

A Prayer for the Church

Colossians 1:1-14

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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What we have here is a letter from the Apostle Paul and Timothy to the Colossian Christians. Most likely Paul had never met these people or been to their church, but Epaphras, who started the church and was from there, had told Paul about them.

And so Paul writes to encourage them and instruct them. Paul wrote to them from prison somewhere.

The Christians at Colossae were gentiles. We don't even know exactly where this city was because the whole city relocated after an earthquake not too long after this letter was written.

This passage that we look at today consists of Paul's opening words of thanksgiving for the growth in their faith and then Paul and Timothy's prayer that they will continue to grow in the grace of God. Listen to some of Paul's words to the Colossians:

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints. . . . Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. . . .

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Did you notice the main thrust of what Paul is saying to the Colossians here? He's thanking God for their growth. He's telling them of his prayers that they would continue to grow in Christ.

I don't know if you've noticed, but we're growing a little bit here at Second Baptist. At Camp Second, our children's camp, last week, we took 71 kids. Two years ago we took 35. If you look around the sanctuary you will see more people here than were here last year. Especially over the last six months our attendance has suddenly gone up about 10%.

We don't emphasize the numbers here, and that's a good thing. But attendance numbers are important. I want more people here, not fewer. We should be encouraged.

As important as these kinds of numbers are, this is not primarily the kind of growth that Paul is talking about to the Colossians. Paul says his prayer for them is that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will, that they would lead lives worthy of the Lord, that they would bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God, that they would be strong in the strength that comes from God's power, that they would be able to endure everything with patience all the while joyfully giving thanks to God.

Now that's a picture of a growing church.

Bill Hull says that the wrong question for the church is, How many people are present? The right question is, What are these people like?

Are they learning how to live like Christ?

Are they being formed into greater Christ-likeness?

Are the people in our church increasingly practicing the classical spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, compassion, and holiness?

What about the new people who have become a part of our church over the last four years? There are about 100 of them. Are they better, healthier, stronger followers of Christ today than they were the day they joined our church?

Are they leading lives worthy of the Lord? Are they strong in the strength that comes from God's power?

What we are talking about here is spiritual growth, spiritual formation, discipleship.

Paul is not interested in cotton candy Christianity—light, fluffy, sugary sweet, and when you bite into it there's no substance. Paul is offering a prayer for this church—and this church—that we would grow deeply and lastingly in the grace of God.

And that's a big part of our shared vision for our church. One of the points of our vision for 2012 is expressed this way: *Cultivating healthy spiritual formation—growing in the grace of God through meaningful worship and discipleship*. In fact, purposely put that statement first in our vision statement because it is so important.

If we're going to reflect the kind of growth that we're talking about and that Paul is talking about here in the first 14 verses of Colossians, we're going to have to get over a couple of common misconceptions of spiritual growth.

I want to talk about two common misconceptions about spiritual growth or spiritual formation.

Misconception #1: Spiritual formation happens at salvation [this discussion on misconceptions is based in part on the chapter "Rethinking Discipleship" in Rethinking the Church by James Emery White]

We often operate under the assumption that total life change happens instantly at salvation. This is the idea that when someone gives her life to Christ, there is an immediate and in-depth change in her habits and character, that a person is fully formed spiritually at conversion. In other words, disciples are born (again), not made.

The idea that spiritual formation happens at salvation is a misconception.

The same thing is true with husbands and wives. Just because a preacher says, *Now I pronounce you husband and wife*, that doesn't mean that right away that man is the best husband that he will ever be or that at that very moment that woman knows as much about being a wife as she might in 25 years.

I didn't learn everything about being a fully formed, mature husband the first day. It has taken time. Just because I'm a perfect husband, totally mature and understanding now doesn't mean I was this wonderful the day we got married.

You know because I've told you that I've had to learn things along the way. I've had to learn about picking up the green mat after I'm done taking a shower and folding and placing it on the side of the bathtub. I didn't know this at the beginning.

I've had to learn about making the bed. I didn't know at first that making the bed was an important part of being a husband.

I didn't know at first that I was responsible for anniversary presents and birthday presents—every year.

Heidi's birthday is June 28. This year, I will be in Washington D.C. for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly. It happens that way almost every year that the CBF annual meeting is on Heidi's birthday.

One year, before we moved here, Heidi's birthday was the day that we were leaving for Atlanta for the CBF General Assembly. Her mom and dad were there to stay with the kids.

On Wednesday, the day before Heidi's birthday and the day before we were leaving, it was about 6:00 pm, and Heidi's parents started discussing when we were going to open Heidi's presents and sing Happy Birthday to her. They decided we'd go ahead and do it that night because we were leaving in the morning.

That made a lot of sense. Heidi's parents always made a big deal about birthdays. The only problem was that it was just hitting me that I didn't have a present.

It just didn't seem right to me that it was already time for a present again. I had just gotten a present for our anniversary June 18 and before that Mother's Day. I mean, really, how many presents can a guy be expected get?

But I realized that this wasn't going work when we had the big present opening and I didn't have anything. It was now 6:05. I called Glenda Blair at the Eagle Lake Drugstore. Like everything else in the small town of Eagle Lake, they closed at

6:00. She answered, and I said, *Glenda, I've got an emergency, if I come up there right now will you wait for me?*

She said, *You need a prescription?*

I said, *No, a birthday present.*

See, these aren't things you know just because the preacher pronounces you a husband. It's a long process of learning.

The extraordinary book by C. S. Lewis called The Screwtape Letters is written under the guise of correspondence between two demons concerning their "patient" on earth. Early in the book, the human who had been the demon's subject of temptation becomes a Christian.

The elder demon, named Screwtape, counsels his young nephew, Wormwood, not to despair saying, *It's O.K. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favour.*

Deep, lasting life change does not often happen at the point of salvation. This is not to say that it never does, and God can do whatever God wants to, but almost always salvation is the beginning of a pilgrimage, not the end. For too many of us, what God intended to be a starting line has become the finish line.

Eugene Peterson calls the process of discipleship "a long obedience in the same direction."

Misconception #2: Spiritual formation continues naturally over time

Almost anyone will acknowledge that perfection is not attained at the moment when someone makes a commitment to Christ. Often, the assumption is that the leftover areas of resistance will be taken care of over time. This is the idea that becoming a Christian will over the process of time translate into becoming Christ-like.

So, a person who has been a Christian for five years will have five years worth of spiritual maturity, a ten year old Christian will have ten years of spiritual maturity, and so on. So, if we can just get someone to say the sinner's prayer and start coming to church, they will over time be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Not necessarily true.

Discipleship comes from the same root as the word discipline. Being a Christian does not automatically translate into becoming Christ-like. In the same way, a child does not automatically grow up doing everything the way his parents would like him to do it. He has to be told. It takes discipline.

Do you remember learning how to ride a bike? If you have kids, do you remember when they learned? I remember that one day when Sam was 5 years old he just insisted that we take the training wheels off his bike. I tried to talk him out of it. I told him it was hard.

See, I didn't learn how to ride a bike until I was about 14. That may be an exaggeration, but not by much. I remember once all my friends were starting to ride their bikes and I still couldn't, they'd want to ride bikes, and I'd say, *How about we just ride our Big Wheels.* I didn't actually have a Big Wheel. I had a Green Machine.

So you're trying to teach your child to ride a bike. You take off the training wheels, and there you are going down the driveway, you're running along beside with your hand on his shoulder. About 2 or 3 trips down the sidewalk and you're huffing and puffing.

Then, you're just helping him get started and letting him go. Then he's working on getting started all by himself.

Learning to ride a bike is not something that just automatically happens to a child because they hit a certain age. A child who is right now trying to ride a two-wheeler is learning. He's being trained. He's practicing. He's falling down and getting back up. He's developing the skill to balance on two wheels where at first he only fell over.

We who are followers of Christ have to grow and develop and be trained and shaped into Christ-likeness and spiritual maturity. It doesn't just happen automatically. William Willimon says that worst possible advice you can give someone is to "be yourself." We don't need to just be ourselves. We need to grow. We need to be changed.

The great Greek orator Demosthenes was not born an outstanding public speaker, and he didn't just grow into one naturally. He had to overcome his natural limitations.

He overcame speech impediments by rehearsing his oration with pebbles in his mouth.

He would practice speeches while running or going up steep places in order to build his vocal stamina.

And to keep himself studying for lengthy periods of time so that he could prepare and learn his craft, he would shave half his head. That way, if he ever desired to stop studying and go out in public, he would not be tempted to because of the shame of his appearance and would instead stay fixed in his course.

In order to grow, discipline is required. That's why I'm saying to you that it is a misconception to think that your spiritual growth will occur naturally overtime. We have to grow and develop and be trained and shaped.

That's not how we like things. We like things easy, convenient, and instant. Sam and Ivy were putting something in the microwave yesterday for lunch, reading the directions for how long it needed to be in there, and one of them said, *Three minutes!*

Yakov Smirnoff, the comedian from Russia, says that when he first came to the United States from Russia, he wasn't prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores.

He says, *On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk—you just add water and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice—you just add water and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, “What a country!”*

We like things easy, convenient, and instant. But that’s not being a Christian.

I want to be a part of a growing church. Yes, I want our church to grow in numbers. I want to see more people here and I want to see us baptizing more.

But I want to be a part of a growing church in another way also.

Let me remind you one more time of Paul’s prayer for the growth Colossian church. His prayer for them was that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, that they would lead lives worthy of the Lord, that they would bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God, that they would be strong in the strength that comes from God’s power, that they would be able to endure everything with patience all the while joyfully giving thanks to God.

I want to be a part of a growing church like that.