

Progressing Toward Communion With Christ

✘ At the conclusion of the ancient Jewish ceremony of formal betrothal, after a ring or some other token of value had been given to the bride, those gathered to witness and celebrate the occasion would shout together: "Sanctified!" All that remained to seal the marriage was a cup of wine, the blessings and the bridal chamber.

In those days the wedding ceremony came at a later date.

However, the ceremony of formal betrothal set the couple apart to one another in such a binding contract that only a certificate of divorce could part them. They were sanctified: set apart by consent and by a holy contract signed by two witnesses. After betrothal, unfaithfulness was regarded as adultery.

The sequence of a believer's spiritual growth is similar to this ancient betrothal process. When we are born again of God we begin our spiritual lives as babies. In human years we may be 50 or 100 years old; but we begin life in the Spirit as newborns.

Then, just as we grow physically, we must grow spiritually. Christians accept their betrothal to our Lord Jesus at the time of their new birth, but it is infant betrothal. When we mature as disciples of the Lord, Christ begins to draw us into a

ratification of
that infant commitment. He acknowledges that we are ready to
be more
fully sanctified and come into union with Him: "Then I passed
by you
and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love" (Ezek.
16:8,
NASB).

Being deeply united with Christ is not an experience for
spiritual babies. When we first come to Christ we are saved
but
fleshly—very fleshly. We must go through the spiritual "boot
camp" that
we call "life" to convince us that Christ alone—in us and
through us—is
the only answer to everything on Earth (see Eph. 1:23).

All believers experience infant betrothal, but only a few
will press on to experience the unity that is possible with
our Lord
during this lifetime. It is not that we do not want deeper
oneness with
Christ.

But many of us cannot grasp the intensity of the
commitment required to reach such a goal. And we are unable to
recognize the signposts that indicate whether we are simply
marking
time in our spiritual walk or are making progress in allowing
the Lord
to become our all.

Loving God With All Our Strength

The major signpost for all true believers is the first
great commandment. The extent to which we obey it is the
extent to

which we approach oneness with Christ.

Jesus quoted this commandment when questioned by the scribes: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29-30, NKJV).

Here we have the Word Himself confirming the written Word. He is quoting from the Shema (the Hebrew word for “hear”), the daily prayer said by every Jew, that is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

The commandment not only affirms the unity within the Godhead (“The Lord our God is one Lord”) but also tells us how we may enter into that oneness—by loving God with our whole beings.

Every part of us must be involved in this endeavor—heart, soul, mind—as well as every bit of our strength. The word “strength” refers to a degree of exertion, a measurement of application. Therefore “strength” includes the body.

However, it is not our own strength on which we must rely. The Greek word for “strength” in Mark 12:29-30 is “ischus,” which means the “strength of God.” The same word is used in 1 Peter 4:11: “Whoever serves let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified.” (NASB).

It is not possible for God to be glorified “in all

things” unless the strength in us is from Him: spiritual, mental, emotional, volitional and physical. The Bible clearly affirms that all good strength is from the Lord (see Ps. 28:7; James 1:17).

As Christ is increasingly formed in us, we are to utilize the strength of His resurrected life that He gives to His people through His Spirit within them. “He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give [resurrection] life to your mortal bodies through His [Jesus’] Spirit who indwells you” (Rom. 8:11).

One of the early church heresies held that the body could be excluded from the requirement to live a holy life. Those who believed this heresy felt that because the body already was corrupted by the law of sin within it (and therefore would need to be replaced eventually), sin did not affect the true inner person, who was spiritual. However, Paul addressed this heresy in Romans 3:8: “Some claim that we say—‘Let us do evil that good may result’[.] Their condemnation is deserved” (NIV).

We may smile at this, but in our own day, do we not indulge in the same heresy? How many of us are abusing our bodies, separating our physical person from our inner, spiritual man? Since our bodies are no longer ours, we have no right to use them as we please.

We would not borrow a neighbor’s car and then drive it to

ruin. Well, our bodies are borrowed by us now. They belong to our Husband, Christ, who bought them on the cross out of Satan's slave market.

It is through these bodies that we express the Gift who is within us. Of course we can choose how the gift of His strength is to be used. But for the committed disciple, the motive should be that of serving God by honoring the Lord Jesus in all things, just as Paul proclaimed: "Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20, NASB; see also Col. 3:23-24).

Submitting to Examination

What is true of the human body in its utter dependence on God for righteous strength applies also to worship, intuition, fellowship and conscience in our spirits. In addition, God supplies all the spiritual heart faculties of character, decisive thoughts and intentions (aims), virtues, values and motivations that are to govern the soul.

God alone examines our spiritual faculties. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 tells us that it is "God who examines our hearts." But few of us plead with the Lord to carry out such an examination, as the psalmist did: "Examine me, O Lord, and try me; test my mind and my

heart" (Ps. 26:2).

We act more like Adam and Eve, who "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord" (Gen. 3:8). But if we sincerely want the Lord to set us apart as holy vessels for His use alone, we must be willing to be examined and then to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He moves to clean the insides of our cups, causing us to be "filled up to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19).

Though God examines our inner person, we are to examine our acts. Galatians 6:4 tells us that each of us must "examine his own work." After all, that which is inside of us eventually expresses itself on the outside through our bodies (see Luke 6:45).

And it is easy for everyone—including nonbelievers—to see whether we are living a life that is a witness to Christ. How many times do the lost say, "If that is a Christian, I want no part of it"? They know that our outer actions reveal our hearts.

We have to stop lying to ourselves! The truth is that the devil does not need to deceive us; we are doing a good job of deceiving ourselves.

The word "disciple" suggests discipline. As disciples of Christ, we need to submit our actions to the correction of the Holy Spirit. He gives us the power to resist sin and choose Christ. Truly, a moment of fleshly thrill is not worth the dishonor to God or

the loss
to us in eternity.

Determined to Win

In taking the steps that are necessary to prepare for
oneness with Christ—allowing the Lord to examine our inner
person,
making an honest evaluation of the work and acts of our outer
person
and then yielding to the Holy Spirit—we must remember to keep
our eyes
on the finish line in the race we are running. Paul describes
this race
in Hebrews 12:1-2: “Let us also lay aside every encumbrance,
and the
sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with
endurance the
race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the
author and
perfector of faith.”

If we do not know that Jesus is the finish line as well
as the starting point, we might not aim for Him. If we make
the goal
anything less than Him, then although we run, we have lost the
race.
And Scripture tells us to “run in such a way that you may
win”; that
is, “not without aim” (1 Cor. 9:24-26).

Most of us have seen an Olympic competition and heard the
testimonies of the contestants. Their single-minded focus is
awe-inspiring.

From the tender ages of 4 or 5 years old, these ambitious
athletes set their sights on a single goal: winning an Olympic
goal

medal. In order to train for their events, they rise early, do homework in the car, practice before and after school, forego parties and other normal social activities for young people, eat special diets and put themselves to bed early for additional rest.

The personal and financial sacrifice on the part of these contestants, their families and sometimes even their hometowns is monumental—and they are seeking an earthly prize. Paul comments on this type of commitment: “Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Cor. 9:25).

The point is, we are running an eternal race. Should we not show ourselves equally as determined as the participants in the Olympic games, seeing that we seek an eternal prize—all that Christ Jesus has won for us through His death and resurrection?

Betrothed to a Holy God

How do we know if we have matured in Christ to the point that He will lead us into the greater intimacy of being one in spirit with Him? We will know.

One day my husband and I had lunch with a dear friend, whom the Lord has used powerfully for years in international ministry. Knowing his walk with the Lord, my husband asked him if he could shed

some light on the subject of deeper union with Christ.

Our friend asked: "Do you remember how different your life became when you were born again?"

"Yes," my husband answered.

"And did your life change when you were baptized in the Holy Spirit?"

"Yes," my husband said. "Each time my life changed radically—unbelievably."

"Well," our friend continued, "multiply those two experiences by 10, and you will understand how changed a life becomes after Christ has joined Himself to the believer in this deeper union."

Oh yes, we will know. Our lives will become charged with Life Himself. This is a depth of relationship that no believer wants to miss.

We were created to be consumed by love. Therefore, with all the strength God supplies, let us fix our sights upon the goal of Christ Jesus—refusing to be turned aside by lesser treasure or to be placated by gifts, ministry or blessings.

Deep calls to deep. The Holy One gives Himself to the holy—those sanctified to Him alone. Oh, may we be in that number!

"Anna" Rountree is actually a husband-and-wife team who spent several years in pastoral ministry. They are the founding directors of Christ Jesus Triumphant and authors of The Heavens Opened (Charisma House).