

“Locations for Formation”

Introduction: As we have meandered through Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, we have been led by the question: “Who do we think we are?” In response, we have seen Paul declare our new identity in Christ: that we are holy and dearly loved, reconciled to God, and citizens of God’s kingdom. In recent weeks, we have then moved to the natural follow up question: “Given who we are, how should we live?” In response, we have considered the “wardrobe” Paul brings out that we are to put on: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love. This is the uniform we are to wear so that we might live well, ruling and reigning rightly over all that God has entrusted to us, for our sake, the sake of others, and for God’s glory.

The “How should we live” question actually has a second component to it. It contains not only a what should our lives as followers of Jesus look like aspect; it also contains a how does this transformation take place? Enter the Holy Spirit, our personal spiritual trainer, as we named him last week. As we engage in various spiritual disciplines, practices and habits that make us available to the Spirit, he does the work of transformation on us that only he can do.

As Paul begins to draw this letter to a close, he continues to address our spiritual, character formation by adding to the “how” the “where.” He gives us four locations in which formation takes place: the church (3:15-17), our families (3:18-21), our places of work (3:22-4:1), and our neighborhoods (4:2-6). We’ll take a big picture look at these today and then return to them more specifically in the fall. (Over the summer months, I want to take the side-trail of looking more closely at our character formation by examining how Jesus talks about this in what are known as the Beatitudes.) What I want to think with you about today is that in and through these four locations, Paul is calling us to be “whole-life” disciples. That is, followers of Jesus that recognize there is no area of life God does not want to use for his glory, and can’t use for our ongoing mission and character formation.

I. The Church Scattered

A. As we consider these four locations of formation, the fact that the church is only one of the four is significant. It helps us to recognize that the church exists as both a scattered, as well as a gathered, community. Neil Hudson, the keynote speaker at last summer’s 4C’s annual conference, sketches it out this way in his book *Imagine Church*: Hudson observes that there are 168 hours in a week. If we assume that we spend roughly 48 of those hours sleeping, that leaves 120 hours. Of those remaining hours, most Christians can give around 5-10 hours per week to church activities, from Sunday morning worship to some small group time to some form of volunteer service. That in turn leaves 110 hours for family, work, and community. What Hudson is encouraging us to realize is that our primary arena for living as followers of Jesus is not those 10 hours of church activity, but the 110 hours when we are scattered out in the world in some capacity. In those 110 hours, we are still the church; we are just not gathered but scattered. Both mission, and our ongoing formation, takes place within our everyday life.

B. We find the word “scattered” used in Acts 8:4. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” This refers to a time in its early days in Jerusalem when the church had begun to be persecuted. A church leader named Stephen was stoned to death, and Saul was hauling Christians off to prison. The followers of Jesus were forced to “head for the hills.” Yet God used this scattering of the believers throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria for his glory, to advance his mission. He seeks to do the same with and through us. We might not be scattered during the week due to persecution, but we are scattered to where non-Christians are. We are called in precisely those places, from our homes, to our work, to our neighborhoods, to share the good news in both word and deed. We do so by modeling Godly character, doing quality

work, ministering grace and love, and seeking truth and justice, as we live as ambassadors for Christ. We have a small group series entitled “Fruitfulness on the Frontline” that we will be offering in the fall to help us think more intentionally about what it means and looks like to be the church scattered.

C. However, this doesn’t mean that those 10 hours or so when we are the church gathered are a waste of time. They, in fact, are an important part of our preparation to be scattered.

Illustration: Those of you who are parents know how protective you can feel about your child, and how, especially at an early age, you want to keep them away from all influences and care other than your own. But eventually you hire your first babysitter, and then send them off to daycare or preschool. Soon after they have their first sleepover and then are off to a week or weeks of summer camp. Not too long after that they get into a car for the first time driven by someone other than you. Before you know it they are heading out the door to college and not long thereafter you find yourself walking them down the aisle and watching them head off into life with a spouse, and maybe to one day have kids of their own! Of course, you can’t keep your child in a hermetically sealed room, and, each one of these new stages in life is part of their growing up, maturing, and formation process. What you hope is that you’ve raised them well and given them the tools to handle each stage of life that they enter.

The apostle Paul had similar affection and intention for his spiritual children, the members of the churches he had founded. He knew that their new life in Christ would not be lived out in some protective cocoon, but in a challenging and often difficult world. So the church gathered provides important times of formation, times we spend together to equip one another to live well for Jesus when we’re scattered in the world. This is what we find Paul writing about in 3:15-17. How does Paul help us, the church gathered, prepare to be the church scattered?

II. The Church Gathered

A. Here’s what he says:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. [3:15-16]

As we look at how Paul describes what our life together is to look like, we could put it all under the habit or discipline of the practice of community. “Christian community exists when believers connect with each other in authentic and loving ways that encourage growth in Christ-likeness” (Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, p. 129). So community is not just hanging out with people of like mind or interest. Real community is a place of growth. As we practice community, other people in the community become means of God’s transforming grace to us and we become such a means to them. When you think about it, the wardrobe we have heard Paul exhorting us to wear in 3:12-14 does not describe virtues that are exercised, or can be developed, in isolation. Rather, they are all relational and are used, sharpened and refined, as we interact with and rub shoulders with one another.

B. So it shouldn’t surprise us, therefore, to remember that Jesus taught his followers that they were part of the large family of God, not ever meant to be lone rangers living out the faith but part of a living organism, a “body.” In a body, no part functions well by itself but only finds its health when in right relationship to the other parts. What might this look like?

1. First of all, the practice of community involves living at peace with one another: Such living at peace means more than just speaking it to one another on a Sunday morning. Living at peace with one another means actually seeking and offering forgiveness where we have wronged one another

so that we can operate well as the body of Christ. Most likely, Paul draws here from the Sermon on the Mount in which, early on, Jesus instructs his followers that if they are coming to worship and they realize someone in the body has something against them, that they should go and first seek reconciliation. The body won't be healthy otherwise

2. The practice of community means engaging together in the habit of thanksgiving. Learning to be thankful, as we have said, is not just a good social habit. As we think about and give thanks for all that we have, it actually helps us to notice the presence and activity of God in our life in ways we might miss. If we are to head out into the world and hope to notice the presence and activity of God wherever we are scattered, it helps to have practiced such noticing with our gathered community.

3. The practice of community involves being good students of God's word. We're not simply to read it for information, but for transformation, letting the word dwell in us richly, studying and pondering it so that the Spirit can change us. In addition, we need to be open to admonishing or counseling our brothers and sisters, with wisdom, speaking the truth in love (as Paul writes elsewhere), into the places where they need to make healthy changes in their lives. Again, all of this to the end of living well, ruling and reigning rightly over all that God has entrusted to us.

4. Finally, the practice of community involves being at worship together. Worship is not limited to but at least includes singing in various ways our praise and thanksgiving to God. Worship re-directs our focus. It reminds us that all we do we are to do in the name of—for the praise and purposes of—Jesus.

As we rub shoulders with one another in the family of God, learning to live in healthy ways together as we are gathered, it prepares us to rub shoulders with those in the world when we are scattered. It's very difficult, for instance, to think about offering forgiveness to a nasty boss. But it can be made easier if we first learn to offer it to members of our Christian community, our family of faith.

May we thus make ourselves available to the Spirit as the church gathered, practicing the disciplines of community, that God may have his own, refining, way with us, as a potter to the clay, that Christ may live more and more within us and through us in all of the various locations of our lives.