

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

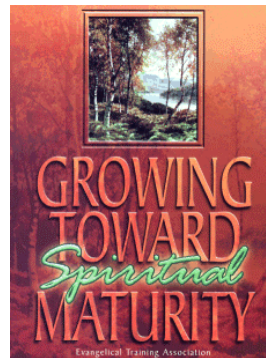
HANDOUT B

Being a Lifelong Learner

Chapter 12 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

Published by Evangelical Training Association



Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity
By Gary C. Newton
Published by Evangelical Training Association

Growth is a never-ending process for the Christian. This was true in the lives of such biblical personalities as Moses, David, Peter, and Paul, as well as almost every other person in the Scriptures that God used. The phrase, “Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet,” expresses the sentiments of Christians today and in biblical times.

The apostle Paul emphatically stressed this point over and over. In Philippians 3:12-14, Paul talks of pressing on and straining for what is ahead; and, in 2 Timothy 4:7, he refers to the Christian life as a race and a continuing fight.

Adult educators often use the term “lifelong learning” when referring to the concept that learning continues in a person’s life long after formal education stops. Although commencement speakers often remind graduates that the granting of their degrees does not indicate an end, but a beginning, this idea seldom makes the impact the speaker desires. However, lifelong learning teaches this exact principle—the formal, school-oriented instruction children and youth receive is only the *beginning*, not the end, of learning. If our formal schooling has been successful, it will have provided us with the tools to continue learning for the rest of our lives.

Yet how does a person make sure that they will continue to learn after they leave school? One of the keys is taking advantage of challenging learning opportunities that help an adult to integrate their life experience with their learning. Research indicates that adults prefer to learn using various learning styles often frustrated in the typical classroom setting. A good mix of both formal and nonformal learning experiences provide a variety of ways of learning to challenge the adult learner.

Formal Learning

Formal Christian adult education is usually linked with structured classroom learning experiences. Following are some of the most common possibilities.

Adult Sunday School

In the context of the local church, this is an excellent opportunity for adult learning. Since adults have varying needs and interests, most churches provide elective classes on different topics and subjects. Often adults can choose from different teaching formats. Adults select the class which will be most valuable to them in their Christian lives and growth. At the same time, they determine personal goals for participating in the class which may be slightly different from the goals of the course but will guide their own involvement in the class.

Evening Training Institutes

Individual churches or several churches in a community often cooperate to develop an adult training institute. These programs usually meet one night a week and often include course offerings in Bible, doctrine, and lay ministry topics. Some form of adult education credit leading to a certificate or diploma is often offered as well.

Colleges and Seminaries

As the older adult population continues to grow, Christian colleges and seminaries are providing more non-degree and degree programs geared especially for adults. Many schools offer courses at convenient times during the day, evening school classes, correspondence school courses, on-line courses, weekend classes, and summer school sessions, with fee structures more appropriate to part time students. On-line opportunities for Christian education are rapidly becoming a very popular way for the non-traditional adult learner to continue their education. More and more school and ministry training sites are being added to the web daily.

Adult Bible Studies

There are an increasing number of opportunities for growth in both large and small group adult Bible studies. Sometimes these study groups meet in homes, churches, community centers, or even businesses. Yet, the goals are usually the same—to study and discuss God's Word in an informal setting, to apply biblical truths to daily lives, and to fellowship with one another. There is a growing variety of Bible study material available to minister to almost any need. Studies are available for people from every walk of life and circumstance—women, men, couples, singles, new believers, the elderly, divorced, and even those trying to lose weight. There are studies that focus on systematic or inductive Bible study and others that are more topical in their approach. Some are geared for evangelism while others help mature Christians to grow in their faith. In order to grow, Christians need to be a part of a challenging Bible study group with other believers.

Seminars, Conferences, Workshops

Opportunities to be involved in seminars, conferences, and workshops for Christian adults have never been more available. Leadership and teacher training, marriage and family, and Bible content areas are popular topics at seminars and workshops. Many camps and conference centers provide a relaxed setting for adults to not only attend challenging lectures and seminars, but also to relax with family or friends. Denominational conferences also provide valuable opportunities for local churches and their members to learn and grow together. However, to achieve the full benefit of these meetings, specific personal goals must be

determined prior to attending. It is a good idea, after such retreats, to discuss with family members or friends what to do with what is learned at such events. Plans should be formulated and recorded at the conclusion of the seminar, conference, or workshop for putting into practice what has been learned. Ideally, several individuals who attended the same conference could later meet to discuss personal reactions and applications.

Adult learning has both a personal and interaction component. Although each of these formal learning opportunities includes interaction with other adults, the full benefit of each learning experience will only be realized as individual adults determine personal learning goals prior to participating and make plans for application after involvement in the learning experience.

Informal Learning

A phase of lifelong learning often overlooked is informal learning—the independent learning opportunities all adults participate in nearly every day. Whether it is seeking an answer to a problem through conversations, reading, or study, or a more structured independent learning project, we are constantly involved in informal learning. Following are some examples.

Personal Devotions/Bible Study

Whether it is reflecting using a daily devotional guide, studying a biblical or theological issue, or studying a book of the Bible, personal Bible study and reflection is one of the most significant learning experiences contributing to our spiritual growth. To help organize these learning experiences, it is a good practice to keep a notebook to record what we learn during our personal Bible study and devotions.

Sermons

Sermons can be excellent learning experiences if we take the time to take notes, discuss the main points with others, or critically reflect on the ideas presented. By studying the text ahead of time, a person can be better prepared to wrestle with the issues presented. Taking sermon notes in a Bible or a separate notebook helps a person to remember key points better and to refer to them at a significant time in the future. Some churches are turning their Sunday evening services into small group discussion groups focusing on the main points of the morning sermon. Such experiences help people to apply Scripture to their lives much more effectively.

Reading

Books, magazines, and journals covering every subject imaginable for Christians are available today. Regularly reading a journal or magazine of personal and spiritual interest can be a significant part of a growing believer's diet. It is also good to develop a habit of reading a book a month for challenge or encouragement.

Adult Learning Projects

Almost every day, adults are involved in learning, whether it be researching an idea in a library or asking questions of an individual more knowledgeable in a particular area. Each person should determine what it is they desire to learn and then devise a course of action to

achieve that learning goal. After setting up a learning plan, it is important to be accountable to some other person for accomplishing it.

Establishing Lifelong Learning Goals

Growing spiritually is a lifelong process which will only be complete when we see Christ face to face. We need to keep our eyes on that goal as we deal with the day-to-day struggles and frustrations. These are some areas which should be considered in establishing lifelong learning goals.

Heady

As the believer's textbook for life, the Bible is the most important element in lifelong learning. An increased knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures should be a major goal of every adult believer. Those books of the Bible which are least known and understood should be studied more. At the beginning of each year, we should determine our personal goals for the study of the Scriptures and plan a learning strategy to meet those goals during the year. Theology, church history, Christian biographies, and Christian magazines should all be a part of the growing Christian's diet. Since all truth is God's truth, wherever it is found, we should stay abreast of reading from stimulating secular authors.

Hearty

We need to set goals in our life related to keeping our hearts and passions pure. Since the Bible teaches that growth in the Christian life comes from the inside out, we need to develop a growth plan that includes disciplining our inner life. Emotions such as anger, lust, hatred, bitterness, pride, resentment, and hurt, if left uncontrolled, can often destroy the life and ministry of a neglectful believer. Once again, to ensure progress in these areas of our lives, it is imperative to have a close friend or mentor to hold us accountable. Since many of these issues have deep roots in our past, it may take time to deal with them. At some point it may even be necessary to see a professional counselor.

Handy

Each adult believer is gifted with abilities from the Holy Spirit for the edification of the church and fellow believers. These gifts and abilities, however, must be continually developed to bring glory to God. We must take advantage of every opportunity to grow in the area of our spiritual gifts, skills, and abilities. This may include instruction in teaching, leadership, mentoring, evangelism, counseling, visitation, or some other ministry skill. While discipleship in the church has tended to focus more on learning information about God and the Bible, Jesus emphasized not only knowing but also obeying what we know. We must make sure that we become not only good hearers of the Word but also good doers.

Putting It All Together

Not every adult learning experience is beneficial. For adult learning to have an impact on our life, ministry, and spiritual growth, we must choose our learning experiences to suit our individual needs and goals. These principles may be helpful in organizing a beneficial, individual learning plan that will help us to continue to grow and mature.

Determine Personal Goals

Any learning program requires specific goals and an action plan. These goals should be based on our needs in light of what God wants for our lives based on Scripture. A good place to begin is by examining our needs in each of the major areas of our lives—Head, Heart, and Hand. In areas that the Holy Spirit reveals to us that we are weak, we set a specific goal that we will strive for based on God's Word. In order to achieve a sense of balance in our growth, it is a good idea to pick at least one goal from each of the three areas.

Choose Learning Experiences to Meet our Goals

Next, we should determine which formal and informal learning experiences will best achieve our goals. At this point a person must evaluate their available time, learning preferences, opportunities, and other obligations. While a person may want to be involved in every learning opportunity available, it is necessary to be very selective about what we commit ourselves to. Often, informal learning opportunities provide busy adult learners with the flexibility they need to achieve their goals. Matching our goals with the best learning experiences is the second step to achieving our goals.

Determine How We Will Know If our Goals Have Been Met

To make sure that we accomplish our goals, we need to determine ahead of time how we will know if our goals have been met. Are there specific skills or attitudes that we want to have learned? Are there areas in our life that we need to deal with? We need to identify specific areas of knowledge or behavior change which should be learned by the end of the learning experience. We need to clearly identify how we will know when the learning is complete and the goals have been met.

When our learning experiences work together to accomplish specific purposes, real growth and development will result. Developing and following through with an individual learning plan becomes a catalyst to our growth and development.

—Gary C. Newton serves as the Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Christian Ministries and Associate Professor of Educational Ministries at Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana. His passion has been to help the church become a training ground for building disciples of Jesus Christ.

Summary

Growth is a continual process for the Christian. Paul modeled his passion for continued growth by setting spiritual goals and continuously working towards accomplishing them. We should wisely follow his example.

Opportunities for lifelong learning abound for us today. Whether through formal or informal means, the believer needs to take advantage of every opportunity to learn, grow, and develop. By developing an individual learning plan we will be more apt to take our learning seriously as we diligently strive to walk more closely with Christ and learn from Him and His Word.

For Further Discussion

1. Investigate the available formal learning opportunities that would be of interest to you. List those that could have potential for you in the next two years.
2. Investigate the available informal learning opportunities that would be of interest to you. List them as you did above.
3. Think of specific ways you could develop your ministry skills, increase your knowledge of the Bible, or deal with a personal struggle or habit. Develop an action plan related to each of these areas of learning or development.
4. Why is it important to have an organized plan for lifelong learning related to your spiritual life?
5. What ways do you learn best? What learning situations do you enjoy the most?

TO ORDER COPIES OF *GROWING TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY*,
PLEASE GO TO: http://www.etaworld.org/cat/gtism_book_cti.htm
OR CALL TOLL-FREE: 1-800-369-8291

© 1999 by Evangelical Training Association. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America. ISBN: 0-910566-45-3