

# THE VINEVILLE PAGE

Helping us all grasp the big picture of where we are and what our challenges are as we face the future.



The Life Long Quest for Spiritual Maturity

Issue # 7

Spiritual growth cannot be separated from personal growth. One of Jesus' favorite descriptions of spiritual growth was "fruit." He would warn that many would claim to be followers of Christ. They might preach, cast out evil spirits, and even do miracles—but if their lives and speech do not reflect the disposition of Jesus, all they say and do will be meaningless. Spiritual growth is not to be measured primarily by knowledge but rather by how such knowledge affects our choices and attitudes. Spiritual growth leads to personal wholeness. We find our place in life. We discover the way: to recover peace when shaken; to rekindle joy when troubled; to maintain hope when knocked down; and, to hold fast to our purpose when our best plans have faltered. *But even these virtues are but the beginning of maturity.*

## The Place of the Bible

One of the greatest misconceptions about spiritual growth is that studying your Bible will result in growth. Maybe it will, maybe it won't. It all depends on how you read the Bible. There is certainly a significant benefit to knowing the basic facts of the Bible. Unfortunately, most Christians don't know as much as they think they know. They fail to take into account the varied cultural backgrounds of writers thus missing the context of the writers (which is essential to interpretation). They are ignorant about how the Bible came to us and fail to appreciate varied understandings of individual texts. They like their Bible tidy and fail to see how they give certain messages weight and ignore other messages (which don't fit their own ideas and opinions). It is lunacy

to think for one moment that you can easily comprehend everything that God needs to say. The Bible gives us words when we are spiritual infants that we hear differently when we grow up.

The Bible has a specific function. It always points beyond itself to the possibility of an encounter with God. This God has moral character who calls every lost soul in the universe to return to him. He is not subject to our partisan ways or our theological differences. These are all aspects of childhood (childishness). The Bible tells us that God is

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continuing his creative work in our world by making new creations—new beings whose lives reflect the strength and gentleness of Christ. Jesus is the model of wholeness. He is angry at injustice and self-centeredness. He is kind and respectful. He offers encouragement to the marginal. He lives his life to lift up others. He forgives his enemies and weeps over those who cannot hear his words of the path which leads to peace. In a word, he has ceased to be conscious of his own self because that self is one with God. His consciousness is riveted on the needs of the world. Now, that is maturity. It is far reaching and we may never get there, but it is the dream of God and the destiny of those who will inhabit heaven. It is what we strive for in this life though full possession awaits another age.

In the Bible, we find stories of ordinary people who wrestle with life and struggle to understand how God will meet them. We find remarkable people whose stories remind us of our own stories. We find people who are flawed and stained, yet welcomed by

Jesus. We find teachings filled with wisdom for living. We find messages which lay bare our hardness of heart, resentment, obstinacy, narrowness, argumentativeness, partisanship, and selfishness. We find hope. We find a larger vision for capturing the meaning of life in a troubled world. We wrestle with God in the pages of Scripture and if we are fortunate, we lose.

### **The Place of Prayer**

Neither will prayer, in itself, produce the fruit of maturity. God, of course, hears everyone's prayers. He filters through what is asked and gives what is necessary for our good or for his higher purposes. Our prayers might be simply the prattling of a child wanting daddy to give him candy, toys, and horses. Hopefully, however, they can also be heart to heart conversations about what is most dear to us. Rather than monologues, they are dialogues. We are open to correction and yield to his guidance. Such prayer is based on a genuine relationship and not some superstition that if you just get the words right, God will answer.

Prayer is simply another word for conversation. Conversations can be one-sided. We have all experienced people who were talking but not listening. For prayer to assist in growth, it must be the kind of conversation in which our sense of God's presence in our world is constantly deepening. It must be an honest expression of our wounds, needs, hopes, and dreams. It must be punctuated by real stillness when God can make himself known.

### **The Place of Worship, Church, and Ministry**

While worship often takes place when we are at prayer or becoming mindful that some event has

been a gift from God, such worship does not take the place of corporate worship. In corporate worship: we stand with others evoking God's favor; we experience in the beauty of text and musical blend the jarring reality of God; we hear truths that we have not considered to that point in life; and, we give testimony to children and community that God is supreme in our loyalties.

The Church, with all its weaknesses, is the very instrument which preserves the light of faith in the world. It sustains the flame of evangelism and discipleship. It gives to the body of Christ a center around which to focus our energy in the work of God. It offers to us a safe people with whom we can practice the difficult commands of God— forgiveness, forbearance, mercy, confrontation, love of enemies, and humility. After practice, we take these expressions of Christ into an indifferent to hostile world.

In ministry and mission, we face the greatest obstacle to growth. To pass from adolescence to adulthood requires a deliberate choice to assume total responsibility for one's life and happiness. It does not always happen. In our culture, adolescence can continue throughout one's life. Equally, spiritual maturity requires that we own our life and place in the world. It means accepting ourselves with all our limitations as worthy of God's best. In accepting ourselves, we are then free to concentrate on those who yet struggle to own faith, to have food, to hear God, and who need the Jesus in us. Ministry and mission is the last frontier to maturity. It is the truest test that we have passed from death to life, from centering life around our good to centering life around God's Kingdom.

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