

The Nature of Growth

Charlie Brackett

The nearest thing I know to growth which can be seen, that is, which happens before your very eyes, is the kind of growth the Bahia grass in my Florida yard enjoyed during the rainy season. It seems that as soon as it was cut it needed cutting again. It was almost as though you could see it grow, but you couldn't. Growth takes time and happens quietly while no one is observing. Oh, you know it happened because yesterday the grass or the plant or the child was only that big and today, when you look again, it is obvious there has been growth. You can see the difference. You can measure it, but you can't watch it happen, and you can't hurry it.

New babes in Christ grow that same way. You can sow, you can water, you can feed and nourish, but you cannot hurry the process beyond its natural pace. Why? I really don't know why except that God made it that way. Perhaps it is because new concepts and new beliefs take time to soak in and to become a part of the natural thought processes that are comfortable. It takes time for convictions to change behavior. Perhaps it is because breaking old habits and forming new ones takes time. And, perhaps it is because the human mind can accept only so much teaching in a given period of time. I mean accept in the sense of receiving and fully comprehending to the extent of doing something with it.

Of course, different individuals accept new teaching at different rates. Some very slowly because of their level of intelligence or because of being thoroughly ingrained in erroneous views for a number of years. Others are better prepared to accept truth because of their readiness of mind borne of upbringing, or of their practice in the business of accepting new ideas, or because of innate intelligence.

I appreciate those who are zealous in the teaching of others, especially those who teach new converts. The most effective teachers learn from both experience and the Bible that zeal without knowledge is not a good thing. First, they must have knowledge of the truth they are teaching, at least knowledge adequate to the teaching job at hand. While this is essential, more knowledge is required than just knowledge of the truth. This is especially so when teaching a new babe in Christ, one whose faith is fragile.

One who is effective in bringing about change in the lives of others must exercise knowledge on a broader scale. There is the matter of knowing when to introduce a needed principle of truth, which will correct wrong practices. It involves knowing the right time and place as well as the proper pace. All misunderstanding of truth and worldly practices that a new convert may bring with them when they come to Christ cannot be changed overnight. It is unwise to unload on them at one time all the teaching they need. Paul didn't do it. Notice Acts 17:22-34. He wisely started where they were (v. 22) and taught only one message, their "unknown God" (v. 23-29). Then he called for action on that one point, i.e., repentance from seeking after other gods (v. 30, 31). Happily some accepted and obeyed. I wonder how much more they needed and how long it took for each of them to grow to maturity. After Paul first visited and taught in Corinth (Acts 18:11), the teaching and growth process lasted years. He stayed eighteen months teaching and admonishing. He continued teaching them when he wrote 1st Corinthians some four or five years after establishing the church there. And, a year or so later, he was still teaching when he wrote the second letter.

I remember a young man, new in Christ, who worshipped with us in Atlanta years ago. He was zealous, but lacked knowledge. So, he would bring a friend by my house and, together at my dining room table, we would teach his friend the gospel. The first few studies were disasters. This zealous young Christian could not resist jumping on every false thing his friend might say, and we could make no headway at all. The friend would leave in disgust. Finally, by prearrangement, we agreed to teach on only one subject per night. If his friend said something that opened a door to a new study, we agreed that I would kick him under the table as a sign to keep his mouth shut, and a reminder we could study that subject later. Well, that plan did help. But, it never worked really well. I didn't have the heart to kick hard enough or often enough to keep us on the subject at hand. Or maybe he was not willing to curb his tongue in the face of error.

Have you ever carefully considered the process of spiritual growth? There are many facets. For example, take the regulating effect that conscience has. Suppose you teach someone who is indoctrinated in worldly ways the truth about faithfully attending church services. You teach them that we are not to forsake the assembling together (Hebrews 10:25). You teach them that attending is an opportunity to provoke others to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). You teach them that when the saints are together Christ is in their midst (Matthew 18:20). You teach them that being together with the saints at every opportunity is a spiritual blessing, and warn them that if being with God's people is not the most desirable place to be in this life, there can be no enjoyment together in life to come.

Suppose they agree with every point you make and then fail to attend whenever the church doors are opened. Maybe you didn't fail. Maybe growth is silently taking place, and is not yet complete. Remember, growth takes time. You see, intellectual agreement is only the beginning. This new knowledge must take root and grow into motivating desire. Old habits must give way to new ones. There are associated skills to learn, skills in keeping other matters and other people from competing with proper attendance, and winning. Skills in keeping the human weaknesses of other members from discouraging and clouding the commitment to be in attendance.

Many of us render obedience to the Lord in matters of this kind on a more or less habitual basis, out of years of practice. I don't mean by rote, without meaning. I am using 'habitual' in a good sense. Doesn't the Bible encourage us to exercise and discipline ourselves unto godliness? (Hebrews 4:14; 1 Timothy 4:8) New converts today deserve the same time to grow and develop as many of us have already had.

Zeal must be coupled with sensitivity and patience. There is a point beyond which forced feeding is detrimental to new converts as well as to new plants. Where is the line between proper feeding and forced feeding? It is hard to know, but one thing is sure. It is far more to be judged within the circumstances of the taught than within those of the teacher. Isn't all of this implied by Paul's admonition to teach the truth in love? (Ephesians 4:15)

The Spirit reminds us in 1 Corinthians 3:6 and 7 that we can sow and water, but it is God who gives the increase. Let us pray that our Father in Heaven will give us greater compassion for lost souls coupled with the initiative and sensitivity to act in their behalf with the kind of love, knowledge and wisdom which is from above.