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FRUITFULNESS: ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN GROWTH

by Dan Trygg

Having seen that new life does exist within anyone who has been united with Jesus in His death and resurrection, anyone who has died to his old nature and has been reborn into Jesus' family, the next issue which we must deal with is how that new life can be brought into our experience. **If the new life is dwelling within us, what is necessary to see it brought to the surface and expressed outwardly in growth and fruitfulness? Is there something that we must do to encourage or produce its outworking?** How does action on our part coincide with our claim that fruitfulness is the natural by-product of life? **If fruitfulness occurs naturally, why is it necessary that we do anything?**

According to the parable of the seed planted in the field (Mk. 4:26-29), the process of growth is an automatic process which the farmer does not understand. He does not *cause* the growth, or control its appearance. It never ceases to be a source of amazement to him year after year. More than merely coming to expect it and look for it, he even invests significant effort to secure it. He knows that if he does the preparation and care, he can count on the natural growth to do the rest. In I Cor. 3:6,7, Paul states plainly that God is the One who causes the growth. Does this mean that we have no part in the process at all? Hardly. Paul spoke of himself and Apollos as co-laborers with God (vs. 9), ones who were responsible for planting and watering the seed of truth to which God gives life. Obviously, there could be no growth at all if no seed was sown, nor if water does not come to it. Just as in the illustration of the farmer and his crop, **there is a place for human involvement in the production of spiritual growth.**

What are the necessary ingredients for optimal growth? The proper amounts of water, sunlight, loose, nutrition-rich soil, and freedom from competing weeds are basic to the good growth of any plant. Other factors may be involved as well. Certain particular kinds of plants may need support, pruning, or other special techniques in order to obtain maximum fruitfulness. When any of these factors are missing, the good gardener must compensate in some way to provide the best conditions possible for that plant's growth. He does not have any control over the principle of life itself, nor can he change the genetic programming of any particular seed. He can only encourage the natural, built-in program for growth and fruitfulness which is already contained within the seed. This he does by producing the growth environment which will best feed this normal cycle of life.

It is at this point where we can draw out some important lessons:

(1.) As ones who are reborn into Christ, the new life is already within us. We do not need to manufacture it.

(2.) Growth is the natural advance of this life which is within us, as it has opportunity to develop according to its God-given design.

(3.) It is under the empowerment and direction of God, not caused merely by our actions themselves. We remain dependent upon God, not only for our spiritual life itself, but also for the nature or kind of growth which He has designed for us as individual members of the body of Christ (Cf. I Cor. 12:4-18). Different giftings and callings for ministry will require different growth patterns and experiences. This remains under His oversight, and according to His design (Eph. 2:10). A healthy awareness of our dependence upon God will leave no room for pride. Our manipulations or attempts at producing growth are entirely futile apart from the continued gift of life given us through our life-link of dependence in Him (Jn. 6:63; Ps. 127:1; I Cor. 3:5-8). Pride interferes with the flow of life and, try as we might, true growth will be stunted, even coming to a virtual standstill. It is also possible to continue in almost a spiritual suspended animation, or a state of dormancy, for many years (Heb. 5:11-14; I Cor. 3:1-3). This is the result of either hindering or cutting off that flow of life through pride (*too much* will) (Cf. Gal. 5:1-6; 6:15) or lack of cultivation (*not enough* will) (Lk. 8:14,15).

(4.) We are necessary active participants in our growth. Even though it is God who has put life within us, and continues to be our life (Col. 3:4; Jn. 15:4,5), there are necessary conditions for growth which enable that life to be actively producing change and fruitfulness in us. God, in designing us with free will, has ordained that we be co-laborers with Him in the process of growth. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to understand the principles of spiritual gardening and to do our part in this co-operative process of expressing Jesus' life to the world. **The life is present within us. The growth is from God. We, however, as free moral agents by God's design, are given the "response-ability" and, therefore, the responsibility to provide the best conditions for growth** that are possible. We cannot *make* growth happen by our choices. We do have, however, a significant role in either encouraging or hindering this outworking of life by the choices we make.

Father, we praise You for the mystery of life. We do not fully see or understand what has happened to us. We *have* sensed the difference, even seen the changes, in our inner heart. Our perspective and our motivations are different because of our new birth. Thank You that You have a plan, a program for our growth, in which You have appointed us to fulfill a certain ministry. You know the purpose for our existence, and You are working to bring it to pass. We also thank You, Father, for the high privilege of being fellow workers with You, both in the work of the Kingdom, and also in our own personal spiritual development. Give us eyes to see the seriousness and honor of this calling. Grant to us, O Father, a heart of courage and zeal by which to move forward in pursuit of You, and of usefulness in Your service.

FOR MEDITATION: Philippians 2:12b,13

"...work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

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Community Must Be Inclusive, Not Exclusive

"...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Eph. 4:2,3 (NRSV)

"Community is and must be inclusive. The great enemy of community is exclusivity. Groups that exclude others because they are poor or doubters or divorced or sinners or of some different race or nationality are not communities; they are cliques -- actually defensive bastions against community. Inclusiveness is not an absolute. Long term communities must invariably struggle over the degree to which they are going to be inclusive. But for most groups it is easier to exclude than include. True communities... are always reaching to extend themselves.

"[Inclusivity] is not merely a matter of including different sexes, races, and creeds. It is also inclusive of the whole range of human emotions. Tears are as welcome as laughter, fear as well as faith. Community, like marriage, requires that we hang in there when the going gets a little rough. If we do hang in there, we usually find after a while that 'the rough places are made plain'. A friend correctly defined community as a 'group that has learned to transcend its individual differences'. But this learning takes time. 'Transcend' does not mean 'obliterate' or 'demolish'. It literally means 'to climb over'. The achievement of community can be compared to the reaching of a mountaintop. Perhaps the most necessary key to this transcendence is the appreciation of differences. In community, instead of being ignored, denied, hidden, or changed, human differences are celebrated as gifts."

Abridged from *The Different Drum* by M. Scott Peck, pp. 61,62.