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TEACH ME, LORD!

The Spirit and the *Disciplines* of Living

"Live for the life to come. Live in the light of eternity. Live for the powers of the age to come."¹

These words are not a pious, sermonic exhortation to God's people concerning the things they ought to do. Rather, they declare A.B. Simpson's challenge to the Church to follow his lead in focusing life's course upon the pursuit of the eternal. Accepting this challenge calls for the courage to make a bold, definitive decision. It is a decision to embrace spiritual disciplines and to make all things subordinate to the value of knowing God intimately and continuously growing in Christ's grace.

The Apostle Paul's rousing words, "train yourself to be godly" (1 Timothy 4:7), challenged Timothy to make this formative decision. Simply responding to life's circumstances and events is an inadequate and unacceptable strategy for spiritual development. Scripture implores us to be wise and faithful stewards of the grace we have received. As faithful stewards we have a responsibility to establish an intentional course leading to our own personal spiritual development and the spiritual growth of Christ's body, the Church (see Ephesians 4:12-13).

Paul's admonition to Timothy flowed out of the conscious decision he had already made to "consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:8). Nothing was more important to Paul than knowing Jesus Christ. Paul had established the ultimate priority in his life. This settled priority authenticated the validity of his exhortations to pursue the things leading to godliness. The words "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1) are

an open invitation to join Paul in pursuing the formation of Christ's character and life within our own lives.

This was an invitation Albert Benjamin Simpson could not refuse. He wholeheartedly accepted Paul's invitation. Simpson made a conscious and deliberate decision to forsake anything that had the potential to jeopardize the pursuit of his spiritual formation, service to Christ and a life leading to godliness. Throughout his life, in the midst of various and often difficult circumstances, Simpson made decisions which continuously reaffirmed his commitment to follow in Paul's steps. It is out of a life of obedient submission to Christ that A.B. Simpson invited others to "live in the light of eternity." His invitation expressed the longing of his heart for every believer to enter into the joyous satisfaction of the fullness of Christ.

To this end, Simpson understood and embraced the role of discipline in his own life. He extolled the importance of voluntarily embracing practices and habits that enhance spiritual development and lead to godliness. Simpson did so without any fear of reverting to some form of legalism. He knew the disciplines were a gift of God's grace that he voluntarily embraced in cooperation with the Spirit's working to form Christ's character within his own being.

A.B. Simpson's writings are seasoned with statements underscoring the value he placed on practicing the spiritual disciplines. Their flavoring is a reflection of the practices he embraced in his life with Christ. These statements give us a glimpse into Simpson's heart. We discover that he was a man who was not afraid to bare his soul, letting us see the longing desire of his heart in a way that dispels any notions of spiritual superiority. He openly said, "I had to learn to take my spiritual life from Jesus every moment."² These are the words of a man growing in godliness. They reveal an openness, an enticing vulnerability inviting, even compelling, us to join him in pursuing activities of spiritual formation leading us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

DAILY SUPPLY

Moment-by-moment, day-by-day we must learn what it means to take our life from Jesus. Simpson called this his "daily supply." His unpublished poem "Breathing Out and Breathing In" describes

his attempt to cultivate a conscious awareness of Christ's presence living within.

Jesus, breathe Thy Spirit on me,
Teach me how to breathe Thee in,
Help me pour into Thy bosom
All my life of self and sin.

I am breathing out my own life,
That I may be filled with Thine;
Letting go my strength and weakness,
Breathing in Thy life divine.

Breathing out my sinful nature,
Thou has borne it all for me;
Breathing in Thy cleansing fullness
Finding all my life in Thee.

I am breathing out my sorrow
On Thy kind and gentle breast;
Breathing in Thy joy and comfort,
Breathing in Thy peace and rest.

I am breathing out my sickness,
Thou hast borne its burden too;
I am breathing in Thy healing,
Ever promised, ever new.

I am breathing out my longings
In Thy listening, loving ear;
I am breathing in Thy answers,
Stilling every doubt and fear.

I am breathing every moment,
Drawing all my life from Thee;
Breath by breath I live upon Thee,
Blessed Spirit, breathe in me.

I am breathing out my sorrow,
Breathing out my sin;
I am breathing, breathing, breathing
All Thy fullness in.³

Simpson never considered the conscious awareness of Christ's presence and reliance upon Him for the "daily supply" as an end in

itself. Without dismissing the significance of this “daily supply” in the believer’s consecration and edification, it is more than this. It is the essential source and qualifying criterion for empowering God’s children for service and ministry in advancing Christ’s kingdom. Simpson understood the crucial correlation between spiritual character and effectiveness in ministry. This relationship is too important to ignore or dismiss as inconsequential. Simpson realized that evangelistic effectiveness was proportional to the quality of the spiritual life and experience of those who preached, labored and prayed for the salvation of men and women to become members of God’s kingdom.⁴

His vision and determination to reach the lost could not be compromised by spiritual indifference or lethargy within the Church. He denounced what he perceived to be a low level of spirituality in the Church by saying, “The blight of the Church today is spiritual starvation. People are famishing on rationalism, socialism, sensationalism, on lifeless bonds and bank notes and unwholesome pleasures.”⁵ Simpson did not make statements such as this in a derogatory or condemnatory manner. They were made within the context of an appeal to pursue the things leading to godliness and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom.

To A.B. Simpson, the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the sanctification of God’s children were inseparable. The vitality of one’s spiritual life, the journey and progress in spiritual formation, have profound ramifications for the individual, the congregation and the harvest waiting to be reaped. He would most certainly concur with R. Kent Hughes’ assertion that

Whether or not we have disciplined ourselves will make a huge difference in this life. We are all members of one another, and we are each elevated or depressed by the inner lives of one another. Some of us affect others like a joyous tide, lifting them upward, but some of us are like an undertow to the Body of Christ.⁶

It is the upward redeeming influence Simpson sought to exert for Christ. This is affirmed by the role of sanctification within his own life and as a distinctive doctrinal characteristic of The Christian and Missionary Alliance. Simpson’s pursuit of godliness in

his own life compelled him to take the gospel of Christ to the unreached people of the world.

DEVELOPING SPIRITUALLY

Evangelization and sanctification are not objectives Simpson sought to accomplish on his own. They were activities he pursued in obedient dependence upon Christ and in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. He understood the Father's concern for the lost and the spiritual development of His children.

A.B. Simpson recognized that the Father's love for His children compelled the Spirit to actively seek ways to further the believer's spiritual formation through the circumstances and events of life. Commenting on Jacob's spiritual formation, Simpson notes:

When Jacob yielded himself up to the Presence in the submission of perfect trust, then came the fullness of God's working and God's victorious love. We too must learn that the secret of our deepest desires after God is His overruling grace.⁷

Simpson sees God playing an active role within the believer's life, cultivating the desire for continued spiritual development that ultimately culminates in the maturity and character of the fullness of Christ. It also culminates in action, seeking to reach others with the Father's love and grace through Jesus Christ.

Since Jacob's severest trials came after his consecration at Peniel (see Genesis 32:22-32), Simpson fully expected the same to be true for others. It was true in his own spiritual development. After he completely yielded himself to Christ, Simpson perceived spiritual realities in a new light. The surrendered heart has the spiritual sensitivity to perceive and recognize the Father's interactive involvement in life's circumstances and events that are designed to further our development in Christlikeness. Consequently, it may seem as though God has a greater level of interactive involvement in our spiritual formation following our own personal surrender and consecration to Christ.

Simpson expresses this personal realization of God's longing desire for his own spiritual formation by writing:

The Holy Spirit is not leading us to develop our goodness, strength and love, but to discover our insufficiency and make room for a new manifestation of Christ's sufficiency and grace. In this holy discipline the Spirit uses all the circumstances of our life as the framework in which to constantly manifest and exhibit the face of Jesus Christ and the fullness of His grace. Trials and temptations only furnish new channels, needs and opportunities for the Master to live out His life within us. As the potter turns the wheel and at the same time molds the clay, so God's providences are the whole of life and the Holy Spirit the molding hand of the potter.⁸

The lesson embedded upon Jeremiah's heart and mind while he stood watching the potter work the clay, listening to God's voice (see Jeremiah 18), was ablaze within Simpson's soul. An attitude and posture of trusting submission to God's sovereign working, even in the face of mysteries he did not yet understand, governed his understanding of God's interactive involvement in his own spiritual formation. It prompted him to write these words of counsel:

The first thing you need in order to be of any use anywhere is to be thoroughly broken, completely subjected and utterly crucified in the very core and center of your will. Then you will accept discipline and learn to yield and obey so that He can use you as a flexible and perfectly adjusted instrument. Henceforth you will only do what God wills and choose only what God chooses.⁹

These words underscore the premium Simpson placed on the surrendered life, a life lived in complete submission to the will of the Father. Some of life's most valuable lessons are learned in the hard places and through experiences we would not choose. Consequently, Simpson invites us to join him in living in trustful, obedient submission to God. He cautions against the possibility of missing "the discipline of life and the victories of faith if we do not watch for God in all the hard places that come to us day by day."¹⁰ He writes,

Look at the hard places in our lives not as discouragements, but as challenges, things that God has permitted that He may overcome them. And that we may be lifted through the conflict to a higher place of victorious strength and blessing.¹¹

A.B. Simpson recognized that God had more in mind than his own spiritual formation. While recognizing the importance of his development in Christ, Simpson looked beyond himself to see the purpose God sought to accomplish through him. That purpose was the spiritual development of others. He writes,

After God has pressed into a life by the long and hard process of trial and discipline, the influences of His grace and the power of His transforming Spirit, then He loves to take out of that life the same power and expend it on others. Power can never be lost; so if we receive of God's fullness we can no more help giving it out than the sun stop shining.¹²

Simpson never viewed the spiritual formation and growth God sought to bring into his life with an attitude of self-indulgence or spiritual favor. He repudiated the notion of sacrifice, even self-sacrifice, where it was needless, and declared it wrong.¹³ Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that Simpson would have drawn the same conclusion concerning any spiritual discipline that was practiced in a similar fashion.

Simpson understood the Father's involvement in shaping his spiritual character as a sacred trust, equipping and rendering him effective in service to Christ and the advancement of His kingdom within the Church and throughout the world. He affirmed that there may be occasions when God lovingly imposes restraints upon us in order to bring us into conformity with the good the Creator has for us. Simpson viewed the restraints God imposes as a loving limitation that directs us into spiritually beneficial avenues.

Leading people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and into the depths of the Christ-life are two primary objectives Simpson connected with spiritual discipline. This is why he could view difficult circumstances in light of the opportunities for spiritual formation that came through those experiences. "How can we become more than conquerors? We can get out of the conflict a spiritual discipline that will greatly strengthen our faith and establish our spiritual character."¹⁴

This exhortation reveals Simpson's commitment to practice personally the spiritual disciplines. It affirms his conscious and

deliberate decision to pursue the things leading to godliness simultaneously and in cooperation with the Spirit's working to mold and shape his spiritual character. Expressing this in the first-person plural pronoun "we" reveals his concern for the spiritual formation of other believers.

The realization that he had a sacred responsibility to bring others into the fullness of the Christ-life never escaped Simpson's attention. His concern for the spiritual formation of others permeates his writings. Simpson's works are authentic spiritual theology. They do not present abstract theology, but expound biblical truth with a view to the spiritual formation of the readers.¹⁵ His sermons, books, poetry and hymns are concerned with the spiritual transformation of people. Simpson's spiritual purpose was to guide people into the fullness of the Christ-life, and then into the full expression of Christ's life in the world.¹⁶

In *The Christ Life* Simpson outlined practical steps Christians can take in furthering their own spiritual formation. He developed them in a way that underscores the conscious, deliberate and active role believers play in furthering their own spiritual development. These steps are an autobiographical testimony to an aspect of the process A.B. Simpson pursued in his own spiritual formation.

[Life in Him] must be a momentary life, not a current that flows on through its own momentum; but a succession of little acts and habits . . . so that if you shall renew this fellowship every moment, you shall always abide in Him. . . . [T]his abiding must be established by a succession of definite acts of will, and of real, fixed, steadfast trust in Christ. It does not come as a spontaneous and irresistible impulse that carries you whether you will or not, but you have to begin by an act of trust, and must repeat it until it becomes a habit.¹⁷

These words of personal testimony affirm the necessity of conscious little *acts* in establishing the foundation to cultivate a *habit*. Over time the movement from an *act* to a *habit* repeated with sufficient frequency becomes an established pattern in one's spiritual formation. Eventually, the established pattern becomes as unconscious as breathing itself. Over time it becomes a distinc-

tive trait, a part of one's character, a vital and indispensable element in one's life and relationship with Jesus Christ.

In *Echoes of the New Creation*, Simpson writes:

In practicing the presence of God slowly and patiently, the habit of dependence is formed; it is there that we triumph or fall. Cultivate the habit of constant dependence. In everything let it be, "Not I, but Christ," until at last it becomes so natural that you do it without thinking, that almost mechanically you will find yourself saying, "Jesus for this," "What shall I do, Lord?" Thus we shall establish the habit of dependency upon Him for all the little details.¹⁸

Simpson's words underscore his conviction that Christians play an active role in their own spiritual development. There is nothing passive about it. Christ's followers must seize every opportunity to grow in the grace of God. In *A Larger Christian Life*, he describes our participation by saying:

While it is true that all the resources are divinely provided, this does not justify a spirit of passive negligence on our part. In fact, it summons us all the more to diligence and earnestness in pressing forward in our spiritual career. . . .

[Salvation] is an inward principle of life that must be developed in every part of our life, and to this we are to "make every effort" (2 Peter 1:5), an effort that often reaches the extent of "fear and trembling." When this happens, there rises a holy and solemn sense of responsibility to make the most of our spiritual resources and opportunities, because "it is God who works in [us]."¹⁹

Making the most of the resources and opportunities given to us is a critical determining factor in spiritual development. Individual responsiveness and responsibility play vital roles in the believer's own spiritual formation. Simpson notes:

Every servant is given, at the beginning of his spiritual life, an equal measure of spiritual resource, and that the difference in the issues of human lives is not to be found in the unequal measure of grace and power afforded from on high, but in the unequal measure in which they have improved the power given.²⁰

His comments reveal personal responsibility, steps and a structure to follow that are consistent with the pursuit and practice of

spiritual disciplines. He maintains that what we become through the provisions and grace of Jesus Christ depends upon us. For Simpson, the practice of God's presence through inward prayer and bringing His presence into every thought and activity of life and service is at the heart of the Christ-life.²¹

In taking these steps Simpson did not depart from his fundamental convictions concerning the grace of God.

[Sanctification] is not the work of man nor means, nor of our own strugglings, but His prerogative. It is the gift of the Holy Ghost, the fruit of the Spirit, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the prepared inheritance of all who will enter in, the great obtainment of faith, not the attainment of works. . . . It is the inflow into man's being of the life and purity of the infinite, eternal Holy One, bringing His own perfection and working out in us His own will.²²

Spiritual formation is not something we accomplish on our own. It is actualized by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the actualizer in practicing the presence of God.²³

Simpson's position has much in common with Richard Foster's statement that views the disciplines as tools in our spiritual formation, and our spiritual life itself as gifts of God: "God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so He can transform us."²⁴ The transformation of our character and being into the likeness, stature, fullness and maturity of Christ is the Lord's doing.

It is in this spirit that Simpson advocated the principle of *separation*. He viewed separation as an inherent and indispensable dimension of consecration and sanctification. One must separate and abstain from the things of this world so there can be a complete and total dedication to God. Separating or abstaining even from activities to further the work of God's grace in our lives is paramount to Simpson's beliefs, teaching and practice. The principle of abstinence played a significant role in his continued spiritual formation.

He called upon believers to do more than renounce and separate themselves from evil in all of its many and varied forms. He

called upon believers to separate themselves from things that are not sinful in and of themselves, but which could be things that impede one's spiritual development in the Christ-life.

The aim and motive must be separated from all that is not for His glory; the source of its pleasure must be purified and the spirit separated from all joy that is not in harmony with the joy of the Lord.

Is your spirit thus separated, cleansed and detached from everything that could defile or distract you from the will of God and life of holiness?²⁵

This separation Simpson was calling for is abstinence. He challenged us to abstain voluntarily from the things of life so we may pursue a higher purpose.

This higher purpose is dedicating ourselves to the fulfillment of God's design for our lives and within our lives. It is not enough merely to practice abstinence or separation. The next step must be taken. This step involves a conscious and deliberate dedication of ourselves to God. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1).

Dedicating ourselves to God was central to Simpson's understanding of consecration and sanctification.

We offer ourselves to God for His absolute ownership, that He may possess us as His peculiar property, prepare us for His purpose and work out in us all His holy and perfect will. . . . This is what the term consecration properly means. It is the voluntary surrender or self-offering of the heart, by the constraint of love to be the Lord's.²⁶

By using plural pronouns "we" and "us," Simpson confirmed that he was not merely telling us what to do. The plural pronouns affirm that Simpson considered this a journey we are taking together. He was inviting us to join him on an adventure into the depths of the Christ-life. The invitation flowed from his conviction that God wants "us to give Him the possibilities of our lives and to let Him build upon them His own structure. He will construct temples of holiness that He will make His abode."²⁷

A.B. Simpson never viewed this as an instantaneous accomplishment. A number of factors may impede the progress. God's desire for our lives may be met with reluctance. Even when we are open and responsive to the Spirit's leading, there are times when it is necessary to pause and reflect upon the things the Lord is teaching us. We may have to grasp the principles, comprehend the implications, understand the significance and live to the level of truth that has been entrusted to us before the Spirit can lead us deeper and further into the things of Christ. Simpson notes:

It is here that the gradual phase of sanctification comes in. Commencing with a complete separation from evil and a complete dedication to God, sanctification now advances into all the fullness of Christ. It grows up to the measure of the stature of perfect personhood in Him, until every part of our beings is filled with God and becomes a channel to receive, a medium to reflect His grace and glory.²⁸

More than anything else Simpson wanted his life and ministry to reflect the glory of Jesus Christ. To this end, he engaged in a variety of spiritual disciplines. Seeking to cooperate with the Spirit's sovereign working, Simpson availed himself of the disciplines as tools to aid in his spiritual formation. He knew that the Lord was working to shape and mold him. He wanted to cooperate with the Spirit's working no matter what the cost. His early hymns expressed the urgency of his desire to deepen his life in Christ, to grow in the Lord and to make himself available to God's service. These hymns required action and deeper commitment to the Lord.²⁹ "Search Me, O God" reveals his longing for more of Christ:

Search me, O God, search me and know my heart,
Try me and prove me in the hidden part;
Cleanse me and make me holy, as Thou art,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

Thou art the same today and yesterday,
Oh, make Thy life in me the same always,
Take from my heart the things that pass away;
Lead, lead me in the way everlasting.

Take my poor heart and only let me love
The things that always shall abiding prove;

Bind all my heartstrings to the world above,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

Help me to lay my treasures upon high;
Teach me to seek my future in the sky;
Give me my portion yonder by and by,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

Oh, let my work abide the testing day
That shall consume the stubble and the hay;
Oh, build my house upon the rock, I pray,
And lead me in the way everlasting.³⁰

Simpson wanted nothing less than to be and to live in the center of God's will, bringing honor and glory to Christ through every facet and dimension of his life and ministry. It is for this purpose that he embraced the discipline of the Spirit. And it is in this spirit that he invited us to join him in cooperating with the Spirit and in practicing the disciplines so Christ's character can be developed within us and His mission accomplished through us. Simpson's invitation comes through the example his life sets before us. It is proclaimed in his writings, and the invitation is voiced in hymns of aspiration that extol the virtues of a life totally surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ.

A.B. Simpson called us to live for the honor, glory and praise of Jesus Christ. To follow in his steps means that we must embrace the discipline of the Spirit and pursue the practice of the spiritual disciplines leading to and resulting in the formation of the Christ-life within us. Let us consider the role spiritual disciplines played in Simpson's spiritual development, not out of curiosity or merely for the sake of knowing, but with a view toward our own spiritual formation and the glory of Christ our Lord.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

God is interested in developing the life of Christ within you. Working together in harmonious cooperation, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit will proactively seek to influence your spiritual formation and development.

Christians are always in the process of becoming. We will continue “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Our spiritual formation unfolds as God works within us, through us and in a partnership with us.

God’s wisdom and knowledge will play a crucial role in determining how this unfolds in our lives. The vital issues are how we respond and the initiative we put forth in developing our life with Christ.

Let’s consider our role.

First, we have to trust God. Of course, sometimes it is easier to *say* we trust God than it is to actually trust Him. Trusting the Lord for our salvation is one thing, but trusting Him enough to relinquish control of our lives is something else! Sometimes we want to reserve the right to have the last word or to veto something that is not to our liking.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● *Application*

1. Do you ever sense the tendency to hold back or have another plan, just in case God doesn’t come through the way you want? What does this say about trust?
2. Sometimes God chooses to use things in our spiritual formation that we wouldn’t choose, things that may be unpleasant or bring pain into our lives. How do you respond when this happens? Do you embrace it, confident in God’s love for you, or do you ask, “Why me, Lord? Why me?”
3. Can you recall times when you questioned what God was doing? If so, how did you resolve it?
4. The second part of our role is our initiative, the conscious, deliberate effort we make to grow in Christ. Have you developed a personal spiritual growth plan for the coming year? If so, will the plan stretch you, or is it overly aggressive? (Plans that are too ambitious can be self-defeating.)

5. Develop a list of the things you are doing that are designed to help you develop spiritually (e.g., Bible study, prayer, accountability group or partner). What priority do you give to pursuing these things?
6. What will you let go of, give up or abstain from doing in order to develop spiritually?