

Painting and repainting

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I looked at the front of my house and saw some peeling paint. I looked again and saw more peeling paint. This did not make me happy. Just four years ago I painted the house. I know that proper preparation is critical for painting success. I spent days, no, more like weeks, on prep. I power washed. I hand scraped the entire house. Up and down the ladder. I scraped most of the south side of the house down to bare wood. Then I bought good paint, expensive paint. Paint that was supposed to last 25 years. I didn't really expect 25 years but I was expecting more than four.

So last week I washed the front of my house and started removing the peeling paint. It came off in pieces as big as my hand, down to bare wood in about 20 places along the front of the house. When I looked at the pieces they were made up of both the new paint and the old paint. I figured I must not have prepped and painted as well as I thought I had. That's what you hear about painting: poor prep=poor results. Just because I just think like this, I also thought there is a metaphor in all this about our spiritual lives.

We do what we think we are supposed to do, as well as we can and still the paint peels. Growth in faith isn't a one-time process. You can't spend one summer working diligently on your spiritual life—scraping, washing, painting—and expect it to last 25 years. So with a philosophical sigh I began rewashing, rescraping, repainting, and thinking about spiritual formation as a never ending process.

Hoping to figure out my mistake I googled “peeling paint.” I discovered that my current problem was most likely due to my using really good latex paint. The new paint bonded to the old paint (like it should) and expanded and contracted with the weather (like it should). But the new paint ended up pulling the old less flexible paint off the house. As you might imagine I was annoyed. I spent significantly extra money to avoid problems and ended up with other problems. The only way to avoid this, according to the painting sites, is to scrape the entire house to bare wood. And painters on the sites confessed that this is seldom done—too difficult and too expensive. They implied that perhaps a paint of lesser quality wouldn't cause this

problem—or at least as much of a problem. Now that’s sort of depressing. Every few years I’ll have the opportunity to repaint parts of my house. Short of vinyl siding, I’ll never be done.

I don’t like this new information as metaphor for spiritual growth, but there it is. No matter how hard I try, how attentive to the details I am, how meticulous I am, how carefully I prepare, things will still peel and crack. I will still need to wash, scrape, and repaint from time to time.

I knew that. I know that spiritual formation, like painting, is never done. But I must confess, I was sort of hoping I could, at some point, take a break and enjoy the fruits of my labor.

Of course I still can enjoy the fruits of my work, just not for as long as I had hoped.

The front is repainted and it looks good. I am happy about how the house looks every time I pull into the drive. And I think, “I did that. I painted my house.” And next week, I start working my way around the rest of the house.

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