

As John gave the churches tests to distinguish who were false teachers, he did not want the believers to doubt their own standing in Christ. He wrote to reassure them of their spiritual growth toward Christ's likeness. In the churches of Asia, and for that matter throughout the world since Pentecost, there were three stages of Christian maturity identified by John. He does not bring them up to chastise anyone for not growing more quickly. He merely states the qualities of each stage, which is an incentive for all to grow to maturity. Growth is a natural phenomenon. In the physical and spiritual world, growth is the sign of health. Stunted growth usually means a lack of nutrition (the Word) or the presence of disease (false teaching). It is abnormal for living things not to grow to maturity. That includes our life in the Spirit. (2Thessalonians 1:3)

John begins by addressing the first stage that is the experience of all believers. ¹² *I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.* "Dear children" is a translation of the Greek word *teknion*. It is the diminutive of the word for children. It would be used for infants. In the Christian world it became the term for converts. Since our Lord told us that we must become as little children to enter the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3), and a new convert has just begun their spiritual growth, they were called little children, (*teknion*).

Every believer is or has been an infant in Christ. That is the stage in our spiritual life after we have repented of our sins and trusted Jesus to be our Savior. That is a wonderful stage. It is a stage of joy and enthusiasm. The weight of guilt has been lifted. Many of us can remember the exact moment, while for others it was a process that developed over time. I guess we could compare it to those babies that were born after an hour of labor compared to those who were delivered after several days of false labor followed by a 36 hours of labor. Whether quick or slow, we come to the wonderful state of knowing we are forgiven and made right with God. We can face eternity without fear of judgment. We are amazed that God would be so gracious.

However, the babe in Christ is blissfully ignorant of all the pitfalls and temptations that lie ahead. They often will attach themselves to a spiritual hero and take in whatever that person teaches. Babes in Christ must be warned about false teachers and grounded in the basics of the faith that will keep them from error. (2Peter 2:1; Psalm 119:11) They need the milk of the Word to grow strong.

It was for His name's sake that we were forgiven. It wasn't anything that we did. To understand the Hebrew implication of that phrase, "for His name's sake" we have to grasp what the Hebrew sense of "name" means. Throughout the Old Testament, we see that God does things *for His great name's sake*. We get an idea of it when Moses argued with the Lord that if He destroyed murmuring Israel in the wilderness, the nations would say God brought them out of Egypt just to destroy them. (Numbers 14:14-16) In other words, the nations would ascribe false motives, even evil motives, to God. Moses was concerned about God's name, the perception of His character. It was for God's great name's sake that He chose Israel. (1Samuel 12:22) He leads us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. (Psalm 23:3) God saved people for His

Commented [notes1]: 3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.
2 Thess 1:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."
Matt 18:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 1 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves.
2 Peter 2:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
Psalms 119:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 14 And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, O LORD, are with these people and that you, O LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
15 If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 16 'The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.'
Num 14:14-16 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 22 For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own.
1 Sam 12:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Psalms 23:3 (NIV)

name's sake. (Psalm 106:8) *Hallowed be your name.* (Matthew 6:9) That is the idea behind this phrase John is using. It is for the glory of God that you became a child of God, but children should grow into their Father's likeness to properly represent His name. (Hebrews 5:12)

In our spiritual life, growth means a greater likeness to the perfect man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 8:29; Philippians 3:10) John just told us that if we say we live in Him, we must walk as He walked. (1John 2:6)

John jumps to the most mature stage, the spiritual fathers. *13a I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning.* As we saw last week, to know Him is to love Him. We saw in the introduction of the letter that the One from the beginning is Jesus. (1John 1:1) Those who have become fathers know Jesus.

Through their life in the Word, and their years of abiding in Jesus, the fathers have come to know Jesus to a greater depth than the infants or young men. That knowledge results in a love and dependence on Jesus that is contrasted in the next verses with those who love the world. These are the ones that should be elders in any assembly of believers. Their intimate knowledge of Jesus leads them to base their decisions not on personal preferences or even favorite doctrines but rather on the leading of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus looked to the Father in everything, they look to the leading of the Spirit to know the mind of Christ.

If the church would adhere to the first century principle of Biblical eldership, it would transform the church in Sedona, in our nation, and in the world. That is not voting on who is the most popular, or business savvy, but recognizing those fathers who have come to know Him who is from the beginning. The Apostle Paul lays out in two different letters exactly what that looks like. (1Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9) Biblical elders would then lead the church as a whole to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. The church of today too often has a CEO mentality, and like the changing world, we are moving from board run businesses to dictatorial style CEOs with a board of "yes" men. Like Israel of old, we want a king. (1Samuel 8:6) We see it in the huge salaries of the pastors of some mega-churches, a reflection of what is happening in the corporate world. It's a sad comment on the church when it imitates the world!

The church is not a corporation; it is a living organism. The head is Christ Jesus! (Ephesians 5:23) The mouth is no more important than the eyes or the ears or the hands or the feet or any of the hidden organs within, no matter how small. The fathers in a church are not the head. They submit to the head and lead the rest of the body at His direction. (Hebrews 13:17) One is no more important than the others. (Philippians 2:3)

The real problem is not just that we don't adopt this clear New Testament teaching, but that there aren't men who qualify as fathers. When churches fail, it is because the men in the church have failed to be who God has called them to be. That failure comes not in one significant event, but over a lifetime of choosing to please the flesh instead of spending the time getting to know the Word, to know Him who is from the beginning, Logos. (Galatians 6:8)

Commented [notes8]: 8 Yet he saved them for his name's sake, to make his mighty power known. Psalms 106:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 9 "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, Matt 6:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Heb 5:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:29 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, Phil 3:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 1 John 1:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ... [1]

Commented [notes16]: 6 An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. ... [2]

Commented [notes17]: 6 But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. 1 Sam 8:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Eph 5:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so tha ... [3]

Commented [notes20]: 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Phil 2:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Gal 6:8 (NIV) ... [4]

The rank and file Muslim will attempt to memorize the entire Koran, but few Christian men can even guide someone down the Romans road of Scripture to salvation. They remain children overcome by sinful desires. I'm so grateful that we have many in this small fellowship that are developing into fathers, to truly knowing Him who is from the beginning. It takes a life of consistent discipline, dying to self and yielding to the Holy Spirit, which develops, in time, into real spiritual maturity. You can be of any occupation, in any nation, under any condition or standard of living and grow into a father. It is God's will for every man. Excuse me, women, for focusing on the men as I believe this passage does. You know that you women have a unique role in the body of Christ that is just as essential and is developed in the same way, that is, knowing the One who is from the beginning. (Philippians 4:3)

I'm reminded of one of the Promise Keeper songs. "Rise up O men of God. Have done with lesser things. Give heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the King of Kings!" If the Son of Man fails to find faith on the earth when He comes, it will be because men of God were absorbed with lesser things rather than serving the King of kings. (Luke 18:8)

There is also an in-between phase in our spiritual growth. *13b I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.* After that initial phase of new birth, we are faced with the conflicts with our old nature. The old nature has associated comfort and satisfaction with certain carnal things. The evil one will try to keep us engaged in those things after our conversion, but there is a problem. Our new heart is immediately convicted to a greater extent than ever before because of the presence of Christ in us. We no longer desire to do those things, but the patterns are still in our mind. (Romans 12:2)

As we grow in Christ's likeness, we begin to realize who we are in Him. We realize we are no longer slaves of sin and that we have the authority to ask the Lord to rebuke the evil one. (Jude 9) He dangles before us those things that once enslaved us and though we struggle at first, eventually we find that in Christ we have a new comfort and satisfaction. His presence is our new joy. Our heart longs to please Him.

The spiritual young men learn to yield to the Holy Spirit instead of the evil one. If someone wrongs them, instead of becoming filled with rage, they turn to the life of Christ in them and pray for the person. When temptation to lust is presented, they recall the word of God and the temporary nature of this world's pleasure. (Hebrews 11:25) They employ the power of the Holy Spirit and turn away. Spiritual young men walk victorious over the evil one in the power of Jesus. (Romans 16:20)

Think how much stronger the church would be if believers moved on from being babes in Christ to strong young men. This stunted growth keeps them from moving on to become fathers. Instead of deepening their life in the Word, they are still battling the same old temptations year after year in a seemingly endless cycle of sin, repentance, and renewal. Something is wrong with this picture. Either the repentance is not genuine, or the conversion is not real. Repentance means a change of direction, not regret that you were caught. Genuine conversion comes with a new heart for the

Commented [notes22]: 3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.
Phil 4:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"
Luke 18:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.
Romans 12:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: 9 But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"
Jude 1:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.
Heb 11:25 (NIV)

Commented [notes27]: 20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.
Romans 16:20 (NIV)

things of God. (Philippians 2:13) Young men in the Spirit can be 75 years old. This is the phase of a victorious walk, but deepening of the knowledge of the Lord is needed to truly become fathers.

Commented [notes28]: 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Phil 2:13 (NIV)

Next John seems to repeat himself, but there is a difference. *13c I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.* This is what John had said to the fathers. How could the children in the faith have the same description? The difference is in the depth and kind of knowledge. Little children know their father as the provider, protector, and disciplinarian. This is the kind of knowledge of spiritual babes. They see God as their loving provider who protects and disciplines them. There are times when they fear that discipline, but they know it will always be followed by love. They are secure in the knowledge that their Father loves and cares for them, but they still know so little about their heavenly Father's nature.

14 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. John repeats exactly what he said before to the fathers, but here it is a contrast to the knowledge of the babes. The fathers know the eternal God. They knew Him like the babes know Him, but their experience has deepened. The time in the Word has rounded out their understanding of His nature and His ways. They don't expect things to always be easy or to always get what they want. They appreciate the times of being abased as well as the times of abounding. They have learned the secret of contentment. (Philippians 4:12) They see the eternal One in every detail of life. Nothing can shake them. (Psalm 16:8) The eternal dimensions of our unchanging God has given their life of faith a stability and calm that is almost tangible. (Hebrews 13:8) Their passion for the Lord is stronger than ever, but tempered by wisdom and patience. They discern the Lord's timing and wait for the Spirit to lead. They continue in intimate communion with God. (Psalm 130:5)

Commented [notes29]: 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. Phil 4:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes30]: 8 I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Psalms 16:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes31]: 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Heb 13:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes32]: I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. Psalms 130:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes33]: 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Col 3:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes34]: 11 They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Rev 12:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes35]: 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.' " Luke 4:4 (NIV)

14b I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one. John reiterates that the young men have overcome the evil one, but he adds a few points. The word of God lives in them. (Colossians 3:16) To move to the stage of a young man, the Logos must live in you. Of course the Word lives in every child of God, but the emphasis is that the young men rely on that living Word within them. That is what gives them the strength to overcome. (Revelation 12:11) He guides them to discern true doctrine from the false teachings. He gives them strength to resist temptations.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He relied on the Word to be His strength in resisting the evil one. He quoted Scripture. The Spirit quickened the verses He had put to memory and He used them to defeat the evil one. (Luke 4:4) If Jesus used the Word to defeat the evil one, surely we must do the same. But first we must value it enough to memorize it, if not word for word, at least the ideas and principles so that we can say as Jesus did, "It is written..."

John did not write these descriptions to condemn anyone for the stage in which they found themselves. He wrote so that they could identify their level of growth and then apply this letter to continue to grow. If you find yourself to be a dear child, enjoy that enthusiasm of childhood, but look forward to exercising your victory over the evil one.

Watch out for false teaching. Attach yourself to Jesus, not man. Realize your strength lies in the Word living in you, and practice yielding to the Holy Spirit.

If you find yourself in the young man phase, praise God for the victories. Solidify them by strengthening your resolve to let the Word live in you moment by moment, and by keeping your eyes on Jesus. (Hebrews 12:2) Recognize the source of your strength and add to it. Look to the depth and insights of the fathers and learn and grow. It is good to desire to become a father, but don't rush into it. It comes with great responsibility. You are accountable for more. (Luke 12:48) You will limit your freedoms even more because you become an example for your congregation. (Romans 14:13)

Fathers, fellow elders, whether you have the title or not, the flock looks up to us. Our failures bring a greater condemnation for we are expected to always be an example. We, too, are still growing. It goes without saying that the work in us is not complete, yet we are expected to live as if it was. We are the target of the enemy. If the evil one can bring us down, he causes great confusion in the church. The repercussions of fallen Christian leaders in this town have been great. Overcome the bad examples with your good example. (Romans 12:21) This means your freedoms will be limited so as to not offend the weak. It means you are not as free as others to say what is on your mind. It means everything you do must be bathed in prayer. It means you must continue to abide in the One who is from the beginning, for that is the source of your endurance. (John 15:4)

Pride can be a dangerous temptation for fathers. Humility comes from recognizing that it is only the grace of God that keeps us from falling. Resist the temptation to compare yourself with others and always look to Christ as your measure of maturity. That will keep us all humble. Amen? Spiritual fathers always point to Jesus, never to self.

Our stage of spiritual growth has nothing to do with God's love for you, or your standing before God. (John 13:1; 1Corinthians 1:30) Nor is spiritual growth measured by how long we have been a believer or how much theological information we have memorized. (Hebrews 5:11; Romans 2:21-24) Nor is spiritual growth directly related to successful ministry. It is about knowing Him who is from the beginning (the living Word), living in continual obedience (application), and remaining in Him (endurance).

Now, at what stage are you? What does that mean to the investment of your energy? What should you be focusing on? No doubt, as we went through these descriptions the Holy Spirit pointed out something He's been pointing out for some time now and asking, "Do you hear me now?" What intentional change will you make as a result of that conviction? John is writing to all of us at our various stages of growth to share some very basic but deep truths so that we can all continue to grow. Cling to these truths. Remember your need for fellowship. Remember obedience is the sign we know Him. There are more signs to follow. Cling to them, for they are our reality checks that challenge us to continue to grow in Christ.

18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. 2 Peter 3:18 (ESV)

Commented [notes36]: 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Heb 12:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes37]: 48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. Luke 12:48 (NIV)

Commented [notes38]: 13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. Romans 14:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes39]: 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes40]: 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. John 15:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes41]: 1 It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. [John 13:1 (NIV)]

Commented [notes42]: 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 1 Cor 1:30 (NIV)

Commented [notes43]: 11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. Heb 5:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes44]: 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? Romans 2:21-22 (NIV)

Page 2: [1] Commented [notes15] Paul Wallace

2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,
3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.
4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.
5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)
6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.
7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.
1 Tim 3:2-7 (NIV)

Page 2: [2] Commented [notes16] Paul Wallace

6 An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.
7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.
8 Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.
9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.
Titus 1:6-9 (NIV)

Page 2: [3] Commented [notes19] Paul Wallace

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.
Heb 13:17 (NIV)

Page 2: [4] Commented [notes21] Paul Wallace

⁸ The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Gal 6:8 (NIV)