



## GOSPEL GROWTH

Colossians 1:3-8

October 12, 2008

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

### Introduction – Confusion about Growth

“We made a mistake,” says Bill Hybels, the pastor of what is arguably the most influential church in North America. That was a really courageous confession, in light of the revealed survey that Willow Creek undertook several years ago—a comprehensive several years long process to evaluate the state of their ministries at the church. And the data as it came back to Bill Hybels, the senior pastor, with courage he stepped forth and confessed to his folks, “this is the “wake-up call of my adult life.” We made a mistake about how to think about doing church. Here is one of the things he said. “Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data from the survey actually came back, it wasn’t helping people that much. You can find this all on line now: REVEAL SURVEY. In fact some of you may be aware that Calvary participated in the reveal survey. When I found out about this, I said to the staff, “Do you think I can get a copy of it?” They chuckled and said, “You mean all 80 pages of it?” There it is, slide after slide of survey results. If I were to say, “We made a mistake,” you might say, “Oh, that’s interesting.” But when the senior pastor of one of the most influential churches in North America, and arguably in the world today says, “We made a mistake about how we’re doing ministry,” it sort of grabs your attention, doesn’t it?

There is confusion about growth these days. There is confusion about growth at Willow Creek. That’s apparent; they are even saying. How is it that we as Christians grow? How is it that we do church in a way that enables the people of God to grow up spiritually into maturity? There is confusion about growth not just with obvious churches; there might be confusion of some of us. There certainly in my own life, at Willow Creek, in my prayer closet as a college student; it happens in prayer. I remember being a junior at Wheaton College, and by golly, I wanted to get my prayer life sorted out, and growth this very weak prayer life I had. I heard about this idea called the prayer closet. Has anybody heard of this idea? Some of the seasoned old saints of yester years—the George Meullers and John Wesleys and folks like them—they would rise really early in the morning, find a closet, climb inside of it and pray for two or three hours. As a college student—as you might imagine how a college student can be zealous—I thought this a good idea, this is what I’m going to do. So I started setting my alarm clock for 4:30 in the morning. It broke the silence at 4:30 and I promptly got out of bed, took my shower, got my cup of coffee, got my bible and my journal, and I remember I climbed into my closet in the house I was living in my junior year in college, and shut the closet door, in complete darkness, sat down in a huddle on the floor of the closet and decided I’d start praying. This is the means in which I was going to grow my prayer life. So I sat down and I began thanking the Lord for getting me up so early, so very, very early. And that’s what my sort of cut into unconsciousness. And I woke up about an hour later, or it was a couple of hours later, its daylight finally and I’m sitting in my closet.

There’s confusion about growth at Willow Creek; there’s confusion in my prayer closet, there might be confusion about growth in your prayer closet. How have you grown this year? There is confusion about growth at Colossi as well, the church to which Paul is writing this

letter, confusion about growth. Remember last week we said that peace is the purpose of Colossians, that is, that's the big goal of Paul's apostolic ministry and of the Bible, to communicate grace and peace to the people of God. But in particular, the issue at stake in Colossi, the church to whom Paul is writing, the issue at stake is growth. How it is that we continue on and carry on in the Christian life. How it is that we attain maturity, spiritual maturity in Christ and grow in Christ?

Evidently in the church in Colossi, some self-appointed spiritual gurus were coming in, distracting and tempting the Colossians, these new believers, to turn away from the simple sufficiency of Jesus Christ that they found in the gospel to all sorts of rigorous, ascetic practices—perhaps like waking up at four-thirty in the morning and going to your prayer closet—things like, “Do not handle or do not taste, do not touch certain sorts of food or drink,” the veneration of angels, judging people in terms of their observance or non-observance of certain holidays, fasting and prayer. These self-appointed spiritual gurus were coming in and saying, “Yes, Christ, that's fine but if you want to grow up in the spiritual life, you need to take on a few of these other human traditions.” And Paul recognizes that it's a problem. So he writes Colossians, dashes it off and sends it to the church by way of Epaphras, his fellow worker and helper. In chapter 2:8, you get a sense of what the particular issue at stake is at the church in Colossi. It has to do with this confusion about growth. In 2:8, Paul says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends upon human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” So there is confusion at Colossi about growth. They are being tempted to pursue human traditions rather than to stay steadfast, unmoved and fixed, stable and firm in the gospel and sufficiency of Christ.

There is confusion about growth in Colossi, in my prayer closet, at Willow Creek. But one of the purposes of Colossians is to speak clarity into this issue of growth in the Christian life. So interestingly enough, Paul opens the letter up with this thanksgiving section where he begins with this celebration.

“We always thank God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...”  
(Colossians 1:3, NIV)

And he explodes into thanksgiving for the Colossians. The focus of this paragraph, this opening celebration, is Paul celebrating the growth produced by the gospel. That's what he is celebrating in this passage—the growth produced by the gospel. He is not just giving a genuine expression, his heartfelt thanksgiving for the growth that's been produced by the gospel in Colossi, what he is also trying to do in celebrating is to remind them of the source and the nature of true Christian growth. Do you see that? He is not just saying “I'm delighted that this is happening, and what God is doing in this in your lives.” He is also telling them that I'm celebrating this about you to remind them, “Ah, yes, that *is* the true nature of Christian growth, that *is* the source of Christian growth.”

### **The Nature of Gospel Growth**

So we are going to look at that this morning. We are trying to get some clarity about growth in the world of confusion about growth. So my first point this morning, the first thing we see about this passage, before we even talk about the source of growth and where this growth comes from in the Christian life, is the nature of growth. What is the nature of true Christian growth? How do you know you are actually growing? What should you be seeing in your life if you are growing in Christ? Paul describe first of all this explosion of growth in Colossians in the

middle of the paragraph, at the end of verse 5, “the gospel, which has come to you” and in verse 6, “all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.” He is describing this wonderful explosion of growth in rather dramatic terms—do you notice that?—personifying the gospel. The gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the world, this wonderful rhetorical flourish on Paul’s point. The gospel is thriving and expanding. How does he define growing and bearing fruit in this passage? We find the definition of it up in verse 4. Go back up to verse 3:

“We always thank god, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,<sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love that you have for all the saints...”

Faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the saints. What does it mean for the gospel to be going around the world, growing and bearing fruit? What does it look like? It looks like people coming to faith in Christ Jesus and the saints loving each other more and more.

In this age there is a lot of confusion about growth and we live in a religiously complex age. Programs and organization, institutions and techniques, all these methods and means of promoting growth, and talking about growth, bible studies and all these stuffs. Do you feel it—a kind of complexity of things? In one sense Paul is very simple and straightforward. The nature of gospel growth is this: faith and love. That’s it!—faith in Christ Jesus and love for one another—that’s the nature of gospel growth that has some sobering implication for us too, for *all* of us.

The first is this: you and I can grow without really growing. That is, we can grow in our knowledge of things biblical or theological, or churchly; we can grow in our participation in programs and activities and churchly goings on; we can even grow in our religious experience—mountain top worship experience—eagerness to be singing songs of praise and this sort of thing. We can be doing all that and yet not really be growing in the gospel sort of way. Because if those things don’t catalyze greater faith in Christ and greater love for one another, then we can be growing without really growing as the Bible and as the gospel defines growing.

The second sobering implication for us as is that we as a church can be growing without really growing. That’s the sobering thing! Our budget can be expanding, our attendance can be expanding, we can be bursting at the seams in terms of numbers of people, we can be overflowing with programs and ministries, and yet, from a gospel perspective, from God’s perspective, not really be growing! We can grow without growing! You can fill a church, you can fill services, you can increase a budget and yet not have an increase in faith in Christ Jesus and love for one another. So as we think about the nature of true gospel growth, it’s always good to apply what I like to call the acid test of 1 Corinthians 13 to all thoughts about growth. Do you know the acid test of 1 Corinthians 13? Turn to 1 Corinthians 13 and we are going to see the acid test. Did you ever think, “Am I growing in my Christian life?” “Have I seen any growth?” Or we as a church “are we growing as a church? We seem to be. There was a big attendance last week. There was a bigger offering last week. Are we growing as a church? It’s good to take out the acid test of 1 Corinthians 13 and drop our ideas of growth into it and see what comes out on the other side. Hear Paul saying,

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If

I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love (for the saints) I gain nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

You see the acid test of growth here, gospel growth? Sobering! So the first point is about the true nature of gospel growth is that it consists of increased faith in Christ Jesus, people coming to faith and in particular, increased love for one another. That’s the first point about the nature of true gospel growth.

### **The Source of Gospel Growth**

Where does it come from? How does faith in Christ and love for all the saints happen? Where does it spring from you might ask? Here we’re going to land on the most surprising thing in this passage this morning, and I hope, the main takeaway. Where does growth come from? I think we will find it in verse 5. Paul tells us back in Colossians 1:5. He divines the nature of growth in verse 4, it’s faith in Christ Jesus, the love you have for all the saints. And look what he says in verse 5, “the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven.” (NIV) That’s surprising, isn’t it? Faith, Love and Hope, those three are like cousins; they love to hang out together in Paul’s letters. But this is a surprising passage because he says that hope is the source of faith and love! Very interesting for Paul! Have you thought about it that way? What is it that creates and causes and increases my faith in Christ? What is it that increases my love for other people? It’s hope.

The other interesting thing is the way he talks about hope. Hope here is not the *act* of hoping, it’s the *object* of hope. Did you see that? Look in your Bible.

“The faith and love that spring from a hope that is stored up for you in heaven.”(Verse 5)

This is the object for which we are hoping. So where does faith in Christ come from? Where does it spring forth from? And where does love for the saints spring forth from? It springs forth from a fixation on the hope, that is, the object stored up for you and I in heaven. Have you thought of that before? How do I promote growth in my life or in the life in this church? How do I do it? How does it happen? It happens by an increasing fixation and focus upon where we are headed, upon our inheritance, upon the glory that is going to be revealed to us one day in Christ Jesus. Are you tracking with me? Have you thought about that before? Hope is the source of growth. Very, very interesting indeed, and important! And why is it that hope really liberates us for growth? Why is it? What is it that hope does? It frees up our handle, our need to hold on to the things of this world, doesn’t it? That’s what hope does! In order to love people well, we need to be freed up from needing to hold on to all sorts of things that we have: our time, our money, our resources, our reputation, our comfort, and our relationships—all those things. And how is it that our hands are loosed from grasping those things? It’s by seeing the riches that God has in store for us in Christ Jesus.

So the nature of gospel is this: faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the saints; the source of gospel growth is hope, the hope that is laid up for us in heaven, the hope that one day will be revealed to us when Jesus Christ returns.

### **The Agents of Gospel Growth**

The third and final point that I want you to take away from this passage is the reminder that growth doesn’t happen in a vacuum. In particular, growth does not happen in a relational vacuum. Growth happens by God sending agents of growth. This is the third point. There are

agents of gospel growth that God sends into our lives. It was true in Colossi. See there in verse 7 Paul mentions Epaphras who was the agent of growth for the Colossians. See what he says of Epaphras. You learned it, that is you learned about the gospel and understood God's grace in all its truth, you learned about it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf and who also told us of your love in spirit. They're agents of gospel growth that are in this wonderful profile of Epaphras here. He is the sacrificial servant and he is faithful. And if you turn over the page in your Bible, you'll see in chapter 4, verse 12 we also read about Epaphras there. Paul begins the letter describing and talking about Epaphras who was really instrumental in the founding of the church in Colossi, and then he closes the letter with a reference to Epaphras in verse 12, chapter 4:

“Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. (NIV)

Epaphras is an agent of growth in the life of the Colossians, he is the sacrificial servant, he is a faithful minister, he is prayerful, and he is tireless. We all need agents of growth in our lives—faithful servants in gospel work who will come alongside us like Epaphras did, speak the truth of the gospel and help us understand the grace of God in all its truth. So there is an agent of growth.

There is a second agent of growth and it's really the most important agent of growth—the ultimate agent of growth—in the life of the Colossians. Do you see who that is in this passage? Who is it? The Spirit, yes, the Spirit! Do you see that? You might take that little clause at the end, “Epaphras has told us about your love in the Spirit.” You might say, “Ah, it's a throw away; it's sort of nice, it's sort of flowery language.” “Your love in the Spirit” or you might say, “Your love produced and engendered by the Spirit of God.” Where does love come from? Where does growth come from? Growth comes ultimately from the Spirit of God at work in our lives. And the Spirit, by God's sovereign power and grace, uses other agents of growth in each of our lives.

So what is the nature of true gospel growth? Faith and love. What is the source of true gospel growth? Hope. And do you have as an agent of gospel growth, do you have some Epaphrases in your life, who are coming alongside you, speaking grace and truth into your life, and helping you grow in the Holy Spirit and in the things of God? Do you have an Epaphras, or a couple of Epaphrases, or an army of Epaphrases that are, as Paul says of Epaphras for the Colossians, who are wrestling in prayer for you? Are you an Epaphras for someone? There are some seasoned saints that I am looking at this morning who have a lot of wisdom and experience and seasoning. Are you stepping up intentionally as an Epaphras to come alongside other people and are explaining to them the grace of God in the gospel, helping them grow in their faith, helping them grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? If you aren't let me encourage you to do so. And if you don't have an Epaphras or a few Epaphrases in your life, let me encourage you to find a couple. Come talk to me or to another staff member, or one of the elders. Find an Epaphras who can love you and serve you, and teach you the things of Christ. And be engaging with the people of God here as well, and in the services, in the life of this church where you hear the grace of God unfolded and explained in all its truth.

Amen.

© Dr. Todd A. Wilson, October 12, 2009