

GROW UP INTO CHRIST

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SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:11-16

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ; From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

"Therefore, beloved, beware lest ye fall from your own craftiness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Birth is the beginning - not the end. When a baby is born into the world, his growth is not finished; it is just beginning. He has before him, if God wills, a whole lifetime in which to come to physical, mental, and spiritual maturity; to learn, to grow, to develop, to change, to come to the fullness of his potentialities and capabilities.

When a man is "born again of water and of the Spirit," his life in God's kingdom is not complete, nor mature, nor perfect; it is not finished; it is only just begun. He has not arrived; he has only started his journey. He is not "grown up into Christ"; he has only been born into a new environment, with a new purpose, a new sense of direction. The new birth does not bring the complete and mature and perfect new life; it only makes possible the new life, which then must be lived to fullness, to maturity, to perfection.

One of the misconceptions of the spiritually infantile mind is that when we are "born again", we have arrived, that henceforth we have reached the goal, and that we never more need to strive or struggle or grow or repent. Such people are like the little six-year-old boy who was once my neighbor. After about six weeks in the first grade, he came home to his mother greatly excited one afternoon and said, "Oh, mother, I'm almost finished with school! Just a few more pages and I'll be through with my reading book."

Spiritual infants think that when they are born again they can do no more sin because they have arrived at spiritual maturity and perfection. They quote 1st John 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

The idea that it is impossible for the born-again Christian to sin is an idea which had its origin in Gnosticism, the first great heresy to enter the Christian church. Among other trange doctrines, the Gnostics taught that matter -- and therefore the physical body -- did not exist. They argued, therefore,

that if the spirit was "born again," the man was saved, regardless of the actions of his body which after all simply didn't exist anyway. The body could sin as it liked, and so long as the spirit kept aloof and pure, there was no sin. The modern Christians who contend that it is impossible for one who has been born again to sin, are the spiritual descendants of these Gnostic heretics, against which the first epistle of John is almost completely directed.

Comparison with other translations gives light as to the sense in which John meant this disputed verse to be interpreted. Murdock's translation of the Peshitto Syriac reads, "Every one that is born of God doth not practice sin...." The 20th Century translation reads, "No one who has received the new life from God lives sinfully....." The Centenary translation published by the American Baptist Publishing Society, reads, "Whoever is a child of God cannot go on sinning...." The Inspired Version, corrected by Joseph Smith, reads, "He that is born of God doth not continue in sin....."

We repeat -- the man or woman who is "born again" has not arrived; he has only started to live. Though the new birth is certainly essential before a man can begin to live as he should, it does not guarantee instantaneous perfection, or an instantaneous salvation. There is still the possibility that born-again men may fall from grace, if they do not continue to make wise and righteous choices, if they do not continue to grow, to learn, to mature, to progress towards perfection. Having been born into Christ, they must "grow up into Christ." Jesus counselled his disciples to "pray lest ye enter into temptation." Paul manifested some concern lest he -- a born again Christian -- should become a castaway. Read carefully the sixth chapter of Paul's letter to the Hebrews, where Paul counsels them to go on unto perfection, not staying forever with the first principles of repentance, faith, baptism, and laying on of hands. Then he states his determination for them, "And we will go on unto perfection if God permit." Now in verse 5, notice that there is a danger to those who do not go on to perfection: "For he (God) hath made it impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to be renewed again unto repentance; seeing they crucify unto themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." Men who are born again, but fail to go on to perfection may fall away through their own neglect; and if they prove false to the new life that is in them, and to all the help and strength which that new life can give to keep on combatting sin, then there is no hope of their revival.

This does not mean that born again people never sin, but that they do not keep on sinning, or continuing to sin. The quality of their life is changed. Their allegiance has been shifted; they are facing in a new direction as they journey through life. Before the new birth, they loved and delighted in sin. After the new birth they abhor sin, even though through weakness they may find themselves overcome of it on occasions when they are not as alert or watchful or faithful as they should have been. If they do slip into sin, they will heed the promptings of the new life which has been transplanted into them -- the new Spirit which is in them -- and repent of that sin. Repentance brings forgiveness, and they can continue on to perfection, overcoming day by day until all sin is eliminated from their lives. On the other hand, the man who has not been born again commits sin, loves his sin, and keeps on sinning. There is nothing within him to call to repentance, so long as he is ruled by his own carnal, sensual, devilish, stubborn, rebellious spirit. And without repentance, there can be no forgiveness. Thus the man who has not been born again goes on from worse to worse, until the end is both physical and spiritual death, and eternal banishment from God.

Peter also has something to say about those who are born again, but permit themselves to be overcome. 2nd Peter 2:20 says "If after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning." In the tenth chapter of Hebrews Paul says (verse 26) "If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation....."

There are many more passages in Paul's epistles which stress the fact that men who are born again need to "grow up" into Christ. Paul certainly had been born again before he wrote to the Philippians: "Not as though I had already attained, ("arrived") either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect (margin, "mature,") be thus minded....." What Paul is saying is that he has not yet "arrived," he is not yet mature or perfect; he has not yet finished the race. The new birth started him on a new life, gave him a new hope, a new goal, and set his feet in the path leading to the attainment of that goal. But he must press forward until he reaches the goal -- perfection in Christ Jesus.

There is small consolation in Paul's writings for those who think that the new birth is the end and goal of all Christian endeavor, the stopping place, rather than the beginning place. Read for example, the fifth chapter of the Hebrew letter, beginning at the eleventh verse. Paul says, "I have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age," or "mature" or "perfect" according to the margin. Here Paul was writing to some people who had been born again, but had never progressed out of their spiritual infancy. They were still eating milk, when they should have been ready for more solid food; and because of their immaturity in spiritual things, Paul found it hard to tell to them the things which they should have been prepared to hear, and to teach to others.

In 1st Corinthians 14:20, Paul again says: "Brethren, be not children in understanding, howbeit in malice be ye children; but in understanding be men." In Colossians 1:28 he expresses a desire to present every man perfect (and perfect here carries the sense of maturity) in Christ Jesus.

When you are born again, the battle is not over; it has just begun. Before that time, you were fighting on the wrong side. Now you are fighting on the right side, but the battle is still to be won. Satan will now try harder because you are trying harder. He doesn't need to worry about those who are still in rebellion against God and Christ; they are in his anyway. Satan is intensely concerned about those who have deserted him, and those who are active against him. It is worth remembering that Jesus received his strongest and most insistent temptation just after his baptism, after his reception of the Holy Spirit -- and just as he was ready to begin his life work, Do not expect to be immune to temptation or to sin after you are born again, but

".....watch and fight and pray,
 The battle ne'er give o'er;
 Renew it boldly every day,
 And help divine implore."

Although each one of us must individually be born again, growing up into Christ is not altogether an individual process. Our scripture reading from the fourth chapter of Ephesians says that God gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers; "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry; for the edifying of the body of Christ; Till we, in the unity of the faith, all come to the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect (mature) man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Till we all come unto the perfect man! Not some of us, individually, but all of us, together. If we are to grow as we should, we need each other. If the hand of an infant is to grow, the hand needs the life of the body, the whole body, working and functioning together, to supply the materials of growth. If the body dies, the hand dies. If the body thrives, the hand thrives and grows. If the infant member of the church expects to grow, he needs all the other members of the body to give him the sustenance of growth, to help direct that growth. Just as no single organ or member of the body can grow alone, so no one who is born again can grow up into Christ unless the rest of the body of Christ -- his church -- grows too -- unless all grow together -- unless each member and officer functions in his proper place and carries out his appointed task towards the nourishment and strengthening and growth of the body as a whole. As Paul goes on to say: that we, "Speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ; From whom the body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." When every part, every joint, every organ, every member of the body does its part, in cooperation with every other part, directed by Christ, the head, who is the life-giving intelligence which permeates that body -- the entire body will grow together, and each member will grow with it, until we all come unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.