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Why Is Christian Growth Important?

Growth in Christ, what we can expect

Knowledge of God's grace is central

Biblical images for growth

Conditions for growth

Summary, and the way ahead

Introduction theme: *A key theme in the Bible is that God's presence transforms deserts into gardens. What is true of the big project for the world and His people is also true for individual lives. Faith in Christ grows and bears fruit, resisting adverse pressures in a hostile world. Flourishing in the wasteland is achieved by 'growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. Followers of Christ grow because they know who they believe, what they believe and why they believe it. The Bible illustrates these foundational realities and uses key images for growth. It also indicates the conditions that favour it, and the successive stages of growing up into Christ.*

There are lots of books on Christian growth, many of them very good. However, if you randomly pick one out the chances are you'll get a sort of Christian self-help manual, majoring in 'how it feels' to be a believer, rather than a biblical approach. Therefore, this book is a biblical presentation of how we should approach growth into Christ.

Have you noticed any changes in the attitudes of Christians in recent years? It could well be the case. Many things that used to be thought of as bad or wrong are accepted by those around us. The juggernaut of social progress is gathering speed on the highway to change and believers are dragged along in the slipstream. Traditional attitudes are left behind and the new normals become commonplace. The passing of former moral values influenced by Christianity is now almost complete and we are into a time when new values are being normalised.

We would be wrong to think this doesn't influence the life of the average believer or what is acceptable in church communities. Pressures to conform are becoming more compelling. Christians must either get on board without question or have a good reason for resisting.

A current idea is that if faith is going to survive in the post-truth world, a new more relaxed approach centred on personal feelings and expectations must be adopted.

Winners and losers

This is not to say that the past was necessarily better and the present is always worse, but at least we should be aware of what's happening. One of the big losers in the ballpark of upbeat believing is *the content* of faith. Ultimately this impacts everything else, but are we really convinced of its importance? What used to be called teaching, doctrine, theology, or any form of reflection is sidelined as 'head knowledge'. Group Bible

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studies are often free-for-all discussions, sometimes the pooling of ignorance. Those who want something deeper can follow online courses or go to seminars. Teaching and discipling are low on the radar of the average church programme; being friendly and relevant is pretty high. What is all important is not primarily what God says in Scripture, but how we feel about ourselves.

This devaluation of content is surprising. Apart from the fact that what Christians think and believe and not what they feel makes them different from those around, our age has seen an explosion of information technology. 'The science' is the be-and-end-all of decision making. Knowledge is at a premium in educational systems and professional training. Parents want the best for their kids and measure growth by ticking the boxes of progress reports. Knowledge is important for jumping through the hoops on the path to success.

So what are the expectations for knowledge and growth in normal Christian living? How do we value them? Is it so important as to be considered something worth striving for, or is it simply an elitist luxury? So what, if it is an optional extra? Many Christians, including those who are well up the professional ladder, seem happy to muddle through life's challenges with a lowest common denominator understanding of faith. This is surprising and no wonder if they express that something is missing from their way of being Christians.

Measuring growth

This attitude leads to a worrying question for many believers, particularly after a few years of Christian involvement. It can become acute if mid-life crises arise, when the doldrums of routine, imperceptible progress, or disappointment take the

wind out of our sails. Am I growing at all as a Christian? How can I measure it, and is there any way of measuring?

There is no one simple answer to those questions for everyone, nor any pat answers, because we are all different. Many factors are involved because as believers we are all at different stages in growth, and we have all begun with different personal life experiences. However, three comments are relevant.

Firstly, many Christians have never thought seriously about what growth is, or even whether it is important. It's taken for granted, perhaps with only a minimal awareness of the biblical markers that will be presented in the following chapters.

Secondly, growth is naturally rather rapid at the beginning of the Christian life, full of discoveries and new insights. The changes are obvious to us and to those around. Later things plateau out, and progress is less evident. I see my grandchildren in the USA once a year. How fast they grow up! But they do not see much change in me, all they see is an ageing dude!

Finally, and because of this, growth is measured in terms of lifetimes, not weeks or months. We can look back over our journey of life and think of how problems that were enormous back then are manageable now. Or we can think of how we handled a crisis in the past, where we went wrong, and how we have learned something from it. More concretely, we can look at the faults, often secret and unknown to others, that have been overcome because we have learnt, with the Lord's help, to deal with them.

When we take stock in this way it's not with a view to patting ourselves on the back. While being thankful for spiritual growth, we should also be humbled because we recognise God's grace has been imperceptibly at work. Moreover, we still struggle with our imperfections and are far from the goal. What was true for the apostle Paul, as he expressed it in Philippians 3:12, is much more so of us: 'Not that I... am already perfect,

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but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.'

What we must avoid is a defeatist mindset from the get-go. The temptation is to say: 'there's nothing that can be done there, because that's me, I'm just like that.' If that's our attitude, we'll starve ourselves of the means of growth. The end product will be discouragement and indifference, leading to spiritual depression.

Grace and knowledge

The focus of this book is specifically on growing in Christ, leaving aside the broader issues of church life and its importance for sanctification, or the practice of prayer. The question of how to grow and be stable in Christ is one of the most important ones we face, either for the present or the future life.

Biblically speaking, the two essential ingredients in spiritual growth are grace and knowledge, not feelings, self-image, ministries or programmes. Grace and knowledge are siamese twins, birthed by understanding of Scripture as God's revealed Word, and the Spirit of God. One never goes without the other. God's grace brings a corresponding deepening of knowledge, which in turn stimulates the desire to know more of the wonders of grace. Knowledge is not knowing things *about* God, but a deeper personal appreciation of God Himself: His wonder, the greatness and the glory of His ways and works. The Psalms repeatedly refer to the 'steadfast love of God' in action, which leads to praise for who God is.¹

The beginning of the four Gospels in the New Testament present the fulcrum of God's plan of salvation. In John's Gospel in particular the arrival of the Lord Jesus on the world scene sets the tone for the grace-knowledge relationship. He

1. Psalms 36:7-10, 89:1-2, 14.

personally embodies them both. God's incarnate Son dwelt 'among us full of grace and truth'. The apostle Peter, one of the eyewitnesses who also heard the Father's words on the mount of transfiguration, exhorts believers to 'growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.² Knowledge of God and recognition of His grace and truth is the way to growth and stability. Maturity is the opposite of being blown about by every 'wind of doctrine'.³ Christians are not the barometers of the present climate; they have a thermostat set by God's revealed Word.

Isn't it a tragedy when children don't grow as expected? A comparable tragedy is when people who have been Christians for a good while are indifferent, or show no sign of growth. Is it because grace and knowledge have had little impact on their lives that many buckle when they run into the first real test? Or when they lack consistency by following the latest religious fads, or when they are unaware that the world's agenda is moulding their views?

The danger is that unwittingly, people who take themselves to be Christians may really be dead on the vine, not producing any fruit by growth into Christ. The grace and knowledge duo has not had any real or practical impact. It's tragic that folks go through life clocking up sermon hours week in week out, with little sign of change. Eventually its absence leads someone to question the reality of faith and its practical usefulness. People become lukewarm and indifferent, or church hoppers. Perhaps they eventually quit altogether.

Even a superficial reading of the New Testament shows how vital the notion of growth is. One of Jesus' iconic parables, known as 'the Sower', about how seed grows, sets the tone. The story is about the spiritual reality of God's kingdom and the

2. John 1:14, 2 Peter 3:18.

3. John 1:14, 17, 2 Peter 1:18, 3:18, Ephesians 4:14.

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way it comes into the world. From the insignificant beginning of a seed falling in the ground, much fruit is produced. The unexpected miracle of Christ's kingdom is that it goes from almost nothing to astonishing outcomes.

That is what we can legitimately expect as well.

Biblical images of growth

The farming culture of biblical times provided a rich backdrop for suggestive teaching about spiritual growth. Vines, olives and fig trees were used as symbols for Israel as God's people.

Several biblical images about personal growth refer to sowing, favourable places for planting, trees blossoming and producing fruit. By way of contrast, unfavourable conditions lead to negative equity in growth. The prophet Jeremiah was not a crowd-pleaser. The unbelievers of Judea had turned away from God, trusting for help from alliances with the superpowers. They were like 'a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come ... dwelling in the parched places of the wilderness in an uninhabited salt land'.⁴

Jesus chose a crucial moment, just before His death, to teach His disciples about 'abiding in him' as 'the true vine' in order to 'bear much fruit'. He added:

If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.⁵

This is rather remarkable. Believers show themselves to be true disciples by asking God 'whatever they wish' *in order to bear*

4. Jeremiah 17:5-6. Cf. Ezekiel 17:1-10.

5. John 15:7-8.

fruit. This is the result of the life-giving presence and power of Jesus' words. The Father is glorified when His Son's Word abides in us and as a result we trust in Him. Everything we desire is received from Him by doing this. What should we ask for? Not random things like a new car or a holiday abroad, but for growth in Christ through His Word, blossoming into the assurance that we are true disciples.

Several times in the New Testament we come across another illustration. Children grow to maturity when they move from a diet of milk to solid food.⁶ In 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, the apostle Paul underlined the centrality of love in the pilgrimage of believers from time to eternity. He chose an illustration contrasting what children and adults know to describe the continuity and the difference between the present and the future. Both of them know the same reality, but adults have deeper perception than kids. A child knows their parent goes to work every day, but has very little idea of what they actually do there. The Christian life is all about living well and enjoying life in Christ now, and subsequently growing up to adulthood in eternity.

Living as we do in an age of 'how to' books it strikes us as surprising that there is no 'self-help' letter on Christian growth in the New Testament. Why don't we find something like John Calvin's 'golden book of the Christian life' in his *Institutes* (III:6-10)? There are many reasons, but perhaps the main one is that the New Testament is not primarily about our needs, or our performance, but about what God has graciously done for us, and His glory. As we see our lives associated with God's story of grace we find ourselves as believers, and at the same time we find what we can aim for. 'This is your life' becomes meaningful when we see our story in the light of the story of

6. 1 Corinthians 3:2, 1 Peter 2:2-3, Hebrews 5:12-13.

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Christ: His life, death, resurrection, ascension, reign and return in glory to bring in the new creation.

At a certain moment the penny drops. Christ is my destiny, and all my life from beginning to end is wrapped up in Him, who He is and what He did.⁷ Christian growth is all about living in Christ and growing into Him, day by day, year after year, until He says, 'Well done, it's time to come on up here with me'.

Conditions for growth

In the natural realm, growth is something of a mystery. Two plants stand side by side, one does well and the other doesn't grow.

Think of the adjacent houses Jesus pictured in the parable at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Both looked the same, appeared to be solidly built, at least until a weather bomb demolished one of them. The reason for this was a hidden fault, namely the lack of a sure foundation. Sand provides no stability.⁸

So spiritual growth is not something to turn into a method, a twelve-step programme, with results guaranteed. Thinking about growing, analysing it, and seminars might help, but they do not automatically promote personal growth. It is something that happens naturally in Christ, when the conditions are right. Spiritual vitality is a living and personal walk with Christ. As any gardener knows, growth requires loving care and cultivation in the right conditions.

How then can the conditions of spiritual growth be described? A comparison may help. Photosynthesis is a chemical

7. Cf. Ephesians 1:4-15. Note the repeated references to 'in him' in this text.

8. Matthew 7:24-27.

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reaction in plants you probably heard about at school. Light, carbon dioxide and water are the conditions necessary for life and growth. Carbon dioxide enters through the underside of leaves, water through roots, and in sunlight the plant releases oxygen into the air and makes glucose for growth.

Light, water and air are vital to plant growth. Put a plant in the dark, or water too much, and you'll kill it. So also there are important factors for growth in the spiritual sphere. The right conditions are necessary for life to flourish in Christ.

Several factors are included in the biblical conditions for life and growth. The context must be right, with rooting in good soil and exposure to light. Growth is maturing in strength. Finally the fruit appears. This way of seeing spiritual growth is useful, because it is biblical. Psalm 92:12-15 describes it in a few brush strokes, with the key words in italics (added):

The righteous *flourish* like the palm tree
and *grow* like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are *planted* in the house of the LORD;
they *flourish* in the courts of our God.
They still *bear fruit* in old age:
they are ever *full of sap* and green,
to declare the LORD is upright:
he is my rock and there is no unrighteousness in him.⁹

Here we get down to basics. The growth process is described by five factors that provide the right conditions: planting, flourishing, growing, being full of vitality, and fruitfulness. Together these apply to the Christian life and how it is lived throughout our earthly journey.

Paul takes up the psalmist's image in a collective way when he writes to believers at pagan Corinth. In 1 Corinthians he

9. See also Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:5-10, Ezekiel 19:10-14, 47:12, Revelation 22:14.

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reprimands them because of their factions, reminding them that Paul, Apollos or Peter are only servants each with a part to play:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labour. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.¹⁰

Paul uses mixed metaphors of the field, the building and the workers to describe a construction that grows harmoniously according to God's design.

What applies to individuals applies also to faithful churches. Nothing could remind us more clearly that when individuals are growing up into Christ, the believing community also grows. When a living church grows, believers who are part of it also grow. Little room is left for praise of leaders, who are simply servants. 'Only God gives the growth'. It's not bad to remember that in a day of megachurches and superstar internet preachers.

Summary, and the way ahead

Sad to say, one reason life today is a challenge for many believers is because of the wishy-washy teaching in the churches. There may well be sleeping Christians in gospel churches where the leaders preach their hearts out. They need to wake up and get real about their laid-back attitudes. The context is right but they are indifferent and static. There may also be young, stalled believers with a desire to grow in half-dead churches. These places have the name but not the nature of a true church, because their teaching is indifferent to biblical truth. If believers

10. 1 Corinthians 3:6-9.

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stick around there long, they will not grow and eventually the lack of light, water or the poor soil will stunt them. The biblical ideal for health and holiness is the growing Christian in a living church.

In the following chapters the biblical factors for conditions favourable to growth into Christ will be presented in this order:

1. *Planting* in the right place for spiritual life to begin
2. *Rooting* in the biblical teaching of the Word of God
3. *Growing up* to stability in Christ
4. *Maturity and vitality* through the work of the Spirit
5. *Fruitfulness* as the outcome of growth into Christ.

The growth process is dynamic. We will describe how, as believers, we can benefit in a practical way from the conditions for growth in Christ. It's also exciting, like graduating from primary to secondary school, moving from the second to the first team, or getting that first job. The different stages are mileposts on the path of progress.

Finally, it's wonderful because growth is growth in God's grace. We should never cease to be amazed by what God has done for us and is doing in us and in others on the way with us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the main problems preventing spiritual growth today?
2. Why is spiritual growth important?
3. What is the link between grace and knowledge?
4. Discuss the biblical images for growth.
5. Why is the right context for growth important?

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6. Can you name the biblical conditions for growth in Christ?
7. Can you evaluate your growth in Christ?
8. Are you in the right place to encourage growth in Christ in your own life?