PROFILES IN FAITH
John Owen (1616-1683)
by Sinclair B. Ferguson
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John Owen was born at Stadham, or Stadhampton, near Oxford, in the year 1616. The second son of Henry Owen, the local Puritan vicar, John had three brothers, William, Henry, and Philemon, and one sister, whose Christian name is unrecorded but whose married name was Singleton.

Almost nothing is known of the intimate details of the Owen household. In a rare comment on his upbringing, Owen later wrote that his father was “a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord.” When he was about ten, he went to a small grammar school in the parish of All Saints, Oxford, in preparation for his entrance to Queen’s College at the age of twelve. He matriculated in Oxford University on 4 November 1631, which required his subscribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles, and graduated B.A. on June 11, 1632.

While receiving his grounding in grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy, and taking part in the required academic debates, he apparently found time to throw the javelin and compete in the long jump! He also played the flute. Owen reputedly disciplined himself during this period to take only four hours of sleep each night. Already, as a teenager, he was sowing the seeds of both the academic learning and the ill health which were to characterize his later years. He is reported to have said in adulthood that he would have sacrificed his learning in exchange for better health. On April 27, 1635, he graduated M.A., and soon afterwards was ordained deacon, and began the seven-year course for the degree of B.D.

Those were difficult times for a young man who had inherited his father’s Puritan convictions, and was beginning to hold them for himself. In

(continued on page 10)
Thoughts to Ponder

Of Bearing with The Defects of Others


Those things that a man can not amend in himself or in others, he ought to suffer patiently, until God order things otherwise.

Think that perhaps it is better so for thy trial and patience, without which all our good deeds are not much to be esteemed.

Thou oughtest to pray nevertheless, when thou hast such impediments, that God would grant thee help, and that thou mayest bear them kindly.

If one that is once or twice warned will not listen, contend not with him: but commit all to God, that his will may be fulfilled, and his name honored in all his servants, who well knoweth how to turn evil into good.

Endeavor to be patient in bearing with the defects and infirmities of others, of what sort soever they be; for that thyself also hast many failings which must be borne with by others.

If thou canst not make thyself such a one as thou wouldest, how canst thou expect to have another fashioned to thy liking?

We would willingly have others perfect, and yet we amend not our own faults.

We will have others severely corrected, and will not be corrected ourselves.

The large liberty of others displeaseth us; and yet we will not have our own desires denied us.

And thus it appeareth, how seldom we weigh our neighbor in the same balance with ourselves.

If all men were perfect, what should we have to suffer of our neighbor for God?

But now God hath thus ordered it, that we may learn to bear one another’s burdens; for no man is without fault; no man but hath his burden; no man sufficient of himself; no man wise enough of himself; but we ought to bear with one another, comfort one another, help, instruct, and admonish one another.

Occasions of adversity best discover how great virtue or strength each one hath.

For occasions do not make a man frail, but they reveal what he is.
10 Questions To Ask
To Make Sure You’re Still Growing

Are you more like Jesus than you were a year ago?

by Donald S. Whitney
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One of the early explorers to the North Pole charted his journey hourly to ensure that he stayed on course through the white wasteland. At one point a strange phenomenon began to occur. As he checked his position, his instruments indicated that even though he had been moving northward, he was actually farther south than he had been an hour before. Regardless of the speed at which he walked in the direction of the Pole, he continued to get farther from it. Finally he discovered that he had ventured onto an enormous iceberg that was drifting in one direction as he was walking in the other.

There is a world of difference between activity and progress. That is as true on a Christian’s journey toward the Celestial City of heaven as it is on a North Pole expedition. The Christian life is meant to be one of growth and progress. We are even commanded in 2 Peter 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” How can we know that we are growing in grace—that we are making real progress and not merely deceiving ourselves with activity?

It’s often hard to recognize spiritual advance over a week’s time or maybe even a month’s time. Trying to determine the progress of a soul is like looking at the growth of an oak—you can’t actually see it growing at the moment, but you can compare it to where it was some time ago and see that there has indeed been growth. The following ten questions can help you discern whether you are maturing spiritually. Use them to evaluate the past six to twelve months.

1. Are you more thirsty for God than ever before?
The writer of Psalm 42:1 said, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” Have you been thirsting for God like that? Is He your passion? If so, your soul-thirst is a sign of soul-growth.

Do you yearn to know Jesus Christ more and more intimately? In spite of all of his maturity in Christ, in spite of all he had seen and experienced, the Apostle Paul declared late in life, “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10). What was he talking about? Didn’t he already know Jesus better than most of us ever will? Of course he did. But the more he knew Jesus, the more he wanted to know Him. The more Paul progressed in spiritual strength, the more thirsty for God he became.

Is your soul thirsty for the Lord? Do you long to see Him face to face? Like a deer thirsting for water, are you thirsting to be filled and saturated with God? That’s a sign of someone who’s growing as a Christian.

2. Are you more and more loving?
The mark of a Christian is love, especially love for other Christians. “Dear friends,” urged the Apostle John, “let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God” (1 John 4:7). If you are growing in love, you are growing in grace.

I have a friend who, early in his Christian life, quickly and openly expressed his disgust with individuals and groups who disagreed with him theologically. But (continued on page 21)
The cover of *Newsweek* magazine displayed in bold letters:

**THE SEARCH FOR THE SACRED:**  
**AMERICA’S QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL MEANING**

With the increasing secularistic materialism of our modern culture, people both within the church and in society at large are looking for spiritual answers. This quest has taken many different forms.

The “new age” movement has attracted large numbers of followers as highly visible entertainment figures try to give spiritual answers for complex modern life. But the new age movement has developed its practices apart from Jesus Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is a counterfeit of Biblical spirituality.

The recent popularity of “spiritual formation” authors in some quarters of the church speaks to a desire by Christians to find deeper practices of the spiritual life. There is a hunger for a real spiritual life, something different than simply playing church. But even within the Christian realm we find remarkable differences in what proponents mean by “spirituality” or “spiritual formation.”

**Approaches to Spirituality**

The history of the Christian church is marked by a variety of approaches to spiritual formation.¹

*The contemplative life.* Church history has witnessed men and women who fled the life of the city to found cloisters and monasteries, emphasizing the importance of solitude, meditation, and prayer. A notable example is Augustine of Hippo. Here many emphasize that the road to spirituality is through contemplative intimacy with God.

*The life of holiness.* In a world of sin and moral laxity, some have emphasized the removal of sinful habits in the life of the Christian. John Wesley and his friends were nicknamed the “Holy Club” because they took sin seriously and developed specific methods to achieve a life of holiness. For many spirituality is achieved through holiness before God.

*Life in the Spirit.* Still others emphasize the shaping of the individual Christian by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the means or agency of spiritual formation. Some groups, as widely divergent as Quakers and the Assemblies of God, emphasize that spiritual formation is achieved as the Christian is open to the experience of the Holy Spirit.

*Social justice.* From Francis of Assisi to the modern organization World Vision, many in church history have devoted their lives to care for the sick, the poor, and the lame. Some have abandoned their former lives altogether, while others make this a conscious pattern of life within regular activities. For many the path to spiritual formation is pursued in a life characterized by following Jesus’ example and admonition to care for the needy.

*The Word of God.* The Reformation, led especially by Martin Luther and John Calvin, focused on the centrality of the Bible as God’s Word of truth, instruction, and guidance. Reformers advocated the accessibility of solitude, meditation, and prayer. A notable example is Augustine of Hippo. Here many emphasize that the road to spirituality is through contemplative intimacy with God.

This article is adapted by the author from his book, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (NavPress, 1997). All rights reserved.
of the Bible to laypersons and clergy alike, which spawned a movement to study and apply Scripture as a primary means to spiritual formation.

The disciplined life. In the “spirituality” traditions, the focus is upon the practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, meditation, etc. “Formation” is regarded as whatever “disciplines” it takes to bring us where we are able to engage rightly in a life of spiritual growth.

Community life. Benedict of Nursia initially sought spirituality through being a contemplative hermit. Later he recognized the need to live in relationship with other believers, and so he developed the monastic community of faith, the Benedictines. Since Jesus gathered disciples around him, many emphasize that spirituality must be pursued within a community of believers.

Leadership training. Some understand spiritual formation to mean formal training in special spiritual activities. In the Roman Catholic tradition this points to “priestly formation” or the “spiritual formation” of the priest. The future priest is involved in external training for ministry, although this is implied to go deeper, to the inner self. The counterpart in the Protestant tradition is seminary training, where the emphasis is upon developing a successful minister, pastor, leader, or full-time Christian worker. From this perspective, spiritual formation is the training that turns the individual Christian into a successful Christian worker.

Going To Extremes

Each of us has been exposed to some aspects of these approaches to spirituality. There is some overlap, and much can be learned from each. However, within each there are adherents who overemphasize their particular area of strength. For example:

- the contemplative who forgets the needs of the world

- the moralist who focuses on sin and neglects compassion

- the charismatic who seeks the gifts and neglects the Giver

- the social activist who forgets to listen to God

- the Bible-study enthusiast who feels no need for the Holy Spirit

- the ascetic who disallows the joy of life in Christ

- the community participant who loses his/her individual identity

- the Christian leader who forgets that she/he is still simply one of the flock.

It is important to learn from each, but not to overemphasize one or another, or allow one to dominate the others. The spiritual life is obtained by following the kind of life that Jesus exemplified, which is a balance of each of these approaches.

Would you consider yourself to be “spiritual”? Is a “spiritual” Christian different from an ordinary Christian? What in your life today indicates that you are involved in your own personal spiritual formation? How does spiritual formation relate to discipleship?

“Yes to God”

Robert Meye defines spirituality as

...the grateful and heartfelt “Yes to God,” the response of the child of God to the call of God in the Spirit. Expressed both in act and attitude, the believer lives in obedience to and imitation of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, and walks in the disciplined and maturing pattern of love’s obedience to God.3

“Yes to God.” Yes to God in his call for us to be holy. Yes to God when he calls us to his Word. Yes to God as he directs us to serve our neighbor and love our brothers and sisters in Christ. The various approaches to spirituality we mentioned above are powerful attempts to say yes to God in one particular area of the Christian

(continued on page 6)
Since we have been created with both immaterial and material dimensions, the process of becoming like Jesus is a call to each of us to develop in every area of our lives. We are healthy persons when we develop as whole persons.
The normal life is the spiritual life. Since we have been created with both immaterial and material dimensions, the process of becoming like Jesus is a call to each of us to develop in every area of our lives. We are healthy persons when we develop as whole persons. Like Jesus in His earthly life (Luke 2:52), we are to grow mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially/emotionally.

**Discipleship Is Spiritual Formation**

How then does spiritual formation relate to discipleship? Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation as “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.” That definition is virtually synonymous with discipleship. Discipleship and spiritual formation/spirituality have striking similarities. While both terms have unique emphases, they are quite similar in their intended result: to be transformed into the image of Jesus. Jesus said that a disciple when fully trained will be like his master (Luke 6:40), and Paul said that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is to be transformed into the image of Christ (see Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). As with discipleship, spiritual formation is the process that is the natural outgrowth of new life in Christ.

Discipleship is the emphasis of the four gospels, where Jesus in his earthly ministry gathered disciples and they followed him about. Once he ascended to his Father in heaven, Jesus sent his Spirit as the Comforter who would carry out his ministry in the lives of his followers. Spirituality became the focus of those in the early church, such as Paul, who stressed a life lived “in Christ” in the power of the Spirit.

Therefore, discipleship is the flip side of the same coin as spiritual formation. Discipleship emphasizes the immediacy of Jesus’ example, while spirituality emphasizes the dynamic of the Spirit’s work in our lives as we follow Jesus’ example.

(continued on page 24)
Daniel and friends in Babylon. Joseph in Egypt. Thrust into cultures very different from their own, they served well and were greatly used by God to advance His kingdom and further the welfare of His people. God allowed tough circumstances that developed their character and their faith, empowering their witness to leaders and unbelievers in pagan societies.

Their examples still resonate down the years. My workplace is a multinational institution, employing the best and brightest of over 185 countries, representing religions from all over the world. I view my role as one of ambassador for Christ. The dynamics of spiritual warfare are palpable, almost on a daily basis. It is a challenging environment, intellectually, politically, and spiritually.

In an increasingly global and secular society, we all come in contact with people of different cultures and belief systems. For many of us, “work” is our ministry. We spend a lot of time there—for at least five days a week, usually more waking hours than at home. It is among those with whom we interact regularly that we can have the greatest impact.

Yet one of the most difficult places to live out one’s faith is at work. There, we face the struggles that come with the routines and personalities of office life, exposing our best and worst qualities. Questions of ethics, morality, and simple right and wrong confront us in the course of a normal day. Our true character, or lack of it, is revealed in these situations.

While rubbing shoulders with those in the highest echelons of Babylonian society, Daniel and his friends did not waver in their commitment to faith. Living among the heathen, they did not ascribe to the systems of the world. They neither ate the king’s choice food nor bowed to foreign gods. Their lives were founded on the character and word of the living God, not the idols of this world.

Kingdom Perspective
A similar challenge greets us daily. We have opportunities to influence for good or for ill. Our choices often determine the course of our nation and the world. Even though we observe the fallibility of our leaders regularly and firsthand, the world’s siren of power and influence calls. It takes effort on our part to maintain a kingdom perspective as they did, faithfully challenging the culture, day by day, rather than allowing it to shape the way we live.

My understanding of the need for such perspective has grown considerably in the past eighteen months, when I have had to trust God during many tense, tough days. I have recognized the importance of seeking God’s will and kingdom prayerfully, daily, and lifting up our leaders, my workplace, and my colleagues in prayer. I find I need to be reminded to seek first the priorities of the kingdom. When I wake to the demands that press in for the day, am I taking the time to prayerfully put them in the context of God’s larger purposes?

There is an opportunity for a testimony in times of adversity if our response is different from that of the world. Am I willing to trust God’s higher ways, as Joseph did, or do I take things into my own hands, intent on advancing my career?

When dark days come, so do questions. How Joseph must have wondered what God was doing! His reward for resisting...
temptation was a plummet from a place in the house of Pharaoh to prison. But it is clear from the Scriptures that Joseph came to understand that God was in it. He trusted God’s sovereign plan.

I can testify to the same. It is through challenging situations that God disciplines us and exposes our need for dependence upon Him. In the desperate moments, the depth of my inadequacy is revealed. Yet there is a deep peace that comes from submitting to God’s will. Joseph’s sterling character was formed through long, difficult circumstances, later to be on display and recognized even among those in an idolatrous culture. As Eugene Peterson writes, “we are reshaped through the days of our obedience.”

Kingdom Living
In retrospect, we tend to see only the completed picture, skipping from the beginning to the result. God rewarded Joseph’s commitment; his wisdom and spiritual discernment eventually led to a powerful position in Egypt. It can be easy to forget that, in reality, he was grinding it out, day after day, in the confines of a prison and in conversations with the jailer, the cupbearer, and the baker. So it is with us. Our conversation reveals the condition of our heart, and nowhere is this more important than at work.

It has been said that knowledge is power. Rumor, gossip, and innuendo shape opinion, both in the mass media and in the smaller-scale politics of office life. And in the politically supercharged environment in which many of us work, it is hard to refrain from falling into this trap of the world.

James describes the tongue as “a restless evil and full of deadly poison,” “set on fire by hell.” The propensity to gossip is an ever-looming, insidious temptation and has the potential, perhaps more than anything else in our day-to-day work life, to seriously undermine our Christian testimony.

For me, in many ways it is ground zero. The authenticity of my witness is compromised when I fail to resist the negative talk about others which so often characterizes the to and fro of the workplace. It is usually a matter of pride. I want to impress another or protect myself, unwilling to pay the cost of appearing to be “not in the loop.” I desire either to score points with someone who may not hold the best view of me, or to not lose face with someone who already thinks well of me. Indeed, gossip is hardest to control among friends.

But as James points out, this is twisted thinking, reflecting a divided heart. It is an issue of integrity. Am I praising God during my morning devotions, and criticizing colleagues and public officials, made in His image, later in the day? He states it very clearly: “My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.” Given what the scriptures say about his testimony, it is hard to imagine Joseph engaging in destructive gossip.

With our speech, we have the power either to bless or to curse. We all have experienced the power of an encouraging word and the sting of a harsh one. “Let your speech be always with grace,” Paul instructed the Colossians, “seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how to respond to each person.”

Like any good ambassador, what I say should accurately represent the authority

(continued on page 25)
Profiles in Faith: John Owen
(continued from page 1)

1628 Charles I had forbidden debates over such controversial matters as election and predestination, the very themes which, for Owen and his friends, lay at the heart of the gospel. As the influence of William Laud and the High Church Party increased, it became clear to Owen that remaining in the University was an impossibility, and so, having already “taken orders,” after two years he left Oxford in favor of becoming chaplain and tutor in the household of Sir Robert Dormer of Ascot.

Although already holding Puritan convictions, the young Owen appears to have lacked assurance of his salvation. An early anonymous biography (1720) suggests he was in a state of melancholy for a period of some five years. But, now in London, he went to hear the renowned Edmund Calamy preach at Aldermanbury Chapel. To his intense disappointment a substitute preacher entered the pulpit and preached on Matthew 8:26. From that sermon onwards Owen experienced the love of God shed abroad in his heart, and enjoyed a new assurance that he was a child of God. Despite all his efforts he was never able to discover the identity of the man whose preaching had delivered him from the “spirit of bondage” (Rom. 8:15).

The Beginnings of His Ministry
Shortly afterwards he married his first wife, Mary Rooke. She was to bear him eleven children, the first of them in 1644. But only one, a girl, survived into adulthood, and she, having contracted marriage unhappily, returned to her parents and shortly afterwards died of consumption. Owen’s few references to his home life indicate the common tensions of every family.

On his settlement at Fordham, Owen soon demonstrated his deep sense of pastoral responsibility. Orme states that on one occasion he bewailed the fact that so few people seemed to be genuinely helped by his ministry, and expressed his opinion that John Bunyan’s preaching gifts were worth more than all of his own learning. Nevertheless, his own preaching drew influential congregations, and throughout the course of his life was helpful to many people.

The Congregationalist
By 1646 the ministry at Fordham was drawing to a close. Shortly before leaving, Owen (still in his thirties) was invited to preach before Parliament, on April 29, 1646. Later in the year he moved to Coggeshall, to occupy the distinguished pulpit of St. Peter’s where the brothers John and Obadiah Sedgwick (a member of the Westminster Assembly) had successively ministered, to a congregation of some two thousand people.

A Wider Sphere of Influence
It is difficult for us to imagine the political crises of these days. Within months King Charles I had been accused of treason, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. He was executed on Wednesday, January 30, 1649; his crime that of levying war on the nation. Parliament called on Owen, still only thirty-two years old, to preach before them the next day, along with John Cordell, the minister of All Hallows in Lombard Street, London. Owen spoke from Jeremiah 15:19-20. His sermon was “an appropriate message in a difficult hour.” It was one of the most signal tokens of the esteem in which he was already held that, although young in years, the Commons should look to him on such an occasion for spiritual wisdom and guidance.

Owen again preached before the Members of Parliament in April of the same year, taking as his text Hebrews 12:27. In its published form his sermon took on the apocalyptic title, The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth, although, in Owen's exegesis, the heaven and earth of the passage were interpreted as the great political powers of the world. This sermon was, in part, the means of his introduction to Oliver Cromwell, and the beginning of an important relationship to both of them, characterized by mutual respect and a consequently proportionate rupture in their friendship.
when Cromwell later appeared to be on the brink of accepting the crown.

**Dean and Vice-Chancellor**

In 1651, Owen was advanced to the appointment as Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. Cromwell was now the Chancellor of the University, and clearly anxious to promote his cause by shrewd appointments. Under normal circumstances, the deanery commanded the almost princely stipend of 800 pounds per annum, which was more than ten times the figure earned by well-established clergy in ordinary parishes. This may help to explain Owen's reputation for sartorial elegance!

According to Anthony Wood's (doubtless overplayed) caricature, he scorned formality and undervalued his office by going in quirpo like a young scholar, with powdered hair, snakebone bandstrings, lawn bands, a very large set of ribbons pointed at his knees, and Spanish leather boots with large lawn tops, and his hat mostly cocked.

Owen now preached regularly in Oxford, at Christ Church where he was Dean, and also on alternate Sundays with Thomas Goodwin, at St. Mary's. Those who listened to Owen would have heard, at least in embryo, his later published treatises on Mortification, and Temptation. It is instructive for our generation to remember that this material was preached to congregations composed of teenaged students!

Oxford certainly contained a galaxy of stars in its firmament in those days, among them Thomas Goodwin and Stephen Charnock, theologians and pastor, Christopher Wren, William Penn, and John Locke, who held a junior studentship at Christ Church while Owen was there. Each of them was to make a permanent contribution to western culture; yet Calamy was able to write of Owen that, “He was reckoned the brightest ornament of the university in his time.”

In September 1658, Owen participated in a synod of congregational churches meeting at the Savoy Palace. He was appointed, with Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, William Bridge, William Greenhill, and Joseph Caryl (who had all been members of the Westminster Assembly fifteen years before), to prepare the draft of The Declaration of Faith and Order, more commonly known as The Savoy Declaration. Owen himself was almost certainly responsible for the lengthy preface.

In 1660 the monarchy was restored. Charles II was enthroned, and Owen removed from the Christ Church Deanery some months before. He moved to his small estate at Stadhampton, and continued his ministry to a gathered congregation. He clearly hoped for continued usefulness as a writer and pastor, but his leisure was disturbed, and his hopes for the Congregational churches thwarted by the various acts of the Clarendon Code. In the Great Ejection of 1662, almost two thousand Puritans were driven by conscience into persecution and poverty.

Owen had already suffered the loss of his ministry. He added to this a willingness to lose his civic freedom by continuing to preach despite the Five Mile Act forbidding ministers to return to their pastoral and preaching duties in their own parishes and in the cities. He did not lack opportunities. He declined the offer of a bishopric, and later the invitation of the First Congregational Church in Boston (John Cotton's congregation) to minister to them. But the sacrifices involved in the Five Mile Act (1665) must have reached into his soul. As we will later see, his primary commitment in life was to the pasturing of the people of God; the ultimate sacrifice for such a pastoral spirit is prolonged separation from the flock. The spoiling of his goods he might allow, and even do so with a measure of joy that he was counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the gospel; but the spoiling of the flock was his greatest sorrow, and one beyond recompense. Owen did not

(continued on page 12)
Profiles in Faith: John Owen
(continued from page 11)

regard this intolerant law as binding on his conscience, even if its effect was necessarily restrictive on his own ministry.

Later, with other ministers of Puritan persuasion, Owen returned to preach in London after the Plague and the Great Fire. In an atmosphere in which these events were regarded as judgments from God for the extreme response of the establishment to nonconformity, 1667 was an opportune time to plead for liberty. This Owen did, in Indulgence and Toleration and A Peace Offering. Several years had passed before The Declaration of Indulgence was enacted in 1672. During this period he found sufficient leisure to write up much of his earlier preached material, and some of his most valuable works made their appearance. His Indwelling Sin, Exposition of Psalm 130, and the monumental commentary on Hebrews all date from this period.

In 1676 Owen lost his first wife. Little is known or written of their life together. It is only possible to guess its influence on him; but it must have been a painful blow to one whose entire offspring were snatched from his presence by “the last enemy.” His sense of loss may perhaps be measured by the testimony she received: “an excellent and comely person, very affectionate towards him, and met with suitable returns.” It ought also to be measured by the fact that he married again within eighteen months, and thus filled the void Mary Rooke left behind. His second wife was Michel, the widow of Thomas D'Oyley of Chislehampton near Stadham.

Last Days
Owen was evidently now drawing toward the end of his life. He was afflicted with severe asthma and apparently gallstone. He was frequently incapable of preaching.

On the morning of August 24, William Payne, a Puritan minister of Saffron Waldon, who was seeing Meditations on the Glory of Christ through the stages of publication, called to tell him that the work was already being printed. Owen's biographers record his eloquent reply:

I am glad to hear it; but O brother Payne! the long wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world.

Later in the day he took his final breath and passed from the world of faith into the world of sight. Just as Cromwell went to his rest on the anniversary of his greatest conflicts and victories, Owen died on the anniversary of “Black” Bartholomew’s Day, the day of the Great Ejection, when Puritanism and its greatest theologian had also fought their most memorable battle.

Eleven days later he was buried in Bunhill Fields, the resting place of many of his greatest Puritan companions, in the confidence that he would rise together with them on the day of resurrection. The following Sunday David Clarkson preached his funeral sermon. Owen was, in Clarkson’s estimation, “a great light...one of eminency for holiness and learning and pastoral abilities.” In another’s opinion, there was in him “much of heaven and love to Christ, and saints and all men; which came from him so seriously and spontaneously, as if grace and nature were in him reconciled, and but one thing.”

There is widespread agreement that John Owen was the theologian of the Puritan movement. Witness to the value of his writings can be found among Christians from his own day until ours. His contribution to the life of the church is beyond dispute. But perhaps the most telling testimony to the purpose of his writings...is to be found coming from Owen’s own pen:

I hope I may own in sincerity, that my heart’s desire unto God, and the chief design of my life in the station wherein the good providence of God hath placed me, are, that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God; that so the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things.
Argument from Agape

by Art Lindsley
C. S. Lewis Institute Senior Fellow

Many books have been written about love. It is at the center of our spiritual lives and at the heart of the believer’s witness. Jesus says that the greatest command is to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind (Matthew 22:37). Along with it we should love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18). Jesus calls us to an even broader love including the neighbor and the enemy (Matthew 5:44). Even more we are to love as Christ loved us (Ephesians 5:2). The great love chapter (1 Corinthians 13) holds that we can have all kinds of spiritual gifts, knowledge, and noble actions, but without love they amount to nothing.

All these emphases, though essential for our meditation and cultivation in thought and action, are well known. It is not so well known how radical Christ’s love is in comparison to any other worldview or religious system. No other approach gives a significant place to “agape” or other-centered love. John Stott defines “agape” love as the sacrifice of self in the service of another. In other words, it is a voluntary giving of yourself.

One author, writing about agape, argues that “agape” love is essentially a Christian invention. In fact, it is only used once outside the Bible, where the goddess Isis is given the title agape. Such a word existed in the Greek culture, but the New Testament and particularly Jesus’ teaching place “agape” love front and center, filling it with a full, rich meaning it did not have before. Though you find the same loving God in the Old Testament, the emphasis on loving neighbor and enemy expands and stands out in bold letters in the New.

Another truly unique contribution not found in any non-biblical religion is the idea that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Leon Morris says in his study of love, Testaments of Love:

Why does God love sinners? I have been arguing that He loves them because it is in His nature to love, because He is love. Unceasingly, He gives in spontaneous love. He loves not because of what we are but because of what He is: He is love. This is a new and distinct idea in Christianity, though in part of the Old Testament (notably in Hosea) we read about something very much like it. But it is not found in the non-biblical traditions.

Emil Brunner uses the analogy of radium. You could mention all the properties of radium, its molecular structure, chemical properties and so on; but if you failed to say that it radiates you would miss something essential. Similarly, God has many attributes such as holiness, justice, goodness, all-knowledge and all power, but if you omitted to say that He constantly gives himself in love—in fact, that He is love—you would miss that which really matters. Brunner wrote:

The message that God is love is wholly new in the whole world. We perceive this if we try to apply the statement to all the divinities of the various religions of the world: Wotan is love; Zeus, Brahma, Ahura, Mazda, Vishnu, Allah is love. All these combinations are obviously wholly impossible. Even the God of Plato who is the principle of all Good is not love. Plato would have met the statement “God is Love” with a bewildered shake of the head. From the standpoint of his thought,
As we have seen, agape is central to the New Testament, and the belief that God is love is not only unique but also key to what motivates our love.

The primary reason followers of Christ love is that God first loved us. We are to love others, not just because He commands it, but because of who He is. We are to be just because God is just, we are to be holy because He is holy (1 Peter 1:16), and we are to love because He is love (1 John 4:7-8).

But what is the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament views of God's love? One author puts it this way: "What then is the distinctive difference between the Old Testament view of God's love and that of the New Testament? The most obvious and the most important difference, in fact the only significant difference, is the Cross."

As we have seen, agape is central to the New Testament, and the belief that God is love is not only unique but also key to what motivates our love. But the key to what love means is seen in Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross. Leon Morris says, "It is the cross that brought a new dimension to religion that gives us a new understanding of love. The New Testament writers saw everything in its light, finding their ideas about love revolutionized by what the cross meant."

For example, husbands are described in Ephesians as the "head of the wife" but immediately called to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:35). What is the kind of love Christ had for the church? Well, it was not based on our goodness and beauty. This love is poured out for us in spite of our unattractiveness. C.S. Lewis in The Four Loves wrote about the husband's love in relation to his "headship":

This headship, then, is most fully embodied not in the husband we should all wish to be but in him whose marriage is most like a crucifixion, whose wife receives most and gives least, is most unworthy of him, is—in her own mere nature—least lovable. For the church has no beauty but what the Bridegroom gives her; he does not find, but makes her, lovely. The chrism of this terrible coronation is to be seen not in the joys of any man's marriage but in its sorrows, in the sickness and sufferings of a good wife or the faults of a bad one, in his unwearying (never paraded) care or his inexhaustible forgiveness: forgiveness, not acquiescence.

Sacrificial love, giving till it hurts, is called for not only in marriage but in all our relationships. Jesus told his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). As Christ gives himself for us, so we are to give our lives for others.

Following the above verse, Jesus adds, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Jesus' new command to love is one which believers are to obey, which of course implies that it is possible to disobey. Believers in Jesus are not automatically loving. They can be disobedient to what Jesus asks of them. Jesus says that the way other people will know that believers are disciples is by their love, if and only if they love one another.

But couldn't this love come equally from other world views and religions? No! The pantheist world view maintains that All is One and that the world is an illusion (Shankara). The whole thrust of the New Age perspective is inwards (to the divine within) or upwards (to merge their identity to that of the One) but definitely not outwards (to an illusory world).

Os Guinness, in his book, Unspeakable, talks about the world-denying quality of Eastern religion:

This view of ultimate reality means that neither traditional Hinduism nor traditional Buddhism shows the slightest concern about human rights...Entirely logical within their own frames of thinking, Hinduism and Buddhism regard the Western passion for human rights as a form of narcissism as well as delusion. R.C. Zaehner,
who followed Radakrishnan in the Spaulding Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University, underscored their logic bluntly: “In practice it means that neither religion in its classical formulation pays the slightest attention to what goes on in the world today.”

Such a world-denying quality makes it impossible to consistently address social issues such as human rights (or love). If distinct people are part of the illusion, why should we give regard to them as of significant or ultimate concern?

Similarly, when we look at atheism or materialism, there is no mandate for other-centered love. Darwin once said that truly other-centered trait “would annihilate my theory, for such could not have been produced by natural selection.” Richard Dawkins has a book titled *The Selfish Gene* and writes, “Universal love and the welfare of the species as a whole are concepts which simply do not make evolutionary sense.”

This summer, I met with a professor who speaks and writes widely on evolutionary biology. He has a unique argument that he has developed over the years. You might call it the argument from altruism. Basically he argues that there is no Darwinian way to get to altruistic, truly other-centered “agape” love.

There is, he says, a growing recognition that materialist arguments are inadequate to explain altruistic love. For instance, Richard Dawkins admits on the last page of *The Selfish Gene* that we alone in the universe are capable of altruism. Dawkins says that, “disinterested altruism—is something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world.” Because of this admission he has to, as we will soon see, give up his materialism.

Materialism seems to entail a couple of central ideas:

1. All things are determined or facilitated by physical, material causes.
2. All genes produce behaviors that benefit the individual. To use a double negative—No gene produces behaviors that fail to benefit the survival of that gene pool. This means that anything truly selfless is excluded. But it seems that there is selfless, altruistic, other-centered love. How can a Darwinian explain this phenomenon?

There are various attempts to get around this problem. The professor referred to earlier called these approaches “work-arounds.” First, the idea of kinship encourages suffering or death to protect the immediate family (gene pool). But this is of limited scope and value in the debate because it does not apply to those outside the family (immediate or extended). Second, there is a direct reciprocal argument. You could sacrifice for those from whom you would expect to get an equal or better sacrifice. You could even call it a fair trade. Third, there is the indirect reciprocal argument that would maintain that such “selfless” acts can be done so that you are made to appear good in the community’s eyes and thus benefit eventually.

But can all human acts be reduced to the above ultimately self-centered actions? These theories only rise as high as “loving those who love you” (Matthew 5:46). Jesus calls believers to go beyond this kind of love and love our enemies. That goes beyond anything materialism can explain.

In fact, Dawkins knows that we are capable of altruistic love (as we saw earlier). How can he explain his materialism and the “selfish gene?” The professor maintains that Dawkins gives up his materialism. Dawkins postulates the existence of “memes” (in addition to genes)—non-material, ethereal (spiritual?) entities that infect the human mind and make people do what they wouldn’t do otherwise. These “memes” seem to hop from person to person like a virus. Dawkins makes up this vague, unsubstantiated, unverified “meme” to explain things like “agape” love. The professor

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asked one such biologist, “How is a meme different from a demon or the Holy Spirit?” There was no clear answer forthcoming.

Many of these atheists are nihilists (no purpose, no morals, etc.) but they don’t like the implications of such a position. For instance, David Sloan Wilson’s book *Darwin’s Cathedral* values religion’s effective promotion of commitment and community. Beliefs of religious people are wise—but false. They are practical “truths” that have beneficial results for society but they have no basis in reality. Others such as Michael Ruse argue in the book *Taking Darwin Seriously* that moral realism has to be jettisoned. When asked whether he would give any place for morality, Ruse replied that he acted on the basis of sheer preference: “I do whatever I feel like doing.”

The professor held that it is of some value to point out the nihilistic implications of evolutionary biology and expose their feeble attempts to explain things like morality and love that provide huge holes in their account of life. It also might be more economical (less time) to develop the “argument from altruism” as the central argument against Darwinianism. However, the best way to disprove this theory is to act in an “agape” way—love our enemies, give sacrificially without any thought of return, love as Jesus loved. Thus we can demonstrate in these loving actions something that materialistic theories can’t explain. People recognize that when they encounter such love, they are encountering something unusual. You can show materialism false by your love.

Certainly materialists and pantheists can and do love. In fact, they may be more loving than some Christians. But they lack any basis (motive) to sustain “agape” love.


“… Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”
Union with Christ: 
The Sum of Our Salvation

by Bill Kynes
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The Apostles’ Creed affirms, among other things, that Jesus Christ was “crucified under Pontius Pilate.” The mention of a first-century Roman governor may seem out of place in this grand statement of Christian truth, but it anchors the gospel at a particular place in human history. But that raises another question: How could something so far away in space and time affect you and me? How could Jesus’ death cover my sins and his resurrection guarantee my eternal destiny?

Theologically, we speak of the various ways in which Christ’s saving work is applied to our lives: God calls us to himself; he regenerates us, giving us new spiritual life; he justifies us, taking away our sin and imputing to us the righteousness of Christ; he adopts us into his family; he sanctifies us, conforming us to the image of Christ; and he promises to complete his saving work by glorifying us with the resurrected glory of Christ. But these spiritual blessings flow into our lives only because we are somehow united to Christ. If our lives are not joined to his in some way, he remains a distant figure from ancient history—about as relevant to us as Julius Caesar.

Being “In Christ”
Our union with Christ is captured in that simple prepositional phrase, “in Christ,” used by Paul in one form or another 164 times. Only as we are “in Christ” are we chosen, called, regenerated, justified, sanctified, redeemed, assured of the resurrection, and given every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3; Eph. 1:3). This union with Christ spans space and time—so that Paul can say that the Christian has died with Christ (Rm. 6:11; Gal. 2:20); the Christian has been resurrected with Christ (Eph. 2:5f; Col. 3:1f), the Christian has ascended with Christ to share now in his reign in the heavenly places (Rm. 5:17; Eph. 2:6) and the Christian is destined to share Christ’s coming glory with him (Phil 3:20f; 1 Jn. 3:2).

No wonder some call our union with Christ one of the central messages of the New Testament. Theologian John Murray called it “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.” A.W. Pink said, “The subject of spiritual union is the most important, the most profound, and yet the most blessed of any that is set forth in sacred Scripture.” Cambridge scholar B.F. Westcott wrote: “If once we realize what these words ‘we are in Christ’ mean, we shall know that beneath the surface of life lie depths which we cannot fathom, full alike of mystery and hope.”

Union with Christ is that spiritual reality whereby we as believers are joined to our Lord such that what is true of him becomes true of us. This spiritual union is the means by which space and time are transcended and we share in all the benefits of Jesus’ work in history on our behalf. It is central to our understanding of who we are as Christians.

The Window of Social Solidarity
Surely, this notion of our being “in Christ” is mysterious. How do we live “in him”? And how does he live “in me”? The Apostle Paul speaks of this relationship between

(continued on page 18)
Union with Christ: The Sum of Our Salvation
(continued from page 17)

Christ and his people as a “profound mystery” (Eph. 5:32). Among theologians it is sometimes referred to as a “mystical union” for that reason.

At least part of our difficulty in understanding this union relates to our false understanding of human life. Particularly as Americans, we think of people as autonomous individuals, independent agents. However, in much of life we do not live as isolated individuals but as a part of various social units that knit our lives together in all sorts of ways.

As a trivial example, one thinks of the identification between football fans and their team. The fate of the players on the field determines the outcome for the fans in the stands, who then proclaim, “We won!” At a more serious level, we are all involved in the social solidarity of our nation. In some ways, the entire nation is represented and embodied in one person—the President. As the head of state, he speaks for the country. If the President commits our country to some military action, then America is at war, and we all are affected.

At a personal level we experience solidarity in the context of our families. When a man and woman get married, they acquire each other’s assets, and they assume each other’s debts. And if I as a father squander my material resources and go bankrupt, my whole family suffers, even if they had nothing to do with it.

All of these are examples in our ordinary experience of ways in which we are bound together such that the well-being and destiny of many can be determined by one. And all are pointers to the most important social solidarity of all—the union of Christian believers with Jesus Christ.

Biblical Images of Union With Christ

The Bible provides a variety of images that help us gain some insight into this profound mystery. Jesus used a horticultural metaphor: “I am the vine, and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). From this vital union with Christ we draw our nourishment, our strength, our spiritual life. Certainly our experience of the Lord’s Supper is to be a visible expression of this union (or “communion”) with Christ.

Another way that we can understand our relationship with Christ comes through the Hebrew conception of the solidarity between a king and his subjects. When David was anointed as king, we read that all the tribes of Israel came to him to pledge their loyalty, and they said, “We are your own flesh and blood” (2 Sam. 5:1). He became their leader, their representative before God. When King David sinned, as he did when he made a census of the people (2 Sam. 24:1-15), the whole nation suffered. But when he was victorious in battle, the whole nation prospered.

This notion of royal representation was then transferred to the solidarity of the Messiah with his people. When we turn to Jesus, the Messiah, in faith, and submit ourselves to him as our King, we are joined to him—he represents us, and we become his own “flesh and blood.”

The Apostle Paul presents several images for this union. He speaks of our relationship to Christ like that of our body’s relationship to its head. “He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18; cf. 1 Cor. 12:12,27; Eph. 4:16). What was the origin of this conception? One need look no further than Paul’s experience on the Damascus road. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul was
intending to arrest leaders of this heretical sect when suddenly in a brilliant flash of light, he encountered the glorious risen Jesus, who asked, “Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). In that instant Paul was confronted with the truth that to persecute the church was to persecute Jesus. Christians are in some mysterious way one with Christ, united as a body is united with its head.

Paul not only uses a biological image to picture our union with Christ, he also uses the image of a building—more specifically, a holy temple. Speaking to the Ephesian Christians, he writes, through Christ you “become members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:18-22; cf. also 1 Pet. 2:4,5). We are united with Christ like stones in a building built on a cornerstone. In him we become a holy temple to God—a place where God dwells.

From bodies and buildings, Paul moves to the much more intimate and personal metaphor of marriage to picture our relationship with Christ. This is especially helpful, for marriage had been used already in the Old Testament to describe the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people Israel. More than that, the biblical description of marriage stresses the new union that is created by the marriage bond: “the two will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The physical union of husband and wife becomes an expression of an inward union of love, and the new social unit that marriage creates pictures well our union with Christ (Eph. 5:32).

In a marriage the couple assumes a new identity, no longer as individuals but as a couple. Their happiness and their sorrows are joined to one another inextricably. Marriage also has legal aspects, and so it is in our relationship with Christ. When we are joined to him, he assumes the debt of our sin, taking it upon himself and bearing it away, and we share his righteousness. God sees us not as isolated individuals, but through the lens of our marriage relationship with Christ. In union with Christ we are presented as a beautiful bride in the sight of God.

Paul speaks of a body (with Christ as its head), a building (with Christ as its foundation), a marriage (with Christ as the groom), and in Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15 Paul develops one other picture of solidarity that sheds light on our relationship with Christ, cosmic in its scope and embracing all humanity—the picture of our union with Adam. “For just as through the disobedience of the one man (Adam), the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man (Jesus Christ), the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).

By nature all humanity has been united with Adam, such that his sin has impacted us all. We are all now subject to the curse of death that was placed upon him. Every one of us now shares something of his self-centered, sinful nature. But Jesus Christ has come to undo what Adam has done. By his obedience, Christ creates a new humanity, a people redeemed by his death, who now follow him in their lives. And whereas we

(continued on page 20)
Union with Christ: The Sum of Our Salvation
(continued from page 19)

are joined to Adam by nature, through our physical birth, we must be joined to Christ by faith, through a second, spiritual birth. Humanity in Adam and the new humanity in Christ—this is the contrast, and the choice, Paul sets before us.

The mystical union with Jesus Christ can be pictured in rather ordinary images—a vine and its branches, a king and his subject, a building, a body, and a marriage. Our relationship with Adam opens up a new dimension which embraces all humanity. But one final image takes us to the very nature of God himself. Jesus tells us that our relationship with himself is in some sense a reflection of his own relationship with his Father in heaven. We are united to Christ in a way that reflects the mysterious union of the divine persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In his great prayer in John 17, Jesus addressed the Father on behalf of his disciples. He prayed “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me” (John 17:21-23). This is indeed a profound mystery!

Union with Christ as a Work of the Spirit
It must be emphasized that our union with Christ doesn’t mean that we somehow become God—that we are joined to the divine being in some metaphysical sense. It is a spiritual union that is the work of the Holy Spirit—“we were all baptized by [or in] one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). The Holy Spirit bridges the chasm of space and time. He takes what happened then—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and brings its saving power into our lives now, by uniting us in a spiritual way with Christ. By the Spirit, Christ lives in us, and we in him. By the Spirit, we are now joined to Christ as a vine and its branches, as a king and his subjects, as a body and its head, as a building and its foundation, as a husband with his bride, and as the new humanity in Christ Jesus. The Spirit himself unites us with Christ and so applies all his saving work to our lives. “We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13).

Union with Christ—you could say it is the sum of our salvation. The saving work of Christ is captured in this one simple phrase—by faith we are now in Christ. That’s our only hope, for to be separate from Christ is to be “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). But to be in Christ is to share in all his riches. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”

In the next issue of Knowing & Doing, we will see that the union with Christ we enjoy by faith is a relationship in which we are to abide.

Endnotes
4. (cf. 1 Cor. 6:17,19; Rom. 8:9-11; 1 Jn. 3:24)
as he has grown in grace he has become more gracious. He is less frequently combative and angry with those to the left of his views, especially if they claim to love Christ.

Can you recall recent instances of Christlike love in your life? Have there been occasions when you’ve sacrificed your own preferences, plans, or rights for those of others? These are mileposts on the journey in grace. Those stalled in selfishness are stuck spiritually.

3. Are you more sensitive to and aware of God than ever before?
The grace of God causes us, who were once dead to God, to be “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). One result of this new life is the glorious invasion of our souls by the Holy Spirit of God. His resident presence can give us a sense of being “alive to God” in daily life. What does this look like?

Like a spiritual artesian well, the Holy Spirit frequently brings thoughts of God and the things of God spontaneously to a Christian’s mind. Growing Christians find spiritual pleasure in seizing and dwelling upon these thoughts. The Spirit prompts them to see God everywhere—in pink-tinged clouds at sunset, in the warble of a wren, the kindness of a friend, the death of a loved one, even in the timing of a traffic signal.

As you read this, you are bombarded by radio and television signals, cellular phone conversations, and satellite transmissions. Of course, you have been entirely unaware of them, for you aren’t built to receive them. Once you are “alive to God,” the Spirit makes you alive to God’s presence everywhere. Not that you are always sensitive to and aware of God, but if you find yourself noticing and often choosing to enjoy the Spirit’s promptings, chances are you’re growing spiritually.

4. Are you governed more and more by God’s Word?
Before we are made alive to God, we’re controlled mostly by what we want. But after we become alive to Him, we have a new desire to be governed by His will. In other words, the true Christian has a new compulsion to do what God wants him to do. And that information is found in the Bible.

A classic text on the sufficiency of Scripture for the Christian is 2 Tim. 3:16–17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Words like teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training are all growth-related words. When you are growing as a child of God, you can regularly point to how the Word of God has been teaching you, how it has reproved you for sin, how it has shown you how to correct mistakes in your life. And you can point to how the Bible has been training you to live in new ways God says are right.

I hear people who are moving forward in the things of God telling me how they are having new insights into the truth of Scripture, how God has used the Bible to give them direction for a career or ministry, how the Lord has reproved them about materialism or family failures or prayerlessness, and how He has corrected them.

Can you point to specific ways the Word of God has been doing this in your life during the past months? If so, you are growing in grace.

5. Are you concerned more and more with the physical and spiritual needs of others?
In Luke 9:11 we read of Jesus encountering a crowd of people, and we’re told, “He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who
needed healing.” This was typical of Jesus. He taught them God’s truth and then often He would heal or feed them. He was concerned primarily with their spiritual needs but cared deeply about their physical needs, too. The more we become like Jesus the more concerned we will be about the physical and spiritual needs of others.

In my pastoral experience I have observed that the longer a person is a Christian, the less evangelistic he tends to be. This is obviously not a mark of growth or Christlikeness, but of spiritual stagnancy. We must consciously fight this tendency toward “evangelism erosion.”

How have you been demonstrating a concern for the physical and spiritual needs of others? Have you shown it through helping to provide for someone's food, clothing, shelter, or health needs? Have you proven it through praying, giving, witnessing, or encouraging?

A sure sign of Christian growth is seeing needs you never saw before and beginning to meet them.

6. Are you more and more concerned with the Church and the Kingdom of God?
When we read Ephes. 5:25—“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”—we say that husbands are to grow in their love for their wives toward the model of Christ’s love for the Church. But this verse also emphasizes that Jesus loved the Church, the people of God, so much that He died for them. The more we grow to become like Jesus, the more we will love His Church, too. We’ll be concerned with our local part of His Church and with the work of His Kingdom as a whole.

Christians who isolate themselves from the Church aren’t growing stronger by their isolation. They are like a body part that’s separated from the body.

In November of 1970 I tore the cartilage in my left knee during the last high school football game of the year. A doctor at Campbell’s Clinic in Memphis put my entire left leg in a cast. I couldn’t move it at all, so in a sense my left leg participated very little with the rest of my body. Even though I was at an age when my body was rapidly growing, the muscles in my left leg didn’t grow because they weren’t involved much with the rest of my body. In fact, those muscles atrophied, and it took a long time to build them back to a healthy condition. In the same way, the more we separate ourselves from participating in the life of the local Body of Christ and working for His Kingdom, the less we will grow.

7. Are the disciplines of the Christian life more and more important to you?
Growth in godliness is ultimately a gift from God, but that doesn’t mean there is nothing for us to do. Regarding our role in spiritual growth, God has said in 1 Tim. 4:7 that we are to “discipline [ourselves] for the purpose of godliness” (NASB). As we engage in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, the Holy Spirit molds us more into the character of the Master.

Probably the most common reason for the lack of spiritual growth among Christians is inconsistency with the spiritual disciplines. We don’t grow in grace if we fail to use the God-given means for growing in grace.

It’s a simple fact: Those who grow the most and the fastest are those who place themselves in the channels of grace such as the intake of God’s Word, prayer, worship, service, evangelism, silence, solitude, journaling, learning, fasting, and so on.

8. Are you more and more aware of your sin?
In one of the last things he wrote, when he was about as mature as a Christian gets, the Apostle Paul described himself as the worst sinner in the world (1 Tim. 1:15). How could he say that, since he was probably more like
Jesus than anyone we’ve ever met? It’s because the closer you get to Jesus, the more aware you become of your sin and how unlike Him you are.

One of the first spiritual struggles of a new Christian occurs as he becomes aware of sin that never bothered him before. It’s not uncommon for a new believer to feel more guilty at times than he ever did before becoming a Christian. That’s because he’s alive to the Holy Spirit for the first time in his life, and thus he’s more aware of sin.

The more you grow as a Christian, the less you will sin. But it often will seem as though you sin more because your sensitivity to sin will be so much greater.

9. Are you more and more willing to forgive others?
Ephes. 4:32 exhorts us to forgive each other “just as in Christ God forgave you.” Forgiveness is one of the hardest and most unnatural things we could be asked to do. But the more we become like Jesus, who forgave even those who nailed Him to the cross, the more we will be willing to forgive.

Last week I spoke with a hulk of a man wedged in the soul-vise of bitterness. He adamantly insisted that a mutual friend was not a Christian because of something our friend had done to him. When another man became involved in the same incident, he’d even prayed for God to change the man’s mind about it or to kill him. If he doesn’t choose to forgive, his bitterness will crush every tender shoot of growth that sprouts in his heart.

Are you still bitter at someone you were bitter toward six months ago? If so, then regardless of all your Christian activities, you have deceived yourself about having made any real spiritual progress during that time.

Have you forgiven any longtime hurts during the past year? If so, then you have made a measurable advance in Christian maturity.

10. Are you thinking more and more of heaven and of being with the Lord Jesus?
The Apostle Paul wrote to a church needing his help, “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Phil. 1:23–24). The more he became like Christ, the more he wanted “to depart and be with Christ”—that is, to be in heaven, for he knew that “is better by far.” Do you think like that very often?

Reading Christian biography has taught me that godly men and women think often of heaven and of being with Jesus. If you read one of the world’s all-time bestsellers, John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, you’ll read the writing of a man obsessed with the Celestial City.

One of the signs of becoming more like Jesus is increasingly wanting to be where He is.

It’s a Matter of Direction.
Growth in grace happens intentionally, not automatically. Like the explorer on the iceberg, you can drift away from spiritual progress, but you never drift forward. Without purpose and occasional evaluation, you’ll eventually find that, despite your activity, you’ve been carried away from Christlikeness.

But don’t be discouraged by slow spiritual development—as long as you are growing! Direction is more important than speed. The question isn’t always how quickly are you growing, but rather it is are you growing?

Regardless of the measure of your maturity, what is past is past. You can start fresh today. What would God have you do to begin growing?
The true mark and goal of spiritual formation and discipleship is full transformation into the image of Jesus.

Jesus, the Mark of Real Spirituality

The true mark and goal of spiritual formation and discipleship is full transformation into the image of Jesus. We really cannot separate what they mean or how they are carried out. Discipleship is spiritual formation, and spiritual formation is discipleship, and together they speak to the full concept of sanctification.

We really cannot separate what they mean or how they are carried out. Discipleship is spiritual formation, and spiritual formation is discipleship, and together they speak to the full concept of sanctification.

Jesus, the Mark of Real Spirituality

The life that we now live as Christians is to be marked by one characteristic: Jesus. No matter what other characteristics our particular form of discipleship and spirituality may take, Jesus is the boundary marker of real Christian life. We enter through Jesus, we are nurtured by Jesus, we follow Jesus’ example, we become like Jesus, and Jesus is formed in us.

John Calvin stretches our understanding of this truth when he comments on Paul’s statement, “Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19). “Christ being formed in us is the same as our being formed in Christ. For we are born that we may be new creatures in him. And he, on the other hand, is born in us so that we may live his life.”

Christ is formed in us, and we are transformed into the image of Christ. This is the wonderful truth of the life offered to us. Each person who has come to Jesus as Savior for eternal life has been introduced to a life of discipleship and spiritual formation through the new birth. What does the process of growth look like?

In my book, In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life, I have tried to develop in some detail what I call the “non-negotiables of biblical discipleship.” None of these characteristics or axioms can be excluded. Each is rooted in clear, biblical teaching. Each must be employed in conjunction with the others, simultaneously. And although we can examine them individually, they contribute to the whole person, the disciple of Jesus who is in the process of becoming like Him.

Non-negotiable biblical discipleship—
• is grounded in a personal, costly relationship with Jesus
• results in a new identity in Jesus
• is guided by God’s Word
• is empowered by the Holy Spirit
• is developed through a whole-life process
• is practiced in communities of faith
• is carried out in our everyday world.

We need a biblically based understanding of spiritual formation and discipleship. While various programs and formulas of growth can help, they are only means to the end. The true mark and goal of spiritual formation and discipleship is full transformation into the image of Jesus.

Endnotes


2 James Bryan Smith, A Spiritual Formation Workbook, p. 17, suggests the first five. I suggest the latter three extremes.


5 M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 12.

6 For a more complete discussion, see Michael J. Wilkins, Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

under which I serve. If I desire a pure reflection of Christ in the marketplace, I must take care to control my tongue. Easy to say in the flesh, but very hard to do!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spells out the righteous lifestyle of those who belong to the kingdom of God. He calls us to live differently than the world. Among other things, He says we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. How the tenor in Washington would change if we Christians were obedient on this point! I certainly fail, and often. It seems natural to pray for our friends and those we care about. It is not natural to pray for those who hurt us or intend harm against someone in whom we are vested.

Joseph, having survived kidnapping, slavery, and prison, when given the chance did not take the opportunity to seek revenge against his brothers. Instead, he forgave, assuring them that although "you meant evil against me, God meant it for good."

In the modern age, from time to time we hear stories of missionaries or the families of victims of heinous crimes who follow the Lord’s example of loving enemies. We see and the world sees the difference in their approach to injustice and it’s impressive—so much so that it makes the news.

(continued on page 26)
In addition to trusting the sure, sovereign hand of God, I need the Spirit’s filling—Christ’s presence in me—every day. I also have learned that I must exercise discipline to protect my heart and mind, daily putting on the full armor of God. The armor is necessary because, as Paul reminds us, our weapons are not of the flesh, and we do not war according to the flesh. Rather, our weapons are God’s truth, prayer, faith, righteousness, and the gospel message of peace through forgiveness. To live this radically different lifestyle that God will bless, I must be controlled by the Spirit day in and day out.

Salt and Light
The presence of the Spirit is apparent to those around us, even if we ourselves are unaware. Daniel was tapped by more than one king because his colleagues saw that he was a person of integrity who possessed “an extraordinary spirit.” His life reflected the power, majesty, and character of God.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this in my own life to date occurred at a diplomatic event in the Middle East. I was conversing intently with a fellow American in a side room off the main reception area when we were interrupted by three women in traditional Muslim dress whom I had never met. They spoke little English and I don’t speak Arabic, but the sense of urgency was evident on their faces when they indicated that they wanted to talk with me. “We can see that you have God on your face,” they said once we were seated. “What do you believe?” Through an interpreter, and amidst the clamor and chatter of the ongoing reception, I was able to share with them my belief that Jesus is the Christ and the only way of salvation. In the darkest of places, the light of Christ was shining through me.

It was a reminder that we must always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have, making the most of every opportunity. God is faithful to open doors for the gospel, sometimes when we least expect.

More often, we are given opportunities through the ordinary. When Michael Ramsden spoke at the Institute’s annual banquet this past year, he stressed that salt is effective when it is rubbed into foods. It is important, then, that we take a personal interest in those with whom we work. Genesis 40 tells us that Joseph took note of those around him, befriending the cupbearer and the baker. He noticed when they appeared discouraged and listened to their concerns. He talked to them about spiritual things and counseled them about their futures, all the while giving credit to God. I have observed that in any culture, basic kindness goes a long way, whether it be a word to the security officer, inquiries about a co-worker’s children, or shared concern for aging parents.

About a year after I moved to Washington, I received a call from a former colleague in Illinois saying his father had passed away. We talked for quite awhile, but after we hung up, I regretted that I wouldn’t be able to go back for the funeral. At the time, I was scheduled to depart on an extended international trip for the U.S. government. But I couldn’t help thinking that I needed to be there. My friend’s past experiences with “religion” had left a bad taste in his mouth, but my faith had not been a barrier to our friendship at work. This was an opportunity to minister to him at a very important time. After conversations with friends back home, I made the decision to fly back to Illinois for 24 hours before departing on my
What can we take from this theme study?

1. Love is at the center of our spiritual lives and at the heart of the believer’s witness. Jesus says that the greatest command is to love God and neighbor.
2. Christ gives us a new command to love as He loved.
3. The centrality of “agape” love in the New Testament is an utterly unique emphasis compared with other world views and religions.
4. The idea that “God is love” is also another utterly unique teaching of the New Testament.
5. The difference between the Old Testament and New Testament idea of God’s love is the cross.
6. Jesus says you will know his disciples by how they love one another (and others).
7. This other-centered “agape” love cannot be motivated or sustained by pantheism or materialism.
8. The thrust of pantheist philosophy (Shankara) is inward and upward but not outward.
9. Darwinian materialism has nothing that can explain “agape” love. Both genes and the whole of nature are selfish.
10. Materialists are unsuccessful in their desperate attempts to explain “agape” love.
11. The best way to demonstrate the falsity of pantheism and materialism is to love in an “agape” way.
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