



GOSPEL GROWTH IN 2022

BY KELSEY JURKOVICH

VOL. 52 | NO. 1
A CMC PUBLICATION

Talking about New Year's resolutions is popular at this time of year; so, I figured I would take a stab at it. Each new year many people create goals (resolutions) regarding how they are going to live life differently. Nearly all these goals are made with the aim of self-improvement. Resolutions are approached as matters of self-discipline and will power: "If I am just strong enough to not pick up that candy bar," or "If I can just muster the strength to get on that treadmill." There is something to be said for self-discipline and will power in our efforts to change, but the reason many resolutions fail is because we think change is only about what we can do, in and of ourselves.

We must begin by acknowledging that we do not have the power, in and of ourselves, to change in the ways Christ is calling us to.

This self-discipline/will power mentality is often the way we approach our striving for sanctification in our Christian journey. "If I can just muster the strength to get on the treadmill" easily becomes "If I can just muster the strength to pick up my Bible," etc. Our failure in keeping our resolutions and our failure in spiritual growth have the same core problem—a failure to recognize where the power to change comes from. As long as I am looking within (the purely self-discipline/will power approach) my efforts for true change will always fail. It seems counterintuitive, but this is the paradox that forms the foundation of Christian growth—in order to change, you must look outside of yourself for the power to do so.

Paul expresses this paradox in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "... 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (ESV).


Power...in...weakness. This is the paradox that lies at the core of

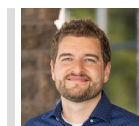
true growth and change in the Christian life. What this principle acknowledges is that Christ must be the driving force of our growth as Christians. The self-discipline/will power approach cuts Christ out of our striving for change because it convinces us that we have the resources in ourselves to effect the change desired. This mentality may sound good and make us feel good about ourselves, but it is deeply unbiblical. In order for our growth in Christ to flourish, we must begin by acknowledging that we do not have the power, in and of ourselves, to change in the ways Christ is calling us to.

Perhaps Author Dane Ortlund says it best in his book *Deeper*, "Christian growth is, among other things, growth in sensing just how impoverished and powerless we are in our own strength—that is, just how hollow and futile our efforts to grow spiritually are on our own steam."

Gospel growth is growth that is rooted in our inadequacy and in Christ's sufficiency. Listen to the words of Paul again, "...*My grace is sufficient for you...*" The grace of Christ that began our journey as Christians is the same grace that propels us into deeper likeness to Christ. But this grace is only accessible to those who know they need it—for those who acknowledge their weakness.

Do not approach your spiritual growth in 2022 the way most approach their personal resolutions—if you do, your growth will last about as long as their resolutions do! Instead, believe that Christ's grace is sufficient for your growth in 2022 and beyond, and daily cast yourself on him.

The journey of growth in Christ is walked not on the path of self-discipline and will power, but on the path of humble reliance. 



Kelsey is associate pastor of Fairlawn Mennonite Church in Apple Creek, Ohio. He and his wife Abbie have three sons.



A New Day

BY BRIAN HERSHBERGER



I love watching children open presents. Their personalities come out. Some of them rip into their presents, wrapping paper and cardboard flying everywhere, and when it's all over they are sitting in the middle of a pile of paper, boxes, and gifts with a big smile on their faces. Other children open them slowly, carefully, and methodically, and when it's all over their gifts are stacked neatly beside them and all the wrapping paper and empty boxes have already been put in the garbage. Okay, so maybe that's a slight exaggeration. I don't know that I've ever seen a child quite that precise and methodical when it comes to opening presents. But some are certainly more that way than others. No matter what their personalities though, the one thing children have in common is their anticipation of the moment. Children love to open presents! They love the mystery of wondering what they are getting, and then the rush of excitement as they get to uncover the mystery and see what's inside.

God set the universe up so we receive the gift of a new day every 24 hours.

Most adults seem to lose that sense of anticipation and wonder. Perhaps, because we've gotten enough gifts over the years that were less than exciting, we've become conditioned to believe that this gift is not going to be all that great. Perhaps it's because we spell out so specifically to our loved ones what we want them to get for us that it is absolutely no mystery to us when the gift is actually placed in front of us. I didn't even bother trying to act surprised when I opened my gifts this year and discovered the very things that I had added to my wish list on the Elfster app that our family uses. Or perhaps it's because many of us have the means to go out and purchase what we really want – we don't have to wait until Christmas and hope that we might receive it as a gift.

It's January and we've been presented with the gift of a new year. I appreciate these built in opportunities for a clean slate and a fresh start; a new year, a new month, even a new day. God set the universe up so we receive the gift of a new day every 24 hours. There's an old saying, no one knows for sure where it came from, but versions of it have been quoted by

poets, authors, musicians, a president's wife, and even Oogway, the tortoise in *Kungfu Panda*. The saying goes, "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present." This is a cute play on words, but it speaks to the necessity of embracing each new day as a gift. Today is a gift from God! How do we open the gift of each new day that God gives us? Is it with a sense of anticipation and wonder like that of a child? Or have we experienced so many uneventful, unexciting, maybe even painful days that we don't really expect anything good out of this new day that God has given us, so we "open" it as a jaded adult rather than an excited child. There are many reasons that can happen. Unfortunately, the attitude with which we go into a new day often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I wonder if this is one of those instances where Jesus would encourage us to become like little children.

If you are a pastor or a church leader who has experienced the trauma of days and days on end of COVID frustration and divisiveness in your church, maybe you've stopped looking forward to each new day. I can certainly understand that. I pray that 2022 can be a year of healing and restoration of hope. As we embark on a new year, I'd like to challenge you to open the gift of each new day with the same sense of anticipation and wonder that children display when they open their Christmas gifts. Who knows what great things God might have in store for us today?! Rather than burning all our strength and energy on worrying about what happened yesterday or worrying about what might or might not happen tomorrow, let's savor the gift of today. 🍷



Brian serves as executive director of CMC. He and his wife, Sharla, live in Marysville, Ohio, and are involved in community outreach and worship ministry at Lighthouse Fellowship.



BY PHIL WEBER

“Mistakes Were Made” (Part 1)

How Do We Get the Bible Right?

Mistakes are costly! Sometimes the costs are mild—an extra trip to the store or a follow-up text to correct a phone’s autocorrect feature. Sometimes the costs are high, including damage or death as our highways graphically illustrate. I hate making mistakes. I hate being mistaken. But somewhere between being paralyzed by a fear of making mistakes and being careless about costly errors, there is a fruitful approach. This is true of life in general, but also of biblical interpretation.

In biblical interpretation, we strive to find a fruitful approach between fear of getting things wrong and careless interpretation. Truth is, we fail to hear God’s Word whether we fail to read it, or fail to understand what we have read. Being willing to learn from our mistakes is an important way to limit the damage that our misreading of God’s Word can create.

To misrepresent the meaning of God’s Word is a costly mistake. History provides many sobering examples of how misinterpretation of Scripture has harmed the work of God, bringing devastation to faith and witness. When we don’t listen to or read God’s Word with sufficient humility to hear his message rather than the one we think he ought to have said, we don’t honor the Speaker! This is a mistake.

Here are two mistakes to avoid. The first is a general approach issue, and the second is a notorious historical circumstance often brought up against the church. First, some Christians claim that interpreting the Bible shouldn’t even be attempted. They say one must choose between “taking it literally” and “interpreting it.” But to say we are *taking it literally* means an interpretive choice has already been made. This approach seeks to bind the reader to a single way of approaching God’s Word without acknowledging that it comes to us through historical accounts, poetry, prophecy, parable, proverb, and psalm. Not seeing this variety in the ways that God communicates to us is a mistake bound to make us misread God’s Word.

Figurative expressions are a ubiquitous element of human speech. The ability to decode the figurative aspects of spoken or written speech is basic to communicative competence. Remember Amelia Bedelia, the character in the kids’ story who took everything absolutely literally? When she heard, “Daddy is tied up in the office,” she imagined a rope!

If we want to hear God’s message, we need to understand that the plain meaning of a passage or an expression is not always

the most literalistic interpretation possible. It might not even be what we think it is at first glance.

Second, in the 17th and 18th centuries, observations through a telescope generated mounting evidence that the earth revolved around the sun (heliocentrism) rather than that the sun revolved around the earth (geocentrism).

The Catholic Church declared Galileo a heretic for affirming heliocentrism, and some of the Protestant Reformers also objected that the theory was contrary to scripture. This response of the church to new research about the universe has been used by many since to push the idea that one cannot be at the same time a reliable scientist and a believer in Scripture.

Passages such as Psalm 104:5 sound geocentric. God “set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved” (ESV). Ecclesiastes 1:5 speaks of the sun’s cyclicity, “The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.”

Even some of the churchmen/astronomers who judged Galileo agreed that heliocentrism was a better explanation than geocentrism for what they were seeing in the sky. But because they felt restricted by their reading of Scripture, they could not agree that the earth *actually* moved around the sun.

What can we learn from this history? Today most Christians feel no crisis of faith when they acknowledge that it both *appears* and *is true* that the earth moves around the sun. The consensus is that those verses in Psalms and Ecclesiastes had been misread by the church. Are there issues today where we feel compelled to deny what appears to be true because we have been misreading the Bible?

The stakes are high, and we remain mistake-prone. Yet God chose to reveal his Word in human languages. It’s a task God’s people have been working at for centuries, variously succeeding and failing.

I hope this “Mistakes Were Made” series introduced here helps us learn from our mistakes and grow in sincerity and humility. 🙏



Phil has served as academic dean at RBC since 2008. He also teaches church history and a variety of biblical courses including Romans. He and his wife Twila have three children, four grandchildren, and two foster grandchildren.