

The Old Paths

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“Passing The Toothbrush”

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[Editor’s Note: Preachers’ wives do not get the “credit” they often deserve for their contributions to the work in the Lord’s kingdom. They are often there to help their husbands, and to provide a word of wisdom at various times; not to mention the numerous other ways that they serve the Lord on a daily basis. I say these things to introduce the article below. It was born from some comments made by my wife recently.]

When children are young, parents must feed, dress, groom, transport, and take care of the needs of their children. In addition to this, parents teach and influence their children on a daily basis. Christians who are parents must realize that they are to teach and influence their children for good in such a way that their children will be interested in God and truth for the rest of their lives. (Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4; etc.)

As children mature, the parents must relinquish certain aspects of their work and make the children do it, so that they may learn. Thus, a child that was once fed by “Mom” or “Dad” now feeds himself. This child now dresses himself. Per our title, the child who once had his teeth brushed for him, must be handed the toothbrush, instructed on how to do it, and made to brush his own teeth!

As a child learns, he will make mistakes. This child will drop

food as he tries to feed himself. This little one will miss a button on a shirt, and put his shoes on the wrong feet. A child, while learning to brush his teeth, may get toothpaste on his shirt and the sink, and miss his mouth altogether! This time of instruction and learning demands patience on the part of the parents as they clean up the mess, and in loving care and tenderness, correct the mistakes so that the child might do better the next time.

This time of training can be frustrating, because the parents know they have more experience than the child does. The parents could do things “better” and “faster” than the child. However, the child will never learn and will not be independent if he is not allowed to try it himself, learn, and improve with experience. There comes a time when one must put the “toothbrush” in the hand of the child and tell him to do it himself!

As parents read the above lines, we recognize the truthfulness of these statements. Perhaps parents, in looking back on former days would say, “I wish I had done ...” or, “I wish I had let them ...” As my wife and I discussed the above situations where parents must allow children to experience, learn, and grow for themselves, we also saw that this same principle applies in the spiritual realm.

Spiritual Birth And Growth

What description is given of the person who has been saved from his sins (Mk. 16:16)? Jesus calls this being “born again” (Jn. 3:3, 5). Peter

used this term as well, stating that we have been “born again” of “incorruptible” seed (I Pet. 1:23). Paul states we have received that “spirit of adoption” and are now considered “children of God” (Rom. 8:15-17).

Having been born again, the Bible then calls new converts “babes in Christ” (I Cor. 3:1). As “babies”, we are expected (just as actual newborns) to feed and exercise so that we may grow. Those who have been “born again” must feed upon spiritual food, the “milk” of the word (I Cor. 3:2; I Pet. 2:2). They then must exercise their senses (Heb. 5:14), learn to discern between good and evil, and follow the Lord’s commands all of their lives (Rev. 2:10b).

Then, just as a child physically ages and acquires the ability for solid food, so also, the spiritual “baby” must mature, now being able to digest more of the “solid food” of the gospel. The difference between physical growth and spiritual growth, however, is the fact that while one is involuntary, the other is entirely voluntary! Thus, the writers of the New Testament encouraged and even demanded growth, chastising the Christians who did not grow! For example, Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their lack of growth, telling them, “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (I Cor. 3:2). A similar rebuke is given to the Hebrew Christians in Hebrews 5:12-14. Other passages simply command Christians to grow. For example, in II Peter 3:18, we read, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen.” In the physical realm, we cannot demand that our 13-year old have a growth spurt. We cannot command our

2-year old to be more coordinated when she walks! Spiritually, though, growth and maturity can and must be expected of Christians.

Some Christians Don't Grow!

It is obvious that some Christians have no desire to grow. Those folks need to repent! They need to realize that being a Christian demands spiritual growth (II Pet. 3:18). This growth will not come by accident! Spiritual growth is not an involuntary action, but is a choice we make, and a work we accomplish. Seeing that this is the case, we can know that if we refuse to grow, and refuse to mature in Christ through careful study of His word and application of what we know, then we have sinned. We have been omitting the Lord's command to grow from our lives (Jas. 4:17)!

Some Christians Are Not Given The Opportunity To Grow!

This is an entirely different situation from the above paragraph, and really the point of this article. Just as some children are not handed the "toothbrush" and given the chance to learn and experience growth, so also some Christians are not given an opportunity to grow as they should. I think this parallels a situation common among parents where the parent knows he/she can do something better and faster than the child, so it is easier for them to do it rather than encourage the child to do something new, and watch the child mess up, thereby making the job harder than it might have been otherwise!

Thus is the case with Christians, unfortunately. Sometimes, the "mature" Christians have an attitude which says to the new convert, "Just let me do _____

while you watch." While observation is needed, if all we ever do is "watch," we'll never have the experience we need! We'll never have our senses "exercised" as they need to be (Heb. 5:14).

To illustrate this, consider the preacher who goes to a congregation, and in his zeal to do the Lord's work, ends up doing ALL the work! Of course, the more he does, the more the congregation is satisfied to let him do the work, as they do less and less in the Lord's vineyard. After all, "our preacher" is working and, "We pay him to do it. He has time." A few years later, this man either leaves the congregation or quits being a preacher altogether because, in his words, "Those folks never wanted to do anything."

Yes, there are lazy Christians in the church; but is there not also an element of truth to the fact that some Christians want to grow and "exercise" their spiritual senses, but are just not given the opportunity to do so? I believe part of the preacher's problem in the above paragraph was that he did not allow anyone else the opportunity to grow or mature in the Lord. They watched him do it all! Such actions impaired the growth of a congregation and "burnt out" a good man!

Of course, spiritual exercise can be done in many ways. It takes the form of being allowed the opportunity to take part publicly in our wor-

ship. (Prayers, Praise, Preaching, etc.) It also takes the form of being allowed to teach a Bible class. (Teaching demands one study harder than the students if he is to be prepared, II Tim. 2:15; Eph. 3:4!) This spiritual exercise can also be seen as new converts are encouraged to read, study the Bible, and express themselves at times (Ex: I Tim. 4:13, 15-16). I can remember one young Christian being shouted down (literally) for expressing thoughts on a subject. As I remember, the young person *was* wrong, but it did not demand being treated like that; but spoken to kindly, corrected patiently, and then encouraged humbly (Gal. 6:1). Isn't that what we wanted as we were (and still are) trying to grow in the Lord (Matt. 7:12)?

Conclusion

Remember, just as parents pass along the "toothbrush" to their children, they are still there to watch and correct, etc., when needed. A parent will still be there for assistance and further instructions even after the child "knows" how to do it! Likewise spiritually, let us be mindful of our brethren, put the "toothbrush" in their hand, and in a loving manner, instruct and help them grow in the Lord. It helps them and it helps us, as more mature laborers are equipped for the Lord's work and more ready soldiers are enlisted His army! (Prov. 27:17)

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