

Christian Fundamentals

The Garden of God as a Metaphor

The Bible uses the metaphor of a seed, a vine, or a tree to describe the process by which we are planted in God's vineyard; and then it describes how we are grown by God, that is, how we are fed, watered, and pruned; the purpose of all this is to yield plentiful fruit (Jn. 15:8). The fruit sometimes refers to evangelistic reproduction – planting the seed for producing a large crop (Matt. 13:23). Sometimes it refers to fruit being reproduced in kind, representing coming to Christ (Lk. 13:6-9). Sometimes it refers to our personal display of fruit, which can be the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). But more often, it refers to glorifying God by visibly displaying his character in the way we live, i.e. visibly “abiding” in him (Jn. 15:5).

In the very beginning of the Bible, we find ourselves “planted” in the Garden of God (Gen. 2:8). Our very first test was how we dealt with a tree (3:3). Our curse is described as scratching in the ground to produce our own food by the sweat of our brow (3:19). God's grace is given to provide us ongoing nourishment with things we did not produce for ourselves, like the manna that fell in the desert during the Exodus (16:31); it is described there as “seed.” Jesus tells us that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we have no part of him (Jn. 6:51-56).

This tension between what we produce for ourselves (our works), and what God provides for us (his grace), is the great theme running from cover to cover in the Bible. There are things we are to do, and things which God is to do. Discovering and acknowledging which one is which, recognizing the inadequacy of what we do, and the splendor of what God does, is the foundation and the substance of the entire Christian life. It is what yields humility in us, and brings glory to God. ***He is Creator. We are creature.*** If we can simply understand and work out that relationship properly, then life will change for us dramatically.

How we Grow

If we are called for the very purpose of producing fruit (Jn. 15:8), and if by producing fruit we may show that we are disciples of Christ, then our primary focus must be to produce fruit. The problem is that we cannot force the production of fruit directly. The parable of the barren fig tree (Lk. 13) suggests that even the vinedresser (the Holy Spirit), cannot put fruit on the tree for the owner of the vineyard. He may only “dig around it” and “throw warm manure on it.” Then they both wait to see what the tree will do, having provided it with good soil, water, sunlight, and food. This is the cooperative nature of God working in us (*synergism*) to produce what his sovereignty intends in us (*monergism*).

That sentence may seem logically inconsistent. Surely it is either a cooperative effort, or it is a sovereign act. We either participate (2Cor. 5:18; 2Pet. 1:4; Phil. 1:12), or else God does it inexorably (Eze. 36:27; Phil. 2:13; 1Cor. 6:19; 1Jn. 2:27). Yet the Bible clearly says that both are true, and both are true at the same time. That's what we call a *mystery*. The Trinity is clearly taught in the Bible, but how it works is a mystery. Our salvation is mandated by God (Jn. 6:65), and yet we must believe in Christ (Jn. 11:25-26). We have questions about this paradox, even objections to this seeming contradiction (Rom. 9:19-24): but it remains a *mystery*.

Christian Disciplines and Theology

I have always been troubled by the theology of the books on Christian disciplines. They tend to come out of the Catholic tradition, the monastic practices of the early church. Although they speak of the disciplines as a means to an end, in the end they *are* the end. They become part of an obsessive checklist, an allocation of time and effort devoted to their practice. That is not what Christian freedom is all about. And yet, *and yet*, bible study, prayer, worship in song and deed, solitude, contemplation, fasting, and all such out-workings of the Holy Spirit are indeed part of the normal Christian walk.

What we think, what we hear, read, and believe, impact how we respond to the world around us, to our Creator, and to each other. In fact, these things don't just impact us; they determine our response. If we feed on the despair and anger of rap music, we become despairing and angry. If we feed on the hope and the promises of Scripture, we become hopeful and we act as the beneficiaries of the promises would be expected to act.

In line with that, I cannot effectively teach what I do not believe and do not do – it would be hearsay. Parents are often tempted to say to their children, “You *ought* to do as I say, and not as I do” Instead, they need to be doing what they say in order to set a proper example. It would not be right for me to tell you, “You may believe what you want, or what you are more comfortable with, even though I *know* it may lead to the perishing of your soul.” Now, against this mandate of personal integrity with regard to biblical truth, comes the cross-denominational approach of evangelicalism. Instead of a standard of beliefs, there is a mixture of beliefs. There is a mixture of interpretations and schools of thought about a number of things that the bible teaches. The foundational truths of Scripture must not be compromised. But in matters of indifference, we are free to choose our own path as God leads us individually.

For example, if I were to tell you that I believe God is triune, but I let you believe that he is not, I would be allowing you to believe what I am convinced is a lie about God – and it would not be what the Church teaches. The Trinity is a foundational truth of Christianity. But if I tell you that I believe *all* debt is forbidden, but it's OK if you believe that having a mortgage on your house is permissible, then I would be within this spirit of evangelicalism. I don't believe that mortgages are improper, by the way; it's just an example.

The boundary between foundational truths and matters of indifference is not always clear in today's evangelicalism. There is no catechism, no confession, and no creed to tell us where the one stops and the other begins. Therefore, feel free to ask questions and to challenge what is taught – not for purposes of dispute and disunity, but to better understand the reasoning behind the statements. After diligently checking the Scripture (like the Bereans – Acts 17:11), if you still disagree, that's OK. Feel free to disagree; do not feel free to impose your point of view on others, or to break fellowship over what may be a matter of indifference. Let me give you another example: your church may recognize baptisms from other Christian churches, whether done by sprinkling or immersion; but its own practice may be to immerse. If your elders believe baptism by immersion is correct, it doesn't mean baptism by sprinkling is heresy. Breaking fellowship with other churches over this issue isn't necessary. Instead, use a **Grocery Store Approach**: take what you can use; leave the rest on the shelf – *but submit to your elders*.

Personal Perspective

As I lay out the teachings in this course, I could be a chameleon in my theology, adapting to everyone's point of view. That way, you would never know where I'm coming from. I *could* do that. I could explain the Scriptural support for every side in a dispute. But I won't do that. I won't do that because I don't really believe that every point of view is equally valid. Truth, by its very nature, is exclusive. Two contradictory points of view cannot both be true. And truth, especially biblical truth, is not at all subjective – it's not a matter of how I *feel* about it. There are truths of Scripture that I just don't like. But I accept them.

I make it my practice to tell everyone that I not only come from a reformed background (the theology of the Reformation – Westminster Confession of Faith), but I am thoroughly reformed in my theology. Revealing my *bias*, my leaning, is intended to help you differentiate between my vantage point, and your own. Of course, I believe that my theology is biblical. But so do others who differ with me. You need to know that it is OK to have theological differences with others in the Body of Christ. In the end, however, you must rely on the bible alone for your guidance. **Stick to the text:**

- *Do not go beyond what is written* (1Cor. 4:6).
- *Do not argue over words* (1Tim. 6:4).

And do not get hung up on labels either! Don't get side-tracked on fine points of theology that do not help you to know God, and to act out what you know in a practical way. Let me give you a biggie. An **Arminian** would say that Christ died for the whole world, every man, woman, and child. But he did not save anyone. He only made it possible for them to be saved by believing in him. A **Calvinist** would say that Christ died only for those the Father gave to him. And he completely saved every one of them. And every one of them will believe in him. The Arminian would say that the elect are those whom the Father foreknew would accept Christ. The Calvinist would say that the elect are those whom the Father foreordained to accept Christ. Now, in practical terms, both the Arminian (e.g. John Wesley) and the Calvinist (e.g. Geo. Whitfield), will present the gospel to every person they meet. The Arminian hopes to convince them of their need for salvation, the Calvinist hopes to persuade them of their inheritance. The audience is the same. The message is the same. The result is the same. Only the unstated motivation will change.

Here is the wisdom of Charles Simeon of Cambridge on the subject, in conversation with the veteran John Wesley on Dec 20th, 1784:

“Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions.... Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?” “Yes,” says the veteran, “I do indeed.” “And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?” “Yes, solely through Christ.” “But, Sir, supposing that you were at first saved by Christ, are you not

somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?” “No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.” “Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?” “No.” “What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?” “Yes, altogether.” “And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?” “Yes, I have no hope but in Him.” “Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.”

(Ch Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, Preface: I.xvii f; quoted in JI Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, IVF, London, 1961, pp 13-14).

What Charles Simeon omitted was *Irresistible Grace*, and *Unconditional Election*. These doctrines are not essential to saving faith. After you finish the course you'll know why that's true, but you may not care one way or the other, and that's OK too. You should at least understand the issues involved, or you won't be able to play peace-maker in the church.

Equipping

In addition to covering the material, we're going to become word-smiths. Like a blacksmith who knows how to shape metals, we're going to gain a new craft. The bible is filled with words. The words are constructed in a particular way, with specific meanings. Translations are reliable, for the most part, but they are not always useable. So we're going to look at the bible itself, its construction, orderliness, overall message, particular application, etc. There are tools that other Christians have assembled for us over the past 2 millennia that will prove invaluable in our study of God's word. This course is designed to teach you how to use those tools effectively – by effectively, I mean in a way that changes and transforms the way you think, the way you act, and the way that you respond to how the world and God are dealing with you.

The Basis of Our Fellowship is Christ, but he is revealed to us – 1 John 1:1-4

¹ What has been from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have beheld, and our hands have touched of the Word of life, ² (indeed, the life was **revealed** to us; and *what* we saw and testify to and show to you *is* eternal life, which has been with the Father and appeared to us!); ³ what we have seen and heard we are proclaiming to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and your fellowship, moreover, *is* with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And these things we write to you, so that your joy may be full!

Even so, there are things that have a duty to do, and to learn, and to believe. We are responsible for them, and we will be held accountable for them. One of those duties is to grow. But as with many things in life, growth is not a destination – it happens on the journey, along the way.

COURSE OUTLINE

The path of Christian growth is neither progressive nor sequential. There is no specific set of skills or knowledge that must be acquired in a specific order. Nor is growth progressive or sequential in the sense that everyone learns the same things to the same extent. No assembly line is capable of reproducing cookie-cutter Christians. Not everyone needs exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. We can begin the journey even if we don't have everything we need at the start. We may be uncomfortable or ill-equipped for part of the trek up the mountain, but we're not leaving the base camp for good. We're going out and coming back each day (Jn. 10:9). We take what we think we'll need for *this* day's journey, but we're not surprised when something else comes up. That's the moment we're looking for: it's our moment of growth – it's just outside our comfort zone; we're being challenged in areas we didn't realize were weak.

Even so, there are essential supplies every believer needs to gather, and practices every believer needs to become adept at. The Church stands on three pillars: worship, discipleship, and evangelism. We're all members of the Church; and so every maturing Christian needs to be willing to actively participate in worship, discipleship, and evangelism. Each of these pillars stands on a foundation of *faith*. And of course, Christ is both the object and the Cornerstone of our faith. What we know of Christ, even what the early church knew of Christ, is based on the eternal *Word of God*. The strength of our faith flows from God's Word. Without the promises of the Old Testament, without the covenant, without the cross, there is no promise, no revelation, no relationship, and no Christ. Our knowledge of all these things comes from God's Word which is an active and living thing; it never returns to God empty or unfulfilled (Isa. 55:11).

Here then is the outline of our journey over the next sixteen weeks as we feed on the Word of God to gain strength, and drink from the Fountain of Christ to gain grace. We're setting out to discover the provisions of God's Covenant of Grace, and the fulfillment of His promises in Jesus Christ. Why? Because we're the named beneficiaries of Christ's New Will & Testament, which was signed in his blood on the cross (Lk. 22:20); the more we know of Christ, the better prepared we are to be shaped into his image (2Pet 3:18), and become mature (Heb 5:14):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Foundation of the Christian Faith <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1a. Effectiveness of the Word 2. The Nature of Covenant <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2a. Receiving the Spirit 2b. Fellowship and Debate 3. The Adamic Covenant <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3a. Abuse of Means 3b. The Tie that Binds 4. The Covenant of Grace 5. The Redemptive Covenant <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5a. The Children of God 6. Covenant and Community 7. Christian Disciplines 8. Habits and Intent | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Journaling <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9a. Sabbath Study 10. How to Read the Bible 11. How to Outline 12. Our Corrupt Nature <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12a. Federal Headship 13. Prayer 14. Fasting <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14a. Fasting Worksheet – Isa 58 15. Meditation 16. Evangelism <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16a. The Sacred Dance 16b. The Gospel Plot 16c. The Gospel Story |
|---|--|

The Mature Christian - What are some things that characterize mature Christians?

- They have grown beyond the basic principles of Christ (Heb. 6:1-8; 1Cor. 3:2).
- They rightly divide the Word of Truth (2Tim. 2:15)
- They have learned to abide in Christ through personal obedience (Jn. 15:5, 10).
- They press on, letting go of what hinders them (Heb. 6:1; 12:1).
- They are not blown about by every wind of teaching (Jms.1:6).
- They have renewed their minds, now having the mind of Christ (Rom. 12:2; 1Cor. 2:16).
- They learn to love one another just as Christ loved them (Jn. 13:34).
- They walk by faith and not by sight (2Cor. 5:7).
- They learn to be content in every circumstance (Phil. 4:11).
- They are committed and faithful to the point of death (Rev. 2:10).
- They delight in God and in his Law (Ps. 119:35,70; Rom. 5:11; 7:22)
- And so they have become Salt and Light in the world, because *that* is their nature (Matt. 5:13-16).

This course is designed to foster these attributes in the serious Bible student. ***But how do we become mature?*** Simply by reading the lessons and doing the homework? *Hardly*. Let's look at maturity for a moment. What is it?

Maturity is reaching a point at which we begin to *noticeably* display these characteristics of Christ. We *visibly* evidence "Christlikeness" in the way we think, speak, and behave. Yet keep in mind that even if we attain these things in large measure, we cannot duplicate Christ in all his glory and perfection. Those attributes belong to him, and not to us. Christ told us that no student is above his teacher; it is enough that a student is *like* his Teacher (Mat 10:24-25). So maturity is a relative thing compared to Christ. It's also a relative thing compared to other believers. Some believers will be stronger, wiser, kinder, and abler than others. Some will mature more quickly than others. Some will be gifted in certain areas that others are not gifted in, and that's by God's choice, not their own. But every growing Christian, to a lesser or greater extent, will display the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and do so to the glory of God. ***It is the fruit that identifies us, not the gifts.*** And that takes us back to the image of trees that we began with:

"A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, ***you will know them by their fruits.***" (Mat 7:18-20 NAU)

What then are these fruits that we should aspire to display, both in season and out of season?

"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." (Gal 5:22-25 NAU)

As I said earlier, we cannot produce any of these fruits ourselves. They're not ours to produce – only to display. They belong to the Spirit; and yet they are inevitable by-products of spiritual maturity. ***How then do we mature?? THAT's the essential question.***

We can see easily enough that fruits are the visible evidence of the Holy Spirit working in us to transform us into the image of Christ, imperfect though our image may be. We'll learn that the Holy Spirit is given to us to be our Helper, not our Doer; and so there are things we need to *initiate* before He will come alongside to help us. And we can see from the list of the fruits that not one of them exists on its own; *every* fruit is a response to something outside the believer – *each* one requires some sort of interaction with the world around us. That's how the Holy Spirit generates and produces them in us. We are stimulated by the world around us, and we strive to respond to each circumstance and each person with the love of Christ, until we begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit. This continues until the fruit matures on the Vine. **And that is maturity.**

That's also the key: God brings adversity into our life to stimulate Christ-like behavior in us. He repeats a process – adversity, response, learning, and adjustment; adversity, response, learning, and adjustment – until Christlike behavior becomes a conditioned response in us. And even then, God continues the process as He *perfects* His grace and His power in us (2Cor 12:9).

To help us through the process, and to give us a context in which to grow, God has given us the Church to equip and prepare us for the trials which lie ahead. Through the Church, and especially through fellow believers, God stimulates us – God *provokes* us – to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). To grow, we must learn forbearance and patience. We must learn to create an environment in which other Christians feel free to fail and to confess their sins. We must learn to listen attentively, and encouragingly, to what other believers have to say and to learn to both share with them, and receive from them. That's how *they* grow, and how *we* grow.

Growth cannot occur without adversity. It simply cannot be done. Growth cannot occur in isolation. It simply cannot be done. It is through adversity, and by learning to deal with others, that we eventually learn to respond with “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

But we'll never learn to respond in a Christlike way, if we don't first learn what that response looks like, and why it is necessary. And so this course attempts to foster the character of Christ in his people by providing a true image of God. Until we know our heavenly Father, we don't really know how to properly respond in a “fruitful” way to the things God brings to us. As you progress through this course, it is my sincere desire that you will come to know God better. And I pray that you come to acknowledge His absolute sovereignty over every aspect of your life and over existence itself. Most of all, I pray that you come to realize the full extent of God's great love for you, which He visibly expressed through the sacrifice of His Son on your behalf. I fully expect that as you come to realize these things more and more, you will begin to respond to God fruitfully, and with exceedingly great joy.