

# 1981

## November 1981

Dear Friends,

This letter marks the modest beginning of the writing ministry in Immanuel. I trust that such a ministry will prove to be beneficial, and increasingly fruitful in the coming years.

I have been reflecting upon our first four months together as a body of believers, and I would like to share some of my thoughts concerning the work of Christ here in Norfolk. I believe that most of us have discovered that the past four months have been more arduous and costly than noticeably blessed and fruitful. We may have grown discouraged at times, and wondered whether the Lord could really be vitally interested in a work which is so small, and which is seemingly so plodding. Ah, but we must realize that the first phase of our work is ploughing. We are now just beginning to break up hard, fallow ground, in our own hearts, as well as in the hearts of others here in Norfolk. This phase may yet continue for months or even years; but we will not always be ploughing in this way.

This thought should cause a question to arise in our thinking: What is a sure sign of spiritual germination? To answer this question, we must not be so preoccupied with the present toil of ploughing that we lose sight of the fruit we are seeking, or the goal towards which we are striving. Our goal, our vision, can be nothing other than our blessed Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Phil. 3: 8-14), and our object in the ministry of Immanuel must be nothing other than to grow, and to help others to grow, in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The result will surely redound to God's glory, and His children will inherit their full share of blessing.

If this is our vision, then we can detect true spiritual germination when the hearts of people in our midst begin freely to go out to the Lord in loving gratitude. I believe that we have already seen a small measure of this in some. For when we observe in erstwhile lifeless and listless souls a genuine quickening, a new self-motivation towards the things of God, what can we conclude except that the Lord is at work in His people? Indeed, this spiritual self-motivation is of paramount importance, since it indicates the presence of a new person, who is being increasingly moved from within by the powerful and sweet influences of the Holy Spirit. Hence, such people gladly and freely respond to Paul's challenge to, work out their salvation (Phil. 2: 12). They have the mighty living God working in them, causing them to desire and do His will (Phil. 2: 13).

But we find the work of God germinating not only in the hearts of individuals, but also in fellowships. Many Christians overlook the fact that in the verses quoted above, Paul is addressing a fellowship, a family of believers in Philippi. So we see that God not only works within individual believers, but also among congregations. And where the Lord works, integrity of character and purpose, maturity of mind and heart, holiness, love, generosity, etc., cannot fail to be present.

So this is what we are looking for in ourselves and in our fellowship: holy self-motivation toward the Lord. But how can we stimulate and nurture such godly growth? Apart from the negative aspect of one's growth via trial and suffering, it seems to me that there are two categories of stimuli which the Lord uses to incite spiritual growth. There are what we may call external stimuli, such as church activities, special programs, conferences, films, and so forth. We are blind or perverse if we deny that the Lord uses such things to help draw men closer to Christ and closer to one another in Christ. But surely these stimuli, derive their power from mere secondary sources. They may seem more appealing and fruitful in the short term, but as effective tools for the deep and lasting work of character development they simply are not adequate. In fact, if such external stimuli are used exclusively, or are relied upon too much, the danger is that people will become programmed, and as such they will grow addicted to their external stimuli.

The internal stimulus is God the Holy Spirit, working through His Word, the sacraments, and in response to prayer. We in Immanuel are committed to allowing the Lord to build us up primarily from within, so that less and less we will need to be like babes, who require external stimulation for motivation. That is why we are committed to a Bible teaching ministry, and why our prayer meeting is such a priority. Our ministry is simple by design, so that the glory and power of Christ may not be obscured, thus causing our holy self-motivation and resolve to be fractured and weakened. It may take those who visit us some time to see that what we offer is the opportunity for them to develop lasting fruit, and to build lasting individual and corporate Christian character. Nevertheless, we press on, seeking to offer the gospel and ourselves to a needy and dying world.

Yours in hope,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

One of the themes which we have encountered in our Sunday evening studies in Proverbs has to do with the development of godly potential in ourselves and in others. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the whole tenor of Proverbs is calculated to stimulate the development of godly character. Through his warnings and positive instructions, Solomon intends, "...to give prudence to the naive," and he aims to impart, "...to the youth knowledge and discretion." (Pr. 1: 4). It has been exciting and helpful for us to discover that the Lord has created us all with various capacities. But the challenging thing we have learned is that many of us do not rise to anywhere near our full stature in Christ. The potential too often remains dormant, with the result that our ability to reciprocate the love of our heavenly Father, and our capacities for serving our Lord in the world stay underdeveloped. Of course it is possible in such cases for us to remain formally pious and orthodox; but practically speaking we can gradually become cold, callous, and ineffectual.

Surely we all hope to grow to maturity in Christ. So how can we develop our godly potential? How can we avoid withering away spiritually? How can we help, rather than hinder others in their growth in Christ? The simple yet profound answer lies in our maintaining a wholehearted devotion to the Lord. This general principle may be outlined in three main stages: (1) we accept the love which God has for us in Christ, (2) we respond by loving the Lord with all of our energy, and (3) we communicate this love of God in Christ to others. John's first letter gives us the same formula wherein we are told that we love the Lord and others because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4: 19).

However, some believers get stuck at the very first stage. They cannot accept the fact that they are accepted in the beloved Son of God. In such cases, the vital fact of free justification in Christ—which may be only intellectually acknowledged—needs to penetrate and transform the heart. If such penetration and transformation do not effectively take place, we will discover that instead of our having the full, rich, warm, life-giving love of Christ pulsing through our lives, the weak, cold and noxious streams of sinful self will increasingly pollute and stagnate our hearts. The causes of such a condition are many. We may view the Lord as a stern Judge who is obsessed with our sins. Then we live as if He were waiting for us to step out of line so that He could crack us over the knuckles. How easy it is to forget that He is a loving heavenly Father who has demonstrated His love for us by doing something very costly on our behalf—giving His only begotten Son for our salvation.

There are other factors which can contribute to our having a distorted vision of the Lord. Of course the wickedness and harshness of society, the rudeness and perversity of fellow workers, neighbors, unsaved friends, or even members of our own natural family may all serve as poor models of godliness for us. Consequently, we can become jaded, begrimed, insecure, and pessimistic about our own prospects in life. Then we can think, "If I'm so filthy, and if I feel so depressed and even depraved, how can the Lord love me?" It naturally follows from this that we will, at least secretly, feel the same way about others. We can thus lose self esteem and respect for others. We do not bloom in Christ as we should, nor are we effective transmitters of the potent love of Christ. We begin to believe that there is no potential for good or God in ourselves or others. But all of this surely is to leave the Lord almost entirely out of view. As in the case of the birth of our Lord—when there was no room for Him at the inn—so we can allow Him to be crowded out of our hearts and lives. And to make matters worse, such a spiritual disease is never confined to the one who suffers from it. Such spiritual tunnel vision, with its malicious effects, can be communicated to entire families, fellowships, and communities.

So during this season when our minds are beginning to focus upon the wonder of our Lord's birth, let's remember what that birth means for us. Talk about perceiving potential! Think of dear old Simeon, and his reaction when he saw Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus to the temple (Lk. 2:22-35). He saw in that tiny, helpless, baby boy, all of God's purposes for man, and he rejoiced in the great gift of God's salvation. But remember that Simeon was a devout man. Although he was no doubt aware of his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world, he was not primarily concerned about that. He was not obsessed with sin in himself or others. Instead, he was looking for relief from the agony of sin; he was looking for the consolation of Israel. Because he maintained a wholehearted devotion to the Lord (calling himself the Lord's bond-

servant, Lk. 2:29), because he was seeking, in all humility, to receive and to give the Lord's richest blessing (cf., Lk. 2:28,34 where he blesses God and Joseph and Mary), he had a sense, finely trained and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. This enabled him to detect, to appreciate, and rightly to respond to divine potential within the most unlikely sources.

In this joyful season, let us remind ourselves of what it means to rejoice in the Lord. Let us seek, by God's grace, to be like Simeon, accepting and giving the Lord's blessing, and hence allow the godly potential in ourselves to be developed by the Master's careful and loving hands. Then we shall find that we are becoming life-giving transmitters to the glory of God. How about that for a real Christmas present?

Yours in Christ's love,

William Harrell

