

Growing up into Christ

“My Journey into Ephesians”

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Introduction

When I was eight or nine years old I felt a strong call to become a missionary doctor. This motivated me to work very hard at my schoolwork. During my schooling there were a number of things that made this task difficult, including changing schools five times and the fact that my parents were quite poor as my father served the Lord as Hobart City Missioner which at that time was a poorly paid position. But my parents believed and supported me in my desires to be a missionary doctor and so I was the first in my family to go to high school. At the end of my high school I discovered that, because I had been too shy to ask for advice, I had chosen the wrong subjects to allow me to study medicine. My only option seemed to be to train as a teacher and I did this believing that this might be the way God would enable me to eventually study medicine but this was not to be. It was several years later and after my marriage to a wonderful Christian woman, Maryanne Stroud, that God showed me he wanted me to be a teacher. From that time on I was a “called” teacher. I now was convinced I should become a missionary teacher. But in what at the time seemed inexplicable at the time, on each occasion I volunteered for missionary training or service I found a door that was shut. One morning when I was thinking about this strange state of affairs, I felt clearly called by God to leave teaching and train to be a pastor. This was a new thought to me but it was an idea that Maryanne also believed God wanted me to follow. At this time I was serving as a Commerce Master at Fort Street Boys High school, a selective school in Sydney, I was the coauthor of a very successful series of geography textbooks and my career prospects looked very bright. However, God’s call was so clear, I immediately resigned from my teaching position and enrolled at Morling College. I started my studies there in 1971. I also enrolled in a BD Honours course at the Melbourne College of Divinity as Morling College did not award degrees at that stage.

Learning about Community

In 1972, in my second year at College I was appointed the student pastor of St Marys Baptist Church. I found in pastoring the Church, a deep sense of fulfillment and I firmly believed my

teaching career was over. In fact I was enjoying the work so much that I remember asking God “Why did you leave me teaching for 17 years?” It was sometime later that he gave me the answer to that question. By 1973, the church which had been quite small when I became pastor, had rapidly increased in size and Maryanne and I believed that this was where God wanted us to serve. We sold our house and bought another in St Marys so that we could be with our people. I became interested in finding ways to help people in our community and I applied for and was granted a significant Commonwealth Grant to set up a “Latchkey Child Care Centre” for children whose parents left home early in the morning and often got home late at night. In order to get a theoretical understanding of how communities work, I started along with my theological studies, a MA degree in Community Studies at Macquarie University. This was the beginning of my interest in community. In 1974, I took a series of studies with my Church from the book of Ephesians and started to explore with them what it meant to be “the Body of Christ”.

My life changed dramatically at the end of 1974 when a fellow trainee pastor, Peter Hester asked me if I would like to be the principal of a Christian school. When I asked him what he meant by a “Christian” school he said he really did not know but he believed there ought to be one. At that moment God showed me that he wanted me to do something different in education and that this was his call on my life. I shared my ideas with Peter and the two of us became convinced that this was what God wanted us to do. We gathered together a small group of interested people and I challenged them to start a Christian High school in 1976. I obtained permission from the Baptist Union to become involved in this project and with the support of two Baptist Churches the school commenced in February 1976 with 14 students. But in the meantime as well as doing the practical things involved in such a huge undertaking, I had a church to care for and I knew I needed to have a biblical basis for the school. My church agreed to release me from 50% of my duties and to also drop my stipend by the same percentage to allow it to employ an associate pastor. This gave me the time to attend to the practical details and to also spend time in prayer and study as I sought God’s leading in developing a biblical basis for the schooling.

Journey into Ephesians

In the first chapter of the history of Christian Community Schools (2011) I wrote about how God gave me a biblical basis for a Christian school which came out of my study of the book of Ephesians and my interest in understanding the Church as the Body of Christ and God’s holy community.

Perhaps the most daunting task was to develop a Biblical basis for the proposed school. As I prayed for direction, I believe the Lord led me to the Epistle of St Paul to the Ephesians with its teaching on how Christians should live as God’s community. One morning while I was reading Ephesians, one verse in chapter four seemed to jump off the page. *Rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ* (Ephesians 4:15 RSV). I suddenly saw that since Paul was exhorting Christians to live lives worthy of their calling to be God’s people, his holy community on earth, Ephesians should form the basis of how we should teach students to live.

With a growing sense of excitement, I read chapter four again. I saw that it contained three principles of growth into Christ, which I believed should form the basis for the philosophy of a Christian school seeking to educate children in a Christian learning community. I rang Peter and shared this insight. I remember saying to him that the chapter used the word *measure* twice, in verses seven and twelve and the idea of a measure was implied in verse 16. Peter opened his King James Version and on looking at the passage remarked, "What do you mean, it uses the word *measure* twice?" It uses it in each of the three verses!" Sure enough when I went back to my Greek New Testament, I found that the Greek word μετρον or "measure" was used in each of these verses. From this, I saw that the verses spoke of measures of growth into Christ and into his Body, the Christian community. Subsequently, I presented these concepts to the Interim Council who adopted them as part of the foundational philosophy of education for our new school. The school would seek to develop the gifts of each individual to help a student grow towards true maturity in Christ, the Head of the Body; and to lead him or her into a responsible Christian life of service as an active and cooperative member of the Christian community. I proposed that verse 15, that *we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head that is Christ* provided a summary of how people should grow as Christians. The motto for the new school, "Grow up into Christ" was adapted from this verse.

The Interim Council decided that the aim of the school should be to develop a Christian learning community where students would *grow up into Christ in all things* (Ephesians 4:15). It would thus become a Christ-focused learning community where students would be encouraged to *Grow up into Christ* according to the three measures or goals of growth. The first of these, *the measure of the gift of Christ* (Ephesians 4:7) challenged teachers to remember that each person is gifted and given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Thus, a Christ-focused education must take into account the individuality of each person in assisting the growth of each for the good of the whole Christian community. The second goal, *the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 4:12, 13) was a reminder that the growth towards maturity in Christ comes as students and teachers work together as a body towards *unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God*. The third goal, *the measure of the effective working together of the parts* (Ephesians 4:15-16), emphasises the inter-dependence of each person and the need for each to see his or her gifts in terms of their role in the community and not just for individual gain. Growth towards these goals comes about by practising the truth in love so that students will

grow up into Christ, the Head of the Body in all things (Ephesians 4:15).

My earliest proposals for the school were quite radical, but over the course of the year, these were modified as I realised that it was no use having a school so different that no one would be brave enough to enrol their children in it. However, from the start, the school was going to be different; it was to be a Christ-centred, Bible-based, low-cost school that would enable students of Christian families of any socio-economic status to attend. Families could join if they showed commitment to its ideals, accepted its discipline and shared in its worship. I promoted the concept of a Christ-focused, biblically-based school by preaching in as many churches as would invite me. I also wrote a series of articles in the May and June 1975 issues of *The Australian Baptist*, a weekly paper circulating among Baptist Churches in Australia.

The following is a summary of an article I wrote in June of that year outlining some of the ideas I had at that time:

The modern high school is...very expensive. How can a group of Christians possibly hope to find enough money to start one? A new concept in education will, I believe, provide the key to the solution. Progressives in the field of education have developed a radical concept of a school without a building, which they have called a "community school". The community school is an attempt to provide an education that is more relevant and practical than that provided in the institutional types of schools we are using at present.

These educators believe that the best preparation for life will be found by training children in the market place, the home, and the factories and in the public places where children will spend most of their lives. By utilising the range of teaching opportunities and resources available in the community an education can be provided at a far cheaper cost than in traditional high schools. However, this concept of a community school without a building is, I believe too radical. Children need the security of a building where they can do much of their learning of a more academic nature, and teachers too will need a place where resources can be accumulated. However, the use of this concept opens up new possibilities. From this, I have developed what I call the "Christian Community School".

The Christian Community School will use the facilities and human resources of the Christian community along with that provided by the community at large. Many of our churches possess excellent Christian education blocks designed to facilitate education. These make ideal bases in which a small high school could be developed.

What became clear to me from my study of Ephesians was that there are principles of growth that should form the basis for a Christian school if it truly wanted to be in line with God's purposes. Paul explains in Ephesians that God's purpose was to have a people for himself who would live for the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:12-14). Paul goes on to explain that it was not just the nation of Israel that God had in mind when he told Abram (Genesis 12:3) "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" but all who through faith in Jesus Christ would be incorporated into his family (Ephesians 3:6). Paul called on Christians to live lives worthy of this calling to be God's people (Ephesians 4:1-6) and they were to do this by practicing the truth in love so that they would grow up into Christ in all things. This is a message that is hard for us to accept with our very individualised and often secular thinking. It is however the message that is as much needed today as it was when the Holy Spirit touched the lives of the first Christians. Acts 2: 41-46.

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

While the way that community is expressed will change over time and in different cultures, the need for Christians to live as a community of God's people is an essential part of his plan. Christians are to be known by their love for each other (John 13:35) and their obedience to the truth (John 8:32).

Reference

Friskien, R.J. (2011). *It only takes a spark: The story of Christian community school*. Sydney Unpublished.