

Col. 1:28-29, Maturity vs. Disconnection

Over the last few weeks, we've been doing several 'macro' studies, looking at global deception, the mystery of the Body of Christ and other things that are universal in scope. This study is going to focus on us as individual followers of Christ.

First, we'll look at what spiritual maturity is and how God works in us to get us there. Then we'll look at the disconnection between knowledge and life; the thing most likely to sabotage our move to maturity.

Here's our passage in Colossians:

Col. 1:28-29

"Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily."

(We are already perfect positionally, but in this context, 'perfect' means 'full grown' or 'spiritually mature').

Paul was driven by this one passion above all others – to move those under his care from infancy to maturity. Whenever he planted a church in any locality; he immediately went to work to move all those who came to Christ on the path to spiritual maturity. Here's the way one author described this:

"The great feature of the dispensation in which we live is the gathering out from the nations of the members of the Body of Christ, and then the bringing of them on to as full a measure of maturity as is possible. It is not only the salvation of souls, and it is not only the collecting of believers into a spiritual Body. It is afterward - their coming to full growth - *which represents the supreme interest and concern of the Lord in this dispensation.*"

The Lord's desire is to take us to maturity and, as one author wrote, "He will consider no price too great to reach His end. . . (He is willing) to involve Himself in a good deal of misunderstanding if only, thereby, He can reach His goal for us."

This helps explain all the mysterious and often painful ways God deals with us in chastening (lit. 'child training') as He seeks to move us forward.

H.L. Roush in his book "The Man God Uses" said simply,

"There is no man on the face of the earth who lives such an unusual life as the man God would see fit to use for His glory and praise."

And one of the best explanations of this process is from a Sparks article I found. Here's what he wrote,

"The believer has become possessed of an entirely new set of spiritual faculties and is a new spiritual entity - a different species of being, an entirely distinct creature. These spiritual faculties, by which alone the things of God can be known and entered into, have to be developed - have to grow - have to come to a place of spiritual efficiency... just as in the natural child, who has its faculties at birth but has to have a steady development of those natural faculties. The believer is born from above with an entirely new and different set of faculties from that with which he came into this world and which he has by nature, and it is those spiritual faculties and senses which have to be developed in order to make him full grown."

It's not just our identity in Christ which needs to be understood (which we looked in detail in our last study), it's how that identity, or position, becomes ours in experience.

There are so many passages and historical examples given in the Bible exhorting us to move to maturity that it would take hours to quote them all. Our passage in Col. 1 is just one of many that shows Paul's passion for this, which of course reflects the Lord's desire for all of us.

As a theological statement, which will need some practical illustration to clarify, maturity is conformity to Christ.

How far we get to the goal of spiritual maturity will be different for each of us. We are starting at different points and we move at different speeds, but we all need to understand what the goal is and how important that goal is to the Lord.

Spiritual growth is simply the increase of Christ in us – Christ being progressively formed in us as we “grow in grace and in the knowledge of (Him)” (2 Pet. 3:18). Or, as Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 3:17-18,

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

“From glory to glory” shows that growth is not instant but progressive. We move from spiritual infancy to maturity over the course of our lifetimes.

Every disaster in the Church over the last 2000 years, whether division, false doctrine, inability to impact this world, lack of spiritual discernment, or a thousand other problems, can all trace their source to spiritual immaturity – the willingness to remain spiritual infants in a world that desperately needs those who have grown up in Christ.

Just as the Lord’s single most important goal for us is maturity; the enemy’s greatest attacks are designed to hold us in infancy.

We are currently living in the most spiritually immature generation of believers in history. Satan has spent the last several decades completely dumbing down the saints of God by replacing meat with milk from the pulpits and preparing a generation of Christians with little or no spiritual discernment – who are completely vulnerable to the deception sweeping this world.

He has successfully brought the church into the apostasy Paul predicted in 2 Thess. 2:3.

As a whole, believers in the West, “. . . *will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, have heaped for themselves teachers (giving them what they want to hear); and they have turned their ears away from the truth.*” (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

It’s like I said in our last study – Western Christianity has become little more than a rock concert followed by a TED talk. No one can move beyond infancy in that system.

Listen to this passage from Eph. 4 also,

“And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, (for the express purpose of) equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.”

I hope with all we’ve looked at over the last few months, you can see clearly why there has never been a more dangerous time to be “*tossed to and fro*” in spiritual infancy than the time we’re living in now.

This is a survival issue for us. Growing spiritually is not “one of the things” we’re meant to do; it is the *most important thing* we’re meant to do.

Here’s another author’s comment on this:

“As the Lord of history, God is controlling all of its events, not only on earth but in all realms, to serve His purpose of bringing to maturity and eventually to enthronement with His Son - not angels or archangels, but the Church, His chosen Bride.”

Now, I want to move into “Disconnection”. What is it that holds us back in our personal lives from true spiritual growth and development?

And before we start talking about our responsibility in this process, there is something we have to keep in mind in everything we look at.

In Heb. 6:1 we see this:

“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation. . .”

The phrase, *“let us go on to maturity”* should be translated, *“on to maturity, let us be borne or carried”*. This verb is in the passive voice. God is working in us *“both to will and to do of His good pleasure”*. God will take us there as long as we cooperate with Him in the process and refuse to ‘disconnect’ from the path He has set us on.

Let’s start with one of the enemy’s early attempts in our Christian life of trying to move us off our course. The following is an explanation of the difficulty young believers often have in moving from natural to spiritual understanding of reality.

“You see, it is very often to the children, the elementary stages of faith, where there is not the capacity to take very much strain, that God has to give quick results and manifest signs. The marks of maturity are usually the withdrawing of outward manifestations, the willingness to walk with God alone for God’s own sake. It is a mark of graduation in the school of God that He can withdraw outward things. . . As in the case of Abraham, God often works along the line of delay and of contradiction. . . The longer the delay, the more the realization that our hope must be of God, and the less possible it can be of man.” Source Unknown

Spiritual maturity for the Christian is not simply an increasing understanding of the truths of the Bible (though it definitely includes that), it is the reception and application of those truths in a way that shapes our character into what those truths reveal to us of God's character.

In other words, the ultimate goal is not knowledge; knowledge is a means to an end: The ultimate goal is inner moral and spiritual conformity to Christ.

There is a growing pattern among Christians to consciously or subconsciously disassociate the truths of Scripture from the implications of those truths to real life.

We have somehow found a way to compartmentalize the principles and teachings of the Word of God to such an extent that we can become extremely enthusiastic about what we are learning without having a clue what those truths would mean to us personally if we applied them to the way we think and live.

Our real goal is to learn the Scriptures in such a way that the truths we are learning are fleshed out in our own lives—that we *become*, in our character, what we have learned.

Just as the Word of God became flesh in Christ, it must also become flesh in us. This desire of God for our lives is short-circuited if we fall into the trap of ignoring the *implications* of what we learn.

One example of this problem is found in James 1:22; "*But be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*" When we hinder the Word from moving past the "learning" to the "living" stage we are in full-blown self-deception.

In other words, if we don't accept and jump with both feet into the implication part of learning the truth, we will end up thinking we jumped when we didn't.

This is one of the subtleties of deception. People actually believing they are living a life they aren't living.

Other people can see it, God can see it, the angels can see it; but the people themselves can't see it at all.

In James 2:20 the writer points out the inconsistency of claiming to believe the Bible while not obeying it; “. . . faith without works is dead”. Why would anyone have to write that to someone?

If we say we believe a news report that a massive earthquake is going to hit our city in the next few days, wouldn't we leave town? If we stayed, what would that indicate? That we didn't believe the warning.

But this is where deception comes in. If an earthquake really *was* coming, and everyone was warned, and proof was given to convince even the most skeptical, but still people found ways to disbelieve, we would call them deceived.

Welcome to Western Christianity, 2020

No matter how intellectually stimulated and excited we may be about truths we have learned, failure to act on them leads to self-deception.

Now, keeping these things in mind, here's an example of obedience to the moving of the Spirit. It's in a familiar part of the book of Acts.

The Bible teaches us that we are united together in Christ *and* with one another. We live and move as a family in the grace and mercy of God. And we all love thinking about that.

But, it's like C.S. Lewis once said, *“The idea of forgiveness is delightful, until there is someone to forgive.”*

The family of God is a delightful subject, until we take a closer look at the implications.

On the plus side, as brothers and sisters in Christ we can have real, authentic relationships—maybe becoming more of a family than we’ve ever known before. We can support and care for one another, but to achieve this we may have to commit to each other more deeply than we are normally willing to. Here’s one of the passages in Acts 2:

“And all who believed were together and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them according to every man’s need.” (Acts 2:44-45)

We’d do this for our kids. Parents make sacrifices all the time for their children and each other as husband and wife, and we don’t necessarily think we’re being noble or being martyrs.

We love, so we sacrifice. That’s what family is all about.

The Church in the first century was family. So, they did whatever was needed to help each other survive. These verses in Acts are the Holy Spirit’s historical examples of what happens when people love each other more than they love themselves.

But here’s the real key of why all this was happening – look at the *result* of this same sacrificial love cited in Acts 4;

“And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:33)

Again, we want power, we want to experience the strength of the resurrected Christ, but God only grants that strength to those moving in His will. He gives us what we need for *His* agenda, not for *our* agenda.

Conservative, fundamental, evangelical churches are doing a lot of great things; children’s ministries, home groups, missions. A lot of behind-the-scenes sacrifices are taking place. All of these things are good and lives are saved because of them.

But if we really want to impact the world and the communities we live in, we need to see Acts 2 & 4 happen.

And it can't be forced or "programmed"; then it's not real, it's not authentic, it's just another religious experiment, or worse, its Christian socialism – mandated redistribution of wealth.

I've heard Christians quote Acts 2 to try and prove that God is actually *for* socialism. The sharing of the believers with one another in Acts was *voluntary* based on the inner development in their souls of the character of Christ. Christ was being formed in them, so they *naturally* expressed His life in their relationships with one another.

Socialism is government-mandated; it is not voluntary. It's another of fallen humanity's attempts to create their own deceived idea of paradise by ignoring the inner man and focusing exclusively on the outside of the cup.

But, if the church understands and embraces the truth about giving, sacrifice and compassion, Acts 2 & 4 will happen and it will get the community's attention.

Love expressed like that would shock our city just like it shocked Jerusalem.

In our generation the world simply sees the church as one of thousands of religious organizations jumping on whatever the newest 'politically correct' bandwagon happens to be. For now, it seems to be "social justice".

But often the man or woman in the church is still lonely and hungry.

It's considered cool to give money to popular movements. For some reason it's not as popular to take care of each other.

There's another danger to our contemporary redefinition of compassion that we need to take to heart. It's cited in Jeremiah 6:14, "*They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially. . .*"

If you read the context of this passage you will see that God hates superficiality. He knows those who are hurting and He knows exactly why they remain in pain. This principle is reinforced in the New Testament epistles:

"If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" (James 2:15-16).

And in 1 John 3:17-18

"But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth."

What drew the lost to Christ and captured the wonder of the first century world was *their inability to explain* the early Church. There was really no rational explanation for Acts 2 and 4. It's just not the way this world functions.

The world will only be drawn to the Lord when, as they look at the church, they see another world (another Nature, another Presence). This is when Christ is glorified, because glorifying God happens when His own invisible nature is expressed visibly through His people.

When there is no other explanation for the church except the presence and power of Christ, then you have true spiritual life being expressed. And the greater the expression of that life, the more spiritually mature the person is.

But there *are* other explanations for much of contemporary Christianity (our programs, our creativity, our events, our projects and outreaches, etc.). All religions do these things.

We don't really have to draw our strength from heaven, nor do we necessarily need heaven involved.

I have shared this before, but listen to this quote from A.W. Tozer:

"If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference."

Now, just a quick tangent on something that seems to hit a lot of us in a personal way – another scheme of the enemy to throw us off the path of spiritual growth. This is from Mr. Roush,

"Discouragement is a monster that cannot be reckoned with. Were it not for the cakes and cruse of water in a needy time, these vessels of God would succumb in the death grip of that indefinable... intangible... unexplainable... unspeakable cloud of gloom and mist of darkness, called discouragement or depression. There are times when the journey is too great for us, and we feel we must sleep until God ministers to us and enables us to go on.

Our brother Peter warned that we should not think it "strange concerning the fiery trial which is to test you, ...as though some strange thing happened unto you." No, this is nothing strange to the many who have gone on to glory before us. This was the common lot of them all. We cannot take too lightly Paul's solemn words that he had "trouble" in Asia... that he was "pressed out of measure"... far "above strength", and that when this tempest had reached its zenith, the great heart of the man that shook Rome "despaired even of life!"

We cannot soon forget this testimony that while in Macedonia, his flesh had no rest. He was troubled on every side, without were fightings, and within were fears.”

As our battle intensifies (which is a given at this time in history) we are going to be assailed from within and without. We are going to increasingly need encouragement.

By the end of the 1st century, unbelievers weren't seeing Christ in His church; they were seeing followers of Jesus attempting to *imitate* Him.

The goal of spiritual maturity is not imitation; it's reality. It's the expression of the indwelling life of Christ through us made visible to the world and to angels in ways that are immensely practical.

We may be contemporary and relevant, but is God really directing our lives? Who's designing all this? Who's the author of our TED talk?

In our generation where nearly everyone in the West already has an opinion of Christianity, the key to effectively reaching the lost is to love one another and to love those outside of Christ in ways they would never expect. It's love that impacts, not just words.

According to Acts 2 & 4, when those outside of Christ see Him in us, that will be the ultimate attention-getter.

Those who move toward maturity, are moving away from imitation to reality, simply because who they are in the flesh is decreasing and who they are in Christ is increasing.

Maturity involves the loss of self and a growing understanding of the ways and ultimate purpose of God in Christ.

These are the people who will have broken away from both the world and from Laodicea and who will make up the final remnant of the Church age - the ones who will glorify God in this world leading up to their deliverance at the rapture.