

The Actions of a Christ-Sufficient Minister

Can you remember your first time in church? For some of you who grew up in church, that will be very hard. But try to think back to your first encounter with church. We humans are very sensitive about standing out or being embarrassed. So if you have never been to church, you try very hard to fit in, to not stand out. You try to work out what is going on, and keep up, so that you are not ashamed. So you see the people stand up at some points, and so you stand with them, and they sit down, and you sit down. They sing, reading the song out of a book, which you try to find and open. They read out of the Bible. And then a man gets up and talks – for a long time. And everyone very politely listens to him, and waits till he is finished. And then people have coffee, talk and go home. Now, if this was your first experience of church, and you were asked to explain what church is about, you might say, it is about listening. You might say, it is really about following some kind of pattern. You might say it is about being quiet. You might not understand what it is we are doing.

But in fact, many people who have been coming to church for a long period of time, still don't have a very clear idea of what we are doing. They are still unsure as to what the main idea of church is. They hear about ministry, but they wouldn't be able to explain to an outsider what ministry is.

So what is ministry? What is it that we are doing every Sunday, every Wednesday, and in all the days in between? What are we aiming at?

In the book of Colossians, Paul has been telling the Colossians of the supremacy of Christ in creation and in salvation, and how they can know they have partaken of that salvation. At the end of verse 23 (chapter 1), he calls himself a minister of this Gospel of Christ. Paul knows what ministry is, because he is one of its ministers. From verse 24 down into chapter 3:5, he is going to describe what ministry is.

Paul, by way of personal testimony is going to describe what the aim of a Christian is, regarding other Christians. He is going to show us what it looks like when a person is dwelling in the sufficiency of Christ, when Christ is supreme and sufficient to him, how it flows over to others.

We'll see this in two parts – the Actions of a minister, and then the Approach of a Minister. When I say minister, what do I mean? I mean servant. Who is a servant of other Christians? Every Christian is. A minister is not simply the pastor. Every Christian is a minister. That is why we talk about every-member ministry.

So let us start by getting to the heart of ministry. What exactly is it, and how do you do it? For that, we drop down to verse 28 to find the answer.

Colossians 1:28,29 *Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ To this end I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.*

1. His motive: *To present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*

Like a teacher presents the child back to his parents with a new ability to read, so Paul wants to present every Christian back to Christ in a manner different from how he/she was first found. In particular, what is his aim? His aim is to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. (The word 'perfect' is used in NKJV, KJV, NIV Bible versions; 'mature' is used in ESV and CSB versions; 'complete' is used in NAS version).

Perfect. Is Paul's aim that every believer would be sinlessly perfect? I don't believe that is his aim, because it is Christ who will present us before Himself as sinlessly perfect (Jude 1:24, Eph 5:27).

The word for perfect here means something which has reached its goal. It carries the idea of maturity, completion, full development. There is such a thing as spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is not the same as perfection.

The goal of parents is the maturity of their children. You feed them, clothe them, and teach them, so that they will be adults capable of perpetuating what you have taught them. You do not expect them to remain children forever. You love them for what they are at each age, but if they did not develop it would be difficult. It is one thing to have a two year old screeching for something in the supermarket. You might take them out and discipline them. But if you are strolling through the aisles with your 35 year old son and he starts to stamp his feet and eventually lie on the ground kicking because you didn't buy him some Jelly Tots, it would be ridiculous. I wonder if the church doesn't look ridiculous from a spiritual point of view to heavenly observers, like bearded men being pushed around in prams, silver-haired ladies with dummies in their mouths, grown women drinking milk out of a bottle, groups of adults listening to toys playing nursery rhymes, groups of middle-aged men reciting the alphabet together. It sounds ridiculous, and it is. But is it any less ridiculous than men who have been saved for 10 years and know almost nothing of the doctrines of the Bible? Or couples who have been saved for twenty years and still do not know what the Bible expects of them in marriage? People who have been saved for 5 years and cannot find the book of Nahum or Jonah without using the Contents page? Or people who have claimed faith in Christ for 15 years and have no idea how to share their faith, much less defend it? Or people who have been saved for five, six, seven years, still plagued by the same sins, same temptations, the same attitudes. Or people who have been saved for twelve years, but couldn't teach children a basic Bible lesson, let alone disciple another Christian?

If you would detect a problem when seeing people in their fifties reciting the 5 times table, why do you not see it as a problem that people could attend church for 5, 10 years and do nothing differently from when they first arrived? It is as ridiculous, if not more so.

What are some of the markers of spiritual maturity? Some are given for us in this passage:

A mature believer loves other believers – Col. 2:2 ‘Knit together in love’

Whenever you read the New Testament, you will find that the writers place love at the top of their order of priorities.

Colossians 3:14 *But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.*

1 Timothy 1:5 *Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,*

Love is the goal, love is the end result. Love for Christ, love for one another. The sign of maturity is not a cold, indifferent, heart. It is sincere love out of a pure heart. You may find a man very knowledgeable in the Christian faith, but if he is bitter and cold toward other Christians, he is not mature.

Some people think that great love belongs to baby believers, and as you mature, you get more truth, and have less love. But that is not true. The end point of holiness is love.

A mature believer experiences growing understanding of Christ – Col. 2:2

What is meant by ‘*and attaining to all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ?*’ In the following verse, Paul gives us something of

the answer when he says (v3) *'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'* This mention of knowledge, wisdom and understanding takes us back to chapter 1:9, when Paul was saying the key to the Christian life is to be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. The Gnostics liked to talk about secret knowledge, hidden wisdom to be attained. But Paul says his desire for every Christian is that they may come to full assurance of understanding of the mystery of Christ – and it is in Him that all wisdom and knowledge is hidden. I would say the idea here is – *a mature Christian is growing in the knowledge of Christ through the illumination of the Spirit and it grows their assurance of salvation.*

A mature believer is not easily deceived (Col. 2:4)

It is the mark of immaturity to lack discernment in all of life. Children do not know what they should put into their mouths and what they shouldn't. Children don't always know what is appropriate to say and when and how. Children don't understand certain dangers. Children are easily deceived. They cannot discriminate, they cannot judge as adults can.

Spiritually immature Christians cannot discern true from false. They cannot tell a false doctrine from a true one. They cannot discern profane worship from true worship. They cannot discern what is ugly and unfitting from what is beautiful and fitting in worship. They are easily beguiled by fads, new teachings, and new philosophies.

Ephesians 4:12-16 *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴ that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ -- ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*

A mature believer can teach others. (Heb 5:14). Take note that the mark of maturity is that you eventually give out the knowledge you receive. The mark of immaturity is that you continue to receive, but never give back. You are never able to reproduce yourself. Your inputs never become outputs.

Love; Illumination; Discernment; Leading Others.

This is to be the goal of every believing parent.

This is to be the goal of every pastor and every teacher.

This is to be the goal of every Christian for every other Christian.

This is the goal of every Christian who loves another Christian – to see them reach greater maturity in Christ. When you know how sufficient Christ is, you will long to see believers welcome Him in for full fellowship, that He might show them His sufficiency.

Does Paul believe he will achieve this goal with every person he ministers to? No. This is a subjunctive verb, it is a conditional statement. He knows much depends on the response of each person to his ministry. Yet it is his goal.

The next question is, 'How did he do this?' What was Paul's main method in bringing people to maturity? Did he set up as many church socials as possible to foster unity? Did he have classes where people practised sitting and speaking, and looking like a mature Christian? Did Paul feel that maturity would happen without his interference, and therefore did nothing to disturb its natural processes? No. In order to present every man perfect in Christ, He did something? What did he do?

The beginning of verse 28 tells us.

He preached Christ.

II. His Method: *He preached Christ – teaching and warning in all wisdom.*

He declared, He preached, Jesus Christ. Amazing! Paul's method was not to have specialized ministries. He did not introduce games and gimmicks to get the children in. He did not introduce Christian rock concerts to win the youth. He did not invite celebrities who were Christians to give their testimonies. He did not tell the Colossians they needed to deal with their brokenness and get them to heal their memories. He did not get them into groups and tell them to verbally confess all the demonic influences in their past. He did not cast out all kinds of demons. He did not tell them to lose themselves in Christian music, or to be a part of a small group so they could open themselves up.

He preached Christ.

Quite simply - He made Christ known to the people He ministered to. He declared the Person and work of Jesus. Note – not to unbelievers, in this context, but to believers.

How could it be that simple? Because when you truly understand who He is, you will understand He is more than enough for every part of your life.

All through nature, particularly in mammals, you see an illustration of this. When the young elephant or whale or lion is born, it spends its first years by the side of its parent, imitating what its parent does. By being exposed to its mother, it learns how to hunt, how to forage, how to protect itself. Without that exposure, it would not know what to do.

There is an even more direct example in nature. Most plants need exposure to the sun. They are designed to take in the sun's rays, and convert that very light into chemical energy. By simply being exposed to the sun's rays, they grow, they are enabled to live. This is not something a plant *learns* to do. It is the complex way they are made, so that photosynthesis can occur from the start of that plant's life.

Christians are like baby animals watching the parent, and consciously copying it. We learn of Christ and consciously seek to obey Him.

But we are also like the plants. Our new nature grows and thrives in ways we cannot explain, by being continually exposed to the knowledge of Christ :

2 Cor. 3:18 *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*

Is this for the pastor only? No. Consider **Col. 3:16**:

¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*

The words 'teaching and admonishing' are the exact words used here - literally teaching and warning. Interestingly, one of the means we must use is music – psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The declaring of Christ is not something that is for pastors only. It is at the core of ministry - sharing Christ with one another.

As you grow in your Christian life, you are to teach and warn other believers. You are to take your own understanding of Christ and apply it to others. You are to make His sufficiency known to others so that they may apply Him to their lives and grow as a result.

How long does this process take? How hard do you have to work to see results? Is the teaching of Christ to other believers like high-pressure spray-painting or like farming? We may wish it were like spray-painting - just douse them with a once over of teaching and they're good to go. But the Bible doesn't describe the work of ministry like that. When Paul speaks to young pastor Timothy, he says:

2 Timothy 2:6 *The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops.*

He describes it as being like farming. It is steady, it can be slow. It takes much patience. It includes a lot of failure and frustration. And at the end of the day, it is God who has to give the increase.

Training children to be well-mannered human beings who can postpone their immediate desires, share with others and speak to others in a polite tone and in a polite voice takes much training. If you want instantly obedient children, don't have any. It takes a lot of work - hard work. There are times when it doesn't seem to be working. But you keep at it until the results come through.

This is ministry. You keep teaching Christ from the Bible. You keep reminding others of the promises. You keep repeating the warnings. You keep applying accountability and even discipline. You keep encouraging growth. You keep praising good works. And when the growth doesn't come, when the zeal is lukewarm, you keep at it. You stay with it until God brings the results, as He always does, to a patient farmer.

In short, it is hard work. In verse 29, Paul says, *to this end I labour*. That word *labour* in the original means toil - becoming extremely weary. It speaks of an exhausting work, like when a man has been ploughing by hand all day. He is weary beyond words when coming home at night. That's Paul's attitude to the ministry. In the next sermon, we'll see his entire approach to ministry, how he was willing to suffer, and to serve, and to struggle even for those he had never met. He is not loafing

This matter of preaching Christ takes up vast amounts of time and energy. So much so, that it burns people out, and causes them to throw in the towel.

How many pastors quit the ministry every year? Multitudes are diagnosed with all kinds of medical problems related to stress, overwork, nervous exhaustion. The strain of trying to present people mature in Christ will flatten a man if he does not follow Paul's example. How many Christians simply give up trying to mature other Christians and just retreat into their private worlds? It seems like too much trouble, too much commitment, too much involvement to be there for others, to have them look over my shoulder, to be the one someone will call at midnight. So where does one get the power and the strength to minister to others like this?

III. His means: *He laboured, striving according to His working*

Paul says 'I strive, according to His working, which He works in me mightily'. See how grace and human freedom are working in synergy.

Some science buffs or conspiracy theorists may well have read, or heard, about zero-point energy or perpetual motion machines. The idea of a perpetual motion machine would be like a bicycle, that once turned, generates electricity, which is used to turn the wheels of the bicycle, which keeps generating electricity to turn the wheels. Now it's a lot more complicated than that, but the idea is

that there would never be a loss of energy, because the machine keeps making it while working.

In a way, Paul is teaching the secret of zero-point Christian living. He is about to describe a system where whatever action he does actually generates as much energy as is needed, so he never runs out.

I strive. Who is doing the striving? Paul. The word in the original is where we get our word 'agonise' from. Paul is struggling and fighting and putting every last ounce of energy into this work of presenting each person.

According to His working. Paul's struggle is matched by, and empowered by, His working. The word for working is *energeian*, which you will recognise as similar to the word *energy*. Paul's agonising work does not come from his own resources, but from God's.

Which He works in me mightily. Here Paul uses that same word for energy in a verb form. In effect, he says, 'I struggle, with the energy He energises me with mightily.' God energises the Christian greatly when they do His work. God gives grace proportional to the strain. Demand will never exceed supply when it comes to grace for good works.

I find it interesting that Paul was often weary, exhausted, worn out. But Paul was never burnt out. Paul was not in a cycle of complete breakdown – having to be booked off for months, coming back, burn out again. No, Paul ministered in the energy God gave him.

Part of the reason was that Paul was not busy with things he wasn't supposed to be busy with. Paul had his priorities straight. Moreover, he knew what he was to do in ministry. He wasn't trying to run a popularity contest, please everyone all the time. He wasn't trying to solve every minor problem that ever cropped up. He wasn't trying to organise the church to death. He was busy with maturing the saints. He knew the way to do that. Expose them to Christ. When Christians see Christ, they grow into His image. So he focused on teaching and warning with all His heart.

But to do that, he needed to do all he did dependently. He agonised, God energised. If you do what God wants you to do, in the way He wants you to do it, for the reasons He wants you to do it, you will never lack the strength to do it. The power will always be there.

A Christian who is trying to teach another Christian more of Christ out of true love for God and his or her brother or sister, and doing it correctly from the Scriptures will have the grace of God providing the strength.

Does that mean you will not be tired? No. Does it mean you will never need holidays or rest? No. Does it mean you will not at times feel completely finished? No. You will indeed be exhausted and need refreshment. What it does mean is that you will not burn out. You will not resent the ministry. You will not grow bitter against the unresponsiveness, or ingratitude, or apathy of the people you minister to.

The Lord's choice of the human body to illustrate the church is a brilliant one. When you think about it, so much of the body lives on the concept of the blood circulating to every part. There are organs to oxygenate the blood, to purify the blood, to pump the blood, to give nutrients into the blood. And this blood is sent to every corner, as it were, of your body. And when any part of your body is denied blood, it suffers, and may even be permanently damaged or lost. The point is, the whole body works together, to make sure that the whole body gets clean, oxygenated, nutrient-rich blood.

If the life is in the blood, what is the blood of the church? It is the knowledge of Christ. A local church is supposed to be an organism of believers, all diligently seeking to pump the knowledge of a sufficient Christ to all others. Some purify that knowledge from the false teaching. Some oxygenate it with prayer for the Spirit to keep illuminating. Some feed it with sound teaching. Some warm it with their love, mercy, hospitality. Some thin out the sluggishness with their zeal and encouragement. Some direct the flow with their leadership and administration. Some oversee that every member is getting a supply with their shepherding. But it is all about making sure the blood of illuminated knowledge of Christ gets to every member in the body.

Now, imagine a church of 100 Christians, all diligently seeking to be involved in the lives of the other Christians, seeking to discover and reveal Christ more and more to one another. A church so caught up with the sufficiency of Christ, that it continually works to know Christ, and make Him known to each other. No one is just a floater, a recipient, but every member seeks to know Christ more than he has up to now and share that knowledge with the others.

So what are you doing? Are you a lung, a heart, a kidney, a tooth, a stomach, an artery? What part are you playing to see Christ known amongst us?

Do you know what one of the most dangerous things to the body is? A blood clot! When blood clots in one section and begins to cut off supply to all others, the tissue around it dies, because it receives no blood. You become a blood clot in the body, when you do nothing with the knowledge you receive. You hear it in the sermon, but it seems to clot, to congeal in you. You do not pass it on, freshen it up, or relate it to others. You become a dead spot in the body. Your family receives no life-giving knowledge of Christ from you. Your fellow believers receive no life-giving knowledge of Christ from you. You not only receive no blessing yourself, but you begin to deny it to others with your bitterness, apathy, boredom or lack of interest in spiritual things.

I think that no one would like to be a blood clot in Christ's body. But it takes some effort to get out of old and bad habits. Learn to see that ministry is not about one man that you call the minister. It is every member, spreading the knowledge of Christ to all the others, so that we (plural) may present every man mature in Christ.