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Quarterly

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# ARE YOU SPIRITUALLY MATURE?

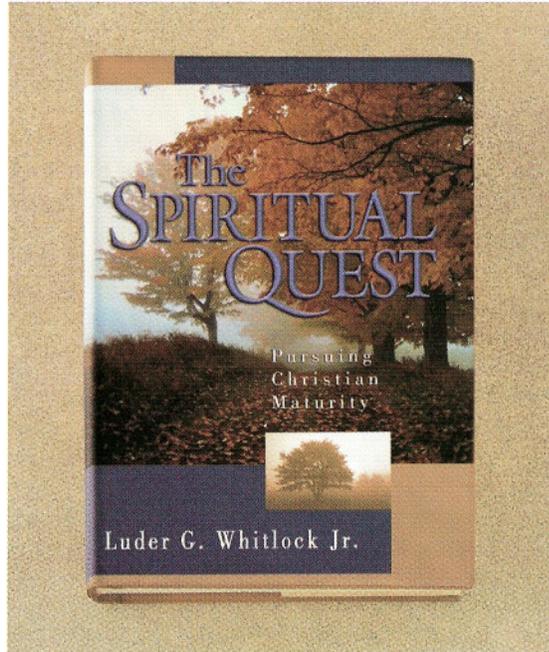
BY DR. LUDER G. WHITLOCK, JR.

**A**fter the usual perfunctory greetings following the funeral service, Alice and Robert were walking to their car in the parking lot when she said, "I'm going to miss Helen. She was the finest Christian I have ever known."

You may have heard similar statements on occasion, but they raise the question: How do we know who is a fine Christian and who is not? To phrase it another way, how do you become a person of spiritual stature? How can you attain spiritual maturity? How would you know if you or someone else has attained spiritual maturity? If you were asked to survey the membership of a local congregation to determine who is spiritually mature, what identifying marks would you look for? Can you compile a list of characteristics that would enable you, with some confidence, to recognize spiritual maturity when you encounter it?

I have often asked that question, listening carefully to the replies. They usually fit into a pattern of emphasis on Bible reading, prayer, and church activity or ministry. The answers typically are that a strong or spiritually mature Christian is someone who reads the Bible regularly, someone who is a serious Bible student, or someone who really knows the Bible. Another response might be to single out someone who prays sincerely and devoutly to God, a real prayer warrior, or perhaps as someone who knows how to talk to God. It is not unusual for people to combine prayer and meditation on the Scriptures as the epitome of a devotional life that reaches the highest levels of Divine approval. Nor is it unusual for someone to suggest that intense involvement in the life of the church or a Christian ministry is a defining factor. This is tantamount to making frequency of attendance, level of activity or status in the church the determining criteria of spiritual maturity.

There is, of course, good reason for people to suggest these answers or they would not be offered so often. After all, they respond, why would you engage in such activities unless you were a Christian, and a serious one at that? How else can you justify the motivation? As the activity level increases you would usually expect that to signal a deepened commitment or higher level of spiritual attainment, wouldn't you? Following this line of thought, it is perfectly plausible to expect ministers, missionar-



ies, church officers and leaders to be at a comparably higher level of spiritual development than other Christians.

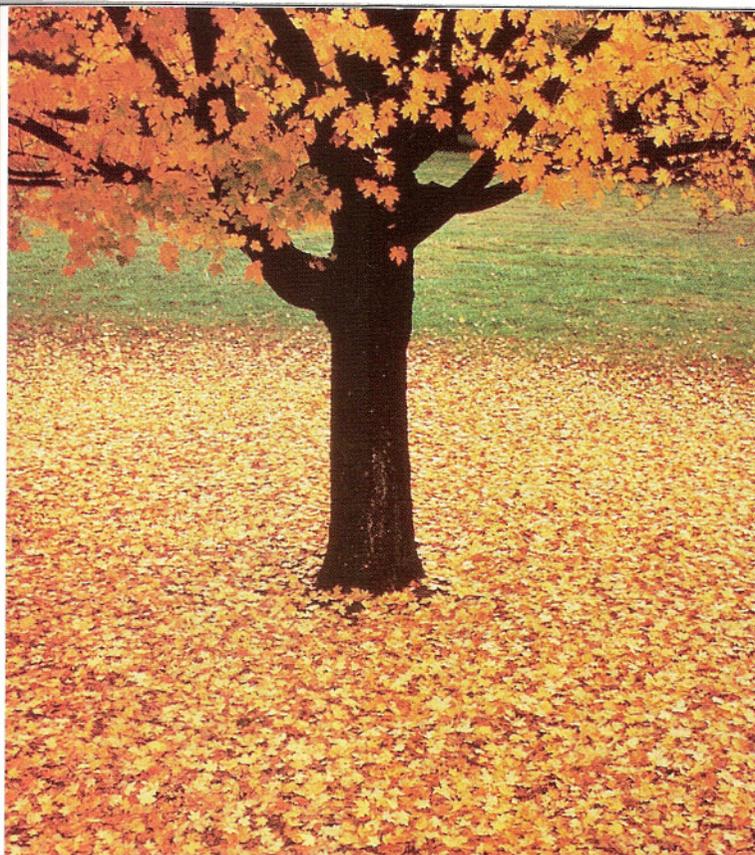
Yet, however reasonable this may seem, it does not always work this way and it is definitely not the way to assess spiritual growth. This may come as a surprise, but the fact is that you may do all of these things—read the Bible daily or read through the Bible yearly, pray frequently and fervently, and be extremely active in a congregation or Christian organization—without even being a Christian, much less a spiritually mature Christian. It happens.

Think about that! The devil knows the Scriptures, doesn't he? Satan did not hesitate to quote the Bible persuasively when tempting Christ (Matthew 4:1-10). Unbelievers have been and still are biblical scholars. They may be accomplished academicians or widely published authors. That is not unusual. The Jesus Seminar of the 90s certainly seems to qualify. The Pharisees of Jesus' day, though their hearts were far from the Lord, set an enviable example of disciplined devotion and dogged, compulsive obedience to the law according to their interpretation of it. In their world if you had asked the Jewish average citizen on the street who would most likely get to heaven, the answer would have been a Pharisee or a Sadducee.

To counter that kind of thinking, as you may recall, Jesus sternly warned that not all who pray "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven. He cautioned His listeners not to make false assumptions about their spiritual status or future spiritual reward, for although they could point to things they had done in His name, such as prophesying, casting out demons and performing miracles, they might still hear the judgment, "Away from me, I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21-23).

The message is crystal clear. You should be careful about the criteria you choose for assessing the assurance of your salvation or spiritual maturity. Regardless of popular opinion, it is a mistake to assume that prayer, study of the Bible and active participation in worship or ministry guarantee you or anyone else spiritual status since they do not even guarantee faith. Why is this so?

The basic error is often one of confusing the methods or means of spiritual growth with the marks of spiritual maturity. The



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term “means of grace” has been used through the years to refer to the medium through which grace may be received. The means of grace for strengthening the faith of the Christian are generally understood to be the Word of God, sacraments and prayer. Once you are a Christian they become the primary channels by which you draw closer to God, growing spiritually. Reading God’s word and hearing it preached or taught, joining in public worship at a church regularly, receiving the sacraments, and participating in prayer and support groups are foundational to one’s growth and development in Christ.

They do not automatically guarantee spiritual growth, as has been noted above, but must be received sincerely in faith and with gratitude or they may become the means of condemnation and judgment for the believer (I Corinthians 11:29, John 12: 47-48). That is why these activities should be understood as means of grace for spiritual growth, not the actual marks of spiritual maturity. They become the vehicles to help you reach spiritual maturity but must not be equated with it.

## DISCERNING SPIRITUAL MATURITY

So, the question remains—how can you discern those who have approached spiritual maturity in contrast to those who are just beginning the journey of faith? One response might be—look for the fruit of the Spirit as listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22,23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This makes sense because these qualities are a sign of spirituality, marking the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit who brings them to fruition. *However, the most satisfactory and straightforward answer to this question is that God wants you to become like Him, conformed to His image in Christ (Ephesians 4:23, Romans 8:29).*

This is what God intends for your spiritual pilgrimage. Let us consider why this is true and what it means to be conformed to God’s image. To do so drives us back to the first pages of the Bible. There we read that Adam and Eve were created in His image

at the dawn of the universe (Genesis 1:27). They were like Him and enjoyed an intimate relationship with Him. However, that image was soon marred or distorted by their sinful disobedience. This disobedience alienated them from God, resulting in tension, if not outright hostility with God, dramatically portrayed by their banishment from the Garden of Eden.

The placement of the cherubim at the gate of the Garden, brandishing a flaming sword to bar Adam and Eve from returning was an unmistakable mark of God’s judgment. Their sinful folly had lost them their unique role in Paradise, along with all its benefits. The nobility of the human race was severely eroded, resulting in a dehumanizing trend that would eventually lead to all kinds of inhuman acts. Moreover, they would not be able to re-enter the Garden and regain what had been lost. That now was impossible. There would have to be another solution.

The Gospel is the solution God provides to all who are under His judgment. Everyone must repent of the sin that has estranged them from God and trust in Christ for forgiveness and acceptance. The Gospel is a message of hope. But it is also a message of transformation because all who genuinely repent and believe are changed forever. They are born again spiritually. The old person is left behind and the new person takes over. When they become Christians they do so as spiritual babies who begin a process of spiritual growth. The nature of the change following conversion is an experience of grace that gradually remakes believers so that they become more and more like God. That is what spiritual growth means—being remade into the image of God. It is a progressive experience of conformity to the character of God.

The most important step any person can take toward spiritual growth is to seek a better knowledge of God, who has revealed Himself to us most clearly through the Scriptures. He has also revealed Himself to us through the universe, His creation, and through other Christians. In biblical times He revealed Himself through unusual appearances, such as the Angel of the Lord or the pillar of fire. All of these sources of information are helpful to us in coming to know God, but the Scriptures provide the only infallible record and guide. Moreover, the Scriptures are our source for the knowledge of God as Savior.

Gathering this information and seeking to understand it, as well as use it to interpret our experience, enables us to have a true and accurate understanding of who God is and what He is like, although it is far from an exhaustive knowledge. And, even with all the information available, what person could claim to know God completely or comprehensively? The important thing is that we know Him truly.

## TRANSFORMED LIVES

Spiritual growth is transformation. Lives are changed from unbelief to belief, from ungodly to godly. Although your transformation will not be complete until the glory of heaven is realized, nevertheless there is a recognizable change that begins with conversion and continues throughout your life. It may have ups and downs, spurts of great growth and slower times of imperceptible advance, but it is a new and different life empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit. What you were becomes more and more distant and different from the new you who is becoming more and more like the Lord you have come to love. It is somewhat reminiscent of perusing photographs taken during various phases of your life. The progression from infancy to childhood to youth and then on to the stages of adulthood reveals striking changes. Every day God’s attributes should be

more clearly apparent and enduring in you.

Consider the Sermon on the Mount in this light (Matthew 5:1ff). Jesus began His great sermon with a surprising statement regarding the poor in spirit, or it might be translated "the beggars of the spirit." He might well have said, "The best thing that can happen to you is to acknowledge your spiritual impoverishment. You are spiritually destitute; so the road to happiness begins when you admit that you are sinful through and through. Everything that you think and touch is in some way tainted with sin. It pervades and corrupts your whole life, holding you captive like an addiction. But, of greater concern is the fact that it brings you under the wrath and judgment of the holy God who cannot have fellowship with sin. Do you realize that the consequences of your sinfulness means eternal punishment? If so, then you have taken the first step toward true happiness."

Grabbing the undivided attention of His listeners with this striking statement, Jesus might have continued, "Once you recognize the magnitude of your problem, the best thing you can do is repent—mourn because of the sin that has separated you from God, triggered His anger and brought you under His judgment. If you genuinely grieve for the way you have spoiled your life and offended God, there is hope. If you are distressed because of the harm you have done and are therefore willing to reject this way of life, you can begin anew, finding peace and comfort. If you hunger and thirst for the righteousness that comes from above—from the Lord—and can be received through faith in the Savior He has promised, then there is hope for you."

Given the biblical emphasis on changed lives, which should be radically different from those of non-Christians, it is extremely disturbing to learn that when it comes to moral-ethical standards, you cannot tell much difference between many church members and non-church members. If our world were characterized by unusually high standards of moral behavior, this fact might be somewhat more encouraging, but given the significant erosion of moral standards and behavior during the last forty years, this is a matter for serious concern.

Perhaps we have failed dramatically in our effort to teach people what God expects and, given the abysmal biblical ignorance that typifies the Christian populace, that may well be the case. You do wonder what is being accomplished by so many hours of Bible study and preaching. Or perhaps many Christians do not care, finding it easier and more desirable to accommodate their behavior to the unbelievers around them. Some may assume that only church-related matters are to be influenced by faith. Another possibility is that many church members may not be Christians, but for one reason or another find it advantageous to be part of the church.

Whatever the reason, there is a serious prob-

lem. Christians should be different. And if we are not developing a new way of thinking and living that is different from an unbelieving world, we cannot meet God's approval. Something has to change. It is time for Christians to get serious, especially if there is a genuine desire to take advantage of the spiritual stirrings in the land. For if non-Christians see nothing distinctive about us, they will ask, "Why should we bother considering Christianity? What difference would it make?"

Therefore, while the avenues to spiritual growth may be multiple, the destination of spiritual maturity is clearly and singularly to be understood as conformity to the image of God. When other people mingle with us and observe us in the ebb and flow of daily activities, they should be pointed to the Lord through our transformed lives that reflect God's grace and character.

Character should be emphasized because spiritual growth involves the formation of character. Together the characteristics of God reveal His character just as the various facets of our personalities, values, and behavior demonstrate our character. As your life is transformed by the Holy Spirit so that you become conformed more and more to the image of God, a character change is occurring in you. This character change, reflected in the transformation of your various characteristics or attributes, will make you more like the Lord and less like unbelieving people around you. From the inner core throughout we will become different—people of character—godly people.

Don't let anyone persuade you that character doesn't matter as long as you have faith—that as long as you believe, you can live however you wish. Real faith creates character as our lives are transformed to the characteristics of God. Such character formation shapes our behavior. When the heart is changed, the person changes. When enough people change, the culture changes, and ultimately the world changes. RTS

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## W H I T L O C K

Dr. Luder Whitlock has been president of RTS since 1979. In addition to serving on numerous boards and committees, he is President and a member of the executive committee of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. He is also currently President of the Foundation for Reformation. He was the executive director of the *New Geneva Study Bible* and has contributed to several other significant volumes including *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* and *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. This article is an excerpt from his new book, *The Spiritual Quest*, to be released by Baker Book House this fall.

