Learning Christ and the Indwelling Life

By Jerry Johnson

A reflection on Christian nurture, the inward work of the Holy Spirit, and the corporate life of the church.

Learning Christ

Paul makes an arresting statement in Ephesians 4:20–21: "*But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus."* The language is personal. Paul does not merely speak of learning facts about Christ. He speaks of learning Christ, hearing Him, and being taught by Him.

This does not diminish the indispensable place of Scripture, preaching, teaching, or Christian fellowship. It clarifies their purpose. Christian instruction must not make a believer exclusively dependent upon the human teacher. It should provide ongoing assistance as that believer grows in recognizing, trusting, and obeying Jesus Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Paul's instruction to parents provides a helpful picture: "*Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"*—Ephesians 6:4. The passage directly concerns parents raising their children, and that primary meaning must be preserved. Yet the New Testament also speaks of babes in Christ, children in the faith, spiritual fathers, and

believers growing toward maturity. The parental relationship therefore helps us understand an important dimension of Christian discipleship.

A parent does more than teach a child information about Jesus. A faithful parent brings the child to Jesus and helps the child learn to respond personally to Him. In the same way, a pastor, teacher, or mature believer should help a newborn child of God learn from the Companion who now lives within.

The Back Door and the Front Door

How can we understand the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a believer's heart? Let's use the illustration of a house with a back door and a front door. This is a spiritual metaphor, not a literal diagram of human anatomy. Its purpose is to help us understand two "directions" of attention within the Christian life.

The rear entrance opens toward the created world: our five senses, circumstances, relationships, culture, instruction, pleasure, suffering, and everything that reaches us externally. Parents, evangelists, pastors, teachers, books, sermons, and fellow believers routinely approach us from the back door. Of course, the Holy Spirit can use all of these powerfully.

The mature believer stands at the new believer's "back door" sharing biblical truth for the young Christian to absorb as the Holy Spirit living in that young Christian's "house" gives them light to understand it and power to live it out. The more experienced brother or sister brings Scripture, wisdom, correction, encouragement, testimony, and loving example. But Christ lives within. He entered the front door of the heart when the young believer "heard" His knocking and invited Him in. Human ministry, when aided and guided by the Holy Spirit, helps the new believer learn to know and respond to Christ within them.

The “front door” opens toward God. The knock of Christ is inward and spiritual. The mysterious activity of the Holy Spirit uses circumstances, preaching, Scripture, conscience, etc. to bring a person to recognize that Someone is calling at the inward door of their heart as opposed to the superficial world of natural perception. Just a little glimmer of faith in their heart affords that person a profound, gripping, unique experience: mortal life is touched by divine immortality!

Jesus said, “*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”* —Revelation 3:20.

This verse was originally addressed by Christ to the struggling church at Laodicea. It paints for us the picture of how our Divine Master facilitates His internal relationship with all His children. And we want to stress that a believer’s responsiveness to Christ is not limited to an initial response of faith to His call in the heart. For indeed, Christ calls each of His children into continuing, indwelling, spiritual fellowship with Himself.

When they open the front door, the new Christian does not merely accept a theological proposition. He literally receives a Person and enters a new realm of communion with that divine Person. A new world opens to that babe in Christ; a world in which Holy Scripture comes to life as the Holy Spirit shines His supernatural light in the mind of His child. The Holy One, Who is LIGHT and LIFE, has entered the believer’s inward world, and the Christian’s life becomes a process of learning to live as a child of God in submission to our heavenly Father.

Discipleship must therefore do more than keep directing the believer toward secondhand instruction at the back door. It must encourage the believer to live responsively before the indwelling Christ: to listen, discern, trust, obey, abide, and have the mind renewed. The human teacher brings good food to the back door of the Christian learner’s

house, but Christ Himself is the loving Host and grace-giving Teacher within their heart and mind.

The Architecture of the Inner Life

The word "architecture" may be useful if we employ it humbly. We do not possess a complete blueprint of the invisible human person. Paul reminds us that now we see "*through a glass, darkly"* —1 Corinthians 13:12. Through Scripture, faith, and experience, however, we can begin to recognize the contours of the reality God is creating within His people.

Faith does not give exhaustive sight, but it gives substance to hope and conviction concerning realities that cannot be observed with natural eyes. We cannot physically see the indwelling Holy Spirit, the new man, the writing of God's law upon the heart, or the renewal of the mind. Yet these are not religious figures without corresponding reality. They describe the supernatural work of God that He is accomplishing within His children as He promised under the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:6–13; 10:15–18; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Luke 22:20). This is the New Covenant that was purposed before the foundation of the world, established by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, confirmed by the Resurrection of the Son of God, applied in the hearts of God's children through the new birth, and sealed in the lives of Christian believers by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit!

The new covenant is not merely a theological category. It is a divine intervention and an ongoing activity of the Creator within His people. God has promised, "***I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts,"*** and, "***They shall all know me"*** (Jeremiah 31:33–34). The first statement is intensely personal. The second creates a people, the people of God.

This is where the intentional renewal of the mind belongs. The believer turns from inherited patterns of darkness and learns to think under Christ's light. The body and its senses become instruments through which the inward life is expressed. What begins invisibly at the front door moves into thoughts, motives, and attitudes; through words and conduct; into relationships; and eventually into the shared life of the church.

I call this living communion a **DOCLOR**: a **D**ynamic, **O**ngoing, **C**onversational, **LO**ving **R**elationship with God. Rather than manipulate and control it, human ministers must faithfully, prayerfully seek to be agents of the Holy Spirit, guided and empowered by Him, to protect, nourish, and encourage that internal relationship between Father God and His children. Human ministry must never presume to replace that relationship or position itself as its necessary mediator, however innocent or subtle that presumption may appear.

From the Individual Temple to the Corporate Temple

The believer's individual fellowship with God is not displaced by corporate fellowship. It is shared and amplified through it. The corporate temple is not merely a crowd attending the same religious activity. It is a fellowship of persons in whom God dwells.

Each believer brings into the fellowship something Christ is producing within. The fellowship, in turn, helps that believer test, understand, mature, and faithfully express what has been received. No individual possesses the whole reflection, but each supplies something under the spiritual headship of Christ.

This is where spiritual leadership carries both extraordinary promise and grave responsibility. The leader is not the Architect; God is. The leader is not the source of life; Christ is. The leader does not own the stones of God's temple and must not cut every stone into his own image. Faithful leadership supplies nourishment, protects against

destructive influence, removes impediments, encourages the exercise of spiritual gifts, and cultivates an atmosphere in which believers can hear and respond to the Holy Spirit in their own spirit.

In such a fellowship:

- Scripture is not merely analyzed; it is illuminated and obeyed.
- Prayer is not merely performed; it becomes communion.
- Spiritual gifts are not decorations or badges of status; they serve and build up the body.
- Correction is not domination; it is truth spoken in love.
- Unity is not uniformity; it is many members sharing One Life.
- Leadership does not replace the believer's DOCLOR; it protects, nourishes, and encourages it.

Paul teaches that the body grows as every part does its share, building itself up in love. The minister's work is not to perform all ministry while everyone else watches. It is to equip the saints to be ambassadors for Christ, demonstrating His life, His light, and His love to a dying world around them. As the unified body of Christ, each member of His Church is to make a unique contribution to the spiritual health, growth, and strength of His body!

Sin shattered communion—with God, within the human person, between human beings, and throughout creation. In Christ, God is restoring communion and fitting together what sin divided. Each believer reflects something of Christ's light, but the corporate temple can display dimensions of His wisdom, beauty, love, and glory that no isolated believer can express alone.

The gates of hell cannot prevail against Christ's church because the life within His people is His resurrected life. The architecture is inward, outward, and corporate. The Architect is God. The foundation is Christ. The presence filling the house is the Holy Spirit. The atmosphere permeating the work is love.

Walking in the Light Together

The apostle John joins the personal and corporate dimensions in one sentence:

> "*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."* —1 John 1:7

Walking in divine light is not solitary spiritual self-absorption. It draws believers into honest fellowship while Christ continually cleanses them. John does not say that we manufacture the light. We walk in the light as God is in the light. God Himself is both the environment and the source.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14–21 portrays for us the dimensions of the believer's inward life and the corporate life of the eternal Church. He prays that believers will be strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man; that Christ will dwell in their hearts by faith; that they will be rooted and grounded in love; that they will comprehend with all the saints the breadth, length, depth, and height; and that they will know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul then identifies where this divine activity occurs: *"According to the power that worketh in us"* —Ephesians 3:20. This is the power of our majestic and dynamic Master, working within us through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We often measure ourselves from the back door by our history, temperament, education, failures, abilities, circumstances, and what appears naturally possible. Paul prays from the other direction. He measures Christian potential according to the riches of God's glory and the power working within His people.

We must not calculate the potential of the Christian life solely from what has entered through the back door of natural experience. The measure of our calling is found at the front door: Christ dwelling in

our hearts through faith, the Holy Spirit strengthening the inner person, and the power of God working within us beyond what we can ask or imagine.

Paul does not leave this as private spiritual attainment. He concludes, "*Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen"* —Ephesians 3:21. The immeasurable inward work of God in the individual believer will reach its crescendo one day at the gathering of all God's people around the throne of Heaven to His eternal praise and glory. Amen!

A Final Note

This reflection grew out of meditations undertaken in the process of developing the third edition of **The Practice of Divine Light**. I used ChatGPT as an editorial tool to question, organize, clarify, and refine my thoughts, sentence structure, and grammar. Its assistance helped me express what I was trying to communicate and I am grateful for this tool. It should go without saying that the tool is not the source of the faith or experience described here.

Scriptures quoted from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

11/08/26