

#3 Focused on growing disciples

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[0 : 00] Help us to concentrate.

Will you steal our minds from wandering away? Would you help raise our energy levels? Will you help us to see that you are indeed a Lord who is worth following?

And Father, we just ask that you would let your word dwell in us this morning by your spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now, I'm a bit of a fan of the Peanuts comic strip, which I regard as the spiritual ancestor of another great comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes. And there's this little comic strip which is on the screen, which often puts a smile on my face.

Let me just read it to you in case you can't see. So in the comic strip, Linus is running up to his old friend, Charlie Brown, and he's shouting excitedly, I can swim! I can swim! I just learned how to swim! I can swim four feet!

[1 : 10] And Charlie Brown offers his congratulations. Well, I'm glad to hear that, Linus. And then Linus goes on to excitedly interrupt him. Yes, sir. If I'm ever aboard an ocean liner and it sinks four feet from shore, I won't have a thing to worry about.

And the joke, of course, is Linus' childish expectations. We know that no ship is going to sink so close to the shore. Linus' training is inadequate.

He's only equipped for the shallow end, not the deep end. You can take off the comic now. And that brings us to core conviction number three for our church, which we'll be covering this morning.

Focus on growing disciples. Let me quickly remind you what a disciple of Jesus Christ is. A disciple is a follower.

Those who are not following Jesus are not his followers, which means they're not his disciples. Which means they aren't Christians.

[2 : 20] It's that simple. Followers, by definition, follow. So following Jesus means following his convictions, his dreams, his teaching all the way.

And so a disciple is a learner. They are learning Jesus, which means growing in Christ-likeness. But as disciples learn Jesus, they discover one of the big things that Jesus teaches is that they can't follow and learn him on their own.

Instead, to quote the song Rock of Ages, They need his cross and resurrection.

And so that means also growing in Christ's dependence. And ultimately, it's the church's job to grow disciples of Jesus.

It's the church's job to form Christians who don't just float at the shallow end, ill-equipped to live life as a Christian, but those who can survive at the deep ends of life.

[3 : 36] For like it or not, we all have to deal with the deep ends at some point. Life is messy and complicated. It's rarely simple and straightforward.

It cannot be easily navigated by quoting one-liners and just saying, Just try harder. And if the church is not making disciples of Jesus, who else is going to do it?

Our schools? Internet podcasts? As the pastor John Otberg has written, it's on your outline, everyone is being spiritually formed all the time, whether they want to or not, whether they are Christian or not.

The question is not if someone will sign up for spiritual formation. It's just who and what our spirits will be formed by. We all follow someone or something, whether we recognize it or not.

The question is whether that someone is Jesus. So then, what does a focus on disciple-making look like?

[4 : 52] And one way to answer that question, the way we're going to answer it this morning, is to watch the apostle Paul. Watch his ministry. After all, he's the model church planter.

He's the model disciple-maker. He's the model troubleshooter. He's the servant of the gospel, as he describes himself in Colossians 1 verse 23.

So he's an obvious example to look to. Now, as we watch him this morning, we have to be aware, of course, that there are some things that are unique to him, simply because of his special commission as the apostle to the Gentiles.

But there's other things that we can see that will help us understand what the pattern of our ministry should look like. So let's keep Colossians 1 verse 24 to 2 verse 7 in front of us this morning.

That's one way to express our conviction that we are to be driven by God's word. We keep our Bibles open in front of us. That shows that the word is driving us. And then let's watch Paul from three angles.

[6 : 02] What he does, what he aims for, and what he experiences. So firstly, what he does.

Paul proclaims Christ. Paul proclaims Christ. That's the big theme of his ministry. I wonder if you saw that straight away in chapter 1 verse 28.

He is the one we proclaim. Him we proclaim, as the ESV nicely puts it. Jesus is the message.

Whether Paul's up front in a pulpit, whether he's in a small group or the debating hall, whether he's meeting one-to-one with a fellow believer, whether he's in a formal meeting like a Sunday church service, or whether he's informally meeting with someone else in a cafe, in a home.

He's proclaiming Christ. Now that sounds extremely obvious. And perhaps even a little disappointing to those of us hoping for some silver bullet, some magic secret that will unlock the mysteries of disciple-making and give us a breakthrough.

Well, duh, we say. Of course it's about Christ. And perhaps secretly in our minds, we think to ourselves, but I was hoping you would say something different from that.

[7 : 34] Paul certainly knew that some of the Colossians were thinking that. For the temptation to move away from Christ is right there in the background.

It's hinted at earlier in Colossians 1, verse 21 to 23. You can have a look at it. There, Paul says, it's amazing, isn't it, that we who were once completely cut off from God, who had no standing with Him, no status before Him.

Well, now we have complete rights to see Him, complete relationship to be with Him through Christ. But then he goes on to say in verse 23, this only applies if you continue in the faith, establish and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the Gospel.

The implication is that they were things that were slowly moving the Colossians away from Christ. And this becomes more explicit in chapter 2.

So for example, in 2, verse 4 and 2, verse 8, where Paul appeals to them not to be deceived by fine-sounding arguments or philosophy. Or if we were to move on later to places like chapter 2, verse 18, we discover that there were people becoming infatuated with mystical experiences like the worship of angels.

[9 : 05] And then we read a bit further in chapter 2, verse 20 to 23, and we discover there were others talking about developing all sorts of rules.

Make sure you don't do this. Make sure you do that. As a way to become more spiritual. So it seems that there were people saying to the Colossian church, to grow as a disciple of Christ, you need this special ingredient or that special ingredient, which wasn't Christ, whatever it was.

They were slowly losing their anchor in him. And at first glance, you can sort of see why.

Proclamation of Christ versus seeing visions of angels and participating in some sort of angelic worship, which sounds more exciting.

Proclamation of Christ versus unambiguous rules about what to do and what not to do, which sounds more concrete. Proclamation of Christ versus compiling and giving lots and lots of information, which sounds more straightforward.

Making disciples sound a lot better if it's just about giving experiences or making rules or dumping information. We Asian students love just to receive lots of information.

[10 : 35] Proclaiming Christ sounds less clear-cut in comparison. But that's what Paul does. He, Jesus, is the one we proclaim.

Because Paul's reminding us, Jesus is not a rule book. Jesus is not a proposition. Jesus is not even just an experience.

Jesus is a person. And discipleship is about following a person.

And not just any person, actually, but the greatest, the kindest, the loveliest person in the entire universe. Jesus is the person who wipes away your tears even after you left him hanging on the cross to die for your sin.

That's who we follow. And that's actually exciting business. And if we are tempted to move away from Christ for mere rules, information, or experiences, it's precisely because we've forgotten that discipleship is essentially about following a person.

[12:04] Just come down with me to chapter 2, verse 3. This person is the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Now, some of us can think of teachers and mentors whom we've been much influenced by. They seem to be the fount of all wisdom. They always seem to know what to say at the right time or what to do in any given situation.

And Paul is saying Jesus is the greatest fountain of wisdom and knowledge that we can ever know. Stored within him is all that we need.

Did you notice that little word all there in chapter 2, verse 3? All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in him.

We don't need to go elsewhere. We learn best when we have a relationship with our mentor. And when we talk with Jesus, spend time with him, listen to him in the Bible, have our hearts warmed by him, and seek to imitate him, we are being formed as disciples, even as we simply relate to him.

[13:28] And Jesus is not some secret. He's not just available to those who are inside us. Did you notice what Paul says earlier in 1, verse 25 to 28?

Paul is saying, well, yes, in one sense, in previous generations, Jesus was a secret.

The great big redemption plan of God for his people had not been fulfilled yet. But now, Jesus is an open secret to all Christians everywhere.

And Paul's job is to make this secret known. Like an excited laksa lover who's just discovered where the best laksa in town is. He's busy telling everyone the glorious riches of this mystery.

And to do so, what does he do? Verse 25 tells us he opens a book. He presents to us the word of God in its fullness. So you can see here that core conviction number one, the gospel, and core conviction number two, the word, is essential for core conviction number three, growing disciples.

[15:12] It's about knowing Jesus more and more in his word that we grow. And it's for everyone. Did you see that in verse 28?

Paul says that he's teaching everyone about Christ. He's admonishing everyone by Christ. And remember Paul is talking to Christians here, not non-Christians.

He's forming the Christians and helping them grow simply by proclaiming Christ to them. But how does proclaiming Christ actually make disciples?

Again, remember it's to do with who Christ is. He's not a rule book, a proposition, or an experience. He's a person.

man. And so we open the Bible not simply to find practical answers to our modern questions like financial management, parenting tips, or responsible citizenship.

[16:25] We open the Bible to know Jesus from every possible angle. The better we get to know him, the better we can follow him.

So let's take some examples from the book of Colossians as a whole. How am I getting to know Christ better in Colossians?

Well, earlier in Colossians chapter 1 verse 15 to 17, I'm told that he created everything, visible and invisible. I discover he rules over all creation, and he holds it all together.

And so he's supreme. And so that knowledge should begin to form me. I begin to see that my money belongs to Jesus, my possessions belong to Jesus, my health belongs to Jesus.

And then if I hit some point in my life where life just begins to get a bit out of control and I'm feeling very stressed and scared, perhaps there's some sickness, perhaps there's some financial stress, well, then I remember, I know Christ is supreme over that.

[17:46] Not meaning that he will necessarily bring the outcome that I want, but that I know that he knows 100% what he's doing.

Because I learned that about my master. but it doesn't stop there. I'm being formed further because if I'm going through that particular trial, I'm now learning to apply that truth and to live like it's true.

And the church should be discipling me as my fellow Christians and my leaders come alongside me as they remind me of that truth and as they walk alongside me to help me hang on to that truth

when I'm tempted to give up.

here's another example. What if the devil is currently tempting you and taunting you? He's telling you to go the wrong way because it feels so good.

Or he's telling you that you're so worthless. But if we're getting to know Christ in Colossians, what will we remember? Colossians 2 verse 13 to 15.

[19 : 07] If we were to turn there, you can say, hey, I know my king. I know that he has defeated the powers of evil. And he's done so by cancelling my debt of sin.

Christ's work has been proclaimed to you. And because you've gotten to know Jesus and he's informing your thinking, well, you can begin to wrestle with the devil's accusations.

And as you wrestle, you are being formed further as those truths are becoming internalized in you. They don't simply remain abstract. See, it's all about knowing Jesus.

That's what disciple-making is about. Not mere advice, guidelines, or rules. It's about getting to know Jesus better and helping each other to get to know him better.

So the implication is to talk about Jesus. Make much of him. Put the focus on him. In your Bible studies, is Jesus the main show or is he just the side act?

[20 : 25] That's gospel ministry. That's making disciples. When we hear the word proclaim, proclaim, we usually think of preaching. And when we think of preaching, we usually think only of the pastor or maybe the elders.

But proclaiming here is not just about pulpit ministry, it's people ministry. It's any opportunity, any conversation, any Christian can have to talk about Jesus, to help each other to walk with him closer, to help each other know about his supremacy, or his victory, or his humility, and how that changes the way you live today.

Christians in the 17th century had a practice called conferencing. Now, that doesn't mean going to conferences. It simply means that they had intentional spiritual conversations with each other that simply flowed from what they had been learning from the sermons, or from their own personal Bible reading.

It's a lost art today. But it's biblical. He is the one we proclaim, teaching everyone and admonishing everyone with all wisdom.

That's why that workshop on one-to-ones is happening. It's one way to fulfill Colossians 1 verse 28. Secondly, let's look at what Paul aims for.

[21 : 58] he wants everyone to be fully mature in Christ. I'm sure you spotted that again in verse 28. He is the one we proclaim admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

Now, if you have the older NIV, it would say perfect in Christ. But fully mature in the NIV 2011 is probably better as it's less misunderstood. Now, it's helpful to think what maturity means.

You see, it's quite possible to think, to hear the word mature and think boring. It's like when you're at school and you're all plotting to do something that the teachers might not be too pleased about, like maybe putting superglue on the white board markers or putting some fake cockroaches in the girls' toilet, something like that.

But you're discussing amongst yourself whether to include A-Bang into your plans, and someone says, no, you know A-Bang, very mature one. The implication is that being mature means having no fun.

Being mature is about being a spoilspot. And it's quite possible that some of us think of being mature in Christ like this. Which is why it's not attractive to us.

[23 : 24] We equate it with being boring. But perhaps it's better to think about who you want in charge of your country.

Would you prefer someone immature as your Prime Minister? Someone who is only interested in golfing and tweeting? Or would you prefer someone who knows something about economic policy? Who is willing to listen to good advice? Who is calm and collected in moments of crisis? Perhaps that's a better picture of what Paul wants.

It's certainly more attractive. And he wants this for everybody to grow into fully functioning Christians who can handle the deep ends life.

See, this is what Paul wants for everyone. Being spiritually mature is not just for the so-called keen Christians. It's not just for those whom you think are a bit more spiritual.

[24 : 31] It's not just for those who are into learning the Bible. Oh, he's into learning the Bible. I'm not really. Remember again our definition of discipleship. It's simply about following Jesus and learning Jesus.

And if so, then every Christian by definition is a disciple. And so that means a church focused on growing disciples will not exclude everyone, anyone.

If a school teacher said to you, oh, you know your child isn't very interested in learning his ABCs and 123s, I think he's not very keen.

So I think we'll just let him play around how everybody sits in class. You'll find that strange, wouldn't you? You will say that the teacher is not doing his job.

And so similarly, a church can't just be focused on growing disciples only for those who are interested. Paul wants to present everyone fully mature in Christ.

[25 : 41] and so should we. So what does it look like to grow in maturity? It can help to identify two wrong ways to think about spiritual growth.

The first way is what we can call the performance trap. basketball Now some of you will know that I'm a basketball fan. I follow the NBA. And I like looking at statistics.

Who is currently scoring the most points per game and so on. And some of the best players in the NBA are top in multiple statistical categories.

They're in the top ten in scoring, in passing, in defending. And we can have a similar idea of the Christian life. The most mature Christians, we think, are in the top ten of doing quiet times, how often they share the gospel, how involved they are in church.

But that would be the wrong way to measure spiritual maturity. We'll simply be using the same measures as the Pharisees, who check how often we tithe, and we fast, and so on.

[27 : 00] The second wrong way to think about spiritual growth is to judge by the wrong standard. So maybe we put up some arbitrary measure.

The fact that we didn't curse this week, or the fact that we have been to Bible study more than that person. And so when someone else meets that standard, or doesn't meet that standard that you have set, no cursing, how many times that Bible study, we categorize him or her as mature, or immature.

But again, that's how the Pharisees did it. They compared themselves with others, and told God how they were so glad they were not like the adulterer, or the thief. So those in itself are not accurate measures of maturity.

maturity. Now, a growing disciple would definitely be involved in church. He would be having regular quiet times. He would be sharing the gospel.

Of course he would. But what I'm trying to say is that spiritual maturity goes beyond those external markers.

[28 : 14] See, disciples do those things because they are gradually and continually being renewed in the image of Christ.

At its core, a growing disciple longs to be like Jesus, to be full of kindness and goodness and self-control like him, to be genuinely concerned about the spiritual health of others like him.

They want to care about what Jesus cares about. Can you see it's not just about following rules and regulations. They want to see all of life through his eyes.

Thomas Goodwin, a pastor from another century, has a great insight into this. He says, it's not so much that a person is always thinking about Jesus, but just as a person doesn't always look up to the sun, but navigates around by its light, God.

So a disciple growing in maturity is always navigating life around by the light of the Son of God. Well, that's the direction all Christians want to move in.

[29 : 29] That's spiritual maturity. And right now, we are clearly not yet everything we could be. We have not arrived at our destination.

see, every day, every week, every year, we need to keep coming more and more under the influence of Jesus.

But Paul encourages us. At the end of verse 27, he proclaims to us not just Christ, but Christ in you, the hope of glory.

here lies the key to growing towards full maturity. It's to remain in the one who holds our future tightly in his hands.

For one day, he will indeed transform you to be all that you were designed to be, to be just like Jesus. That's his guarantee. And so, growth is endured when we are brought to Jesus week after week, and we accept his influence as we grow into who we are meant to be.

[30 : 40] Growth happens in a church where Christ is consistently and authentically proclaimed, and people are willing to let him shape them rather than resist him.

So this morning, it's good to ask yourself, what do you think church is for? Do you think church is simply for doing charity work?

Do you think church is simply for receiving comfort? Do you think church is simply for building your circles of friendship? No, it's for presenting everyone fully mature in Christ.

They will be charitable for a church aims to form followers of Christ who are eager to do good. It will be a place of comfort for a church aims to form followers of Christ who love and care and point to the comfort found in Christ.

It should have deep friendships for it's about forming a people who, although they are unlike each other in so many ways, have the ultimate common ground of Christ.

[31 : 59] But all this flows out from being a disciple of Jesus and the conviction that the job of a church is to grow such disciples. If we only focus on the externals of charity, comfort, and friendship circles, we've missed the point completely.

what we are aiming for in the words of 2 verse 2 is to be a place where people may be encouraged in heart and united in love.

Why? So that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ. You see, it all comes back to Jesus.

And that's what I'm trying to aim for. In the words of Colossians 2 verse 1, to contend for you and for all whom I've not personally met, which is inevitable in a church this size.

But it won't be easy. Notice thirdly, what Paul experiences. There is struggle and suffering.

[33 : 11] Struggle and suffering. In 1 verse 24, Paul writes what is probably the most puzzling verse in the whole of Colossians.

Now I rejoice, he says, in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church.

What in the world is Paul talking about? Well, let's rule out one possibility. When he says, what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, he cannot possibly mean that somehow Christ's atonement was not enough.

He doesn't mean that something went wrong at the cross, which he has to somehow top up. That makes no sense in a letter where he has consistently stressed that Christ is enough, Christ is the fullness of God, Christ is all that's needed.

In context, it makes more sense to see what is still lacking being the proclamation of Christ's afflictions on the cross. That, after all, is what he goes on to talk about in verse 25 onwards.

[34 : 29] And Paul is saying, as he engages in the ministry of proclaiming Christ and growing disciples, he is at the same time, fueling up in his body his quota of suffering, if I can put it that way.

For to engage in the work of forming and growing disciples would include sacrifice and sorrow. We know from other parts of the Bible what Paul had to endure.

Persecution, beatings, shipwreck, sickness. And while his particular sufferings are probably unique to him as the apostle to the Gentiles, his experience of suffering in general isn't.

And so that means if we follow through on core conviction number three, we must adjust our expectations accordingly. if we are simply focused on meeting our needs, now that might very well mean an easier time for us as a church for a period.

But it will mean that we won't be able to present everyone fully mature in Christ. It will mean that we'll produce people like Linus who are only able to swim four feet and not be able to cope with the deep ends of life.

[35 : 55] And it will over the long term mean the decline of our church. Because any church that is not making disciples is a church that the Lord cannot use.

But if we do focus on growing disciples, it will actually make life tougher for our church. Working out how to live the Christian life takes wisdom and thinking.

Walking with others to help them live the Christian life takes sacrifice and effort. But if we choose to suffer well, if we're ready to work hard, give up some free time to work at knowing the scriptures more, ready to love hard and step outside our comfort zone to work at helping people grow, well,

God can use that to bless the church.

Notice that poor suffering is ultimately for the sake of the church. That's what he says in verse 24. It's for their long term good. Discipleship is hard work, but then so is everything worth pursuing. I'm just reminded of something that the pastor Francis Chan once said. He said he's not scared of failure. He said he's scared of succeeding at the things that don't matter. But here's the good news. [37 : 23] 1 verse 29. To this end, I strenuously content with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Paul has told us the truth about disciple making. It's hard work. It's a struggle. It's strenuous. He doesn't downplay that. But wonderfully, he doesn't struggle alone.

God is there with us all the way. God is at work because disciple making is his work. And so if we all come together and we allow this to be our core conviction, you can be sure that God will be in our midst.

And Paul will be pleased too the way he was pleased with the Colossians. in 2 verse 5. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in crisis.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if he said that about us, if he heard about us today? So as we finish, let me just repeat what are the convictions that we've laid out so far in the past few weeks.

[38 : 43] core conviction number one, we have to be centred on the gospel. Core conviction number two, we have to be driven by God's word.

And here is core conviction number three, we have to be focused on growing disciples. close. And that can only happen as Christ is proclaimed and the word of God made fully known.

So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Amen.