

The Christian's Job: Spiritual Growth and Production

1.0 Introduction: The Excellence of the Gospel

You believe that Jesus Christ -- God Who put on humanity to become one of us -- died for your sins. Hallelujah! You're a Christian, a child of God entitled to a share in His Eternal Wealth. This is the most important thing in the world.

If you managed to build an empire like Alexander's Greek wonder or acquire wealth the size of Jeff Bezos's or gain the strength of Samson or the beauty of a lily or attain the wisdom of Solomon, it would amount to exactly nothing if you are not one of God's children. Everything in this world fades or crumbles to dust eventually. Even we who work so hard to acquire those things inevitably die. So the best we can have without God's adoption of us as His children is a few short years of reckless pleasure and then death.

It is rather easy to be glib about death when anyone makes the choice to devote their earthly lives to the pursuit of sensual pleasure, but the reality of death is always remote until we are right on the brink of it. It is in that moment when we know that we will actually die that the reality of the meaninglessness of such a pursuit weighs on us like a leaden anchor.

Those who have chosen to believe in Jesus Christ have by definition dismissed the standards of this world and chosen to pursue the wealth and pleasures of the world to come. Of course, this is not always how it plays out practically. In fact, most Christians refuse to make a clean break with this world's cares and pleasures. Nor is there ever a perfect Christian who has not or will not occasionally fall prey to this world's seductions and threats (James 3:2). Regardless of this, a Christian is at core a person who has rejected this world in favor of the one that God promises.

As such, Christians are also by definition people who do not fear death. Death is for them just a transition from this world of pain to a better state of existence. So the choice to be a Christian is actually the whole point of human existence here on earth. That you made it means that you have justified your own existence on this planet. Good for you.

That choice to be a Christian, however, is only the beginning of a journey. It is because of that journey that this choice is so important. When we fail to pursue that journey, the choice to be a Christian becomes almost a mockery even if it is still an infinitely better choice than the one to remain opposed to God.

2.0 The Journey: Spiritual Growth.

Spiritual growth is a bit of a buzz term in Christian circles. Everyone uses it but they tend to mean different things by it (just as so very many people use the word, Christian, to mean a dizzying array of things). What it means according to the Bible though is continuous development in the knowledge of correct biblical teaching that we actually believe. That is, if we are learning, believing, and applying accurate teaching about the Bible, then we are growing spiritually.

2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby
1 Peter 2:2 (NKJV)

Why is this important at all? Why is the choice to believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ not enough? The second question is a bit of a trick question. The choice to believe in Jesus Christ is enough, but that choice to believe in Him is also the choice to follow Him and learn His Way of thinking and doing things. That is what it means to believe in anyone. Reposing confidence in somebody means accepting their leadership or authority in whatever it is you are trusting them about. So, accepting the Gospel is actually making a commitment to learning what Jesus has to teach and live accordingly.

So why is that important? For the same reason that believing in the Gospel is important. We were created for God, but we are rebels against Him. When we believe the Gospel we are reconciled to Him so that we can finally fulfill His purpose for creating us. Going on then to learn what Jesus has to teach us equips us to be able to do what God created us for.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.
Ephesians 2:8-10 (NKJV)

What are we going to learn when we get started on spiritual growth? We will learn all the teachings of the Bible as one whole solid unit. The major doctrines of the Bible that we will learn are organized into the following:

- Theology (the biblical study of God)
- Angelology (the biblical study of angels)
- Eschatology (the biblical study of the last things or the end-time)
- Anthropology (the biblical study of man)
- Hamartiology (the biblical study of sin)
- Christology (the biblical study of Christ)
- Soteriology (the biblical study of salvation)
- Pneumatology (the biblical study of the Holy Spirit)
- Peripateology (the biblical study of the Christian Walk)
- Ecclesiology (the biblical study of the Church)
- Bibliology (the biblical study of the Bible or the Scriptures)

This is not some divinely sanctioned order or even organization, but it does make the process easier. That is what Bible teaching actually does: make the Scriptures more accessible to believers.

3.0 How It Works: What We Do To Grow Spiritually

We've already mentioned above that spiritual growth is learning, believing, and applying Bible teaching. Here we are concerned with how we get to do that.

3.1 Read Your Bible.

Obviously, the first thing is to read your Bible. We cannot learn what the Bible teaches if we don't know what the Bible actually says.

Although this should be an obvious lesson, there is much noise out there suggesting that the Bible is not critical to the process of spiritual growth. Notions ranging from the idea that God somehow supernaturally makes us aware of His Counsel without our needing to read the Bible to the idea that the Bible is corrupted, incomplete, or otherwise unreliable exist so that some of us do need to be reminded that the only way that we can be sure that anything is true is by the Bible's confirmation of it.

As we see from 2 Peter 2 quoted above, it is in "the word" that we grow. We can't grow in the Word if we are not reading it. The Lord Jesus Himself warns us that we can only tell whether someone is a false prophet by testing what they teach against what the Bible says (Mark 7:6-7).

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.
Matthew 12:33 (NKJV) (cf. Matthew 7:15-20)

The Bible is our protection from lies about God. If we don't know what it says, then we will be susceptible to any opinions that anyone tries to feed us. It is hard to reject something without having a reason to do so. If we reject a lie without knowing the truth, we could still be rejecting it because there is another lie that we prefer to believe. This is why we must be very familiar with what the Bible says.

3.2 Seek Out and Submit to One Gifted and Prepared Pastor-teacher.

If people have issues with the Bible itself, you can certainly expect that they will have even more with human teachers. But the Bible says,

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
Ephesians 4:11-13 (NIV)

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.
Hebrews 13:7 (NIV)

17 Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.
Hebrews 13:17 (NIV)

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." 16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." 17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep.

John 21:15-17 (NIV)

1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

1 Peter 5:1-4 (NIV)

There are at least two parts of the Bible that people tend to take hold of to claim that pastor-teachers are not necessary to spiritual growth. One is John 14:26, and the other is 1 John 2:27. It should be clear that whatever these two passages mean, they cannot contradict the passages above, since Scriptures cannot be broken (John 10:35). Even so, their very context is clear that they don't mean that pastor-teachers are not necessary.

The first passage teaches that the Holy Spirit is the one who makes us able to actually perceive and understand God's Word. This is what Paul elaborates on in 1 Corinthians 2:12. Even with the aid of a pastor-teacher, we cannot understand Bible truths unless we have the Holy Spirit inside us. The other thing that this verse in John 14 teaches is that the apostles and other disciples at the time were going to be inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the New Testament after Jesus left.

The second passage teaches that once we have heard and believed the Gospel, we no longer need anyone to teach us the Gospel. We already know it and the Spirit of God Who came to live inside of us because of our faith in Jesus is Himself proof that we believed the correct thing. John said this because of the antichrists that were teaching at that time that Jesus did not really become human. That was the major theme of that letter.

Now that we've got that out of the way, we can see that the passages previously posted are clear that we must have pastor-teachers to interpret the raw truths of the Bible to us even though we still need the Holy Spirit to be able to understand them at all.

Gifted and prepared pastor-teachers are not common, however. 1 Corinthians 12:4 teaches this in the Greek. They are the part of the Body of Christ that "lacks," that is, that are much fewer in number than the others. This makes sense when we remember that in an army, the officers are disproportionately fewer than the rank and file. Apostles, prophets, and pastor-teachers are the officers in Christ's army. Throughout human history, prophets have always been very few.

Apostles are only 12 (the Bible does call missionaries "apostles" too, but the context is clear that they are different from the Twelve that the Lord chose as the foundation of the Church). Pastor-teachers are the same.

First, few believers are given the gift of teaching. Second, very few believers who do have the gift endure the course of spiritual growth to mature spiritually. Third, even among those who do mature, the testing and preparation necessary to become full-fledged pastor-teachers tend to prove too discouraging, so that only a handful do make it into full-fledged ministry.

This does not mean that there are not enough pastor-teachers for everyone who wants the truth. There are. It just means that those who want the truth will often find that they have to patiently wait and perseveringly seek a gifted and prepared pastor-teacher to prove that their desire for the truth is real and permanent, not the fleeting kind.

18 Therefore the LORD will wait, that He may be gracious to you;
And therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you.
For the LORD is a God of justice;
Blessed are all those who *wait* for Him.
Isaiah 30:18 (NKJV)

20 And though the Lord gives you
The bread of adversity and the water of affliction,
Yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore,
But your eyes shall see your teachers.
Isaiah 30:20 (NKJV)

A final word on this is that although it is fashionable today to collect teachers by the numbers so that one does not trust any one teacher too much, the Scriptures actually counsel the opposite. We are warned not to "collect" teachers, but rather to find one and submit to that one to learn everything that the Bible has to teach us from him.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.
2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NKJV)

15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me.
1 Corinthians 4:15-16 (NKJV)

The Bible does say in Proverbs that there is safety in a multitude of counselors, but this is the sort of statement that the Bible does not provide as an absolute. There are conditions under which this is true. One who has matured can judge between multiple opinions or between different counsels. One who is still a spiritual babe cannot. Therefore, this is not for spiritual growth. Only when we have become spiritually mature is it even remotely safe for us to listen to

more than one teacher at once. Even then, there is often no use doing so, because a teacher who helps you grow to spiritual maturity is truly enough for you. Only a gifted and reasonably prepared pastor-teacher can do that. It is pastor-teachers themselves for whom this multitude of counselors is most useful, just as a large cabinet is very useful to kings and other leaders. The pastor-teacher carrying out his research into Scriptural truths will find multiple perspectives exceptionally useful for establishing the truth of the text that he studies in the Bible.

3.3 Diligently Listen to (or Read) What Your Pastor-teacher Says.

It's no use finding a pastor-teacher if we are not going to listen to him. And there are a few reasons why we might not.

One, he "goes on and on" and never stops. The length of his teaching, whether delivered orally or in writing, often puts people off. Especially in our very fast times when everything can be had with no delay, when people work on weekends to make sure that no customer or client is disappointed if they want something right now, the notion of taking so long to finish anything is quite annoying, especially when it does not have any monetary guarantee attached to it. But the Bible is a very large and complex book -- it is the very thinking of Christ, the Word of God, after all -- so this should not be surprising. If we wish to learn the Truth, we must be ready to patiently put in the work required to learn it.

Two, something about the pastor's personality puts us off. It may be the way he speaks or writes (compare 2 Corinthians 10:10). It may be his stature or his standing in society (the apostles were mostly poor and uneducated men, for example). It may be his age (cf. Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12). It may even be how he chooses to do his ministry, whether in writing, in person, on the Internet, on video, in his house, etc (compare Elijah and John the Baptist). If any of this puts us off of the truth, it only proves that we don't value God's Word enough to tolerate or endure anything we have to in order to get it.

Three, we have other priorities. This world runs on money. We have to feed, clothe, and house ourselves and our loved ones, at least. This responsibility can be very demanding in terms of our time and energy, but whether we think that they are more important than working to secure our Salvation and become useful to the One Who saved us with His Blood is a choice that is entirely up to us. We can structure our lives to some degree so that the things that matter to us can be done with nothing left out. But we can also choose to structure our lives to leave things out. Often, the choice that is made is to leave out Bible teaching even though it is the most important and least expensive undertaking for us comparatively (the truth is freely taught by gifted and prepared pastor-teachers, after all: "freely you have received, freely give" -- Matthew 10:8).

There could be other reasons, but it is enough to say that there is no benefit if we are not going to listen to what the pastor-teacher has to teach us.

3.4 Believe What You Learn.

This again seems obvious, but we often underestimate the deceitfulness of the human heart. We don't often believe things even when we make a mental assent to them. We tend to just nod to them so that we can move on already. We can't grow spiritually by doing that.

If we don't believe in any accurate teaching that we receive from our pastor-teachers, then we will not be able to use the truths in it to do anything meaningful in our lives. For example, if your drill sergeant teaches you to clean your rifle and fire it a certain way and you never believe it, then you simply will never do it. If you don't, then you will not be combat-ready if an enemy attacks you.

Spiritual growth is growth in faith. So if we have satisfied ourselves by initially checking to see if the pastor-teacher stands in agreement with the Bible generally, we should accept his teaching as truth and act on it. If we find anything in the Bible that gives us cause to wonder about his teaching, we have a right to ask him to explain his position in light of what we read in the Bible (the disciples did that with the Lord Jesus Himself too, although He was the perfect Pastor-teacher). Alternatively, and more efficiently too, we can give him the benefit of the doubt and just keep working through the material. It may be that along the way, our confusion/doubt/concern will be resolved as we read or listen.

3.5 Apply What You Learn.

As James teaches us, it is impossible to believe something without actually doing it or using it in some way. This is how we can even know if we believe what we claim to believe.

As the example of the soldier above shows, if we believe that our drill sergeant is correct about how to clean, strip down, load, and fire our weapons, then we will simply do what he says. If we don't believe it, then we will not do it. It's that simple. So we must use what we learn from the Scriptures in our daily lives.

If, for example, we learn that the Bible teaches that marriage is meant to be used to raise godly children (Malachi 2:15), then choosing a spouse on the basis of their demonstrated ability and inclination to raise godly children is just the right way to apply that. We don't ignore what we learned and then pick the prettiest or richest partner we could get and still claim to believe that teaching.

3.6 Help Others to Grow Spiritually too.

It is actually impossible to grow spiritually without doing this. In our earthly life, we soon learn that it is by helping others do what we are learning to do that we get good at doing it too. In spiritual matters, this is doubly true since spiritual growth is really in order for us to become able to help others find and believe the Gospel and grow spiritually too using our unique spiritual gifts.

12 So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

John 13:12-14 (NKJV)

2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

John 15:2 (NKJV)

16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

1 John 3:16-18 (NKJV)

3.7 Keep Your Eyes on The Prize.

Spiritual growth is not only hard, it also never ends while we are still alive. Not only that, Satan and this world in which we live are violently opposed to it, so we get pretty compelling reasons from them to quit. How do we stay focused and keep pushing through?

We do that by keeping in mind that God has promised incredible rewards to everyone who perseveres in it until the end. Although even the least believer will earn rewards that will make this world's riches look like a stinking heap of garbage, there are higher levels of eternal reward that make that least believer's reward look like a consolation prize.

Every small act of true faith in Christ, every small effort to endure the fiery trials of this life, every small show of love for God's children will be rewarded by the Lord Jesus (Matthew 10:42). Growing to spiritual maturity, however, fetches one the first eternal crown -- the crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8). Enduring the tests of maturity (very unpleasant and daunting experiences that test our faith in the Lord) fetches one the second -- the crown of hope (James 1:12; Revelation 2:10). Fulfilling one's ministry, that is, having discerned and developed one's unique spiritual gifts, to use them to help those unbelievers marked for salvation to come to the faith and to help fellow believers grow spiritually and fulfill their own ministry fetches one the third and highest crown -- the crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4).

These rewards may not sound like much because we tend to view the value of things in terms of lack. In this world, pain is normal, so we attach a great deal of value to things that ease that pain. In the world to come, there will be no pain, so we tend to wonder what difference great rewards will make then. Suffice to say that we will be very pleased to find that it makes a great deal of difference. Everything we endure here and all the work we put in for the truth here out of love for the Lord and for His children will carry such a weight of glory as to put us to shame for even doubting its value.

It is good to keep in mind that it is this very same motivation that made the Lord Jesus able to run His Own Race and pay the terrible price that He paid for us on the Cross. Even if we don't see how eternal rewards can be such a big deal, we would do well to still follow the example of our Lord Jesus from whom we have elected to learn anyway.

1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Hebrews 12:1-2 (NKJV) (cf. Philippians 2:5-11)

4.0 Ministry: The Culmination of Spiritual Growth

The end or goal of spiritual growth is ministry. That is not to say that we no longer have to grow spiritually once we come into our ministry. Rather it is to say that this is the reason we grow spiritually: in order to be able to do our share of Christ's work in this world helping unbelievers to come to the faith and helping fellow believers grow spiritually and fulfill their own individual ministries. Obviously, the more we grow spiritually, the better we will do this job of ours. So, we don't stop growing until we are doing our job perfectly (an unattainable feat in this world, although we are responsible to approximate as closely as life, breath, and everything else that God gives to us for this duty permits).

But what is ministry? It should be obvious that it is not just teaching the Scriptures, although because of the rarity of spiritual maturity today, it tends to appear like it is the only work of ministry in the Church. Ministry is really everything that we do to help other people get to know and walk productively with the Lord. The gift of a cup of cold water given to a believer because he or she is a believer (Matthew 10:42) is literally ministry. The word itself is an old synonym for service. So what service we render to others on behalf of the Lord Jesus in keeping with His Principles is ministry even if it is not done from a position of pastor-teaching.

However, we are particularly concerned with full-fledged ministry here. That is the equivalent of a spiritual career. Just as we go to school to acquire a set of skills and get a degree in order to be able to pursue a professional career, we grow spiritually to reach a fundamental point of spiritual maturity at which we become able to pursue a spiritual career helping fellow believers with a unique set of spiritual skills.

In this section, we discuss how we do that.

4.1 Identifying our spiritual gift(s).

The first thing to do, of course, is to identify what our spiritual talents or gifts are so that we can begin to hone them for our job. This is something that exercises some believers who are zealous for God.

The short answer to how to identify those gifts is spiritual growth. As we get to know and understand the Lord and His Plan, we are changed (Romans 12:2) and our spiritual gifts start to respond to that understanding. We find ourselves instinctively doing certain things in response to our growing love for the Lord and to our growing understanding of His Plan. If we pay attention, those things we are doing will lead us steadily to a clear identification of what our spiritual gifts are.

What gifts can we have? There is a long list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, another in Romans 12, and yet another in Ephesians 4. None of them is exhaustive. There are about as many spiritual gifts as there are Christians. In fact, as Ephesians 4:11 teaches, each believer is himself or herself a unique gift to the Church, even though all gifts can be categorized into groups. The confusion about spiritual gifts today is tied to the Pentecostal Movement that started late in the 19th century just as the momentum of the Reformation died down. Suffice to say that much that is popularly taught about it is wildly wrong. It is enough to say that each spiritual gift has clear utility in promoting the spiritual growth and welfare of other believers and in helping willing

unbelievers come to the faith. Each gift is given when we become saved. Spiritual growth is only needed to awaken and define it.

4.2 Developing Our Spiritual Gifts.

It bears repeating that our spiritual gifts are developed as we grow spiritually. As we learn the truth, believe it, act on it, and help fellow believers to do the same, we become more and more like Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18) and that also impacts our spiritual gifts. We find ourselves improving in our understanding of our own selves (Matthew 10:39) and of our talents so that we can more deliberately shape them in the right ways.

4.3 Using our Spiritual Gifts.

As we understand them better, we can plan how we deploy our spiritual gifts for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Jesus. It takes considerable spiritual maturity to become able to plan our use of our talents and no longer be haphazard in our use of them. That planning and deployment is essentially full-fledged ministry.

4.4 Ministry is All About The Truth.

It bears repeating that our spiritual gifts are not for show and that they certainly are not for our private consumption. We are not given gifts so that we can feel important for having them. Our spiritual gifts are merely our unique spiritual talents and skills to be used to help others to either come to know or grow in their appreciation of God's Truth.

7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all
1 Corinthians 12:7 (NKJV)

5.0 Conclusion: Your Job is To Grow Spiritually And Be Abundantly Fruitful for the Lord

There is very much indeed to say. This piece is a highly condensed description of the business of being a Christian because this is not the medium where such a thing can be explained comprehensively and in-depth, but this writer has some confidence that enough has been said to start the reader off on a directed quest for greater understanding in the matter.

For now, it is sufficient to say that God's Truth is what life here in this world is all about (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). Literally, nothing else matters at all. If we don't believe the Gospel, our lives are completely meaningless. If we do, then we have a real and important job to do and there are incredible eternal rewards attached to it. We would be wise to get cracking on that job.

It is not by any means an easy process or even one that is popular at all. But we have excellent reasons to get on with it anyway. This writer urges you, reader, to take the bull by the horns and get on the job. Whatever the reason why you think that you don't need to, please think about the unpleasant alternatives (remaining in ignorance of the Lord and risking falling away from the faith) and commit to this path. Hard and painful as it is guaranteed to be, it is well worth everything that we suffer for it. The Lord Himself guarantees that to us.

If you're wondering where to go to find a teacher, this writer strongly recommends <https://ichthys.com>, where he himself received training and continues to find support as he prepares for a full-fledged pastor-teaching ministry, and www.bibleacademyonline.com where

there is another excellent teacher if you prefer videos. What matters is not where or who but that you learn the Bible accurately and comprehensively and become able to do your part in the Body of Christ so that you can qualify for the rewards that God calls every one of us to.

Grace and peace be with all God's children.