

Our Vision for Maturity

Colossians 1:27-29

Mark Vroegop

²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me (Colossians 1:27-29)

It has been an amazing week of seeking God's face together. Prayer Week 2013 featured some incredible times of prayer, and there was a vibrancy and transparency in them that was different than the past. Our staff prayer summit was so personal and deep as people poured their hearts out to God that I found myself weeping in private intercession. Once again there was something beautiful about the combination of the Scriptures, community, prayer, and real life.

As well, it is infectious. Part of the goal of prayer week is to give you a taste of what prayer could be in your life or in your small group. A leader and staff member wrote me an email this week which illustrates this:

I wanted to share with you our encouraging time at small group last night. My husband and I have the privilege of leading a small group of singles and young marrieds. We had a convicting time talking about the sermon and then ended by praying for one another. We picked out one or two things that each of us would need to work on in our spiritual walks in 2013. We then had everyone pray their desires for spiritual growth rather than just say them. So, we followed the format that you used yesterday and we had a sweet time of prayer for one another. I looked up after we had finished, and we had been praying for 45 minutes! It was such a powerful time of vulnerability, encouragement, and praise.

That's why we do prayer week. And the growth doesn't have to stop there. Every month we have events and opportunities that you can grow in your practice of prayer. Here are a few examples:

- Fresh Encounter Prayer Service – the third Sunday night of the month
- Elder Prayer every Sunday at 7:15 a.m. in the prayer room
- Throne of Grace Prayer during the second service
- Noon prayer on the first Wednesday of the month
- First Friday Global Missions
- Making use of the online prayer wall (yourchurch.com/prayerwall)

So please, please do not let this be the one week a year where you take prayer seriously. Let's continue to grow together as we learn what it means to be a church that passionately seeks the favor and power of God through prayer.

Why Spiritual Maturity?

Last week I challenged you to pray intentionally about spiritual maturity. We studied Colossians 1:9-14 which was a prayer that the Apostle Paul prayed for the church in city of Colossae. I summarized his prayer this way:

*Lord, I want to know you
so that I can faithfully follow you -
even when it's hard -
all because of the gospel.*

I wanted you to pray about spiritual maturity for a week and then for us to talk about it this Sunday. This weekend our elders are gathering for our annual retreat, and there are some things that the Lord has placed on our hearts. We would like for you to understand what we are praying about, researching, and discussing.

As a church family, we are in a great place, and there is much for which we can be thankful. Our church is healthy spiritually, our pastoral staff team is fully staffed, our facilities are completed, our financial position is strong, and the Lord continues to add people to our church family. Churches go through seasons of crisis and challenges, and College Park has seen those days before. We are through them.

However, that doesn't mean that everything is safe. There are great blessings to being a church our size. For instance, it is just incredible to me that our church family has given over \$696,000 in our Christmas Offering. We are able to offer a wide variety of ministries and leverage a vast array of resources to meet the spiritual needs of our people and a lost world.

But there's also a danger. And I'm sure that you feel this at times. There is a danger that with all the programs, all the activities, the attractiveness of our facilities, and the "vibe" of a crowd that a church can "feel" successful but it might not actually be successful in the right things. In other words, as elders and pastors feel the prevailing winds of our culture and the size of the ministry of College Park, and we want to be sure that we are really producing disciples. We want to be sure that we are doing everything in our power to help you become spiritually mature.

Our pastors had a retreat in August where we pressed into this subject deeply, and we will be discussing it in depth with our elders this weekend. I summarized our passion with a paragraph that I presented to our elders this fall. Here's what I said:

We will fight against the natural, gravitational pull of a large church which, despite all its blessings, can often lead to under-developed life-on-life discipleship and stagnating spiritual maturity. Therefore, we will invite our people to a refocused vision toward "presenting everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28) at every level of ministry such that spiritual depth, personal transformation, and multiplication are visible aspects of our future culture.

Let me emphasize again that it is not that our church is struggling. But it is a part of good spiritual leadership to be on guard and to be sure that we are doing what God wants. And I think it is also important for you to know what is on the hearts of your Pastors and Elders.

The Vision of Colossians 1:28

Sometime last summer I was reading the book of Colossians while I was thinking about these things. As I read Paul's vision for the church at Colossae in chapter one, it resonated with me in a profound way. This text became a rallying cry for me, and I have shared it numerous times with our pastors and elders. Its vision is clear, compelling, and clarifying. It reminds us what is really important and what the ultimate goal is. Look at what is here:

1. The Focus

I love the simplicity and the power of the first three words in verse 28: **"Him we proclaim."** This phrase helps us to keep perspective and priority in the midst of many other things that could become accidentally distracting. It fits very well with our mission statement – "Igniting a passion to follow Jesus" – and a historical commitment to "keep the main One, the main thing."

This was the main purpose behind Paul's letter to this church. He wanted them to keep Christ at the center of everything and for them not to add other things that would become more important. This is so clear in 1:15-20.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15–20).

It is all about Him! It is about the message that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). It is the message that "... to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God" (John 1:12). And it is the understanding that spiritual maturity is about becoming more and more like Him. It is about being transformed from one degree of glory to another as we look more and more like Him (2 Cor. 3:18). Spiritual growth is more than just knowledge, ministry activity, church involvement, and helping people. All of those things are a part of it, but at the end of the day the goal is to become like Jesus. It is all about Him!

And it is church's role in the world to proclaim this message. The Greek word here has the idea of a solemn or important proclamation that is spread or is on a mission. This isn't just news. This is "breaking news," life-changing news; it is the kind of news that demands to be shared. The message about Jesus demands a passionate declaration.

Don't miss this! This message and focal point of the centrality of Jesus informs everything else. Don't miss the fact that the church's role is not just to help you understand the Bible, theology, or how to deal with life's problems. The church's central mission is to proclaim Jesus.

How is a person forgiven of his sins? Jesus! What is the church about? Jesus! What is the goal of spiritual growth? Jesus! It is all about Jesus – "Him we proclaim!"

2. The Process

The second thing that emerges in this text is the process by which the centrality of Christ is brought to bear in people's lives. This passage helps us to see the scope and the variety of what the process of spiritual maturity involves.

The first thing that I hope you noticed was the repetition of the word "everyone." The NIV, for the sake of linguistic flow, only translates one of two Greek words here: "admonishing and teaching everyone." But the original language is very specific. The repetition of the words was meant to communicate that every single person should be involved in this spiritual maturity process. There were to be no exceptions. This was important in Paul's day because of the teaching which suggested that spiritual growth was only for an elite class of people. Paul would have none of this. Instead, this verse calls every single one of us to realize that we need to grow.

What's more, it is solemn reminder to our pastors and elders that we have to work hard to help everyone grow. It is verse that is similar in tone to what we hear in Hebrews 13:10 – that pastors are to watch over people's souls "as those who will have to give an account." It is a verse that calls us to never use the size of the ministry as an excuse. If God has blessed us with a lot of people, then we have to work hard to help every single person. And that is just not our responsibility alone; it is all of ours together. Every single person's spiritual growth matters!

But then notice that how we do that is varied. Paul uses two words and one qualifier: warning, teaching, and with all wisdom. The word "warning" is also translated as admonish. It is the Greek word *noutheteo*, and it means to correct and to turn others from what is wrong and to lay what is good on their hearts.¹ So part of the process involves helping one another through loving correction – identifying what is wrong so that it can be made right. Spiritual maturity also involves teaching. The word simply means to provide instruction whether formal or informal. Finally, the text says that this should be done "in all wisdom," which seems to mean that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

When you put all of this together, there is a clear sense that we need to continually work really hard to consider the spiritual needs of every single person in the church. And we need to find creative ways to bring correction and instruction to the needs in people's lives. Every single person's spiritual growth matters. We have to warn and teach everyone.

3. The Goal

As meaningful and important as the previous two points may be, it has been this last phrase – "that we may present everyone mature in Christ" – that has really gripped me. And it is this vision that caused Paul to say: "for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he works powerfully within me" (1:29). So Paul saw himself as "all-in" when it came to this task. He clearly saw this as an important work, something to which he was willing to give his time and energy.

Three things have struck me about this last phrase. First, I find that the idea of "presenting everyone" to be a glorious and challenging concept. Do you hear the concept of stewardship

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich. electronic ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-.

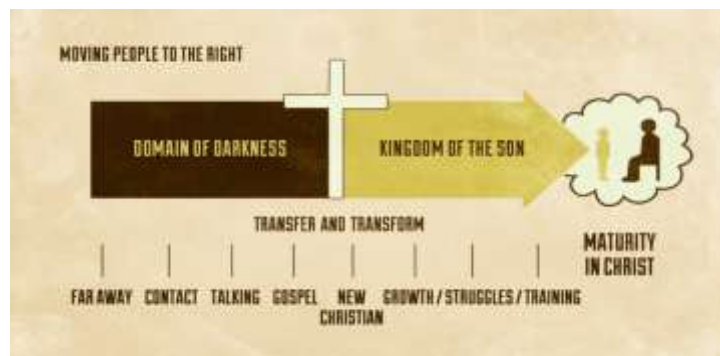
embedded in this phrase? “Presenting someone” seems to mean that someone important is being given the opportunity to see or review something. In this case it is people who are going to be presented to Christ.

Second, this phrase indicates some kind of movement or destination. There is a goal in mind here. Life is not static, and spiritual subjects are not an end in themselves. Every day that goes by, we are closer to the final accounting of our lives.

Third, the ultimate goal is maturity in Christ. The word for “mature” can be translated as “whole, without blemish, complete, and full.” In this context it means full-grown or completed from a spiritual maturity standpoint. It means that over time there is a progressive growth in a person’s resemblance of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that growth is substantial and obvious. And sometimes there is a temporary decline. But the overall trajectory of our spiritual maturity is characterized by growth.

Our pastoral staff attended a conference by the authors of The Trellis and the Vine last fall. It is a great book on discipleship that makes a comparison of programs to trellises and personal discipleship to the growth of a vine. The book is a call to be sure that we have trellises but that we aren’t consumed with trellis work. It is a reminder about the priority of disciple-making or in the context of Col 1:28, of presenting everyone mature in Christ.

As a part of the conference the authors shared a model that was helpful.



It identifies the different stages of spirituality that people are in. It is designed get us thinking about where people are spirituality, and then for us to ask a very important question: **How are we moving people to the right?** The question really resonated with our pastors because it reminds us of two essential things: 1) we have people who are in very different stages in the spiritual journey, and 2) the goal of everything we do is to “move people to the right” – to help them become spiritually mature.

For our pastors, this means taking a careful look at everything that we are doing and asking ourselves a very basic question: *“How does this program, ministry, or event help us in producing spiritually mature disciples?”* Now that may seem like really basic question – maybe even a dumb question – but it is one that somehow churches stop asking themselves. The priority of disciple-making can wane over time as we get so involved in running programs, recruiting workers, fixing problems, and managing the ministry. Big churches and small churches struggle with this.

But churches are not the only challenge. Every one of us can be guilty of this. It happens when you get into a pattern of meeting with Christian friends, attending Christian programs, transporting your kids to Christian activities, listening to Christian sermons, and serving in Christian ways, but then we don't use those venues of Christianity to get below the surface and really help us to become spiritually mature. The problem is that Christian busyness can convince us that we are growing spiritually when we might not be.

So our vision for spiritual maturity is something that we need to embrace together. In light of that, let me ask you some questions:

1. Are you further along in your spiritual maturity and who would know?
2. Who would be a spiritual mentor to you?
3. Who are you pouring your life into right now with a vision of helping them "move to the right?"
4. Do conversations with other believers involve talk about personal spiritual growth?
5. Do you come to church with a purpose to grow and to help others to grow?
6. Are you intentionally building into people who are not Christians?
7. Have you taken the first step of being a disciple after receiving Jesus as your Savior and being baptized?

You see, there is a danger with all of the things that College Park offers. The danger is that we could be busy building ministry trellises while neglecting the vine, which is spiritual maturity. The danger is that we could have all the trappings of success while not really producing the one thing that the church is meant for: making disciples.

Do you see why Colossians 1:28 is so relevant to our church as a whole but also to you personally?
²⁸ *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).* The focus is Christ, the process is warning and teaching everyone, and the goal is to present everyone mature in Christ. EVERYONE!

As pastors and elders we see the importance of really dialing into this theme for the next number of years. We feel the prevailing structural winds that are blowing, and we can see the path where a large church could be a mile wide and an inch deep. We are not there now; but we believe that it is our responsibility to lead all of us into season where we intentionally work on this important disciple-making culture.

Three Specific Areas of Focus

Having looked at the text of Colossians 1:28, let me turn now to the context of this next year at College Park. Under this theme of disciple-making, vine-work or spiritual maturity we have three specific areas of focus about which we are praying, researching, and planning. Our intention is not to roll out a number of new programs. Rather, we are asking ourselves what themes do we need to be talking about to help us do a better job of presenting everyone mature in Christ.

Personal Evangelism

The first area relates to the need for us to help one another when it comes to personal evangelism. There are three reasons why this is on our hearts. First, in order to be a group of people who are true disciple makers we have to know people and work with people who are far to the left on the former chart – people who are far away, people with whom we have contact, those with whom we talk, and those with whom we've shared the gospel.

Second, we received the results from our church-wide survey last week. And while the survey showed some very encouraging statistics about our church in terms of spiritual growth, depth, and vibrancy, the statistics on evangelism were sobering:

- Almost 40% of the church do not know their neighbors
- Over 60% do not know them well enough to have a spiritual conversation with them

So clearly we have some work to do not only in learning how to share the gospel but even in making it a priority to spend time with the people around us.

The third reason is because of what personal evangelism does. Philemon 6 says this: *"... and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ."* There is something about personal evangelism that dramatically increases the pace of discipleship. The intentional development of relationship with non-Christians, the risk of talking about spiritual things, and the process of dealing with the questions, rejections, or reception makes a person more likely to grow spiritually. Christianity was never supposed to be safe, and personal evangelism challenges that. Therefore, we are going to be talking about this and doing some things to help you and empower you in personal evangelism.

Disciple-making Culture

The second thing that we are talking about as elders is how to create a culture of disciple-makers beginning with our leaders. We've already established some things, such as an Aspiring Leader Class, our Pastoral Residency Program, and a Future Shepherds Mentoring Program. But our intention is not to start a new discipleship program. Instead, we want to call and empower our leaders to pour their lives into others such that they are helping them become spiritually mature. Most of our leaders are doing this already at some level, but we want to see how we can help it grow even more.

We want to create a culture where people are constantly and intentionally being "moved to the right." We want to help all of us see the value of this, and we want to provide resources that would empower you to join our leaders in this effort. If you are a godly person who has some life experience, we'd like you to find a younger believer, spend time with that person, and help him or her grow. If you are new in the faith, we want you to take the initiative, find an older, godly person and learn from them. If you are an experienced ministry leader in some area, we want you to constantly think about whom you are training to take your place. We want you to see that your role is not just to do the work of the ministry but also to equip others for the work of the ministry.

External Impact

One of our core values is the “Call to Go,” and we believe that we need to continue to work on making College Park a conduit of ministry not a cul-de-sac. In other words, we need to continue to work at giving our resources and our people away to reach our community and our world for Christ. This is important for two reasons.

First, the needs around us are great. We have a team researching church planting and multi-site initiatives in the city of Indianapolis. Now you might think that there are enough churches in our city, but it might surprise you (as it did me) to learn 60 percent of people in our city are unchurched and would not identify with Christianity. Of the existing churches in our community only 56 percent are self-declared “evangelical” in the broadest sense of the word. A national benchmark is one evangelical church for every 1,000 people and Indianapolis is one for every 1,800 people. So there is clearly a need.

But second, we need to consider church planting for the health of our own church. There is something really helpful when people have to prayerfully consider helping a church from the ground floor and when people leave to make that happen. This external mind-set helps the church not to become overly comfortable or too consumer-oriented.

Our team is researching what is next for our church in order to reach our community and help us become mature. And we already have one opportunity. On Tuesday evening, January 29, Pastor Cory Johnson and the elders of Nehemiah Bible Church will be holding an informational meeting for people from College Park who would like to learn more about the church plant in the Brookside neighborhood². So that might be something you need to consider. It is my prayer that this will be one of many opportunities to strategically reach our community. We need to do this for the sake of the Kingdom and for the sake of our own souls.

Personal evangelism, a disciple-making culture, and external impact are the three specific focal points for our pastors and elders. This weekend is our annual elder retreat, and we will be dialing into each of these important areas.

Last week we prayed about spiritual maturity and this week I wanted to give you a sense of where we feel the Lord is leading us as it relates to this all-important topic. God has been so good to our church over its 27 years. Our church is healthy, and now we can look to the future and really ask ourselves – “What can we do to present everyone mature in Christ?”

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² The Nehemiah Bible Church informational meeting starts at 6 p.m. on January 29 in the chapel.