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A Note from The President Of LCMI

THE JOURNEY TO MATURITY

When my wife signed up for “Child Growth and Development” in college, she never dreamed that this Psychology course would be our life story. Now, a few decades later, we can truthfully say that we have gained a bit of head-on, hands-on experiential knowledge in regard to the growth and development of children. She and I have been blessed with six sons, the eldest being twenty years older than the youngest. I suppose one could say that we possess that “full quiver” mentioned in Psalm 127.

Our lifetime course of “Child Growth and Development” has proven to be one of the biggest blessings of our life. At the same time, it has been the most challenging. The spacing of our children has afforded unique learning opportunities that only a wide variety of ages living together can offer. And now since the grandchildren have come along, we entered a new phase of our “continuing education program.”

Within the spiritual realm, all of us are involved with a “continuing education program.” In fact, all of us who are a part of God’s Kingdom are already enrolled in this “Child Growth and Development” course. In essence, when Jesus commissioned us to “Go...and make disciples...teaching them...,” He knew that we would need to be equipped and empowered for the gigantic task at hand. The Master Teacher of this course knows just the right “curriculum” for each individual student, and is able to prepare every one of us in order that we may nurture His precious children, helping them along through the stages of growth and development.

Close observation of the stages of life and growth is indeed captivating. Watching a child progress from level to level, and analyzing the various characteristics of each particular stage is not only fascinating, but necessary, in order that we may be able to nurture them properly in wisdom and understanding. The same is true in God’s Kingdom. John knew this when he outlined

three different levels of maturity in 1 John 2:12-14. In fact, notice that he had three specific stages of “growth and development” in mind when he was writing his final words from exile on the Isle of Patmos, to his spiritual family back home.

*“I write to you, **little children**, because your sins are for-given you for His name’s sake. I write to you, **fathers**, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, **young men**, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, **little children**, because you have known the Father. I have written to you, **fathers**, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have writ-ten to you, **young men**, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.”*

LITTLE CHILDREN

Notice that John mentions the “little children” first. These little ones are a priority in the Kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus places them as being the “greatest on His V.I.P. list.” It seems that the all-important “Who’s the greatest in the Kingdom?” issue would come up every so often with Jesus’ disciples. Just imagine those grown men and their heated debates on such a topic! The temperature must have risen high enough on one occasion that they decided that they would bring Jesus into the discussion. “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” Before uttering a word in answer to them, “He called a little child to Him, and set him in the midst of them.”

Picture this! A whole group of grown-up men standing there looking down at this little kid! (Jesus knew the importance of “visual aids” for those visual learners.) Now with everything in place, He went on to grab this “teaching moment,” and gave them (and us) some vital information regarding the Kingdom. “...Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4).

In essence, Jesus wanted them to quit being “childish” - and to become “childlike.” He clearly declared that their entrance into the kingdom demanded this, and their “Who’s the Greatest?” status would be totally dependent upon their capacity for childlike humility. He then continued with more shocking doctrine: “Who-ever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” (verse 5). He wanted them to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He relates to children, identifies with children, and has passionate interest in children. They are of number one importance as far as He is concerned!

Let us now note what John specifically wrote to the little children: “I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake” (verse 12). “I write to you, little children, because you have known the Father” (verse 13).

Each time a newborn baby joined our family, we would spend countless hours just gazing at him. Not too many days would pass, and we would notice that he would begin to gaze back! It would seem that he was just as interested in us as we were in him!

Some fascinating research on newborns has revealed that they have very limited vision. In fact, they are only capable of focusing clearly on something about twelve inches away. Amazing, isn't it? This "just so happens" to be the distance of eye-to-eye contact when a baby is being cradled in someone's arms! The researchers also discovered that it is at this crucial point of development that the baby's brain is actively "imprinting" the images of the ones at whom he is gazing. This time of focusing on his parent's eyes is critical to the development of his brain and vital to the formation of his identity base!

Oh, how the physical gives us insight into the spiritual! No wonder little children are a priority in God's Kingdom! This stage is a most critical time of spiritual growth and development! Young believers must be encouraged to spend much time gazing into the eyes of their Heavenly Father, imprinting His image firmly and deeply within their being. They need to know that they have a Father, one who unconditionally loves them and has forgiven them. They need to be assured that nothing is standing in the way of their capacity to have a close, intimate relationship with Him. They need to know that they are identified with Him, that they are secure in His family. Without this basic solid foundation, they will not be free to go on to maturity. They will be unable to progress to the next stage of development.

Along this line of the importance of establishing the identity of the young believer within the family of God, I find it immensely interesting that the words in the Great Commission, "*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*" is sandwiched between "*making disciples*" and "*teaching them.*" This issue of baptism is a crucial matter in establishing the identity of the new believer in the Body of Christ. The very word itself means "to dip, plunge, submerge, or immerse." The picture of baptism is one of being placed into and becoming identified with Christ and His Body. "*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized **into** Christ have put on Christ*" (Galatians 3:26-27). "*For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized **into** one body...*" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13a). It is no wonder that water baptism is an integral part of the Great Commission. God knew that a physical, visual, "hands-on activity" would be necessary to powerfully and effectively demonstrate to every new believer what has actually happened within the spiritual realm. They are now completely identified with Christ and His Body - a new creation.

Without a doubt, these little children are of vast importance to our Heavenly Father. He definitely views them as His major priority. Secular educational research has revealed that "...from conception to age 4, the individual develops 50% of his mature intelligence, from ages 4 to 8 he develops another 30%, and from ages 8 to 17 the remaining 20%." "**As much of the development takes place in the first 4 years of life as in the next 13 years.**"¹ Just as in the physical world of education, the early years of spiritual life are incredibly critical. The subsequent success of the new believer will be affected and in a large part determined by what he learns within this early formational period. We do a disservice and much harm to young Christians when we neglect to properly nurture them during this crucial season of growth. The Church of God must rise up and take responsibility for the "full" commission which God has commanded. Working with young children will be draining, time-consuming, and at times very messy, but we must not leave the baby to fend for himself. We must strive to lovingly nurture him at his particular level of maturity and take him to the next stage of growth and development.

YOUNG MEN

Some of our most emotional times as a family have accompanied those days surrounding the departure of one of our sons. Each time the moment arrives for a son to “leave the nest,” the tears of sadness flow freely. But the feelings of loss are mixed with a sense of joy, and even celebration. Another precious child is growing up into manhood and is going on to face the challenges of the future in the strength of the Lord. His leaving may be difficult, but it is only a sign of a healthy maturing process - and it is right!

In the spiritual journey to maturity, there are specific times of transition into a new level of development. Most often this season of change is accompanied with much difficulty, but again, it is healthy - and right. The writer of Hebrews pointed out to his audience that they were dull of hearing. He goes on to explain why this was so: *“You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need some-one to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food. And a person who is living on milk isn’t very far along in the Christian life and doesn’t know much about doing what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right. So, let us stop going over the basics of Christianity again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature...”* (Hebrews 5:12-6:1). Let’s go on and grow up! Let’s go on to maturity!

John addresses those who have graduated to this second level of maturity by saying, *“I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one”* (1 John 2:13b, 14b). He recognizes a clear distinction between those who have gone on to this level and those who are still in the “baby stage.” The characteristics of this new phase are clearly defined by:

1. A new level of strength (“...you are strong”).
2. The abiding power of the Word of God (“the word of God abides in you...”).
3. The ability to overcome the wicked one (to be successful in spiritual warfare).

In the military world, children are not sent to war. It is the strong young men that are sent to conquer and attain victory for their country. Notice the distinct “military feel” as we come to this level of maturity. The young men are “no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting...but...(they have) grown up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ” (see Ephesians 4:14, 15a). They have a keen sense of discernment and ability to distinguish between right and wrong. This is a result of the Word of God becoming their sole source of nourishment and strength. They no longer feed on “baby food,” but are able to digest the “meat of the Word.”

WARNING! We must be aware that the believer coming into this stage of development is still in some need of fatherly input, or mentoring. They are young and will lean on and glean from wise counsel. They are in a season of “breaking away” from child-hood, and they are coming into full maturity. There may be moments when they will be drawn back to the “toys” of the past, like a young teenager who still enjoys his Legos. They have not come to the point of reproduction

and continue to be in somewhat of a receiving mode. Although they are much more independent and less demanding than a young child, they are still dependent on the guidance and care of a father.

FATHERS

“I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning...I have written to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning” (1 John 2:13a, 14a).

Seems a bit repetitive, does it not? What did John have in mind when he addressed those who had come into this third and final level of development? This elderly man of God who had walked and talked with Jesus some years before could certainly be labeled as one who had entered the “father category” himself. He was definitely one who knew his God and enjoyed an intimate relationship with Him. The double reference to having “known Him who is from the beginning” is not an accident, and more than likely the repetition is meant to express emphasis.

There are various levels of relationship, or “knowing” some-one. We may well say that we “know” the president of our country, meaning that we know who he is; we would recognize him if we saw him on the street. Then there are those to whom we have been introduced briefly. Technically, we may say that we “know” them, but that knowledge is extremely limited. However, there are those whom we know intimately, such as a close friend, family member, or spouse. We have spent much time with them and are extremely familiar with how they think and behave. In fact, we may have even taken on some of their characteristics. This is the type of relationship that spiritual fathers have with their own Heavenly Father. They have somehow entered a level of deep intimacy with the eternal God of the universe.

This concept is indeed mind-boggling. Take the time to ponder this! Human beings are designed to have direct, intimate contact with their God! The Hebrew word “**yada**” is translated “know,” meaning “to know by observation, investigation, reflection, or firsthand experience.” The highest level of “**yada**” is in “direct intimate contact.” In fact, this word is used in Genesis in regard to the life-giving intimacy in marriage. (“**Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain,...**” - Genesis 4:1.) The same word is used in Daniel 11:32b, which states, “...**but the people who know their God shall be strong and carry out great exploits.**”

The Greek counterpart for “yada” is “ginosko.” This likewise carries the idea of experiential knowledge. The fathers in 1 John 2 have come to a new and deeper level of maturity in which the life of God has actually been produced in them, thereby giving them the capacity to reproduce. What an awesome truth! Direct intimate contact with our God conceives and births blessings and victories! The Bride of Christ is meant to reproduce. We are to go on to become spiritual fathers and mothers who are reproducing the life of God in others around us. This stage of maturity is the least self-centered of all of the levels and requires that we: “*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others*” (Philippians 2:3,4).

The parental stage is truly the most demanding and difficult season in our developmental journey. At this level the parent must be constantly focused on the little ones and their individual

needs. However, the ultimate reward makes the effort that is expended all worthwhile. There is no greater joy for a parent than to participate in the birth of a child, then to watch as he goes from infancy to becoming a toddler, from adolescent to teen, from becoming a young man or woman to ultimately rejoicing with him as he enters parenthood himself. This is our Kingdom purpose! This is our divine destiny! Let us each go on to maturity and partner with God in the fulfillment of His Great Commission.

*“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected, but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended, but one thing I do, for-getting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. **There-fore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind...**” (Philippians 3:12-15a).*

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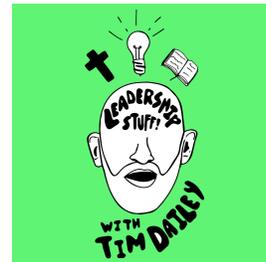
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