

How Old Are You? Spiritually, That Is

By Paris Reidhead*

The end of the year is always a time of inventory. One must take stock in order to discover whether or not the business has made the progress that is necessary if they are to continue, prosperously operate. The end of the school year determines whether or not the child is going to be promoted. Inevitably there has to come a time of reckoning. I think there is no better time for one to take spiritual inventory than just on the occasion that finds us meeting together, the last Sunday of the year, the theme before you, HOW OLD ARE YOU? Spiritually, that is.

Age is a relative matter. The little six year old girl out in Stuttgart, Arkansas, that responded to my request when I said, "Dear, can you teach me how to play the piano?" Had me sit down beside her on the bench and gave me the elementary instructions, and after about ten minutes of faithful tutoring, she looked at me with all candor and kindness, and said, "I just don't think that you will ever learn how to play the piano."

Now she was telling the truth as far as today is concerned, because I have not, up until today. And I suppose that that means that I am considerably younger than six years of age, according to her estimate, and anyone else's for that matter, when it comes to the matter of music. All of us are infants in some area. There have to be choices. The doctor may know nothing about repairing his automobile that carries him on errands of mercy to the home, just as the auto mechanic may know nothing about surgery and diagnosis of physical ills. They have had to choose. One man has chosen to minister to the body and another has chosen to minister to the automobile, and both are specialists, experts. They have deliberately chosen to neglect something that to another may be of considerable importance.

As you are here within the sound of my voice this morning, you have made choices during the months of the years past. Each of you were given by God 24 hours a day, and you have used them, somehow, in some way. They are gone. You were granted by Him 168 fresh, brand new, clean, unwritten, unscarred, unmarked hours every week. You have done something with them. These hours have passed. Eternity is going to show what you inscribed upon them for they are then like pages in a book upon which you have made indelible writing. And in that day, when you stand before Jesus Christ, the book will be open, and that which is written is written, and will be disclosed for all to see. One of the greatest follies of the human spirit is the folly of thinking that no man knows, and even God does not see. There is nothing that is any greater proof of moral insanity and the absolute insanity of sin than this, for every word that has been spoken is, as the vibrations left your throat and mouth, have gone on and on and on, and where they stop we know not. But I know this, that one day those words will come back again. And every deed has been indelibly inscribed and will be faced in the day when you stand before Jesus Christ.

Consequently, the year whatever it is is written. The time has been used. The weeks... The days have become weeks, the weeks months, and so theoretically you are one year older. The janitor who faithfully sweeps the floors of the college for 40 years does not get a degree when he retires. He has been in proximity to test tubes, lecture platforms; he has known generations of students by their first names, and he knows the teachers as if they were his own family; but the fact that he has resided inside of the walls for eight working hours a day has not in any wise entitled him for a Bachelor of Arts. There have been students that came in with all of their youthful enthusiasm in their late teens that had not a fraction of the experience and life that the janitor had, that have had not portion of the maturity in terms of family relationships and social responsibilities, but in four speeding years they have earned the right to be honored by the school with an irrevocable degree, because they used the time profitably and in the prescribed manner. And so, at the end of four years, they were not only as old as the janitor had become, but they have also completed the course. And therefore we have to ask ourselves as we go into 1962, Are we a year older, or have we simply been going through the routine demanded, and have ended up as young or even younger than we were when the year began.

Now God's goal for His children is maturity. This we find set forth in the Scripture that was read. That we may all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man. That word perfect has reference to maturity. The word is from that word *Teleios* that means ended. The end of our being, the end of our development, the end of our

purpose, becoming what we ought to become. In the spring, you see the blossom on the apple branch. It is protected from frost and nourished from the soil, and watered by the rain, and warmed by the sunshine, a little knob forms, and that knob increases until finally it is a green apple that gives the children tummy aches when they eat it against mother's law, and finally the sun kisses it in the fall, and the apple becomes red and it is ripe. You take it off the branch and hold it in your hand, and you say, "A perfect apple." What do you mean? It has done what apples are supposed to do. It is matured. It used the sunshine. It used the soil. It used the air that is breathed upon it, and it has become what it ought to become.

And so God has said He expects us to become what we ought to become. God's goal is maturity, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man. And then lest we should make mistakes and begin to feel content because we compare ourselves among ourselves and judge ourselves by ourselves, He said the measure of maturity is not the Pastor, nor the elders, nor the deacons, nor husband, nor father, nor brother. The measure of maturity is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. We are to become like Him. Are you a year older? Have you gone on one year's worth of development into the likeness of Christ? This is God's goal. But just as a parent has grades in this his children progress, so God has grades for His children. The goal is maturity. God does not expect us to leap from kindergarten to college graduate. He has put before us stairs. And so if you are in despair this morning saying, Well, I find I am not a mature Christian, and I have not come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and you were to try and jump the first week of the New Year by resolutions into this maturity, we can predict nothing for you but despair. If you were to come and say, I must reach the balcony and stand down here, first pray and then crouch and spring with all of the desperate, lunging effort you could muster, I say you cannot jump from here into the balcony. But if you will go through the door and turn to the left you will find that provision has been made, and if you are prepared to go up six inches at a time you can soon with ease reach the balcony. And how many there are that neglect the day by day growth that God has prescribed, and hope by some experience to reach maturity, it will not come thus. Oh, experience we have proclaimed and taught, phases of relationship we have established. But my dear, your growth comes as a child, just line upon line and precept upon precept.

And so God has grades for His children. We find them. If you would care to turn to I John, the 2nd Chapter, vs 12, 13 you can see the source for these grades for I have taken them from the Word. John, the beloved, writing about 95 A.D., 65 years after the ascension of Christ, establishes a principle that is going to continue as long as time endures, and that is that God has grades for His children: "I write unto you, little children..." And now he defines a little child spiritually. Someone that is in the kindergarten, the 1st grade, the 2nd grade of maturity. "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you..." There it is. The ones whose sins are forgiven, the one who is pardoned, the one who is justified, God owns as His child, when He says, little children. And so, if you find that last year, you began the New Year forgiven, and you are today, of course, forgiven, and there has come to you no maturation beyond forgiveness, you were a little child, you are still in the 1st grade of the Christian life. Forgiven, pardoned, past sins under the blood. But He has identified this first stage of childhood by saying; it is on the level of forgiveness.

Then you notice he says, I write unto you (in the second part of vs 13) "I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one." And thus he is talking to those Christians that having been forgiven have gone on to victory, victory over habit, victory over attitude, victory over temptation, victory through the Cross, victory through identification. And he is saying that this establishes you as young men. And so we would ask you, "Have you entered into victory? Have you seen the fact that when Jesus Christ died you died? Has this become an operating principle in your life? Have you understood that you can carry the key to victory with you into every situation that would lock you in the tentacles and chains of defeat. There is victory. Have you learned how to operate this combination and use this key?" Then you are a young man. For there is no excuse for continued failure and continued defeat. God is faithful who has not intended us to go on victimized by habits and corrupted by our imaginations, and weakened by our failure. God has made provision of victory. There is no temptation overtaken you or me but such as is common to man, and He will with the temptation make a way of escape, that we may be able to bear it. And when we understand this way of escape through reckoning ourselves to be dead indeed unto sin we have reached the stage of young men, we have overcome the world.

But, lest there should be some that say, "This is the optimum of spiritual maturity and the end of spiritual development," he says, No, no, no. Wait. For the beginning part of the 13th verse says, "I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known Him

who is from the beginning.” And he is saying that there is a state of fellowship with God. You might do nothing better for your own spiritual development this year than to read again the book I trust that is in your possession, and you will not seek far from it, and that is Practicing the Presence of God by a Roman Catholic saint, who was nothing more than a lay brother in a monastery in southern France, Brother Lawrence¹. Oh, how your soul should be stirred with hunger! How it should be quickened with desire! How it should be excited with the possibilities that lie before you when this man, working in a monastery kitchen, with all the demands that are thus brought upon a mortal (and I know of no place where human personality so disintegrates as in an institutional kitchen). But go back to a medieval kitchen, using but the iron swinging over the fireplace, and it is aggravated a hundred fold from the modern, stainless steel equipment that you will find today. And here is a man who said, For the 35 years that I have been in this monastery, as a cook, I cannot recall a waking moment when I have not been conscious of the presence of God. He has known forgiveness, he has known victory, but he has gone past forgiveness and victory into conscious communion and unbroken fellowship with God. And thus John says, These are fathers.

You are not an elder because of years past and hair greyed. We are not to be respected on the level of passing of years alone. It is maturity. It is development. It is growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ, passing from little children to young men, to fathers. Do you see it? Now, how old are you? Spiritually, that is? A little child? A young man? A father? God has grades for His children.

And then I want you to see something else. Not only does God have a goal for His children, and grades for His children, but God has grace for His children. Would you turn to Ephesians, Chapter 5, vs 25 to 27, and let the Spirit of God impress upon your heart this word. Our Lord is speaking concerning the family, but He is going beyond the family to the church which the home is to be, but the prototype. “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). It carries you back to Titus 2:14 where you read, “The great God and our Savior Jesus Christ gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” So, He gave Himself for the church. Why? That He might take you to Heaven when the members of it die? Oh, yes. Yes! We do not decry for a moment forgiveness and pardon, but notice. He gave Himself for the church. Why? That He might sanctify it, make it holy, cleanse it, purge it, purify it that He might sanctify the church and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing but that it should be holy, and without blemish.

Now God’s grace for His children is sufficient to sanctify the church, to cleanse it with the washing of the water by the Word, and to present it to Himself without spot or wrinkle. He has provided all of this for you. The parents that provide food for their children, adequate and nourishing, and provide clothing for their children, and then provide school opportunity for the children, and enroll the child and pay the tuition, and keep the child there, and then they have the sheer attitude of ingratitude and indifference to the lectures, and carelessness about the studies, have every reason for grief.

Think of what God said there in Isaiah 5. He said, “I planted a vine in a very goodly hill. I fenced it and I dug it, and I built a tower in the midst of it” (Isa. 5:1-2). And He said, “I looked that it should bring forth grapes and it brought forth wild grapes.” What should I do? He said, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do, I will take down the walls, I will break down the tower, and I will leave those grapes to be trampled. They have failed of their purpose” (Isa. 5:5). Now our Lord Jesus Christ gave Himself for the church that He might sanctify the church. This means cleanse it, purge it inwardly, so that it is pure within; And then that He might continue to keep cleansing it as it speaks of the laver through the washing of the water of the Word; And present it to Himself, spotless. Everything necessary for you to grow in the grace and likeness of Christ has been provided in the New Covenant. He has said, “This is the New Covenant in My Blood,” and in His Blood He has provided everything so that you can have the Law written upon your hearts, taken away the heart of stone by sanctifying grace, give you a heart of flesh, put His Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in His statutes (Luk. 22:20). Everything necessary has been provided.

¹ Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) A lay brother in a Carmelite monastery in Paris.

Then notice, He has not only made provision in Christ, but He has established a ministry to aid in this. If you will turn to Colossians 1:28-29, you feel something of the concern of the Apostle. Here he has established the principle first, Christ in you, and this His presence makes possible maturation apart from the indwelling presence of the Lord, consciously enjoyed and experienced, we remain as children or young men. He says, "Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). And now notice the sweet provision of a loving Lord for His church. As the Apostle says, "Whom we preach" (Col. 1:28). What is he concerned about? I heard a pastor say some years ago, "Well, at least one thing, we are getting the job done." And the job was increased membership, and enlarged role, and hundreds coming into the membership of the church. But the church prayer meeting was not increasing, nor the spiritual life increasing, but the job that he envisioned was a statistical job, a numerical job. And he said, "We are getting the job done." Now Apostle Paul, tell us, What is the job? And hear him, "Whom we preach warning every man, teaching every man that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus..." This is the task. And so the Lord Jesus not only gave Himself, but He gave us such as Paul. And lest we should say Paul was the last of this company with this ministry, let us go back to the Scripture we read in Ephesians 4:11-12. And we read there, "And He gave some to be apostles and prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors, and teachers for the perfecting of the saints." This is why He has given evangelists and pastors and teachers. "For the maturation, the perfecting of the saints." No man is entitled to take this ministry to himself. And anyone who has ever undergone ordination will understand something of the seriousness with which it is approached, when good men have godly have examined and tested your life and your mind, and your heart, and your purpose, and then they (whoever they may be) condescend to say that in their eyes and in the eyes of the Holy Ghost as best they understand His leading, you have been ordained of God. And so we find here that the purpose of ordination our Lord gives, and men recognize, and no man takes the honor to himself. And this says, "Be not many teachers, for theirs is the greater condemnation" (Jam. 3:1). And one day, every man who stands behind the desk in the presence of a company of people must give an account of his ministry to the Head of the church as to whether or not he has understood the purpose of the Head, and ministered in that purpose. And what is it? "He gave evangelists, and pastors, and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints." There it is. Christ gave Himself for it. He gave this purpose to His ministers, and He gave men. And pastors have reference to elders, and every elder has been given of Christ, has been ordained of Him for this purpose. And every teacher — "for the perfecting of the saints."

How old are you? Spiritually, that is. Have you availed yourself of the ministry? The people in this congregation have had most amazing opportunity through the years with Dr. Simpson's² ministry for the first 35 years, and the good men and godly, the best he could bring, not just of the Alliance. He brought Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists; the Annual Convention in this church was a roster of the outstanding servants of God for years and years. And these past years we have sought to bring to you, at least during that week, the men of God from every persuasion who have shared the convictions that have been dear to us? What have you done? You say, you have not been able to profit from the ministry that God has brought through me. I am grieved. But what have you done with the ministry that He has brought through other men that have stood before you week after week and some of them year after year for that week?

How old are you? A year older? How old are you? Spiritually, that is? Out of the mouth of many witnesses He is confirmed. Have we grown? How old are we? God has given men.

Then, I would have you see not only God's goal for His children, and God's grades for His children, and God's grace for His children, but I would also have you think for just a brief moment on God's grief over His children.

Galatians 4:9 lets us get the echo of it through His servant Paul. Listen to it: "But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, where unto ye desire again to be in bondage?" And then vs 19: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you..."

You say, This is Paul. Oh, I think I know something of a Pastor's heart and yearning and longing for the people that he serves, but God knows that. But here we have the testimony of one whose evidence is unimpeachable, one whose life stands as indited by the Holy Ghost, and looking out at the people in Galatia, the very ones who were the products of his zeal and of his

² Albert Benjamin Simpson (1843-1919) founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance

ministry, the Apostle Paul saw them, going down into the bondage of legalism, and turning away from the simplicity of the Gospel, and then he said in these pathetic words, "My little babies..." You know the Bible says, "As a father pitieth his children" (Psa. 103:13a). Mothers love them, but there is something that God saw in a father's heart that He did not see in a mother's heart. Perhaps it is their helplessness, their inability to know what to do. But when God wanted to get a measure of pit He said, "As a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that love Him" (Psa. 103:13). And so here is a father in the faith, and he says, "My little babies..." Nor children. Babies. For it was the impregnation of the truth he brought that brought them out of death into life. My little babies. I am travailing, travailing, in pain, in agony, in birth, until Christ be formed in you. This is not Paul. This is Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church who has given everything, Himself, sufficient grace to sanctify, cleanse and present spotless. And yet He saw them turning aside, and He says, I am travailing in pain.

And then in Hebrews, Chapter 5, vs 12 & 13, those pathetic words. The writer of the book of Hebrews said here in words we cannot escape, "For when for the time comes you ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For everyone that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. You ought to be teachers, and you need to be taught again." And God looks with grief.

What does God see? You know, when a child — I have never had this experience and trust God that by His grace I shan't, but how it must grieve a parent's heart when the child is not passed in the first grade, or the second grade, the third grade, the fourth grade, and is not passed, and the class goes on and our Lord says, "You ought to have been teachers, but ye have to be taught. You ought to be eating strong meat and it is still milk." How God's heart must break. And so there is God's grief over His children.

At the end of this year does God see you a year older? Do you cause joy and rejoicing?

It brings us to the next point and the last. God's glory in His children. Would you turn to Galatians 1:24. This is the same chapter where we saw His grief. Now we see God's glory. And Paul said, "They heard only that which he who persecuteth us in times past now preaches the faith which once he destroyed, and they glorified God in me." Oh, the wonder of it. Oh, the glory of it. The triumph of it. Here is a man who was a persecutor, and an enemy, and he is heard. He has met God. There has been a glorious transformation, the ultimate deliverance, the release and the freeing of a human personality into obedience into the will of God. And he says, "And they glorified God in me." The heavens declare the glory of God, the earth showeth His handiwork, but never so glorify God as when the unbreakable rock of the human heart has been broken in pieces by the Holy Ghost, and healed and made whole. And so just as men glorified God in Paul, so God glorified Jesus Christ in Paul, and glory turned to joy. And from the very place in which this verse is taken, it says, And He shall joy over them with singing. He shall joy over them with singing. And He looks down into the face of His children and He joys over His people with singing.

And then the last we refer to is Ephesians 1:18. Here where Paul is saying, "That the eyes of your understanding may be opened," that we may know three glorious things: the second of which is this. The riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. Our Lord's inheritance is not in organization. Our Lord's inheritance is not in church. Oh, we have become a spectator participants in national life and recreation. Our President some months ago, weeks ago actually, said that he is in great concern over the number of men that are rejected from military service because of seemingly a national debility of our youth, weakening of our national physical strength in spite of all the advantages of nutrition that we have I wonder if this is not but a picture of the church. We find that we can be part of an organization, and measure ourselves by it, just as someone gets great pride in the fact that they are a member of the school where eleven men on the football field defeated all the other teams in that circuit. What difference does it make to the individual? Why should they be proud? So it is that someone says, "Well, we are members of this church. We have so many thousand members, and we have so big a missionary budge, and we have this much." This is not the issue. The issue is, Are you a year older than you were last year? Have you grown? Have you matured? We cannot become spectator Christians and find our satisfaction by someone in the yesteryears that knew us and loved us. I wonder if their hearts might be broken.

I think if Dr. Simpson might come back and see the Society that he brought into being, and some who sat under his ministry and others that have grown from it, I wonder if his heart would be filled? If he would joy over us with singing? I wonder? I wonder if the Lord Jesus Christ came today He would find you a year older than you were last year? How old are you? Spiritually, that is. Little children? Young men? Fathers? Is Christ living in you? Christ filling you with His fullness in unbroken fellowship? Walking in the fullness of the Holy Ghost? This is the normal Christian life. Are we normal? Adult? Hear it. "That Christ may take up His lasting dwelling place in our hearts through faith, that we being rooted and foundationed in love may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the length and breadth and height and to experience the love of Christ which passeth intelligence that we might be filled unto all of the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17-19).

You say, "What are you going to do? Leave me in despair? I find I am no older. I find I have failed Thee, months have passed, the days have gone, and the hours have sped. I am not where I ought to be." All right. Perhaps you have failed to pass this year. But what you do about the months that come depends upon your attitude this morning. Survival is not the end. Keeping yourself fed and clothed and warm is not the end. The end is to grown in the grace and knowledge of Christ. You say, "I haven't. What can I do?" Realize that God has a purpose. God has grades for His children, find out where you are. And then give yourself to Him in confession of failure, of callousness, of lovelessness, of prayerlessness, if such has been the case, and come before Him, and tell Him that in the days that lie ahead you make yourself a candidate for every provision of love He has made in Jesus Christ and every ministry of truth He can bring you, whether it be from book of men long dead, or men now living, but you shall avail yourself of every ministry that He has made, so that you can grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The only thing that I can say to you is this, What happens a year from now is going to depend upon you. We cannot do anything about what happened in the twelve months past, but you have it within your power to change the future if you are willing to face your need, God's provision, and God's means.

What is God's goal for His children? Maturity. What are God's grades? Little children, Young Men, Fathers. God's grace in the full provision of His Son. God's grief over those that are content to remain infantile. And God's glory in those that grow up into the grace and knowledge of Christ into the measure of the statue of the fullness of Christ.

Shall we bow in prayer? Father of our Lord Jesus, we are here before Thee. We know that there are flowers that bloom in the dessert. We know, our Father, that there are flowers that bloom up in the mountains against a snow that never leaves. And we know there are orchids that bloom in the feted valley. There are lilies that come on the swamp of filth. Flowers Thou hast found. None of us can plead our circumstances, none of us can make excuse by our past, our heredity, none of us can find contentment in our difficulties, in our surroundings, or in our habits. Thou has made provision for them all. Thou hast taken into account every handicap and liability that we had when we came to Thee, and made full provision for each of us to grow in the grace and the knowledge and the likeness of Christ. So seal to our hearts this morning the deep desire of God. We are content with so little. Put into our hearts such a hunger for Thee, Lord, that we will not be satisfied until we awake in His likeness, till Thou art satisfied with us. Help us to find how old we are spiritually, and then to avail ourselves of the provisions of Thy love, and the instruction of teacher ministry that Thou hast given, and to go on, determined to be a year older a year from now. For Jesus' sake, for the testimonies' sake, for sinners' sake, yea, and in that hour when we see Thee, for our own sake. Amen.

Let us stand for the Benediction. "Now may the God of peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the Blood of the everlasting covenant make us perfect in every good work to do His will, working in us that which is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom be the glory now and forever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21).

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, December 31, 1961 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.