

# PERSONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH

By Dale DuVerney

Do we realize that church growth is tied directly to personal spiritual growth? Without personal spiritual growth there can be no congregational church growth - spiritually, numerically or any other way. Many churches spend enormous amounts of money, energy and time on programs. They talk about how to grow church membership, how to increase church finances, how to build a quality leadership, how to effectively minister to the outside community and a host of other subjects. These are important, but I believe that the church of our Lord needs fewer programs and more emphasis on personal spiritual growth in the lives of the membership. When the church emphasizes spiritual growth, the rest will take care of itself.

I believe that there is convincing proof as seen in the book of Acts. Notice Acts 2:42: "*And they (the new converts to Christianity) continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.*" We find recorded in this scripture four key elements to personal spiritual growth that resulted in the growth of the first century church. First, they continued steadfastly in the word of God. Second, they continued steadfastly in fellowship one with another. Third, they continued steadfastly in their worship of God. Fourth, they continued steadfastly in prayer! They listened to God, they made friends of God's children, they worshiped God and they talked with Him continually! Sounds like a personal growth plan to me!

To understand these elements of personal spiritual growth, we must understand the importance of a key word: "continuing steadfastly" — denoting "devotion." The idea here is that of "devotion;" the state of being constant or steadfast toward. The literal translation of this word, *proskartereo*, is: "standing ready in constant attendance." There was nothing casual or haphazard in the commitment of these new believers! There was nothing casual or haphazard about their commitment as a Church! Today, the church cannot afford to have less than "devoted" followers of Christ.

We are living it difficult times. Our world has experienced some catastrophic social, cultural, political and religious changes in the last few generations. One of the most significant changes we have seen in recent years in religion has been the disposition to re-define Biblical terms in ways that best suit the user. That is, one may mean something entirely different from that which is intended in the original use of a word as it is employed in Scripture. The philosopher Socrates was so correct when he said, "*To use words wrongly or indefinitely is not merely an error in itself, it creates error in the soul.*" The word spiritual is such a word — meaning different things to different people — I pray that I can help us understand what it is and therefore how to grow in it personally.

We are commanded: "*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 3:18). Brethren, one cannot be obedient in Christ and not grow! Our growth begins, as it does in the physical realm, from the moment of birth (John 3:3-5; Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17). We grow in the knowledge of what is right and wrong, leaving sin behind (Romans 6:1-2; Psalm 119:11). Getting out of the sinning business we learn to never justify it, as Saul did (1 Samuel 15). We learn that we must never seek to hide it as David did (2 Samuel 11-12). We will follow the admonition of Romans 13:14 and deny those opportunities to engage in it!. In fact, we will ever seek to be free from sin (2 Peter 2:1; Romans 6:6-7, 17).

What are some imperatives for spiritual growth? Well, obviously **food** would be at the top of the list. Not physical food, but spiritual food - the Word of God. The inspired Peter wrote that we are to desire the sincere milk of the word that we may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:2; cf. Hebrews 5:12-14). We need to **exercise** our new faith by godliness (1 Timothy 4:7). We learn to be spiritual by doing what is spiritual! We learn to sing by singing, pray by praying, teach by teaching, etc. Of course, being ever watchful of our **environment** is vital to our proper spiritual growth as well. Just as we do not plant tomatoes and corn amidst the weeds, we must not plant our spirituality amidst the withering weeds of humanism, hedonism, atheism and every other contrary and contradictory worldly philosophy. These will stunt your growth. Remember the admonition of the inspired Paul: "*Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits*" (1 Corinthians 15:33). Lastly, remember that it takes **time** for growth in any and every aspect of life. Realize that you will not be the same person spiritually tomorrow as you were yesterday if you are growing. You should be able to look over your life and see spiritually beneficial changes. Hebrews 5:12 states that there is a time when we grow from being merely learners to practitioners and then teachers. May we never be "*ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth*" (2 Timothy 3:7; Cf. John 8:31-32).

So then, who is the spiritual person? The word spiritual connotes one who has accessed knowledge from God, for Paul speaks of the wisdom of God which had been manifested in certain spiritual things revealed by God's Holy Spirit through inspired men and their preaching and writing (1 Cor. 2:6-16). The contrast at the end of this section of Sacred writ is the comparison between the "natural man" and the "spiritual man." The point is that those who rely solely upon their own intuitive faculties and intellectual prowess cannot know the will of God, for he does not value divine revelation. The "spiritual" man however, is one who welcomes the Spirit's revelation and seeks not only to know it, but apply and obey it.

Spirituality is not achieved by a **monastic life-style**. In the early 4th century, certain persons professing Christianity concocted the notion that if they withdrew from society and lived in isolation, such would cultivate the spiritual. Neither is spirituality associated with **asceticism**. The ascetic person labors under the illusion that mere acts of self-denial, and even bodily abuse, can generate a spiritual dimension. Some allege, for example, that abstention from marriage is a "holier" state (cf. 1 Timothy 4:3). While there occasionally may be some value in maintaining the celibate state (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:26) such does not automatically produce holiness. When dealing with a certain heresy which plagued the saints at Colossae, Paul spoke of those who practiced "severity to the body" in the hope of being spiritual — But, he declared, such is *but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh* (Colossians 2:23). Vast multitudes assume that **mere morality** is the equivalent of spirituality. They believe that doing benevolent deeds is sufficient to qualify them as spiritual people. Paul wrote: *"...for by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory"* (Ephesians 2:8-9; cf. Titus 3:5). I have been acquainted with a number of people who are very kind and generous, but not saved. Still, others are convinced that if they are **religious**, i.e., exhibit a piety towards God, this insures that they are spiritual people. Such a notion is far removed from the truth. The Jews of Jesus' day were devout, believing in the true God, yet they were lost without Christ! (Acts 4:11-12). Cornelius, the Roman centurion, was "a devout man" (Acts 10:2), yet was lost! The pagans of Athens were "religious" (Acts 17:22), but not spiritual. Spirituality is a unique dimension and not easily attained through mere outward piety.

So, who then is a spiritual person? A spiritual person will deeply believe in the existence of an intimate God, and concede the Lord has a sovereign right over his life (Psalm 100:3; cf. Romans 9:20-21). The spiritual soul will acknowledge that he does not possess the inherent wisdom to know how to conduct his life (Jeremiah 10:23). The spiritual soul prays with David: "Uphold my steps in Your paths, that my footsteps may not slip. " (Psalm 17:5) and "*Direct my steps by Your word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me.*" (Psalm 119:133). David rightly declared: "*The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way.*" (Psalm 37:23). The spiritual person strives to have a yielding spirit that longs more than anything else to obey God. We read of Ezra's prescription for success: "*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel*" (Ezra 7:10).

When one "sets his heart" to do what is right, everything else follows. The spiritual person views things in terms of eternity, not time. He may experience hardships and heartaches now, but he reckons "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." later on (Romans 8:18). The spiritual person labors to fulfill God's will now, while it is day, knowing that the night is coming when no man can work (John 9:4).

A spiritual individual subordinates the material to higher interests. He sets his mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth (Col. 3:2). He does not, become inordinately preoccupied with "things" of a material nature. Rather, he seeks foremost the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). One who is truly spiritual strives for balance in his existence. He does not compartmentalize his service to God by "selective devotion." The quality of being "spiritual" is achieved by a determined effort; it is neither an accident, nor an automatic birthright. **My prayer is that God will help each of us, as His people, to strive for this noble quality of life (D.D.).**