



# GROWING UP

a lifelong journey

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Each of these seven conversations moves from **Reflection** to **Conversation** to **Prayer**. Some larger groups will find it helpful to alternate their weekly discussion between smaller groups of 2-3 and the larger group for summarizing discussions. We offer guidance for weekly Bible reading out of Ephesians in preparation for *Conversation Two* through *Conversation Seven*. And we highly encourage you to engage in the practice of converting your thoughts into a written prayer at the end of each conversation.

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CONVERSATION ONE  
**A Growing Person**

*We must no longer be children,  
tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine,  
by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.  
But speaking the truth in love,  
we must grow up in every way  
into him who is the head, into Christ.*

*Ephesians 4:14-15*

*The apostolic writers of the New Testament declare with one voice that  
God wants his people to grow up and grow into maturity in Christ.*

*John Stott*

## REFLECTION



On the walls and columns of a grey stoned sanctuary hung twelve to fifteen prints of Rembrandt's painting *Return of the Prodigal Son*. The audience was a mix of parents and grandparents and nuns and pastors and students. We were all gathered in a Beverly Hills Anglican church to hear spiritual writer Henri Nouwen speak on his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Image Books, 1994). That afternoon in 1995, Nouwen beautifully wove together his own life story with the characters of Jesus' parable (younger son, older son, father), a brief portrait of Rembrandt's life, and the story of the painting. Everyone there was invited into an understanding of the younger son, an understanding of the older son, and an encounter with the father of Luke 15.

During the Q & A time it became clear the audience identified deeply with the characters' experiences. Several questions were asked by persons who knew firsthand the pain of leaving home on bad terms. Other questions revealed the loneliness of sons and daughters who knew only duty in their life of faith. I found myself pondering the lost-ness of this older son. However, moms and dads, looking for advice concerning their children, asked the bulk of the questions. One had a daughter who was much like the younger son in the story. Several had a son who "did all the right things." Others had to kick out a rebellious child. They each wanted to ensure that their daughter felt loved or their son did

not grow resentful like the older son of the story. What was the right thing for them to do? They wanted direction and assurance and advice. Nouwen replied patiently to each. He spoke directly to all of these questions, except one.

There is little I recall today of what Nouwen said specifically throughout the afternoon. I cannot remember what this mother of a junior high boy asked, but now years later Nouwen's response to her still sticks with me. Instead of explicitly answering the mom's question, he paused, looked intently at the mother and said,

*There are a lot of good things that can be said of parenting a child, but the greatest gift you will give your son is the gift of you being a growing person yourself.*

We were all “grabbed” by his response. He went on to explain that in a community like a family, love is communicated more by who you are than by any single situational choice or strategy. He did not ignore this woman's particular concern for her son, but rather placed it in a larger perspective. He certainly did not minimize any of those particular parenting questions (for after all, he answered those questions for more than half-an-hour) But in his response, he pointed out the critical importance of recognizing the bigger picture in which life is lived and love is transmitted to others. And in so doing, his words offered far more than

parenting advice. As I remember it that afternoon, in his words to this mother, the Spirit seemed to ask all of us, “Are you a growing person?”

Nouwen’s words raised for us all the question of development; a large group of adults seemed to look around the room and ask of each other, “Are we still growing up?” Most of the time, this is not a question posed to adults. Rather, it is a framework typically reserved for aunts and uncles, teachers and youth pastors, moms and dads, asked of their children or their students. A grandfather marvels at his grandson, “Boy, have you seen how much so-and-so has grown up?” or a mother bemoans her nineteen-year-old, “When will so-and-so grow up?” But for adults, the question of whether we are still growing up often goes unasked—perhaps we are assumed to be “grown up” already.

And yet, God’s Spirit seemed to be poking at this question through Nouwen’s words to this concerned mother. *The greatest gift you will give your son is the gift of you being a growing person yourself.* These words continue to echo through my life now many years later. I ask you to let it do some echoing in your life. Do you really hear the question? *Are you a growing person?*

It was almost 2,000 years ago the Apostle Paul wrote a letter that undoubtedly prompted reflection and prayer for Jesus' followers in and around the large commercial city of Ephesus. Paul's words both supported and challenged these local churches who were struggling with fear, immorality, and disunity. After painting a magnificent portrait of God at work in the world through Christ (Ephesians 1-3), Paul urged them to live a way of life worthy of God's gracious and powerful work (4:1). He challenged the community's leaders to foster maturity in its members (4:11-13). Then Paul wrote,

*We must no longer be children.... But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*  
(Ephesians 4:14-16)

Followers of Jesus Christ over the centuries have continued to encounter Paul's challenge to the believers in Ephesus. Men and women who have confessed faith in Jesus have discovered their lives to be too often fearful, preoccupied, and immature well into their faith journeys. And amidst these hard discoveries, they have encountered the Spirit of God patiently inviting them afresh to *grow up in every way into Christ*. As we stand today in the



wake of this long line of believers, we must discover yet again in the everydayness of our lives that growing up into Christ is a lifelong journey.

So let us look around the room and ask each other and ourselves honestly; where are we on this journey? Amidst all the demands and joys, the activities and expectations of our lives, are we *growing up as people*? In what ways is the Spirit of God inviting us to deeper maturity in Christ?



# CONVERSATION

Good conversation requires deep listening and honest dialogue. And certainly with the hurried pace of life, we could use a little more of both. We invite you to enter into some good conversation through the questions below. Listen for new questions and perspectives emerging from your time together. Allow this to be a gift of space for one another.

- *What stood out to you from the above reflection?*

- *What do you think it means to be a growing person? Who has been a growing person in your life?*

- *From your perspective what does the Bible say about maturing and growing into Christ?*

# PRAYER

*What has this reflection and conversation stirred in your mind and heart? Convert your thoughts and feelings into a written prayer:*

*My prayer is that God's work of creation may continue in me as well as in my plants, that my soul may become his garden, whether a place of wild and spontaneous beauty like a mountainside—part of the green wilderness—or a more gentle work of God's art, in a sheltered garden with a diversity of colors and shapes, only God can determine; he loves green, and the growth it signals, in any setting. But I have faith that in my life he will see continued evidence of his loving cultivation.*

*Luci Shaw, poet*



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Throughout this week read and reflect upon Paul's prayer in  
Ephesians 1:15-23 asking yourself the question:  
*What are Paul's deep concerns for the believers in Ephesus?*

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