

Intentional Faith-Development

Galatians 4:19; 5:22-23

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We have a friend who is a county extension agent. His presentation on planting trees has some parallels in what we're talking about today. Scripture compares the people of God to trees planted by the waters, bearing fruit in season, and to branches that remain attached to the vine and bear much fruit. Trees need a good root system, room to grow, and plenty of water. Also, my friend says, "Trees have to survive where you put them. Don't baby them."

What's involved in planting and growing trees can help us understand being fruitful Christians, being a fruitful church. It gives us some insight into *Intentional Faith-Development*. This is the third of "five practices of fruitful congregations" we're exploring (the first two are Radical Outreach and Hospitality and Passionate Worship; the next two are Risk-Taking Mission and Service and Extravagant Generosity).

Dallas Willard is a great writer on spiritual growth. He suggests a simple way to understand and remember how we develop faith and grow in grace. He uses the word "vim." That word's appropriate because it means "lively or energetic spirit; enthusiasm; vitality." It's not a word we use much anymore, though you might still sometimes hear the phrase "vim and vigor." Willard uses each of the letters in vim to stand for a word that describes what we need to grow. United Methodists have Volunteers In Mission, but this is a different use of VIM. Willard talks about **V**ision, **I**ntention and **M**eans. Each of these is vital in the process of intentional faith-development, spiritual growth, formation, the adventure of following Jesus as his disciples. (See Willard's book *Renovation of the Heart* 85-91.)

Vision shows us what we're aiming for, what our goal is. The apostle Paul shared something of his vision for the Galatian Christians in 4:19. He compares himself to a mother in labor pains, probably referring to the trouble and strain he went through to establish the churches. The Galatian Christians seem like they may go back and give up on the gospel. Paul says, "It's like I am again in the pain of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you.*"

Paul's vision was that these believers would have Christ in them, shaping their lives around the shape of Christ's life. Paul often talks about believers being in Christ—that's the relationship that makes us who we are. But he also often talks about Christ being in believers. That's not a figure of speech. Through the Holy Spirit, the living Lord Jesus Christ actually comes to dwell in the people who put their faith in him.

To say that Christ is formed in us is another way of saying that Christ will shape us according to his own image. As we submit to him, we come to reflect his image and glory in our lives. Several times, Paul uses the word "form" or a variation of it to describe what our lives are to be like in relationship to Christ and as Christ lives in us.

He says that God's purpose for us is that we "*be conformed* to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29).

He makes this appeal: "Do not *conform* to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed* by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2).

In another place he says, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, *are being transformed* into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

So we have this vision of being transformed to be like Christ, having our lives made like his, learning to live from him, and allowing him to live his life through us. In our tree illustration, we put our roots down and draw life from Jesus. Like branches, we're connected to him and his life flows into us and produces fruit. Paul tells the Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit, the outworking of the Holy Spirit in our lives is in things like "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (5:22-23).

A good way to see if we're making progress, if we're growing, is to look for that fruit in our lives. Are you more loving than you were a year ago? Do you have more joy than you did? Are you more at peace? Do you

have more patience, a longer temper instead of a short temper? Are you kinder than you used to be? Do you have an increasingly good and generous attitude toward other people? Are you more faithful and reliable than you once were? Are you more gentle, humble, teachable? Do you have more self-control now than you did a year ago? Do you expect, with God's help, to have all those qualities increase in your life in the coming year? That's a goal, that's a vision.

Intention tells us that it doesn't just happen automatically. God intends for us to have some responsibility for our faith-development, our spiritual growth. Robert Schnase says that in intentional faith-development, "*Intentional* refers to deliberate effort, purposeful action, and high priority. Growing in grace does not come without purposeful commitment to learning the faith and cultivating our love for God" (*Cultivating Fruitfulness* 43). Someone once said, "In the garden of obedience the fruit of the Spirit will grow." To have this fruit we need to learn to be gardeners who can tend and prune and irrigate. We need to keep the birds and squirrels out of the garden. We watch for disease and cut away ivy and other parasites. We make sure the young trunk can stand firm in strong winds (N. T. Wright, *After You Believe* 196). Having this intention means that we actively participate in what God's doing in our lives and in the world. Right after Paul describes the fruit of the Holy Spirit, he says, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25). The Spirit leads and we have to follow. The Spirit is moving and we need to pay attention and get in step.

At some point we have to make a decision that we're going to pursue life with God, we're going to embrace life in relationship with Christ, and we're going to commit ourselves to growing in that relationship. John Ortberg describes forming this intention:

No one can do this for us. I want this. This is what I want more than anything else. I know I will be wayward, I know I will forget, I know that I'll get off track, but I'll keep coming back to this. This is what I want and I will have it and whatever it takes to do this I will do.

(Menlo Park Presbyterian Church Sermons, "There's Always a Next Step," Feb 9 & 10, 2008)

Have you made that kind of commitment? Have you formed that kind of intention to be in relationship with Christ and to grow?

A priest noticed a young man coming in to the sanctuary and kneeling for about fifteen minutes each morning. One day he stopped him as he was leaving and asked what he was doing. The young man said, "I pray and say, 'Jesus, here's James.'" The priest said, "That doesn't take fifteen minutes." James went on, "Then I wait until I hear him say, 'James, here's Jesus'" (Jim Buskirk, "Freedom and the Spirit," 4/9/89, First United Methodist Church, Tulsa, cassette tape).

That brings us to *Means*. How do we hear the voice of Jesus? How do we wait? How do we receive grace to help us grow and develop and go on?

Different writers list a variety of "means of grace" or "spiritual disciplines." These are practices we engage in, not to earn grace, but to open ourselves to grace, to put ourselves in a position to receive grace, to cooperate with grace.

Let's keep it simple today and mention just a few of these means. *Prayer* of course is one way we offer and open ourselves to God. As we learn to listen in prayer, we do hear God's voice, we do become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. I realized recently that some of my praying is just talking to myself—trying to get my mind focused or to talk myself into something. Now, I believe God hears that and it can lead to prayer. But I want to learn to tell the difference between conversation with God and talking to myself.

Another means is *reading, studying, and hearing the Scriptures*. To develop our faith, to grow in grace, there's no substitute for the Bible. You don't have to understand it all—in fact, struggling with questions about the Bible is one way we grow. But the more you engage the Bible prayerfully and thoughtfully, the more it will come alive to you, and the more you'll find it nourishing you.

Getting together with other Christians is another great means of growing. We're not in this by ourselves. We belong to a community of faith,

we're members of the body of Christ, we are God's household and God's temple, we're part of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Communion is a vital means of grace. As we rehearse the gospel in the sacrament, we bring ourselves to God and we receive what God wants to give. As we receive the signs of the body and blood of Christ, our faith is renewed and strengthened, we're fed so we can grow, we're refreshed on our journey of following Jesus.

There's another way that God helps us grow. My friend the extension agent says not to baby a tree. It has to become able to survive. It has to *develop strength through adversity*. Now, I believe that God is good and loving and wants only good for us. God doesn't cause the pain in our lives or send the hardship. He doesn't have to—in this fallen world there's plenty to go around. But God can use anything that happens, God can redeem it and bring good out of it. A man I knew used to say, "God can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick."

FFH is a contemporary Christian band founded in Pennsylvania over twenty years ago. After about ten years of recording and touring, the group decided to take a break. Two members of the group are a husband and wife—Jeromy and Jennifer Deibler. During the group's break, Jeromy and Jennifer and their three year old son went to South Africa to lead music in a small church and work with musicians there. Their six months in Africa was a time of great faith-development for them. They learned about silence and simplicity and prayer and real conversation and many other ways God works in our lives. As they prepared to return to the U.S., they found out they were going to have another baby.

After they returned they spent several more months waiting for God's guidance about their future. They also found out the cause of some physical symptoms Jeromy had. He was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. They were still taking time off from recording and touring, so they had some time to deal with this. It was depressing news, but at least they knew what was wrong and could begin to address it. They learned all they could about MS. Their daughter was born. And Jeromy went through an experimental treatment as part of a clinical trial. He's doing better, but MS is part of their life now. Their group got back together and recorded more

music. They lived through the big flood in Nashville in 2010, although they lost most of their possessions. One of their songs comes from the time when they were discovering Jeremy's illness and dealing with it.

What It Feels Like

So this is what it feels like to walk the wilderness
and this is what it feels like to come undone
So this is what it feels like to lose my confidence
unsure of anything or anyone
So this is what it feels like to walk the desert sand
and this is what it feels like to hear my name
and to be scared to death cause I'm all alone
but feel love and peace just the same

And this may not be the road I would choose for me
but it still feels right somehow
And I have never felt you as close to me as I do right now
So this is what it feels like to be led

So this is what it feels like to have it fall apart
to be totally unglued
and find out if I accept my brokenness
I get more of me, I get all of you
So this is what it feels like to be on shaky ground
Careful of every step I take
Realizing as I stop to look around
I look around and see everything a different way

And this may not be the road I would choose for me
but it still feels right somehow
cause I have never felt you as close to me as I do right now
So this is what it feels like to be led

So this is what it feels like to just walk away
from everything I thought kept me safe
to depend just on you for every meal
and find it's better this way
oh it's better this way

And this may not be the road I would choose for me
but it still feels right somehow
And I have never felt you as close to me as I do right now
And this is what it feels like to be led

(<http://jeromy-deibler.squarespace.com/#our-story-1>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFqGSKcyvbc>, accessed
4/20/16)

Do you have a vision of life in Christ? Christ in you empowering and shaping and forming, of becoming more like him in life with God, in character, of him preparing you for the great transformation of a resurrection like his to live in the new world God is making, to live in God's glorious presence forever. That's the Jesus Vision.

Have you made a decision to receive life from Jesus, to commit yourself to him? Are you intentional about entering life in him and with him? That's the Jesus Decision.

Are you following Jesus' way of life? Are you using the means, the method, he gives for growing and developing in kingdom living, in life with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and connected to other believers? That's the Jesus Way.