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HOW TO GROW AS A CHRISTIAN

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

The Bible makes clear that it is God's intention that those whom He adopts as His sons and daughters through their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, should grow in Christian virtues, and should reflect the character of their heavenly Father now that they have become His children. To put it in a nutshell, we are to grow into the character of Jesus Christ who is the perfect example of God's purpose for human life. Jesus is called the Image of God, because in Jesus we may see, perfectly represented, the character of the unseen eternal God. And so in the Bible Christians are commanded to conform their character and actions to the character of God. Thus in the sermon on the mount Jesus told His disciples "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for He makes His sun to shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust". And in Philippians 2:5 St. Paul urged Christians to be humble by pointing out Christ's example and saying "Have this mind in you which was

also in Christ Jesus, who though in the form of God thought it not a thing to be grasped at to be equal with God but made Himself of no reputation and as a man He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also highly exalted Him". There are many other passages which urge us to imitate Jesus Christ, the perfect pattern for human life.

All Christians' of every denomination are agreed on what I have been saying, but the vital question arises, how are we able to imitate Christ and so grow into a character of Christ-likeness? What are the means we are to adopt to achieve this object? It is at this very practical point that Protestants and Roman Catholic methods diverge radically.

The New Testament makes clear God's method for our Christian growth. This is based on knowledge of God's character, which is made known to us by God Himself in His Word of the Bible and in particular is exemplified in the life of Christ contained in the Bible. To

grow in the knowledge of God is to grow in the character of God. Thus St. Paul tells in Colossians 1: 9 how he prays for the young converts at Colossae and his constant prayer is "that you might be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all. spiritual wisdom and understanding". Notice the threefold repetition of the content of the prayer: knowledge, wisdom, understanding. This knowledge is not an end in itself but as St. Paul goes on to explain, it leads to walking worthily of the Lord, in all well pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing. Knowledge of God's Word, revealing His character and His will for us, is basic to leading the Christian life.

Like St. Paul, St. Peter also urges the young Christian converts to whom his first letter was addressed (chapter 2, verse 2) "Like newborn babies, long for the pure spiritual milk of the Word that by it you may grow up to salvation"; and St. James, our Lord's brother, in his letter (chapter 1, verse 21) tells the readers to "receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your

souls", and St. Paul, taking his leave of the church leaders at Ephesus (Acts 20:32) said "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace which is able to build you up"; and in Colossians 3:16 he said "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly". So then the basis of Christian growth is a knowledge of God's word, because God's Word reveals God's character and His will for us. We must remember that God's word is no ordinary word. When God speaks, His words are effective. As Isaiah 55:11 states "My word shall not return unto me void but shall accomplish the thing for which I send it" The Word of God is the instrument which God's Spirit uses. The Holy Spirit dwells within Christians and transforms them through His influence unto that character of Christ which is seen reflected in the pages of Scripture. St. Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 3:18 "We are transformed into the same image from glory to glory as by the Lord of the Spirit.

Our growth in Christian character is from one point of view entirely the work of God within us; for if God is within us through His

Holy Spirit it is not suprising that the character of God should show itself in our character. The presence of God's Spirit within our personality results in the fruit of the Spirit being seen in us. Now this fruit is listed in Galatians 5:22 as "love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control". These are all Christ-like characteristics.

God created us as persons not merely things. Consequently in His dealings with us it is not surprising that He treats us as persons and works according to our natures. Thus He uses our intelligence in comprehending, and understanding the written Word of the Bible. He uses our consciences to stir us up to desire to be like our Lord Jesus Christ; and He uses the religious side of our nature so that through our prayers we might receive a fuller indwelling of God's Spirit. Jesus said that our heavenly Father was most anxious to give His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him, so that as we see the lack in our life of any particular fruit of God's Spirit, whether love, joy, or peace, or so on, then we are to

pray for God's Spirit to supply this lack.

Now the Roman Catholic method of growing as a Christian is in some important respects quite different. First of all there is no stress at all on the works of God's Word on our minds and consciences. Indeed Pope Clement XI in Section 18 of his bull unigenitus condemned as untrue the statement that "The seed of the Word which the hand of God waters, brings forth always in fruit". Here the Pope carries his denigration of the Bible to the point of direct contradiction of the prophet's words "My word shall not return unto me void but shall accomplish the thing for which I send it". As is well known, in the past the Roman Catholic Church has forbidden ordinary Christians to read the Bible, and up to last year in Roman Catholic church services the Bible was read out not in the ordinary language but in Latin, which no-one understood. This has been the traditional Roman Catholic practice, which illustrates the fact that growing as a Christian is not regarded to be the result of "the

Word of God dwelling in us richly" as St. Paul put it. As a further example Pope Clement XI in section 80 of his bull Unigenitus denied that "the reading of Holy Scripture is for all men" and in section 82 that "Christians are to sanctify the Lord's Day with reading godly books, more particularly the Holy Scriptures".

Secondly, in Roman Catholic theology there is no stress on the direct work of God's Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian, but for this direct work of God on our personalities through His Spirit influencing in a natural way our understanding, our will and our hearts, there is a substituted semi-mechanical method of obtaining grace through the sacraments; and grace is thought of not as God's love and favour but rather as something created and added to our souls.

The knowledge of God's provision of full forgiveness in Jesus Christ and His loving bestowal of this forgiveness every time we ask for it as we turn back to Him, is of tremendous stimulus for living a

holy Christ-like life; but in the Roman Catholic theology forgiveness is said to be shut up to the sacraments. It is not received through faith in the gospel, but rather through attendance at penance and confession to a priest, and receiving his absolution. For a Roman Catholic there is no other way of forgiveness.

If a Christian wishes to grow in Christian character the advice offered by the Roman Catholic Church is regular attendance at the sacraments to obtain this created entity called "grace" which sacraments are said to convey, and the infusion of moral virtues which are treated quite independent of the presence of the Holy Spirit, whose fruit in reality they are. In addition, asceticisms such as fasting or self inflicted punishment are also suggested as ways for improvement as a Christian, though the Bible says of such things in Colossians 2:23 that they are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Over against this system is the Biblical way of growing as a Christian. It is an ethical way,

as it works through our moral natures rather than an external semi-mechanical way, working through the rites and services of the church. And the basis of our moral growth is God's Word which, as Scripture says, is quick and powerful. When you reflect on it, this of course must be so, because God's Word cannot be inert, but rather will accomplish the purpose for which it is sent, which is our growth in Christian character. Let me illustrate: Suppose we wish to overcome resentment. Now we read in Scripture "Avenge not yourselves, for vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord". This word calls for our faith in God who will handle our vindication much more truly than we could if it was left to our own limited understanding of the rights and wrongs of the case. Moreover the Bible brings before us the example of Jesus, who when He, was reviled, reviled not again, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously " (I Peter 2:23) Reading this we are by God's Spirit enabled to trust God.

Or again, we may wish for calmness in the midst of an anxious

situation. Again we read "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He might exalt you in due time, casting all your cares on Him for He cares for you" (I Peter 5:7). Here the Bible brings before us the fact that God is in control of the circumstances which enter our life. It is His mighty hand under which we are to humble ourselves, and the Scripture adds the promise that He will exalt us in due time, just as in the case of Jesus. So we are enabled through faith to cast our cares on God knowing that He cares for us. Thus the Christian life is a life of faith, faith exercised toward that loving character of God made known to us in His Word, and this faith itself is the gift of God's Spirit within us who enables us by faith in His word to imitate Christ and so brings forth in our own lives the fruit of Christian living, such as love, joy, peace, patience, and all the other Christ-like virtues.

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