

Intentional in our Growth

Ephesians 3:14-21

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14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

There was lots to hate about lunchtime in Junior High. As you might expect, lunch – like every other moment in Junior High - was the time for stratification based on popularity. It was a time when the “cool kids” sat together at the “cool kids” table and the not so cool kids didn’t. It became one more time for division and drama. It became one more time for horseplay and misbehavior. Those were the negative aspects of junior high lunch.

But, when I was in Junior High, there was one positive aspect about lunch – one thing to love: multiple food options. It wasn’t like elementary school where you went through one line and you got a tray-full of whatever mystery meat they were serving that day. In Junior High, you could pick what you wanted. There was still a line with the standard school lunch fare, but there were also lines with junior high favorites – pizza, tacos, chicken nuggets. But, the best thing was there was a line with “fun” items. Chips, candy bars, Little Debbie snacks, frozen treats, and soft serve ice cream. And if that wasn’t enough, to top it all off, there were vending machines with Coke, Dr. Pepper, and Big Red available for purchase.

I probably didn't eat a balanced meal in Junior High, but I wasn't the worst case. I had a friend who was not so disciplined in his lunch choices. Everyday he would race into the cafeteria and slide into the "fun" line. There he would purchase soft serve ice cream and a bag of Funyuns. Then, he would swing by the vending machine to purchase a Dr. Pepper before finding a place to sit. And that was his lunch every day. He would dip his Funyuns into his ice cream and wash it down with a swig of Dr. Pepper. There was no one to police his actions – to tell him that wasn't a good idea (or a good combination) – so he ate and enjoyed whatever he wanted...and his parents were none the wiser.

As today's junior high students can attest, times have changed and the idea of free choice at lunch has mostly gone away. It's been replaced by a balanced plate of a protein, grain, vegetable, fruit, and milk. You can still purchase some snacks, but gone are the Funyuns and Little Debbie's, soft-serve ice cream and Dr. Pepper. These have been replaced by healthy items like apples, and sodas have been replaced with fruit juices that meet wellness policy guidelines.

While my generation might argue that we turned out all right despite our food choices. But as my generation has become parents, we've recognized that these were wise changes to implement. Sometimes, we don't quite know what is best for us, especially when we are just starting out...when we have the freedom to choose from so many appealing options.

When my nephews were younger, my sister implemented a rule at dinnertime. They had to eat their "growing food" before they could eat their "fun food." That meant they had to eat the fruits and vegetables and protein before they could have dessert. Now, there was grumbling at times because my nephews really wanted to skip to the cookies, but they learned to accept that fruits and vegetables were part of what they needed to grow.

This same principle is true with our spiritual lives. The Apostle Paul began his first letter to the Corinthians with a concern for their spiritual immaturity, and then in Chapter 3 told them:

Brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready... (3:1-2)

The author of Hebrews was even more blunt in using a similar analogy to express his disappointment with where the readers were spiritually:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. (5:12-14)

Both the text from 1 Corinthians and the text from Hebrews make an assumption. They assume that growth is the normal condition of the Christian life. Healthy things are expected to grow. Nearly every metaphor of the Christian life described in the New Testament is a metaphor of growth. We are like seeds planted growing to the harvest. We are like buildings going up from the foundation to the roofline. We are like athletes competing in a race from the starting blocks to the finish line. We are like babies growing from infancy to full adulthood.

But how do we know if we are growing in a healthy way? How do we know if we are filling our spiritual plates with the things that move us from infancy to adulthood in fitting and sustaining ways?

This was a question Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago area asked fifteen years ago. As perhaps the “megachurch of megachurches,” they had heard the old adage – the charge leveled against them and other churches of size – that they were a “mile-wide but an inch-deep.” So, they set out to prove that this wasn’t the case for them as a church and for their people.

To determine if they were investing their resources in what matters most, Willow Creek commissioned a survey which sought to measure spiritual health using scientific research. The results were eye-opening. For instance, this survey revealed some encouraging things. For example, 50 percent of the congregation indicated that they “loved God more than anything else” and were expressing that love by reaching out to their unchurched friends and serving the poor on a regular basis.ⁱ However, the research also found that nearly one out of every four people at Willow Creek was stalled in his or her spiritual growth. As a church, they had offered a variety of options. They had kept people busy. But for the most part, it wasn’t making a significant difference. Their people weren’t growing. The truth was increased attendance in ministry programs didn’t automatically equate to spiritual growth. In fact, what the Reveal survey “revealed” is that their spiritual growth curves had been stunted.

When these results were presented to Willow Creek’s senior pastor, he said that the pain of knowing was almost unbearable. But, after thinking about it for a while, he then concluded that the pain of not knowing could be catastrophic.ⁱⁱ And I can relate to that. Facts can be painful, but they can also be our friends. After all, the goal was helping the church reach its spiritual potential, not filling the seats. So it was at Willow Creek. That’s why they set out to learn everything they could about how people grow spiritually. They opened the survey to more than 1,000 other churches, surveying over a quarter million people. These churches were diverse in size, geography, and denomination – including one Disciples of Christ church I used to serve. And over the course of six years of research, that *Reveal Spiritual Life Survey* identified that there was a four-stage spiritual continuum for people on the journey of faith.

In the sermon notes section of your bulletin, you will find these four stages of spiritual growth. And it might be fairly easy to identify where you are on this continuum. The first stage, “Exploring Christ,” describes people who have a basic belief in God, but haven’t yet made the decision to make Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior. On the other hand, the second stage, “Growing in Christ,” identifies people who have made a commitment to be in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. However, they are just beginning to learn what it

means and what it takes to develop a relationship with him. The third and fourth stages, “Close to Christ” and “Christ-centered” describe individuals who have grown more deeply in their spiritual walks. Those who are “close to Christ” see Jesus as someone who assists them in their day-to-day lives, while those who are “Christ-centered” identified their relationship with Jesus as the most important relationship in their entire lives. It shapes absolutely everything they do.

While this continuum provided a helpful way to think about the segments of our spiritual life and where we are, what the research also showed is that spiritual growth is not linear or predictable. In many cases, one doesn’t become “Close to Christ” or “Christ-centered” and stay there. Sometimes, things happen in life that challenge your faith and cause you to take a step back. Sometimes, the things you do to stay in relationship with Jesus – those spiritual disciplines - take a back seat to the demands of life. Sometimes, we “skip the line” which best serves our spiritual health and head straight to other “more fun,” “less healthy” options.

Paul knew these things to be the reality for Christ-followers even back in the early days of the church. That’s why he prayed for the church’s spiritual growth. It wasn’t a timid prayer, but one of scripture’s most powerful prayers. And in our scripture lesson this morning, we get to eavesdrop on Paul’s prayer for spiritual growth – for the church then...and for us today.

As you heard a moment ago, Paul doesn’t pray that the church and its members will be healthy and safe. He doesn’t pray that they will be successful and wealthy. He doesn’t pray that they will find a way to stand up to political foes in the Roman empire. He doesn’t pray that they might experience their best life now. No, he prays for strength by the Spirit to bring Christ more fully into their hearts.ⁱⁱⁱ He prays that that the church would be strengthened inwardly, that Christ may dwell within the church, and that the church may be firmly rooted and grounded in the soil of love.

But Paul doesn’t stop there. He then prays that the church might receive power. Not a political power of worldly clout or a brawny power of military might. No, what Paul prays is that the church may receive power to grasp something very nearly ungraspable: how wide

and how long and how high and how deep the love of Christ really is.^{iv} It is the Spirit of Christ in their hearts and the power to grasp Christ's love for the world that Paul would suggest characterizes a spiritually healthy diet.

That's what the idea of being rooted and grounded is about. It's about being rooted – anchored – to a source (Jesus Christ) and allowing that to be the basis – the grounding – of all we do. And this balance is important because spiritual growth is not about knowing more. It's about being and doing more – more of what Christ calls us to be and to do. Paul strenuously prayed that the church would realize this – that Christ's love would be active in the way they live their lives.^v

That's been our prayer, repeated over-and-over, throughout our 129-year history here at First Christian Church. Our value of being intentional in our growth has kept us balanced between knowing and doing. We see it in our Sunday School classes that both teach the Bible and care for one another. We see it in the way that we worship every Sunday morning where Word and Table shapes our lives “out there.” We see it in our Christian Women's Fellowship and Christian Men's Fellowship groups as they dig into the Word together, and church and the world serve the world together. We even see it in the particular way we do funerals here at First Christian. We don't just talk about the life our loved one lived. We talk about why he or she lived that way – how Jesus Christ made a difference. Those are just a few of the things we intentionally do to enhance our growth together.

After surveying more than 250,000 people, the Reveal Spiritual Life Survey uncovered several things that people like you and me need to grow spiritually, to move further down the continuum, to make Christ even more fully the center of our lives. The first is that we need to be grounded in our spiritual beliefs and attitudes. We need to know the tenets of faith. We need to know about the God of the Bible, revealed in Jesus Christ. We need to know about grace and sacrificial living. We need to know about who Jesus Christ is and how he makes a difference. Likewise, the Survey revealed that growing spiritually also requires being firmly rooted in our relationship with Christ through personal spiritual practices – things like prayer, the study of scripture, journaling, giving, and times of solitude with God.

Now here's what's interesting. All of those things could be done by a person on their own. And it's true - we need to realize our critical role in our own spiritual growth. We can't sit like baby birds with our mouths open expecting to be fed. We have to do some self-feeding. But, in the process of that, we also have to recognize that if we only do these things on our own, something would be missing.

Brad Griffin recently wrote a blog post about a situation that most parents have faced – your teenager doesn't want to go to church. Griffin laid out the truth as plainly as I have ever seen. He stated that if your teen stays home, there is no one for him or her to argue with or test their beliefs against, except their childhood memories^{vi} – those few stories that they heard, those few truths they learned when they were “forced to go” to church. And that's the danger of making spiritual growth a solitary exercise. Unless we are satisfied with remaining spiritual children, we need more than childhood memories – we need more than just a basic understanding of God, more than just a cursory knowledge of the Bible and biblical interpretation, more than just a simple doctrine of sin, sorrow, and death.

This is what the worship service, fellowship, and the whole life of the church is about. The divine love that Paul prayed we would know is not knowledge gained by private study, but love learned in the fellowship of the church.^{vii} And that's what our commitment to being intentional in our growth ensures – that as a church, we will strive to help you grow beyond a childlike faith – beyond your childhood memories. Our commitment to this value helps us recognize that a steady diet of “fun food” isn't healthy for our spiritual lives. We also need “growing food.”

Just as we are intentional in the ways we take care of our health through regular exercise, healthy eating, adequate hydration, and proper rest. So, too, being intentional in our growth requires us to be purposeful, systematic, and disciplined in our spiritual lives. And as a church that is supporting those efforts, we can't just offer a haphazard smorgasbord of activities and options. We have to intentionally design opportunities for growth, offering spiritual guidance, to offer accountability, to provide belonging and a sense of ownership, and easy and significant ways to serve. This might look like designing eighteen years of

experiences and teachings for our children that we can share with them when they are in our purview, so that when they leave for college, they will know what will equip them for life. That same kind of careful design has to be implemented for our adults as well. This is the healthy thing to do. And while we are doing those things, we can also be sure that God is doing immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine; all that we could dream; all that we could design.

The good news is, when we have gathered together in a place, when the rest of the world is divided between the popular and the unpopular, here we provide a sense of belonging; a sense of place. A place where we can hear again those truths that come from scripture: that God loves us in Jesus Christ beyond what we can imagine. The fact is there is a lot to love about that.

ⁱ Hawkins, Greg L. and Cally Parkinson. *Reveal: Where Are You?* Willow Creek Association, August 2007.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hoezee, Scott. "Ephesians 3:14-21" in the *Center for Excellence in Preaching*. July 23, 2018. https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-12b/?type=lectionary_epistle

^{iv} Ibid.

^v M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock. *The People's New Testament Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

^{vi} Griffin, Brad M. "What Should I Do When My Kid Says 'I'm Not Going to Church?'" Fuller Youth Institute, May 2, 2014. <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/im-not-going-to-church>

^{vii} Peterson, Brian. "Ephesians 3:14-21" in *Working Preacher*, July 26, 2016. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2546