

“Are You Growing Up?”

"No whining will be permitted!" This was the first instruction from Moderator Jim Hardenbrooke as he presided over the 219th Church of the Brethren Annual Conference that met last week in Peoria, Illinois. It seemed a little abrupt, until he put the remark in context. Two weeks earlier he had been in Sudan with other Brethren representatives, seeing for himself the incredible suffering and the remarkable faith of the Sudanese people. He asked the delegates to pardon him "ahead of time" in case they should challenge him on a picky point of parliamentary procedure, or on a relatively unimportant matter, and he responded by saying, "Quit whining," or "Get over it." Compared to the plight of people in Sudan, the things we think are so important aren't.

I've never told anyone to his or her face, "Stop whining." I've thought of saying it, but didn't. There is a related expression that I have thought and spoken. Chances are, you have uttered it, too, either as a statement-"Grow up!" or a question-"When are you going to grow up?"

From the moment the fertilized egg that became you was formed, you have been growing. You outgrew the womb, the crib, and your clothes. You outgrew your dependency on your parents. We are all growing up and growing old. But beyond our physiological growth, God created us with the capacity to grow emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually and never reach a limit.

Creation didn't stop in Eden. God is constantly creating possibilities. One reason for sending the Holy Spirit is to give us an inexhaustible reserve of strength to do God's creative work. Think of people you know who love without limit. They don't

draw love from a restricted supply. The more love they give, the more they have. Their bodies eventually wear out, but not their capacity to love. This is why Paul told the Corinthians:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.

God's will for us is growth. We can't be content to grow older. We also must grow WISER. But how? People who live to be centenarians are asked, "What's the secret to your long life?" They say things like, "Keep a positive attitude. Be fixed for friends. Get plenty of fiber in your diet."

A man walking down the street noticed an old lady sitting on her doorstep. "Excuse me," he said. "I couldn't help but notice the happy look on your face. What's the secret to your long and happy life?" She said, "I smoke two packs of cigars a day, drink a bottle of whiskey, eat nothing but junk food, and I never exercise." "That's incredible!" he exclaimed. "May I ask how old you are?" "Sure," she said, "I'm twenty-four."

We know next to nothing about Jesus from age twelve until he began his ministry, but Luke 2:52 tells us the result of those years... "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man." He was totally tuned to listening to and doing God's will. So how do we increase in wisdom, stature, knowledge, and spiritual maturity?

One way is to avoid being stuck in an arrested state of development. In our lesson, Paul said:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. (1 Cor. 13:11)

You know children housed in adult bodies. They never learned to compromise. If they don't get their way, they pout, throw tantrums, and refuse to talk, or take their marbles and go home. Earlier in the chapter Paul says what love DOESN'T DO. It

doesn't insist on its own way. It isn't jealous or boastful, or arrogant or rude, and it doesn't insist on its own way. It's common for children to have security blankets or a favorite toy they clutch for comfort. Some adults do the same with religious experiences. They recall a moment from their spiritual past and they talk about it and live it over and over until it's thread-worn as a security blanket. I remember hearing Billy Graham telling the story about one of our early Presidents who prayed every night, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." Some Christians keep referring to when they were, "born again," but the question is, "What has happened since then?"

We cannot grow if our spiritual drive is in park. We grow by exposing ourselves to new ideas and experiences. We grow by enlarging our understanding of prayer and worship. We grow by practicing new behaviors and relating to different people. Growing up means being willing to take risks and be open to what God wants to do in your life.

God doesn't know how to stop creating or stop loving all he has created. Growth happens when we align our spirits with God's.

But before we move on, I want to look again at this "child business." Paul said we must give up childish ways. But Jesus said that unless we become like children, we won't enter the Kingdom. It seems contradictory, until you distinguish between CHILDISH ways and CHILD-LIKE ways.

Brennan Manning recalls the time he was visited by young parents and their three-year-old son. He opened the door, knelt down and said, "Hi, John. I'm delighted to see you." Then, with his face set like flint, the boy replied, "Where's the cookies?" Reflecting on it, Manning says:

The child doesn't struggle to get himself in a good position for having a relationship with God; he doesn't craft ingenious ways of explaining his position to Jesus; he doesn't have to create a pretty face for himself; he doesn't have to create a state of spiritual feeling or intellectual understanding. All he has to do is happily accept the cookies: the gift of the Kingdom.

Think of how freeing it would be to recover a child-like trust in God and not be preoccupied with what has been done, or be undone by what the future may hold. If we will grasp the importance of right now, and practice standing in the presence of God without trying to look good or impress him, we will grow.

Once there was a Zen monk who was being pursued by a ferocious tiger. It chased him to a cliff. He turned to see the tiger bearing down on him when he spotted a rope hanging over the edge of the cliff. Grabbing it, he shinnied down out of the grasp of the tiger. One problem gone, but another appeared. 500' below were jagged rocks. Looking up, he saw the tiger peering at him, along with two mice nibbling the rope.

Contemplating what to do next, he saw a strawberry growing from the cliff face just an arm's reach away. He picked it, put it in his mouth, and said to himself, "This is the best strawberry I've ever eaten in my life!" Fangs and claws above him, jagged rocks below him, and neither mattered because he was enjoying the best strawberry ever in the moment he was given.

In Plymouth, Massachusetts, twin sisters who never married celebrated their 93rd birthday surrounded by family and friends and a reporter from the newspaper who asked, "To what do you attribute your longevity?" The sister known as Miss Minnie answered, "Time."

Growing as Christians is not a matter of spectacular achievements or accomplishments, or dwelling on what HAS BEEN or WILL BE. It is not about rehashing the old material or hanging on to past experiences of God-- no matter how meaningful. As we've said before, our growth is tied to worship, prayer, study, and relationships. But its foundation is built upon tuning in to the preciousness present of God's grace, and learning and growing from the experiences that come our way. In Philippians 3:13 Paul put it this way: "All I can say is that I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come."

There is much more to be said about Christian maturity. But for now, listen to Peter Gomes who said, "We are talking about a power that is not generated by our will but God's spirit, and it is this last kind of growing, the growing in God's grace, which makes all other growth possible."

Now it is time for a spiritual growth experience. We stand at God's door and knock. The door opens, and we just stand there—no attempt to impress, no explanations, no covering up. We stand there as we are. God says, "I'm delighted to see you." Trusting in God's grace and mercy, forgetting what's in our past, we ask, "Where's the cookies?"