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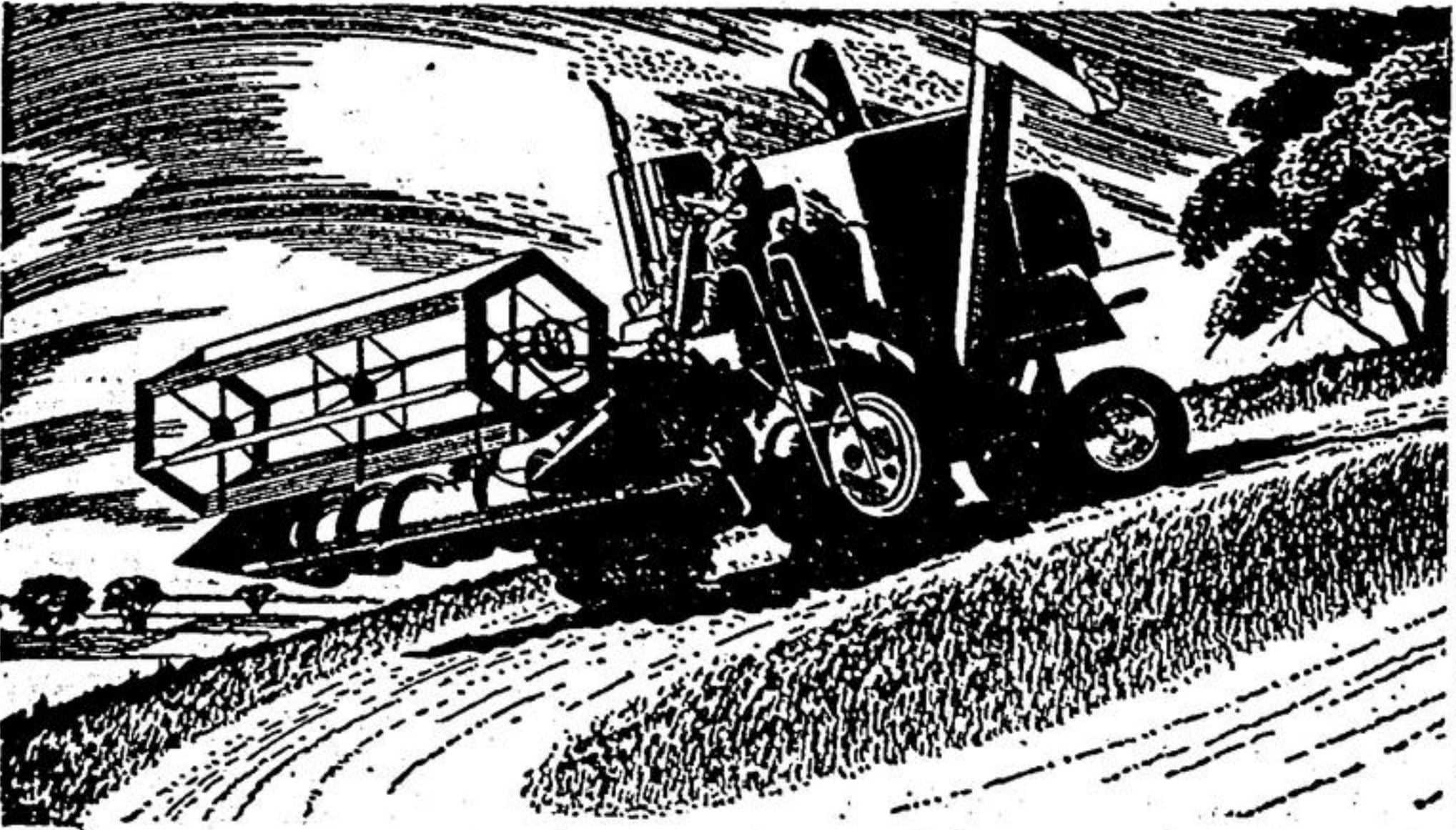
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THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

ARE WE GROWING AS CHRISTIANS?
 (Lesson for July 11)

1 Cor. 13:1-3; Ephes. 4:11-16; 2 Peter 1:5-8; 3:18
 Golden Text—Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.—2 Peter 3:18

THE LESSON AS A WHOLE
 By J. C. Macaulay, D.D.
 Approach to the Lesson



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In the physical sphere, growth proceeds to a certain point, is maintained there for a season, and then retrogression takes over, at varying rates. We reckon that by his later teens a youth has come to his full stature. After that he may continue to develop his strength, his agility, his powers of endurance for some time. By dint of regular training he may hold himself at the peak of physical condition for quite a few years. But after a while you will find him saying, "I can't take it the same since I turned forty." Fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty all tell the tale of less endurance, less resiliency. Not many attain to Moses' record of one hundred and twenty with eye still clear and natural force not abated.

With regard to intellectual growth, the general law is the same, though its operation is not so marked. Development in this sphere is a much longer process, and at sixty a man should be as keen mentally as he was at twenty. The difficulty then is that the body is often unable to keep up with the mind. Billy Graham (in his Hour of Decision Broadcast, April 11) said concerning Prime Minister Winston Churchill that his mental processes at the age of eighty are unimpaired, despite the marks of age otherwise. Ordinarily, however, the mind also begins to relax its strong grip, and its retentiveness diminishes.

But the laws of progression and decadence do not hold in the spiritual realm. In the last year of his long life, Pastor D. J. Findlay of Glasgow, Scotland, said in a public announcement: "In nature life becomes more weak as it goes on into old age—but in grace it need not and should not be so. We may and should bring forth fruit even in increasing measure and quality in old age."

Our lesson, then, is not just for young Christians, but also for the oldest, maturest saint in any congregation. The possibilities of spiritual growth are limitless. At no point is there room for retrogression, for at no point do we reach the peak of attainment. To the end we must say with Paul, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after." (Phil. 3:12).

Verse by Verse
 1 Cor. 3:1—...not...as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal...babes in Christ." Notice the words "spiritual" and "carnal"—pertaining to the spirit, and pertaining to the flesh. Carnality is attributed to lack of growth—remaining in the baby stage.

Verse 2—"I have fed you with milk, and not with meat...not able to bear it." Teaching must be in keeping with the ability of the believer to receive it. Just as a first-grader is not taught calculus, so a babe in Christ should not be "fed" teaching that will leave him floundering, but the simple things.

Verse 3—"...among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" Here is the mark of carnality—taking sides and creating divisions; just like the natural man who has not been touched with the life of God. There is no testimony here to the reality of the supernatural! "Eh. 4:11—"...apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers." Here are the minis-

tries of the church, all gifts of the ascended Lord. In the technical sense the first two passed with the first generation of the church, but there are still men who have veritable apostolic and prophetic ministries. Consider William Carey, the "apostle" of modern missions, and John Wesley, who certainly had a "prophetic" voice in England.

Verse 12—"...the perfecting of the saints...the work of the ministry...the edifying of the body of Christ." These are not three separate purposes of verse 11. Their task is "the perfecting of the saints," so that they in turn will engage in a work of ministry, to the end that the whole body, the church, should be built up.

Verse 13—"...the unity of the faith...unto a perfect man...the fullness of Christ." We so emphasize our differences, and show so little unity of faith, that the church looks more like a dismembered monster than "a perfect man." No wonder "the fullness of Christ" is so conspicuously absent.

Verse 14—"...no more children, carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men." "Children" is the same as "babes" in 1 Corinthians 3:1, carrying the thought of helplessness. Another mark of such spiritual babyhood is ready acceptance of every new doctrine proposed. Such fall easy prey to the crafty propaganda of heretical cults.

Verse 15—"But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him...the head...Christ." There is more than "speaking the truth" in the Greek word—it is truth-living as well. But always "the truth in love." Without love truth can be very sharp. No lopsided growth here. Every part of our character must be true to the Head, Christ.

Verse 16—"From whom the whole body maketh increase, unto the edifying of itself in love." As we grow "into him," out of Him flow all the virtues required for the perfecting of the body. Each member ministers to each other member in the process. Despite the complicated language here, the big thought is clear enough.

2 Peter 1:5—"...giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; "For this cause" is better than "beside this." Our contribution to spiritual development is diligence, responding to the "all things" of verse 3. The adding is not mechanical, but organic. In our faith must be ample provision for virtue, and in our virtue for knowledge.

Verse 6—"And to knowledge temperance, patience, godliness." So in knowledge we must develop self-control, with patience and true pity.

Verse 7—"And to godliness brotherly kindness, charity." The organic process goes on in the abundant provision of love of the brethren, and love. Notice again how full-rounded our growth must be. Strength in one direction does not make up for weakness in another.

Verse 8—"For if these things abound, neither...barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Knowledge divorced from character is both idle and unfruitful, but by diligence can be productive of likeness to Christ.

Chap. 3:18—"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Only make the link of our diligence (1:5 with God's provision, and such growth will be spontaneous, and the glory shall be all His. Never divorce grace and knowledge.

The Heart of the Lesson
 The tragedy of retarded growth is fully recognized and deeply bemoaned when it occurs in the sphere of the body or the mind, but it is scarcely regarded in the spiritual sphere.

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