

Growth Power

John Birk - May 24, 2015

Introduction

A couple months ago now, I shared a message on the topic of spiritual growth, entitled, "To Grow or Not to Grow", and we looked at one way of defining spiritual maturity:

Becoming a child of God who lives in ready, willing, and ongoing obedience to Jesus, from a mind and heart of resilient faith and supreme love, grounded in God's Word, inspired by God's Spirit, and built up by God's people.

With that as our goal, we looked at four essential steps that followers of Christ must continually take to progress upward on the path of spiritual growth - KNOWING, BELIEVING, LOVING, and OBEYING God in Christ [Growth Cycle Diagram]. We saw how each step is fueled by and builds upon the step before to create a growth cycle, that lived out on an ongoing basis, becomes an upward spiral of spiritual growth toward the goal of spiritual maturity. [Growth Spiral Diagram] We might think of those steps as the minimum necessary requirements we must be willing to invest in our spiritual growth - our part in the process, if you will.

Having touched a bit on our role in the process of spiritual growth, I want to continue by considering God's role, with a particular focus on the Holy Spirit. But to do that, we should begin by asking...

I. Who is the Holy Spirit?

All kinds of depictions of supernatural spirituality permeate our culture in literature, music, television and film. A universal spiritual Force was the pervasive subtext of the blockbuster *Star Wars* series in which characters were drawn toward good or evil by the light or dark side of the Force, and accessed its power in a cosmic battle of good versus evil.

In the international sensation, *Avatar*, a spiritual power connected all living things. Plants, animals, and persons formed a universal ecosystem permeated by a single spiritual life force.

With such speculative concepts of spiritual reality being portrayed for us, we can find our own concepts of God blurred or distorted, and especially our beliefs about the Holy Spirit, who certainly seems to be the most mysterious and difficult to understand member of the Trinity.

Is the Holy Spirit a cosmic energy field to draw upon? Or a spiritual life force that interconnects all things? Or is the Holy Spirit an omnipresent divine person who is God himself? That's what Scripture tells us - the Holy Spirit is the third person of

the one true God, who along with the Father, and the Son, make up the Trinity, or Tri-unity of God.

Though the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly defined in the Bible, it is an accurate summary formulation of many passages of scripture that teach three fundamental truths about the being of God: (1) There is one God; (2) There are three persons of God; and (3) Each person is fully God. In essence, putting those truths together in an integrated statement results in the doctrine of the Trinity, a summary form of which states there is only one God who exists in three persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are identical in essence, power and glory, yet distinct in roles and functions¹

Our purpose today is not to examine the biblical evidence for the Trinity, but simply to affirm from Scripture that the Holy Spirit is fully God and fully personal, as groundwork to understanding his role in our spiritual growth.

A clear reference to the Holy Spirit as God is found in Acts 5:3-4, where Peter, in confronting Ananias about his deception, said:

"Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." (NIV)

Various passages ascribe to the Holy Spirit all the characteristics of personhood. Summarizing a series of verses concerning the Spirit, Nicky Gumbel writes:

"He thinks (Acts 15:28), speaks (Acts 1:6), leads (Romans 8:14), and can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). He is sometimes described as the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) or the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7). He is the way Jesus is present with his people....He is sometimes described in the original Greek as the *parakletos* (John 14:16)....'It means one called alongside' – a counselor, a comforter and an encourager. Jesus said the Father will give you 'another' counsellor. The word for 'another' means 'of the same kind'. In other words, the Holy Spirit is just like Jesus." ²

Being fully God and fully personal, the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in our salvation and spiritual growth. A whole set of supernatural transactions take place at the beginning of our Christian lives:

- Call of God – God's loving conviction of our sin and call to the forgiveness of his grace in Christ
- Conversion – Our confession and repentance from sin, and turning to Christ as forgiving Savior and loving Lord

¹ Grudem, Wayne Arden. Systematic Theology; Zondervan; 1994; pp. 231ff; www.hisplacechurch.com; "Statement of Faith"

² Gumbel, Nicky; Alpha – Questions of Life; Alpha International; 1993; p. 116

- Regeneration – God instilling new spiritual life in us through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit
- Justification – God granting us right legal standing before him in the righteousness of Christ
- Adoption – God taking us into his eternal family as sons and daughters.

That's the amazing work of God's grace in our salvation, and from that point on until we die and leave these bodies behind, we're new creatures, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and living out a Christian life of progressive growth in holiness toward the likeness of Jesus. [Diagram: The Process of Sanctification³]

- At point (1), notice the immediate translation from being a non-Christian under the dominion of sin, to becoming a Christian, no longer a slave to sin, but growing in holiness, through-out the Christian life as shown at point (2).
- The jagged line depicts our growth, never smooth and continuous, but by the Spirit's faithful work and our imperfect cooperation, there should be growth in maturity and holiness over time.
- Point (3) represents our physical death, and once again there is an immediate translation from a state of growing holiness, to perfect holiness.

It's in the ongoing process of spiritual growth, or progressive sanctification, that the presence, power, and work of the Holy Spirit plays the primary indispensable role. Just as we cannot save ourselves from sin and destruction, we cannot grow ourselves in holiness and sanctification.

But, as we must respond to and receive God's saving work in humble faith, we must prepare for and participate in the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in humble faith as well. As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phil 2:12-13; NIV)

So, clearly we are not just passive recipients, but active participants in the process of sanctification. But our focus here is on God's part in the process.

II. How is the Holy Spirit Involved in Our Growth?

Let's look at a few of the ways the Holy Spirit is involved in our spiritual growth, and how we can help or hinder his work and our progress.

³ Grudem, Wayne Arden. Systematic Theology; Zondervan; 1994; p. 750

1. Inner witness - perhaps the most precious work of the Spirit within, after indwelling and rebirthing new spiritual in us, is his inner witness that we're sons and daughters of God, and he's our Heavenly Father.
 - Romans 8:15-17 - ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (NIV)
 - Not only have we an entirely new identity as children of God, but we have an eternal security as heirs of all that God has for us in his kingdom, in his time.
 - We help the Spirit's inner witness by deeply believing, and actively remembering and affirming on a daily basis the truth that we are a deeply loved, totally forgiven, completely accepted and truly pleasing child of our Heavenly Father. And by thanking and praising him, and working to live from that mindset in every area of our lives.
 - But we hinder the Spirit's inner witness by failing to clearly know and deeply believe that great and precious truth, and neglecting to regularly refocus and recalibrate our identity and security to that highest reality, and living only out of our natural sense of identity, security, and confidence.

2. Intimate presence - another life shaping role of the Holy Spirit is conveying the intimate unbroken presence of God with us at all times, in all situations.
 - John 14:15-23 - ¹⁵ "If you love me, you will obey what I command. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth....you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you....you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ... ²³...If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (NIV)
 - One of our universal human fears to is to be abandoned, and left alone. Conversely to know that we have the companionship and friendship of one who loves and cares for us is a deep source of security and encouragement.
 - According to John 14, the Holy Spirit not only surrounds us with his intimate presence, but conveys to us the presence of Jesus and the Father as well! We are surrounded by a Divine Dream Team! And in the presence of God we find the deepest forms of peace, joy, comfort, and encouragement in the midst of the circumstances of life.
 - We participate in that process by spending time in God's presence in the Word, prayer, meditation, and worship, and learning to be mindful of his presence throughout the day.
 - We hinder the awareness of his presence when we neglect regular time alone with God. It's not that he leaves us, it's that we've not reset our focus on him; we've quit relating to him, and we've neglected our conscious intake of his love, goodness, truth and grace.

3. Wisdom, revelation, and enlightenment to know God better, and the hope to which he's called us, and his great power for us to live as followers of Christ.
 - Ephesians 1:17-19 - I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. ... (NIV)
4. Desire, motivation and vitality to turn from the attitudes and actions of the old nature, and grow the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.
 - Gal 5:16, 22-25 - ¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ... ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (NIV)

We've only begun to identify the many ways the Holy Spirit works in us to grow our maturity and holiness in Christ, and we haven't even touched on the means of the "filling" of the Spirit. But while there's great variety in the Spirit's role in our sanctification, there seem to be some common elements on our part, that I'd like to share by way of conclusion.

Conclusion - How do we prepare for and participate with the work of the Spirit?

- Believe the Holy Spirit is with you and within you in presence, power and purpose to help you know, believe, love, and obey God in all you do, and resolve to cooperate with him.
- Continually confess, be cleansed, and turn from known sin, to follow in the steps of Jesus.
- Spend personal time with God reading his Word, opening your heart to him in prayer, expressing your love and worship, and seeking his will and work in and through your life.
- Pursue a heart posture of surrender for God's use, and obedience for his glory.
- Seek to live life with God, in mindful intimacy, ready responsiveness, and humble dependence.

The Holy Spirit is our "Growth Power" and we partner with him in our growth by preparing for and participating in his work in us.