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# Prayer for a New Year

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Sunday Sermon Jan 6, 2012

Scripture Passage Ephesians 3:14-21

Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



This is the time of year when people make what we call—New Years Resolutions. **What is the most common resolution people make at this time?**

Well, the sad truth is, new years resolutions don't seem to last very long. We can and must do better.

One word that belongs uniquely to the Christian faith and vocabulary is the word **doxology**. It literally means, a word of glory. It is a burst of praise to God.

In the middle of a great letter about God being at work in the church and accomplishing all he would do through the church. There is a sudden doxology, a burst of praise to God. Paul is only halfway through his letter, but he stops to give this burst of praise.

You find it in Ephesians 3:20-21.

**20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,**

**21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen**

Paul is giving us a daring prayer in this doxology. He says that no matter what he asks in prayer, God can do even more than that. In fact in these verses he creates new words to try to describe what he really means.

Then he says, even when he thinks in the realm of the imagination God can do even more than he can imagine!

The place where he sees these daring prayers being fulfilled and coming to pass is in the church. The Christian church is to be the place that gives glory to God. God's primary place to see his work done is in and through the church. When the church operates as God intended it so, then the church is the place which gives glory to God.

God calls us into the church, to be the church. His desire is for us to experience the community of the cross. Biblical Christianity is not individualistic. It is communal. It is so much more than just Jesus and me! We are to experience it together, share it together. We have to come to the cross alone, but when we get there we are not alone, we find ourselves in the fellowship of the church.

But what is it that prompts Paul to explode with this burst of praise? What stimulates this doxology?

You find the cause and the reason for this outburst of praise in Ephesians 3:14-19.

**14 For this reason I kneel before the Father,**

**15 from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.**

**16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,**

**17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,**

**18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,**

**19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**

We need to enter into the heart of this great prayer. Imagine as we read it and study it. As Paul says, we are on our knees.

The prayer has three great desires, three movements. We must personalize them for ourselves.

**Our Prayer for 2013 is that VCBC would train people to be spiritually strong, to develop people with spiritual stamina.**

**16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,**

**17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.**

Whether we like it or not, Christendom is dead. I do not mean Christianity, but Christendom. Christendom is that environment in which the church had a favored status, and was given a place of privilege and advantage. For a good part of this past century, churches and pastors were given a position of privilege in most communities, and were held in respect. But by the early 1970's Christendom in Canada was pronounced dead.

Today the great majority of the churches in Canada are under 100 people, and many of those are stagnant. The only growth they experience if any at all is generational, as children grow up in the church. Even that is declining, as young people do not necessarily embrace the faith of their parents as they once did.

Sociologists tell us that with the demise of Christendom, this 21st century, unlike any

other, will be most like the 1st century. In those first 100 years, the church had to survive and prevail in a culture that did not accept it.

The church had no rights, no privileges, no status. If anything, it had everything going against it, and almost nothing going for it. Yet it did more than survive, it prevailed. The gates of hell beat against it and it did not fall.

We all know that earthquakes are deadly. Their destruction takes just a few seconds, but what we will face is something just as deadly. It is the silent work of erosion, a silent moral and spiritual erosion that has been going on for many years. It has eaten away the moral fiber of Canada.

Today we face such spiritual erosion caused by :

1. A moral vacuum in society; a recent article said that in the absence of personal values, television is defining the moral values and standards for many young people. Think about that, what you see on television, today's sitcoms and reality shows, are defining sexual values of our teenagers – that's scary!
2. Rising consumerism. This Sunday in Vancouver, more people will go through the doors of places like IKEA, Costco and Home Depot than through the doors of all the churches in Vancouver. Many people have so much to live with and yet so little to live for.
3. There are the challenges both of religious pluralism. We are no longer the only religious show in town.
4. The quicksand of moral relativism.

5. For many, there is the struggle of addictive lifestyles: alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography.

In the face of these challenges, it will be vital in 2013 and the years to come that we develop our spiritual stamina and strengthen our spiritual muscles. We can no longer assume that those who become Christians will know what it means to follow Jesus and to live like Christians. More than even we will have to train Christians to live like Christians.

Paul to Timothy, 1 Tim 4:7: Train yourself to be godly.

This will involve – 4 ideas

1. Training people to understand and experience the new life that they have within them. This includes the indwelling presence of the Spirit, the truth that Christ now dwells in them.
2. It will involve training people how to read and study the Bible with the same skill they would get if they went to seminary. Every Christian is called to be a theologian, someone who can handle the Word of God.
3. It will involve training Christians and especially our young adults how to recognize the strategies of the devil and how to confront evil, how to resist the devil and stand strong.
4. It will involve training in what it means to be married and have a Christian house and family. 2 Christians getting married does not automatically create a Christian marriage.

In 2013 and beyond, we need to be a church that is known for its spiritual stamina.

As we see God doing that, we will be unembarrassed to declare.

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20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,

21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

**Our Prayer for 2013 is that everything we do at VCBC would be driven by love.**

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,

18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,

19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--

There are perhaps 4 main reasons that motivate people to do things.

1. **Fear.** They are afraid of what will happen to them if they don't do something. There are times that a little fear might actually be healthy!
2. **Guilt.** They are motivated by guilt. They know that they will feel bad if they don't follow through. Someone may think less of them and they don't want that, so grudgingly they say, I guess I'll do it. Some people are experts are using guilt on people.
3. **Duty.** A lot of what we do is motivated by duty. We are expected to do certain things. We have agreed to them. Duty is not always wrong, but it tends not to work permanently.

These reasons may all work to a certain extent. Some of them work to a greater extent in certain personalities. Some people

respond to fear, others to guilt, others to duty. But as soon as this stimulus or reason is removed, it is very easy to slip back into a state of being passive and apathetic. So we ask, why should we bother anymore?

4. **Love.** In Christianity, the highest and the deepest motive is always found in love. It is not something we just do or discover by ourselves. The power of love is to be experienced with all the saints. In other words, we discover love and we practice love in the church.

Remember this doxology comes in the letter to the Ephesians, a church that is said to have been founded and motivated by love. But we need to fast forward ahead some years and see what happened to this church.

Revelation 2:1-7 gives us a insight into this church some years ahead. Chapter 2:2-3 says:

"I know your deeds your hard work and your perseverance, I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men that you have tested those who claimed to be apostles but are not, and found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships in my name and you have no grown weary.

This sounds like a great church to belong to. When you join, they have got programs for you to be involved in. They take you through a class to discover your spiritual gifts. They get you working. The atmosphere of the church just oozes commitment. The lights are on 7 days a week at this church. People are busy, The church is active.

They can smell heresy a mile away. You are not going to pull the wool over their eyes. You almost want to pastor this kind of church!

Then John says as he records the words of Jesus who can see into the heart of the church, what it is really like because Jesus has x-ray vision. He says, have this against you, you have forsaken your first love. So Jesus calls them to repent.

In other words, behind all this busyness, behind all the activity, there is an absence of love. The first love is gone. What is this first love?

3 Circles that intersect and overlap.

1. First love, a love for God.

Remember the first commandment from Jesus, to love the lord our God.

2. We are also commanded to love one another. Jesus says this is how the world will know that we are true Christians. John says we will know, be assured that we have passed from death to life because we love another.

3. We are called to love the people and our world.

Someone said "duty makes us do things well – love makes us do things beautifully."

The warning to us is that we can get the church busy with all kinds of activity, classes for this and that, programs for everything, but if it is not driven and motivated by love, Jesus will stand in the middle of VCBC and say to us as he said to the church in Ephesus – Repent!

How do we get there to the motivation of love? How does love come to us in this way?

Jesus teaches us that we do not, in fact we cannot create love on our own. We cannot manufacture it within us. Rather first we have to receive it and then as we receive it, so we pass it on, we give it away.

## John 15

As the Father has loved me – so I love you.

As I have loved you – love one another.

**Our prayer for 2013 is that VCBC will be a church that is filled with the presence of God.**

... that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

People today are spiritually hungry, but also spiritually lost, that makes that vulnerable to all kinds of seductive voices. In ways that they do not even know or understand, they are looking for God. They want to sense His presence.

I pray in 2013 for such a sense of God's presence and power to be here when we gather for worship. I have started to imagine what it would be like to gather with such holy expectancy that we can hardly wait for worship to begin. The call to worship is like the opening note that starts our praise, and the fullness of God is present. We are never late for hockey games, concerts, movies but church....

Whatever I am asking for, whatever I can imagine, God can do more.

The French general Napoleon said, Imagination rules the world. Imagination is the power of an idea that lifts us beyond the ordinary, which refuses to believe what cannot be done and instead commits itself to what must be done.

So what can you begin to imagine?

Can you imagine the passion that would pulse through a church in which its pastors and people are utterly sold out to the cause of Christ?

Can you imagine the potential in a church in which people know the gifts that God has given to them and bring them joyfully in service, where everyone is needed?

Can you imagine the unity in a church in which there are rich and poor, people from the west and the east, young and old, those well-dressed and those not so well-dressed, those with university degrees and those who never made it through high school, Chinese and non-Chinese, but when they sit down at communion, and when they pass bread and wine from hand to hand, they know that they are the church. They are one as the body of Christ. They come together where the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Can you imagine the spirit of loving warmth and devotion in a church in which people treat one another with the same grace and love that we believe God extends toward us and we live in an environment of love and grace with one another.

Can you imagine the excitement a church that believes that lost people matter to God and it become normative to see people daily being saved and coming into the church, being baptized, following Jesus?

You see, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, like the local church when it is working right. Its beauty is indescribable; its power is breathtaking; its potential unlimited; it can comfort the grieving and can heal the broken-hearted. It provides the love of God to those in need. It can open its arms to welcome people and lift up the tired and the weary. It speaks the word of Jesus that can set people free of addiction;

In the word and power of the gospel, the church has the hope of the world. It alone has the message that can change the eternal address of people. When the church is

faithfully and strategically fulfilling its Biblical mandate of the message of the Cross in the power of the Spirit, no other group of people in the world is able to make such a significant impact on humanity.

When I stand on my tiptoes, I can imagine all these things being a reality here at VCBC, and then God says that he can answer beyond what we will ask and even beyond what we can imagine.

This means that we lay aside any thought of merely doing what is status quo. 2013 is not a year for business as usual because whatever we ask in prayer, God can and wants to do more, whatever we imagine, God can do even more than that. Our city and our world is changing rapidly, and the church must retool itself to meet these changing times.

The seven last words of the church are: we've never done it this way before! There are programs and ideas that we have not yet thought of that are already in the imagination of God. We need to listen to his mind. We will need to think outside our own small box, and get into the bigger box that God works in.

I believe we are fast turning the corner into a strategic and critical time in our culture. Maintaining the status quo will simply leave us behind.

A personal thought as I close.

As we celebrated New Year just a few days ago, I realized that I am actually getting way past retirement age. This is the time when many people are starting to think about slowing down and moving into retirement mode. Can I tell you that I am not. When I started ministry 44 years ago, as a hockey player would say, I had young legs. My legs are no longer as young as they once were, but my heart and my mind are more committed than ever!

I have asked and wanted only one thing of the Lord. Actually 2 things.

1. I would be a faithful husband and love one person for all my life. I enjoy just being with Harriet more than anything else in the world.
2. That I would be the faithful pastor of an extraordinary church. I am asking the Lord that I would be faithful and that we would be an extraordinary church for His glory.

So as we step into this year, God says that he will grant us more than we pray and He will accomplish more than we can imagine.

Would you begin to pray deeply me with the other pastors, with the Council and commissions. Pray for EC leadership team, deacons, pray for God to bring a new Lead Pastor to us. And as we see that starting to take place. And we will say.

**Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.**