

Education, Not Spiritual Experiences, Lead to Full Maturity in Christ

Bishop Chip Edgar Preaches at 2026 Diocesan Convention

The following is a transcript of the sermon given by Bishop Chip Edgar during the service of Holy Eucharist at Holy Trinity Church in Myrtle Beach, SC on March 13 which began our 2026 Diocesan Convention. It has been edited for readability.

It's a joy to be together as the Anglican Diocese of South Carolina. What an array of clergy vested up and looking good. What a joy it is to have all our lay folks with us, as well. This is a great moment, and I'm so grateful. Chance (*Perdue, the rector*), and all the folks at Trinity here in Myrtle Beach, thank you so much. You've gone above and beyond. You've done a lot of work to make this happen. We're so grateful. Thank you for hosting us.

Let me tell you about a young woman. I can't imagine you'd know her, but just in case, I want to give her another name, but for It's a small world, you might know her. We're going to call her "Brigitte."

Brigitte grew up in a small town in Texas, at a very large — the name doesn't work, does it? For small, well anyway, Brigitte grew up in a large church in a small town in Texas. She was a talented musician, and by the time she was in high school, she was helping lead worship in her church. By the time she was in her early 20s, her college years, she was leading worship at youth conferences around Texas. Looking back, she said of her teenage faith that it was intensely experiential.

Her church emphasized things like "feeling God's presence" and "powerful worship experiences," the spiritual highs that came when you went to camps and conferences and things like that.

But one day she had a somewhat unsettling realization, and that was that the feelings she had always interpreted as "God showing up," she could manufacture if she used music and lighting and crowd energy right. And then during a difficult season of her life, She discovered that she didn't really have an intellectual foundation that undergirded her faith.

She said, looking back, "I realized my faith had been built almost entirely on experiences, and when the experiences stopped, the structure collapsed." These days, she says of herself that

she's not hostile to Christianity, but she would describe herself as “spiritually open” but not really a Christian.

Or how about another person? We'll call him Friedrich. The Sound of Music is letting me down.

Friedrich was raised overseas by evangelical missionary parents, and as a child, his faith was strong and sincere. But he came to the States to go to college, and in the States, he encountered a kind of Christianity that he had not experienced in the church in which he grew up. He encountered a Christianity that he thought had been politically hijacked in a way that really deeply troubled him. He met people who spoke passionately about biblical values, but who often in their everyday engagement with other people displayed anger and cruelty, sometimes even racism in political discussions. He said, “the Christianity that I saw in America looked nothing like the Jesus I grew up learning about from my parents and our church.”

And so, for Friedrich, his deconstruction didn't begin in intellectual doubt, it began in moral disillusionment. He didn't reject Jesus outright, but he did reject the church. Now he says, I still follow Jesus, but outside of organized religion.

Now, brothers and sisters, those are just two fairly classic stories of the kind you've probably heard around us for the last 10 years—stories of young people deconstructing their faith because somewhere along the line what they had known as the faith didn't measure up to the challenges life was bringing at them.

It's worth noting that these kids typically are the generational result of churches that turned away from taking the teaching ministry of the church seriously—Churches that moved away from biblically sound and theologically undergirding all of their sermons and education and substituting powerful spiritual experiences as the goal.

In Colossians 1, which we read as our epistle this evening, Paul calls us to something far deeper than that. Amazingly, he holds out for us the possibility that a Christian can come to what he calls full maturity in Christ.

But notice that such maturity is formed through teaching, through doctrine, not spiritual experience. Listen carefully to how Paul describes his ministry. He says, him, that is, Jesus, him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Early in my ministry years, I was blessed to work for a remarkable priest who was one of the best preachers I'd ever heard. And he used to always say, when he was helping the clergy that

worked for him work on their preaching skills, “look for the verbs.” Look for the verbs. And if you look there in this section of Colossians, you'll notice that Paul does not say anything about creating powerful worship environments. Or generating moving experiences.

He says, we proclaim, we warn, we teach.

Why does he do those things? Because he knows that's how people become mature in Christ. Paul assumes something very important. He assumes that spiritual maturity grows out of understanding the truth about Jesus. Earlier in the passage, he calls the gospel the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

So Paul's understanding is that Christianity is a thing which is revealed, which is therefore something which must be learned, and in order to be learned, it must be taught.

It's built on the revealed truth about who Jesus Christ really is. And Paul believed that when truth is proclaimed and taught and understood, something really powerful can happen.

People can grow, people can change, people can mature and become fully mature in Christ Jesus, not because they had a great moment, but because their minds have been shaped by the truth of Jesus.

Paul, of course, is simply working out Jesus' own teaching. In Matthew's Gospel, which we read, asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Jesus included your mind as a necessary part of your maturity in Christ Jesus.

Love, as Jesus defines it here in the question about the Great Commandment—love is not merely a mode of experience. It's not even just a volitional act. It includes them, of course. But to love God fully requires the engagement of the mind, because love is the proper response to who God truly is. And you cannot love what you don't know.

Not that we can ever have exhaustive knowledge about God. God is infinite. We could say, “I have come to learn 10 true things about God.” But that leaves an infinite amount about God that we don't know. But as we grow in maturity, we could say, “I've come to know 100 true things about God.” Well, that's better than 10, but God's infinity still vastly outweighs it. We could say, “We've grown to know 1,000 true things about God,” but still we are so overwhelmed by the goodness of God. And yet those things that we come to know truly are what help shape us so that we can live faithfully.

You see, all throughout Scripture, devotion and doctrine and moral life are connected. Truth shapes love, and love flows out of truth. Now, it's likely that all of us have heard Ashley Noll's excellent and spot-on summary of Thomas Cranmer's view of the human person, where he writes, Cranmer's idea was that, "What the heart desires the mind justifies and the will pursues."

You see, Cranmer understood that human beings aren't primarily rational creatures who calmly analyze the world and then decide how they're going to act and behave in it.

Cranmer knew that our deepest loves and our desires are what shapes our thinking. But my point here is that this reality that Ashley Noll has turned our attention to explains exactly why experientially based Christianity is so fragile and can be so ineffective.

And also, it's worth noting that dry intellectualism, which I am not promoting here, also fails. But the point he's making is, if the heart drives everything, then the heart must be trained to seek that which it should desire most of all. And if the heart is trained to know, then the mind will begin to justify the faith as it grows and develops.

But if you only have emotions, when feelings fade, the mind can just as easily justify abandoning the faith. So even though Cranmer understands the heart as the driving engine of the human, his solution to the problem is not less teaching or less doctrine. And I think this is where his true genius appears. He knew that the church must be involved in reordering the heart's desires through truth-saturated teaching that manifests in true worship.

Years ago, one of my associates, when I was working in Columbia, South Carolina, was a professor at Columbia International University. Columbia International University, may they be blessed forever. It's not an Anglican institution. And they were very suspicious of people in collars and vestments and things like that. And so there came this day when they said—his name is Hule Goddard, you've met him, we had him at our clergy retreat—they asked him if he might take a chapel service to sort of put everyone at ease and explain to everyone this crazy turn that he had taken moving into Anglicanism and vestments and all that sort of stuff. And so as he was doing that, somebody asked him, why he found dead liturgy so helpful to him.

His answer was, "Brothers and sisters, your categories are wrong. Liturgies are not dead or alive. Humans are dead or alive." And he said, "My experience is if you have an alive-in-Jesus-Christ human with a truly truth-saturated liturgy, you have something incredibly powerful with the capacity to form people into the image of God."

In Cranmer's liturgy, over and over again, the worshiper encounters the truth of God's mercy in Christ Jesus. And over time, as we worship again and again and again and rehearse that same

truth over and over again, the truth of the gospel, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that he sacrificed himself so that we might be made new. As that happens, our hearts are subtly guided towards loving the things they should love. But that process begins in knowing maybe not exhaustively, but truly who God is. And that's why as human beings we're so tempted to believe just what we want to believe.

That's why the church's task is not simply to create powerful experiences. The church's task is to call people to be immersed in the truth of the gospel until the heart begins to desire God rightly, the mind recognizes what is really true, and our lives follow in faithful obedience.

Last year at our convention, I laid out three priorities for our diocese. I said I wanted our church to be strong in Christian education. I said that I wanted us to work together to strengthen all of our congregations, strengthening those congregations which are weak, and planting congregations where there aren't any. That I wanted us to have the desire for all of our congregations, not just our own, to be strong and able to meet the needs of their community. And then finally, the third thing, a commitment to prayer book worship and formation.

And I want us to see, as the next few years unfold together, that those commitments—a commitment to Christian education, a commitment to the strength and the health of all of our congregations, and a commitment to prayer book worship — all work together towards the end of what Paul holds out in Colossians chapter 1, that we can present to God through our ministry of teaching and exhorting and warning Christians who are fully mature in Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.