

# “Alive in Christ”: Colossians 2:13

[South Central District Convention, Duncanville, Texas, June 13 & 14, 1988]

*By Armin J. Panning*

Writing to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul states: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ, forgiving us all our sins” (2:13). That is the verse that your program committee has asked me to use as a basis for developing the theme, “Alive in Christ.” Subsequent reception of the printed agenda indicates that the emphasis, “Alive in Christ” is also the theme of your convention.

Although the term is not used, it is obvious that what is being highlighted is the concept of spiritual renewal, which has engaged our thinking so fully for the last year or more. At the Synod convention last August two lengthy printed memorials and two unprinted memorials resulted in a floor committee report of eleven “whereases” followed by seven resolutions, all of which were adopted.

The cause for such major concern was set forth in the sixth “whereas” of the floor committee’s report. It states: “Within the congregations of our Synod there are numerous evidences of spiritual weakness.” The report then proceeds to set forth a sobering list of weaknesses; poor attendance at worship services; infrequent participation in holy communion; low enrollment in Bible classes; lack of involvement in lay ministry; “backdoor” losses in membership; personal, marital and family problems; misunderstanding of mission and ministry resulting in “maintenance ministry” rather than an aggressive growth-oriented ministry.

Those are earnest concerns that the delegates were encouraged to take back home to their congregations—concerns to which they were prayerfully and resolutely to address themselves in the hope of effecting a speedy and God-pleasing solution. I would see in your choice of convention theme an indication that you have been concerned about the need for spiritual renewal, that you have been working at it in your congregations, and that as brothers working in unity you intend to continue that effort also here in these next two days.

With spiritual renewal as a dominant note of this convention, I would commend the program committee for directing our attention to Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Not only the thirteenth verse of chapter two, the basis of our essay and the source of the wording for the convention theme, but Paul’s whole letter to the Colossians is really directed to the matter of spiritual renewal.

One of the basic truths, often repeated by people concerned with spiritual renewal, is that there is no quick fix, no easy solution, no program that will effortlessly provide the remedy for spiritual weakness. True and lasting change can be brought about only by God’s means of grace, by faithful use of the sacraments and by diligent study of the Word.

Thus, instead of talking about or trying to devise a program for spiritual renewal, I am proposing to use the time allotted to me to direct you into Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Then we will not be merely talking about the problem, but we will be availing ourselves of the one, reliable source of help, God’s powerful, inerrant Word given by inspiration through the Apostle Paul as he provides the basis for effecting spiritual renewal in his beloved Colossians.

What I have tried to do is to set up a series of theses, all dealing with aspects of spiritual renewal, and thus to arrange under the individual theses those parts of Paul’s letter which deal with the thesis in question. Hopefully the result will be a topical arrangement of Paul’s material, allowing us in a systematic way to touch all the major points Paul makes in writing to the Colossians about spiritual renewal.

There are nine theses. Obviously the number is not inspired. There could have been more; it might have been done with fewer. They serve merely to bring Paul’s main points into focus. To give you something of an outline for the essay, a listing of the nine theses follows.

**Thesis One:** Basic to spiritual renewal is an underlying, previous newness. (a having been made “alive in Christ”)

**Thesis Two:** The heart of spiritual renewal consists in being kept in touch with Christ and in strengthening that bond.

**Thesis Three:** Spiritual renewal is effected by means. (Word and Sacraments)

**Thesis Four:** Spiritual renewal involves the Spirit/spirit.

**Thesis Five:** Spiritual renewal is all encompassing. It affects the believer not only individually and personally but also in his relationship to every other believer (family, congregation, church at large) and in his relationship to unbelievers. (the world)

**Thesis Six:** Spiritual renewal is essentially a changed/improved attitude of heart and mind. (love and thankfulness)

**Thesis Seven:** Spiritual renewal reflects itself in greater sanctification. (love in action)

**Thesis Eight:** Spiritual renewal cannot be programmed, but programs need not, per se, be unspiritual.

**Thesis Nine:** Spiritual renewal is a continuing process.

Perhaps it would not be out of place to outline briefly the setting that occasioned Paul's writing to the church in Colosse. Together with Ephesians and Philemon, which were sent at the same time, the letter to the Colossians is a "captivity letter," written by Paul about 62 A.D. while in confinement at Rome.

Colosse was a thriving little city on the trade route that crossed through southwestern Asia Minor, modern Turkey. From the letter it becomes evident that Paul himself did not found the church in Colosse, for he writes to them as ones "who have not met me personally" (2:1). It seems rather to be Epaphras, one of Paul's co-workers, who has the distinction of having done the initial work with the Colossians, for in speaking of their acceptance of the gospel, Paul writes: "You learned it (gospel) from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who has also told us of your love in the Spirit" (1:7,8). It would seem that gospel work in Colosse was part of the outreach work done by Paul's team of co-workers during the three-year period that he spent in Ephesus, the main city of that area.

Be that as it may, Epaphras had recently joined Paul in Rome and told him not only about the Colossians' "love in the Spirit," but he brought also some bad news. False teachers were agitating and troubling the congregation. Their heresy seems to have been fairly complex and it is not very fully described by Paul. On the basis of what he does mention in his letter to the Colossians, we'll attempt a somewhat fuller explanation a bit later. Suffice it at this point to say that the false teacher presented themselves as an elite spiritual "club" which they invited the Colossians to join. The point of their appeal seems to have been somewhat as follows: As simple Christians by virtue of your faith in Christ, you'll never reach your full potential. If you want to be really complete and mature people, then you'll need the inside information, the *gnosis* (knowledge), that we have to offer.

It will be evident at once that these false teachers were actually offering a form of spiritual renewal, albeit of a false and misleading kind. Paul's response was to pen the short four-chapter letter that we have come to know simply as Colossians. In it he sets forth the principles of true spiritual renewal. It is those principles that we wish to highlight in our series of nine theses.

**Thesis One: Basic to spiritual renewal is an underlying, previous newness. (a having been made "alive in Christ")**

While at first sight it may seem to be merely an exercise in semantics yet it is important to catch the force of the prefix *re* in the term "renewal." Perhaps examples from other areas can illustrate. We don't speak of refilling a cup that's been empty before. It's unlikely that a waitress' opening remark would be, "Can I give you a refill on your coffee?" Or, you can't return something that you didn't first receive. You can't retread a tire that never had tread on it. You can't very well retreat if there has been no previous advance.

So too, there can be no talk of spiritual renewal in the case of a person who has no spiritual life. It's futile to talk of spiritual renewal to the unregenerate and unconverted man on the street. Spiritual renewal is a concept appropriate only to Christians, to regenerate people who have a new man who can be appealed to.

In writing to the Colossians, Paul addresses the subject as to how such new-ness is obtained—and it has to be *obtained*, because sinful and fallen man doesn't have it by nature. Paul first of all speaks of our original, natural state as one of being in darkness, for he declares:

(God) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (1:13).

But the situation was worse than just being in the dark. Recall that in the verse assigned as the basis for our essay, the apostle uses even a more drastic picture to describe our state:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ (2:13).

We were not just in the dark, but dead, lacking any ability at all. We needed to be made alive. How did God do it? How did he make us alive and give us the spiritual newness that is a prerequisite for any spiritual renewal? He did it in and through the Christ whom Paul is at pains to describe in the most glowing of terms. For the benefit of both believing reader and unbelieving errorist the apostle states:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ) and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation (1:19-22).

In this quotation there is yet a third picture which emerges. It is that of enmity and alienation. Obviously, if there was to be any improvement in the sinner's situation, then there needed to be a reconciliation, a peace treaty. That too has been brought about through the greatness of the Christ in whom God was pleased to have all fullness dwell.

God sent his Son to "make peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Hence Paul can assure the Colossians that God has now "reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

Note that there is not the slightest hint of the sinner actually becoming good enough to be acceptable to God. It is not an improvement in him personally that makes him tolerable to a just and holy God. No, it is rather that the death of Christ's physical body has paid the debt of sin that the sinner owed. With that load of sin removed, with the debt paid for and forgiven, God can now look at the sinner as holy, can declare him to be just, or as Paul tells the Colossians, God can now "present you as holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

Astounding as the thought is that through the blood of Christ the sinner's entire debt can be forgiven and that God can now deal with him as just and look at him as holy, even more astounding is the scope of that reconciliation. Look at what has been included in the peace treaty! "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (1: 19,20).

It boggles the mind to think what is all being included when the apostle says that all things have been reconciled, whether things on earth or things in heaven. But even though our limited reason perhaps cannot comprehend fully what's all included, one thing is absolutely certain. No sinner has been excluded. All have been reconciled in the blood of the Lamb of God, who "takes away the sin of *the world*" (John 1:29). "God was in Christ, reconciling *the world* unto himself" (2 Co 5:19). The same group that stood under condemnation is also the group that has been justified, as Paul so clearly declares to the Romans when he tells them, "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (Romans 5:18). On each side of the equation, the "all" refers to the same group of people. All were under condemnation; all have been justified. This is the universal or objective justification of which the dogmaticians speak.

But if all men have been justified, why aren't they all saved? Why are there so many on the broad road to destruction? Simply because in unbelief they refuse to accept what really and truly is there for them. Unfortunately, "he that believeth not shall be damned" still remains true.

The blessings of Christ's reconciliation are apprehended by faith, and only by faith, as Paul makes abundantly clear to the Colossians when he says:

(God) has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel (1:22,23).

The reconciliation that is universally and objectively there for all becomes the sinner's private and personal possession only by faith. Faith is the "receiving organ." It is the "hand" that receives God's gracious blessing of justification, forgiveness of sin and life everlasting. This is subjective justification. Such as have faith are "alive in Christ." They have the newness that makes spiritual renewal possible. To such Paul can say, for example:

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is, being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (3:9,10).

**Thesis Two: The heart of spiritual renewal consists in being kept in touch with Christ and in strengthening that bond.**

Faith does not save because it is so good and so fair a work, but because it puts us in touch with Christ. Faith lays hold of what he has done for us. That's what gives us life. That's what makes us "alive in Christ." A strong and living connection with Christ is what is needed for a vibrant and active Christian life.

We need to center on the greatness of Christ and what he has done for us. And that's what the letter to the Colossians is all about. In their false and exaggerated claims the false teachers were really undercutting and downplaying Christ. The "pitch" they made to the Colossians was that by merely having Christ, they were still second-class citizens. They were missing out on a lot. There was so much more that could be theirs.

The false teachers had worked out an elaborate and complex system of stages through which men could supposedly pass until they reached the stage of being gods themselves. The "bait" was that by rising above a mere faith in Christ, by accepting the superior wisdom which their *gnosis* (knowledge) gave people, the Colossians could experience a "renewal" that would lift them far above their present humdrum Christian status. Paul's countermove is to extol the greatness of Christ. He unreservedly makes the claim: In Christ you have everything.

We have already commented on the close connection between the letter to the Ephesians and the letter to the Colossians. Both are "captivity letters" written at the same time (ca. 62 A.D.) and from the same place (Rome). Both were delivered to their destination by the same carrier, a certain Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21/Colossians 4:7,8). The content of the two letters is similar, but with a somewhat different emphasis. Ephesians speaks in glowing terms of the church, of which Christ is the head. Colossians speaks in glowing terms of Christ, who is the head of the church.

The greatness of Christ is everywhere evident in Colossians. References to it fairly abound in the letter. We cite simply the major and more extended ones. Early in the letter, after the typical "laudatory sentence" in which the apostle commends the faith of the readers, Paul states:

(God) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things (1:13-20).

There is material enough in that quotation to engage us for the full time allotted for our essay, but let's note just a few points. We tend, perhaps somewhat simplistically at times, to think of God the Father as creator and preserver. Note that Paul includes Christ in the role. "By him (Christ) all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authority; all things were created by him and for him."

Not only did Christ create all things, but he still preserves them. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The force of that last, statement may impress itself on us more fully if we put it into the negative. Without Christ's constant care and attention, the whole universe would fly apart! It "holds together" only "in him." And Christ uses all this tremendous strength and power in the interest of the Christian church, for "he is the head of the body, the church."

With Christ in charge of everything, what a colossal blunder it would be to look elsewhere for good and blessing! What folly to heed the siren call of false teachers who promise "renewal" or "fulfillment" or "fullness" through the knowledge (*gnosis*) which they claim to have discovered. Look rather to Christ. Maintain your connection with him, the apostle urges:

for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority (2:9).

There is a note of urgency and pastoral concern that shows through Paul's words when he says:

I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.... See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human traditions and on the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (2:4,B).

Anything that takes the place of Christ, anything that is advocated "rather than Christ" is to be avoided like the plague. It is dangerous and destructive, yes, even diabolical. True spiritual life and spiritual renewal consist in staying in touch with Christ and in strengthening that bond. But how is the bond with Christ formed or maintained, how is it strengthened? There are means. God has provided them.

### **Thesis Three: Spiritual renewal is effected by means. (Word and sacraments)**

We have already seen in the letter to the Colossians a number of graphic pictures illustrating natural, fallen man's helpless and hopeless state. Paul has talked of sinners as being under the "domination of darkness" (1:13) and of being "alienated from God... enemies in your mind" (1:21). In the verse you have assigned as the basis for our essay there is in addition to the familiar picture of being "dead in sins" also the less common imagery of being in a state of "uncircumcision." Paul refers the Colossians to a time "when you were dead in your sins in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature" (2:13).

All of these pictures represent a basic problem that needs attention. If there is to be any spiritual life in the sinner, then the "darkness" that engulfs him must be dispelled. "Enmity" needs to be reconciled. "Death" needs to be displaced with life. "Uncircumcision" needs to be replaced with circumcision.

How can such spiritual changes come about in the sinner? Answer: God is able to do all this through that great and glorious Christ whom Paul has been extolling throughout the letter. God has given the believer "fullness in Christ." Paul says:

In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ (2:9-11).

In Old Testament times circumcision was the sign and seal of Jehovah's covenant of grace with his people. Paul uses that imagery here and speaks of accepting "circumcision" as the means for "putting off the old sinful nature." But what ever is Paul speaking of when he talks of a "circumcision" that puts off the old sinful nature, a circumcision not done by the hands of men but by Christ? We need only to finish Paul's sentence to get our answer.

In him (Christ) you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature ... having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith (by) the power of God, who raised him from the dead (2:11,12).

Baptism is a means whereby God brings us his grace in Christ. As such, it is a means whereby he not only puts us in touch with Christ, but he makes us partakers and sharers with him, so much so that Paul can say we were both “buried with him” and also that we were “raised with him through faith by the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Baptism is God’s means of grace whereby he gives life where there previously was spiritual death, which is precisely the point of the passage on which our convention theme and essay are based: “When you were dead in your sins ... God made you alive with Christ” —and he did so through baptism.

But baptism not only gives life and effects the initial change from spiritual death to spiritual life, but it also is a powerful means for continuing and strengthening that life. Numerous passages of scripture speak of that role. Typical is Paul’s observation to the Romans:

Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3,4).

Baptism is not a one-time thing done “back there” in our infancy, but it is an ongoing, powerful force for spiritual renewal. As our Catechism states: Baptism signifies “that our old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever.”

But baptism doesn’t just signify. It also empowers and enables. It proves to be a bastion and bulwark against every evil. In times of temptation, in times in weakness or discouragement, in times of despondency over sins of omission or commission, we can and we should use Luther’s retort: But I am baptized; I am a child of God.

Baptism, water to which God’s promise has been attached, works hand in glove with God’s Word. The power of the Word is also a dominant theme in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Note the role of the Word in bringing about the blessed state of the Colossians that Paul commends in his opening “laudatory sentence”:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf (1:3-7).

The gospel, which the Colossians had learned from Epaphras, was “producing fruit and growing” among them just as it was doing “all over the world.” That is spiritual renewal brought about through the Word.

In the case of the Colossians Paul is talking about the Word as that had been preached by Epaphras. But Paul claims the same blessed and renewing power for the Word also as he preached it. In speaking to the Colossians about reconciliation effected by Christ’s death on the cross, he indicates that its benefits will remain theirs:

if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.... I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make know among the gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom,

so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (1: 23-29).

Paul labors and struggles to proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone so that he may present them perfect (*teleion*: mature, complete) in Christ. Again, that is spiritual renewal, worked by the spoken and preached Word.

But Paul is conscious also of the power of the written Word. He is aware that he is penning this letter to the Colossians under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hence he is aware of committing God's Word to them. That is why he can command, as he does at the close of the letter:

After this letter has been read to you, see to it that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (4:16).

There are some exegetical problems in this verse, notably what the "letter from Laodicea" is, but one thing is very clear. The letter to the Colossians is "must" reading. It is the Word of God, a means of grace. It has the power to change the hearts and lives of the Colossians. It can bring about spiritual renewal. And it will do the same also for us, if we but use it so that the Holy Spirit may turn it to full account in our hearts and lives.

We note in passing that in his letter to the Colossians Paul makes no reference to the Lord's Supper. Omission, of course, does not imply a low estimate of the value of that sacrament. A likelier explanation for its omission is that the attacks of the false teachers were directed much more against the reliability of the Word than against the Sacrament.

#### **Thesis Four: Spiritual renewal involves the Spirit/spirit.**

Perhaps it need not engage us extensively at this point, since it will also come up in connection with Thesis 6 and 8, but we should in passing remind ourselves that, by definition, spiritual renewal involves the Holy Spirit working on our spirit. It would be hard to state more pointedly the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the Christian than Paul does in telling the Corinthians, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Co 12:3). Without the Spirit's work there can be no spiritual life. It's as simple as that. It's a "given" to the point that Paul in his epistles often says relatively little about the Spirit's work. In Colossians there is decidedly more specific reference to the Father's saving activity than that of the Spirit.

In the opening "laudatory sentence" Paul tells the Colossians, "We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you" (1:3). He speaks of the Colossians as ones who are constantly "giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom, of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness" (1:12,13). In speaking of the gospel he has been commissioned to preach, Paul says, "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). The verse you have chosen as your convention theme states, "God made you alive with Christ" (2:13).

There is relatively little specific mention of the Spirit in the letter to the Colossians, but Paul by no means overlooks the Spirit's essential role. The Colossians' acceptance of the gospel is wholly the Spirit's work. "You learned it (gospel) from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant," Paul says, "who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love *in the Spirit*" (1:7,8).

It was not Epaphras who worked love in the hearts of the Colossians. No, he reported to Paul their "love in the Spirit." Preaching the gospel, applying the means of grace, does not give the preacher "leverage" to create new life in the hearts of his hearers. That remains the realm of the Spirit. Jesus' words to Nicodemus are still true:

Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind (*pneuma*) blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (*pneuma*) —John 3:5-8.

The Spirit works when and where he wills, and the work he does is spiritual. “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” The spiritual nature of the Spirit’s work of effecting spiritual renewal will be touched on again under Thesis 6.

**Thesis Five: Spiritual renewal is all-encompassing. It affects the believer not only personally and individually, but also in his relationship to every other believer (family, congregation, church at large) and in his relationship to unbelievers. (the world)**

God’s dealings with sinners are always on a one-on-one basis. Each person in the world is individually accountable to his God. Each one is personally and individually responsible for his sins and misdeeds. Each person has been personally and individually washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb of God does indeed take away the sins *of the world*, but as the Good Shepherd he knows each of his sheep individually. Our Savior God says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name” (Isaiah 43:1). Jesus encouraged his disciples, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Each person’s life—and his eternal fate—is marked by faith in Christ or by the lack of it.

The kingdom of God grows as individual souls are added, one by one. Conversely, the kingdom sustains losses as individuals fall away, one by one. The kingdom of God, the church, flourishes as its members grow in faith and remain strong in their connection to Christ. On the other hand, the church languishes as individual faith withers and dies. There is in that formula an important truth regarding spiritual renewal. Spiritual renewal is always an individual thing. There is no such thing as “group renewal.”

When the framers of the synodical resolution state, “Within the congregations of our Synod there are numerous evidences of spiritual weakness, such as poor attendance at worship services, infrequent participation in holy communion, low enrollment in Bible classes and a lack of involvement in lay ministry,” the weaknesses they are talking about reflect the collective action of individuals. To illustrate: When in 1987 only 46.3% of WELS members were in church on an average Sunday, 53 out of 100 WELS members were individually doing something other than attending church that morning. For spiritual renewal to happen in the church there needs to be spiritual renewal in the life of the individuals who make up the church.

The point of this rather long digression is two-fold. It points out first of all the need to reach individuals with the proper motivation that can come only through the means of grace. Secondly, it gives us to understand that the spiritual renewal of individuals results in the collective strengthening of the church. Note how Paul makes a clear, gospel-motivated appeal to the individual Colossians when he says:

Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (3:1).

In effect Paul is saying, “Look at what Christ has done for you! He’s raised you from your spiritual death and has given you new life. Now set your heart on the things above, on the new and God-pleasing things that he enables you to do.” Or again the apostle writes:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (2:6,7).

These are direct appeals to the new man personally and individually to live as someone who is “alive in Christ.” But the point to note is that very few things a Christian does remain personal and individual. His actions always affect people around him. He is part of the collective group. Hence Paul in writing to the Colossians spends considerable time in speaking of the implications of true spiritual living—what it does to the relationship in which the Christian finds himself.

The framers of the synodical resolution urging spiritual renewal state: “Increasingly the impact of a pagan society is causing pain for God’s people in the form of many personal, marital, and family problems.” The antidote to those problems is to bring to bear upon the situation the impact of the spiritually renewed Christian. This is exactly what Paul urges in his *Haustafel*, the ground rules for maintaining a Christian home. There Paul addresses three distinct categories of Christian living: husband and wife, child and parent, employer and employee. In each station of life the key to making the relationship work lies in the phrase, “in the Lord.” That’s spiritual renewal. Paul writes:



Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong and there is no favoritism. Masters (*kurioi*: Lords), provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you have a Master (*kurion*) in heaven (3:18-4.1).

Reverence for the Lord sets the tone for everything good that happens in a Christian home. But the Christian home is not an island. Members of the family form the Christian congregation. As spiritually renewed Christians they exert a wholesome influence on other church members, and they themselves in turn are influenced by fellow Christians. Paul, the prince of spiritually renewed Christians, was very much aware of the influence of one dedicated Christian in helping others. His own life was a case in point. He says:

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and unified in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:1-3).

The same claim that Paul makes regarding his relationship to the Colossians can be made also for their pastor, Epaphras. Of him Paul states:

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 at Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:12,13).

Notice that the scope of Epaphras' wholesome and beneficent influence reaches beyond just Colosse. He is concerned also about the neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. That is typical of the spiritually renewed Christian. He is not provincial or parochial, concerned only with local advantage. He feels an obligation to all men, to the world.

Paul recognizes himself to have been entrusted with a "mystery," a message that had to be shared with others. He says, "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). And how is that message to be communicated? Through individuals Christians. Paul acknowledges, "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness" (1:25).

But Paul is under no illusion that he is working at this alone or independently. Earnestly he seeks the support of the spiritually renewed Colossians when he pleads:

Pray for us that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should (4:3,4).

Colossian support, however, goes much farther than just moral support—or perhaps we should more properly label it "prayer support." They too are to be personally active in outreach. Call it lay involvement, if you will, for Paul encourages each one of the Colossians, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (4:5).

For the believer, the spiritually renewed Christian, every contact with an unbeliever is an "opportunity." It is a chance to help an "outsider" become an "insider," to help him become a child of God and a member of Christ's body. Well might we all make the most of the many opportunities that come to us to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders. "Friendship evangelism" may be a new term, but the concept is genuinely ancient. The approach Paul is advocating is, of course, nothing other than that which Jesus talked about when he calls believers the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth." In fact, the latter picture may be in Paul's mind

when he closes this section with the encouragement, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (4:6).

Spiritual renewal in the believer is a highly personal and individual thing, but it never stops with the individual. It touches everybody around him. As such, it has tremendous potential for good in the family, the church, the community and the world at large. We do well to pursue such renewal vigorously. But just what is spiritual renewal?

**Thesis Six: Spiritual renewal is essentially a changed/improved attitude of heart and mind. (love and thankfulness)**

With all the potential for blessing to family and home, church and community that has been claimed for spiritual renewal, it would be easy to think of these blessings as the basis and reason for urging such renewal. Personally, I get a little nervous when I sense that the basis for urging spiritual renewal is the gain and the benefit that can be realized from it. It makes me uncomfortable to hear the logic, either expressed or implied: “We’re in trouble with our budget. What’s needed is the renewal that we restore the spirit of sacrificial giving in our contributors.” Or to hear people say or imply: “Our mission program has plateaued. We’re in trouble unless a vigorous program of spiritual renewal can restore the proper zeal to our missionaries and move our laity to become more involved.”

It’s usually not expressed quite that crassly, but that thought is out there. I would submit that the approach of seeing benefits as the motive for spiritual renewal is an inversion, if not a perversion, of the proper view. It’s putting the cart before the horse. Spiritual renewal has to do essentially with the heart, with the attitude that leads to right action, with the frame of mind with which a person approaches situations and challenges.

Recall that before there was any spiritual life in the Christian, his problem was basically one of having the wrong attitude. Paul reminds the Colossians, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” (1:21). The gospel in word and sacraments had worked an essential change in them. In baptism they were buried with Christ and were raised again through faith by the power of God. Such people have new life, a new heart, a changed outlook to which an appeal can be made. Paul urges:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (3:1,2).

Such a resolve to avoid base earthly things and to set their minds on things above, to think and to do God-pleasing things, can be nourished and strengthened. Paul assures the Colossians that he is busily at work doing that very thing for them. He says:

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and those at Laodicea and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:1-3).

Of the host of specific thoughts and feelings that crowd to the fore in the regenerate Christian heart and mind, two come in for special notice in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. They are love and thankfulness. Recall that Paul informed us that it was not he but Epaphras who had founded the church in Colosse. Epaphras subsequently joined Paul in Rome where, in reporting to Paul about the Colossians, Paul says that he “told us of your love in the Spirit” (1:8). This heartening report of the Colossians’ love buoyed up Paul’s spirit as he sat in his Roman prison, so much so that he can acknowledge:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you (1:3-6).

Note the motivation for this love. It springs from the gospel they have heard. It rests on the message of what Christ has done for them. John in his epistle states it in beautiful brevity and simplicity when he writes,

“We love him, because he first loved us.” Paul elaborates a bit more fully in our epistle, but the motivation is exactly the same when he says:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, wholly and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (3:12-14).

Another frame of mind or predominant attitude in the regenerate heart is thankfulness. Paul urges it on the Colossians, using the same gospel motivation for it as that which he cited for love. To people who are it alive in Christ” Paul can say:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (2:6,7.)

But Paul doesn’t just urge thankfulness on others; he personally reflects a heart that is overflowing with it. It has always struck me how generous and unstinting in his praise of fellow Christians Paul is. Read the laudatory sentence that constitutes the second paragraph of virtually all his epistles (Romans 1:8 f. /1 Co 1:4/11 Co 1:3/Eph 1:15/Php 1:3/1 Th 1:2/11 Th 1:3), and you will find it typical for Paul to say as he does to the Colossians, “we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your love in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints” (1:3,4).

And let’s not forget these were not perfect congregations to which Paul was writing. Paul wrote to them when they had problems, but he never fails to thank God for his beloved believers. That’s the mark of a spiritually renewed pastor. Is it always characteristic also of us and how we think of our members?

Paul is equally generous in his praise and his expressions of thankfulness for colleagues and co-workers. Epaphras certainly doesn’t suffer at Paul’s hand, for the apostle describes him as “our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf” (1:7). He draws the further commendation from Paul, “I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis” (4:13). Tychicus, the carrier of the letter, is “a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” (4:7). Aristarchus, Mark and Justus are the only Jewish co-workers with Paul in Rome, but “they have proved a comfort to me” (4:10,11). Even Onesimus, the runaway slave turned Christian and helper to Paul is “our dear and faithful brother” (4:9).

Thankfulness is an identifying mark of spiritual renewal. Paul, great apostle that he was, valued every helper and co-worker in the gospel cause. Do we always feel that same thankfulness for our brothers in office?

We have noted that thankfulness and love are identifying marks of spiritual renewal. But they tend to be essentially attitudes and emotions. As such they’re intangible and invisible, tucked away in the heart. How does spiritual renewal show itself?

### **Thesis Seven: Spiritual renewal reflects itself in greater sanctification. (love in action)**

Note the wording. Spiritual renewal *reflects itself* in greater sanctification. Spiritual renewal is not in and of itself to be equated with the doing of good works. As we have seen, spiritual renewal is rather the changed attitude of heart and mind which is brought about by the Holy Spirit’s working through the Word and sacraments. It is a preliminary and antecedent step. The person thus changed, whose heart and mind and will have been put in tune with God’s will, he out of love to God and gratitude for what his Savior has done will want to lead a life of good works. That sequence of spiritual renewal leading to sanctification is clearly shown when Paul, early on in his letter, tells the Colossians:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this is order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light (1:9-12).

So much is packed into these two sentences that we really need to stop and sort things out a bit. Note the initial stage. Paul prays for the Colossians, asking God to fill them with the knowledge of his will through spiritual wisdom and understanding. “Spiritual wisdom” is wisdom that the Holy Spirit imparts, and as we know, the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace, through Word and sacraments.

What is the point of Paul’s asking that the Colossians be filled with wisdom and understanding? The answer follows immediately. “We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.” A life of good works is definitely expected to follow upon being filled with knowledge and learning about the Savior. In fact, it is assumed that sanctification will not only occur but that it will grow and increase, as is indicated by the four present participles which Paul now strings together: “*bearing* fruit in every good work, *growing* in the knowledge of God, *being strengthened* with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully *giving thanks* to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.”

When people have learned to know their savior, when they have become “alive in Christ,” then they can be urged to lead a life of love and good works. “Since you have been raised with Christ,” Paul says, “set your hearts on things above” (3:1). And then he proceeds to make his appeal for sanctification and holiness in their lives:

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthy nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourself of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (3:5-10).

Just as there are sins of omission and commission, so one could say that there is sanctification of omission and commission. The list just enumerated contains negative things, things to avoid. It is followed immediately by things that are to be encouraged and cultivated and strengthened. Again Paul supplies the proper motivation. These are things that are being asked of people who have experienced God’s great love:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (3:12-14).

Where people have put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, a forgiving attitude, and love for their Lord, there great things can be expected of them. It is therefore not unfounded optimism on Paul’s part when, four verses later, he comes with his guidelines for Christian households and confidently expects that such husbands and wives will live in domestic harmony, such children will listen obediently to their parents, such slaves will get along well with their masters.

So too, it was not ill founded or unfounded optimism on the part of those who passed the synodical resolution calling for spiritual renewal to assume that something can indeed be done about the pain being caused by “many personal, marital, and family problems.” The anti-dote is “life in Christ” brought about by the Holy Spirit’s working through Word and sacraments.

Nor need we despair when the sixth “whereas” of the synodical resolution, no doubt correctly, calls our attention to evidence of spiritual weakness in our congregations, “such as poor attendance at worship service, infrequent participation in holy communion, low enrollment in Bible classes, etc.” The situation as described is serious, but by no means hopeless. Paul suggests the remedy when he urges:

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 (3:16).

Greater interest in Bible study, both private and in group sessions, a renewed willingness to teach the uninformed and to admonish the erring, a revitalized worship life, All these are possible when those who are “alive in Christ” let the Word of Christ dwell in them richly.

We dare not close this section without a reference to yet another tool in the Christian’s arsenal. That is prayer. While not a means of grace, prayer is nevertheless a blessed privilege and a very useful tool in regard to spiritual renewal. Paul used it zealously. We have repeatedly cited the opening sentence of the letter where Paul says, “We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” (1:3).

Paul’s prayers are not only prayers of thanksgiving, but also of intercession for the Colossians, asking God for their spiritual renewal, as Paul indicates when he says, “We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will.... And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord” (1:9,10).

Nor is Paul alone in using this precious Christian tool. Epaphras too is “always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured” (4:12). Again, his prayer is a request for their spiritual renewal and the advance of their life in Christ. But Paul urges also the Colossians to pray. Earnestly he encourages them:

Devote yourself to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should (4:2-4).

Pastors and teachers, how often have you asked your people, flat out, to pray for you so that your preaching and teaching and handling of the Word might be clear and effective? And laymen whether you have been asked or not, how often do you pray for your called workers? Are we perhaps neglecting or underusing a tool that’s vital for the spiritual renewal of the church in our day?

**Thesis Eight: Spiritual renewal cannot be programmed, but programs need not, per se, be unspiritual.**

I suspect that in many cases, when people heard that there would be a convention essay dealing with the topic of spiritual renewal, there was the sanguine hope that this would be a “practical” paper, that it would have a “how-to” approach suggesting some quick, easy, sure-fire way of curing the ills that were documented in the “whereases” of the memorials to Synod and resultant floor committee report. Quite apart from the lack of talent and natural ability on the part of the essayist, there are other reasons that prevent such a hope from being easily realized.

There is first of all the matter of remembering that spiritual renewal is, after all, the work of the Spirit. And the Spirit works when and where he pleases. Even by using the Holy Spirit’s designated means, the Word and sacraments, we do not back him into a corner and compel him to do our will! Thank God that he doesn’t capitulate to our will! In that case there would be no Lord of the church. We would be in charge. That is hardly the kind of “renewal” that is wanted or needed.

But there is another consideration, and that is the problems and limitations that inherently tend to attach themselves to a program. It is unlikely that there could ever be a “standard” program that would at the same time fit all Christians in all situations of life. Faith and life simply are not static things.

There is, however, a yet more serious problem. With even the best of programs there is the danger that, undetected by the practitioner, the program may become a formula, a pattern or a ritual to be followed mechanically. When that happens, the heart and the life have gone out of the program, but the person going through the motions still fancies himself to be the better for having done it. He then runs the risk of legalism and work-righteousness, and in some cases, even superstition. The fault does not necessarily lie with the program. The problem is just as likely to be caused by “baggage” that the user brings. Take as an example the ceremonial regulations that God laid on his Old Testament covenant people. That was an educational “program,” and there was absolutely nothing wrong with it, but when it came to be viewed as a plan of salvation, then it formed the basis for the worst kind of legalism. In that section of the letter from which our convention theme is drawn, Paul talks about canceling that Old Testament “program.” He tells the Colossians:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross (2:13,14).

The Colossians, of course, were Gentiles and as such had never been under the Old Testament Jewish ceremonial laws, but one of the problems Paul addresses in this letter is that false teachers were apparently trying to introduce a pattern of ceremonial regulations and hold the Colossians to them. Hence Paul cautions them:

Do not let any one judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (2:16,17).

But there was also a much more bizarre program being advocated to the Colossians. If even God's Old Testament "written code" had to be canceled by "nailing it to the cross," what hope could there be for the curious program of "renewal" devised by the *gnostic* false teachers who had spun a complicated theory about "emanations" and "aeons" through which people supposedly could become angels and even gods? Paul disposes of that "program" with the words:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow (2:18,19).

A few verses farther down Paul makes the general observation:

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (2:23).

What was the problem with those programs? Paul himself has given us the answer in stating that the one who is hooked on a program "has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (2:19). True spiritual renewal and growth have to come via "connection with the Head," namely Christ.

But can there not be programs that strengthen and support this connection with the Head? Indeed there can. Such programs should be devised and used to the full. Such programs must be widely diverse and broadly flexible, so that they can be applied to all age groups at all times in all situations of life. But diverse and flexible as such programs need to be, to be good programs, they must have one thing in common. They must use the Word and sacraments to put people in to touch with Christ and thus strengthen their connection with him, the Head.

The Scriptures abound with references to "programs" that existed to put people into touch with Christ. Jesus had structure or a program in his ministry when he speaks of being "sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus laid out a program for his disciples when he gave them the directive, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God had a program for Paul, as indicated in his words to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15,16). Paul discloses a program for his mission work when he informs the Romans, "It has always been my ambition (*philotimoumenon*) to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (Romans 15:20). The common denominator in all these "programs" is that the Word of God and the message of a Savior are purposefully and systematically being shared with a specific target audience.

I have perhaps been a bit sneaky about it, but I can confess that at this relatively late stage that there has been something of a "mini-program" underlying this essay. Instead of talking about spiritual renewal, I have

chosen rather to lead you into the Word, which alone can effect true spiritual renewal. By the time we have finished this essay, you will have read, in somewhat rearranged order, virtually the whole of Paul's inspired letter to the Colossians. That is by design, not by happenstance. It is intended to put you in touch with the Word that alone can bring about useful and lasting change.

I mention it only to illustrate that it is incumbent on all of us to use our best ingenuity and our most diligent effort to involve people with the Word. We're all aware of the zealous home missionary who is so busy beating the bushes for prospects during the week that he has very little by way of a sermon to offer when people show up on Sunday morning. The same can and does happen in other situations as well. How easily our "busy-ness" with administration and externals cuts in on our time for sermon work and hampers our preparation to the point where our Bible classes really are not all that stimulating and offer little incentive for people to return. Instead of introducing new programs, a first step toward spiritual renewal might well be to overhaul and revitalize existing programs.

But there is a place also for new programs. If spiritual renewal is to move forward, then we need to devise better and more efficient ways of bringing the Word to the hearts of our people. And here efforts by the local congregation should be supplemented by programs whose scope includes a larger group of participants. In this connection it is a special blessing of God that he has heard our prayer and filled the position of Project Director for Spiritual Renewal. In view of the obstacles that confront the Word and the problem that our church faces, this is indeed a challenging and demanding position that needs our support, our cooperation, and above all, our prayers. Well might the project director request of us, as did Paul of the Colossians, "Pray for us that God may open a door for our message.... Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should" (4:3,4).

Spiritual renewal cannot be programmed. Hence we dare not place blind confidence in programs, as though they could magically or mechanically effect the desired improvements. That can come only by the Holy Spirit working through the Word. But on the other hand, any pattern or program that puts people in touch with the means of grace dare not be summarily dismissed. Such programs deserve our endorsement and enthusiastic use. In our cautiousness about programs, let's not throw the baby out with the bath water.

**Thesis Nine: Spiritual renewal is a continuing process.**

Despite what its name might seem to suggest, spiritual renewal is not really something new. It's not a novelty that's being sprung on us. It's not a new process that's being tried, perhaps on a temporary basis. No, spiritual renewal has been going on all along, as long as the gospel has been preached. Individually and personally, we have experienced its blessings ever since that moment when through baptism or through hearing the gospel message we have come to faith and have become "alive in Christ." And collectively we as a church body have through the Holy Spirit's renewal experienced some remarkable blessings. True, with current "backdoor" losses we may not at present be experiencing phenomenal growth in numbers, but we do well to look back and recall what we were at the beginning. In the period of a century and a quarter a handful of struggling congregations have increased to the 1,194 congregations that today comprise the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. A ragged group of disorganized Lutherans pushing back the borders of the midwestern wilderness in the 1800's have today become over 400,000 souls located in all fifty states. Like Paul in the laudatory sentence that opens virtually every one of his epistles, we too need to step back and to observe what the Holy Spirit has accomplished in our brothers and sisters in the faith. Then, with the apostle, we too will want to say:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:3-6).

Things are not all wrong in the church, as the casual reader of the memorial's "whereases" might conclude. We would call your attention also to the fact that in the "whereases" there is not one hint about what would be the very worst of problems, namely the intrusion of error and false doctrine into our proclamation of the gospel message. The problem is not that the gospel has been lost or is in process of being adulterated in our

midst. The problem is rather that we seem not to be turning the gospel to full account in our lives. We're not using to the full what we have. We're living below our Christian potential. That, of course, is serious and requires our immediate attention, not only or even primarily for our own sake, but for the glory of God and the benefit of our neighbors whom we are not serving properly with the gospel. We need to devote ourselves zealously to Word and sacrament, so that our life in Christ may grow and increase and that love and good works may abound in our life. But as we do so, we need to do it with the realization that on this side of eternity we will never reach that stage where our sanctification is complete and we no longer need to concern ourselves with spiritual renewal.

Spiritual renewal remains an on-going and a continuing process. Note that Paul reckons with the continuation factor in dealing with the Colossians. From Epaphras he had heard about the Colossians' fine confession of faith and their love in the Spirit. But it was only a beginning. "Since the day we heard about you," Paul says, "we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom, and understanding" (1:9). Obviously the Colossians had not yet been completely filled with spiritual knowledge and understanding. There yet was much they could learn and much they could improve in their lives.

Epaphras also was aware of the same need for continuing growth and maturity in his Colossian members. Paul says of him, "He is always wrestling in prayer for you (Colossians), that you may stand firm in the will of God, mature and fully assured" (4:12). Epaphras' goal for them was the maturity and the full assurance that comes from a strong and vibrant faith in Christ, but it had not as yet fully happened. That is why Epaphras was "always wrestling in prayer" for them.

Spiritual renewal needs to be an on-going and continuing thing. As long as we retain an old Adam, so long will there be a need for spiritual renewal. Even the apostle Paul had to reckon with that factor. In frustration he exclaims, "What I do is not the good that I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19).

Nor was this simply a cry of frustration at a low point in Paul's life. Even in his letter to the Philippians, where Paul is overflowing with joy and optimism, he acknowledges, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already have been made perfect" (Phil. 3:12). Perfection, with no need for further renewal, is not possible here an earth. The Christian is constantly in a state of "becoming." But how are we to react to that situation? How can we cope with that state of incompleteness? Paul gives us the answer;

One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (Phil 3:13-16).

As people who are "alive in Christ," let us live up to what we have attained, and let us turn to God for help with the rest. "That, too, God will make clear to you," Paul promises. But how does God do that? How does he make things "clear" to us? Again, we are back to our basic answer: through the Word. There really is only one approach, only one "program," and that is:

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. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:16,17).

When the Word of Christ dwells in us richly, then we are on the road to maturity, or as we should perhaps say, then he who has begun a good work in us is carrying it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. There can be no denying the fact that there are many things that need improvement in our lives individually and collectively as a church. But for persons who are it alive in Christ," those improvements are attainable through faithful use of God's means of grace. Clinging to the Word then, let us all, individually and collectively as a church, press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.



