

# Until Christ is formed in You

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Until Christ is Formed in You  
by Dr. Jerry Nelson

One of the great experiences of life is to hold a newborn child.  
A sense of awe and even joy moves over us as we look at that infant.

But one of the saddest experiences of life is to see or even hold an eight year old child who is still infantile in size and ability.  
We delight in new birth but we grieve at severely stunted growth.

God is in the business of restoring his creation.  
God created the heavens and the earth and it was good.  
And God created Adam and Eve and they lived in an open, loving, fruitful relationship with their God.  
But sin corrupted that relationship and all of creation.

Speaking of all of creation except human beings, what to us is a beautiful and marvelous created world is a mere shadow of what God intended and what will be.  
At the same time that we call this world beautiful we recognize that disease, destruction and death are also part of our world – witness a forest fire, a drought or a typhoon.  
Our world is not pristine and perfect.

The Bible makes clear that what is needed is not a little change here and a little change there but a total renovation.  
The created world doesn't need a just little help but a total remaking.

Romans 8:20-22 “For the creation was subjected to frustration... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (But) “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

2 Peter 3:10,12-13 “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

God's Restoration of Us  
And what is needed by the rest of the created world is needed by human beings as well.  
At the same time that people enjoy family and friends they suffer broken relationships, failing bodies, and the ever-present specter of death – witness divorce, cancer and child abuse.  
Our world is not pristine and perfect.

Sin has so corrupted, so destroyed humanity that God is recreating it.  
Sin has so completely pervaded, so warped, so negatively changed every aspect of what it means to be human that God is in the business of remaking us – not just a snip here and a tuck there as if altering a garment – but a remaking, as in starting from scratch.  
We like to think we need only minor alterations to be what we were created to be but without God's intervention we are much more like Hitler than we are like Jesus.

And so God starts over with us – Jesus said it is being “born again.”

Not just born-again but growing!

In the emphasis on Christian “new birth”, however, many have relegated the idea of spiritual maturity to the place of “nice but not imperative”.

But it is not God's purpose to populate heaven, the new earth, with spiritual stillbirths and spiritual infants.

His purpose is to recreate us and shape us to be like his Son, Jesus.

The same idea is found in the Christmas Carol, “Away in a Manger:”

“Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.”

If we want to know what God's goal for us looks like then look at Jesus.

When we think and act like him, when we reflect his character, then we will have reached God's goal for us.

That reshaping may not be completed until Jesus comes again but the Bible is clear, that is God's work in us now.

And unlike some of us God is not pessimistic about his transforming work in our lives.

2 Corinthians 3:18 “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Philippians 1:6 “...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

And what does it mean to be like Jesus?

Several times in the Bible descriptions of the re-created person are given:

Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

2 Peter 1:5-7 “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”

Matthew 22:37-39 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

An old term for becoming like Christ is the term “spiritual formation.”

One author describes this becoming-like-Christ this way:

“Spiritual formation is the progressive patterning of a person’s inner and outer life according to the image of Christ...” (Melvin Lawrenz The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation p15)

Has that been accomplished in your life?

Is God finished with you?

Is God finished with your spouse and your children?

Is God finished with your friends?

Is God finished with your neighbor?

As I said earlier, some of us have relegated spiritual growth to the “nice but not imperative” category.

Would it matter if nothing changed about your spiritual condition until the day you die?

Yes it matters because if nothing changed it would mean that God’s primary purpose in your life would be aborted.

Yes, it would matter because it would mean that there is probably no spiritual life.

Hear how seriously God takes the issue of spiritual growth:

Hebrews 3:12-14 “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

God’s goal for our lives is not a “get out of jail free” card that we redeem at death.

His goal is not to simply keep us out of hell.

His goal is our re-creation – restoring us to the humanity he intended in creation and the full humanity that is manifested in the person and life of Jesus.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19-20 “Therefore go and make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

A disciple is an imitator – one who becomes like his master.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:25, “It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”

The destiny of every believer, of every spiritual rebirth, then is to become like Jesus.

- Galatians 4:19 “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”

- Colossians 1:28 “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”

- Ephesians 4:13 Paul’s mission was to be God’s instrument in people until we “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Most of us want very much to be different.

I’m not talking about being richer, smarter or more famous.

We probably wouldn’t mind that either but I mean that most of us know we are not, within, the kind of person we want to be and should be.

You don't have to be very old before you begin to understand that self-help programs aren't likely to make the changes we need.

We tried enough times to change with little result that we realize something is broken.

Not only do we wish we were different, but most of us long for relationships that are much deeper than we experience.

We long to connect at ways far deeper than the superficial we usually experience.

At a certain level we are lonely and it hurts but we have even a greater fear of trying to connect and being rejected.

And so we live in uncomfortable isolation, simply putting on a happy smile much of the time.

But according to God's Word, the change we long for and the relationships we covet are found in the church because that is the way God made us.

Now when I say, "change and relationships are found in the church," I must quickly add again that I am not defining church as the building or the institution or the program.

I am using a biblical definition of the church as God's new community – people spiritually connected to each other in committed relationships.

Something very unhealthy has developed in the evangelical church over the years – something we have adopted from the culture.

Are you a Person or just an Individual?

That unhealthy value is "individualism" and it has resulted in an "individualistic Christianity".

We ask, "Church, why bother?" because we have reduced Christianity to a private affair between God and the individual.

William Willimon has written, "American Protestantism often impresses observers as a highly individualized, privatized, psychological affair... Individual conversion experiences – in which individuals are saved from individual sins in order to have individual relationships with Jesus – are viewed by some evangelicals as the end rather than the beginning of the life of faith. The church becomes (little more than) a conglomerate of like-minded individuals who find it useful to congregate in order to keep the flame of individual religious experience alive and to foster it in others." (Willimon in What's Right with the Church 15)

I think he's right.

We speak and act as if getting our personal sins forgiven and getting our own ticket to heaven is the sum of what it means to be a Christian.

And furthermore we sometimes think the only reason for church is to tell others about their need for getting their sins forgiven and getting to heaven.

Church gets reduced to an assembly of individuals emphasizing an individual religion.

But as Willimon points out, individual, personal conversion is not the sum or conclusion of the life of faith but simply the beginning.

We are converted, saved, born again, into a community – a community of faith, the body of Christ, the church.

An Asian Indian by the name of George David, wrote an excellent little book, I came across recently, entitled, The Eclipse and Rediscovery of Person.

“Community is what we in our generation, who have been socialized in a secular culture, are conscious of having lost. We need to realize afresh that we have lost community because our very personhood is being eroded by secularism. Our self-understanding has sub-consciously shifted, so that we (see ourselves most importantly as) autonomous individuals.” (David 46)

We are so intent on being individuals, having autonomy, that we have sacrificed our personhood.

George David, following Paul Tournier and others, makes an important distinction between being merely an individual and also being a person.

The concept of “individual” speaks of number – you are one, alone, separate from. The word “individual” emphasizes autonomy, freedom, independence.

In and of itself, being an individual is not wrong but when it excludes the more important aspect of what it means to be a “person” then individualism is harmful.

We are not just individuals; we are, more importantly, persons.  
You say that just sounds like semantics.  
Listen, and I think you will hear a real difference in the distinction.

As I just said, the word “individual” refers only to number – the number “one” and by definition “individual” emphasizes our separateness from others.  
The word “person” speaks of relationship and “personhood” doesn’t exist apart from relationship.

“The ‘I’ can have no real knowledge of itself apart from others. When two selves interact mutually they develop common attitudes, interests, beliefs and goals. When the interaction is such that the individuality of each is not lost but rather respected by the other, they (each) develop a relational self. It is (this relationship) that transforms an individual into a person... A person possesses not only an individual self, but also a relational self, which is possessed in common with another, making them persons to each other.”(David 43,44)

Yes, God made us individually but he created us to live in relationship.  
Genesis 2:18 “The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.

God created human life to live in fellowship (not just alongside but in relationship) with him and with others.  
Derek Kidner writes, “(A person) will not live until he loves, giving himself away to another on his own level.” Derek Kidner Genesis 65

## The Model of the Trinity

And when God created us to live in relationship, to be persons, he was mirroring his own personhood.

Genesis 1:26-27 “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God, as “three persons in one”, is central to who God is.

Even before we existed God was love.

It is not just that God is love in some abstract conceptual way but that God loves and love necessitates relationship – in this case the relationship was between the three persons of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Love is impossible alone.

Love is only meaningful if there is some other to love. (David, 49)

God would cease to be God if he was not a Trinity.

Catherine LaCugna writes, “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.... (Our purpose) is to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit... Divine life is therefore our life. The heart of the Christ life is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with each other. The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other.” (Catherine Mowry LaCugna, God for us: The Trinity and Christian Life found in Bolsinger It takes a Church to Raise a Christian, 61)

Yes, God would cease to be God if he was not a Trinity.

And while we might remain individuals, we would cease to be persons outside of relationships.

It is interesting how Islam defines Allah; of the 99 attributes given to Allah in the Koran, never is there a mention of love.

In great contrast, the CENTRAL self-revelation of God is that he is love.

Love is impossible alone.

Love is only meaningful if there is some other to love. (David, 49)

To be fully human, to be “person”, is to live as God created us to live.

And thus to be truly human or fully human we must live in relationship with others – again, not simply among others but in genuine connectedness to others.

That is why Jesus prays to the Father in John 17:11 “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name–the name you gave me–so that they may be one as we are one.

We have too much adopted the culture’s priority of autonomy.

We have placed individual freedom as the highest value to be achieved and sustained.

We are so convinced that autonomy must have priority that we will sacrifice everything else to have it, including the sacrifice of true community.

When that happens “church” becomes merely a congregation of individuals, each striving to maintain his or her freedom, and being part of a congregation only to serve their own interests. We don’t really give, serve or love others for others, we just act in certain ways to get for ourselves.

And when it is merely a collection of individuals bumping up against each other in self-serving ways there is no community, no church.

Sin has done that.

Sin has turned persons into merely individuals.

Sin has isolated us and keeps us apart and keeps us from being fully functioning persons made in the image of God – connected to one another, living in real community.

And that is what Jesus came to change.

- He came to give us worth, based not on what we do but who we are by his grace.
- He came to change us, to free us from our self-protecting individualism.
- He came to set us free to be persons, persons who are loved and who love.

Ephesians 2:19-22 “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

It’s important to notice that the Apostle Paul here is not writing merely of a Christian as an individual but of Christians in relationship with Christ and each other; he is addressing the church.

We, together, are God’s temple.

In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul speaks of our bodies individually as temples of God but in 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is describing the church – God’s new community:

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”

Here Paul is not describing your individual body but the church – the body of Christ.

And in 1 Corinthians 12:27 he writes, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Christians are not just born again individuals, we are born into a family. We become the new spiritual (“ethne”) ethnic group, the new people of God in Christ.

We desperately need each other

The only context for being Christian is the church – the community of believers.  
Paul Tournier wrote “There are two things you cannot do alone. One is to be married and the other is to be a Christian.”

Some may say, my church is watching Andy Stanley or John Piper on the internet.  
Or others may say, my church is standing on the top of peak 8 at Breckenridge and praising God for all he has made.

I hope they don’t mean what they are saying.

It would be like saying my marriage is watching videos by Gary Smalley or James Dobson.

The church is God’s people living in relationship with each other.

This is where the definition of church gets “down and dirty”.

It is not church when all it includes is individuals attending the same programs.

It’s church when the individuals, as persons are connecting, knowing each other, caring about and for each other, investing in each other.

And that is where it gets hard because who could object to the idea of church, of community? –  
But people – that’s another matter!

It’s a variation on the old Charlie Brown theme – “I like church, it’s people I can’t stand.”

One author wrote, “When it comes to the religion called Christianity, it’s the scandal of particularity that bothers us. The thing that sticks in our craw is not that the gospel is about love, peace, freedom, liberation or any other loveable abstraction. What sticks in our craw are the particulars, the messy side of Christianity, imperfect people and an imperfect church. “Many approve of both the idea of following Christ and the concept of the church. But they are horrified by the particulars. It was the romantic poet Southey who said, ‘I could believe in the Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church.’ Jesus has many admirers who feel that he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved.”  
(William Willimon in What’s Right with the Church 2-3)

Rarely does the Bible speak of the church abstractly.

Almost always the word church is a reference to a specific group of people in a specific location – E.g. the church in Rome, Ephesus, or Phillipi.

These were real people with all kinds of real differences, conflicts, hard-to-get-along-with personalities, questionable pasts, annoying habits, and the rest that drive people apart.

The people of God is made up of professionals and laborers, highly educated and barely educated, short and tall, slim and not-so-slim, kind and selfish, liars, thieves, adulterers, gossips, murderers, the gentle and the angry – all kinds, those you’d love to spend time with and those you wish you never had to be around.

But it is we with all of our abilities and warts and brokenness that God has called to be part of this church – to be in relationship with each other.



Larry Crabb has written, “A spiritual community, a church, is full of broken people who turn...toward each other because they know they cannot make it alone. These broken people journey together with their wounds and worries and washouts visible, but are able to see beyond the brokenness to something alive and good, something whole” (in each other, by God’s grace) Crabb p32

Robert Saucy wrote, “It is in fact, God’s purpose through the miracle of redemption to weld together a divided and estranged humanity into a living unity where differences of gender, race, nationality, and position are all transcended in Christ.” (The Church in God’s Program p102)

There have always been some who have understood what church is about but for too many of us we have seen church as something we attend rather than a people we are truly a part of.

The Bible’s definition of church is not a building or a program but a community.  
This is not a YMCA where you simply pay your dues and keep the rules.  
The church is people who are asking you to become part of their lives.

Becoming part of each other’s lives takes time together.  
There are millions of people who call a certain church their church home who show up only once or twice a month or even less frequently.  
In fact only about 55% of those who call one church their church home are present on any given week.

Now to be certain there may be some who have job or health issues but it doesn’t change the fact that you can’t build a relationship with such infrequent contact.  
One word you can’t help but notice that describes Jesus’ relationship to his disciples is the word “with” – he was constantly with them.  
And he was “with” them for a purpose.

Fighting for each other’s soul

In Galatians 4:19 we read, “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”  
It is personal and it is intimate.

What does it mean to labor for someone until Christ is formed in him or her?  
Paul’s choice of the childbirth metaphor was not accidental.  
His concern for those people’s spiritual growth was intense, it was urgent, it was with difficulty, it was with single-mindedness and it was with a very definite goal in mind.

Paul fought for their souls.  
Who is fighting for your soul and whose soul are you fighting for?

A younger pastor from a large church in our city called and asked to meet.  
His wife is struggling so severely from depression that he doesn’t know if he can hold his family together.

He is struggling in his soul to be a godly husband in the midst of his situation.  
He didn't put it in these words, but he was asking me to fight for his soul!

I have a friend in this church who struggles with a health issue in his family and a pressure-cooker job so that many days he's depleted emotionally and physically leading to a real spiritual battle in his own soul.

There are days he nearly despairs, nearly giving up on life and God.

How many Christians are beaten down by life and are close to having no hope?  
Who is fighting for their souls?

How many others are "fat, dumb and happy" but a discerning eye can see the trap into which they are headed?  
Who is fighting for their souls?

Paul knew that the battle for our souls is deadly serious – the enemy of our souls is unrelenting, powerful, cunning and deadly.

Here's the way God says it:

Ephesians 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

1 Peter 2:11

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

The war against our souls is intentional and deadly, and so the fight for our souls must be equally intentional and life giving.

The fight FOR our souls is also intensely personal and individual.

Again Paul wrote in Philippians 2:20 "I have no one else like (Timothy), who takes a genuine interest in your welfare."

And of Jonathan's and David's relationship we read in 1 Samuel 18:1ff: After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself... And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.

That younger pastor, I mentioned earlier, asked if I would meet with him regularly. I felt very inadequate, knowing the condition of my own soul, but I realized what I was being asked to do was to care and contend for his soul.

Prayer in the Fight for another's Soul

Who prays for you and who do you pray for?

Romans 15:30-32 "I urge you, brothers...to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

Colossians 4:12-13 “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 has a deep concern for you...

- Look at the frequency of Epaphras’ prayers for them – always.
- Look at the intensity of his prayers for them – wrestling – agonizing.
- Look at the goal of his prayers for them – that they may stand firm and mature.
- Look at the motivation for his prayers for them – deep concern, love.

“In 2 Timothy 1:2,3 Paul said, “Timothy, my dear son, night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.”

To the people of Colosse he wrote, Colossians “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you...

I sense the difference between those who say they pray and those who do pray, between those who pray once or occasionally and those who pray constantly.

Those who pray constantly are fighting for my soul.

Scripture in the “Fight for another’s Soul

Fighting for the soul of another not only includes intercession for them in prayer but it also includes interaction with them in the Word.

There is a “with-ness” in Christianity that is foreign to many of us.

Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzeneger and Peter Segall are not role models for spiritual warfare.

The go-it-alone, Lone Ranger, Christian will fall.

God made us to live in relationship with him and his church.

God intended that we grow and live the Christian life together.

Romans 1:11-12 “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.

Look at the “one anothers” in the Bible:

John 13:14 “wash one another’s feet

John 13:34 “love one another.

Romans 12:10 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love

Romans 12:10 “Give preference to one another.

Romans 14:10 “Build up one another

Romans 15:7 “Accept one another.

Romans 15:14 “”Admonish one another.

Galatians 6:2 “Bear one another’s burdens

Ephesians 4:31 “Be kind to one another.

Ephesians 4:32 “Forgive one another

Philippians 2:3 “Regard one another as more important than yourself

Colossians 3:16 “teach one another

1 Thessalonians 5:11 “Encourage one another

Hebrews 10:24 “Stimulate one another to love and good deeds

James 5:16 "Pray for one another  
1 Peter 4:10 "Serve one another.

In isolation our souls will dry up. We need each other.

But interaction alone is not sufficient.  
There are many who are good friends.

But the kind of interaction that fights for our souls is centered in the Word.  
It is God's Word that God's Spirit uses in the context of God's people that makes the difference  
in our lives.

It means that our interaction is informed by the Scriptures.  
When we get serious it is truth from God's word that we bring to bear on the situations and  
decisions of life.  
The counsel to one another is not man's wisdom but God's wisdom because it is informed by the  
Bible.

Who is interacting with you centered in the Word?  
Who is praying for your soul?

Who's fighting for your soul? Who's soul are you fighting for?

I grieve when I think of how many men and women have no one who cares for them personally,  
no one who cares for their soul.