

Developing healthy spiritual growth

‘No one I know has a greater command of teaching practical godliness and experiential Christianity than Joel Beeke. Drawing upon Paul’s prayer for the believers in Colossae, Beeke utilizes his exceptional exegetical abilities to lay open this text of Scripture, showing its primary relevance for the daily life of every believer. In so doing, this work will promote greater growth in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and deepen your spiritual life so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col. 1:10). This book should be a staple in your personal library regarding what constitutes genuine growth in biblical, reformed spirituality.’

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Dr Jerry Bilkes
Professor of New Testament
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Knowledge, practice
and experience

Joel R. Beeke



EP BOOKS
Faverdale North
Darlington
DL3 0PH, England

www.epbooks.org
sales@epbooks.org

EP BOOKS are distributed in the USA by:
JPL Distribution
3741 Linden Avenue Southeast,
Grand Rapids, MI 49548.

E-mail: orders@jpldistribution.com
Tel: 877.683.6935

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First published 2013

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available
ISBN: 978-0-85234-947-2

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, Authorized (King James) Version.

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For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins

(Colossians 1:9-14).

Preface

Biblical, Reformed spirituality and an accompanying need for personal spiritual growth has fallen on hard times. At a recent ministers' conference for the Free Reformed Churches in Ontario, I was asked to address the question of spiritual growth in terms of knowledge, practice and experience. I chose to do so using Colossians 1:9-14 as my background.

Since this book was originally given as addresses to ministers, I have retained some of the applications given directly to them. Those applications, however, are usually applicable to all believers in one way or another.

After the conference, some of the ministers present offered some valuable suggestions and asked me to publish these addresses. I am grateful for Graham Hind and Evangelical

Press's willingness to do so, and pray that God may use them to promote spiritual growth in his people.

Many thanks to Paul Smalley, Phyllis TenElshof, and Ray Lanning for their invaluable assistance on this manuscript. And, as always, many thanks to my remarkable wife, Mary, and dear children, for their generosity in allowing me the many hours that a writing ministry demands.

Joel R. Beeke

1

Spiritual growth in knowledge

*For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God
(Colossians 1:9-10).*

By today's standards, the ancient city of Colossae was a place of no great importance. Centuries before Christ, Colossae had been a large and flourishing center of commerce and textile manufacturing, located on the main highway running east to west through Phrygia. In Roman times, however, the highway was relocated to the north, leaving Colossae off the beaten path. Years of economic decline had reduced the city to a small town scraping by in the shadow of Laodicea, ten miles away. Around the time

Paul wrote to the Colossians, the area suffered a damaging earthquake. Accordingly, it might also be thought that a church planted in such unpromising circumstances would be of no great consequence or strategic importance in the larger context of the mission of the gospel to the Gentiles.¹

But when we read Paul's epistle, we see things in a very different light. In Colossians 1, Paul celebrates the conversion of 'the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossae' with heartfelt unceasing thanks to God. Paul was thrilled that 'the word of the truth of the gospel' had come to the Colossians through the faithful ministry of Epaphras, and was bearing much fruit. He thanked God for the new believers' faith in Christ and their love for 'all the saints', both of which were a gift from God and marks of his grace at work among them. Many members of the infant church at Colossae had been soundly converted, by the grace of God, leaving the darkness of their unbelieving past behind, and embracing the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Clearly the particular circumstances of the church did not matter to Paul. The location of the church, and its temporal circumstances, were of no interest to him. He was not concerned about numbers or budgets or programs. What mattered was, the gospel was being preached, and the Lord Jesus was gathering his church in Colossae. God had honored his Word. God had used his faithful servant. A good foundation had been laid, and the Colossian believers

had begun well. That is something to celebrate, something to give thanks to God for.

But Paul went on to say that he prayed constantly that what God had begun in the believers at Colossae would continue, and increase in depth and scope, filling them with the knowledge of God's will, inclining them and empowering them 'to walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing', more and more. Paul rejoiced in the beginning they had made, but he also longed for spiritual growth. So should we.

What is spiritual growth? Spiritual growth is the development of the believer's faith and life in learning to know, trust and honor the Triune God intellectually and experientially, which issues in the Spirit's graces exercised in conformity to Christ through practical Christian living. By this growth a deeper insight is also gained into spiritual liberty.

There is a saying: 'The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement.'² Certainly that is true of our spiritual lives. We must not be satisfied to say that we have been born again, but pray that the child of our new birth would grow into a mature man. Spiritual growth should be as natural to believers as physical growth is to children. Regardless of the number of people involved, or the social or strategic importance of the church, God's will for all his children is that they grow up to maturity in Christ.

Wilhelmus á Brakel provides several reasons spiritual growth should be a staple part of every believer's life: first, 'God promises that He will cause His regenerated children to grow' (Ps. 92:13; Hosea 14:5-6; Mal. 4:2); second, 'it is the very nature of spiritual life to grow' (Prov. 4:18; Job 17:9); third, 'the growth of His children is the goal and objective God has in view by administering the means of grace to them' (Eph. 4:11-15; 1 Peter 2:2); fourth, 'it is a duty to which God's children are continually exhorted, and their activity is to consist in a striving for growth' (2 Peter 3:18; Phil. 3:12); and finally, the need for spiritual growth 'is also conveyed by the difference in believers in regard to their condition and the measure of grace' (1 John 2:13).³

Such spiritual growth vindicates a believer's claims to have been converted. Regeneration creates new desires. As Matthew 5:6 says, 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.' Such persons are blessed because they have been begotten again unto new life in Christ. A healthy infant has a strong appetite, and the newborn child of God wants more of God. Lack of appetite in a child is a symptom of sickness. Lack of spiritual appetite in a professing Christian is a very disturbing sign. Gardiner Spring (1785-1873) said, 'The hypocrite, when once he imagines himself to be a Christian, views his work as done. He is satisfied. He is rich and increased in goods. But it is otherwise with the true Christian... The more he loves God, the more he desires to love Him.'⁴

So Paul prayed for the new converts at Colossae. He provides a detailed summary of his prayers, giving us a description of true spiritual growth. Let us soak our minds and hearts in the rich broth of this passage of Holy Scripture so that we may know what true spiritual growth is, and how it takes place. Then let us climb this text as a high hill from which to survey the broader biblical teaching on growing in grace.

Before getting into the details, let us observe something we may otherwise overlook. All spiritual growth ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit. Why else would Paul pray for such growth, if God did not give it? Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:6: 'I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.' Just as we must thank God for our conversion, so we must also pray for spiritual growth from his hands. Indeed, Paul by example teaches us that praying for spiritual growth should be a high priority for us. We are told that Paul and his co-workers did not cease to pray for this growth. It was their constant prayer for the 'saints and faithful brethren' of the Colossian church. We see this same priority in Paul's other letters: constant prayer for the spiritual growth of all Christians, and the churches they belong to.⁵

Do you pray for spiritual growth in yourself and in the church? Is it your priority? It will do us little good to talk about spiritual growth if you do not yearn for it and pray for it. Robert Rollock (1555-1598) said, 'Earnest and fervent

prayer to God is the means to get grace from him.¹⁶ If we do not want to fall under the rebuke of James 4:2: 'Ye have not, because ye ask not', we must pray for ourselves, our families, our fellow believers, and our churches. Notice that the church at Colossae was not one that Paul planted, for which he was personally responsible. This church was planted by Epaphras, perhaps with the assistance of Archippus (4:17). But even so, these Christians were dear to Paul, and he prayed for them as lovingly and faithfully as for any other. As you pray for the church you serve, do you also pray for other churches in your communities? Do you pray for churches in other places? Let us offer prayers that walk all over the globe for the sake of God's church!

Taking up the contents of Paul's prayer, we learn that spiritual growth is like a diamond; it has many facets. It begins in the head and the heart (v. 9), works itself out in our daily lives (vv. 10, 11), and is consummated in the praise and thanksgiving that we offer by word and deed to our Father in heaven (v. 12) for our deliverance in Christ (v. 13). Peter presents the matter in even more detail: 'And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity' (2 Peter 1:5-7). Spiritual growth is part of the larger doctrine of sanctification, involving the exposition of the requirements of the law, and the use of the means of grace. To stay within the bounds of the subjects allotted to

me, therefore, we need to be focused and succinct in our examination of spiritual growth.

This book will thus consist of how to grow spiritually in knowledge, practice and experience. All three are suggested in our text. In his prayer, Paul first pleaded for believers' growth in knowledge: 'that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding'. Knowledge is primary in spiritual growth, and everything else flows from it. After this request, Paul said, 'that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing', which explains the purpose of being filled with knowledge. Growth in practice flows out of growth in knowledge. This worthy walk is then qualified by four Greek participles: 'being fruitful', 'increasing', being 'strengthened', and 'giving thanks'. The first two participles reiterate the ideas of growth in practice and knowledge, but the second two add another quality: growth in experience. So here are all three elements of our topic.

Let us focus first on the theme of spiritual growth as growth in knowledge. We will first examine Paul's foundational prayer request in verse 9, and the phrase in verse 10 about 'increasing in the knowledge of God'.

Like so many writings of Paul, this prayer reflects the Trinitarian structure of God's saving work. It is not as plain as in Paul's prayers in Ephesians, but just below the surface of his words, we quickly discover that the Father,

Son and Holy Spirit are both the source and the goal of our spiritual growth. This suggests a threefold structure to our consideration of spiritual growth in knowledge: growth in knowledge of the Son, of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit.

Grow in knowledge of the Son

Colossians 1:9 says that Paul constantly prayed ‘that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will’. ‘His will’ means the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom Paul first mentions in verse 3: ‘We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’. The will in this case is particularly the revealed will of the Lord Jesus, as confirmed in verse 10. Such a description is consistent with the terms of the Great Commission. Preachers of the gospel are to make disciples of all nations, ‘teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28:19-20).

Being filled with Christ’s will

Paul’s words ‘be filled’ also point to Christ. Filling and fullness is a major theme in this epistle, which declares the overflowing sufficiency of Christ.⁷ Colossians 1:19 says, ‘For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell.’ Colossians 2:9-10 relates Christ’s fullness to our being filled or completed: ‘For in him dwelleth all the

fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.' About this Rollock wrote: 'God is full. O what fullness is in God! Jesus Christ is full ... then it must follow ... we must be filled with that fullness of God.'⁸ So Paul's language to 'be filled' evokes the idea of going to Christ as the infinite and inexhaustible treasury of blessing to receive more and more of his grace.

Being filled increasingly with knowledge

We must seek grace to be filled increasingly with knowledge. Paul was satisfied that the Colossians understood the basics of the gospel, but he did not want them to stop there. In their zeal and enthusiasm to serve their new Lord, they should not forget to sit at his feet and learn from him as true disciples. John Angell James wrote: 'Young converts are sometimes so taken up with religious feeling and doing, as to forget the importance, even in reference to these, of knowing.'⁹

Sanctifying knowledge

Being filled with such knowledge is more than just acquiring an education, however. If such knowledge were only a matter of education, truth would only be present in the intellect and would not fill one's entire being. To be filled with knowledge means that these truths permeate

one's mind, heart and life as the fragrance of brewing coffee fills a house in the morning. We must keep God's truths percolating in us until they flavor all that we are in Christ.

Thus the whole person is involved in sanctifying knowledge. The mind, which possesses an understanding darkened by sin; the emotions and feelings, which are permeated with distorted affections; and the will, which is not free by nature — all must be renovated by sanctified knowledge. By grace, the Holy Spirit enlightens the believer's mind, cleanses his feelings, and renews his will. Since all three are interconnected, a sanctified understanding leads to sanctified feelings, which in turn impacts the will.

Bible commentator Curtis Vaughan writes: "To be "filled" with the knowledge of the divine will suggests that such knowledge is to pervade all of one's being — thoughts, affections, purposes, and plans."¹⁰ Colossians 3:16-17 says, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.'

Growing spiritual knowledge will consist of:

1. *A growing understanding of God's holy law.* In saying we are to be 'filled with the knowledge of *his will*', Paul was

saying our sanctification is an important part of God's will (1 Thess. 4:3) and that we must be 'doing the will of God from the heart' (Eph. 6:6). So part of what Paul prayed for here is a deeper understanding of God's *holy law*. Psalm 119:33-34 says, 'Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.'

Knowing God's will in its holiness humbles us, for by the law we know our sin (Rom. 3:20). As we sink downward in penitence and brokenness, we grow closer to God. Isaiah 57:15 says, 'For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.'

2. *A growing understanding of God's holy gospel.* God's will is also the *holy gospel*. God's will is his sovereign plan of salvation in Christ, which includes justification but is far more than that. Notice that in verse 6 Paul thanked God that the Colossian believers 'knew the grace of God in truth'. They knew God as their Savior in Christ. Then he prays for them to be filled with the knowledge of God as their Sanctifier in Christ. This view of God's will is consistent with Paul's references to the divine will in Ephesians 1, which says that God predestined people to salvation in Christ 'according to the good pleasure of

his will' (v. 5), and 'made known unto us the mystery of his will' (v. 9), for he is the God 'who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will' (v. 11). In other words, Paul prays for deeper knowledge of God's total plan of redemption in the person and work of his Son. He is the One who came into the world crying, 'Lo, I come ... to do thy will, O God' (Heb. 10:7). Therefore God's will is not merely what God wants us to do; it is also what God has done, is doing and will do through his Son.

Paul's prayer that we would be filled with the knowledge of God's purposes in Christ is consistent with the words of Peter's salutation in 2 Peter 1:2-4: 'Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.' God's grace and peace are multiplied to us through the knowledge of God and Christ. This knowledge is sufficient for all things that pertain to life and godliness. This knowledge is summed up in his precious promises.

3. *A growing Christ-centered knowledge.* The knowledge we need is centered in the Mediator. If we would be filled with this knowledge, we must sit at the feet of Christ, and

learn of him. Christ 'is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption'.¹¹ He is also the wisdom of God, for 'in [him] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3; *cf.* Prov. 8 and 9). Christ is both the Messenger and the Message of salvation. Note that after Paul prays for increasing knowledge, he gives us a brilliant exposition of the riches of Christ and how we make use of them. He was thus praying that God would open up his treasure-chest, his Son Jesus Christ, and fill us with the gold and silver of his truth. Likewise, Peter summed up all Christian growth by saying, 'But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen' (2 Peter 3:18).

Matthew Henry said, 'Spiritual growth consists most in the growth of the root, which is out of sight. The more we depend upon Christ and draw sap and virtue from him ... the more we cast forth our roots.'¹² In other words, the deeper our roots are in Christ, the more we will grow in communion with him. Colossians 2:6-7 says, 'As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him.'

Spiritual growth begins with knowledge. We must be increasingly filled with the knowledge of Christ as the Agent of the Father's will. If our spiritual life is a fire

burning in our hearts, then doctrinal truth received by grace is the well-seasoned wood that fuels the fire, so that it burns hotter and higher. O that God would make our churches great bonfires that blaze in the night of this dark world!

Useful knowledge

Let me suggest some implications that follow from this truth.

1. *It gives us a mandate for Christian education in home, church and school.* If spiritual growth begins with being filled with the knowledge of Christ, then the result of neglecting Christian education will be malnourished, stunted, underdeveloped Christians. Zeal for God without knowledge is deadly, says Romans 10:2. John Davenant (1572-1641) wrote: 'A blind ignorance, however devoted, is not pleasing to God.'¹³ But a well-catechized people have the foundations for vibrant spiritual growth.

Certainly we must read our Bibles to grow spiritually. Psalm 1 reminds us that God's blessing rests upon the person who meditates with delight, day and night, on the law of the Lord. One great heritage of the Reformation is the translation of the Bible into the language of the people, and the right of people to read it for themselves. It was good for the Ethiopian eunuch to read aloud from

Isaiah 53 in his chariot. But when Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading, the eunuch honestly replied: 'How can I, except some man should guide me?' (Acts 8:30-31). People need guidance in understanding biblical doctrine. Ephesians 4:11-13 tells us that Christ gave pastors and teachers to build up the body, 'till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man'.

The Reformed churches have a strong heritage of teaching the truth. But the winds of culture blow through our ranks, and the undertow of the world's tide often sucks us out to sea. We all want to be popular and admired by others. Who wants to look like an intolerant, narrow-minded bigot? But absolute, uncompromising truth is the meat and drink of a true Christian and a faithful church. Never back down from teaching people the truth of the Bible.

2. *This calls for an insatiable hunger to learn more of God's truth.* Paul's prayer is that we would be 'filled' with knowledge. He does not pray for a drip here and a drip there of knowledge, but for a torrent like Niagara Falls. No Christian will ever know enough of God's truth. Men who graduate from seminary must remember that they have not yet graduated from the school of Christ. Ministers in particular must be reading, studying, listening and learning throughout their life. John Calvin (1509-1564) said, 'We must always make progress in the doctrine of piety until death.'¹⁴

Christians must study the Holy Scriptures. First Peter 2:2 tells us: 'As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.' Notice that Peter did not say, 'You who are newborn babes in the faith, do this.' He called all believers 'newborn babes', indicating that we all need to grow up. None of us will reach complete spiritual maturity until Christ's return (1 Cor. 13:10-12). Our goal till then must be always to seek maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:13).

So let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. Do not lean on old studies and favorite verses, which, like bread, go stale. Get your manna fresh each day. Explore the Bible as a prince exploring the property he has inherited from his royal father. Meditate on the Scriptures by turning over a single verse at a time in your mind and savoring its teaching. Review and restudy familiar parts of Scripture, and press on into parts you have neglected until now. Feed yourself before you feed your flock.

3. *This places Christ at the center of the cultivation of a Christian mind.* Bible doctrine is a ring designed to hold a single, sparkling diamond: Jesus Christ. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, 'For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.' But Paul, will you not teach us about the church? Yes, but only as the body of Christ. We can learn about a wife's submission to her husband as her head and she should express that publicly,

but only in the context of our common submission to Christ, our head.

Remember that ‘it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell’. The Father’s desire and delight is that all of our thinking and teaching be centered in his Son, Jesus. God does not want his Son ever to be taken for granted because he loves his Son with an infinite love. So the Father is displeased with any teaching or thinking that marginalizes Christ. Christ must be central in all things. John Owen (1616–1683) said, ‘If I have observed anything by experience it is this — a man may take the measure of his growth and decay in grace according to his thoughts and meditations upon the person of Christ and the glory of Christ’s kingdom and of his love.’¹⁵

Growing in the knowledge of Christ is central for spiritual growth and grounds us in grace. It is so natural to try to build our spiritual growth upon self-righteousness and self-effort. Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813–1843) said, ‘Many look to a wrong quarter for sanctification. They take pardon from Christ, then lean on themselves ... for holiness. Ah, no; you must take hold of the hand that was pierced.’¹⁶

Jerry Bridges says, ‘A correct understanding of God’s grace and a consistent appropriation of it must be the foundation of all our personal efforts to grow spiritually.’¹⁷

He says two bookends must be in place or all our 'books', or efforts to grow spiritually, will fall down. One bookend is Christ's righteousness as our only ground of acceptance with God. The other is Christ's power as our only source of ability to become holy. By constantly studying Christ, we will cultivate dependence upon God's grace.¹⁸

Pursue the knowledge of Christ for your own mind and soul. Read Scripture with an eye to Christ. Read the best treatises on the doctrine of Christ: Thomas Goodwin's *Christ our Mediator*, Isaac Ambrose's *Looking unto Jesus*, Ralph Robinson's *Christ All and in All*, Philip Henry's book also titled, *Christ All in All*, John Brown's *Christ: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, John Owen's *The Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, and James Durham's *Christ Crucified*.¹⁹

Christ is the consolation of the church. Our only comfort, according to the *Heidelberg Confession*, is that we 'belong unto our faithful Savior Jesus Christ'.²⁰ Christless preaching is comfortless preaching. Those of us who are ministers must examine our preaching. What has your congregation learned in the last few months about the Mediator and his natures, states and offices? Have they come to see the beauty of his great heart more clearly and to feel it more dearly? What have you brought them from the Word to show how Christ rules his church through various commandments and propels the church forward in its mission?

Is Christ crucified and risen a magnet that attracts all of your instruction? Or is he becoming marginal, perhaps even forgotten? This will not help believers grow in maturity. Paul says in Ephesians 4:13 that the goal of ministry is that ‘we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God’. Spiritual growth begins with being filled with the knowledge of Christ as the Agent of his Father’s will. Therefore, seek grace to grow in knowledge of the Son.

Grow in knowledge of the Holy Spirit

Note that Paul goes on in verse 9 to pray for believers to be filled with the knowledge of God’s saving will in Christ ‘in all wisdom and spiritual understanding’. By speaking of ‘spiritual understanding’ Paul distinguishes it from the knowledge that is ordinarily accessible to fallen men. Paul uses the word *spiritual* here, as almost everywhere else, as that which belongs to or comes from the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual knowledge imparted by the Spirit

‘Spiritual understanding’ is knowledge imparted to us by the illumination of the Spirit. And whatever comes from the Holy Spirit is characterized by his holiness.

First Corinthians 2:11-16 makes it plain that we must depend on the Holy Spirit to have true knowledge of God: 'What man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.'

The Spirit opened our eyes in conversion, but now we must seek his light to shine more and more, to expand our spiritual vision of all God's blessings in Christ. Paul also prayed for this in Ephesians 1:17-18, saying, 'That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened.' John Eadie (1810-1876) observed: 'This enjoyment of the Spirit of Light is the special privilege of believers. He dispels the mists which obscure the inner

vision, [and] fills the soul with an ardent relish for Divine truth and a fuller perception of it.’²¹

Christ-minded knowledge

Paul called such spiritual knowledge ‘having the mind of Christ’. It is more than information; it is also ‘wisdom’. The mind of Christ is the mind of a humble servant (Phil. 2:5-8). Spiritual knowledge is a Spirit-indwelt, Spirit-imparted mindset; an experience of life and peace, found in submission to God’s law, and belonging to Christ (Rom. 8:6-9). ‘The law is spiritual’ (Rom. 7:14), breathed out by God, and imbued with the life and holiness of God’s Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It is ‘the spirit of ... the fear of the LORD’, who anoints men to delight in the fear of the Lord (Isa. 11:2-3).

Vital, transforming knowledge

Therefore Paul did not pray for mere mental knowledge but for the vital, transforming knowledge given by the Holy Spirit. Calvin wrote: ‘Indeed we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is not religion or piety ... I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.’²² We must realize that in dividing the topic of spiritual growth into knowledge, practice and experience, we are setting up artificial divisions for the sake of clarity. In reality these things are inseparable.

Active knowledge

Colossians 1:9-10 indicates that spiritual knowledge produces spiritual conduct, activity and behavior: 'that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord'. A worthy walk is the purpose of the person who is filled with knowledge.²³ Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:5: 'Now the end [or goal] of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.' Sinclair Ferguson says, 'The goal of theology is the worship of God. The posture of theology is on one's knees. The mode of theology is repentance.'²⁴

Humbling knowledge

This kind of knowledge should humble us. Anne Dutton (1692-1765) wrote: 'As to my knowledge of divine truths, I find it very small: especially if it be reduced to that which is practical; or to that knowledge which influences the soul into an answerable practice. I am entirely of your mind, "that our refreshment in truths, depends upon the Spirit's breathing..." If the Spirit shines upon old-known truths, we behold them in a new glory; and if he breathes in them afresh upon our souls, we're filled with new life immediately.'²⁵

Knowledge often produces nothing but an over-inflated ego (1 Cor. 8:1). Paul did not pray for that kind

of knowledge, for ego inflation is the very opposite of spiritual growth. Such wisdom is ‘earthly, sensual, devilish’, and promoted ‘envy and strife’ (James 3:15–16). This kind of knowledge, which has no connection with the Spirit, is what gives doctrine a bad name.

Loving knowledge

What makes spiritual understanding different from dead orthodoxy? Spiritual knowledge energizes the heart with love, the great fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Paul told the Colossians in verse 8 that the truth of the gospel produces the fruit of ‘love in the Spirit’. He prayed in Philippians 1:9: ‘that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge’. Spiritual understanding touches the mind but also the heart, the will and the affections with the loveliness of God, his ways, and his image in man. The only way to know God is to love him humbly (1 Cor. 8:1–3). In humility we seek to know him as he is in himself. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, ‘There is no better test of growth than that a man desires God because he is God.’²⁶

Digested knowledge

Picture two men with a pizza. One man has a stomach ulcer and cannot eat pizza, but he is a biochemist with a detailed knowledge of the composition of pizza and how its ingredients are combined and processed to produce the final product. The other man may know little

about what is in it, or how it is made, but he wants to eat it, and thoroughly enjoys it. This is analogous to spiritual knowledge: the believer ‘tastes and sees’ that the Lord is good, and therefore loves him, loves his Word, and loves his image in men (1 Peter 2:1-3). Growth in spiritual knowledge is not so much a matter of mere quantity of information, but of quality of understanding, a taste of the heart that relishes the gifts and goodness and glory of God. Therefore we must not aim merely to grow in the knowledge of God’s will in his Son, but also to grow in spiritual understanding of this truth.

Useful knowledge

What does this imply for our lives and ministries?

1. *We should study, teach and pray, relying on the Holy Spirit’s help.* Paul was a master preacher, pastor, teacher and theologian. But he knew he would be a fool if he just taught and wrote. He also had to pray. He prayed for God to fill believers with ‘spiritual understanding’, for otherwise, all his teaching and writing would be in vain. He understood that without the Spirit indwelling and working in the heart, no one could even say for his own soul, ‘Jesus is the Lord’ (1 Cor. 12:3). Prayer is the special duty of ministers for their people. Paul Baynes (c. 1573-1617) said, ‘Ministers must not only teach and admonish, but pray for their people.’²⁷ Samuel said in 1 Samuel 12:23:

‘Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way.’

Christ taught believers to pray for the Holy Spirit as children ask their father for food (Luke 11:11-13). Paul prayed that the Father would give the Ephesian believers ‘the spirit of wisdom and revelation’ to enlighten their hearts in the knowledge of God (Eph. 1:17-18). Without the Spirit we are only the blind leading the blind. Pray for the Spirit every time you open the Bible, brothers, and pray again for Spirit-given understanding before you close it.

2. *We should beware of unspiritual knowledge.* We could spend hours filling our brains with the details of the text of Scripture, but without love, we would be useless as God’s messengers (1 Cor. 13:2). We would be worse than useless, because such unspiritual knowledge destroys individuals, families and churches while waving the banner of theological purity.

Unspiritual knowledge, that is, knowledge without Christ, without the Spirit, without love for God and men, is not ‘halfway to the mark’ but entirely opposed to God. It is hypocrisy, outwardly maintaining the doctrines of Scripture while inwardly opposing the God of Scripture. With unspiritual knowledge men use God for their own purposes; they subordinate God’s revelation to self-love, which is a blasphemous reversal.

‘Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth’ (James 3:13-14). We must judge our knowledge by its fruits in our lives. A good understanding leads to a good application. Spiritual truth produces spiritual fruit. If we lack these things, our boasting should be replaced with repentance.

3. *We should preach and teach with much love.* To light a fire, you must first strike a match. God does not need to work through means, and certainly not through sinful men, such as we are, but thankfully he chooses to do so. If we want the Lord to use us to impart spiritual knowledge to others, we ourselves must first have that knowledge burning in our minds, and filling our hearts with love.

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1:5: ‘Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.’ To preach the gospel in power and in the Spirit, we must be a certain ‘manner of men’, who are as nurses who cherish their children, and fathers who exhort and comfort them (1 Thess. 2:7-12).

Spiritual growth begins with growth in the knowledge of Christ as the Agent of his Father’s will. This is not the

knowledge available to fallen men, to be acquired by their own efforts, but the spiritual understanding that the Holy Spirit imparts and uses to energize us with love. Therefore we need to grow in the knowledge of the Son communicated by the Spirit.

Grow in knowledge of the Father

In Colossians 1:10 Paul writes that his goal when praying for Christians to be filled by the Spirit with the knowledge of the Son was that they would also increase in ‘the knowledge of God’. Why does he say that? Hasn’t he just said in verse 9 that he was praying for them to be filled with knowledge? This is not mere repetition for emphasis; rather, as we noted before, the structure of the text suggests that ‘increasing in the knowledge of God’ is one of the purposes of being ‘filled with the knowledge of his will’.

Knowledge affirming the Trinity

Ordinarily Paul uses the word *God* for the Father and *Lord* for the Son.²⁸ So most likely Paul was thinking here of God the Father in praying that believers increase ‘in the knowledge of God’. This makes sense, for Paul has already prayed for believers to be filled with the knowledge of Christ’s will for their lives. He has already spoken of

knowledge by the Spirit. If they know the Son through the Holy Spirit, they will see, as Paul says in verse 15, that Christ 'is the image of the invisible God'. To know Christ is also to know the Father reflected in him.

The great goal of the new covenant is that human beings should know the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. In the lively preaching of the Word, the Holy Spirit opens our minds and illumines our hearts with 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ', and are transformed by becoming conformed to the glorious person of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4,6). In Christ we see God the Father in a way that gives life to our souls. Because the fullness of God dwells bodily, in Christ, the true nature of the Father is revealed through the Son. This is the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:34: 'They shall all know me.' This is the goal of our earthly pilgrimage, for each step along the way brings us into deeper knowledge of God as our Father.

Knowledge affirming the riches of God's love

O the riches of the love of God, that he would send his Son to the cross for sinners, and pour his Spirit into our hearts, so that we could know his love! What depths of wonder and joy lie in those simple words, 'Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Col. 1:2). Can this be true? Yes, it is true of

everyone in whom God plants faith and love through the gospel. Our spiritual growth includes coming to know the eternal God who is now, for the sake of Christ his Son, our God and Father.

Useful knowledge

Let us consider the implications for our lives.

1. *We should seek grace to grow in the knowledge of our adoption.* We must not neglect to teach the doctrine of adoption alongside the doctrines of election and justification. Adoption is not merely a step or gateway through which we pass when we are saved. It is rather part of the great purpose of God in redemption. Just as God elected us to holiness, so he predestined us ‘unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself’ (Eph. 1:4-5), ‘that he might be the firstborn among many brethren’ (Rom. 8:29). ‘Beloved, now are we the sons of God’ (1 John 3:2).

As believers, we need to grow in our understanding of God’s fatherly heart, his loving purposes towards us, and his faithful dealings with us. We must teach this precious doctrine not as a mere item in the plan of salvation, but as God’s benediction on the whole of our lives, including our prayer lives as God’s children, our sanctification as God’s children, our sufferings as God’s children, and our ultimate hope as God’s children.

As I stated in my book *Heirs with Christ*, there are many benefits to adoption, and we should grow in our appreciation and appropriation of them.²⁹ Our Father calls us out of the mass of fallen humanity, and brings us into his family. We are called by his name, given access to the throne of grace, experience his love, and enjoy the liberty and privileges of his children and heirs, to whom he has given exceeding great and precious promises of protection, provision and preservation. All this has been secured to us by the shedding of the blood of Christ, and all of this is revealed and confirmed to us by the Spirit as the Spirit of adoption.

Our Father comforts us with his love and pity. He moves us to rejoice in intimate communion with him and his Son. Through his Spirit, he assists us in performing spiritual duties. He counsels and directs us. He chastens and corrects us. Our Father preserves us and keeps us from falling. He provides everything we need as his children. He sends forth his angels as ministering spirits to serve us. He makes our death ‘an abolishing of sin and a passage into eternal life’.³⁰ Is any part of our existence left untouched by the fatherhood of God to his adopted children? Then let us study and teach adoption.

2. *We should teach the biblical doctrine of God.* God has a wondrous simplicity in himself, but he has revealed his nature in a variety of attributes, much like white light that is separated by a prism into a rainbow of beautiful colors.

He does this for our edification, since one dimension of our spiritual growth is ‘increasing in the knowledge of God’.

Defects in our knowledge of God produce systematic errors in our faith, obedience and worship. Jesus rebuked the Sadducees for denying the resurrection, saying, ‘Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God’ (Matt. 22:29). If they knew God better, they would not have fallen into such heresies. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:5 that we must abstain from fornication, and learn how to maintain sexual purity, as contrasted with ‘the lust of concupiscence’ so prevalent among ‘the Gentiles which know not God’. As the Galatians were falling under the spell of Jewish legalism and man-made traditions, Paul reminded them, that ‘when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods ... But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?’ (Gal. 4:8-9). The knowledge of God is the best protection against error, heresy and superstition. John Eadie wrote: ‘A God in shadow creates superstition.’³¹

Therefore believers must study God’s attributes. On a basic level our children and adults should be familiar with the ABCs of God’s nature. The *Belgic Confession* summarizes the faith of the church in its first article, which says, ‘We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth,

that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.³² Our goal should be to impart to all church members a basic understanding of these attributes, giving substance to the faith they confess, and the light of knowledge to lead them into closer communion with our God.

We should not be satisfied with knowing the basics, however. Each one of God's attributes is an opening into an underground mine that has walls loaded with diamonds and shafts that penetrate into endless depths. We must go deeper in the knowledge of God. This is especially true of pastors and teachers who are called to instruct others. Proverbs 9:10 says, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.' By the Spirit's grace, let us press on to know the Holy One better!

One way to do this is to make use of the good books God has provided. On the attributes of God, read the all-time classic, Stephen Charnock's *The Existence and Attributes of God*, or William Bates on *The Harmony of the Divine Attributes in ... Redemption*. On the doctrine of the Trinity, see Edward Bickersteth on *The Trinity*, and more recently Robert Letham's *The Holy Trinity*.³³ Study the doctrine of God, to know it better for yourselves, and to improve your ability to teach it to others.

3. *We should labor to know the Father in a Christ-centered, Spirit-illuminated manner.* Follow the structure of Paul's prayer: first he prayed for believers to be filled with the knowledge of what Christ has revealed to us, then for an understanding shaped by the Holy Spirit. Finally he prayed that believers would increase in the knowledge of the Father. If we would know the Father rightly, we must know him as declared by the Son and taught by the Spirit.

Let us never seek to know God in an abstract or purely intellectual way, in isolation from our moral and spiritual lives. Nicholas Byfield (1579-1622) gave the following rules for increasing in knowledge. First, he said, put what you already know into practice. In doing God's will, we learn more about him (John 7:17). Second, do not be drawn aside into curiosities and speculations. Cling to the Scriptures. Third, use the time well whenever you have an opportunity to learn and grow (Eph. 5:16). Do not be lazy, indifferent, fearful, or so distracted that you miss or lose the benefit of an occasion to increase in knowledge. Fourth, hold the things of the world, that pertain to this life, with a light grip. Do not let the cares of this world choke the Word and destroy faith. Fifth, confess your ignorance and need of light, and give glory to God for what you do know, and the light that you have. To fail to give God glory is to despise the knowledge you have, and to provoke him to give you over to a darkened mind (Rom. 1:21-28). Sixth, use all of God's ordinances

constantly and cheerfully. The means of grace are God's appointed channels of blessing.³⁴

This has huge implications for how we handle the doctrine of God, but I think the essence is this: when you aim to know God or help others to know God, keep going back to the cross. Jeremiah told us to boast only in the knowledge of God (Jer. 9:23-24). Paul said he boasted only in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14). Now put those together. Boast only in knowing God; boast only in Christ crucified. Only in Christ crucified can we see God's glory in a way that opens the heart to boast in him. Never separate the doctrine of God from his greatest self-revelation: Jesus Christ, the image of God. If you do, you will not promote spiritual growth. Only in Christ crucified do we find God as reconciled Father.

Conclusion

Let us seek the Spirit's grace to grow in spiritual knowledge and to help other believers to grow. The triune God has promised to give himself to his covenant people. He has bound himself in union to believers so that we might know him personally, intimately and eternally. Do not be content to wade in the shallow end of the pool! Launch out into the ocean depths of his glorious being and heavenly majesty. Go deeper. Know God. Strive to know him better tomorrow than you do today.

Remember that growth is normal for those who are spiritually alive. Proverbs 4:18 says, 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.' As the sun rises through the morning sky until it reaches its noon-day brightness, so should the Christian's light increase as he travels onward to the Father's house.

Furthermore, growth is necessary. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) wrote in his Bible: 'He who ceases to be better, ceases to be good.'³⁵ It is the nature of living things to grow, and if they cease growing, they are beginning to die. Christ said to a backslidden church in Revelation 3:2: 'Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.'

Yearn to grow, pray for growth, and labor to increase more and more in the knowledge of our Lord and his will. If you find yourself indifferent, lethargic, or resistant to growing in knowledge, confess your sin and rebellion, and cry out for the grace of Christ to press on in the upward calling of God.

Today many Christians view faith as a doorway. Once you're in, you're done. But as John Bunyan reminded us, faith is a pilgrimage to a far country. It is a marathon that requires us to press forward on the course until we reach the finish line. What would we think of a runner who sat down halfway through the race and said, 'Why try to go further? Look how far I've come!' No, do not sit down,

no matter how far you have come in your understanding of the Lord. Press on to know the Lord more and more each day!