

What My Parents Church Should Have Taught Them

My parents grew up in the Depression and were imprinted during their teen years by WWII. Like many of their generation, they had an assumption that if you went to college and did what everyone else did, you would have a happy life. My mother was from a blue collar background and my father was from a white collar background. Their early married life was spent in the military. Like many who entered suburbia in the 1950s, they had expectations of happiness that were never realized.

I could have written this as a “What I think is Wrong with Churches” book, however, I am taking this in a more personal direction. In the end, parental and church deficiencies can have a very personal effect on one.

I once worked with a guy from Palestine. I asked him if he was a Muslim and he said he was. I then described four levels of religion. At level one were those who were completely involved in their religion and would die for it. At level two were the children of level one who knew every aspect of their religion and would put up with a lot of discomfort for it. At level three the children of level two were familiar with some of the more significant aspects of the religion and were willing to suffer an occasional inconvenience for it. At level four one could find those who had become secular, switched to another religion, or were even hostile to it. I asked him what kind of Muslim he was and he said he was level three.

As a level one Christian I have always wondered how one can insure that their children are also level one. My parents were level 2. My own journey was level one as a child, level four as a teenager, level three as an adult, level two as a parent, and level one as a senior.

The fact that both my parents turned to alcohol as the only way they saw to cope with a life they felt they couldn't understand or control speaks volumes to the ignorance they had about life. While their own parents were particularly ignorant and thus negligent in teaching their children, their church was even more to blame. While a priest is supposedly an intermediary between God and man, a pastor (shepherd) presents himself as one who cares for the “flock” of Christ.

Perhaps the single greatest flaw in modern churches is inadequate teaching. It fails both in how teaching is done and what it is that is taught. Paul writes the Ephesians that pastoring is done by teaching;

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; - Ephesians 4:11

A closer examination of the verse shows a grammatical connection between the word pastor (shepherd) and teaching such that pastoring is accomplished by teaching. The article translated “some” is singularly applied to apostles, prophets, and evangelists, but is used to combine pastors and teachers.

Some pastors feel that their obligation to teach is accomplished in a weekly half hour sermon-lecture. While this conforms to traditional and common practice, this book will attempt to show how this is woefully inadequate.

I am 72 years old as I start this book. It is my hope that it will be of use to my children and their children. It would be rewarding if this book was useful in changing churches to better instruct their members. While a few might attempt a small change or two, the changes described in this book are so extensive and many that I suspect that the best that can be hoped for is that my children will find in it some use to compensate for whatever inadequacies they find in the churches they attend.

My father grew up in a Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod). His grandfather was the son of a German immigrant and became a pastor of a very large German Lutheran church in Wisconsin from the 1880s to the 1930s. Most of the deficiencies of his church are common to most churches regardless of denomination. While the impact of denominationalism will be addressed later, it can be helpful to consider that denominations (divisions) are called symptomatic of immaturity when Paul writes the Corinthians;

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? - 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Most churches hire a pastor to continue to maintain things the way that they are. Occasionally a church may hire a pastor to be bold and do things a new way (usually to compete in the marketplace for new members). Seldom it is to make the church less worldly and the members more godly. Even if it was the desire of a church, seminary graduates are seldom instructed in this direction. As a result, churches are unlikely to change. The second part of this book will be directed to things individual Christians may wish to experiment with to compensate for what churches usually fail to do.

Chapter 1 - The Power of Christianity Reduced to a Religion

Christianity spread rapidly for its first three hundred years under occasionally very adverse circumstances. Later in history the religion of Christianity would spread similar to Islam or other religions by trade advantages or by the sword. However, when considering how it spread initially, one can see what was at the core of Christianity, the supernatural power to change a life.

It is difficult today to even imagine a world that up until 100 years ago was the way humans lived. Most people grew up, lived, and died in the town or village in which they were born. They had a large number of siblings and cousins as well as aunts and uncles. Each person was known so completely as they grew up that nothing about a person's character was hidden. If a person was a drunk, intemperate, spiteful, or filled with rage, it was known by everyone. When someone became a Christian and became, kind, loving, considerate, and even showed selflessness, it was also known. People could see in Christianity that which was true, real, and useful.

The powerful testimony of a changed life was a sufficient inducement for many to choose to become Christians even if it meant social ostracism, loss of property, or even death. Today this

inducement still occurs but is often not observed as people (even in families) do not know each other well enough and the Christian religion is flooded with those who have inherited a Christian legacy and may not even be Christian at all.

My parents were raised in a Christian religion where it was assumed that everyone was a real Christian because they had been baptized. Confirmation of this was seen in that church people seldom committed murder or were arrested for robbery. However, while many were real Christians and showed the selflessness of love as well as the fruit of the Spirit, most considered the absence of serious sins as proof of their faith.

My parents were convinced that they were not only Christians but fully complete and functional Christians because they had been baptized and confirmed. They didn't have a clue about what real Christianity was or how ignorant they were. While their parents were primarily to blame, the church which declared that they were complete and proficient was also to blame and perhaps even more so for their presentation of themselves as authoritatively speaking for God.

My parents were exposed to the religion of Christianity which was different than the person of Christ or what might be called useful Christianity. While many in Christian churches who follow Christianity as a religion may not even be Christian at all, sadly many who actually do trust in Christ receive no instruction as to how this would be useful in life. They feel that the totality of Christianity is getting out of hell and going to heaven. They usually think that for the rest of life they have to just accept whatever comes.

Ignorance is bad enough however, when a false understanding is substituted for real understanding a fraud is perpetrated. An ignorant person may seek out that which is missing. A person assured that he has full knowledge has no reason to seek out anything because he has been assured that he is complete. My parents strode out into life fully convinced that they were fully prepared.

Chapter 2 - What is a Christian?

Several years ago I was on a business trip to Japan. I asked a gal there if she had ever considered Christianity. She replied that she had felt bad several times in her life but not bad enough to try religion. I had not considered that one would see a religion as something to be used by the weak and injured as a palliative.

Since then I have observed many ways Christianity is practiced as a religion that seems at odds with Christianity as a faith. Perhaps the most common is the number of people who were raised in a particular Christian denomination and practice it in a similar way as someone who has not even heard of Jesus who celebrates Christmas as a cultural or familial tradition.

In conversation with a Lutheran pastor once he told me that they lost about 85% of their youth. I suspect that 75% were never Christian at all and 10% if they were Christian found nothing of value in the church. That perhaps a majority of people in churches are not even Christian can

account for the difficulty those who are Christian have is finding something worthwhile about Christianity.

There was a nurse named Glenda once who had been abused as a child. She had planned on committing suicide one evening after having secured enough medication to be successful. Upon leaving the hospital that evening she happened upon a bible tract and became a Christian that evening instead killing herself. She started going to a church in her neighborhood. She said in a few months she went from thinking she was the only one who did not know about Jesus to thinking she was the only one who did. It may have been that her unique experience made her Christian faith seem more vital and alive. However, it also may be possible that the people in her church were legacy followers of the Christian religion,

My parents were raised in a legacy church perhaps in effect similar to the average Hindu or Muslim worship center. They may have had faith but for all intents and purposes it benefitted them little. A church whose members seem little different than those of other religions or even those having no religion might be expected to provide little benefit to their members.

If my parents had an image of what a real Christian looked like, they might have had a chance to try to imitate it. Christ is usually held up as our example, but with no instruction as to how that can be achieved. As a result, most do not even try. The main problem is that while a person becomes a Christian by trusting in Jesus, living like Jesus can take a lifetime to approximate.

There are two types of Christian. The first are those who conduct their lives in the flesh and appear no different than non-Christians. They can even appear worse as the difference between what is espoused and how one lives leaves them open to the charge of "hypocrite". The second (much smaller) group are those who have made some growth in their faith and often are less noticeable.

My parents were told that their church members were Christian even though most were not and of those that were, most lived lives showing that they were not following Christ. As a result, they could not be expected to even know what a Christian was.

Chapter 3 - The Advantage of Virtue

Christianity is often dismissed because it is just a bunch of rules that stop one from enjoying life. In all fairness some Christians attempt to live the Christian life by rule following in spite of what Paul says in his letter to the Galatians. Sadly those who follow this path often end up in the same place as the Pharisees with a high opinion of their own accomplishments.

One can understand that those without God may come to see their best advantage is to get as much pleasure for themselves while they can.

1Co 15:32 If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.

One can appreciate that those without God might give themselves over completely to whatever pleasures can be gotten. However, even in a such and environment the advantages of moderation even leading to virtue can be observed. There were three Greek philosophies that can be illustrative;

1. Hedonism - Get as much pleasure as you can as fast as you can.
2. Epicureanism - Moderate your pleasures so they last longer.
3. Stoicism - Use your strength to achieve virtue.

Even the Greeks, who knew not God, saw in man the possibility of virtue struggling against the desires of the flesh. This might simply be the civilized equivalent of a tribal young man attempting to prove his mettle in combat. However, there may be more than just seeking the admiration of others. It was seen as including the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Just as painful experience might motivate one to abandon hedonism for epicureanism, logic was seen to drive stoicism. One can apply logic to the ten commandments and see the rational that if you steal from your neighbor or kill him, you create not only injustice but turmoil that often harms yourself. In a similar way the logic of Stoicism was apparent to many.

Stoicism was the pursuit of happiness more than simple pleasure. I worked on a crisis hotline for several years and talked with thousands of people about a wide variety of problems. I tried to summarize some of my observations so that people who found themselves in some of life's difficulties might have a way to more easily resolve them.

One observation was that one could make a spectrum of life with pain and suffering at one end and happiness at the other. In the middle would be boredom. People (often in pursuit of pleasure) would often find themselves experiencing pain. If they took corrective steps they would advance to boredom. Often at this point they would return to the pursuit of pleasures that would bring them back to pain. I observed that the key to breaking through boredom into the realm of happiness, it was essential to let go of selfishness.

Christianity not only points the way to happiness through selflessness, it supplies the means to do so. My parents had no idea about this as their church would do little more than admonish them to "Beeee Gooood" like in the movie E.T. This poverty of information for those who claim to speak for God is inexcusable.

What makes Christianity different than all other religions is that it is true. Not only promises of a heavenly future, but benefit in one's everyday life. The bible is the only book to have prophesied the future and it has come to pass. When one considers that what it says is true, then one can begin to take advantage of what it says.

There seems to be what many consider unattractive aspects to Christianity in that God's grace teaches us to move in an entirely different direction than those who follow after the world would want.

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; - Titus 2:11-12

Humans have governed themselves in various ways from anarchy to tyranny. God established the nation of Israel as the way to bring the knowledge of God to the rest of the world. The law that was given to Israel would be the first step in helping the nation avoid the turmoil and destruction that results from the evil in the hearts of men and ultimately destroys nations.

However, when God sent the Messiah (Jesus) to offer the kingdom to the nation, they were mostly not interested. Subsequently salvation was offered to the rest of the world individually. This salvation included the means to achieve the virtuous life that some Greeks had aspired to and that some in Israel had thought they achieved by keeping the law. While Christianity was turned into an organizational system and integrated as a religion into the various governments to become Western Civilization, many individuals were still actual Christians.

While Christianity was successful for some individual Christians, it failed as a religious organizational system because it maintained some men who were not Christian at all and inhibited those who actually were Christians by diverting them from what was useful into rituals similar to what had happened with Israel.

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. - Matthew 15:9

What would have been useful would be learning how to walk by the Spirit and not the flesh. Acquiring and growing in wisdom. Not to waste a life with selfish ambition. How to raise godly children. How to make a happy home. How to grow in love.

The Protestant reformation stopped a few of the most egregious errors that the collectivized religious organizational system had incorporated. However, it continued as a system and failed to help their members gain what was useful in Christianity.

My parents learned little if anything useful for them to apply to life. They were like soldiers who upon engaging the enemy discover that they have no ammunition.

Chapter 5 - Christian Brands

One might see that a religion like Islam or Mormonism might be sought by those less interested in doctrinal truth than the “truth” of the promise of a well ordered family life. That Christianity no longer has even this vestige of testimony speaks volumes of how much has been lost. In the marketplace of religion most people are less interested in the afterlife than what they can have now. Today Christianity can be seen to exist in four main divisions.

1. Legacy. These churches are losing members fast. The only momentum they seem to have is generational inertia and the comfort of the familiar. In the face of rapidly declining membership, these churches often veer into liberal or experiential directions.

2. Conservative. These churches seem to offer the well ordered family life that Islam and Mormonism seem to promise, but those who do not smoke, drink, play cards, or dance often do so in the strength of the flesh. In a way it attempts to present an image or shell of what unconstrained Christianity would produce. It is sad that it is often achieved through the power of self-righteousness rather than self-sacrifice.

3. Experiential. These churches can range from the rock music format to the deception that supernatural gifts are being demonstrated to healings and promises of prosperity. In a way, this sort of self-stimulation produces feelings sensation and the “experience” sort of stimulates emotional thrills that are more closely associated with the worship of the golden calf by Israel at Mt. Sinai.

4. Liberal. A German historian once referred to political liberalism as secularized Christianity. Instead of the humility that should drive selflessness, one finds a sort of self-righteousness that seeks to make others do what is “good”. The idea that “good” should be done with little idea of what good even is much less how it could be collectively imposed. It tends towards collectivism as this appears to be the mechanism to enforce their ideas of “goodness”.

These four categories are all defined largely by the emotional feelings they generate which diverts one to the selfishness of the flesh instead of the selflessness that Christianity was supposed to be about. It can be difficult for someone “church shopping” to find a church that is not feeling based. Most claim to have “truth”, but in practice seems to elevate that which makes one feel good.

Chapter 6 - The Light and the Dark

A frequent presentation of Christianity summarizes it as the chance to escape the infinitely eternal conscious torment of hell by putting faith in Jesus so that one can go to heaven. It can also be associated with various denominational requirements such as baptism, church membership, or communion. This might be called the “parental” presentation because it emphasizes that a failure to obey results in punishment.

John wrote describing God as “light”;

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. - 1 John 1:5

This might be seen as more than just a poetic description of appearance. By its nature light radiates outward. This parallels love. The biblical definition of love is essentially selflessness;

Love has long patience, is kind; love is not envious of others ; love is not insolent and rash, is not puffed up, does not behave in an unseemly manner, does not seek what is its own, is not quickly provoked, does not impute evil, does not rejoice at iniquity but rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (Darby)

Those in rebellion against God are takers and not so much givers and their consumptive hunger might be seen as “darkness”. Paul is recorded in Acts as reciting the instruction he received from Jesus;

But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. - Acts 26:16-18

If one starts with a context of light being from God who is giving and darkness being a result of those in rebellion to God and seeking after self and taking or consuming, it can be of more help to understand the nature of the universe than the sin and punishment model (which while approximating truth suffers from its simplicity). Since God knew that his creation would rebel, it is natural to ask why were we created. Here it may be useful to consider that Jesus used a harvest analogy to describe the kingdom to his disciples. It may be useful to also apply this picture to all of human existence.

Angels were created all at once and a third rebelled against God. Humans were created to reproduce sequentially. We are born in ignorance and selfishness. It is sad that some make little improvement on during their lives. As each individual human matures, he learns more about the world and the people around him. He also makes choices. This process shapes his character such that he is either drawn to truth and light or towards the darkness of consumptive selfishness. Jesus said that all who were of the truth would hear his voice.

One might see in humanity a crop sown by God looking for a harvest of those drawn to truth. The original plan was for God to use the nation of Israel to be a nation of priests who would tell the rest of the world about God. Sadly, Israel failed to live up to their agreement with God. They spent centuries in rebellion and idolatry. They then spent a few hundred years in what might be called indolent materialism such that when the promised Messiah (Jesus) came to offer the kingdom to the nation of Israel, most were not interested.

Plan “B” (the time in which we live now) God offers salvation (eternal life) to any who trust in Jesus. From what we read in the bible, plan “A” will be resurrected in the future under extreme conditions wherein a faithful remnant of Israel will welcome their Messiah and the long awaited kingdom will be established.

Since the bible tells us that eternal life is a gift from God, it seems unlikely that this “gift” would be given to those who reject or are disinterested in God. This opens the question of what happens to those who are not “harvested” unto eternal life. Often in the bible the lost are referred to as perishing.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life. - John 3:16

The lake of fire which is the ultimate destination of death, hades, and the lost seems to be more an incinerator than a place of perpetual torment as it is called “the second death”. There is a final judgment called the Great White Throne judgment where the lost are judged according to their works. However we are not given any information about punishment or rewards as a result of this judgment, only that afterwards the lost are destroyed.

There are a few verses in the Old Testament that describe the exitance of the dead (prior to judgment) in Hades (called Sheol in the Old Testament). From this we may conclude that the soul can perceive and has memory. From the description of the rich man and Lazarus in the New Testament we also get a picture of torment. The word translated torment is basanos in the Greek and meant a touchstone used to verify the purity of coins. The word was also used to describe the torture Greek slaves were subjected to to verify the truth of their testimony in legal proceedings.

One possible reason for this torment might relate to the idea of truth found in the word basanos. Those who were disinterested in truth or even hostile to it may experience truth painfully until they come to the point where they acknowledge it. Some support for this idea might be found in the statement that in the future all people will acknowledge Jesus.

For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. - Romans 14:11

It may be that at the last judgment even the recalcitrant will acknowledge Jesus. The fate of those at the end of the future kingdom may also bear on the ultimate fate of the lost.

The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. - Matthew 13:38-42

It is interesting to note that the word “world” is *aion* in the Greek and means “age”. A variation of this word “*aionios*” is usually translated “eternal” which would be more accurately translated “age lasting”

The simplistic idea of being good gets you to heaven and being bad gets you to hell has caused a lot of trouble. A more precise understanding of what the bible actually says is not only helpful in making a presentation of Christianity to others (even one’s own children) not only plausible but reasonable.

I think my parents would have benefited from a more accurate understanding of what the bible actually teaches about our life on earth and afterward. The sin/punishment model is rather limited. The selfishness/selflessness model I think is more accurate and opens the door to what might be called useful in Christianity to advance this transition.

Chapter 7 - Denominational errors

Most people think of denominations as sort of franchise brands of Christianity. While some denominations may have doctrines that are closer to or further from truth, they are usually structured in a way that keeps their members from obtaining Christian maturity.

Some denominations make use of catechisms that members are expected to accept as truth. The idea being that smart people in the past made these conclusions for you so that you do not have to be burdened with thinking for yourself. Some denominations hold classes to teach their doctrines expecting that everyone will accept the conclusions that have already been made by others.

Denominations usually form because someone wanted to do something different to “get it right”. Being “right” (especially in opposition to those that are “wrong”) creates static forces that bind one. Growing to maturity in Christ almost requires one to be free enough to explore, question and even be mistaken. Denominations cannot help but present their doctrine as final, complete, and absolutely correct. To do otherwise would be to admit that there is more to learn. They might more accurately represent themselves as a starting point rather than a final destination.

Another problem denominations have is that they are usually run as organizational systems. Francis Chan once described a former gang member that became a Christian and then dropped out. He said that he was under the impression that becoming a Christian was like joining a gang (by which he meant becoming part of a family). He said he didn’t understand that it was simply something that people did on Sunday mornings.

Organizational systems are antithetical to relationships. Christianity was always supposed to be about relationships (us with God and each other). An organizational system can be attractive because it can provide assurance that one is going to heaven by having met whatever criteria is put forth and not making too burdensome demands on time or pocketbook. No one has to know anyone well enough to even be aware of their needs much less be burdened with trying to meet

them. For all their cold efficiency, organizational systems often leave one disconnected from that which is human like Harlow's "wire mother".

By inhibiting Christian growth, members often are not in a position to have helpful Christian relationships with each other. In addition, organizational systems operate by control. Activities, programs, events, and classes can be scripted to provide mechanical efficiency. Often the result is a full schedule and little relational connection between members.

The selfishness of childhood is well known;

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child" - Shakespeare

Since we all start off as selfish children, it should be expected that a denominational church that inhibits growth will have a membership that is less likely to show the real love that Christian maturity brings. It is this love that should be a Christian testimony.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. - John 13:35

In most churches people do not even know each other. Even if they did, it would be unlikely that they would even feel fond affection (the worldly idea of love) for each other much less show real selfless love. Denominations contribute to a sort of Christian arrested development or retardation by which the individual, the church, the community, and God are disadvantaged.

Often a denomination will promote its distinctive characteristics in the marketplace in competition for members. Conservative churches may require the KJV bible only and have dress and behavior codes. Those who find this attractive will be drawn to it. A more liberal church might appeal to the emotional sensations that can be experienced. Both may find that self-righteousness can be fostered for "being right".

One advantage denominations have might be seen as generational legacy inertia. Many denominations had survived centuries on legacy alone. Given the fracturing of families today, one might now expect some denominations to completely disappear in the near future.

For many raised in a particular denomination such as being a Lutheran (for example) it can be more definitive than being a Christian. To many being a Christian is a simple matter of baptism and getting a "ticket to heaven". Being a Lutheran often has more definition for them.

Perhaps the greatest failing of denominations is not even knowing how to live the Christian life and thus being unable to teach it to their members or the members children. My parents had been raised to have the smug satisfaction that their denomination had "gotten it right". Not having humility causes a lack of clarity. Having pride can almost produce a blindness. It is sad for a church to blind the children in its care and then send them out into a hostile world.

Here a distinction needs to be drawn between education (what is done to you) and learning (what you do). one can also see a distinction between facts presented in a classroom and what is integrated in one's life with apprenticeship.

Aristotle put forth the idea of paideia (the instruction of the young) as necessary to insure the continuation of Greek culture and the stability of the "polis" (city). While the rich could hire private tutors for their children, most would attend a classroom of 10 to 20 boys who would listen to a teacher read a book and then recite back what they had heard. The idea of an external imprint on the minds of children to make them behave in certain ways took them out of the influence of their parents. That this was the duty of the state was a new idea.

This sort of education was seen as essential to advance in the social world. For the Greeks proficiency in rhetoric and oratory was essential for a place of prominence in the polis. For regular people, children learned their parent's trade or were apprenticed to a relative to learn a different trade. The implication of the impact a differentiation of classroom learning from life learning continues to us today.

Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. - 1 Corinthians 11:1

Christianity began to be turned into classroom instruction with the catechetical schools established in Antioch and Alexandria early in the second century. Together with the collection of what would become the books of the bible, deference was given to men with intellectual skills that made their own writing on a par with scripture. Christianity started to shift away from relationships and how one lived life to what one knew and how well one spoke. Creeds were published that were intended to prevent error and often acted to repress inquiry and learning.

The mechanical conveyor-like processing of children through one classroom after another has a certain financial appeal in a degree of efficiency, an appeal for parents who feel they have better things to do, as well as those who desire that future generations are programmed with specific values.

The classroom disconnects children from the context of real life. It also disconnects them from dialog that one might foster in an apprenticeship. Often the classroom will dull an inquisitive nature as many do not have the perseverance to contend for the attention of the teacher.

A woman who has been "educated" might tell a friend who is struggling with her husband that she is co-dependant. This may be because the classes she took in psychology helped her classify, categorize, and label various behaviors. A woman who has learned about people from living life may instead offer sympathy, encouragement, or even suggestions for things to try. The "educated" woman may feel bad and be sincere in wanting to help, but may only be able to offer a referral to a counseling service.

I used to teach a bible study for boys in a juvenile detention facility. They would often ask what church they should go to when they got out. I told them it was sad because no matter what denomination they went to, they would be identified as "youth" and sent off to go bowling and have a pizza. They might ask what that had to do with Jesus or the bible and I said that would be a very good question. I suggested that whatever church they went to, they might keep an eye out

for someone who clearly showed the light and love of Jesus and ask that person if they could help them learn more about Jesus and how to follow him.

When I first started I tried to use the classroom model of education for about five minutes. I could quickly see the eyes glazed over with boredom. I then shifted to an open question time and found that at the end of an hour question were fast and furious. I found a hint of this type of instruction in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. - 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Some use these verses to charge Christianity with hating women. I think it is more an indictment of lazy husbands seeking to avoid their responsibility to be leading in the home. However, buried here is the word "ask". To me this reveals a little insight into how their meetings were conducted. Chapter fourteen in general is a rebuke to the Corinthians for disorderly meetings. However, I see a dialog method used as opposed to the lecture format that most churches use today. Dialog is useful because it gears itself towards the interest of the learners and is usually in the context of what the learner would find useful.

Utility is an interesting aspect of the Christian life. Seminary students are taught an awful lot about doctrine and subsequently this is replicated in the sermon-lectures they usually give throughout their careers. A pew sitting Christian may have been told to love others a thousand times, but he might be more interested in how to do this with a son that has just told him that he hates him.

Most pastors are a little fearful of questions because they may not fit with the doctrinal dictums as answers that they were taught. Perhaps actual learning about the Christian life is hindered because seminaries never taught anyone how to do it.

I knew a seminary teacher once and asked him what percentage of the students were what might be called "squirrely". He said about 25%. I thought the number should be closer to 50% at that particular seminary. I asked that since you have so many students so obviously in need of counsel why isn't it provided if for no other reason than Christian charity. I was told that it was the responsibility of their home church to offer such counsel. It seemed to me an answer out of cowardice and convenience. However, on looking back it was more likely out of not having anything useful to offer. It is sad that a Christian seminary would be that impoverished.

Perhaps the best example of bible learning I have heard about is here;

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? - Luke 24:32

That my parents did not have such a passion for learning I attribute to both public schools as well as the instruction they received in their church.

Chapter 9 - Walking by the Spirit

This subject may often be avoided because it sounds mystical or even similar to what Charismatics teach. Those who try to duplicate what they read in the bible may be unaware that the supernatural gifts described were at the time only a “taste” of the power of the age to come. When Jesus establishes the kingdom for the nation of Israel, these gifts will be demonstrable again.

For most of us, our Christian life (the life we would like to lead) is frustrated by our flesh. We can read about the frustration Paul felt in trying to keep the law using just the power of his flesh in Romans chapter seven. Some try to help Christians walk a better life by encouraging them to “repent” by which they mean to summon the emotional energy from making yourself feel bad so that you may be able to resist future sin.

The word translated “repent” in the Greek simply means to change your mind. Making yourself feel bad can provide some motivation to change, but it usually doesn’t last. The bible says to put to death the deeds of the flesh which sounds drastic and seems to promise a single blow. However, the bible also says to make no provision for the flesh so that a picture of death by starvation is more in view.

If the Spirit is given the opportunity to work in us, this work should be manifest in improved character qualities;

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. - Galatians 5:22-23

The fruit of the Spirit might be considered as similar to a crop as the result of labor . What the Spirit does is work in us the result of which is improved character.

The focus is not so much what we do or accomplish but rather being better people. In a way it might be seen as preparation for heaven. The saying, “You can’t take it with you” is often used to refer to the possessions and wealth which are left behind at death. What we can take with us are things of eternal value.

The improved character the Holy Spirit can accomplish within us is not only of value for eternal life, but has significant value in this one. Consider the list of the deeds of the flesh that is given in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit;

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. - Galatians 5:19-21

There is hardly anything that can be described as a work of the flesh that does not bring sorrow and pain. Being better able to avoid these is of great benefit. I was at a business dinner in Paris once where a customer was chiding me about how unsophisticated Americans were because we did not have the European tradition of having a mistress. I replied that I saw it as a math problem. His system at best hurt one of the three people involved. If the best you can achieve is a 67% rate of “success”, it seems not worth pursuing. I did not mention the many other problems such as the blindness one inflicts on oneself through selfishness and the deleterious effects of a pursuit of indulgence. Being increasingly free from the entanglement of the flesh has great and immediate benefit.

The first fruit of the Spirit listed is “love” (selflessness). The list of works of the flesh seem to all flow from selfishness. They also are often associated with painful consequences. Being able to chart a different path in this life is a definite blessing. However, it is possible for the Christian to ignore or even frustrate the will of God in his life by continuing in the flesh (his natural selfish inclinations).

My parents never understood that God would help them through his Spirit to disentangle themselves from the works of the flesh if they would stop “quenching” him.

Quench not the Spirit. - 1 Thessalonians 5:19

There are additional steps that can be taken that make the work of the Spirit in our lives more easily accomplished. In addition to choosing a path of selflessness (which opens a door for the Holy Spirit to work in us) there are additional things we can do.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. - Romans 12:2

Groups like the Amish and Hutterites separate themselves from the world physically but it doesn't seem to make them better Christians. We know that Satan sets the course of the world and that he probably structures it to resonate with the flesh. Things such as wealth, fame, power, and sensual pleasures seem woven into the world system he has developed.

Recognizing the true nature of the world and choosing to avoid such entanglement can help reduce the appeal to our flesh such as greed, anger, ambition, fear, lust, and selfishness. Being able to see them for what they are helps reduce the effect they can produce.

If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, - Philippians 2:1

We become Christians by being placed into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. However, this is not a single act that leaves us on our own. There is something called the “fellowship of the Spirit” that allows Christians who are walking by the Spirit to have deeper relationships (in the Spirit) with other Christians. This sort of fellowship might be seen as a Christian (loving) alternative to the world system Satan has constructed (predatory).

Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; - Philippians 1:27

Paul writes the Philippians about the unity they should expect. In looking at the history of Christianity “unity” is not the first word that comes to mind. This is because it is difficult for Christians to let go of the flesh.

In Ephesians where the “armor” of God is described, one offensive weapon is mentioned, that of the sword of the Spirit which is defined as the word of God. We can see in the temptation of Jesus how this is used.

And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. - Luke 4:3-4

And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live. - Deuteronomy 8:3

Here we see Jesus not attacking like a berserker with a sword, but more deflecting the enticing words of him that would do harm.

This is an interesting example of how the Holy Spirit operates without prominence. There are four things called truth in the bible, the bible itself, God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit (the spirit of truth). One might see that biblical familiarity makes one closer to truth and better able to discern and avoid that which would inflame the flesh.

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. - Romans 8:26

Prayer is another activity that is vastly helpful to Christians. Even if we do not know exactly what to pray for, how to pray, or are negligent in expressing gratitude, God helps us. Growing in the knowledge of the bible and prayer are two paths that draw us closer to God and such proximity also aids in discerning truth.

We are told to be filled with the Spirit in contrast to those who are drunk with wine. This is an interesting illustration in that the alcohol in wine permeates every cell in the body resulting in impaired functionality. One might expect that in contrast to be filled with the Holy Spirit would be to have superior functionality. While perhaps not so much physically more capable (stronger, faster, etc) one would expect increased discernment, greater sensitivity to others, and a more honest appraisal of ourselves resulting in humility.

Today many people think in terms of “spirituality” which is often defined in terms of how one feels. There is an implication of a sort of ethereal, detached, or transcendent feeling. The pursuit

of feelings is of the flesh and the opposite of the work of God's Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is not made discernable by feelings. The first King of Israel, Saul, was unaware when the Spirit had departed from him.

One reason life in the Spirit is so poorly understood much less taught to youth in churches is that churches often support the trajectory of youth from school into the world rather than provide an alternative. This entanglement with the world often promotes the flesh over the Spirit.

I sometimes relate an incident where I had worked with a woman who was a little apprehensive about going to her 20 year high school reunion. She had been to her ten year reunion and it was not that enjoyable for her. After her return I said that I would tell her how it went and she could tell me if I was right. At the ten year reunion people were trying to impress each other with what they had, where they have been, and what their future prospects were. At the twenty year reunion people were coming to terms that their previous ambitions were not going to be fulfilled and that their lives were not as successful as they had hoped. She said it was much more enjoyable without the youthful arrogance and pomposity she had experienced earlier.

It is sad that Christian youth have to spend twenty to thirty years having the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" finally punch through youthful hubris with reality when they could have been living by the Spirit and walking in truth much earlier.

Chapter 10 - Wisdom

The book of James which was written to believing Jews does mention something that is available from God to all men.

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. - James 1:5-6

The only condition on the availability of this gift from God is faith which should not be a limiting factor for a Christian.

Wisdom is a decided advantage in life. For example, it can be useful in making decisions such as avoiding entangling debt, avoiding a bad marriage, how to raise children, and how to help others.

The book of Proverbs often contrasts one who is wise with one who is a fool. This is different than the contrast between one who is smart and one who is dumb. When a dumb person has wisdom he is often said to have "common sense" (which, sadly, is not that common). A fool is something different. A fool gives little thought to his actions which are often motivated to satisfy some urge or transient fancy. A fool, suffers consequences that someone with wisdom would have seen and avoided.

A TV character once observed that all the girls in high school want to date the quarterback on the football team. The implication was that a desirable mate would be the one that was most popular.

Sometimes the girl who actually does end up marrying the quarterback in later years ends up wishing she had selected someone with a better sense of humor. How much better if when she was young, her church had taught her not only the value of wisdom, but how it could be obtained.

My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints. Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path. When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: - Proverbs 2:1-11

Proverbs is known for addressing the subject of wisdom. In the verses above it can be helpful to consider the verbs (receive, incline, apply, criest, liftest up, seekest, and searchest). These all describe someone who focused and almost desperate to obtain that which will save him. That it is addressed to “My son” would indicate that it is intended for youth and that they should be intensely motivated.

Such motivation seldom arises in comfort and prosperity. Often adversity or painful consequences spur one to seek after wisdom. In a way, one might see wealth and comfortable circumstances as being harmful because of the blindness to truth they can produce;

And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. - Mark 4:19

For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. - 2 Timothy 4:10

There is a type of wisdom of the world that might be called cleverness. This sort of “wisdom” is often found in those who betray trust, perpetrate fraud, or gain advantage through deception.

Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? - 1 Corinthians 1:20

Truth might be seen as that which is absolute and unchangeable. It could be considered the ultimate reality. Wisdom might be seen as the ability to see truth. For example, young people (particularly those in college) find pleasurable sensations and camaraderie in going out drinking. Truth would reveal that there is danger in narrowing one’s life to the pursuit of sensation. Wisdom would recognize this truth and follow a different path that would have at the end something more rewarding than a hangover.

Sadly, most churches have people that are unable to recognize wisdom much less teach it to their youth. Failing to teach youth how to seek after wisdom is high on the list of church malpractice.

Chapter 11 - The Template of a Godly Life

One distinctive in the difference between classroom education and apprentice type learning is that the context of relationship gives breadth and depth to what is learned.

As children grow, they often pattern themselves after their parents. For Christian children the pattern demonstrated by others in their church can also contribute to a perception of what choices should be made in life. Sadly, this often simply means that a child is limited in scope to go to college, get a good (high paying) career, and avoid criminal activity.

When the social structure of the church is based on who is most prominent or wealthy rather than who is most humble and wise, children will often select the pattern that is presented to them. A church that endorses a membership that is in pursuit of worldly values will usually produce young adults that follow the same pattern.

Perhaps the single greatest factor in conforming children to the world is public education.

To get a more clear picture of the process of conformity it may be useful to consider the Milgram experiments. A professor after WWII was trying to learn how so many people would have gone along with the Nazi extermination of people. He had volunteers give what they thought were increasing electric shocks to subjects whom they couldn't see. The subjects would give lethal shocks about 85% of the time. It was concluded that people would see themselves as "agents" of another person or organization such that they did not consider they had any personal responsibility for their actions.

Approximately 85% of people would kill others simply because they were told to do so by someone they saw as an authority figure. One might conclude that the need to conform to a group can be so strong as to override whatever values people might have.

There was another experiment that was done with two groups of people. Both were given a very boring job to do. One group was paid a dollar an hour the other group was paid ten dollars an hour. When people from each group were observed telling new people about the job, the ones paid a dollar an hour would describe it in terms of interest whereas the ten dollar an hour group would describe it as boring, but getting ten dollars an hour. The conclusion from this was that people would not like to think that they had done something worthless for little compensation so they alter the truth to make themselves think that there was value in what they did.

One might see in these two examples a desire to avoid anxiety and either deceive oneself or even harm others to avoid the discomfort of anxiety.

I lived in a large city and would travel two counties away to hire kids from a technical school there because I found that farm kids made better employees. One reason was that farm life was more difficult and that kids raised in that environment were not so easily perturbed or distracted when encountering difficulties as city kids.

Children raised in families and churches where difficulties are faced and dealt with have a better chance walking in truth than those whose first instinct is to deceive themselves or seek cover in a group. The child that sees his parents forgo a second income and live less well off so he can be homeschooled may see that there is value that enduring difficulty can provide.

It is difficult for a pastor who derives his salary from the church members to direct his congregation into unfamiliar waters without risking his employment. Most churches only hire pastors who will keep the status quo. A church that had a program for young people to help the elderly would be better than nothing. Still better would be a church where young people picked up from their parents and others in the church the habit of seeking out those with needs and trying to fill them. This might start real relationship building and a tolerance for others that was not bothered by a little anxiety.

The selflessness required to put up with difficulty to help others also is useful in obtaining wisdom. My parents grew up in a church environment that set a pattern of worldly entanglement and achievement, materialism, anxiety and difficulty avoidance, and seeking comfort. Like a manufactured product, they strode into adult life inclined to seek after self.

Chapter 12 - Knowing the enemy

It is not unusual for churches to avoid the subject of Satan. However, it can be beneficial to be aware of what Satan has done and is doing in setting the course of this world so that many of his traps can be avoided.

I was traveling in Europe once and on the train to Rome, I read a travel book that specifically described how some Gypsy thieves worked. A woman would hold a cardboard sign and a child would be with her to pick your pocket while you were distracted. I was in the Rome train station not even ten minutes when I encountered this exact scenario. One would think that Christians (with access to truth and wisdom) would also be so able to avoid worldly traps.

Paul writes Timothy to be patient with those that oppose him so that they might repent and come to a knowledge of truth and thus escape the snare of the devil. That truth is a way out of a snare is an interesting concept because Satan's biggest weapon is the lie. In a lie he can get people to act against their own best interests.

The historical development of big corporations and big government could be the result of his maneuvering the world to increasing collectivism such that he might be able to control the whole world. Since he is unable to be everywhere at once, he needs to leverage his influence through hierarchical systems. Seeing these organizational systems not in the positive light of efficiency, but in the light of truth as to how they harm people, can help the Christian with wisdom avoid being ensnared.

Christians are "sealed" with the Holy Spirit and are thus unable to be possessed by Satan or one of his demons. However, this does not mean that Christians cannot be deceived and even used to

advance the plans of Satan. Therefore truth is the best defense against Satan. When presented with any proposition, it is best to subject it to an evaluative process to see if there is any deception that might be hidden in it.

What is known as prosperity Christianity or health and wealth Christianity would be reflective of Christians being deceived into advancing a plan of Satan. The appeal to greed, materialism, and a desire to acquire feeds the flesh, quenches the Spirit, and brings the name of Christ into disrepute.

There are many existing practices that can benefit from the scrutiny of one looking for error. Consider the frequently cited advocacy of tithing. There is a huge financial reason to promote this idea in churches. However, this practice was meant to provide agricultural support for the tribe of Levi in Israel because they had no land allotment. To brandish it as a manipulative tool to Christians today is cruel and also of the flesh.

Those things done in the flesh follows after the world and makes the cross of Christ of none effect. Consider two big lies of Satan, evolution (there is no God) and relativism (there is no right or wrong). Satan has been particularly effective in divorcing Western Civilization from God.

In the 1950s people might get into a fistfight over politics or religion. This was not so admirable in itself but was reflective of a time when what people thought was right or true was important enough to stand up for. Today one of the biggest social crimes that can be committed is to make someone feel bad. This is reflective of the degree to which truth has been replaced by feelings as what has the highest value.

Now what is emerging is a new kind of “truth” in that any opposition to lies is often considered to be anti-diversity and not to be tolerated. One might consider that Satan needed the United States to be at least superficially Christian for a period of time so that he could achieve the cohesiveness a degree of sublimated selfishness could produce so that a stable society could provide the technological tools he needed to try to enslave the world. Having achieved this he now has those voices that were allowed to be proclaimed as free speech archive a majority so that they can silence the voices of those that let them in in the first place.

Since parents and churches have no clear idea of what Satan is actually doing, they are not able to instruct their children as to how to avoid the lies of Satan that are embedded in the larger world. An awareness of what Satan is doing should be basic for any church that claims to stand for truth.

2Co 2:11 Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Chapter 13 - The importance of truth.

The vulnerability to deception is described in a prophecy about the future;

And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. - 2 Thessalonians 2:10

If we apply the definition of love as selflessness to a “love of the truth”, we can see that seeking and holding truth should be worth any inconvenience or discomfort. Placing truth above one’s own interests is one way to “love truth”. There are so many ways truth can be subverted and most of them have some form of feeling good at the base.

In the movie “The Americanization of Emily” that character played by James Garner tells a British woman who lost her son why he was willing to deflate stories about heroism that many took as a comfort. He said that he had a brother who had died at Anzio, just a simple soldier’s death. His mother has embroidered the story to heroic proportions and now his youngest brother was eager to join so that he can be a hero too.

Youth is particularly vulnerable to deception. The passage of years often brings with it painful experiences that harden many to replace naivete with skepticism. However, it does not only have to be the battle scars of a long life that bring one closer to truth. The word of God is truth and growing in its knowledge greatly aids those who would know truth.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. - Acts 17:11

The believers in Berea found it useful to take what they heard and compare it to the standard of truth (the scriptures). Even taking what one hears and applying only logic to it can be helpful. Consider the person who is first presented with evolution. He might ask, “So nothing existed and then it blew up and became everything?”

In addition to logic, a plausibility assessment can be helpful in approximating truth. For example, when presented with a conspiracy theory, one may consider that there are people who do conspire to benefit from illegal acts. However, when someone presents you with a conspiracy theory that involves thousands of people, it would seem implausible that humans could muster that level of competence.

A woman had recently graduated from college with a degree in psychology. In casual conversation she mentioned the phrase “inner child”. I must have chortled a little because she asked me the reason for my reaction. I said that there was nothing to support the idea of a template of human perfection that could be appropriated therapeutically other than the wish it were true. I then said that if there did exist such a thing, we would have some idea of where it exists how it is formed, and the mechanics of how it is accessed. Her response was, “Well of that is true...”

It is critically important to be aware of sources of information and determine trustworthiness. Not every source of false information is maliciously so. Most error comes from people who are deceived. One might see an unintended consequence of public education as raising children to reflexively take in “official” information as true. Children who are homeschooled tend to be more capable of critical thinking.

Children often explore the usefulness of lying. They are unaware that the betrayal of trust harms their reputation. They often also fail to consider the harm lying does to their own discernment. Bank tellers are often shown videos of quick change artists so that they are able to spot those who would try to deceive them. In a similar way children could benefit from parents and a church that showed them the perniciousness of lies and the value of truth.

Under the umbrella of truth is the category of self-deception. Jesus warned his disciples against the danger of hypocrisy which is not so much the intentional deception of others as it is of self-deception. This is particularly dangerous in times of prosperity as the “truth” of things can be mistakenly substantiated by the “proof” of prosperity. Children are particularly vulnerable to this because they have little experience with struggles in the world. Their lack of reflexive skepticism in addition to having ambitions and desires that are inconsistent with reality can lead them to even ignore truth.

My parents were provided a false picture of the world and of life and as a result, when inevitable difficulties arose, were clueless as to what to do. One might justifiably call such indoctrination with what is false as child abuse.

Chapter 14 - Christian Exercise

Physical education was included in schools because physical health (particularly in children) requires the opportunity to not only exercise muscles, but to have them occasionally pushed to endurance. In past years farm work filled this role. Today the sedentary effect of video games may actually contribute to impaired physical ability.

But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. - Hebrews 5:14

Here the writer of Hebrews chastises his readers for their lack of spiritual growth. He says that the complexities of the faith are to be tackled by those who can discern good and evil because their senses have been exercised by reason of use.

One example of how one’s perceptive abilities can be exercised (especially for children) might be seen with the example of entertainment like movies and TV. Some parents allow their children to see whatever they want. Some parents prohibit any such entertainment. A case can be made that parental commentary on entertainment can be useful instruction for children who might otherwise take in uncritically the messages Satan has put into the world.

Even adults can benefit from exercises that help sharpen discernment. For example, using entertainment one can ask what philosophies are being advanced, what bait is being used to draw in the audience, and what assumptions are being impressed upon the viewers. Here are some common “take aways” from modern entertainment.

Men in general and fathers in particular are stupid.
Men are attracted to selfish women.
You can get what you want if you try hard enough.
Casual fornication is common place and expected.
Discipline for children is cruel.
Love is the same thing as attraction.
Life should be controlled and directed by feelings.

These are just some of the almost endless numbers of lies that are inserted into entertainment. It is helpful to understand that millions of un-discerning people take these lies in and live them such that the Christian will encounter them in daily life and not just entertainment.

I was on guard duty with another guy in the Army once and to kill time we were telling jokes. I told him that we had just gotten a case of “updoc” in the supply room. Even though he knew it was a joke, he spent 15 minutes asking himself the question, “What’s updoc?” As soon as he said it out loud, he got the joke. Allowance should be made for the fact that it was 3AM. However, it illustrates that even when one knows that something is not kosher, it doesn’t mean it will be spotted.

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. - Matthew 10:16

Jesus warned his disciples that the mission he was sending them on would be perilous because many of the people they would meet would be as potentially as dangerous to them as a wolf would be towards a sheep. Most people today think of a snake as something dangerous that can kill with a bite. However, a greater familiarity with snakes helps one see that they usually skedaddle when confronted, are wary, and seek to avoid confrontation. The ability to size up (see the truth of) a situation is perhaps what is more in view.

Often a person who has a painful experience in life such as entanglement with a toxic personality will withdraw to lick their emotional wounds. During this period it is not uncommon for someone to ask themselves, “What should I have seen that would have warned me not to get involved”. This sort of after action assessment is useful in military encounters as well as personal reflection. Much can be learned from mistakes.

Public school have students spend 12 years taking in everything they hear as gospel. It is not surprising that we have a population inclined towards naive gullibility. It can be preferable to spend time enjoying oneself rather than exercise skepticism. However, such negligence leads to underdeveloped skills and a pronounced vulnerability to liars and manipulators.

One might think that a church could have a parents night where a movie was viewed and discussion held afterwards so that the insights of others could be gained and the parents then able to show the movie at home and instruct their children. It has been said that it is much easier to learn from the experiences of others than your own experiences.

Chapter 15 - Bible Study

There are different forms of bible study. The first is that which is done with children and might be called bible familiarization through bible “stories”. For some Christians this constitutes their total familiarity with the bible. Some others take advantage of their denomination’s bible study which usually focuses on bible verses that support their doctrines

The Catholic church uses three sources of authority, the bible, the sacred traditions, and the teaching of the church. It seems unwarranted to elevate things that change (traditions and teachings) over that which doesn’t.

If we consider what the bible is (truth, the word of God, power unto salvation, etc.), we can get an idea that bible study is different than any other sort of “study”. Consider what God says about his word;

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. - Isaiah 55:10-11

The bible is a unique book. There are books that try to explain things and books that try to persuade, however, the bible is simply just truth.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. - 1 Corinthians 1:18

The bible is not going to be well received by those who are not interested in truth. However, because it is truth, the knowledge of the bible is an important component in a Christian’s life and children should be raised with a familiarity in its use.

Some shout bible verses at others almost as if doing so invoked some magical incantation. Perhaps the best use of the bible is to draw us in to seek deeper answers.

Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. - Matthew 22:19-21

Level 1 - Yes, we should pay taxes.

Level 2 - The whole monetary system belongs to the one who set it up.

Level 3 - Do we look to man or God for our provision.

Level 4 - How sad that those who should be serving God do not even recognize Jesus but seek to bait him.

Level 5 - Deuteronomy 8:5 would fit here.

Level 6 - 2 Timothy 2:4 might also apply here.

There are many other levels and paths one can take. The bible offers an infinite number of connections to truth and deeper truth. For most people (and even more so for children) bible study is a drudgery. This is sad because they could be taught to look into and find that which helps them mature, protects them, and satisfies the soul's hunger to draw nearer it's creator.

For my parents the bible was something sacred. Although it was not considered something to use or be studied as smart people had already studied it and there was nothing left to learn. Their takeaway was that the bible was complicated and boring and best only read by experts such as seminary students. How sad that their church directed them away from the power of God that could have helped them.

Chapter 16 - Work

A popular view of work is that it is a necessary evil and that good fortune provides a life of ease that is free from work. This pernicious lie has led many to see what they do as valueless and a burden to be discarded at the first opportunity. The idea that work should be avoided harms the one who holds it as well as those who depend on that work being done right. There is value doing a job well both to oneself and others. Regardless if the job is cleaning a toilet, fixing a car, or performing surgery, our work weaves us into relationships with others and becomes part of our identity.

For most of human history children have followed the footsteps of their parents by learning the work their parents did. The Industrial Revolution changed that as labor became a commodity. Due to some egregious examples of the exploitation of children early on, laws were passed that kept children out of the labor market until they were a certain age. As a result, most children have chores like cleaning their room or doing school work that is a poor substitute for real labor.

One thing that work does is bring us in contact with others that may be quite different from us or how we think. Learning to deal with the varied sorts of people that can be encountered has been largely removed from youthful experiences. There are peer encounters, but even that is a distortion as the world consists of various people at various ages as well.

Children observing their parents work would learn how to deal with pushy, lazy, arrogant, annoying, and even irrational people. They would learn how to set boundaries, navigate social waters, and negotiate terms. The whole process of how to become an adult can be learned from parents who are adults. The segregation of parents from children has resulted in a significant delay in developing these skills if they are developed at all.

The factory approach to work often results in people dealing with each other at a minimal level so that when a task is completed, everyone goes their separate ways. Since so much of work today is concluded in isolation (compared to before industrialization), often even work fails to provide the relational learning opportunities that it used to.

Since parents are often prohibited in finding employment for their children, it would be advantageous if churches could fill that role somewhat with perhaps youth guided to work helping the elderly.

Chapter 17 - Working with children

One problem with age segregated societies and smaller families is that children often have little exposure to other children outside their particular age group. Unless called upon for child care, young people are often deficient in skills dealing with children, adults, or the elderly. This deficiency can result in an amplification of the natural selfishness of young people.

It has been said that the cure for the “disease” of adolescence is parenthood. One reason is that when one is forced by circumstances to deal with various ages, one learns much more in the way of useful social skills as opposed to classifying people as either within one’s cohort or as alien.

Because churches have to rely on their own members to work in various capacities for the various programs they have, youth are sometimes drafted to help out. While administering a scripted activity may not be as instructive as more open interaction, it is better than having no interaction.

In a social situation children who were raised in age segregated environments tend to talk only with others their same age and often talk about themselves. Children who were raised with greater exposure to others of different ages are more often comfortable approaching those who are older or younger and often ask more about others than feel compelled to talk about themselves.

Having exposure to small children often teaches older children to see the residual selfishness in themselves. Being able to see oneself in a line of continuity gives a context to life such that a perpetuated adolescence can seem less desirable.

My parents were the first of their families to be what would later be called “teenagers”. By this it is meant young people excluded from contact with those who would actually help them mature.

Chapter 18 - Humility

The educational system tends to fill those who achieve with pride in accomplishment. The law that was given to Israel was used by the Pharisees to prove their “superiority”. Pride causes blindness to truth, inhibits gratitude, and strains relationships. As my parents were both college graduates in the 1940s, they received a boost in pride from both their families and their church.

The presence of pride in one's life is usually indicative of a distance from truth. One would hope that Christians (who claim closeness to God who is truth) would demonstrate humility. This is the means the Christian has of receiving continuing grace from God.

But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. - James 4:6

One might define pride as using self as the measure of all things. If one can place "self" in correct position relative to God, one may begin to see how humility can be beneficial and inevitable. Humility also opens the door to the selflessness that is required for love.

Chapter 19 - Parental Involvement

The time from adolescence to young adulthood is perhaps when children most need their parents involvement, but least desire it. It can be helpful to consider family life up until 100 years ago. Most people lived and died where they were born. Families were large and one's best friends were usually siblings and cousins. Many more children followed their parents religion simply out of inertia and limited alternatives.

After WWI the increasing use of barrier type contraception resulted in a steep decline in the number of children born. (As a side note it is interesting how many Christian women are unaware of the number of chemical abortions caused by oral contraceptives}. The convenience of fewer children is rationalized in a number of ways, however, the effect is to raise what children that are born to see life in terms of the material advantages to themselves of fewer children. One might not think that this single decision would have a significant impact on their children, but it contributes to the idea of self being more important than others.

In the 1950s the declining birth rate began to rise again.. Veterans and other young people moved to the suburbs with every expectation of happy lives. They gave their children every toy and indulgence they could and refrained from discipline like Dr. Spock (a supposed authority on raising children at the time) said. With children at public school and husbands commuting to work, the discontent of housewives should have been an early indicator that all was not well in suburbia. The youth of the late 1960s in the pursuit of drugs, sex ,and rock and roll was an unmistakable indication that something was wrong.

God gives children to parents so that they would raise them. The disconnection of children from parents seems attractive at first because it seems easy and efficient. Sadly, a point is reached where each generation has less and less of value to give their children until it doesn't matter if parents are involved in the lives of their children or not.

I would have preferred that my parent's church could have compensated to some degree for the poor influence their parents had. however, both parents and church had come to be "broken cisterns' incapable of being filled.

For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. - Jeremiah 2:13

Into this vacuum children receive instruction in public values that have been purged of any mention of God, Jesus, the bible, or even the words father or mother. Even more sad, is the fact that most churches have also been emptied of anything of real value.

A Catholic friend once told me that a priest had told his parents group that sometimes the parents of a troubled teen would bring him to the church and ask if they could give him religion as if it were some sort of inoculation. The priest said they would try but if they didn't have the kids before they were ten years old it was pretty much a lost cause. To me this was an interesting insight by someone familiar with the religion business. However, what was desired was conformable behavior as opposed to independent self-regulation.

One can observe the statistics of children raised in fatherless homes and see that such children do not have the same self-discipline that a father would provide end up paying for it with lives of greater drug use, incarceration, and suicide. One can get a bit of a look inside the character of Satan as he has used considerable of his media resources to denigrate the role of fatherhood. One can understand his desire to collectivize the whole world so he can leverage his influence in an attempt to control the world. However, his desire to reduce people to the state where their undisciplined lives will inflict constant pain on themselves goes beyond what he needs to achieve his objectives and reveals some of the hatred he has for us.

Chapter 20 - The Chance of Change.

Most churches hire a pastor based on his ability to keep things the same. Even if a pastor wanted to change something, he would likely not be able to. As a result, most churches will not benefit from a review of what could be done to make things better.

I could say shame on my parent's church for not being able to compensate even a little for their parent's ignorance of useful Christianity. However, Satan guided churches to be organizational systems. In a similar way Satan hindered those of the Old Testament;

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. - Matthew 15:9

This leaves the attempt to discover and apply useful Christianity in the hands of those who are unsatisfied with what denominational churches are able to do. Since there is no existing tradition for this type instruction, each person has to discover it for himself.

People who become unsatisfied with what denominational church has to offer often explore the realm of house church. The first step is to contact existing house churches to see what has already been discovered. One can find a group focused on one particular or unique doctrine, a church plant by a denomination, or a group of people with a bad experiences, sort of licking their wounds. When no existing group can be found, the second step is to try to start your own house

church. In a major metropolitan area we get about two inquires a year. In a rural area we get about one inquiry every two or three years.

Most Christians are not seeking anything different than they have known or are comfortable with. A few, perhaps after a bad church experience, will try another denomination. Those few drawn to pursue their faith to deeper levels often face a lonely path. Internet or TV preachers can be perused and an occasional nugget can be gleaned.

Satan knows us very well. He has designed his world to appeal to the flesh. In a way, trying to escape the hold his systems have on us requires us to confront all that is weak within us. Few can summon the will to make this confrontation. As a result, there are only a few that seek after truth. There are always a few who seek truth even in the midst of prosperity and comfort. However, more may join this trickle as adversity arises and grows. It is in the furnace of adversity that the dross of a fleshly life can be more easily discarded.

At the present time this book may be useful to a small number of Christians seeking deeper truths. It may be that in the near future adversity will be such that many more may seek it. This book could have some value for those as well.

The homes my parents grew up in were only superficially Christian and their church a broken cistern, It was common for the times and even more so for today. Even the attempt at the house church movement has not been able to provide much in the way of useful Christianity. House churches almost by definition can do much for relational Christianity. However, relationships with family members can be difficult enough in this day and age. Relationships with strangers (particularly if they are, like us, and are not far advanced in their faith) can be painful. One reason modern society can function as well as it does is that it is structured to make as few relational demands as necessary.

The rest of this book will be intended for the individual. If, as I suspect, adversity increases, there may be groups of Christians that may also benefit.

Chapter 21 - Self-Diagnosis

The Christian who wishes to delve deeper in his faith will have to be almost brutal with himself. Most of the obstacles to a deeper faith lie within us. To even recognize them is difficult enough. To remove or change them seems almost impossible. However, we do have some help available.

And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible. - Mark 10:27

The Christian life lies mostly within what we think and believe. Therefore this is the realm that most of the work needs to be done in.

The Christian who desires maturity will have to recognize that he will have to confront all that is within him that is false so that it can be removed. Often a person will embark on a journey of spiritual improvement but try to do so in the flesh. Having morning devotions, attending a bible

study, or increase one's giving can be things that sound good, but may still be only the exercise of the flesh. Similar to a medical process, a diagnosis needs to be made before surgery can be considered.

Self-examination is not something that most are familiar with. Facing one's own shortcomings of character can be difficult enough. However, facing one's basic beliefs and questioning them can be even more difficult. Consider the difficulty for a person who considers himself to be a Christian to ask himself "Is there a God?", "Can the bible actually be true?", "Am I really saved?".

Some might argue that such self-examination might undercut weak faith. However I think a stronger case can be made that such questioning bolsters faith because it reinforces it with new certainty. The bible uses the illustration of metal refining to illustrate a process of purification;

Take away the dross from the silver, and there shall come forth a vessel for the finer. - Proverbs 25:4

In a way, the more often one considers the so-called "science" of evolution or what is called critical bible scholarship, the more it is seen as a sad attempt to obfuscate truth. The removal of the "dross" from one's beliefs only sharpens one's trust in what is proven true.

Chapter 22 - Salvation, Where it Begins

Some of the difficulty in understanding what salvation is can be seen with two differing Christian groups. That they have names given them by each other shows the low regard each has for the other. One group called "easy believe-ism" espouses that salvation (becoming a Christian) is a simple matter of just believing in Jesus. The other group ("Lordship salvation") advocates that salvation is to be found in making Jesus "Lord" of your life. The Lordship people feel that there is a danger in easy believe-ism that one could be mistaken about their salvation. The easy believe-ism people feel that the "Lordship" people can be mistakenly trusting in their works rather than in Jesus.

Salvation (the hope of eternal life) was originally offered to those of Israel who obeyed the law and had the promise of eternal life at their resurrection. When Jesus came and offered the kingdom to the nation of Israel, the hope of resurrection unto eternal life was changed from the righteousness of keeping the law to faith in Jesus.

I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins. - John 8:24

Several years later Paul announced that individual salvation to all by grace through faith was available..

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. - Ephesians 2:8-9

It was perhaps because the nation of Israel was not responding to the kingdom offer through which the world was supposed to come to a knowledge of God, that individual salvation was made available so that this offer to the world could continue even if Israel failed.

This salvation had two additional elements. The first was being placed into what is called the “body of Christ”. The second was being “sealed” with the Holy Spirit. One problem many Christians have today is that they try to measure faith. Faith is simply trusting and can be as simple as trusting that a chair you are about to sit on will not collapse. It can also be as complex as a wedding vow. Paul told the Corinthians that they had responsibility for judging each other. However, faith was not the criteria (which would be impossible to measure), but rather conduct, which was measurable.

But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. - 1 Corinthians 5:11

Christianity has been presented in many different ways such as the solution to feeling bad about sins, to escape the fires of hell, to gain immortality, to conform to the expectation of others, and even to achieve social prominence.

Faith is key to being a Christian and having salvation. It is also key to walking by the Spirit, having access to wisdom, and having discernment, but it is hard to nail down. There are degrees of faith as Jesus chided his disciples for their “little faith”. The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith and Jesus responded with a story about servants that were only entitled to what they were due.

Faith can feel uncertain at first. However, as one grows in maturity, faith grows in certainty.

Chapter 23 - Bible Tools

There are two ways to learn about God, Jesus, eternal life, and truth, the bible and people who tell you what the bible says. For the person who charts his own course to spiritual maturity, the opinions, conclusions, and assertions of others may be helpful, but in the end he will have to learn how to use the bible himself.

There are various ways to study the bible such as word studies, topic studies, and book studies. Being able to use tools such as a concordance and bible dictionary can be helpful. For example if one were to read two verses in Galatians, they might sound contradictory at first;

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. - Galatians 6:2

For every man shall bear his own burden. - Galatians 6:5

Looking at the Greek dictionary for the meaning of “burden”, we find that the first verse uses the word “baros” for burden which is defined as a heavy weight or trouble. In verse five, we find the word “phortion” which in Greek refers to the cargo of a ship that has to be unloaded. These sort of insights help add clarity to our understanding the bible.

Free bible software like esword can be very helpful both in being able to quickly see the original Greek and Hebrew as well as compare different translations. The subject of translations can be very sensitive to some people. I usually recommend the Amplified version for someone new to bible study. I think the expanded translations captures the meaning better than a simple word for word translation even though the Amplified is based in the “critical” text (as are most modern translations) which I feel is inferior to the “majority” text. However, getting a more clear translation I think can be more helpful.

Considering that for 1500 years most people only heard about the bible from someone else, the opportunity we have to delve into its richness and draw in its power is an opportunity it would be a shame to squander.

Chapter 24 - Increasing Faith

Many people are worried about or uncertain of their salvation. This is usually reflective of weak or even absent faith. Those with greater faith have less uncertainty. Here is perhaps where the Christian who takes control of his own faith can start, with increasing his faith.

Denominations can be a hindrance to this as they often assure someone that having met whatever criteria they declare, the implication is that a person has nothing further to do. In actuality, all Christians can benefit from increasing their faith.

A faith assessment can be a good place to start. There are many places one can put his trust such as his education, social prominence, wealth, health, savings, friends, family, or properties. One can also trust in things like insurance policies. It can be difficult to honestly consider the degree of faith one has in each of these areas, however, if one considers the loss of everything, one can approximate a degree of attachment. One might see a horrifying possibility or one might even feel a sense of relief in being unburdened.

We can get a glimpse of Paul’s faith as he reflects on the desirability of death, but the necessity of remaining for the work he had to do.

For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. - Philippians 1:23-24

Our emotional reaction to future possibilities can tell us much about our current distribution of faith. Increasing faith in Jesus is a matter of decreasing faith in other things. One useful exercise is to apply truth to things that we trust in and see that they are not as trustworthy as we may have believed. For example, reading the small print of an insurance policy to discover all the ways the

insurance company has provided themselves with ways not to pay can do a lot to diminish ones trust in them.

Reading history can help a person to have a more realistic opinion of people such as with the holocaust that wealth is not as protective as many might think and that all things do not necessarily continue as they have. The number of defaults on college loans may indicate a college education is perhaps not the best thing on which to hang one's hopes of financial riches. People who get laid off are often surprised that their years of dedication and loyalty to a corporation are unappreciated.

When things are pleasant and comfortable it can be difficult not to trust that it will continue. To rouse oneself out of comfort and tackle uncomfortable exercises often seems pointless. However, as one grows in the ability to see truth and even require it, one is less likely to be satisfied with illusionary comforts.

It was necessary for Western Civilization to have a brief period with a veneer of Christianity so that Satan could have the social stability to have the tools developed he needed in his attempt to enslave the world. Now that this period has passed, there will be less tolerance of Christianity. This should create an oppressive environment that will help those decide if they want to live by faith in Christ or repudiate him. Faith can be increased in adversity.

Perhaps the best way to increase faith is to grow in the knowledge of Jesus. Knowing the bible and what Jesus said and did are important because Jesus is the object of our faith. However, it is important to have context as well. Jesus did not come for gentiles, he came for the lost sheep of Israel. He offered them the promised kingdom and a new covenant. The old covenant was agreed to by the entire nation at Mt. Sinai, The new covenant was not accepted by Israel at that time and the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Since then salvation has been available to any individual who trusts (has faith) in Jesus. Paul was the apostle to the gentiles so his words (even though he spoke often about the kingdom to Israel) can be applied to Christians today. Jesus will return one day and a faithful remnant of Israel will receive him and the kingdom.

Christians have been exposed to lies (particularly if they have been in public school) such that their faith is often crippled as assertions of evolution, biblical error and inadequacy, and the ascendancy of man's enlightenment undercut faith. One way to increase faith is to remove the ideas that have been taken in that are contrary to God and truth.

Evolution is an obvious place to start. It is so pervasive and so many people hold it up as true, it can be a real impediment to faith. Many Christians have accepted things like a "gap theory" to accommodate evolution. There are many books available to counter the assertions of the evolutionists and be a basis for strengthening faith. More and more assertions woven into the public sphere by Satan can be tackled and eliminated strengthening faith until like Paul we can say;

For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. - 2 Timothy 1:12

Chapter 25 - Growing in Wisdom

Wisdom has always been difficult to define. Some see it as intelligence, however, there are many intelligent people completely lacking in wisdom. The bible often portrays wisdom as the opposite of foolishness. By considering foolishness, we may be able to get a better idea of what constitutes wisdom.

A fool thinks only of himself and his desires. He is unaware and unconcerned about consequences or even the pain his words and actions bring on his own head. In contrast, a person with wisdom is discerning and perceptive and considers several courses of action and then selects that which will provide the greatest benefit. Wisdom is seen as prudent, sober, and judicious. One wonders why so few seek this gift from God.

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. - James 1:5-6

While wisdom is available from God, our ability to receive it and use it can be somewhat limited. For example, the person who sees any gift from God such as wisdom as a tool that can help him better get what he wants may be so much in the flesh that he would be deaf to what wisdom would tell him.

Another difficulty in being able to make use of wisdom is the degree to which we are captive to that in which we have invested. An example might be the scribes who asked Jesus by what authority he performed his miracles. Rather than answer them, Jesus tested them with a question. He asked them if the baptism of John was of heaven or of men. They knew if they said of men that the people would be against them and if they said of heaven then Jesus would have grounds against them. They colluded to answer that they didn't know. It is interesting that what was true never entered their deliberations. They were only interested in managing the effect. In a way, one might think that such a distance from an interest in truth might also be a powerful inhibitor of wisdom.

Those things to which we cling that aren't true or distortions of truth can make it impossible to receive or apply wisdom. We can hold a denomination, a political view, or even something like environmentalism or animal rights so highly that truth can be rejected. Without truth, wisdom becomes the wisdom of the world which is simply cleverness and maneuvering for advantage.

Chapter 26 - Walking by the Spirit

The Christian has the power of God's Spirit living within him. The Spirit desires to produce "fruit" in our lives which is essentially improved character;

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. - Galatians 5:22-23

The Christian is not expected to produce these improvements on his own. However, the Christian is free to “quench” the Spirit and thus frustrate the cultivation of these qualities. This is done by yielding to the flesh. Sadly, this is often only thought of as “base” sins such as alcoholism, fornication, murder, or theft. It is tragic that Christians so often do not recognize that pride leads to contention and strife, greed leads to being “pierced” with sorrows, and fear can lead to worldly accommodation.

The bible says to “put to death” the deeds of the flesh. However, it also says to “make no provision for the flesh”. This paints a picture of “death” by starvation. The Christian can make strides in his “walk” by making assessments in the different parts of his life. The first would be those with whom he associates. Those who entice to indulgences of the flesh should be avoided.

Do not be so deceived and misled! Evil companionships (communion, associations) corrupt and deprave good manners and morals and character. - 1 Corinthians 15:33 - Amplified

It should be remembered that such corruption can include even the inflammation of passions such as political activism, class or race hatred, and get rich quick seminars. A second area of life to consider is how money is being spent. If all one’s surplus money is spent on leisure or other indulgences, it may reflect a reflexive indulgence of the flesh that might be altered to include some provision for others such as an elderly brother or sister in Christ or a young Christian mother who needs help with her family. There may be opportunities to connect with others that only wait to be recognized.

A third area to consider is how time is spent. It closely parallels how money is spent and also can benefit from consideration of how time might be used occasionally to aid fellow believers. A fourth area of life to consider might be called a life “trajectory”. A young person often pictures his future as going to college, getting a good job, buying a nice house, raising a family, and retiring in comfort. Some follow this course all the way to the end, yet at the end may question if this was the best use of their life. Altering a trajectory can be difficult because it is often tied to the financial momentum of a mortgage. Drastic changes may be considered, but usually slow incremental changes can be made as one grows spiritually.

The more progress one can make walking by the Spirit earlier in life, the less likely he will find himself tied to a trajectory he regrets. Parents who discover the benefits of the deeper Christian life can help their children learn at an earlier age so that they can benefit by avoiding more of the many pitfalls that can trap those who walk after the flesh.

Chapter 27 - Remaining Independent

There are those in the religion business who desire for reasons of vanity or greed to make captives of those who are searching. They may be charismatic, imposing, or have many credentials. However, the one who would grow in Christ needs to avoid them.

And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. - 2 Peter 2:3

For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. - Galatians 6:13

See to it that no one carries you off as spoil or makes you yourselves captive by his so-called philosophy and intellectualism and vain deceit (idle fancies and plain nonsense), following human tradition (men's ideas of the material rather than the spiritual world), just crude notions following the rudimentary and elemental teachings of the universe and disregarding [the teachings of] Christ (the Messiah). - Colossians 2:8 - Amplified

When one considers how many Christians are held captive and are unable to grow into maturity, it is remarkable that any break free. The Christian out learning on his own will encounter may who would bring him into bondage again. Therefore vigilance is required.

There was a comedian once who speculated that he would like to be a cult leader, but was unable to find any books that could instruct him on how to get followers. Some conditions that make one more vulnerable to be taken in by religious manipulators are;

1. Unfamiliar with truth.
2. Emotionally needy.
3. More introverted.
4. Those feeling guilty about something.
5. People pleasers..
6. Those fearful of confrontation.
7. Potential Milgram “agents”

Since Milgram showed that 85% of people would adapt themselves to be agents of an authority figure, one would conclude that most people are vulnerable to some sort of religious manipulation.

A lesson might be drawn from the FBI investigation of anthrax after the 2001 attacks. They targeted one guy who was resilient and who counter-attacked the head of the Justice Department (who presented himself as a Christian) and accused him of bearing false witness. Their next target was not one so resilient who was driven to suicide.

To withstand enticement, manipulation or bullying, one needs to draw upon resources such as certainty of truth, identification of motives, and resolute faithfulness in Christ. We are not to place our faith in a human. It can be easy, socially acceptable, and even comfortable to go along with a crowd or fall into a role determined by others. But this is of the flesh and does not lead to Christian maturity.

Truth is essential to Christianity because Jesus is truth. Truth is that which is absolute, unchangeable, and the ultimate reality. When heaven and earth pass away, truth will still be there. Being able to see the world with no pretense, distortion, accommodation, or excuse allows one freedom. Every snare and trap is exposed for what they are. Our own shame and ignorance is also exposed. Wisdom will only be useful to one who can see truth. Truth is essential for humility which opens the door to God's grace.

Truth is not something the timid seek out. Jesus said that continuing in his word would allow his disciples to know the truth and the truth would set them free. Jesus said that those who were "of the truth" would hear his voice. This would mean one for whom truth is essential above all else.

Since truth is absolute, unchangeable, and reality, it does not have to be constructed, only discerned. What makes discernment so difficult is our world is filled with lies. The word "lie" implies intention. However, while there are those malicious, most lies are just echoes of those ignorant, undiscerning, or even well-intentioned.

We live at a time when the pursuit of feelings dominate the social world. We can distort truth to make ourselves feel good, relieve the anxiety of the unknown, or receive the comfort of social approval. Those few who can rouse themselves from the soft comforts of self-deception are able to draw nearer to Christ who is truth. The Christian who would grow to maturity has to reject the temptation to indulge in self-deception even if it results in discomfort.

Satan sets the course of the world. One feature he has used extensively is to use feelings as a way to entice through our flesh our departure from truth. Buddhists capture a little of this when they see the dangers caused by desire. However, when changing desire from the elimination of desire is only an approximation of the solution. The better solution is to exchange selfish desires for selfless ones.

The process of transcendence from selfishness to selflessness is aided by old age. Reality (truth) has a way of forcing itself upon some over the years. As one becomes less attached to this world and life, one can gain freedom from attachments that can blind one to truth, even cherished values and beliefs one has held since childhood. One can start a path towards truth by questioning what everyone assumes is true to find real truth.

The Christian who grows in his ability to see truth as he matures, also begins to understand how Jesus looked at the world.

But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. - Matthew 9:36

Chapter 29 - Advanced Christian fellowship

The Christian who begins to make progress on his own path to maturity will begin to discover that he has less relational connection to those he is leaving behind. If one is leaving a

denomination, some may see him as apostate. It can be hard and even hurtful to move on in relationships. Since so few do it, it can be quite lonely as well.

At a denominational level, fellowship is usually defined by what role one performs in the organizational hierarchy. At the individual level one encounters other Christians but there is usually no opportunity for connection often because that is reserved only for other members of the denomination.

Since so few are seeking, it is rare to encounter those who are also open to inquiry and sharing what one has been discovering. However, the joy of growing in wisdom and truth is such that what is left behind is seldom lamented.

The bible instructs Christians to admonish and exhort one another. This is not often practiced in denominations because the system is usually set up to allow only a pastor to do “religious things”. The Christian on an independent path towards maturity might be able to suggest something to another Christian for consideration, but anything stronger is often viewed as arrogant, intrusive, and otherwise unwelcome.

As difficult as it is to find other Christians for deeper fellowship, finding one more advanced than yourself from whom you can receive useful instruction is even more difficult. The Internet has been a help in that easy access to thousands of Christian teachers is almost instantly available. However, one has to be prepared to sift through a lot of dross to find an occasional “nugget”.

One bible teacher had great language skill of Hebrew and could illuminate Old Testament passages clearly. However, he was immature and would use his wife for humor purposes in his presentations. Another teacher would mock and ridicule those who held less advanced views. Another reverently clung to the King James Version as if it were a sacred relic. For all these personality characteristics, there were still things that could be learned.

The closer one comes to Jesus, the more one shares his perspective of humanity, with sadness, compassion, and hope that some would find their way to draw closer to him.

Chapter 30 - Summary

God stands ready to welcome those that would seek him. When Jesus came to Israel and offered the promised kingdom, he did not try to persuade them. He even asked that some would downplay what might be seen as sensational. The path to Jesus is by truth, faith, wisdom, love, and seeking.

My parents were under the impression that baptism secured their future. They were largely ignorant of both this world and the next. They had faith that their education would secure them a life of comfortable success. It is the contribution by their church to their (for Christians) shameful ignorance that I hold their church responsible.

My parents denomination maintained a seminary where there was a brutal theological dispute in the 1970s. The political faction in the denomination that supported the idea that the bible was true barely won. Many denominations took the other path. However, just believing the bible is true does not help people put it to use in their lives.

This book is intended as an exhortation to Christian churches to start teaching real Christianity and a warning that they may be held accountable for the damage they cause people when they do not. It is also a message to Christians spiritually “starving” in various denominations that they can follow a path closer to Christ, but it requires personal initiative and a thirst for truth.

To my children, I apologize for not having provided better instruction. What you received was far better than I got, and I hope that your children will receive from you far better than you got.