

December 2020

Frank W. Nelte

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: IS IT PASSIVE OR PROACTIVE?

We are members of God's Church because God opened our minds to an understanding of His truth, and we responded to that opportunity, by learning God's truths, and by then repenting and being baptized. And at that time God gave us the free gift of His holy spirit.

At present all of us look like "the seed that fell on good ground" in the parable in Matthew 13:8. The "good ground" we provided for God's seed refers to **the attitude of mind** and **the commitment** with which we responded to the truths of God, which truths we were beginning to understand one after another.

The task that now lies ahead for all of us is that we must turn the "**look like** the seed on good ground" into **actually being** the seed that fell on good ground. We do that by producing good fruits. Or, to state this another way, **we must now use God's seed to produce godly character.**

By "godly character" I mean the godly attributes that must be etched into our minds and our very beings, to the point that **those godly attributes will define our identity before God.**

Good attributes are "good fruits" and they define good character. Evil attributes are "bad fruits" and they define evil character. It is the attributes that we acquire over a lifetime that will define the type of character that we have developed. Developing godly character obviously requires good attributes to be etched into our minds.

The development of godly character is **a process that takes time**, much like a river over time carving out its path across a plain. The process of godly character development involves a number of things. So let's take a look at some of the things that are involved in this process.

ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Godly character absolutely requires us to understand **God's instructions to man**, and God's intentions for mankind (i.e. God's plan of salvation). This must always be **the first step** towards developing godly character.

Without understanding what God is looking for in us human beings, and what God requires of us, it is impossible to develop any godly character. We must know what we are supposed to do. But godly knowledge cannot be acquired by the natural mind, because that mind looks upon the truth of God as foolishness.

But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are **foolishness unto him: neither can he know them**, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

This means that people who don't have God's spirit are simply not capable of developing any godly character in their lives, because they cannot really understand the things of God.

People who don't have God's spirit still have a "carnal mind" which is inherently hostile towards God

(see Romans 8:7), even when on the surface that mind has certain positive attributes, like generosity, kindness, etc. It is impossible for a mind that is hostile towards God to develop any attribute that will be pleasing to God. **A hostile mind simply cannot please God** (Romans 8:8).

So then they that are in the flesh **cannot** please God. (Romans 8:8)

This can sometimes be difficult to understand, because people who are still "in the flesh" (i.e. unrepentant) can at times be so friendly, helpful, kind and generous. But Paul clearly tells us that such people "cannot please God".

So here is the point for us:

In order to be able to please God, we first of all have to study the information God has made available to us. **We have to study the Bible** with a genuine desire to learn God's ways. As Paul tells all of us, in addition to telling Timothy:

Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

So let's be clear:

If we don't study the Bible, then we are not going to be "approved" by God. Why will we not be approved? Because we are not putting out any effort to understand God. Do you understand the difference between "reading the Bible" and "studying the Bible"? I ask this question because most of the people who attend the churches of God don't understand this difference at all.

[Comment: While there are certainly some differences between being "**passive**" and being "**reactive**", those differences are not significant in our context here. And so in the remainder of this article I will use the words "reactive" and "passive" as being more or less synonymous. Both words convey the general concept I am trying to present.]

People who are "**reactive**" (or "passive") only read the Bible. And then they react to the information they have read. As a result they then understand a little more, but without necessarily understanding things better. For such people "more" is not the same as "better". They have more information at their disposal, but **not necessarily clearer answers** to specific questions.

People who are "**proactive**" study the Bible by looking for answers to **specific questions**, questions which they themselves are asking. This focus on seeking answers to specific personal questions will guide their Bible study in directions that **mere Bible reading would never even think of**. It is always our own mind that controls whether we "read" the Bible or whether we "study" the Bible.

"**Reading**" the Bible is what the religious people in this world do. Nothing they read ever changes their minds from what they believed and understood before reading those Scriptures. And that is not what God expects from us.

"**Studying**" the Bible is what converted Christians are required to do. Now "reading" the Bible never leads to any specific destination. Destinations are only arrived at when we "study" the Bible. This difference between reading the Bible and studying the Bible is one major difference between "reactive Christians" and "proactive Christians".

If we don't study the Bible, then any godly character in us cannot grow, and **it will stagnate**. We need to have a better understanding of God's mind this year than the understanding we had last year. And next

year we need to come to a better understanding of the mind of God than we have right now. We must constantly be growing.

With God we can't tread water; we can't stay in one place in our relationship with God. And in this regard the most powerful tool God has given us today **to grow in understanding the mind of God** is the Bible! The Bible reveals God's thinking to us. But God will only reveal His thinking to us if we put out serious effort to seek out God's ways. And casually reading the Bible now and then is not "serious effort". Reading the Bible to fulfill a perceived responsibility is also not "serious effort".

Let's be honest and realistic.

Today there are a lot of people who in their relationship with God are simply "treading water". Yes, they are reading their Bibles, and so they are acquiring some additional information. But their actual understanding of the mind of God is no better than it was 20 and more years ago. They are not putting out any effort to grow in understanding, even if they do regularly listen to sermons.

They are largely **passive in their relationship with God**, rather than being proactive. That's not good.

PASSIVE AND PROACTIVE

Let's see if we can distinguish between being passive (or reactive) and proactive in our relationship with God.

The **proactive** person **causes** something to happen, while the **reactive** person only **responds** after something has happened.

The proactive person seeks to control what will happen. The reactive person is being controlled by what has happened.

The proactive person takes the initiative in doing the things that need to be done. The reactive person waits to be told what to do before taking any action.

The proactive person is in control, while the reactive person is being controlled.

The proactive person thinks ahead and takes responsibility for his life. The reactive person denies responsibility and blames others for his failures and his circumstances.

The proactive person seeks to be ready before something happens. As Solomon put it:

A prudent *man* foresees the evil, and hides himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished. (Proverbs 22:3)

"The prudent man" is proactive, while "the simple man" is only reactive.

Now as far as Bible study is concerned, we need to apply the principle of Isaiah 55:6.

Seek you the LORD while He may be found, call you upon Him while He is near: (Isaiah 55:6)

"To seek" means to be looking for specific answers in connection with understanding God's ways and

God's mind. It requires proactive searching for answers.

The very first step towards developing godly character in our lives has to be that we put out serious effort to understand the Bible, to understand God's ways and God's thinking. That also means that a person first has to come to repentance in order to establish a relationship with God.

Only then will someone be in a position to act on a correct understanding of God's instructions for us human beings.

Before we can do what is right, we first have to learn from God what is right. Knowledge and understanding must be the foundation on which godly character will then be developed.

DEVELOPING A FINELY TUNED CONSCIENCE

Once we have a certain amount of knowledge and understanding, after having submitted our lives to God by repenting, then we will be in a position to discern between right and wrong before God.

The very first effect that a better understanding of the knowledge of God will have on us is that our consciences become more finely tuned to God's laws. As we learn what God expects from us, so our consciences will be shaped and molded by that new knowledge.

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered Himself without spot to God, **purge your conscience from dead works** to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14)

We must never go against our conscience. But as we grow in understanding, so **our conscience must be educated**. Purging our conscience means that we no longer feel guilty when we don't comply with the world's standards and the world's expectations. Or in the Apostle Peter's words:

Wherein they think it strange **that you run not with *them*** to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of *you*: (1 Peter 4:4)

We don't feel guilty about no longer "running with them". This purging enables us to now **reset our conscience** to always respond to God's standards.

A simple example:

Before coming to the knowledge of God's truth we might have felt pressured to show some respect for keeping Christmas and for keeping Sundays "holy". Now we have a conscience towards keeping God's Sabbath holy, and towards keeping God's annual Feasts and Holy Days. And we don't have the slightest twinges of guilt for showing no respect whatsoever for Christmas and for Sunday observance.

Another example might be:

Before coming into God's Church we might always have had **a slight feeling of deference or respect** when in the presence of people wearing some religious garb (e.g. a priest or a nun or a monk, etc.). Now such religious clothing has no effect whatsoever on us. Now a religious dress or robe makes no more of an impression on us than a painter's overalls.

In these examples our conscience is being purged "from dead works".

And as our conscience is being purged, so it must be "re-calibrated" or "reformatted" to God's standards. Everything we learn about God and about His laws and about His way of life must be taken into account in some way by our renewed conscience. Our conscience will now only trigger feelings of guilt at the thought of transgressing God's laws and commandments, and the principles underlying all of God's laws.

That process of refining our conscience must be ongoing. To be ongoing means that we must also be coming to a better understanding of God. As we learn more, so we keep refining our conscience. And that process is a major component for developing godly character. Together with the Apostle Paul we must be able to say: **"I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day"** (Acts 23:1).

Our goal must always be to have a clear conscience.

And herein do I exercise myself, to have always **a conscience void of offence** toward God, and *toward* men. (Acts 24:16)

We can present a front and perhaps even deceive other people. But **we can't deceive our own conscience**. It will always expose to us ourselves any wrong motivations or intentions or actions on our part. It can't be fooled. It will always confront us with our own wrongs. That's how God created us.

The only way our conscience can be stopped from confronting us is for us to kill it! That is what the Bible refers to as "having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (see 1 Timothy 4:2). A "seared conscience" is a dead conscience; it has no feelings. A dead conscience can never be revived. And the people who destroy their conscience, God will destroy in the lake of fire.

Destroying our conscience towards God's way of life represents the greatest danger for any true Christian. Searing our conscience will utterly destroy all godly character. A seared conscience is a mortal danger. But before a conscience becomes fully seared, it starts off by being defiled.

Unto the pure all things *are* pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving *is* nothing pure; but **even their mind and conscience is defiled**. (Titus 1:15)

Godly character will strive to be pure, and it will **guard against becoming defiled**. This means that we need to guard our thinking. We need to guard against evil thoughts being presented to our minds, guard against "the fiery darts of the wicked" (see Ephesians 6:16).

The development of godly character depends very largely on the functioning of a finely-tuned and well-educated conscience.

THE DIFFERENCE

In order to develop godly character, it is helpful to understand a major difference between the true religion of God on the one hand, and all the false religions on the other hand. Understanding this difference clarifies a requirement for developing godly character that other religions simply don't understand.

Here is that difference:

All of the false religions of this world have one thing in common. They all require obedience without thinking! The customs and teachings may differ. But the underlying premise is always

the same. And with all of those religions it doesn't matter what you personally think or believe, though it is obviously nice (from their point of view) if a member of a church of this world agrees in his mind with all of the teachings of his church. But ultimately all that really matters in those religions is that you do what you are told to do, that you outwardly conform to and comply with the things you are told to do.

Your outward actions and your speech are all that counts. Converts to all of those false religions are expected to comply with expected actions and conduct. It doesn't matter what people may think and believe on the inside. If their speech and their outward conduct comply with expected customs and traditions, then they are recognized as members of that church or religion.

All the false religions in effect say: you just do what we tell you to do, and **we will do the thinking for you**. You just obey us, and you will be just fine. If you understand, then that's fine. But if you don't understand, then that doesn't matter. **Mindless obedience** is not only perfectly acceptable; in some religions it is even demanded.

This should help us to understand that, for example, every absolute dictatorship is in fact a religion. If a church or organization or political leadership demands mindless obedience, then **that church or organization or political leadership is setting themselves up as a religion of this world.**

Mindless obedience and mindless compliance are the most outstanding characteristics of all of Satan's religions, the religions of which Satan is "the god" (see 2 Corinthians 4:4). Customs and traditions and practices and rituals vary greatly amongst the religions of this world. But they all share the common foundation of mindless obedience.

And with that foundation of mindless obedience Satan ensures that it will be impossible for any member of any of his religions to develop real godly character. **Mindless obedience is a character-killer.**

By contrast:

God's true religion, on the other hand, demands that we must think before we obey! With God's true religion we must obey with the active participation of the mind first, before we obey with our outward actions. God demands that we think first. We must know why we are doing something.

And this is where character development enters the picture!

Character development has to do with how we use our minds first and our bodies second. And if the thinking is wrong, even if the outward actions happen to be right, then no godly character will be developed, and no godly traits are being etched into our very being.

So if anyone ever says "**I just did what the minister told me to do**", then they are saying equally loudly "I didn't think for myself and **I wasn't prepared to use my own mind** before doing what I was told to do". Whenever we obey without first using our own minds, then we never have a valid excuse before God, in the event that what then did happen turned out wrong.

God says to us "I have given you a mind to think for yourself". And the people who look to a minister to tell them what to do say "no thank you, Lord, I don't think that I'll be needing that mind; so I will just bury it for safe-keeping".

To harken back to our earlier point, when our thinking is wrong, then our conscience is not really being fine-tuned. And then we cannot be developing godly character. God does not want mindless obedience.

So someone can be a "good" member of one of the religions of this world by simply doing whatever his religion tells him to do. His mind does not need to be involved in the process. As long as he does everything his religion requires of him, so long he will be accepted as a "good" member. Character development doesn't even enter the picture.

But that same approach applied to God's true religion doesn't get this person anywhere with God. God is looking for the development of godly character; and for that God requires a person to always use their mind first, before doing what they are told to do. And when we use our minds first, then **sometimes** there may be occasions when the right thing to do is to not obey an instruction.

EXAMPLES OF NOT FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

The most immediate **example** where God expected us to think before obeying is found in the recent history of God's Church. After Mr. Armstrong died in 1986, the new leadership gradually introduced one heretical teaching after another into the Church. Obedience to all of God's laws was very methodically done away with.

That was an obvious occasion where we had to think first with all the new teachings that were being introduced. And the result of thinking first in that situation had to be: **no, we will not accept these doctrinal changes** because they are contrary to clear Bible teachings. God expected us to say "no" to that new leadership.

Another **example**: When God wanted the Jewish Apostle Peter to understand that Peter should also accept non-Jews into the Church, God gave Peter a vision. Peter saw a huge sheet filled with all kinds of unclean animals, and a voice from heaven told Peter "rise, Peter, kill and eat" (see Acts 10:9-13). Peter did accept that this was a vision from God, because he addressed the speaker as "Lord". But **Peter refused to agree with "the Lord"**. Instead Peter replied "not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (see Acts 10:14). Soon afterwards Peter understood that God had not wanted him to really eat any unclean animals, but that God was telling him to not call "any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

The point is that Peter used his mind first, and then respectfully disagreed with an instruction God had given him. And Peter never at any time in his life did eat any unclean animals.

Another **example**: When King Saul instructed his foot soldiers to kill God's priests, all of those soldiers, to a man, refused to carry out the king's commandment. Here is the relevant verse.

And the king said unto the footmen that stood about him, Turn, and **slay the priests** of the LORD; because their hand also *is* with David, and because they knew when he fled, and did not show it to me. But **the servants of the king would not put forth their hand to fall upon the priests** of the LORD. (1 Samuel 22:17)

The king's commandment was an instruction to commit murder. And none of the Israelite soldiers were willing to obey the king. They all recognized that the king's command was evil.

Another **example**: When King Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth, Jezebel ordered the elders of the city to set lying witnesses against Naboth and to have him killed. All the elders and the nobles knew that Jezebel was telling them to murder an innocent man. **They should have used their minds and refused to obey this order**. But they didn't.

And the men of his city, *even the elders and the nobles* who were the inhabitants in his city, **did as Jezebel had sent unto them**, and as it *was* written in the letters which she had sent unto them. (1 Kings 21:11)

They set Naboth up and then had him killed in cold blood (verse 13). None of those "elders and nobles" had any real character at all. They were all accomplices to murder.

Another **example**: After the Israelites in the wilderness had made the golden calf, God told Moses:

Now therefore let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and **I will make of you a great nation**. (Exodus 32:10)

Did God want Moses to say: "yes, Lord, and thank you, and I am leaving right away"? No, of course not! God was testing Moses, as to whether he would be motivated by self-interest. And since Moses was really motivated by wanting to help the people, he respectfully disagreed with God. **Moses was using his mind before declining God's offer**. And so Moses said to God:

"... **Turn from Your fierce wrath**, and repent of this evil against Your people." (Exodus 32:12)

[Comment: As an aside, the expression "repent of this evil against Your people" is not in any way referring to sins. What this expression really means is "please **change Your mind** about imposing **this severe penalty** on Your people". Don't read a wrong meaning into the word "evil" in this context; it is not a reference to sins.]

We all know the story. God accepted Moses's intercession and did not destroy all of Israel.

A major component for developing godly character is to **know when not to follow orders**, and when not to go along with anything we can discern is wrong before God. And that brings us to the next ingredient for godly character.

TOTAL COMMITMENT

None of us have perfect understanding. And that will be true until we are resurrected into God's Family. But even if our understanding right now is not perfect, we still need to be committed to what we understand is right. As the Apostle James explained:

Therefore **to him that knows to do good**, and does *it* not, to him it is sin. (James 4:17)

Yes, we need to constantly strive to increase in knowledge and in understanding, so that our ways of thinking can begin to draw closer to the way God uses His mind. But even more important than increasing in knowledge is **putting all the things we do know already into practice in our lives**.

To develop godly character we need to act on all the knowledge that we already have. That is because **we are accountable to God for all the knowledge we have**. God wants to know what we will do if He gives us more knowledge and more understanding. That was also made clear by Jesus Christ.

And **that servant, which knew** his lord's will, and prepared not *himself*, neither did according to his will, shall be **beaten with many stripes**. But **he that knew not**, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be **beaten with few stripes**. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more. (Luke 12:47-48)

The first servant was not committed to the knowledge that he had. He didn't develop any character with that attitude, and he was going to be punished very severely. The second servant had less knowledge, and therefore he was less accountable, and he would therefore receive a lesser penalty.

Consider the Apostle Paul. Before God called Paul, Paul didn't really understand the truth. But Paul did have one thing in his favor. He was **totally committed** to fulfilling his own understanding. His understanding was that the Jews who converted to Christianity were out-and-out heretics. And therefore Paul was zealously trying to eradicate what he considered to be "this Christian sect".

And **Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter** against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)

Paul (previous name was Saul) was totally committed to destroying the new Christian Church. Then Jesus Christ confronted Paul on the road to Damascus, knocking Paul to the ground and saying "why do you persecute Me?" (see Acts 9:1-4). And then Paul instantaneously repented (i.e. changed his way of thinking) and responded with "Lord, what do You want me to do?".

So one minute Paul is a zealous Pharisee intent on having Christians killed, and **two minutes later Paul is a totally committed Christian!** Yes, it took another three days of fasting before Paul was baptized, but it is clear that Paul made the commitment to Jesus Christ within a minute of being knocked off his donkey. Talk about being whole-hearted.

Paul held fast to that commitment for the remainder of his life. And it wasn't an easy life, not with all the beatings and persecutions that Paul had to endure. But he stayed committed.

Consider an incident during Jesus Christ's ministry:

And Jesus said unto him, **No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.** (Luke 9:62)

Paul never looked back, **he never longed for what he had left behind.** He always pushed forward.

I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14)

That is commitment and dedication. And so towards the end of his life Paul could say:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished *my* course, **I have kept the faith.** (2 Timothy 4:7)

To develop godly character, we must be totally committed to the calling God has set before us. And we must hold fast to that calling for the rest of our lives.

But Christ as a Son over His own house; whose house are we, **if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.** (Hebrews 3:6)

Unflinching commitment is a major part in the process of developing godly character. Now let's consider another major component of character development.

WE MUST BE WILLING TO UNLEARN ERROR!

We have all been born into this world of which Satan is the "god" at this present time. **All of us have absorbed errors and false ideas** and incorrect understanding in the process of reaching mental and emotional maturity. This is also true for people who have grown up in a Church of God environment, where the parents came into the Church before their children were born.

There has never been a time when we have understood everything perfectly correctly. There has always been room for growth in understanding, be it in the days of the apostles Peter and Paul, or be it today in our time.

Some of you might remember hearing Mr. Armstrong say that it is **ten times more difficult to unlearn error**, than it is to learn the truth in the first place. You remember that statement? Well, that statement is true, but it is also false! Do you know when it is more difficult to unlearn error, and when it is not more difficult?

Here is the point:

It is easy to unlearn error when we ourselves are the ones who first discover the error. If we ourselves, without needing anyone else to point it out to us, discover that something we believe is wrong, then it is easy for us to change. It was always easy for Mr. Armstrong to change away from error when he himself was the first one to discover the error.

But it is ten times more difficult to unlearn error when that error has to be pointed out to us by someone else. When someone else has to point out to us where we are wrong, then in very many cases it is very difficult for us to change. For example, that was the case for Mr. Armstrong regarding how to correctly count for Pentecost ... it took him years to accept understanding on this matter that someone else had presented to him.

It is tough for us to swallow when someone else tells us that we are wrong. And so a wise teacher as often as possible leads his students to the point where they will understand for themselves what is right and what is wrong.

Now here is the interesting thing about what Mr. Armstrong did in preaching the truth of God.

Mr. Armstrong broadcast his teachings to **an anonymous audience**. People who heard him on the radio (as I myself did back in the early 1960s) or who saw him on TV, didn't see him face-to-face. They were in their own homes, or in their cars, and they could reason out for themselves the things Mr. Armstrong was saying. There was nobody present who would know how they responded to Mr. Armstrong's explanations. They could accept or reject what he was saying without having to face another human being.

This is the difference between us ourselves reading a book and finding out that our understanding is in some way wrong, and being told in person by someone else that we are wrong.

Now by presenting his teachings over the radio, this made it a bit easier for people **to discover for themselves** that what Mr. Armstrong was teaching about the Bible was correct. It was never a personal confrontation when another wrong belief was pointed out to us. And we didn't lose face in front of anybody else in the process. No, the broadcast and the booklets were somewhat impersonal, and a lot depended on us ourselves checking up and proving from our own Bibles (looking up the Scriptures Mr. Armstrong quoted to us) that Mr. Armstrong was right.

The same is true for the booklets we then requested. We could examine them in the privacy of our own homes, and at our own leisure. There was nobody breathing down our necks to accept Mr. Armstrong's

explanations.

This process allowed us to reach our own conclusions, without having to personally face another person who was right and we were wrong. **This approach** (broadcasts plus The PLAIN TRUTH magazine plus booklets) **made it possible for us to reach our own conclusion that our former beliefs were in fact wrong** ... that there will not be an ever-burning hell fire, that there are no immortal souls, that heaven is not the reward of the saved, that Christmas is a pagan observance, that the Bible does not teach Sunday observance, that God is not a trinity, etc.

This approach made it much easier for us to unlearn errors than it was for all our unconverted relatives, whom we then tried to convince of the things we had come to understand. When we presented these things to our relatives and friends, in many cases that was somewhat confrontational: we were looking them straight in the face and saying that their ideas about the Bible were totally wrong. In most cases that didn't go down too well, right?

When we read an article in The PLAIN TRUTH, and we then wrote in for a booklet that was advertised, then we were applying the principle of Matthew 7:7.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: (Matthew 7:7)

We only received the booklets because we asked for them. The booklets we didn't ask for we also never received. And because we had that mindset of asking, therefore God opened our mind sufficiently for us to understand the things in that particular booklet.

Now the relatives we tried to convert after that were not really asking us anything in most cases. No, in those cases we were really pushing this information on them. So it is no wonder that they responded differently than we did with our "asking attitude".

So much for an explanation. But here is the point for us to keep in mind:

With the development of godly character it is inevitable that both these categories of unlearning errors will have to be dealt with!

Initially we may just have to unlearn errors that we ourselves "discovered", meaning that we on our own examined these questions against all the evidence that was presented to us in booklets and broadcasts. And we ourselves reached the conclusion that our former understanding was in error. (The people who did not reach that conclusion never came into God's Church.) For us this was the easy one to handle, comparable to drinking milk.

Later, once we had been around God's Church for five or more years, God saw to it that we were also confronted with errors that someone else brought to our attention. This is the one that is more difficult to handle, because by then we've been in God's Church for some years, and by then "we know pretty well everything the Church teaches". And that situation of someone else then bringing errors to our attention is going to be more difficult to handle, comparable to eating meat.

Once we've been in the Church for a decade or two, **we don't really like it when someone attempts to show us an error in our understanding**. We're no longer all that open to the suggestion that maybe our understanding still isn't quite perfect in one area or another.

How we respond to situations where we are required to deal with errors in our understanding will heavily influence whether we develop real godly character or not. God in effect says to us: here is where you are

still wrong; **so what are you going to do about it?**

What God requires of us in those situations is that we will examine all the evidence that is presented to us against our present understanding, and that we will examine that evidence objectively. Godly character development **is promoted** when we honestly and openly confront new facts brought to our attention; and it **is stifled** when we ignore or reject unpleasant facts that we cannot disprove.

Finally, brethren, **whatsoever things are true**, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, **think on these things**. (Philippians 4:8)

The development of godly character depends on us filling our minds with these things. And the first criterion here is **that we accept "whatsoever is true"**, and that we reject "whatsoever is false". Unlearning errors brought to our attention by other people is very difficult, but it is an essential part of developing godly character.

THE ULTIMATE TEST

People who don't know the difference between right and wrong also don't have any godly character. Character development must start from a foundation of understanding. And once people have correct understanding, then they are in a position to form convictions based on that correct understanding. And then comes the ultimate test: **standing up for our convictions!**

We live in a world that is largely ruled by compromise. If you give me something that I want, then I will make some concessions to you. Since our positions are not in agreement, let's at least meet halfway. That way we both get at least some of the things we want. Politicians are professional compromisers.

But before God there can never be a halfway meeting between right and wrong. Godly character development demands that we totally reject what is wrong, and totally accept what is right. And when we are being pressured to compromise our religious beliefs and practices, then we have to stand firm on our beliefs.

That will be the major test for the Laodiceans in the time still ahead of us. Will they stand up for the truths which they understand, or will they, in the face of severe persecution, compromise? Will they hold fast to the truth? Or will they cave in?

Standing up for our convictions in the face of severe persecution develops godly character. God needs to know whether we will hold firm to the truth, or whether we will be ruled by a spirit of fear.

IN CONCLUSION

The development of godly character is what life is all about. God is not looking for some mindless compliance with some rules or regulations. God is looking for a character that is reliably consistent and predictable. And that requires us to be proactive in our relationship with God.

Initially God was the proactive One in opening our minds to His truth. But ever since then the onus has been on us to be proactive, and to seek contact with God. **We need to pray** to God in order to receive answers from God. **We need to study** the Bible, not just read it, searching for more answers from God.

We have to take the initiative to seek God while things are still going well for us, before we face serious problems. That is the mindset that forms the right foundation for developing godly character.

The things that promote the development of godly character include the following things:

- 1) We must proactively seek a knowledge of God's laws and an understanding of the mind of God.
- 2) That will provide the foundation for constantly refining and fine-tuning our conscience, to the point where the truth of God will always be the deciding factor in our decisions regarding what we will do, and what we will not do.
- 3) Sooner or later we will all be challenged by situations where our conscience is bothered by certain situations (e.g. the introduction of heresies into God's Church in the late 1980's); and then we will have to decide what to do. Resisting influences that are wrong will produce godly character in us.
- 4) Character development requires from us a total commitment to God, a commitment that will not waver in the face of opposition and persecution.
- 5) All of us must unlearn errors at one time or another. When an error is brought to our attention, then that always presents a test of character to us. Are we willing to change and reject the error? Or will we refuse to change?

As James said:

Therefore **to him that knows to do good**, and does *it* not, to him it is sin. (James 4:17)

The development of godly character requires us to always act on the things God has given us to understand.

Frank W Nelte