somewhat so of us, or usually so of us, it will be an indication that some Christian growth is happening.

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21 -- FAMILIARITY INCITES APPRECIATION

There is a lot of truth in the adage about familiarity breeding contempt. When we come to know people intimately, we often revise downward our estimation of them. Their rough spots show up on close examination.

With Christ, it was not so. As people knew Him more intimately, they esteemed Him more highly. This is clearly depicted in Scripture, particularly in John's Gospel.

Those who knew Him only slightly thought of Him as merely a man. A servant maid, who kept the door of the palace of the high priest, so referred to Him. She asked Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" (18:17). Pilate, who could find no fault in Jesus, but who nonetheless knew very little about Him, produced Him, robed and thorn-crowned, and said to the murderous mob: "Behold, the Man!" (19:5).

Those who knew somewhat more of His penetrating insight and works thought of Him as a prophet. After having the living water explained to her (4:10) and after being told what He as a stranger would not normally have known (v. 18), the Samaritan woman said to Him: "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet" (v. 19).

After the Master had fed the 5,000, many believed Him to be a prophet. John tells us, "When therefore the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world'" (6:14).

Another group of people so conceived of Christ in the Temple on one occasion. It was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:37; cf. v. 2). On that day water was brought, in ceremonial procession, from the Pool of Siloam and was poured upon the Temple altar. This was done in remembrance of the scarcity of water during the desert days, and in thankfulness for the harvest rains. Jesus took

advantage of the ceremony and pointed out its relation to himself -- and to the Holy Spirit, who was to come. He had been teaching the people for several of the eight days of the feast; but finally, upon the application of the Siloam water to the "living water" which should flow from the heart and soul of those who would believe on Him (v. 38), they agreed: "This certainly is the Prophet" (v. 40).

But those who knew Jesus best, thought of Him as more than a mere man and as more than a prophet. They knew Him to be the Son of God -- and even their God. John the Baptist knew that a Greater was to succeed him, and he announced the same to his disciples (John 1:27). God had even told him precisely what to look for (v. 33), so that he would be certain of the identity of the Greater One. That for which the Baptist had been told to look came one day in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (v. 32). Then John testified, "I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (v. 34).

Martha, who with Lazarus and Mary was for an extended period a personal friend and a disciple of the Master, and who had had the privilege of entertaining Him in her home (Luke 10:38-42), confessed to Him: "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world" (John 11:27).

Only one title could be higher than "Son of God," and that title was employed by one of the Twelve. He had known the Lord intimately -- had heard His teaching, had witnessed His miracles, and had been around when Jesus was under the pressure of fatigue, hunger, disappointment, and betrayal. Added to this, in a post-Resurrection appearance made without opening bolted doors, the risen Christ was showing him the pierced hands and riven side. Thomas was fully convinced, possibly more fully than if he had been one for whom faith is easy; and he became the first to call Christ God. He exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

Another example of a heightening conception of Jesus may be seen in the man who was healed of blindness (John 9:6-7). He first called Christ a man. Upon the inquiry of his neighbors, he said: "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes" (v. 11). Later, after he had had more time to think about the merits of a person who could heal blindness, he called Him a prophet. The Pharisees inquired, "What do you say about Him...?" and he answered, "He is a prophet" (v. 17). Some time subsequently, after he had been excommunicated from the synagogue (v. 34), and after he had been sought out by Jesus (v. 35), he came to believe in and worship Jesus as the Son of God. The Master asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (v. 35), to which question he replied: "Lord, I believe." And he "worshiped" Jesus (v. 38).

Does familiarity with us incite esteem, as it did in the case of Jesus? As people come to know us better, is their opinion of our Christian character enhanced accordingly? Do they know us to be more genuine, the longer they know us?

Or, on the other hand, do we conduct ourselves in such a manner that they esteem us less highly as they come to know us more intimately? In times of pressure do we betray their confidence by manifesting immaturity? When no acute pressure is exerting itself do reactions leak out unconsciously which reveal that the person who is on the inside of us is a little different from the person our friends had at first seen? Do our conversations tend to reveal that we are more interested in ourselves than in them?

If we are not esteemed more highly when we come to be known more familiarly, it might be for one or more of a number of legitimate reasons. It might be because of the revolutionary character of the true gospel which our lives embody. It might be because, try as we may, we are not of a basically pleasing temperament. It might be because, even while doing our best, we are not very friendly in a sociable way. But if the keen edge of esteem for us wears off, let us be slow to justify such loss and quick to examine our lives to see why. We may be confident that this Jesus is able and willing so to live out His life through us that familiarity with us will, at least in most instances, incite appreciation. To this end may we grow daily in the grace of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It will help if we now consider some basic matters without which a growing Christian can neither live for Christ nor love Christ.

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22 -- THINGS WE CANNOT LOVE WITHOUT

While there are things we cannot live without (air, water, food), there are also things we cannot love without -- things without which we cannot love Jesus Christ as we ought.

We cannot love Him and grow in that love without turning our lives over to Him with uncalculated abandon. When we get married, we do not give our mate parts of our lives, finely calculated to be just enough to secure from the marriage partner what we want from him or her. When we find the one our heart longs for, we delight to shut ourselves off from other possible marriage companions and lock ourselves into union with that one person. Ours would not be true love if we continually calculated its cost and kept figuring out if we were receiving sufficient return for our investment.

It is that way with abandon to Jesus Christ, only more so. If we are only "rice Christians," we are not Christians in the fullest sense. If we are only give-me Christians, we are not truly Christians. When we are Christ's, we are wedded at a dimension of depth to one Bridegroom. An uncalculated abandon to Christ is one thing we cannot love without.

Something else we cannot love without is keeping His commandments. "If you love Me," Jesus said, "you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). If we love Him, we keep them, and they are not grievous to us. They do not weigh us down and spoil the enjoyment of our human existence. To follow His commandments is our delight, our joy, our fulfillment. If we truly love Him, we can do as we please, as the ancient Augustine said, because what we please to do is whatever He wants us to do. To keep His commandments is something we cannot love without.

And speaking up for Christ is another thing we cannot love without. The earliest Christians did this. They made Christ the talk of the town. They were the upside down turners of all those Roman provinces. What if Christians were thrown to Nero's lions, or tarred and lighted as lamps, or dragged behind chariots in Rome's kind of circus? What mattered most was not saving one's skin, but spreading a kind of salt throughout the Roman Empire which would smart in the empire's self-inflicted wounds and save it from itself.

It has been estimated that 40 percent of the world's population is now under the domination of Communism. And it can be reckoned as having begun in 1903 or 1917, according to how you figure its history. It has accomplished this kind of success during about one human life span in great part because each member of the Communist party is a kind of professional -- committed to that ideology in an all-out way, and serving it in costly ways.

The effectiveness of early Christianity waned as the gap between the clergy and the laity widened. The effectiveness of present-day Christianity might increase, might return to that first-century verve, if Christians would realize that we are all in ministry and that we are all to serve with something of the commitment that is more or less only expected of ordained Christians.

Air, water, and food we cannot live without. An uncalculated abandon, keeping Christ's commandments, speaking up for Christ in love to all and sundry in these times of Christ's special destiny -- these are among the many things we cannot love without as we grow up, more and more, in Him.

And we Christians do not mind admitting that heaven, as well as this earth, is in our minds, as we seek Christian maturity by loving Christ in costly ways.

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23 -- WAYS OF MEASURING CHRISTIAN GROWTH

No necessary correlation exists between our Christian growth and our problems. Our problems -- physical, financial, interpersonal, whatever -- might intensify right while we are growing in grace as Christians. Or they might subside,

and some of them might even vanish, at times when we are not making much progress toward Christian maturity.

Something else that is not necessarily an indicator of our growth is our sense of the witness of the Spirit. The acuteness of this inward awareness of close fellowship with God might dim for a time, right while we are sustaining good growth as Christians. This is in part because in many of us there seems to be a tie-in between our physical well-being and the consciousness of God's presence and favor. That consciousness, therefore, might seem to subside at a time of physical depletion of energies or during some illness. But this does not mean we are losing ground spiritually. The fact is, when we feel good physically, we might mistake that for the witness of the Holy Spirit within us that we are doing well spiritually.

John Wesley, who wrote considerably about the witness of the Spirit, said that it surges and wanes and that a Christian should expect such. One should not be discouraged spiritually simply because the consciousness of God's presence has waned for a time.

While such matters as problems that we might be faced with, or the waning or peaking of the consciousness of God's presence, are not necessarily indicators of growth in grace, we Christians do have dependable indicators.

1. If we are growing in grace, our interests and concerns will have a broader scope to them. Early in our Christian lives, and even for a long time if we have not been making very much growth, we tend to be self-centered. We hope strongly that things will go well in our lives and for our immediate family and close friends. As we mature in grace, our hopes are likely to include matters in which we ourselves are not personally involved. Our horizon of concern widens.

2. Likewise, and similarly, our interests will probably broaden as we grow in grace as Christians. We will become more interested in people who are not immediately and significantly related to us by family or work.

We will become more interested in the spread of the gospel outside of our own local church. Other churches of our own denomination, local churches of other denominations, Christian institutions and enterprises other than the ones we are immediately related to -- these and other broad-scoped interests will claim our Christian concern.

This does not mean that we will be less interested in immediate matters, say, at our own local church. It means that besides those and even while those might intensify, the scope of our interests will become wider as we grow in grace.

3. Further, as we grow in grace we will be less satisfied with the quality of the services we are rendering to Christ in His Church, and be more and more anxious to serve more effectively. If we are being asked to sing solos, we will want to sing

with more appropriateness and more effectiveness, even if it means giving more time to practice to improve our performance. As we grow in grace, we will more readily ask for suggestions from all and sundry on how we might improve. And after we ask for suggestions, and receive them, we will not brood over the fact that people had suggestions to make. We will not put ourselves down as persons, but only our performance. When the immature person learns by some means that his work is not very effective, he tends to transfer that to himself as a person and to feel that he himself is not a very good person. The more mature person is able to differentiate between himself as a person and the things he is able to do or is not able to do.

4. Another sign of our growing in grace is that we are better able to control our emotions. Even if we are quite mature, we will still feel deeply about things -- perhaps even more intensely than before. Hurt us enough and we might still cry. Even grown men weep. But as we mature, we are better able to be in charge of our emotions. Our reactions to situations are less volatile.

As we mature, we will be better able to cope when bobbles occur in our interpersonal relationships. If there is a disregarding of or a threat to our personal or social status, we will let it pass without lingering on it. We will not dwell on how unfair or unkind or unthinking the word or action was. The maturing person will try to believe that the person did not mean the seeming slight, the threat to status, or the rebuff. Or he might suppose that the person, in a weak moment, did not act with sufficient composure. Perhaps he himself elicited the reaction and therefore accepts the blame. Realizing, in this case, that the other person might be concerned over it, a maturing person should apologize or in other ways seek to make amends.

5. A maturing person will have some backup gears ready to be put into operation at any time. He will tend to err on the side of apologizing more frequently than he really needs to instead of on the side of not apologizing as often or as readily as he ought to.

6. Still further, if we are growing in grace, our opinions on what a good Christian life is like will be changing. Such alteration does not necessarily mean a falling away from grace as some would have us believe. The fact is, that if we are growing in grace, changing is just what we will be doing. The ways in which we earlier expressed our Christian faith might have been quite negative, consisting mostly in what we did not do. Often it was that we did not drink, or smoke, or dance, or play poker.

While a good Christian refrains from doing certain things considered spiritually detrimental, not doing them is not what makes him a Christian. Rather, he expresses his faith positively by what he does believe and do.

7. Also, if we are growing in grace, our spiritual knowledge will probably be changing. We will still believe in the basics: such matters as the virgin birth of

Christ, His atoning death, His sin-and-death-destroying bodily resurrection. We will also still believe in the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, eternal destiny, and our need to receive, by faith, our justification and our sanctification.

Yet, as we mature as Christians, we will reflect upon our experience of God and His grace in more refined ways. And some of the folk theology that we had learned perhaps from persons who had some odd ideas will slough off. We will find out added bases for believing in the time-honored Christian teachings. Shades of more refined and more biblical understanding will be discovered within given areas of orthodox teachings.

8. Something we would do well to keep on the front burners of our minds, also, is that if we are availing ourselves of the means of grace, we are indeed growing in grace. If we are observing such formal means of grace as prayer, Bible reading, receiving the Lord's Supper, fasting, and worship, we are indeed growing in grace. Also we are indeed growing in grace if we are observing certain informal and perhaps indirect means of grace that I have discussed herein.

If we eat nutritional physical food, we may, of course, assume that our bodies are receiving proper nourishment. And while growth in grace is a much more intangible matter, we may assume that we are indeed growing in grace if we are receiving spiritual nourishment.

Methodism's founder, John Wesley, wrote a sermon on "The Means of Grace." In closing this book, I wish to refer to that sermon, found in Wesley's Works, Vol. I, pp. 135-47.

In the sermon Wesley treats as special means to receiving God's grace -- prayer, searching the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord's Supper. He includes more in prayer and searching the Scriptures than we might expect: worship, hearing sermons, etc. And elsewhere, on the means of grace, he talks of such matters as fasting, and Christian fellowship -- "conference" he calls it.

In this sermon, Wesley includes some cautions which are still apt. He says that "means" are not ends. There is no power resident in any of the means, he feels, simply to produce grace and growth in us, regardless of where our hearts are. He writes, "in using all means, seek God alone. In and through every outward thing, look singly to the power of his Spirit, and the merits of his Son..."

Nothing short of God can satisfy your soul. Therefore, eye him in all, through all, and above all."

Wesley further said, "Remember also, to use all means, as means; as ordained, not for their own sake, but in order to the renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness. If, therefore, they actually tend to this, well; but if not, they are dung and dross."

And he wisely cautions, "After you have done all these, take care how . . . you congratulate yourself as having done some great thing. This is turning all into poison." Instead, Wesley says, "Give him all the praise. 'Let God in all things be glorified through Christ Jesus.'"

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THE END