

# Spiritual Development in Children<sup>1</sup>

"Biblical and balanced spirituality  
is the goal of all Christian living."  
--Dr. Charles Ryrie



## I. The Key New Testament Verse on Spirituality

1 Corinthians 2:15 "But he who is spiritual judges all things . . ."

The mark of spirituality is given as the ability to discern or judge the spiritual value of any matter or decision. This not only includes a strong discernment between what is good and evil, but also between what is better or best in any given situation or choice.

## II. Necessary Elements for Developing Spirituality

The kind of spiritual discernment spoken of in 1 Corinthians 2:15 involves four major elements:

### A. Regeneration by the Holy Spirit is the First Requirement



The word "spiritual" is from a root word that literally means "pertaining to the spirit," which refers to the Holy Spirit. Only children who have experienced a new birth by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior can have any relationship with the Holy Spirit (John 1:12-13; 3:6). Regeneration by the Spirit makes spirituality possible, though it does not guarantee it. Other factors are required.

### B. Sanctifying Ministries of the Holy Spirit are Required



The Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit is responsible for several ministries in the life of a believer of any age which will gradually sanctify or set them apart for God's purposes. These ministries include:

◆John 16:8 \_\_\_\_\_

◆John 16:13 \_\_\_\_\_

◆Romans 8:14 \_\_\_\_\_

◆Romans 8:16 \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material for this subject was adapted from Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969).

◆Romans 8:26 \_\_\_\_\_

◆1 Corinthians 12:7 \_\_\_\_\_

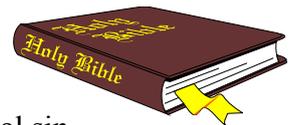
◆Galatians 5:17 \_\_\_\_\_

◆Ephesians 5:18 \_\_\_\_\_

Note: To be "filled with the Spirit" means to be "controlled by the Spirit," as seen by it being contrasted with those who are filled with wine. Those who are filled with wine are controlled by it. To be controlled by the Spirit is to have your attitudes and actions yielded to the Holy Spirit rather than under the control of the flesh. Being filled with the Spirit does not mean you get more of the Holy Spirit, but rather that He gets more of you--as more areas of your life are under His control.

### C. Biblical Knowledge

No one can consistently judge or discern the difference between right and wrong and between what is spiritually better or best without a growing knowledge of God's Word. Man's conscience, mind, and will have been affected by Adam's original sin, and they can only be cleansed and transformed by constant input of biblical truth.



◆Titus 1:15 \_\_\_\_\_

◆Romans 12:2 \_\_\_\_\_

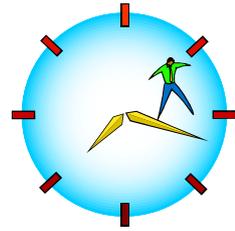
◆Psalm 119:9 \_\_\_\_\_

◆1 Peter 2:2 \_\_\_\_\_

It is impossible to develop spiritually without regularly hearing and applying God's Word.

#### D. Time is Required

It takes time for a child of God to know God's Word well enough to use it as a basis for judging all things. That kind of discernment or maturity in making right choices does not happen overnight. Certainly not all people require the same amount of time, but some amount of time is required for all.



The reason why different amounts of time are required for different people is because not all believers progress at the same rate in this growth process. Some do not have the same opportunities to grow in biblical knowledge. Some have already developed sinful thinking and habits or live in circumstances that make it harder for them to yield to some of the earlier mentioned ministries of the Holy Spirit. So there are no set time frames for developing spirituality.

Though all believers start out as infants in their faith, babyhood does not need to last long. When Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth, he fully expected them to be spiritual after some four or five years in the faith. The fact that they were not yet spiritual caused him to chastise them for their continued carnality.

*1 Corinthians 3:1-3 "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it; and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. . . ."*

### III. A Definition of Spirituality for Believing Children

Spirituality is development of a God-honoring discernment evidenced in day-by-day moral choices that are based on a growing understanding of biblical truth and a submission to the Holy Spirit's work in the believing child's life over a period of time. Some important thoughts and principles that flow from this definition would be as follows.



#### A. Spirituality is the Goal

Spirituality should be your goal for any child you lead to Christ or that you are responsible for teaching.

## B. New Believers are Not Spiritually Mature

New believers of any age cannot possess spirituality (spiritual maturity) simply because it takes time to gain the biblical knowledge and experience in facing temptations in order for spiritual discernment to be developed.



## C. Spirituality Development is Dependent Upon Your Teaching

The rate of the development of spirituality in the lives of the children you teach is very much dependent upon what truths you teach, how much truth you give them over time, and whether or not you teach at the application level. Most believing children remain stunted in their spiritual development, not because they are unable to handle the "meat of the word," but because their teachers never give more than the "milk of the word."

## B. Development of Spirituality is Also Dependent on the Holy Spirit's Work

The rate of the development of spirituality in believing children is also dependent upon their understanding of and yieldedness to the Holy Spirit's work in their lives. Therefore, you will need to teach what the Holy Spirit wants to do in their lives.

## D. Failures of Spiritual Discernment



Failures of spiritual discernment (backsliding) in certain areas of life (i.e., personal Bible reading and prayer, church attendance, witnessing, etc.) will hinder the rate of spiritual development in children but will not cause them to totally lose all the development gained up to that point. However, there are some more serious areas of failure that may have lasting consequences in hindering spiritual development (drug addiction, satanic influences, sexual immorality, etc.).

## IV. Characteristics of Spirituality

### A. Spirituality in a Believing Child's Character

Since the essence of spirituality is being controlled by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and since the Holy Spirit was sent to glorify Jesus Christ (John 16:14), then the spiritual person's life will be reflecting the character of Christ. Thus, the evidence that the Holy Spirit is actually controlling a life is **not** seen in manifestations of the Spirit, but in seeing the qualities that were seen in the character of our Lord. The fruit of the Spirit is a perfect description of these character qualities that will become evident in the spiritually maturing believing child.



*Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."*

There can be no true spiritual maturity without visible evidence of these qualities in the life of a believer of any age.

### B. Spirituality in the Believing Child's Biblical Knowledge

*Hebrews 5:13-14 "For everyone who partakes **only** of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."*



All new believers begin the Christian life as "babes," able to take in only the simple truths that are referred to here as the "milk of the word." That is normal. But it is abnormal for one to continue as a "babe" in faith over a period of time. As a teacher of believing children, you must ground them strongly in the basic truths of Christianity, but then gradually move them on to be able to understand and apply deeper truths and doctrines of the Bible. To fail to do this is to hinder their growth and thus commit the sin of "offending one of these little ones who believes in Christ. Such actions open you up to the serious consequences Christ gave warning about (cf. Matthew 18:6).

### C. Spirituality in the Believing Child's Heart Attitudes

*Proverbs 4:23 "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it springs the issues of life."*

The Bible teaches that the key to correct behavior is having the right thoughts and attitudes in the heart in order to guide the decision process on behavioral responses. Therefore, your teaching of the believing child should not only focus on correct conduct but also on the godly attitudes that he needs to develop with the help of the Holy Spirit. The following are but a few of the attitudes the believing child should display as spirituality develops through his life. When these are in the heart, it will become evident in his behavior.



- ☺ Thankfulness vs. complaining
- ☺ Humility vs. pride
- ☺ Forgiveness vs. revenge
- ☺ Unity vs. divisions
- ☺ Encouragement vs. criticism



### D. Spirituality in the Believing Child's Conduct

*Hebrews 5:14 "But solid meat belongs to those . . . who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."*

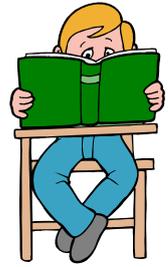
Spirituality will be evidenced in conduct that reflects obedience to the biblical knowledge they possess. As seen earlier, biblical knowledge is an essential element of spirituality, but such knowledge must be put to use in order for spiritual development to take place. The Hebrews being addressed in this epistle were unskilled in the word of righteousness, which meant they were not able to correctly apply biblical truth that related to rightness in doctrine and Christian living. As a result, they could not properly discern between doing what was good or evil. Of course, this meant that they also were not able to discern between better or best behavior in any given situation. Thus, you must guide believing children into a level of discernment in their conduct so that they know not only what is morally right or wrong, but also what behavior is useful and for the good of others. This means that they should know when it is best to give up a personal preference or right in order not to cause another to stumble.

*1 Corinthians 9:19 "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself servant to all, that I might win the more."*

This kind of Christian conduct does not happen automatically. You, as the teacher, must spend time teaching the correct behavior for believers to have in different situations. You will also need to confront and challenge wrong behavioral patterns you see in the children you teach

## V. Areas of Biblical Knowledge for Development Spirituality

2 Timothy 3:16 *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."*



While all Scripture is profitable in some way, some portions have greater value than others for developing spirituality in new believers. The following list<sup>2</sup> is not exhaustive, but merely tries to outline key topics to teach believing children in order to enable them to become spiritually mature even at a young age.

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|--|---------------------------------|
| 1. Assurance of salvation                | 16. Faith                       |
| 2. Personal daily devotion               | 17. Love                        |
| 3. Victory over specific sins            | 18. The tongue                  |
| 4. Separation from sin                   | 19. The use of time             |
| 5. Christian fellowship                  | 20. The will of God             |
| 6. The Bible                             | 21. Obedience                   |
| 7. The church                            | 22. The Holy Spirit             |
| 8. Reading the Bible                     | 23. Satan--the believer's enemy |
| 9. Studying the Bible                    | 24. Confessing sin              |
| 10. Memorizing Scripture                 | 25. Assurance of forgiveness    |
| 11. Meditating on Scripture              | 26. Second coming of Jesus      |
| 12. Applying Scripture                   | 27. Witnessing                  |
| 13. Prayer                               | 28. Discipling new believers    |
| 14. Sharing your personal testimony      | 29. Giving                      |
| 15. Submitting to the lordship of Christ | 30. Missions                    |

### A Prayer of Commitment



After realizing how dependent believing children are on their teachers for development of spirituality, are you willing to make the following commitment to God in your ministry to them? If your answer is yes, please sign and date it.

*"O Lord, I commit myself to develop spirituality in my life so that I can always lead the believing children in my family and ministries into spiritual maturity through my life and teaching. Help me, by Your grace, to learn how to teach and counsel believing children in the basic areas of truth necessary for them to develop a genuine spirituality. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>2</sup> This list was adapted from Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978).