Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

It used to be that if you wanted to buy a book or a cake, for example, you would head to the small bookstore or bakery on your main street. But then some smart cookies thought, why have lots of small stores for a few customers, when you could have big stores for 1000s of customers? And so, along came the Kmarts and Warehouses and Pak-N-Saves. And this led some church folk to wonder if you could take the techniques, practices, and attitudes of the business world, like marketing, public relations, and staff structures, and apply them to the church? In other words, could we have churches of 5000 instead of 50? And so, the Church Growth Movement (CGM) was born. One website says

*The Church Growth Movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a network of church consulting firms, conferences, and publications all focused on helping pastors develop strategies to increase the size of their congregations. Books [about Church Growth] helped American evangelicals couple their love for missions with pragmatic marketing strategies. This led to a new emphasis on consumer-oriented church growth and the future boom of "megachurches."*

And of particular interest to us today is the phrase – “consumer-oriented church growth.” People coming to church were now viewed as consumers or customers. And you know what they say in the business world: The customer is always right. So, every aspect of church needed to designed or redesigned to attract consumers; the music, the coffee, the language used (or avoided), the sermon topics, the décor, the people who led different parts of the ‘service,’ it was all about attracting consumers. And any technique that ‘worked’ was quickly shared and embraced by churches committed to the CGM.

Well, while we can applaud the missionary zeal of these folk, the ‘consumer-oriented’ model is simply not compatible with God’s plan for church growth. And we don’t have time to consider all the reasons why this is so, but one reason is that a very important piece of God’s plan for church growth gets zero attention or is downplayed in the CGM. And that part is **sanctification** – growth in holiness or obedience.

* Think, for example, of Jesus’ classic words on church growth – Matthew 28:19-20 – the Great Commission: “*Go therefore and* *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you*.”
* And the part of Peter’s letter that is before us today is also about this aspect of church growth. Peter wrote his letter to believers in a church or churches. And he has been describing the holy lifestyle that each member of the church must strive to live.
* Well, chapter 2:1-10 is the next section of Peter’s letter, and it is about the character and calling of the church. And in verses 1-3, we see that each member of the church must “*grow up into salvation*” and how this growth happens. And you will note that there is nothing here about ‘consumers’ and music style and barista coffee; instead, Peter uses two metaphors to identify God’s plan for church growth – the first metaphor is **removing dirty clothes** and the second is **drinking like a baby**. And as we consider these metaphors, we will see that **God’s plan for church growth requires personal holiness and Bible intake**.

1. So, the first metaphor of church growth is each member ‘**removing dirty clothes**.’ We read, “*So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander*.”
   1. Chapter 1 ended by reminding members of Christ’s church of their duty to love one another. And this love is to be “*sincere*,” *earnest*, and “*from a pure heart*.” Well, for this love to grow and flourish in a congregation, Peter identifies some love-spoiling attitudes and behaviours that every single member must “*put away*.”
      1. The Greek word translated as “*put away*” literally means to remove or take off an item of clothing. In **Romans 13:12** the same word is used and translated there as “*let us cast off*.”
         1. And I am sure you boys and girls can remember a time when your shoes or socks or pants or shirt were so dirty and ripped that Mum told you to take them off and throw them straight into the rubbish bin! Well, in the same way, we need to take off these attitudes and behaviours and throw them away.
   2. So, what are the love-spoiling attitudes and behaviours that we need to “*put away*”? They are “*all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander*.”
      1. **Malice** is hatred of or having bad feelings for or the desire to hurt other people. Think of Saul’s malice toward David, that ultimately led him, several times, to throw a spear at David to try and kill him. It is a word found in several of the New Testament ‘do not do these sins’ lists, because it destroys unity and fellowship. It is the heart attitude that leads to some of the behaviours that Peter mentions.
      2. **Deceit** is the deliberate attempt to mislead other people by telling lies or by not telling the truth. The Greek word literally refers to the bait on a fishhook. So, you design your words to sound good, but you want them to cause pain. Peter refers to deceit two other times in his letter:
         1. In **verse 22**, we are called to imitate Jesus, in whom there was “*no deceit found in His mouth*.”
         2. And in **3:10**, Peter will again remind us that the believer keeps his lips from “*speaking deceit*.”
      3. **Hypocrisy** means being two-faced. In Greek, a hypocrite was originally an actor who played himself and another character by using a mask. So, Peter is warning us to be genuine with each other; not masked characters. We are not to be one thing in our outward behaviour and another thing in our inward thoughts.
      4. **Envy** is resenting other’s prosperity or success and wanting what they have. In **Mark 15:10** we are told that Pilate understood that the chief priests had delivered up Jesus “*out of envy*.” They hated His popularity with the people! And envy is often associated in the New Testament ‘do not do these sins’ lists with strife and division in the church. What we should strive for, instead, is what we see in **Philippians 2:3**: “*Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves*.”
      5. And while deceit might be to a person’s face, **slander** is criticizing or telling lies or gossiping about someone *in their absence*.
         1. Later in **3:16**, Peter will state that we Christians can expect to be slandered by unbelievers. But there must be no place for slander in how we talk about one another in here.
         2. And ways Christians commit this sin are when we share ‘prayer requests,’ or ‘concerns’ or ‘problems,’ about one person, with others.
         3. We must always ask ourselves, is what I am saying true? Would I say it if this person was present? Is my motive for saying this, truly, his or her good?
      6. And finally, Peter’s repeated use of the word “*all*” suggests ‘every kind of.’
         1. A couple of weeks back, Jeremy very jokingly described **accountants** as “not exciting.” Well, be that as it may, we need accountants. And one of the things that accountants do is to advise customers about legitimate ways they can minimize their taxes. And it is almost a kind of game that tax departments play with accountants. The government will identify one area of tax avoidance, so accountants work hard to find other or new ways to minimize taxes.
         2. Well, in a similar way, there is no end to the lengths that the sinful heart will go to in manufacturing new ways to commit sin. **Jeremiah 17:9** says, “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it*?” And I simply cannot count the number of times I have been shocked to the core by my sinful thoughts and words and actions. Where did that come from? Well, I know where it came from – my heart.
         3. So, we must be constantly examining ourselves to see where we are falling into any kinds of these sins.
   3. Now, before we move on to the second metaphor, one thing we need to remember when we read the New Testament epistles is that they were written to local congregations or with **local congregations** in mind. Whether it be 1 Peter or Corinthians or Romans, etc, the behaviours commanded were with the brothers and sisters *of your congregation* primarily in view. And I mention this because it is much easier to love invisible Christians of the world-wide church than it is the people in the pews in our congregation. Last week, for example, we read all the times that John says in his first letter, something like, ‘If you do not love your brother, then you do not love God.’ And he isn’t speaking, primarily, about Joni Erickson Tada or John McArthur, or the persecuted church, who we all love; he is speaking about the people in the seats around us; do we love the people of *this* congregation?
      1. I know at least some of you have heard this before, but it is worth hearing again: To live above with saints we love, ‘twill be a thing of glory. To live below with saints we know? Well, that’s a different story.
      2. So, who here do you need to grow in loving, “*sincerely*,” “*earnestly*,” and “*from a pure heart*”? Towards whom must you “*put* *away* *all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander*”? Who here do you try and avoid speaking to? Who here is on the opposite side of a disagreement with you? Who here are you convinced gossiped about you back in 2003 but they continue to deny it, so you hold a grudge towards them? Who here must you love as Christ has loved you?
      3. For this, brothers and sisters, is a vital part of God’s plan for church growth.
2. And that brings us to the second metaphor of church growth, which is that each member must ‘**drink like a baby**.’ And we see this in **verses 2-3**: “*Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good*.”
   1. So, what is this metaphor all about? Well, we recently became grandparents to two more lovely grandchildren. And there are many mothers among us, and we have all seen **newborn infants**. And we know that they can’t really do anything as newborns. They can’t walk or talk or sit-up. Their arms and legs don’t seem to be controlled; they just seem to sort of flap about. But there is one thing that newborn infants can do, very well, the moment they are born, which is to suck. They know they need milk, and they are hungry for it, pretty much all the time! Right?! And that is how it is to be with each believer; we are to thirst for what Peter calls “*pure spiritual milk*,” “*like newborn infants*.”
   2. And what is the “*pure spiritual milk*” that we are to long for like newborn infants? Well, the New American Bible version makes this explicit; it translates this phrase as “*the pure milk of the word*.” So, it is **the Bible** that is in view with this expression.
      1. And this is plain from the **context**. Back in **verse 23**, Peter described believers as being born again, which connects with the metaphor of being ‘newborns,’ and said that we are born again “*by the living and abiding word of God*.”
      2. So, putting it simply, “*pure spiritual milk*” is the reading and preaching and teaching and hearing of the Bible – in other words, Bible intake.
   3. Now, some of you might remember that in **Hebrews 5** the author rebukes his readers for being like children who needed milk when they should be teachers who ate solid food. And by milk he meant the basic principles of Scripture and by solid food he meant more complex doctrine. So, children and milk in Hebrews suggests immaturity. But that is not the case here in 1 Peter. Peter is not contrasting *new* Christians and *mature* Christians. He is calling *all* Christians to be “*like newborn infants*” who “*long for pure spiritual milk*” – Bible intake.
   4. Now, if you know your New Testament, you will know that when you get a list of ‘do not do these sins’ in the Epistles, it is usually followed by a list of ‘do these good things.’ Right? But not here in 1 Peter 2. He will get into specific good attitudes and behaviours later in the letter, but it is significant that **Peter’s first ‘do this’ word about church growth has to do with what we are calling Bible** **intake**. And this has implications for us:
      1. First, if I were to ask you what the Bible is all about, I hope that your answer would be God or the Lord Jesus Christ. For, before anything else, that is what the Bible is: The revelation of God. It is the book God gave us that we might know Him!
         1. We see this in **verse 4**, which continues the point of our text: We read, “*As you come to Him*.” God gave us the Bible that we might enter into relationship with the living Christ.
         2. We see this idea also in **verse 3** of our text, where Peter says, “*If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good*.” This is a reference to **Psalm 34:8**, which says, “*O taste and see that the Lord is good*.” To become a Christian is to come to understand and experience that God is good! So, by faith in Christ, you are no longer a hostile enemy of God but a friend of God, a child of God, a lover of God.
         3. And this happens by Bible intake.
         4. So, before you come to church on Sundays, and when we do the silent prayer at the start of the service, and before Bible study, and before you read your Bible at home, pray, Lord, help me to taste and see that you are good. Help me to know you better as my Triune God in this reading, sermon, or study. And I can assure you that that is a prayer that the Holy Spirit loves to answer!
      2. But notice also from **verse 3** that it is by Bible intake that we “*grow up into salvation*.” You see, the more that you understand and experience the goodness of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, from His word, the more you will want to be holy as God is holy, or, to put it another way, to think and talk and behave like Jesus thought and talked and behaved.
         1. **Romans 8:29** explains that the purpose of God’s election is that the Lord Jesus would be “*the firstborn among many brothers*.” So, at the end of time, the Father wants to present His beloved Son with a vast multitude of human beings who think and talk and behave just like Him. And He begins the process of making us more and more like Jesus here on earth. And He does this by the reading and preaching and teaching and hearing of the Bible. This is what the Holy Spirit uses to change the way we think and talk and behave.
         2. And this is why the public reading and preaching and teaching and hearing of the Bible must be the centrepiece of church growth strategy. And then we supplement this with our private reading of the Bible.
         3. You see, if you have a congregation of people who are hungry for preaching and teaching and who read their Bibles at home, for all the reasons we have explored, then the church will grow – in holiness, maturity, and in numbers.

The other day my daughter sent Mrs H and myself a photo of our grandson. The caption below the photo said, ‘A wee bit milk drunk.’ Little Vaughan had just finished a feed and he was full, and he looked perfectly peaceful and content and ready to drift off to sleep. Well, I hope that each one of you are a little milk drunk right now! But not so that you will drift off to sleep, mind you, but that instead you are eager to put away the sorts of love-spoiling sins listed here, and to rediscover a passion for preaching and Bible study and Bible reading, and that you will share with others the goodness of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ!

For this, congregation, is God’s strategy for church growth. May He bless His word to each one of us. Amen.