

“Transformation Station”

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: #3 Intentional Faith Development

John 21:17; Romans 12:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:2; Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Peter 2:2-3 ¹

I first learned to use binoculars in the Navy, where binoculars were one of the most frequent pieces of equipment I used as the Officer of the Deck, and I’ve been interested in them ever since. I think I’ve had five sets of binoculars over the years, of which I still have three. The chief benefit of binoculars, of course, is that they enable you to see things that you couldn’t see otherwise.

I use binoculars primarily to do bird watching in the daytime and to study the stars at night. While I’m no expert at either birding or astronomy—not even close—I do enjoy doing both, and I’ve been interested to see how increasing my knowledge through study causes me to see and to hear things that I wouldn’t have seen or heard before. This difference in awareness and perception—and the difference in enjoyment—are the result of my having invested significant amounts of time in both study and observation.

Our subject this morning is **Intentional Faith Development**, the third of the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (I’m sure you remember that the first two were *Radical Hospitality* and *Passionate Worship*), and Intentional Faith Development has a lot to do with the differences in awareness and perception that come as a result of making a commitment to spiritual study and observation.² One of the reasons Jesus gave for coming to earth was to “restore the sight of the blind” (Luke 4:18), and Intentional Faith Development actually does enable us to perceive things we couldn’t perceive before.

I’m a visual learner, which is one of the reasons why I enjoy designing the PowerPoints for our worship. I discovered that I was a visual learner after I became a teacher, which was not long after I went from no glasses at all to trifocals in the same month that I turned forty. When I got those first glasses, the ophthalmologist told me that, because one of my eyes is nearsighted and the other is farsighted, I’d really been using my eyes separately and had not had stereoscopic or 3D vision for a long time.

Happily, once I got my glasses, those problems were corrected, and I went around for weeks in total amazement as the world assumed a depth and perspective I hadn’t seen for years—if ever. Over and over I’d say, “Wow! Look at that!” as I saw something as it really is for the first time. That’s the sort of wonderful transformation that results from Intentional Faith Development, too.

In our Quarterly Meeting that will follow this service, we’re going to consider the adoption of our Strategic Plan for the next six or seven years. While there are a number of finer points to that document, the essential focus of the plan is a reaffirmation of the Five Things we’ve affirmed—at least in principle—for the past fifteen years. As I’m sure you remember, those Five Things are WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO, or specifically . . .

1. **WORSHIP:** We covenant together to participate in at least one experience of corporate worship every week.
2. **CONNECT:** We covenant together to participate in at least one face-to-face spiritual accountability and study group every week.
3. **GROW:** We covenant together to practice daily personal time in prayer and in the Word as well as the regular discipline of stewardship of our resources.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on June 8, 2014.

² Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010),

4. **SERVE:** We covenant together to use our gifts and abilities to build up the Body of Christ in at least one way every week.
5. **GO:** We covenant together to live in the world in such a way that we engage in some sort of Great Commandment/Great Commission activity every week.

The point of our commitment to those Five Things is not primarily so that we have large crowds in worship, Bible study, or other church meetings, although those things would all be nice. **The point of the Five Things is that these five practices are the essential disciplines of our life in Christ, without which we simply do not grow to maturity.** And spiritual maturity is the point of our life in Christ, as highlighted by the texts that we read together earlier:

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. . . . You have been Christians a long time, now, and you ought to be teaching others.”³

God’s purpose is that you and I progress from spiritual infancy, when we have to be fed, to childhood, when we learn to feed ourselves, to young adulthood, when we learn to feed others, and finally to maturity, when we can reproduce ourselves through nurturing maturity in those who follow after us. Occasionally we hear people comment that “they aren’t being fed” at church, whether here or elsewhere. While such comments may in fact indicate the need for a serious look at what we’re doing in worship, it’s also possible that such comments indicate the inability to feed oneself and a failure to train oneself in righteousness. “*You have been Christians a long time, now,*” Paul wrote, “*and you ought to be teaching others.*”

The idea of *Intentional* Faith Development reminds us that while being born again is not a complicated enterprise, its result is a baby Christian, not a mature one. Maturity requires training and practice.

For example, it’s not enough just to affirm the Bible as God’s Word. If you and I are going to experience the Bible’s transforming *power* in our lives, we’ve got to learn how to understand and interpret it. We’ve got to nourish our spirits through regular Bible study, prayer, and spiritual conversation.

Intentional Faith Development really isn’t optional for persons who are serious about following Jesus. It’s not a “take it or leave it” kind of thing. Serious mental effort is just as necessary in faith development as it is in learning anything else of value.

What does the Bible teach about sexuality? About biomedical ethics? Marriage? Vocation? Music? War and peace? Evil and suffering? Addiction? Self-esteem? Gender roles? Hope? Intentional Faith Development involves learning how to answer those questions for yourself, not depending on someone else to answer them for you.

But as important as spiritual and biblical knowledge are, Intentional Faith Development also requires practice. During those years when I was playing the trumpet all the time, I knew that if I missed one day of practice, it would take me three days of practice just to get back what I had lost in that one day. While that principle may not be exactly the same in the spiritual life, I suspect that there’s similarity. Knowledge alone will not be enough to develop spiritual maturity in your life. Developing spiritual maturity requires disciplined and daily practice, just as does the development of maturity in any other area of our lives.

³ Romans 12:1-2; 1 Peter 2:2-3; Hebrews 5:12-14

And it's just here that we can apply a lesson that we learned during *The Daniel Plan*.⁴ Do you remember what “the secret sauce” is in *The Daniel Plan*? The “secret sauce” of *The Daniel Plan* is that we don't do it alone. We join ourselves with others for encouragement and help, and Intentional Faith Development works like that, too.

We learn faith in community, not just because this was the method Jesus used, but also because spiritual maturity can't be developed in isolation. The fruit of the Spirit can't be learned from a book, even if that book is the Bible. The fruit of the Spirit become part of our character as we practice them in our relationships with other people.⁵

The truth is that it's nearly as important that we “*grow up in our salvation*” as it is that we're born into God's family in the first place. And we can't develop the character qualities of *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* unless we're frequently and meaningfully engaged with other people (Galatians 5:22-23).

We can only learn God's kind of *self-giving* love (as distinct from our more typical *self-serving* love) by being in relationships where giving of ourselves is hard to do. We only learn the anchoring peace of God's Spirit by being in relational situations where peace is not easy to come by. We only learn faithfulness by resisting the temptation to be unfaithful.

Anybody can be kind or gentle or patient where there is no provocation, but that sort of kindness and gentleness and patience is only a vapor. Real strength of character only comes from persistent Christlike engagement with other people, which is why, as the Old Skin Horse wisely told the Velveteen Rabbit, “It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time—that's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept.”⁶ You and I need each other if we're going to grow up into maturity in Christ.

And it is for all these reasons that you and I covenant together to practice daily personal time in prayer and in the Word, to practice regular stewardship of our resources, and to participate in at least one face-to-face spiritual accountability, prayer and study group every week. I submit to you that it's just as important to study God's Word every day as it is to eat every day. It's just as important to talk to God and to listen to God through prayer all day long as it is to breathe all day long . . . and some very interesting things happen when we do these things together with other followers of Jesus.

In the intimacy of small groups, we learn not only from writers and thinkers of the past, but also from fellow travelers in our congregation. These friends help us interpret God's Word for our lives, and they offer an antidote to our human tendency to interpret the Bible in such a way as to merely confirm our current lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors.⁷

In spiritual community we discover what it's like to be genuinely prayed for, to have others invest themselves in us, to have friends who really do care about what happens to us. Through the love we experience in Christian community, you and I get a taste of the incredible love God has for us. We discover that our burdens become lighter as we share them with others. Our lives become connected in deep ways, and we begin to discover the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10).⁸

⁴ www.danielplan.com

⁵ Schnase, *Living*, p. 72.

⁶ Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, 1922.

⁷ Schnase, *Congregations*, pp. 66, 80

⁸ Schnase, *Living*, pp. 81-82.

Now if all this sounds pretty wonderful, it is! But these benefits only develop in our lives if we practice *Intentional* Faith Development. Many of us have had positive small-group experiences in the past, but our participation in those groups was haphazard, incidental, and infrequent. Many of us have been on spiritual retreats that gave us a taste of glory, but we haven't been intentional about our faith development since.

We read the Bible a little here, we pray for a moment there, we come to Bible study once or twice a year, we come to worship when we can't think of anything else to do. And as the years pass, God's Word remains mysterious to us and our relationship with God is distant at best. We dabble in religion without growing in grace.⁹

As is true with any other discipline worth having, whether running a marathon, learning to play the piano, or learning a new language, nobody ever *finds* time for Intentional Faith Development. If you and I ever experience spiritual growth at all, it's because we've *made* time in our schedules and because we've *made* room in our lives for those practices that we know lead to spiritual maturity.

Persons who practice Intentional Faith Development *plan* to feed their spirits. For those persons, growing in grace becomes a way of life, a practice that is no longer haphazard and incidental but that is central, focused and prioritized.¹⁰ And, like any other skill or discipline, we begin in small ways, by developing daily habits that create space for God. As time goes by, those disciplines become their own reward as we find ourselves looking forward eagerly to our daily time with God.

I'm sure you know that we provide small group Bible study opportunities every Sunday morning so your own journey of spiritual growth has a convenient place and time for its development. But in the beginning, of course, Christians didn't meet in church buildings, because there weren't any. Those early believers met in each other's homes.

Today, too, Christian small groups meet not just in churches but in homes, in offices, in dorm rooms, and in factory cafeterias. One of the great things about Christian small groups is that they can multiply easily without any expense for "bricks and mortar." This was one of the secrets of the incredible expansion of the First Century Church.

As we look toward our next years together, I'd love to see five small groups established in the homes of our congregation by this time next year. And I'd like to see five more groups started the year after that, and the year after that, so that within five years we'll have twenty-five groups functioning at many different times and on many different days of the week.

I've been active in church all my life. I've been on the staffs of seven churches and the pastor of three of those. And out of all those congregations, I think we have more potential right here at CBF to become what God intends for the Church to be than anywhere else I've ever been.

God's purpose for Intentional Faith Development in my life, in your life, and in our life together is simply to make us more and more like Jesus, so we'll see what He sees, think what He thinks, desire what He desires, and live every day in His power. Can we do it? **With God's help, we can!**

⁹ Schnase, *Living*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Schnase, *Living*, p. 70.