

Growing Beyond Environmental and Societal Influences

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DEFINITIONS

Growing Beyond – Developing outside of, maturing or aging despite confines, rising or increasing above limitations or constraints

Environmental – Pertaining to the environment, geographical location or ecosystem, natural abode or habitat

Societal Influence – The impact of society, social import, community's sway or pressure, world imprint

PREAMBLE

Exodus 1:7 And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them. 12 But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were grieved because of the children of Israel.

Luke 2:40 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

2 Peter 3:18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

1 Corinthians 3:7 So then neither is he that **planteth** any thing, neither he that **watereth**; but God that giveth the increase.

INTRODUCTION

The environment is our habitat or ecology while society consists of our neighbors, institutions (educational, economic, socio-political and religious), and virtual world. It connotes those other humans with whom we relate and interact. The ground was cursed after the fall to yield 'thorns and thistles' and man was expected to till it with labour, to subdue his environment and dominate the earth. Man in his natural state seeks pleasure and glory for self in every society. People struggle for material success and dominance "by any means necessary" believing it is 'the survival of the fittest.' Human existence and growth is laced with dangers and obstacles primarily due to where he finds himself and those around him. However, from the scriptures stated in our preamble, it is evident that a people may grow as well as an individual socially or spiritually, that seed sowing and nurturing is futile without divine blessings. It is not easy for one who has been part and parcel of the world (Gal 4:3, Eph 2:2,12), now redeemed but who still lives in the world to pretend as if s/he is totally immune from societal influence. Nay, it is '*not by power nor by might, but by my Spirit says the Lord.*' Thus our topic examines the prospect of "*developing, maturing and increasing in all good ways out of the barriers and confines imposed by our environment, whether natural, man-man or by the people themselves.*"

Growth may be **natural** (physical, mental, emotional, professional, material) or **spiritual** (*Christian virtues* - faith, hope, love, joy, knowledge, holiness, etc. and *Christian service* - prayer, giving, evangelism, etc.)

WHO GROWS AND HOW?

A **person** should grow naturally as an individual in the society, such ought to become a **Christian** and grow spiritually. Institutions, especially **the Lord's church** should grow also.

God wills us as individuals, "*speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ*" (Ephesians 4:15-16). And as Christ's body "*in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit*" (Ephesians 3:21-22).

Physical growth which is the most obvious naturally is a characteristic of living things; it is dependent on being supplied with appropriate:

- a) Mineral nutrients from the soil or food intake
- b) Air to breath so as not to choke
- c) Water for cleansing and internal transportation of material
- d) Light for energy, illumination, pigmentation, etc.

A plant or animal must process these and utilize them in a timely and regular manner. For a person to grow physically, it takes the above and **exercise**. Surely, a new convert to Christianity needs water (baptism -Acts 22:16), light and food (the word of God -Ps 119:105; 1 Pet 2:2, 1 Cor 3:1-2, Heb 5:12-14, 1 Pet 5:1-2) as well as clean atmosphere (associates -1 Cor 15:33) for growth. The Bible states that bodily exercise profits little but a Christian gets spiritual exercise by practicing godliness which ensures a better life on earth, and promises eternal life in heaven (1 Tim 4:7-8). Natural Growth may be stunted (as in a dwarf) or normal or excessive (resulting in a giant). Likewise, spiritual growth may be positive (2 Thes 1:3), neutral (Rev 3:15-16) or negative (2 Tim 2:16). This occurs after one is born into the kingdom of God (Jn 3:1-5). That is done via faith, repentance, confession of His name and baptism into His body, the church -Acts 2:36-41.

Natural growth is always terminated one way or the other, usually by death whereas spiritual growth is the dimension in which man may continue ad-infinitum. Some view growth as of little value if the entity is unfruitful and unable to reproduce 'after its own kind.' Irrespective of the kind of growth, one is bound to face challenges and must seek to outgrow such. We must **identify, prioritize and confront** our limitations. Accepting natural death as finality pronounced by God (forget life-support, cloning & other immortality seeking schemes aside the gospel), how can we grow beyond environmental and societal influences? We need to acknowledge factors that may stand against our growth in any area, which may be inherently due to our birth status (physical, mental or family defect/challenge) or imposed (location, neighbours, detractors, etc.). Examples of saints who grew beyond environmental and societal influences abound in scripture:

- Moses who esteemed the reproach of Christ better than the temporary pleasures of Egypt, -Ex 2, Heb 7:25
- Jephthah who bore the stigma of being born out of wedlock to become a warrior and ruler - Judges 11
- Jabez who called on God in prayer to change his circumstances - 1 Chro 4:9-10
- Zacchaeus, a short man who remedied being lost in the crowd by climbing the sycamore tree -Lk 19:1-10

THE CRITICAL GROWTH FACTOR: DECISIONS

The indicators and factors of growth are many especially for youths and perhaps the greatest challenge facing them is **Decision Making** such as:

- Knowing right from wrong
- Identifying personal talents and choosing a career
- Choosing and marrying a spouse

We make decisions all the time, it involves making a choice out of several competing alternatives. For example you decided whether to come to this lectureship or not (*or to read this lesson or not*). It has been said that history is more kind to the person who makes a bad decision than the indecisive one who does nothing! God gave men choices so they might ultimately glorify Him (**Ephesians 2:10**). When an individual does not have choice, they are slaves or as good as robots. A person loving God chooses to be His bond servant (Romans 6:16-22). That is, they voluntarily choose to obey His will knowing it will result in far greater benefit than sinfulness (**Isaiah 55:6-9, 2 Timothy 1:12**). If a child puts his hand in the fire, he will be burned. Wisely, he learns not to repeat his action. Sadly, many an adult chooses to engage poor decision after poor decision expecting a different result. To meet the objective of a life of doing well in God's eyes, God has given the Bible (**2 Timothy 2:16-17, Ephesians 4:14-16**). This enables man to mature properly.

Making a decision is much less stressful when there are few choices. The more the alternatives, the more time consuming and fretful the decision becomes (**Ecclesiastes 6:9-11**). There are two consequences to all decisions: dissatisfaction and contentment. Certainly, all choices have a cost. To choose one item, you give up another. The man who chooses to go worship Sunday morning may miss watching TV or a chance to sleep in. When the proper choices are made, contentment can reign (**I Timothy 6:6**). God has given man a path to choose which will lead to contentment in all things. Is there food and clothing? Let there be contentment (I Timothy 6:8). Whatever a man's position is in life, if he is with God, let him be content (**Philippians 4:11**). God will not fail those whose eyes are on Him and not the possessions of the world (**Hebrews 13:5**).

The fruit of the Spirit outlines attributes listed in Gal. 5:22-23 & 2 Pet 1:5-7 should moderate our belief system, perception, attitude and behavior; or decision making process and conduct. The society more often than not, unfortunately try to affect them negatively. The world is inherently unbelieving and unrighteous, so Christians are expected to limit their association with the people of the world - James 4:4, 2 Cor 6:14-18. The society via

its formal and informal educational system is eroding human spirituality. For example, schools by teaching evolution, self-dependency and relativity of truth and morals. Even our judiciary now teaches that it is better to steal Billions of Naira than a few thousands, as only the poor will be declared guilty! Neglect of divine essence and absolute standards has led to Christian compromises. Those who want to accommodate every scientific theory invariably select portions of the Bible to belief and consequently end up losing faith in the book and its divine source. I teach decision making under uncertainty in some of my courses of Artificial Intelligence, using theories such as AHP, OR, Fuzzy/Probabilistic Reasoning, etc. and as good as these may seem, for me, they never match up to prayer and seeking direction in the word of God –Ps 25:12 & 37:23.

The society if permitted will also impair a Christian's sense of judgment. Peer pressure requires us '*to (do whatever it takes to) belong and keep up with the Jones.*' The world's perverse reasoning is ever ready to lower and corrupt Christian thinking as regards what is right or wrong, modest or immodest, natural or unnatural, etc. This is manifested in the way we dress (fashion), speak as well as the things we celebrate and how e.g. marriage (gay marriage, 419, etc. - **Isaiah 5:20**, Rm 1:22-28). The bombardment of youths used to be mainly from Magazines and Television which could be somehow controlled by parents. The modern generation is Blackberry pinging, Facebooking, Twittering, YouTubing 24/7 on their smart phones and are more exposed. ***Watch what you feed your eyes and your mind on, these tools and technologies can equally be used for godly purposes by those who are willing.*** There are websites for online Bibles in different translations, sermon outlines, apologetics, debates, etc. but I guess more brethren here probably know where to download home videos and the latest hip-hop music. *You find what you seek.* We are severally warned against relying on human philosophy and our own wisdom when it comes to godliness and things of the kingdom -1 Cor 2:13-15; 3:18-19; Col 2:8. ***Christians must learn to keep their body, emotions and ego under check*** (Rm 8:8-14).

PRINCIPLES TO HELP ATTAIN A GODLY DECISION

The Bible makes it clear that we are to make wise, healthy choices as Christians. **Proverbs 4:25-27:** "*Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.*"

It's the kind of life that has purpose, direction, and pure actions. "*His divine power was granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence*" -2 Peter 1:3. When we have our values in place, only then can we make the right decisions. Hopefully the following questions can help us establish standards when faced with life's difficult choices:

1. Is it putting God first, conforming to his authority and glory or of the world? -Matthew 6:33, Colossians 3:17, vs 1 John 2:15-17
2. Would my Lord Jesus himself, do it? -1 Peter 2:21, 1 John 2:6.
3. Would it be a good example? Matthew 5:14, 1 Timothy 4:12
4. Would I want everyone to know I did it (Luke 8:17, Hebrews 4:13) including Jesus if He should return just then? -1 Jn 2:28
5. Could it hurt my body? -1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Ephesians 5:29.
6. Would I want it done to me? Luke 6:31.
7. Is it a good or expedient thing to be? -James 4:17, Matthew 12:1-13
8. Does it have the appearance of evil? -1 Thessalonians 5:21-22
9. Is it a weight to me (Hebrews 12:1) or a stumbling block unto another? -1 Cor 8:9, Rm14:13
10. Can I do it without doubt in my mind -Romans 14:23

CONCLUSION

2 Peter 1:1 Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: 2 Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, 3 According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: 4 Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, ***having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*** 5 And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; 6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; 7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. 8 ***For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*** 9 But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. 10 Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: 11 For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.