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FUNDAMENTALS TO CHRISTIAN GROWTH - Five major principles that I believe God has shown me over the 8 years I have been growing in the Lord:

1. BIBLE INERRANCY - The Bible is truth, and concerted study of the Word results in a growth in ultimate reality.

A fundamental principle to growing in the Word is to accept the whole Bible, all 66 books of the new and old Testaments as the word of God. Even if one is at the beginning skeptical, it is a poor showing for an all powerful God to be so impotent as to be unable to provide His Word to the world without error.

Anyone who reads the Bible as if it were simply like any other book, will get nothing from it. Anyone who supposes that he can pick and choose which verses are of God and which verses are not, will be led to error and away from the truth of God. However, even a skeptic, who sincerely studies the Bible with the intent of discerning truth - will be led to the truth of God.

The main keys to understanding the Bible are: a dependence upon the Holy Spirit and a confidence that the Word does not contradict itself - thus any interpretation of scripture that is at odds with the rest of scripture is suspect in regard to correct interpretation.

As human translators cannot perfectly translate from one language to another without losing nuances of meaning, we must not get hung up on the specific words used in a particular translation, but be willing to ask the counsel of the Living God and use other resources as are available (comparative bibles, word studies, lexicons, etc.) to help decipher the intent and meaning of various passages of scripture. The Word of God is a whole, and the correct interpretation of scripture always results in an increase in understanding and a harmony with the rest of scripture.

Though study of the Word is a continual and life long process of growth and dependence, people are extremely vulnerable to deception by those who will twist scripture, until they grow in the Word to the point that they become comfortable and confident with the consistency of the message in the Gospel - that message that permeates the entire Bible.

Some benchmarks to your growth in the Word:

Are you thoroughly convinced from scripture that grace is neither legalism nor a license to sin?

Do you understand that salvation is only the beginning process of a Christian, much like getting a job?

Are you thoroughly convinced of why it was necessary for God to come to earth and live as a man in order to save man?

Do you really understand what sin is?

2. **PERSONAL WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD** - This is absolutely essential to all Christian growth. Only through a faith that inspires a trust in God can one grow. God is the ultimate teacher about the things of God and about God. He is the ultimate convictor, prompter, encourager, and perfecter of our walk with God. We must develop an absolute trust and confidence that the Holy Spirit is always with us to guide us into all truths, and we must depend upon the Holy Spirit to discern what is of God from what is not.

If we do not depend upon and trust in the Holy Spirit we leave ourselves wide open to: the clever arguments of man, misunderstandings of the word prompted by losses of meaning due to Bible translation, supernatural forces that are not of God, our own intellect and our emotions. We must walk in absolute faith that the Holy Spirit and the Word are in unity.

The Holy Spirit of God is infinitely beyond us and we cannot readily define Him and put Him in a box. Even so, we must learn to recognize and know the Spirit of God.

Some characteristics used to identify the Holy Spirit:

- gives us a peace that transcends human understanding
- teaches the truth of God
- searches, exposes and convicts us of our rebellions against the ways of God
- teaches us God's love in contrast to the love of man
- encourages us to proceed in the ways of God
- strengthens us to overcome our self
- gives us a hunger for the things of God

As we pray, worship, fellowship, study, go about our life - we must learn to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit, we must learn to discern when He affirms, when He sounds alarm, when He starts to withdraw, when He is grieved. We cannot truly walk with God until we can identify the Holy Spirit.

As we learn to walk identification with the person of the Holy Spirit we can aspire to an attitude of continual prayer, communion, and worship.

3. **UNITY OF THE BODY** - Christianity is a Body ministry. Though it is absolutely true that God treats us each as individual creatures, unique and special in His sight and purposes - His manifest ministry is through the Body of believers in Christ. Just as in the human body, the individual cells or parts of the Body of Christ must be separately fed and nourished, at times individually directed, but they must also conform to their particular purposes and perform their function properly in unity in order for the Body to be effective.

We have free will and are much more complicated than the individual cells in a human body. Regardless of how we came to Christ, we came to Christ as an individual act of faith and choice - regardless of whether this was done in isolation or during the attendance at a gathering of people.

Once we start the process of growth in Christ, whether we are first taught by books or the teachings of men, we must eventually grow to a point where we can rely in complete confidence upon the Word and the Holy Spirit - otherwise we are less than a fully developed cell within the Body, and we can never fully discern the Spiritual Body of Christ from the carnal part of man's religion that has always been present in all churches.

Just as the human body cannot thrive unless each cell is a separate thriving entity, performing its designed function properly, the Body of Christ requires that each believer be a separate thriving entity which also performs his unique function to the overall whole of the Body. A complete integration of all the individual thriving Christians is necessary for the Body to function as a whole.

Most certainly this situation does not currently exist in the Body of Christ in the world of today - however in God's mind, plan and vision it does. Christ prayed that the body of believers be brought to a complete unity (see John 17:23). This is the will and the purpose of God.

In the human body, individual cells are attached from birth and thus it is easy to identify which cells are part of the body. As Christians, each man or woman must choose, always having free will: whether to allign or identify themselves with other proclaiming Christians; discerning whether others are part of the Body, cancerous cells, or non-Body cells.

The separate cells in the human body have differing functions, each cell is primarily concerned with its own functional purpose and sustenance, and there are billions of different functions - it would be a virtually impossible task to look at an unorganized pile of all the individual cells that comprise a human body mixed with cells that are not even part of the body, and then hope to separate the body cells from the nonbody cells and combine the body cells into one fully functioning human body. However, this is the very job that we as individual Christians face - an impossible task without the supernatural work of God.

Though we cannot assemble the body by ourselves, we can work in cooperation with God by seeking to identify other cells as part of the body, develop a unity, then make every effort to keep that unity. The problem of man in doing this is one of the chief hindrances towards man cooperating with God to bring about the fulfillment of God's plan.

Though impossible for unaided man, God is calling us to a unity - He wants us to cooperate with Him in the cell gathering process. In particular, Ephesians 4:3 states that we must make every effort to keep the unity of the Sprit through the bond of peace.

Only God can assemble us into a functioning body. However, God does provide us the capability (through our understanding of the Word and identification with the Holy Spirit) to identify when other cells are definitely part of the body. Though sometimes, because of inadequate contact or communications with the individual, or grossly differing functions it is difficult to discern whether another truly is a part of the body.

God will raise up the Body, but we must cooperate with Him to help develop the essential unity He requires for the Body to be assembled. There appears little understanding of the ingredients necessary to facilitate unity in the Body. As such, many of the efforts in today's churches are counterproductive to this unity that God is about to manifest.

Unity among believers can only persist as long as the central focus is upon Christ, the truth and harmony of the Word, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When two or more believers are united in unity, their focus is on the things of God. They can converse in complete freedom, the power and presence of God is central to their will - creating a harmony of discourse, a love and acceptance of each other. When believers make contact in this unity of the Spirit - they know that they know that they know that they are talking to the same God, that the same Spirit of God indwells each of them - they know and experience the unity between man that is impossible other than through God.

Unity in the Spirit and unity of man are two different things. Unity in the Spirit of God leads to peace, to love, to compassion, to wanting and desiring the truth and presence of God. Unity of man leads to agreement in judgment: agreeing in regard to a political action; agreeing that the correct way to baptize is by immersion or sprinkling; agreement that we should all lift our hands now in praise; agreement that we should all agree - these are man's attempts at unity, but these are not spiritual unity.

It is impossible for those who are not of Christ to ever attain this type of unity. Unity in the Spirit is a supernatural unity that is only possible through the supernatural presence of God. We must seek it, we must strive for it, and we must learn to discern when we have reached it. God wants us to have that unity.

Unity in the Spirit promotes freedom in Christ. A significant portion of the Body is continually under a sentence of condemnation when present with other members. Religious agreements, judgments, legalism, lack of mercy, lack of trust in God the perfecter - all contribute to an insufficiency in spiritual unity.

Titus 3:9 states that we are to avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law. Many items of religious observance and the future of prophetic fulfillment are either not defined in sufficient detail to be void of controversy or their meanings still remain partially veiled. The Body divides and new churches arise out of varying opinions on these and other issues. Arguments and quarrels do not lead to spiritual unity.

Compromise with the truth does not foster unity either. True unity is indeed an impossible development without the supernatural presence of God. Maturity in the Word and maturity in our relationship with the Holy Spirit are the essential ingredients to true unity. However, we can be assured that as God is calling us to unity, He will also lead us to the maturity in Him necessary to obtain, and then maintain: unity.

Some signs of our problems in developing unity:

Do we think that only our denomination or our specific church is right with God?

Do we always have to argue our religious beliefs and try to prove we are right?

Do we have a personal peace with God?

When with other Christians, do we have a peace, freedom and the opportunity to be truly spontaneous?

Do we subject other believers to a litmus test of legal compliance before we accept them without reservation?

4. KINGDOM OF GOD - Christ made repeated reference to the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven, much of His ministry was in reference to the Kingdom. If our thoughts about God's Kingdom are always in reference to the future resurrection of the saved and the future Kingdom of Heaven following the judgment - we miss a great part of Christ's message to the Church and we risk completely missing the life of obedience to the service God intended us to perform.

Sin is acting out of the will of God. By looking at the law, such as the Ten Commandments, we have but one aspect of sin. Strict obedience to the law can never please God because it overlooks the principle aspect of sin: going our own way, doing as we please. God has very definite plans for us. He is orchestrating complex plans here on earth. He has given us His prophetic Word and He will carry it off - with or without our willful cooperation.

In Matthew 7:21-23, Christ states that "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Few care to think that Christ's warnings are directed at 'Spirit filled Christians' who have been exercising the Gifts of the Spirit. How can a 'Spirit filled Christian' so displease our Lord? Would it please you, if you were the architect/builder of a house, and your skilled workmen took your expensive building materials and went ahead and built a house that suited them, completely neglecting your own plans and directions? We do that to God all the time.

One of the clearest expressions of the ongoing work of God is depicted in Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." A battle of eternal significance is raging. As Christian soldiers, are we going to choose our own skirmishes to fight, or, are we to act in obedience to our heavenly commander-in-chief? Christianity is not just a process of getting saved and going to heaven at some later date. Christianity is not just the process of being perfected after becoming saved. The real work of Christianity is to be made a trained, willing and obedient soldier for the battle that is raging about us. This battle is unseen to us, thus we can't call the shots. We are walking in the dark and must carefully hear and obey instructions from our Commander, if we are to be effective.

God does not take us to His vantage point to view the battle prior to assigning us our mission

for service, nor does He have a nice little chat with us and outline exactly what He wants us to do. We don't get an itinerary sheet listing the the steps - we have the Word and the Holy Spirit to guide our walk - and we may receive visions, dreams, words of knowledge or other information to direct our path. John 3:8 states it very plainly: The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

God has elaborate plans. Our mission may be straightforward and apparently simple or it may be so complex that it takes every ounce of our faith in God to keep us from doubting our sanity. One thing is always certain, God is serious - and we must be serious in seeking Him and discerning what He is trying to tell us.

Regardless of what our mission is, one thing is certain, God will test us to see if our allegiance is towards Him. This is the test of true discipleship, whether we are truly to forsake all for Jesus. As stated in Matthew 22:14 - "For many are invited, but few are chosen." The Lord calls many to service, the training may be short or of long duration. But one thing is certain, we must be shown able to forsake all for Christ, or we cannot be chosen for critical service to our Lord.

Training in God's army is much different than in man's world. If you were going to be an attorney, it would be easy for you to chart a course as to what you had to do to prepare. In God's army, often we do not even know what it is we are being prepared to do. We must trust God and His Word. Romans 8:28 states it well: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." As we go through the day to day world, no human mind can fathom how all the diverse circumstances of life, apparently without meaning or direction: all are part of the training program that the Lord is putting you through to prepare you for His service.

Understanding the reality of the Kingdom of God is critical. Otherwise one might take their newfound faith and start running with it - trying to do works for God out of their own human strength. As a matter of fact, this is exactly what we do, time and again, until the Lord shows us the fallacy of our own efforts, and in defeat, we learn to lean on Him and walk in fear and trembling - cautious to avoid going our own way.

For God's will to be done, the entire Body of Christ is to be drawn into discipleship to Him. The entire Body is to become involved in service to the Kingdom of God. Though this may appear a uniting effort (and it is), it is also a potentially divisive ordeal as the Lord deals with each of us individually. We cannot just comfortably go along with the herd; we get our marching orders directly from God. Regardless of whether our marching orders are similar to others we know or quite different, we will be put to the test.

5. LOVE ONE ANOTHER - This command of Christ is the most difficult to obey and it is the most necessary factor towards achieving unity in the Body of Christ.

Lack of love is also the single greatest obstacle to spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Intellectual knowledge, our own works in service for God's Kingdom; none of these can bear fruit

unless done in love. God's ways are not the ways of man. When fighting in God's service, we do not fight - We love. Our only offensive weapon is the sword of the Spirit, which is God's Word, Ephesians 6:17b.

Obedience to this command to love, requires that we love God first, as He is the only source of true love. Man recognizes love when he is loved, and man does want to love. However man has two imposing problems: man does not know how to transmit or receive love without the supernatural contribution of God.

It is in relationship to love that "SIN" is the most misunderstood word in the Bible. None of us fully has the mind of God, none of us is without sin; thus it is difficult for us to comprehend sin. We are all carnal (sinful) in different areas and thus view others with judgment in regard to sin differently.

As an example: Within the organized Bible believing churches, the preponderance of leadership positions are held by people who have either overcome or never been involved in many of the vices common to the world (eg.: materialism, tobacco, alcohol, caffeine, gluttony, prescription and non-prescription drugs, gambling, non-productive audio/visual, etc.). Religious leaders and other 'Christians' can readily focus on one or more of these vices as being onerous and condemn those who participate in these vices as being active and unrepentant 'sinners.'

Those who are still caught up in one or more of these vices may be urgently seeking to grow in the Lord. When they receive the condemnation from their brothers and sisters in Christ over these issues - they are in a sense, ostracized from 'polite', 'clean', 'pure', 'christian' society. Such condemnation levied by man is not the same as the convicting, prompting, encouraging of the Holy Spirit. Such condemnation by man results in a confusion for the recipient of the condemnation, a conflict between trying to modify their behavior to be acceptable to their 'brother,' or to accept defeat and their own 'sinfulness.'

Though vices are unhealthy and counter to spiritual growth, judgment and condemnation are lacking in mercy and compassion, totally destructive to the spirit of unity and love.

In the eyes of man sin is a matter of perspective or personal preference. If God exposes a sin in our lives that is one matter, but most often we are best at defining sin as those attributes that we have overcome or that we see as shortcomings in the lives of others. In fact, we are much more adept at pointing out the speck in our brothers eye than we are ever even aware of sensing the log in our own eye.

SIN is to us, most of the time, everything but what it actually is: sin is missing the mark, an unholy act, an act contrary to God's will, acts in rebellion or disobedience to God, going our own way, doing our own thing. Sin is judgment, presumption, self-righteousness. Sin is placing ourselves morally superior to others. Using our own pronouncements of sin as a weapon to try to attack, convict, persecute others, is our principle method of destroying the fruit of God's love in our lives.

The paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 in the Living Bible states it well: "So stop

evaluating Christians by what the world thinks about them or by what they seem to be like on the outside. Once I mistakenly thought of Christ that way, merely as a human being like myself. How differently I feel now! When someone becomes a Christian he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same any more. A new life has begun!"

God accepted us how and where we were when we came to Christ. God called us where we were. 1 Corinthians 7:23-24 states that you were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. A typical action by a new believer is to listen to all the advice and counsel of men and try to perfect himself. The ultimate result of this is failure. Until one gives up and abandons himself to God, the perfecter of our faith and the perfecter of man, he will only persist in the sin of going his own way - no matter how 'godly' it might seem as he achieves minor victories through his own fleshly efforts. The Spirit guides us in the truth and guides us to the conviction and the path of growth necessary to perfect us in Christ.

Do we trust God and His Word? If we did, we would spend less time trying to do the job of the Holy Spirit as we attempt to browbeat others to our points of view or convict them of the sins we see in their lives. Is it our efforts, or the power of God that convicts, encourages and transforms? Perhaps if we truly trusted in God, we could spend our efforts more effectively by yielding to the leading of the Holy Spirit to reach out to our brother out of our abundance, in humility, extending compassion, mercy, and all the other characteristics that comprise love.

Only God can reveal to us the strongholds: our defence mechanisms, prides, judgments, fears and uncertainties that keep us from sharing in Godly fellowship with others.

Maturing in God's Love is a process which God works in those who seek Him. It is like the process of peeling an onion until the last layer is removed and there is no onion left - it is the process of dying to oneself and living for God. It is the process of perfecting our walk with Christ, until we actually keep in step and under His yoke, not pulling from side to side, lagging behind or pulling ahead. As we mature in love, we are used as the instruments, the soldiers, in God's Holy battle to win men's souls and to defeat the forces of darkness.

Just as God is not a respecter of persons, God is not a respecter of denominations. Denominations, churches, pastors and priests tend to express divine ordination and authority over their flocks. Christ did not browbeat the downtrodden sinner. He had no problem with the prostitutes, beggars and thieves recognizing their sinfulness - just as alcoholics, drug users and other caught up in vices have little trouble acknowledging their weaknesses and desiring God's strength to effect a change in their lives. John the Baptist and Christ saved their harshest expressions for the Scribes and Pharisees - those who thought they were right with God. Over and over and over again, in the Psalms, Proverbs, Pentateuch, the books of prophecy and elsewhere the scripture attest to the fact that those who are secure in the things of the world - those who are blessed with lack of persecution, wealth, abundance - are often the very ones who are out of the will of God, the ones destined for destruction. Psalm 73 is just a single example to remember.

Once, like the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, you were a lost sinner, seeking the Lord. Then the Lord started doing a housecleaning job on your life. God humbled you and changed you. But

humility is not something you can put on in the morning and wear like a coat - it is something to be lived. If you think you are humble, you are actually the Pharisee - thanking God He has changed you so that you do not do the sins that you now point out in others.

Love is not a feeling word, it is action transmitted and received. You can feel all the love in your heart you want to for a downtrodden beggar. You can give him clothes and a warm meal and feel that you have demonstrated love. What the beggar may have received was an attitude of superiority and condescension from those who gave. What those who actually gave may have received was a feeling that they did good and earned points towards heaven. The love of God may never have been transmitted at all.

Creeping Legalism: When we first come to the Lord, it is by looking to Him, His word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that a transformation takes place in our lives. We are not to look at the law and try to live it, we are to look to Christ. Through the process of looking to Christ, He starts a housecleaning job. After a while, as we view the changes that have taken place, and we look to the law in the word - we say: Gee whiz, the law is true. If we then start preaching obedience to the law as an indication and attempt to either convict or to justify the fruit of sin in others lives - it is easy for us to gradually reposition our original trust in God to be the author and perfecter of our faith - to a new position where we are trying to be obedient to the law in order to clean up ours and others lives by a process of human effort. When we do this, our testimony, our witness, our effect on reaching out to the world - is lost.