

Growth in Grace

Archibald Alexander

Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), Presbyterian theologian and educator was born near Lexington, Virginia. He studied at Liberty Hall Academy (now Washington and Lee University). Shortly after confessing faith in Christ, he began theological studies under William Graham, who encouraged him to preach. It was two years after his ordination in 1794, that he assumed the presidency of Hampden-Sydney College, a position he held for almost a decade. Early in the year 1807 he became minister of Pine Street Church, Philadelphia, one of the largest congregations in the nation. Then, in 1812 the general assembly (whose moderator he had been) established a theological seminary at Princeton and selected Alexander as its first professor. Leaning on the rail of the gallery listening to Dr. Alexander's inaugural address was a boy of fourteen—Charles Hodge.

For the first year he was the sole instructor. He drafted the three years' course, wrote lectures, taught all the classes and adjusted his teaching to the varying efficiency of students from different institutions of learning. His classes at Princeton grew from nine in the first year until by the time of his death 1,837 young men had sat at his feet. He went home to be with his Lord on October 22, 1851. Charles Hodge, one of his most famous students, but a great host of others were brought near to God, and enabled to see the glory of Christ through the testimony of his lips and life. He passed on the torch to Charles Hodge, and Hodge to other men who were good and true exponents of the Old School Theology. Dr. J. Gresham Machen, who went forth from Princeton to found Westminster Seminary, would have delighted to own indebtedness to Archibald Alexander, the co-founder and first teacher of the Princeton School.

WHEN there is no growth, there is no life. We have taken it for granted that among the regenerate, at the moment of their conversion, there is a difference in the vigour of the principle of spiritual life, analogous to what we observe in the natural world; and no doubt the analogy holds as it relates to growth. As some children who were weak and sickly in the first days of their existence become healthy and strong, and greatly outgrow others who commenced life with far greater advantages, so it is with the 'new man'. Some who enter on the spiritual life with a weak and wavering faith, by the blessing of God on a diligent use of means, far outstrip others who in the beginning were greatly before them.

It is often observed that there are professors who never appear to grow, but rather decline perpetually, until they become in spirit and conduct entirely conformed to the world, from whence they professed to come out. The result in regard to them is one of two things; they either retain their standing in the Church and become dead formalists,

'having a name to live while they are dead'—'a form of godliness, while they deny the power thereof'—or they renounce their profession and abandon their connection with the Church, and openly take their stand with the enemies of Christ, and not infrequently go beyond them all in daring impiety. Of all such we may confidently say, 'They were not of us, or undoubtedly they would have continued with us.' But of such I mean not now to speak further, as the case of back-sliders will be considered hereafter.

That growth in grace is gradual and progressive is very evident from Scripture; as in all those passages where believers are exhorted to mortify sin and crucify the flesh, and to increase and abound in all the exercises of piety and good works. One text on this subject will be sufficient: 'Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' And this passage furnishes us with information as to the origin and nature of this growth. It is *knowledge*, even the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Just so far as any soul increases in spiritual knowledge, in the same degree it grows in grace. Persons may advance rapidly in other kinds of knowledge, and yet make no advances in piety, but the contrary. They may even have their minds filled with correct theoretical knowledge of divine truth, and yet its effect may not be to humble, but to 'puff up'. Many an accurate and profound theologian has lived and died without a ray of saving light. The natural man, however gifted with talent or enriched with speculative knowledge, has no spiritual discernment. After all his acquisitions, he is destitute of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. But it should not be forgotten that divine illumination is not independent of the Word, but accompanies it. Those Christians, therefore, who are most diligent in attending upon the Word in public and private, will be most likely to make progress in piety.

Young converts are prone to depend too much on joyful frames, and love high excitement in their devotional exercises; but their heavenly Father cures them of this folly, by leaving them for a season to walk in darkness and struggle with their own corruptions. When most sorely pressed and discouraged, however, He strengthens them with might in the inner man. He enables them to stand firmly against temptation; or, if they slide, he quickly restores them, and by such exercises they become much more sensible of their entire dependence than they were at first. They learn to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long, and to distrust entirely their own wisdom and strength, and to rely for all needed aid on the grace of Jesus Christ. Such a soul will not readily believe that it is growing in grace. But to be emptied of self-dependence, and to know that we need aid for every duty, and even for every good thought, is an important step in our progress in piety. The flowers may have disappeared from the plant of grace, and even the leaves may have fallen off, and wintry blasts may have shaken it, but now it is striking its roots deeper, and becoming every day stronger to endure the rugged storm.

One circumstance attends the growth in grace of a real Christian which renders it exceedingly difficult for him to know the fact, upon a superficial view of his case, and that is, the clearer and deeper insight which he obtains into the evils of his own heart. Now this is one of the best evidences of growth; but the first conclusion is apt to be, 'I am growing worse every day; I see innumerable evils springing up within me which I never saw before.' This person may be compared to one shut up in a dark room where

he is surrounded by many loathsome objects. If a single ray of light be let into the room, he sees the more prominent objects; but if the light gradually increases, he sees more and more of the filth by which he has been surrounded. It was there before, but he did not perceive it. His increased knowledge of the fact is a sure evidence of increasing light. Hypocrites often learn to talk by rote of the wickedness of their hearts; but go to them and seriously accuse them of indulging secret pride or envy or covetousness or any other heart sins, and they will be offended. Their confessions of sin are only intended to raise them in the opinion of others, as truly humble persons; and not that any should believe that corruption abounds within them.

Growth in grace is evinced by a more habitual vigilance against besetting sins and temptations, and by greater self-denial in regard to personal indulgence. A growing conscientiousness in regard to what may be called minor duties is also a good sign. The counterfeit of this is a scrupulous conscience, which sometimes haggles at the most innocent gratifications, and has led some to hesitate about taking their daily food. Increasing spiritual mindedness is a sure evidence of progress in piety; and this will always be accompanied by deadness to the world. Continued aspirations to God, in the house and by the way, in lying down and rising up, in company and in solitude, indicate the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, by whose agency all progress in sanctification is made. A victory over besetting sins by which the person was frequently led away, shows an increased vigour in the renewed principle. Increasing solicitude for the salvation of men, sorrow on account of their sinful and miserable condition, and a disposition tenderly to warn sinners of their danger, evince a growing state of piety. It is also a strong evidence of growth in grace when you can bear injuries and provocations with meekness and when you can from the heart desire the temporal and eternal welfare of your bitterest enemies. An entire and confident reliance on the promises and providence of God, however dark may be your horizon, or however many difficulties environ you, is a sign that you have learned to live by faith; and humble contentment with your condition, though it be one of poverty and obscurity, shows that you have profited by sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Diligence in the duties of our calling, with a view to the glory of God, is an evidence not to be despised. Indeed there is no surer standard of spiritual growth than a habit of aiming at the glory of God in everything. That mind which is steady to the main end gives as good evidence of being touched by divine grace as the tendency of the needle to the pole proves that it has been touched by the magnet. Increasing love to the brethren is a sure sign of growth; for as brotherly love is a proof of the existence of grace, so is the exercise of such love a proof of vigour in the divine life. This love, when pure, is not confined within those limits which party spirit circumscribes, but overleaping all the barriers of sects and denominations, it embraces the disciples of Christ wherever it finds them. A healthy state of piety is always a growing state; that child which grows not at all must be sickly. If we would enjoy spiritual comfort, we must be in a thriving condition. None enjoy the pleasures of bodily health, but they who are in health. If we would be useful to the Church and the world we must be growing Christians. If we would live in daily preparation for our change, we must endeavour to grow in grace daily.

The aged saint, laden with the fruits of righteousness, is like a shock of corn fully ripe, which is ready for the garner; or like a mature fruit which gradually loosens its hold of the tree until at last it gently falls off. Thus the aged, mature Christian departs in peace.

As growth in grace is gradual, and the progress from day to day imperceptible, we should aim to do something in this work every day. We should die daily unto sin and live unto righteousness. Sometimes the children of God grow faster when in the fiery furnace than elsewhere. As metals are purified by being cast into the fire, so saints have their dross consumed and their evidences brightened, by being cast into the furnace of affliction. 'Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which shall try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you', but rejoice, because 'the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, shall be found unto praise, and honour, and glory'.

We shall here present some practical directions how to grow in grace and make progress in piety.

1. Set it down as a certainty that this object will never be attained without vigorous continued effort; and it must not only be desired and sought, but must be considered more important than all other pursuits, and be pursued in preference to everything else which claims your attention.

2. While you determine to be assiduous in the use of the appointed means of sanctification, you must have it deeply fixed in your mind that nothing can be effected in this work without the aid of the Divine Spirit. 'Paul may plant and Apollos water, but it is God that giveth the increase.' The direction of the old divines is good: 'use the means as vigorously as if you were to be saved by your own efforts, and yet trust as entirely to the grace of God as if you made use of no means whatsoever'.

3. Be much in the perusal of the Holy Scriptures, and strive to obtain clear and consistent views of the plan of redemption. Learn to contemplate the truth in its true nature, simply, devoutly, and long at a time, that you may receive on your soul the impression which it is calculated to make. Avoid curious and abstruse speculations respecting things unrevealed, and do not indulge a spirit of controversy. Many lose the benefit of the good impression which the truth is calculated to make, because they do not view it simply in its own nature, but as related to some dispute, or as bearing on some other point. As when a man would receive the genuine impression which a beautiful landscape is adapted to make, he must not be turned aside by minute inquiries respecting the botanical character of the plants, the value of the timber, or the fertility of the soil; but he must place his mind in the attitude of receiving the impression which the combined view of the objects before him will naturally produce on the taste. In such cases the effect is not produced by any exertion of the intellect; all such active striving is unfavourable, except in bringing the mind to its proper state. When the impression is most perfect, we feel as if we were mere passive recipients of the effect. To this there is a striking analogy in the way in which the mind is impressed with divine truth. It is not the critic, the speculative or polemic theologian, who is most likely to receive the right

impression, but the humble, simple-hearted, contemplative Christian. It is necessary to study the Scriptures critically, and to defend the truth against opposers; but the most learned critic and the most profound theologian must learn to sit at the feet of Jesus in the spirit of a child, or they are not likely to be edified by their studies.

4. Pray constantly and fervently for the influences of the Holy Spirit. No blessing is so particularly and emphatically promised in answer to prayer as this; and if you would receive this divine gift, to be in you as a well of water springing up to everlasting life, you must not only pray, but you must watch against everything in your heart or life which has a tendency to grieve the Spirit of God. Of what use is it to pray, if you indulge evil thoughts and imaginations almost without control? or if you give way to the evil passions of anger, pride and avarice, or bridle not your tongue from evil speaking? Learn to be conscientious; that is, obey the dictates of your conscience uniformly. Many are conscientious in some things and not in others; they listen to the monitor within when it directs to important duties; but in smaller matters they often disregard the voice of conscience, and follow present inclination. Such cannot grow in grace.

5. Take more time for praying to 'the Father which is in secret', and for looking into the state of your soul. Redeem an hour daily from sleep if you cannot obtain it otherwise; and as the soul's concerns are apt to get out of order, and more time is needed for thorough self-examination than an hour a day, set apart, not periodically but as your necessities require, days of fasting and humiliation before God. On these occasions, deal faithfully with yourself. Be in earnest to search out all your secret sins and to repent of them. Renew your covenant with God, and form holy resolutions of amendment in the strength of divine grace. If you find, upon examination, that you have been living in any sinful indulgence, probe the festering wound to the core; confess your fault before God, and do not rest until you have had an application of the blood of sprinkling. You need not ask why you do not grow, while there is such an ulcer within you. Here, it is to be feared, is the root of the evil. Sins indulged are not thoroughly repented of and forsaken; or the conscience has not been purged effectually, and the wound still festers. Come to 'the fountain opened for the washing away of sin and uncleanness'. Bring your case to the great Physician.

6. Cultivate and exercise brotherly love more than you have been accustomed to do. Christ is displeased with many of His professed followers, because they are so cold and indifferent to His members on earth, and because they do so little to comfort and encourage them; and with some, because they are a stumbling block to the weak of the flock, their conversation and conduct not being edifying, but the contrary. Perhaps these disciples are poor and in the lower walks of life, and therefore you overlook them as beneath you. And thus would you have treated Christ Himself, had you lived in His time; for He took His station among the poor and afflicted; and He will resent a neglect of His poor saints with more displeasure than He would of the rich. Perhaps they do not belong to your party or sect, and you are only concerned to build up your own denomination. Remember how Christ condescended to treat the sinful woman of Samaria, and the poor woman of Canaan, and remember what account He has given of the last judgment, when He will assume to Himself all that has been done, or neglected

to be done, to His humble followers. There should be more Christian conversation and friendly intercourse between the followers of Christ. In former days, 'They that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written for them that feared the Lord and thought upon his name.'

7. If you are in good earnest to make greater progress in piety, you must do more than you have done for the promotion of God's glory and of Christ's kingdom on earth. You must enter with livelier, deeper feeling into all the plans which the Church has adopted to advance these objects. You must give more than you have done. It is a shame to think how small a portion of their gains some professors devote to the Lord. Instead of being a tithe, it is hardly equal to the single sheaf of first-fruits. If you have nothing to give, labour to get something. Sit up at night and try to make something, for Christ has need of it. Sell a corner of your land and throw the money into the treasury of the Lord. In primitive times many sold houses and lands and laid the whole at the apostles' feet. Do not be afraid of making yourself poor by giving to the Lord or to His poor. His word is better than any bond, and He says, 'I will repay it.' Cast your bread on the waters, and after many days you will find it again. Send the Bible—send missionaries—send tracts to the perishing heathen.

8. Practise self-denial every day. Lay a wholesome restraint upon your appetites. Be not conformed to this world. Let your dress, your house, your furniture, be plain and simple, as becomes a Christian. Avoid vain parade and show in everything. Govern your family with discretion. Forgive and pray for your enemies. Have little to do with party politics. Carry on your business on sober, judicious principles. Keep clear of speculation and surety-ships. Live peaceably with all men as much as in you lies. Be much in ejaculatory prayer. Keep your heart with all diligence. Try to turn to spiritual profit every event which occurs, and be fervently thankful for all mercies.

9. For your more rapid growth in grace, some of you will be cast into the furnace of affliction. Sickness, bereavement, bad conduct of children and relatives, loss of property or of reputation, may come upon you unexpectedly and press heavily on you. In these trying circumstances, exercise patience and fortitude. Be more solicitous to have the affliction sanctified than removed. Glorify God while in the fire of adversity. That faith which is most tried is commonly most pure and precious. Learn from Christ how you ought to suffer. Let perfect submission to the will of God be aimed at. Never indulge a murmuring or discontented spirit. Repose with confidence on the promises. Commit all your cares to God. Make known your requests to Him by prayer and supplication. Let go your too eager grasp of the world. Become familiar with death and the grave. Wait patiently until your change comes; but desire not to live a day longer than may be for the glory of God.

If we are on the watch we may often find good things when they were least expected. It is seldom that I consult an almanac for any purpose, but wishing the other day to see when the moon would change, I opened the calendar at the current month, and the first thing which struck my eye was the heading of a paragraph in the very words which I had selected as the subject of this essay—'Hindrances to Growth in Grace'. Of course I

perused the short paragraph, and I was so well pleased with what I read that I resolved to take it for my text—and here it is, word for word:

The influence of worldly relatives and companions—embarking too deeply in business—approximations to fraud for the sake of gain devoting too much time to amusements—immoderate attachment to a worldly object—attendance on an unbelieving or unfaithful ministry—languid and formal observance of religious duties—shunning the society and religious converse of Christian friends—relapse into known sin—non-improvement of graces already attained.

Now all this is very good and very true. The only objection is that several of the particulars mentioned should rather be considered as the effects of a real declension in religion than merely as hindrances to growth; although it is true that nothing so effectually hinders our progress as an actual state of backsliding. It seems desirable to ascertain, as precisely as we can, the reasons why Christians commonly are of so diminutive a stature and of such feeble strength in their religion. When persons are truly converted they always are sincerely desirous to make rapid progress in piety; and there are not wanting exceeding great and gracious promises of aid to encourage them to go forward with alacrity. Why then is so little advancement made? Are there not some practical mistakes very commonly entertained, which are the cause of this slowness of growth? I think there are, and will endeavour to specify some of them.

First, there is a defect in our belief in the freeness of divine grace. To exercise unshaken confidence in the doctrine of gratuitous pardon is one of the most difficult things in the world; and to preach this doctrine fully without verging towards antinomianism is no easy task, and is therefore seldom done. But Christians cannot but be lean and feeble when deprived of their proper nutriment. It is by faith that the spiritual life is made to grow; and the doctrine of free grace, without any mixture of human merit, is the only true object of faith. Christians are too much inclined to depend on themselves, and not to derive their life entirely from Christ. There is a spurious legal religion, which may flourish without the practical belief in the absolute freeness of divine grace, but it possesses none of the characteristics of the Christian's life. It is found to exist in the rankest growth, in systems of religion which are utterly false. But even when the true doctrine is acknowledged in theory, often it is not practically felt and acted on. The new convert lives upon his frames rather than on Christ, while the older Christian is still found struggling in his own strength and, failing in his expectations of success, he becomes discouraged first, and then he sinks into a gloomy despondency, or becomes in a measure careless. At that point the spirit of the world comes in with resistless force. Here, I am persuaded, is the root of the evil; and until religious teachers inculcate clearly, fully, and practically, the grace of God as manifested in the Gospel, we shall have no vigorous growth of piety among professing Christians. We must be, as it were, identified with Christ—crucified with Him, and living by Him, and in Him by faith, or rather, have Christ living in us. The covenant of grace must be more clearly and repeatedly expounded in all its rich plenitude of mercy, and in all its absolute freeness.

Another thing which prevents growth in grace is that Christians do not make their obedience to Christ comprehend every other object of pursuit. Their religion is too much a separate thing, and they pursue their worldly business in another spirit. They try to unite the service of God and Mammon. Their minds are divided, and often distracted with earthly cares and desires which interfere with the service of God; whereas they should have but one object of pursuit, and all that they do and seek should be in subordination to this. Everything should be done for God and to God. Whether they eat or drink they should do all to His glory. As the ploughing and sowing of the wicked is sin, because done without regard to God and His glory, so the secular employments and pursuits of the pious should all be consecrated, and become a part of their religion. Thus they would serve God in the field and in the shop, in buying and selling and getting gain—all would be for God. Thus their earthly labours would prove no hindrance to their progress in piety; and possessing an un divided mind, having a single object of pursuit, they could not but grow in grace daily. He whose eye is single shall have his whole body full of light.

Another powerful cause of hindrance in the growth of the life of God in the soul is that we make general resolutions of improvement, but neglect to extend our efforts to particulars. We promise ourselves that in the indefinite future we will do much in the way of reformation, but are found doing nothing each day in cultivating piety. We begin and end a day without aiming or expecting to make any particular advance on that day. Thus our best resolutions evaporate without effect. We merely run the round of prescribed duty, satisfied if we do nothing amiss and neglect no external service which we feel to be obligatory. We resemble the man who purposes to go to a certain place, and often resolves with earnestness that he will some day perform the journey, but never takes a step towards the place. Is it at all strange that that person who on no day makes it his distinct object to advance in the divine life, at the end of months and years is found stationary? The natural body will grow without our thinking about it, even when we are asleep, but not the life of piety, which only increases by and through the exercises of the mind, aiming at higher measures of grace. And as every day we should do something in this good work, so we should direct our attention to the growth of particular graces, especially of those in which we know ourselves to be defective. Are we weak in faith? let us give attention to the proper means of strengthening our faith and, above all, apply to the Lord to increase our faith. Is our love to God cold and hardly perceptible, and greatly interrupted by long intervals in which God and Christ are not in all our thoughts? let us have this for a daily lamentation at the throne of grace—let us resolve to meditate more on the excellency of the divine attributes, and especially on the love of God to us—let us be much in reading the account of Christ's sufferings and death, and be importunate in prayer, until we receive more copious effusions of the Holy Spirit; for the fruit of the Spirit is love, and the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. And so we should directly aim at cultivating and increasing every grace; for the divine life, or 'new man', consists of these graces, and the whole cannot be in health and vigour while the constituent parts are feeble and in a state of decay.

The same remarks are applicable to the mortification of sin. We are prone to view our depravity too much in the general, and under this view to repent of it, and humble ourselves on account of it; whereas, in order to make any considerable progress in this part of sanctification, we must deal with our sins in detail. We must have it as a special object to eradicate pride and vain glory, covetousness, indolence, envy, discontent, anger, etc. There should be appropriate means used, suited to the extirpation of each particular vice of the mind. It is true, indeed, that if we water the root we may expect the branches to flourish; if we invigorate the principle of piety, the several Christian virtues will flourish. But a skilful gardener will pay due attention both to the root and the branches; and, in fact, these graces of the heart are parts of the root, and it is by strengthening these that we invigorate the root. The same is true as it relates to the remaining principle of sin. We must strike our blows chiefly at the root of the evil tree; but those inherent vices which were mentioned, and others, should be considered as belonging to the root, and when we aim at their destruction particularly and in detail, our strokes will be most effectual.

I shall mention at present but one other cause of the slow growth of believers in piety, and that is the neglect of improving in the knowledge of divine things. As spiritual knowledge is the foundation of all genuine exercises of religion, so growth in religion is intimately connected with divine knowledge. Men may possess unsanctified knowledge and be nothing the better for it; but they cannot grow in grace without increasing in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 'Being,' says Paul, 'fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.' 'Grow in grace,' says Peter, 'and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Jonathan Edwards remarks that the more faithful he was in studying the Bible, the more he prospered in spiritual things. The reason is plain, and other Christians will find the same to be true.

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