

# Christian Spiritual Maturity

Rev. Paul Nulton

Just as there are developmental stages of the body and mind, there are developmental stages of the spirit.

We go through increasing grades of school education as we get older. For most of us, our brains can handle more conceptual thought as we get older. We don't need to keep learning 2 plus 2 equals 4 over again every year. We build on the basics to go on to the increasing complex applications of higher math, algebra, calculus, etc. The same is true for applying the basics of God in Christ to more complex questions of faith and practice.

Not every student goes on to high school, college or technical training, graduate studies. But the opportunities are there for those who can learn more, and who want and can afford more complex education. The same is true for church. Some churches provide just the basics over and over, but some churches are called to provide tools for applying more complex faith. The opportunities are there for those who can learn, who want and can afford it.

We don't forget the fundamentals. Pro football players know if they concentrate only on the complex parts of the game and pay no attention to the fundamentals, they lose. They have to know and do both well to win at their level. So must Christians.

## **My Definition**

Spiritual maturity is moving beyond accepting Christ for what I can get; escape from hell, healings. It is moving in a loving relationship where I can give as well as get. There are not just two places in relation to God: the saved and the unsaved, milk Christians and solid food Christians, the immature and the mature. Instead, Christian faith is a journey with many steps into deeper places in the relationship. Maturity is moving further into the heart of Christ.

## **Descriptions**

Simple Christians seek one right and simple answer to questions of faith. For example, salvation means one thing. More mature Christians know there is a whole lot more than one meaning of salvation in the whole Bible.

Christians who are going deeper in faith develop social as well as personal faith. It is not only me and Jesus, but us and Jesus. It is not just Jesus talking to me but Jesus talking through others to me. I honor Christ not by personal morality only, but by helping Christ move the world toward His Kingdom. Salvation is for us as well as me. Faith becomes Trinitarian, like God. Faith is "we" as well as "I".

New Christians want to know what to believe and why. All Christians seek to understand in order to love God more. But Christians who are going deeper in faith can leave as mystery what God leaves as mystery: characteristics of heaven, return of Christ, body and blood in communion, etc. They don't see their questions as weakness or doubt, but as doors to a deeper

level of faith. Room for mystery means we don't have to understand something to believe it. It can be true even if it doesn't yet make sense.

Christians who are going deeper in faith leave as paradox what God leaves as paradox: immanence/transcendence of God, deity/humanity of Christ, etc. They have given up the need for simple answers to complex questions.

Christians who are going deeper in faith desire to use all their assets as tools for Christ's love: physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual.

Christians who are going deeper in faith sense the gifts of the spirit growing in themselves and others: honesty, compassion, sacrifice, Paul's lists, etc.

Christians who are going deeper in faith desire to include it in heart (feelings), head (intellect), and hand (action).

Christians who are going deeper in faith are confident in belief, and still can respect those who believe otherwise by learning and cooperating with them. They have gotten past the notion that others will receive and express God's love in the same way as themselves if those others are mature.

New Christians can get sidetracked into looking for the Bible verses and the kind of God who vindicates their worldview. Christians who are going deeper desire to go where God is going, not try to get God to go where they want to go.

New Christians need to feel the blessings of God and can get the notion that the purpose of God is to bless me. Those who are going deeper celebrate those blessings as gifts, not guarantees. I realize God will be here whether I am here or not.

When seeking answers to faith questions, Christians who are going deeper use the whole Bible, not just parts. The shallow and superficial answers that come when we use just parts may not be the real answers. You'll notice I didn't quote a verse for each of these statements. They are from the whole Bible, not just one place.

The mature Christian conservative or liberal is the one who knows the value of the other.

Mature Christians who seek moral personal economics know that the enemy is not our possessions, it is excess possessions. God helps us find "enough" for ourselves, and therefore a means toward a place of "enough" for all.

Spiritual knowledge does not transform the object into the property of the knower. Spiritual knowledge transforms the knower into a participant in what he or she perceives. (P. 198 Soul Making by Alan Jones) An evangelistic campaign once used the slogan "Got Jesus?". Some new Christians felt that meant that if one accepted Christ, Jesus was now their servant, who existed to meet their needs. But Jesus is not a tame God. Maturity means a change from lordship to fellowship, from conquest to participation, from production to receptivity.

Immature faith hides ignorance behind the verses that seem to criticize knowledge. But the Bible criticizes knowledge as a substitute for faith, not knowledge well used to grow it.

Immature faith expects God to meet my needs. If God doesn't fix what I think is broken, God has let me down. Mature faith seeks what God has for me instead. God can ride a lame horse. Immature Christians don't want God to do that. Karl Barth said, "Many people go to church to make their last stand against God."

Immature faith looks for God on the side of those who want to be rich. Mature faith looks for God on the side of the poor.

Christians who are going deeper can ask "How does God experience me?" I can get beyond myself if I can see from God's point of view.

New Christians need the confidence that their sins are forgiven, God answers prayer, cares about each aspect of their life and provides safety from evil and temptation. Those who go deeper get through the despair of loss and doubt in crises with a new appreciation for the presence of a sovereign, loving God in a broken world. Some writers even call this a "second conversion". Christians speak of being "born again, again".

New Christians ask "What can God do for me and mine?"

Mature Christians ask "What can I and we do for God?"

Saintly Christians ask "How can I and we love God more?"

## **SCRIPTURAL BASIS**

Mark 4: 33-34 The Message Mark refers to the parables Jesus uses

"With many stories like these, he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots."

Mark 4: 33-34 New Living Translation

"Jesus used many similar stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they could understand. In fact, in his public ministry he never taught without using parables; but afterward, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them."

Philippians 3: 15-16 The Message

So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision – you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

Philippians 3: 15-16 New Living Translation

"Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. But we must hold on to the progress we have already made." (much like NRSV)

2 Corinthians 4:16

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

I Corinthians 13: 9 – 12 NRSV

We know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. Now I know in part, then I will know fully.

Heb. 5: 12 ff NIV

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. NIV

Heb. 6: 1-3 NLT

Let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding.

## CONCLUSION

There are developmental stages of our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. This is true for whatever faith expression tradition we are in: mainline, charismatic, evangelical, liturgical, prophetic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran or alacarte.

John Wesley recognized this and spoke of the grace that comes from God at different stages of Christian faith: prevenient grace, convincing grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace. He arranged classes or societies based on the stages of faith: 1. seekers, 2. new Christians, 3. deeper disciples, 4. organizers and leaders.

As C.S. Lewis wrote about Narnia, we can go "Further on and farther in".

In believing the Bible, we are all selective literalists. But we disagree on which verses are to be taken literally. Taking the Bible seriously means evaluating all by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Taking the Bible seriously also means taking the whole scripture, interpreted with reason, tradition and experience, and sought with prayer and other open hearted Christians.

Some churches are called to minister only to the simple. The church I am called to serve makes opportunities for both the simple and the complex. Each can benefit from the other when they are willing to minister together.

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