

# MOVING TO THE CORE

## Part 3

Spiritual growth – like physical growth -- takes time. We'll have some “growth spurts” where we seem to take big leaps forward. But, by and large, our spiritual growth will be slow and hardly noticeable. When it is noticeable is when we take a look back over a period of time. Then we should be able to tell something has happened. For instance:

- Some old habits may have been dropped
- New and spiritual desires have been given birth
- There is an increased knowledge of God and His Word
- We are experiencing different levels of responsibility now, as compared to the past
- Jesus seems closer, dearer
- The Fruit of the Spirit is more evident

Each of these signs tell us that some spiritual growth has taken place.

On the other hand, when growth isn't taking place – physically or spiritually – again, we can tell. Time will reveal that something is dreadfully wrong.

### NOTICE WITH ME THESE VERSES OF SCRIPTURE:

2 Peter 3:18, “**grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**”

Let me point out two important words in this verse:

**GROW.** This actually means, grow now. Grow and keep on growing. Never stop. Then too, it is meant to be taken as an absolute command requiring full obedience. Grow!

**KNOWLEDGE.** The "knowledge" that is spoken of here actually means, a deeper more perfect knowledge; a knowledge that belongs to the more mature in the Lord.”

2 Corinthians 13:9 (*The Living Bible*) adds, “**Our greatest wish and prayer is that you will become mature Christians.**” Paul wanted that for his churches, I too want it for the one that I pastor.

Then, as I pointed out last week, Ephesians 4:13 tells us that we are to grow “**To a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.**”

Other translations put this in part:

- “**unto a full-grown man....**”
- “**fully mature adults, fully developed within and without.**”
- “**that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ.**”

Through the years, I've found a variety of reasons why people claim to serve God:

- "I don't want to go to hell."
- "I want to escape the Great Tribulation."
- "I want to go to heaven when I die."
- “My parents make me.”

However more or less laudable these reasons may be, not one of them is ever mentioned in Scripture as being **THE GOAL** of Christian living. Instead, our goal should be that we grow to become like Jesus Christ:

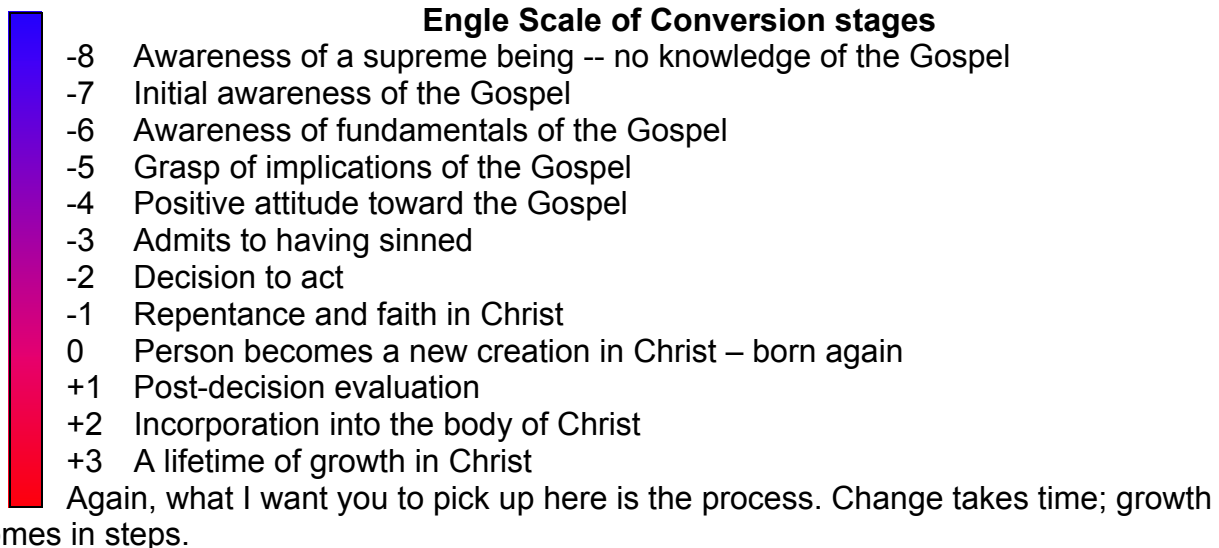
- Be mature -- like Him
- Be faithful -- like Him.

- Simply live as He lived!

Then 2 Corinthians 3:13 adds that we **“are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory....”**

The word that is translated “transformed” here comes from a Greek term from which we get our word metamorphous. Transformed, as found here means to renovate, change, or be transfigured. As a lowly caterpillar is transformed into a beautiful butterfly, so it is that we too are being transformed daily into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. On the day of His return, the transformation will be made complete for 1 John 3:2 promises, **“We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”**

I want to now show you another chart. This one I have adapted from the book, *A Heart for Others: Evangelism and Witnessing* (YWAM) by Andrew Jackson. **(SHOW OHT)**



Occasionally, when I am talking to someone, I get this sinking feeling that they feel that once they accept Christ, that is it. Bingo! Perfection.

- They have arrived.
- They are perfect in knowledge.
- Perfect in sanctification.
- Perfect in giftedness.

They are the man! (Turn to your neighbor and ask them, “Do you feel that way?”)

The Apostle Paul certainly didn’t feel like that. He wrote in Philippians 3:12, **“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on....”**

If the Apostle Paul saw that he was still in the process, then shouldn’t each of us see ourselves in that same light too?

**THINK WITH ME HERE. WHO WERE THESE MEN?** See who can yell the answer out first:: Thomas, John, Peter, Andrew, Matthew, Phillip, Bartholomew, James the Elder, James the Lesser, Judas, Jude, and Simon. Do you recognize the names? These were the Lord's disciples.

These twelve individuals were a dozen different, opinionated, and very human men.

- One had been a tax-collector.
- Others had been commercial fishermen.
- Some had been political renegades.
- They were people who dealt with anger and fear, pride and doubt, great joy and gut-retching disappointment. They knew what it was to scale the heights of ecstasy and to crash in the desert of despair. In short they were folks not so unlike you and me. Not one of them had been cut from a cookie cutter. No, they were unique men one and all.

Then too, you have to realize that Jesus called these fellows to follow Him while they were yet sinners. That's right, they were all evil men when the Lord laid His hand on them.

- They had had problems with temper,
- foul language,
- violence,
- dishonesty,
- greed,
- pride and numerous other vices.

I really do not know if this is true or not, however I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find out that more than one of these guys had had problems staying away from the Budweiser before Jesus enlisted them into His service. Again, they were transgressors with a capital T!

Nevertheless, in a span of three short years, these same individuals, with the exception of Judas, were able to take over the leadership of God's Kingdom here on earth.

- They were there when the Holy Spirit descended on the Day of Pentecost.
- They were a part of the action when the early church "**turned the whole known world upside down**" for God shortly after the death of our Savior!
- In the end, each of these men with the exception of only one were to die the death of a martyr for the cause of Jesus Christ.

The brothers did all of this without the aid of a Sunday school,

- Bible college,
- a doctorate in theology,
- or denominational backing.

Not one of them held ordination papers with the Assemblies of God, they hadn't sat in their pew for 25 years, nor did they have five-hundred dollars worth of Chuck Swindoll tapes in their family room. Yet, something definitely happened between point A and point Z; between when Jesus said, "**Follow Me**", and when He ascended into Heaven. And What happened was THESE MEN GREW. THEY MATURED. THESE VERY DIFFERENT AND VERY HUMAN PEOPLE, TOOK ON THE MIND AND NATURE OF JESUS CHRIST!

Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Behold the speed with which these men grew," or "Hark! See how these men did in three years what you and me can expect to do in thirty."

When Jesus called each of these people, it was a call FORWARD. A call to completeness and perfection. Growth was a process that was natural, normal, and necessary!

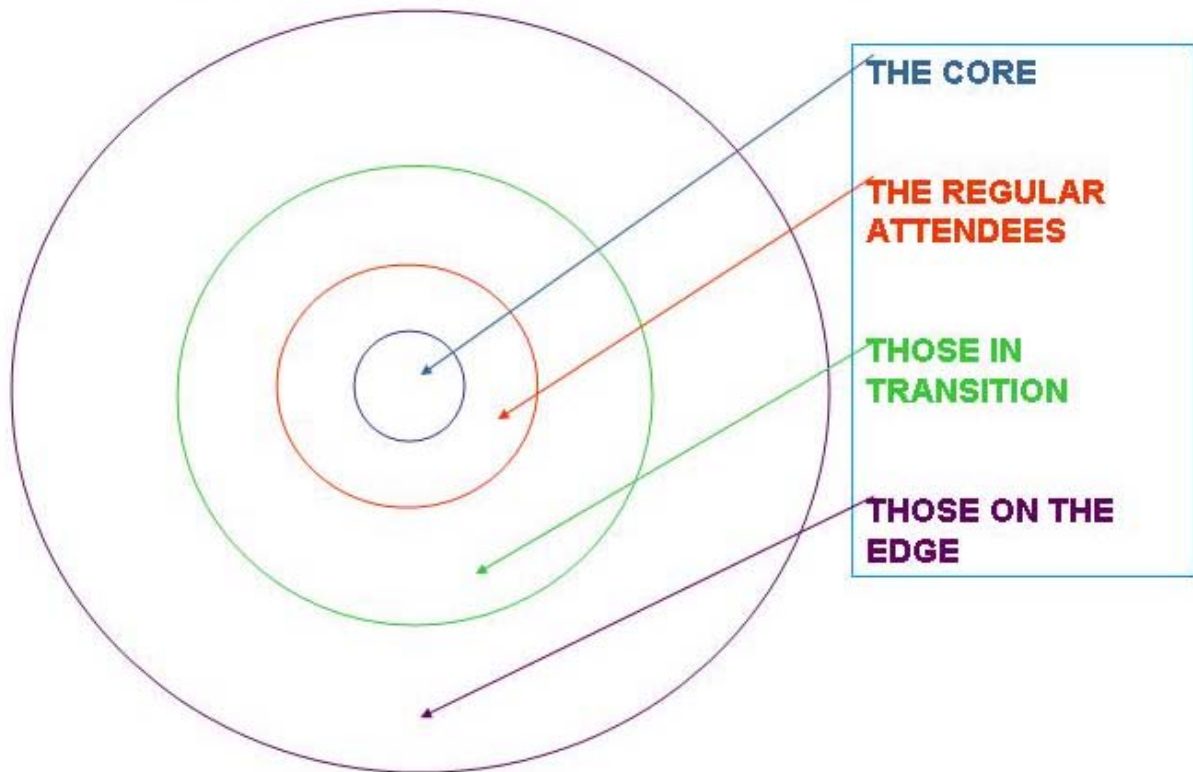
Like these disciples, we too are expected to mature, to grow, to become complete in Jesus. Friends, if growth isn't happening, then something is wrong, terribly wrong. Are you growing in

Christ?

**THIS WHOLE SERIES WAS BIRTHED OUT OF A WEDNESDAY NIGHT BIBLE STUDY SEVERAL WEEKS AGO.**

At that time, I showed the people a series of circles that I called **“CIRCLES OF COMMITMENT.”** I want to show those circles again at this time. (SHOW OHT)

## **CIRCLES OF COMMITMENT**



As you can see:

- **THE INNER-MOST CIRCLE IS CALLED THE CORE.**  
These are the key leaders and influencers in the fellowship. These folks were identified as those who are “Mature In Faith” and the “Disciplers” in the Moving to The Core” chart that I showed you last week. The deacons and their wives, for instance, generally fall into this group. That is why you vote them into the position. These folks can be identified by their commitment to serve. They tithe. They work on work days. They carry the burden of the church. They feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. The core is made up of both men and women. Around 20% of the people within a typical church makes up the core.
- **THE NEXT CIRCLE IS MADE UP OF THOSE WHOM I CALL THE REGULAR ATTENDEES.**  
These are the faithful and true saints. These people support the church, love the church, and form the largest part of the church. They teach or lead classes or Bible study groups. They can be counted on to be at church most of the time. Fully half of the church is made up of this group. When you look at the church, this group is generally what you see.

- **NEXT, WE FIND THOSE IN TRANSITION.**

These folks can be newer people that have only recently started to the church, or older people, for instance, who feel as if they must back out of their previous involvements. These senior saints can be in declining health, disabled, or simply tired.

- **FINALLY, THERE ARE THOSE ON THE EDGE.**

These folks attend services, but they also miss a number services. They rarely tithe, serve, teach, or lead. Due to their lack of consistency, they do not have many deep relationship within the fellowship.

If the temperature is 100 degrees at the core, it is only around 40-50 degrees out here on the periphery. In a typical church, some 20% of the congregation will be made up of those who live on the edge.

In Matthew 13 Jesus gives us the Parable of the Soils. Some also call this, the Parable of the Sower. Anyway, the Lord details for us a story of a farmer who goes out to sow some seed. In the account, we see only one farmer, he sows the same seed, however, Jesus notes that the seed fell on various types of soils. I want to now pick up the account in verse 4, **“As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”**

This is a vivid illustration of the reality and the dangers of those on the edge. Sad to say, many of these people wither and die spiritually due to the fact that they have not taken root in the Lord or in His Kingdom.

One of my jobs is to try to provide an environment for these folks where they will feel drawn in to the inner circles of the church where they might in time take root and grow, where they begin to thrive and be fruitful.

Back now to the parable. Notice verse 8, **“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”** The two inner circles are made up of good-soil people. Most if no all of the growth of the church will be a result of the efforts of these people.

Now to something that I shared on the Wednesday night when I first talked about the *Circles of Commitment*. I said all of that to make this observation. In my 31 years of being a pastor, I have rarely seen a member of the core desert the church. In the rare cases where I have seen it happen, it has generally been due to a moral failure of some sort. In short, it takes extraordinary circum-stances to bring these people down. They are simply committed to Christ and His church regardless.

Something else that I pointed out that Wednesday night. In all of my years as a pastor, I have never buried a deacon while he was in office. I have laid maybe three or four to rest after they had left office, but they were all older gentlemen.

Listen to Psalm 91:14-16, **“Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer**

him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

Proverbs 3:1-2 adds to this idea of long life for those who love and follow the Lord, “**My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity.**”

Another of my favorite passages along this line can be found in Psalm 1, “**Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.**”

What a tremendous contrast is found here. In the Parable of the Soils, the rootless plants wither and die. They are choked out by weeds. Yet, here in Psalm 1 we see an individual who is “**like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.**”

In the “Moving To The Core” chart, I noted that those who are “Mature In Faith” and those who are “Disciplers” have roots that go “down and out,” roots that are “strong and deep.” In both cases, the people bear fruit including some “**30, 60, and 100-fold.**”

Again, in contrast, statistics show that one out of every three people that makes a decision for Christ drops out of the church within three months. No doubt, many more will drop out within one year. Big things, little things, any thing can cause these folks to fall away. Their commitment to Christ and their commitment to His body, the church, are usually on the same level. These people are easy marks for the devil. In fact, 78% of all cult groups are made up of people who have previously attended Christian churches.

Now, just to be honest, the folks at the core, and the people on the edge both experience the same issues in life. Life happens. “**It rains on the just and the unjust.**” And yet, the same trials that many times drives those on the edge away actually draw the people at the core closer to Christ and closer to the church. Strange, isn’t it?

### **THE BIG QUESTION, THEN, IS: HOW DOES SPIRITUAL GROWTH HAPPEN? HOW DOES ONE MOVE TO THE CORE?**

The truth is this: Spiritual growth is intentional. It requires commitment and effort to grow.

- A person must want to grow,
- decide to grow, and
- make every effort to grow.
- Discipleship begins with a decision. No decision is a decision.

Next Sunday, I am going to begin telling you the steps to take to grow in Christ.