

HOW DO I GO DEEPER WITH GOD?
by Andy Manning

“I WANT TO GO DEEPER”

Recently while enjoying my morning coffee my little girl said to me, “Daddy, I need to tell you a question. I would really like some coffee.” That led me into a fatherly lecture about the true definition of a question. I told her that that was not a question, but a statement. If she wants a sip of my coffee, she simply needs to ask, “Daddy, may I have a sip of your coffee?”

In similar fashion, there is a question that is not commonly asked by Christ followers, but it is commonly phrased in the form of a statement. Many Christ followers have at one point or another said the following: “I want to go deeper.”

I remember the first time I heard this statement come out of the mouth of a Christian. I was in college with a group of my peers, and we were at a spiritual retreat in Tennessee. Late one evening after all the planned events we were sitting around the campfire reflecting on all that had happened. Our director asked us what God was doing in our hearts as a result of the retreat, and one of my buddies spoke up and said, “I want to go deeper.” The rest of us just stared at him, amazed at his spirituality.

The problem is that while many Christians make this statement, very few actually go to their spiritual leaders and phrase it as a question. This is a problem. Instead, they assume they understand spiritual depth and they attempt to achieve deepness on their own terms, and it almost always ends up badly. In fact, it’s one of the top three reasons people church-hop. Reason number one, “I don’t like the new changes around here.” Two, “I’m not being fed here.” Three, “I want to go deeper.” Church-hopping is not the answer to your quest for spiritual depth, and neither are most of the options people try in their pursuit of going deeper.

That’s why I’ve written this article. Due to all the misconceptions and myths about spiritual depth, it’s necessary to address the question, “How do I go deeper with God?”

SPIRITUAL ADOLESCENCE

The Bible says that spiritual growth is not optional. It is commanded to all Christ followers. 2 Corinthians 13:11 says, “Grow to maturity.” And 2 Peter 3:18 says, “You must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

However, there are many Christians who are not spiritual babies, and they aren’t growing to maturity either. They are spiritual adolescents. The cool thing about adolescence is that it is only supposed to be temporary. But there are many Christians who seem to be paused in puberty. They are perpetual spiritual adolescents. They’ve stopped growing, and they should be much more mature than they are.

You might be paused in puberty and you don't even realize it. How can you tell? The following are **ten signs of spiritual adolescence**. These are things that mature Christ followers simply don't say and do. Mature Christians have grown past these childish ways. See if you can find yourself in these ten signs, and then I'll show you how to go deeper – how to break out of spiritual adolescence and go on to maturity.

1. Spiritual adolescents have major authority issues. (They submit to spiritual authority until they disagree with a decision, and then they buck or bolt. Have you ever noticed how children want it their way, right away, and they know better than their parents and teachers? Same thing.)
2. They complain that the preaching, small group, or worship isn't deep enough.
3. They complain, "I'm not being fed here."
4. They are habitual church hoppers and shoppers. (Church hoppers join a church and stay awhile before bolting. Church shoppers never even join or get plugged in.)
5. They feel the need to have a close relationship with the pastor. (I remember one such spiritual adolescent at Church Acadiana. One day I got an email from him that read, "Pastor, if you hadn't personally asked me how I was doing the other day, I was going to leave the church." This is a form of manipulation. The man wanted me to know that if I didn't show him very special attention then he wasn't sticking around. He didn't stick around. Spiritual adolescents have to have the pastor come to visit them, and call them, and see them at the hospital, and pray for their needs specifically. The pastor has to be their personal chaplain, and if the church is too big for them to have a close, personal relationship with the lead pastor of the church, they leave and go to a smaller church. They come close to worshipping their pastor rather than Jesus.)
6. They don't bring the tithe to the church. (Tithing is simply not something that mature Christ-followers struggle with. It is called the training wheels of Christian stewardship and generosity.)
7. They think their life is busier and tougher than everybody else's and use this as an excuse for complaining, negativity, and not making God and church a priority.
8. They don't volunteer in church and usually lack a servant's heart. (Mature Christians realize that volunteering in church is not something we want from you, but something we want for you. They realize it's not something they have to do, but something they get to do. They realize that they are *called* and *gifted* by God to serve in a meaningful way in the body of Christ. Serving is not something they do, but a lifestyle they have embraced.)

9. They are the first and biggest complainers about changes in the church. (Part of immaturity is a self-centered focus, and that's exactly what this is. It's focusing on how these changes affect *me*; on how *I* don't like the changes; on how these changes don't sit well with *my* preferences, and with *my* idea of church; and on how *I* wouldn't make these changes if *I* in charge.)
10. They complain about the church being too big. (This is a fail-proof way of detecting spiritual immaturity. Anybody near to the heart of God would rejoice at the sight of a church filled with worshipers and spiritual seekers. Anybody near to the heart of God would realize that a church is supposed to reach people, and that means growth. If you don't like big churches then you won't like heaven. It's going to be the largest congregation ever assembled!)

These are just some of the signs of spiritual adolescence. There are more but I don't have the room to go into all of them. These are things that mature Christians just don't say and do. They just don't.

If you find yourself in the list above, there are two ways you can respond. You can get angry with me for picking on you and stay exactly where you are in your walk with Christ. Or you can use this list as a wake-up call and get motivated to keep growing. I hope you choose the latter response.

DEFINING SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Before I get in to how to go deeper with God, I need to clearly define spiritual depth and maturity. You must know the goal before you start shooting. You have to know the destination before you start traveling. What is spiritual maturity?

I like Willow Creek Community Church's definition because it is simple and clear. Spiritual maturity is:

“to know Jesus more intimately and to live as if he were in your place.”

In other words it is developing a richer, more intimate love relationship with Jesus, and becoming more and more like him in every way. Let me show you this in the Bible.

1 John 2:13 says, “I am writing to you who are mature in the faith because you know Christ, who existed from the beginning.” The first aspect of spiritual maturity is knowing Christ. And this kind of knowing is not merely knowledge about Christ; it's not just knowing a lot of information about Christ; it's having a personal, loving, intimate relationship with Christ.

I know a lot about the President of the United States, but I don't know him personally. Spiritual maturity involves deep knowledge about Christ *and* an intimate love relationship with him.

How intimately are you walking with Jesus? How often do you talk with him? How passionately do you seek him and pursue him? How passionate are you about his passions? How angry are you about the things that anger him? How grieved are you about the things that grieve him? How knowledgeable are you about his character and his purposes and his will for your life? These are all intimacy questions.

1 John 2:6 says, “Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did.” The second aspect of spiritual maturity is becoming more and more like Christ. Living as if Jesus were in your place – in your actions and reactions. Or as Rick Warren puts it, in your character (how you feel), your conduct (how you behave), and your convictions (how you think).

One of the mistakes we tend to make when evaluating our own spiritual maturity is to compare ourselves to others. Wrong. That will either lead to discouragement or pride. Instead we should constantly compare ourselves to Jesus. He is the model.

Spiritual maturity is all about growing more intimate with Christ and becoming more and more like him. But how do you get there? There is a four-fold path to spiritual maturity.

A FOUR-FOLD PATH TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY

1. The Habitual Path To Spiritual Maturity

There are a lot of interesting parallels between spiritual fitness and physical fitness, or between getting good spiritual shape and getting in good physical shape. For example, if you want to get into good physical shape, you’ve got to develop some new healthy habits such as diet and exercise, and you’ve got to stick with them. Eating a healthy meal when you feel like it and exercising when you’re in the mood aren’t going to get you into shape. Have you ever seen a body-builder before? They didn’t get to look like that by dieting and exercising whenever they felt like it or whenever they were in the mood. It took habits.

The same is true for spiritual growth. You’ve got to make some new habits and stick with them. And that’s the habitual path to spiritual maturity:

Spiritual growth results from good spiritual habits.

Rick Warren wrote the following, “You are the sum total of your habits. You’ve got good ones and you’ve got bad ones, but the things you habitually do are the things that make you. The key to spiritual growth is developing good habits.”

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, the apostle Paul wrote, “Train yourself to be godly. Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.”

I've heard it said before by people a lot smarter than me that spiritual growth is not merely about trying harder, but training more wisely. How do you train more wisely when it comes to spiritual growth?

That's where spiritual growth habits come in. At Church Acadiana we recommend six spiritual growth habits that if practiced regularly over a long period of time will help you grow spiritually. These habits are not new. They've been practiced by Christians worldwide since the time of Christ. What are they?

- 1) Gather on Sundays for corporate worship. (Acts 2:46)
- 2) Connect with other believers in a Home Group. (Acts 2:47)
- 3) Commune with Christ in a daily quiet time. (2 Timothy 3:16; Ephesians 6:17-18)
- 4) Serve Christ on a Ministry Team at church. (1 Corinthians 12:7)
- 5) Give a tithe of your finances to God's church. (Malachi 3:10-12)
- 6) Invite people far from God to church. (Acts 2:47)

Let me be clear. Spiritual growth habits don't mean that you are mature, but God uses them to help you grow. In other words, I couldn't point to somebody and say, "Wow, she is really spiritual. She consistently practices all six of the spiritual growth habits. Wow!" No. I could only point to someone who is mature if they are walking intimately with Jesus and are living as if he were in their place. But growth habits are what God uses to help us get closer to the goal.

It's been said that you are what you repeatedly do. Don't neglect the habitual path of spiritual growth. Are there some spiritual growth habits that you need to develop in your life?

2. The Divergent Path To Spiritual Maturity

Getting in tip-top physical shape is not simply about what you take in or receive, but also what you give or put out. It's not just about taking in the right diet; you've also got to put out the right amount of exercise. You've got to get your heart and muscles in shape, and the only way to do that is to put out the right amount of exercise. Getting in good shape involves a balance of diet and exercise, or a balance of inflow and outflow.

Many Christians mistakenly believe that spiritual growth is all about receiving or taking in the right spiritual diet – preaching, Bible study, worship music. It is believed that in order to grow you just need a lot of healthy spiritual food. But that's only one side of the coin. As with getting in physical shape, spiritual growth requires both receiving and giving. And that means two basic things in the spiritual realm: giving generously and serving sacrificially. That's why this is called the divergent path to spiritual maturity:

Spiritual growth comes by giving away, not merely by taking in.

1 Corinthians 12:7 says, "A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other." At Church Acadiana we regularly encourage people to give a tithe of their finances to God's house

and to volunteer for service in God's house. Those aren't things we want from you, but what we want for you. You don't have tithe and serve, you get to tithe and serve. As you take in preaching and worship and fellowship and then give out through tithing and serving, your faith will really take off.

The Dead Sea is a body of water in the Middle East that is completely dead. Nothing lives in it. No plant life. No animal life. The reason is that six million tons of water flow in to the Dead Sea every day from rivers and streams, but there's no outflow other than evaporation. The water is so full of sulphur, and salt, and other potent chemicals built up over time that nothing can survive. It's a Dead Sea because it has inflow, but no outflow.

There are many Christians who are dead in their walk with Christ. They aren't growing. They are spiritually unhealthy. And it's not because they aren't getting ministered to. They have inflow – plenty of Bible study, and praise and worship, and good preaching. But they have no outflow of ministry and giving. They are receiving, receiving, receiving, but not giving back.

Some of you want to grow, and you don't need another Bible study. You don't need more praise and worship. You don't need deeper Bible preaching. You need to serve in a ministry and give generously to God's house and to those in need. You need both inflow and outflow to have a healthy spiritual life.

I heard a preacher once say, "You're only as deep as the last person you served. You're only as deep as the last time you gave over and above a tithe." Is there a balance of inflow and outflow in your life?

3. The Obedient Path To Spiritual Maturity

Can you imagine somebody trying to get into good physical shape while holding on to an addiction to cocaine? They are trying so hard with diet and exercise to get into good shape, all the while clinging to a destructive and debilitating addiction. Obviously until they lose that bad habit they're going to be limited in their health.

The same is true when it comes to spiritual maturity. For many of us, the main thing we need to do to go to the next level spiritually is not a spiritual growth habit, because we're doing that. It's not balancing inflow and outflow; we're doing that, too. What we need is simply a good dose of obedience. There's a debilitating sin in our lives that's holding us back, and we need to lose it if we're to move forward. That's the obedient path to spiritual maturity:

If you want to grow, start by applying what you already know.

Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us."

The writer of Hebrews says that the Christian life is like a race, and many believers are trying to run the race with a backpack filled with weights. But if you're going to run with speed and endurance, lose the pack of sins. For some it's a sin of commission – doing something that is against God's will. And for others it's a sin of omission – not doing something that is God's will.

Real spiritual growth is not just about getting more of God, but God getting more of you. Most of us don't need more information, we need more implementation and application. Our problem is not that we don't know enough, but that we aren't acting on what we already know.

John Maxwell said it well. "Most of us are educated well beyond our level of obedience." I call it spiritual obesity – it's when your knowledge exceeds your obedience. Information without application leads to stagnation, frustration, and spiritual constipation. And that's where many of us are. Information is great. But it's like reading tons of books and magazines about health and fitness. All that knowledge amounts to jack squat until you start putting it in to practice.

How much of what you know are you putting in to practice? Is there a command you need to obey, or a sin you need to strip off in order to move forward in your relationship with God?

4. The Responsible Path To Spiritual Maturity

It doesn't matter how nice your health club is, they can't do the work for you. In the end, if you're going to get in shape it's up to you. You must drive yourself to the gym, use the equipment, eat right, and be consistent.

The same is true with your spiritual growth. In the end, the only person who can keep you from growing is you. That's the responsible path to spiritual maturity:

Your spiritual growth is 100% your responsibility.

Proverbs 26:15 (NIV) says, "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth." One of the number one reasons people hop from one church to the next is this: "I wasn't being fed here." Maybe you weren't. Or maybe the church set the table, presented the bread of life, and you were too lazy to bring it to your mouth, chew it, swallow it, and digest it.

I don't mind helping my one-year-old eat her oatmeal. But if by age 20 she can't pick up a spoon and bring the food to her mouth, we have a problem. Churches are filled with people who have known Christ for decades and still need a bib, a high chair, and want the preacher to do, "Open wide, here comes the Bible" tricks with the Word of God before shoving it in to their mouths.

I try to serve up the Word of God hot and fresh every Sunday, but if you refuse to apply it, study your Bible and pray on your own during the week, join a small group and dig deeper with others, serve in a ministry and tithe, then I can't help you. Your spiritual growth is up to you.

Grab a spoon and learn to feed yourself. Read great Christian books. Read your Bible and pray daily. Listen to worship music in your car and at home. Subscribe to great preaching podcasts and listen all week long. Buy a commentary and a Bible Dictionary and dig deeper.

If you really want to go deeper, the only thing holding you back is you. How can you take more responsibility for your own spiritual growth?

SPIRITUAL EVALUATION TIME

Now that you know the definition and the pathway to spiritual maturity, do you still want to go deeper? I hope so. God amazing things in store for you. Don't stop now. Keep growing.

How are you doing spiritually? The following questions can serve as a guide in evaluating your growth in Christ.

- 1) Am I knowing Jesus more intimately and living more as if he were in my place?
- 2) Are there some spiritual growth habits that I need to develop in my life?
- 3) Is there a balance of inflow and outflow in my life?
- 4) Is there a command I need to obey, or a sin I need to strip off in order to move forward in my relationship with Jesus?
- 5) How can I take more personal responsibility for my spiritual growth?