

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow UP?

*'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house,
not a creature was stirring; not even a mouse.'*

You know the poem: Clement Moore's "The Night Before Christmas". It was written in 1822. I wonder how he would have written it today. There's one line in particular I think he'd have to add. After St. Nicholas bounds down the chimney, and after he's been described in detail, the poem continues.

*"He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
and filled all the stockings and turned with a jerk..."*

Somewhere in there, if the poem were written today, there'd be a reference to St. Nick taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves, and getting on his knees, spectacles on his nose, a screwdriver in one hand and a pair of pliers in the other, trying to make sense out of those cryptic instructions written by Taiwanese elves.

It's one thing to make millions of toys—standardize all the parts, get them all in the right boxes. It's another thing altogether to get them fully assembled.

Today is Pentecost: the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and miraculous things happened: the church was born. The story is recorded in Acts 2, and today's scripture is part of a letter written to a church 25 years later—a part that describes the church, "fully assembled."

(EPHESIANS 4:7, 11-16 NRSV) *But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ... ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We*

must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The purpose of the Gifts is to: *"prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* People—and church—are fully assembled when we all attain *"to the measure of the full stature of Christ."*

It's one thing to say we can attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. It's another thing altogether to pull it off. What does it look like to "attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ?"

Text says we'll be no longer be infants; we'll grow up. The KJV says we'll be "perfect", which may explain why so many people believe it's unattainable. In the

original language, the word means, "completed" or, we might say, "fully assembled".

The first step in Christianity is to receive Christ and follow him in baptism. Jesus called that being "born again". Now, how much does a newborn know about life? How prepared is an infant to face life and make decisions? Being born is just the beginning. Receiving Christ and following him in baptism is just the beginning. Being a Christian doesn't end there; we don't come "fully assembled".

When we're baptized, the assembly process begins. The text says we're infants, and describes spiritual infancy as being "*tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine...*" (vs. 14b).

We call the first six years of a child's life the "formative years"—when the child is most easily influenced—and the personality is formed. Will the child be introverted or extroverted, will he depend on his senses or on his intuition? Will she think things out, or act on the basis of feelings and impulses? Will he grow to want everything planned in advance and structured like a military movement, or will he be more flexible and spontaneous and like to leave all the options open?

"As the twig is bent, so grows the tree"; and most of the twig-bending takes place in those first six years of life.

The text in Ephesians describes spiritual infancy as being tossed back and forth, from one teaching to another. Some names to drive the point home: Jim Jones, Tony Alamo, David Koresh, Adolph Hitler. I get nervous each time I see a new "non-denominational" church going up—some entrepreneurial preacher hanging out his own shingle—membership going from 30 to 3,000 in six months.

Maybe it's okay. Today, when most Americans don't participate in any church, maybe some Christianity's better than none. Poll after poll reveals a deep spiritual hunger in our culture. Sadly, those same polls reveal that—even with megachurches springing up like dandelions—church attendance overall continues to decline. The megachurches are not reaching new people; they're pulling people out of existing churches. They say, "I'm not being fed." [I think they're being fed; they're just picky eaters!] And they're turning by the droves, almost in desperation, to preachers—not churches; preachers—whose charismatic personalities, dynamic styles and inspirational skills seem to satisfy that hunger.

Maybe it's okay. In Luke (9:49-50) the disciples said to Jesus, "*We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he's not one of us.*" "*Don't stop him,*" Jesus said, "*for whoever is not against you is for you.*"

Maybe it's okay. Still, history urges caution. Our culture conditions us to be vulnerable to confusing personal charisma with spiritual depth—to being tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching.

And history leaves no doubt: that which is built on personality and charisma

is a house built on sand. It will collapse when the personality is gone. But the house built upon a rock that will stand firm. And, for the Christian there is only one rock.

We come into this life as physical infants, and we come into Christian faith as spiritual infants. We don't come "fully assembled". We grow up; and like physical growth, spiritual growth is a life-long process. The condition of being grown up—the state of being "fully assembled" is attained through "*unity: ~ in the faith and; ~ in the knowledge of the Son of God*". And there are no shortcuts.

So, how will we know when we're getting there?

We will speak the truth in love. *The truth ought to build up and not tear down.* I take this from Paul, who often gave this test for some religious activity—does it build up or tear down the church? The truth can be used to hurt people. It can force someone into silence or into submission. It can take away a person's sense of dignity. Those who truly care about speaking the truth, will practice stewardship of the tongue. Truth is power and power must be used responsibly. Again, as Aristotle said, telling the truth is not just a matter of "telling it like it is" but rather telling the truth in the right way, to the right person, at the right time, for the right reasons. So, the heart of Paul speaks of "speaking the truth in love."

1. We will grow more and more to become like Christ. Our humanity will become less and less an excuse, as we begin to accept more and more responsibility for our thoughts, our deeds and our relationships.
2. The Body of Christ will be built up by what we do—not declining. It will be built up, not because of some charismatic preacher; but because the whole body will be joined and knit together. Each member of the body will acknowledge and accept his/her role; and each part will do its work.
3. Which brings us full circle back to the opening lines of the text: *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.* (EPHESIANS 4:11-12 NIV)

I have a vision for the church. The common image of "church work" is burden, inconvenience, endless committee meetings... In my vision there'll be no need for committees. Each Christian will identify his or her spiritual gifts and, use them, not in "church work," but in "the work of the church." And it will be for them a source of joy and fulfillment. That's how individual Christians become "fully assembled", and that's how the church becomes "fully assembled": *the whole body, joined and knit together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work*; and Pentecost will not be just a date on the liturgical calendar; it joyfully will be lived out every day of the year.