

# Because Christians Are To Grow

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

February 15, 2009

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*Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)*

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

*Ephesians 4:11-16 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup>The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>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.

*We are United Methodists because we know that Christians are to grow, no longer to be "tossed to and fro" by every wind that comes along. John Wesley understood that we must develop a "practical divinity," the joining of what we believe with how we live.*

*Growing up*

Who wants to be called a baby? When I was in elementary school, those were fighting words. But that is pretty much how Paul sees the Christians in Ephesus. He pulls the punch just a bit by saying "we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro" but the sharp point still hits home. To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as a 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, for you are still of the flesh" (1 Cor.3:1-3). No punches pulled there.

Is Paul *trying* to be insulting? I don't know whether Paul was going for a little shock value or not, but his point was well taken. These Christians were infants in the faith, Christian novices, fresh enlistees in the body of Christ. When we read Paul's letters in the New Testament we have to remember that they are largely letters written to small, emerging communities of faith that he himself had founded only a few years before. He is their "senior pastor," writing to his churches to provide guidance, to settle disputes, to teach, to encourage, and to otherwise help these new colonies of God's re-born people to grow toward Christian maturity.

Just try to imagine the journey that lay ahead of these Christians. There were no churches for them to grow up in. No parents or grandparents to turn to. No theological libraries or Bible Academies. No Bibles. Only this strange Good News about a God who gets himself crucified by the Romans. They were asked to give up their belief in the existence of many gods and embrace the Jewish claim that there was only one God. Their embrace of Christ often meant ostracism from their families and friends, for already there were nasty rumors about these followers of Christ, including gruesome whispers of their gathering to eat Jesus' body and to drink his blood.

They had as much to “unlearn” as to learn, as they grew into ever-truer disciples of Christ. In this, we are like them, for nearly all of us carry around unquestioned but

### Why Paul?

Today’s Scripture passages are from two letters by the apostle Paul. I am sometimes asked why I talk so much about Paul and his New Testament letters. A fair question.

I am drawn to Paul by the nature of his work, his understanding of the Good News, and his faithfulness to God. Paul’s vocation, given him by God, was to crisscross the Mediterranean founding Christian colonies across the Roman empire. He was founding churches and helping them grow. It may have been 2,000 years ago in a world far different from our own, but still, many of the problems and opportunities Paul had to deal with are the ones we deal with. Paul was helping new Christians and more mature Christians to grow in their discipleship and to grasp the enormity of the three-word statement: Jesus is Lord. He was helping them find their way to unity in the body of Christ. He was teaching them the full meaning and depth of the Christian proclamation so that they might withstand a hostile world and false teachers of the gospel. In the deepest sense, Paul was helping people to make their way into the people of God and, once there, to make their way toward God and one another . . . toward a genuine with-God life.

Paul’s letters are the oldest writings we have about Jesus and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, people, particularly in television specials, will try to pit Paul against Jesus, as if Paul messed up the simple teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this metaphor will help. Imagine Jesus’ life and teachings, his death and resurrection, to be a symphony composed by our Lord. You can think of Paul as that symphony’s first great conductor. The music is Jesus’ but Paul is the one who teaches the orchestra (yes, that is you and me) to play as one beautiful and skilled ensemble.

misleading assumptions about the Christian proclamation. We think we understand and then are surprised by how much we have to learn and “unlearn.”

John Wesley understood this. Though he never earned much respect as a systematic theologian, that was never his goal. Wesley pursued what he called “practical divinity,” by which he meant a practical theology. Eugene Peterson calls this “spiritual theology -- the attention we give to keeping what we believe about God (theology) in organic connection with the way we live with God (spirituality).”<sup>1</sup> It is this “spiritual theology” that Paul speaks to in this week’s passages from Romans and Ephesians.

### *Transformation*

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul transitions from Romans 1-11 to chapters 12-16. It is as if Paul has spent the first two-thirds of the letter climbing up the mountain and now, he begins down the other side, examining the Christian life in light of the work of Christ. In this, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus’ teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our *thoughts, feelings, and actions* are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we “grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How

<sup>1</sup>from Eugene Peterson’s thought- and life-provoking book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eerdmann’s Publishing, 2005, p.4. This book is the first volume in his multi-volume work on what Peterson calls “a conversation in spiritual theology.” Peterson is always worth reading . . . slowly.

can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God's Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone we couldn't get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these

### Being Grown-up

We are growing for Christ and toward maturity. In our efforts to grow, we are blessed by having centuries of Christians who have come before us and can guide us in our growth. But most of the Christians to whom Paul wrote this letter were "novice" Christians, new to the Gospel and certainly new to each other. So Paul spoke to them of the need to continue growing, not just in numbers, but in their Christian discipleship.

One of my favorite Amy Grant songs is "Fat Baby," about Christians who wrap themselves in the symbols of the faith but make no attempt to grow to maturity. In contrast, Paul says, "We won't be babies anymore," tossed about this way and that by the latest fads, theories, or books. Instead, we must speak the truth in love. By speaking the truth in love, Paul writes, we will "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (v. 15).

But, of course, to speak the truth, one must know the truth. Even Paul, a learned Pharisee, would not believe that he could know all truth fully, but Paul did believe that God reveals truth to us that we would not otherwise know. The truth that there is a God who created all that there is, who created us in his image, who longs to live in a right relationship with us, and who gave his only Son that we might do so – and who created a church to do God's work.

When we come to Christ, we take on the responsibility to begin a lifetime of learning and serving, of worshiping and loving, of giving and praying, so that we might be able to speak the truth in love to all those whom God invites to his table.

And the truth is that our willingness to commit our energies, our time, and, yes, our money, to the work of Christ's church is a mark of our maturity. Are we grown-ups?

are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don't actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a holy life.

### *Getting to the truth*

This organic connection between what we know about God and how we live with God, depends on our making our way ever closer to the truth about God. But how do we do that? How do we arrive at a trustworthy core of beliefs about the God with whom we live?

The UMC Book of Discipline holds that "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified [to impart vitality] in personal experience, and confirmed by reason." These four: *Scripture*, *tradition* (what we've gotten from those who came before us), *experience*, and *reason* constitute what has been dubbed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. A mistake sometimes made is to think that Methodists see the four as equals, merely four complementary means of coming to know the truth about God. But that isn't it at all. We affirm that Scripture is the primary criterion of what we believe, the measure against which all claims are judged. But we recognize that we learn about God also by listening to those who have come before us (tradition), by seeking to understand our own experience with God and others, and by learning to think well, using our mind as well as our heart.

We are United Methodists because we do not desire to be like children, tossed here and there by the latest Jesus fads. Instead, we pray that by "speaking the truth in love," we will "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." We seek the "renewing of our minds" so that we can "discern what is the will of God," so that we can grow into "maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." May we all embrace a calling to be spiritual theologians.

## Our Heritage of Respect for Learning

The people of God have always had a deep and abiding respect for learning. We usually think of God's Old Testament law as an extended and burdensome list of detailed rules. However, "instruction" is a better way to think of God's law, for the Law told the Israelites how they were to live in relationship with God – what a wondrous thing to be told! So, we shouldn't be surprised when the Psalmist says, "I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles" (Psalm 119:26-27 NLT). The book of Proverbs is, in essence, the lived experience of the Jewish community of learning to walk in God's ways. The Jews understood that they had to teach their children the story of Israel and its God. What does it mean to be Israel? Why do we live the way we live and do what we do?<sup>1</sup> Given their heritage of devotion to God's word and the importance of learning, it is not surprising that the study of Torah replaced the temple as the center of Jewish religious practices after the destruction of the temple in 70AD.

The apostles and early Christians were no less committed to learning and study. Timothy was told to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 3:14-15). Peter urged that Christians "long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2).

In John 8, Jesus tells believers, "If you truly continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (v.31-32). What does Jesus mean by "continue?" It might be translated "stay in" or "dwell." Dallas Willard writes that continuing/dwelling in Jesus' word means focusing on the good news of God's kingdom and devoting ourselves to Jesus' teaching through both private study and public instruction. This is not occasional dabbling in God's word, but dwelling there, being thoughtfully serious, devoting regular time and effort, and asking God to open our heart and mind to his word.<sup>2</sup>

At St. Andrew, we are striving to help all of us to become more knowledgeable and confident in our understanding and use of the Bible. This is crucial because, as our *Book of Discipline* states "United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine." Though a well-educated Oxford man, John Wesley considered himself to be a "man of one book," the Bible. We are called to be a people of that book. In its pages, we learn of God's hopes for us and expectations of us. In its pages, we confront the living Lord and learn of his love for us. In its pages, we learn how to live the sort of life that God intended for us. Indeed, William Willimon reminds us that "a congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>from Brueggeman, Walter. "Passion and Perspective: Two dimensions of education in the Bible." *Theology Today*, 1985

<sup>2</sup>from Dallas Willard's, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God*. 1998. San Francisco: HarperCollins

<sup>3</sup>from William Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible*. 1990. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Paul tells us not to be like children, blown here and there, ever susceptible to con-men (the Greek is a reference to a dice game). I couldn't help but think of books like *The DaVinci Code* (yes, many people still think it is a novel built upon a foundation of solid scholarship) and most televangelists ("get your check in and get your blessing"). What can we do to guard against such snake oil? A church member recently wrote me and said that she had come to believe that "We all need to be amateur theologians." What do you think she means? What would be involved in becoming an amateur theologian? Perhaps this would seem less intimidating if we remember that "amateur" is from the French word for "lover."

3. Paul speaks of our transformation, the renewing of our minds. You might discuss what this means to you. Are you in the process of being transformed? Have you been transformed? How would we know? What are some concrete, real-world examples of what Paul might have meant by the renewing of our minds? Paul means more than just our brains, but still, what does it mean to think as a Christian? Paul also speaks of discerning the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature. How might you go about finding the will of God for your own life? Do you think this is about which job or school to choose? Or is it about living within God's moral will for us, which begins with loving God and loving neighbor? How might these two different perspectives of God's will play out in your decision-making?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Ephesians 4:1-16</b> Building the body of Christ – the larger passage</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Ephesians 4:17-24</b> Off with the old, on with the new!</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2</b> Rules for the new life</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 3</b> The divisions among the Corinthian Christians result from their immaturity. Paul can't even feed them solid food.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Ephesians 6:10-24</b> Be strong in the Lord and the strength of his power. Wear the full armor of God.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

