The State of the Church: Three Stages of Spiritual Growth

1 John 2:12-14

We're embarking on a new year, and our minds are drawn to new commitments, or even fresh versions of previous commitments. Whether your hope for 2010 includes a better way of balancing your budget, or simply finding less of you to balance on your bathroom scales, almost everyone is in a mood to consider change as the New Year approaches.

Each new year in January, the President of the United States speaks to a joint session of congress. This speech has become known as the State of the Union speech. In it he tells what he believes to be the condition of the country and he outlines his plans for the new year. The New Year is a great time to do some evaluation, to take inventory of our lives, to envision our goals, and to outline some plans for the next year. So I have come to give us the "State of the Church" sermon today. Where have we been, what condition is the church in now, and where are we going together in this next year?

I am glad to be back in the book of 1 John today. Have you missed it? John had been teaching us how to have a know-so faith, how we can be sure that we know Jesus and have fellowship with God. We learned that the real evidence of Christ in us is shown by the way we live and the way we love. In the middle of chapter two of this little letter John shares some insight into the stages of spiritual development. The repetition in this passage seems a bit odd but John has used it to underline and emphasize the pattern of our spiritual growth.

John gives us three stages of spiritual development in this section: "**children**," "**young men**" or teenagers and "**fathers**" or adults. Before we get too far in the text, I want to say that these stages do not refer to the physical age or gender of a person. These are stages of spiritual growth. A man who is 70 years old may still be a spiritual baby. A woman of thirty may have the spiritual maturity to be a "**father**."

The order seems a bit confusing because John jumps back and forth between these stages. Let's take them one at a time.

I. Spiritual Children (vv.12,13c).

A. All Believers are God's Spiritual Children (v.12).

- 1. As John begins each sentence in this passage, he says "I write..." or "I have written." The point is the information we need to have intimate fellowship with God is in the written Word of God. We can't find it in a novel, magazine or a TV show. Those who grow spiritually get their spiritual food from the Bible.
- 2. There are two different words for "**children**" in this passage. In v.12 the word is *teknion* a common word referring to an infant or a little child. It comes from a word meaning "to be born or birthed." It could be literally translated "birthed ones" or "newborns."
- 3. This refers to all Christians. Before we can have fellowship with God we must be born again. Jesus said to Nicodemus in Jn.3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." For some of you, 2009 was the year you were born again. You became a child of God. You took

- your first few baby steps: baptism, worship attendance, reading your Bible. I rejoice that God has given some newborns to New Covenant Baptist Church.
- 4. What we have in common as God's children is that our "sins are forgiven for His name's sake." It is by faith in the name of Jesus that our spiritual birth occurs. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). And the gospel of John tells us, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).
- 5. Even though we may be at different stages of spiritual growth, we are all God's children. Some of you have adult children but they are still your children even though physically they are adults. We are all God's kids.
- 6. The first memory of salvation is the forgiveness of our sins. Do you remember that wonderful feeling of having the guilt of your sin removed? It was like a load off my back. I will never forget the wonderful joy of knowing I was free from guilt and the penalty of sin.

B. Some Believers are Spiritual Infants (v.13c).

- 1. A different word for children is used in v.13. *Paidion* means an immature child, "a child under instruction." It can refer to infancy through pre-adolescence. *Teknion* refers to relationship being in the family, *paidion* refers to subordination, being under the training and discipline of the family.
- 2. They have "**known** [have come to know] **the Father**." The first expression of a child is the recognition of his parents.
- 3. How many of you remember when your child first called you Dada or Mama? What made that so special is I knew that they knew me. They said, "Dada." Those of us who are God's children say "**Abba Father!**"
- 4. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit causes all God's kids to know him. Gal 4:6 says, "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, Abba, Father!" (Cf. Rom.8:15-16). Jesus taught us to pray, saying "Our Father in heaven..." (Mt.6:9).
- 5. When you are an infant it is perfectly appropriate to only be able to say, "Dada." However, a 21-year-old who can only say "Dada" is a tragedy. A Christian who has not matured beyond just the ABC's of the faith is a tragedy too.
- 7. When a child is born he already has his arms, eyes, tongue, nose, ears. He doesn't get them later. He just has to learn to use them! If you have been saved for a long time and you are still a baby, it is your fault. When you were born again, God gave you everything you needed to grow and be all He wants you to be.
- 7. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "You cannot go on being a good egg forever. You must either hatch or rot."

C. Characteristics of Spiritual Children.

1. First, both physical and spiritual babies are NEEDY. They can't help others because they themselves need so much help. Heb.5:12 is a parental rebuke for some Christians who should have grown in the Lord but remained babies, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food."

Kathy and I enjoyed our kids when they were babies, but we celebrated when they were out of diapers. Some of you have little ones that have to be fed during the night. You have to change their diapers and clothes constantly. They demand your attention. You delight in them but look forward to when they are not so maintenance intensive!

What do babies do? They lay about the house and scream whenever they want something. This is understandable in a 6-month-old infant. It is intolerable in an 18-year-old! Little ones are completely self-absorbed. They don't care if you are inconvenienced. They want their needs met and met now.

2. Two, both physical and spiritual babies need to LEARN. Most children are not stupid. They are merely ignorant. They have not learned much about the reality of life. So it is with spiritual children. They are ignorant concerning God's Word and don't know how to apply it to their lives. Heb.5:13 says, "For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe." They need to be taught wrong from right, good from evil. They often do what they want to do even when they know they are wrong. They are like the toddler who wants to touch a hot stove. His mother warns him, "No, hot!" But, he touches it anyway and gets a painful burn. Spiritual children have to constantly be warned about the painful results of sin, but often plunge in anyway.

A person who is "born again" starts a new life similar to that of a newborn infant. Seven rules that promote good health in babies can be adapted and applied to a Christian's spiritual growth.

- 1. **Daily Food**. Take in the "pure milk of the word" through study and meditation. (1 Pet. 2:2)
- 2. **Fresh Air**. Pray often or you will faint. Prayer is the oxygen of the soul. (1 Thess. 5:17)
- 3. Regular Exercise. Put into practice what you learn in God's Word. (James 1:22)
- 4. Adequate Rest. Rely on God at all times in simple faith. (Mark 6:31)
- 5. **Clean Surroundings**. Avoid evil company and whatever will weaken you spiritually. (Eph. 5:11)
- 6. Loving Care. Be part of a church. Benefit from a pastor's teaching and Christian fellowship. (Heb. 10:25)
- 7. **Periodic Checkups**. Examine your spiritual health. (1 Cor. 11:31)

These are some of the things we want to concentrate on in 2010. One word to focus on this next year is **GROWING**. As a church I believe God wants us to focus on spiritual growth. We want to grow in Bible Study. If you are not in weekly Bible study with other believers, make 2010 the year that you start this. Come to Sunday School, come to Wednesday Prayer meeting. We offer monthly

women's and men's Bible studies. We plan to begin a weekly youth group where our teenagers can grow in Bible study and in outreach to their friends. This year make spiritual growth a priority.

The second stage of spiritual growth that John talks about is really the third:

II. Spiritual Adults (vv.13a,14a).

- A. Spiritual Fathers have taken Time to Walk with God.
 - 1. In both vv.13 and 14, John says "fathers" are those who "have known Him who is from the beginning." Children "have known Him," but fathers have "known Him... from the beginning." The difference between a baby and an adult Christian is time and obedience. Adults have spiritually developed.
 - 2. Mature Christians have walked with God long enough that they consistently bring God to bear in their every day living.

B. Four Characteristics of Spiritual Adults.

- 1. First, spiritual adults REPRODUCE. Being a man doesn't make you a father. Having children makes you a father. The first test for spiritual fatherhood is do you have any spiritual children? Have you led other people to faith in Jesus? Many Christians come to church, pray and study the Bible, but they are not mature because they are not spiritual parents. If you have not multiplied yourself then you are not mature.
- 2. Second, spiritual adults INSTRUCT. Paul says in 1 Cor.4:14, "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you." Parents constantly teach and warn their kids when they are going astray. If you are a mature believer, you are giving God's counsel instead of the advice of the world. What kind of advice do you give? Do you say, "This is what I think..." or "God says in His Word..."
- 3. Third, spiritual adults MODEL MATURITY. Paul says in 1 Cor.11:1, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." Spiritual fathers live an exemplary life. Someone might say, "I don't follow people." Of course you do. The question is who are you following. I'm so thankful to have a multi-generational church where there are many spiritual adults who give great examples to follow. Do other believers call on you for counsel or to gossip?
- 4. Fourth, spiritual adults LOVE. The great mark of maturity is love.

We have some older men and women in our fellowship that so clearly exhibit this. Though I love our people and try to be a godly leader, I must admit there are times I do my job because it is my job. At times like that I look around and I see some of these "**fathers**" serving at my side. I am humbled and shamed because while I am doing my job, they are serving in love.

Spiritual adults are never satisfied. They want to draw even closer to the Lord. The work of Japanese painter Hokusai spanned many years before his death in 1849 at age 89. But toward the end of his life, the artist dismissed as nothing all the work he had done before age 50. It was only after he reached 70 that he felt he was turning out anything worthy of note. On his deathbed Hokusai lamented, "If heaven had granted me five more years, I could have become a real

painter" (Today in the Word, September 16, 1992).

So the second word to focus on this next year is **KNOWING**. In 2010 we want to know God deeper and to love Him more. We want to move on to model maturity and love. We want to reproduce, to lead people to Christ and to instruct them in the faith. One of the ways we are going to do this is we are joining other Southern Baptist Churches in the *Across North America* campaign. This evangelism campaign is designed to get the gospel into every home in North America during the 2010 Easter season. Just imagine the spiritual impact of every Southern Baptist church working together to sow the gospel all across North America! I will be sharing more about this in the weeks to come. But get ready. Use those 3-1-6 cards and begin to pray for those who need Jesus. This year we want to know Jesus and make Him known.

The third stage of spiritual growth that John lists is:

III. Spiritual Adolescents (vv.13b,14b).

A. Spiritual Adolescents Understand the Battle (v.13b).

- 1. The difficult time between childhood and adulthood is called adolescence or the terrible teenage years. Adolescence is all about breaking the ties of dependence and moving toward independence. Spiritual teenagers are moving away from dependence on the flesh toward independence in Christ.
- 2. John says, "You have overcome the wicked one." The chief characteristic of spiritual adolescence is being at war with the enemy. Spiritual babies don't know enough to fight Satan. Spiritual fathers have already won many of these battles.
- 3. Spiritual adolescents understand that their fight is a spiritual fight, a fight against temptation and sin. Eph.6:12 says, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood..." They don't blame people or circumstances but take their sin to Jesus like we saw in chapter 1 (1:7,9,2:1).
- 4. They have learned to live in dependence upon the Father. They know they cannot defeat Satan by their own will or strength. They have learned to "be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" (Eph.6:10). Steve Camp sang a song years ago that said, "Some people want to live within the sound of chapel bells, but I want to run a mission a yard from the gate of hell. And with every one I meet take them the gospel and share it. Well, look around you as you hesitate, another soul just fell. Let's run to the battle."

B. Spiritual Adolescents Abide in the Word (v.14b).

- 1. John says, "You are strong, and the word of God abides in you..." Putting the Word to work in our lives enables us to defeat Satan. Ps.119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." V.11 says, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!"
- 2. This is why our enemy fights Bible study. You cannot become a mature Christian without learning your Bible! There are no shortcuts!
- 3. Jesus used the Word to defeat Satan at His temptation. Each time He said, "It is written..." Ja.4:7 says, "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

4. It is not enough to have a Bible we must use it! The devil is not Dracula. Holding up your Bible in front of him doesn't scare Him! Acts 19 records how an evil spirit attacked some Jewish exorcists who thought they could use the name of Jesus like a magic word. That's holy hocus-pocus. It doesn't work! The devil flees not because of our power but the abiding power of the Word.

So the third word we want to focus on this next year is GOING. Let's run to the battle. Are you in the battle or just setting on the sidelines? Let's move on in our spiritual growth to fight the good fight of faith. Each of us has an assignment in the battle. Each of us has been equipped for the battle. Each of us has a place of service. What is yours? Is God calling you to serve Him by teaching our children in Sunday School? By leading our youth group? By going door to door with the good news? By serving in the nursery? By helping with our fellowship dinners? By praying earnestly for each other? Let 2010 be the year of GOING for you.

So where are you at today? What is your stage of spiritual growth? Are you still a child? Are you a young man? Are you a Father? I encourage you, take just one step today toward spiritual growth. Make one decision in each of these areas:

GROWING

KNOWING

GOING