

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# The Goal is Maturity

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What is God doing through the church? What is He after? What is the end of it all?

Now we come to Ephesians 4:13-16, where we find Paul's great statement of the end and goal of all God's far-flung strategy for the human race. God's goal, says the apostle, is for us to "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph. 4:13-16).

Twice in this great passage, the apostle gives us the ultimate goal of the life of faith. It is the measuring stick by which we can judge our progress as Christians. In verse 13 he says it is "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." And in verse 15 he urges us to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." He puts it also in a most descriptive phrase, "mature manhood"! That means God wants you and me to fulfill our humanity, the design for us that God intended when He created the first man and the first woman.

It is important to realize that, according to this passage in Ephesians, the supreme purpose of the church is *not* the evangelization of the world. The Great Commission is often held up to us as the supreme aim and purpose of the church, and it is certainly a crucial and essential task. Jesus has clearly sent us out to preach the Gospel to every creature. But the Great Commission is not God's supreme and ultimate goal. Romans 8:29 tells us that God's ultimate plan for us is that we be "conformed to the image of his Son." Evangelization is a means of bringing people into a relationship with God, so that God's ultimate goal for them--Christlikeness--can be achieved in their lives.

Nor does Paul say anything here about accomplishing world peace and universal justice. He does not say the church will ultimately introduce the millennium. We may well believe in the great vision of the prophets that there is a day coming when peace shall reign on the earth and men shall beat their swords into plowshares and make war no more. One day righteousness *shall* prevail over all the earth and all of today's headlines of injustice, tragedy, war, mass murder, terrorism, crime, racism, and hate will be forgotten. But that is not the great and final purpose for the existence of the church.

God's overarching goal is to produce men and women who demonstrate the character qualities of Jesus Christ. God does not want a church filled with whiterobed saints. He does not want a church filled with theological authorities or cultured clergyman. He wants a church filled with ordinary men and women who exemplify the extraordinary integrity, temperament, wholeness, compassion, individuality, boldness, righteousness, earnestness, love, forgiveness, selflessness, and faithfulness of Jesus Christ!

### **Our heart's desire**

Deep in your own heart, isn't that what you truly desire? You want to be a whole person, a complete human being. You want to discover and fulfill all that God has built into you. The proof that this is deep in every human heart is a fact which psychologists confirm we all have a mental image of ourselves which approaches, in some considerable degree, our ideal of humanity. We tend to think of ourselves as much more mature than we really are. The power of human self-deception is almost limitless. Even in those times when we try to be as ruthlessly, brutally honest as we can possibly be with ourselves, denial and self-deception rise up to prevent us

from feeling the full pain of the truth.

We may say, "I'm a stubborn, foolish, selfish person"--but let someone *agree* with us at that point and we blow up! "What do you mean?" we say. "How dare you say such a thing about me!" It's all because we long to fulfill our humanity, to be the kind of idealized persons that God originally designed us to be.

But that is what the church is all about. It is the vehicle designed by God to achieve mature humanity--a humanity exactly like that which was exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ. We have now come full circle, for this is where the apostle began: the church is to fulfill its calling--the calling of demonstrating to the world a new character, a spirit of lowliness, love, and unity, coupled with resurrection power, proving that the church is a body inhabited by God Himself!

As we examine the issue of Christlike maturity, we should distinguish between two words which are frequently used today: *spirituality* and *maturity*. Though related, they are not the same thing.

We can liken the spiritual life to the physical life of an individual. In this analogy, then, spirituality would be the counterpart of physical health. To be spiritual is to have good spiritual health. It involves keeping the mind and the will centered on the revelations of God and on the viewpoint of God about life, resulting in a habit of spiritual thinking which expects God to work in and through normal human activities.

Now, I grant that no one does this very well at first. Spirituality is a condition of openness to the Spirit of God as well as responsiveness to the will of God as it is made clear to us. In a person's early Christian life, he obviously does not understand a great deal about the will of God. Much of the revealed truth of the Word is unknown to him at this early stage of his spiritual development. Even what he is able to read in the Bible is often mysterious and difficult to understand. He lacks maturity--yet a lack of maturity doesn't necessarily mean a lack of spirituality!

A Christian can be very spiritual right from the beginning of his Christian experience. In fact, spiritual health is essential to the new Christian, in order that he can grow and lay hold of the knowledge of the Word. Just as a child needs bodily health in order to move from infancy to adulthood, so a Christian needs spiritual health in order to move from an infant faith to mature Christian character. If a child's health fades, his maturity is threatened; healthy children move on to maturity. The same is true in the spiritual realm. If spirituality--the habit of spiritual thinking and behavior--is maintained as a condition of life, then maturity will ultimately result.

### **A relative concept**

Having defined *spirituality*, we next examine what *maturity* means. I would define maturity as the full range of understanding of the knowledge and will of God, increasing in depth as a Christian grows older. It includes the entire range of experience to which a Christian is subjected. If you think of it this way, you can see immediately that maturity must be considered as a relative concept.

We might say that this person is "very mature" or that person is "immature," but what is the objective standard we are using to arrive at such an assessment? The fact is, we are not able to apply a truly objective standard. The only truly objective standard is Christ Himself, and our knowledge of Him is imperfect because we are fallible and limited. So when we use the term "mature," we are unconsciously applying a standard which really means something like "compared with the average Christian."

The apostle Paul uses this term "mature"--or, as it is sometimes translated in the Scriptures, "perfect"--in both a relative and an absolute sense. In Philippians 3:12, for instance, he says, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect." He acknowledges his realization that he has not achieved perfection which, of course, only Jesus Christ himself has ever manifested.

But later in the same passage, the apostle says, "Let those of us who are mature (or perfect) be thus minded" (Phil. 3:15). Here he speaks of himself, as well as others around him, as being mature. This is obviously the relative use of the term and means a greater maturity than is usually found in the church.

The apostle John has given us a helpful way to gauge various levels of maturity. In 1 John 2:12, he writes, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one." When he speaks of certain Christians as little children, the fact which characterizes them is that they know their sins are forgiven. Certainly that is the first thing a new Christian learns. Therefore, as long as they are celebrating (and quite properly so!) in that stage of understanding, glorying in the fact that their sins are forgiven, they can be lovingly classified as "little children."

Now, John doesn't mean, of course, that they are to forsake their initial excitement over having their sins forgiven. On the contrary, they should have a continually increasing awareness of the forgiveness of sin as they go through life. He simply means that a focus on the joy of being forgiven marks the *initial* stage of the Christian life--not maturity.

Then he says, "I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning." For a long time, I thought John was referring to God the Father, the one who is from the beginning. But thinking back to the way he opens the letter, I began to realize that this is really a reference to the Son: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). Here he is obviously referring to the Lord Jesus Himself.

The mark of being a spiritual father then, is a deep and thorough understanding of the deity and the humanity of Jesus, the fullness of the revelation that has come to us through the Son. It is to have a deep sense of acquaintanceship with him, of closeness to him, of having walked with him through much of life. Out of that closeness comes a clarity of understanding of Jesus' words to such a degree that there is a grasp of the great doctrines which he came to reveal. This level of maturity means to display an understanding and a manifestation of the same character which Jesus consistently manifested, along with the evidence of compassion, tolerance, patience, justice, and forgiveness which only a longterm relationship with the Son of God can produce.

Finally, the young men are characterized as having overcome the evil one, as having reached a stage of maturity where there is an understanding and a practice of the way to resist temptation. Temptation, of course, comes from the evil one and the ability to handle temptation is a mark of a maturing individual, one who knows how to distinguish between good and evil. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). The kind of person who is overcoming the wicked one is able to see evil as evil (even when it looks good!) by the revelation of the Scriptures and by the understanding given by the Spirit.

### **Amplified version**

Now the apostle John goes on to repeat these three statements to the "children," "fathers," and "young men" of the church, and he adds a few statements to amplify his thought. He says, "I write to you, children, because you know the Father." That, of course, is how they came to forgiveness of sin. They came into an awareness of the fatherhood of God by faith in Jesus Christ, when God immediately became a father to them. The two things that mark the beginning experience of a Christian, then, are that wonderful sense of sins having been forgiven and of belonging to a family under God the Father.

Then he says again, "I write to you, fathers, because you know him who was from the beginning." No change there; it simply cannot be improved upon. The mark of a mature individual is that this individual know Jesus Christ, that he or she is growing continually in an understanding of His teachings (both directly and through His apostles), and that he or she demonstrate a growing evidence that the Spirit of God is reproducing Christ's character within.

Now John says, "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." There he gives us a little further insight into how the young men overcome the evil one. They are strong--strong in spirit, that is--and they are responsive to what they're learning. Furthermore, the Word of God abides in them; it is the truth they are learning that makes them strong. They are

functional, able to be useful in the kingdom of God. This passage in John's letter illuminates the process of growth; maturity does not happen all at once.

Returning to Ephesians 4, in verse 15, Paul says, "We are to grow up in every way ... into Christ." Then again, in the latter part of verse 16, he says the body "makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." Growth is God's method. It is a process, and it does not happen overnight. It is a matter that requires time.

This is a crucially important principle to understand. I know many Christians who are greatly disturbed when, having become Christians, they do not find themselves suddenly and remarkably transformed into angelic creatures. They still find much of the old life very much present. The old attitudes are still tugging and even controlling their behavior. They do not know what to make of this and many are tempted to believe that it is a sign they are not true Christians at all. If their faith is in Christ, then they are Christians, period. But they need to learn that there is a process of growth which must follow and it requires time for growth to occur.

This necessity for growth is why the Scriptures warn against putting a new, spiritually young Christian into a position of authority. He simply has not had enough experience in the things of the Lord to be able to carry that burden of responsibility. The growth of his intellectual knowledge of Christian doctrine may have been most rapid and impressive, but knowledge alone does not make a man of God. In fact, time alone is no guarantee of growth! But if the factors that make for growth are present, then growth will occur--if we are patient, persistent, and faithful to God.

### **How do you grow?**

New Christians should also understand that growth does not come by trying. As Jesus pointed out, you cannot by taking thought add a cubit to your stature. You cannot say, "Now I am going to try to grow." Children would grow much faster than they do if that would work! But it doesn't.

How, then, do you grow? You must make sure that the factors that enhance and encourage spiritual growth are present. If they are, growth will occur of itself, naturally and unforced. We have already examined many of these factors, but they are summarized by the apostle Paul in this twofold way: increasing in (1) "the unity of the faith" and (2) "the knowledge of the Son of God." These, he says, will lead to mature manhood, "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

The *unity of the faith* is the shared understanding, in the church, of the great truths revealed in the Scriptures. Though the Scriptures are unchanging, new light is continually issuing forth from them through individual prophets and teachers who are given these new insights by the Holy Spirit. But then they must be shared widely in the body or no new truth is given. New Christians grow when they exert themselves to understand the Scriptures with the help of the teachers and leaders who make themselves available to them within the body of Christ. No growth toward wholeness and perfection can occur without this increase in the unity of the faith through the understanding of Christian doctrine.

But it must also be accompanied by an increase in *the knowledge of the Son of God*. This refers to experience, to a growing encounter with the Lord Jesus Himself, so that we come to know Him more and more--not just know about God, but knowing God, directly and personally. That, too, is necessary for maturity. It is the other factor that makes growth possible.

This encounter occurs when the knowledge of the faith (hearing) is put into practice (doing). Hearing and doing go hand in hand. You cannot *know* Jesus Christ until you *follow* Him. The disciples had an acquaintance with Jesus Christ before they became His disciples. That is obvious from the Gospel records. But they never knew Him until they left everything and followed him. It is here that we are particularly helped by the prayers and concern of the other members of the body. In our relationships with one another, our experience of the Lord who lives within us is deepened and enlarged. As Jesus said, when he revealed the standard of judgment for the last day, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40, KJV).

Since growth is a matter of knowledge plus obedience plus time, we do not need to be discouraged if we find

that we are not yet completely like Christ. Some years ago, a button could be seen on the lapels of many Christians. The button read:

### P B P G I N T W M Y

When you asked that person, "What do those letters stand for?" he or she would reply, "Please Be Patient, God Is Not Through With Me Yet."

This is a great truth! It is not a statement of an unwillingness to change, but of a recognition that change takes time--but it is taking place! The proper attitude for a healthy Christian is an eagerness to grow.

I once asked a boy how old he was. Quick as a flash he said, "I'm twelve, going on thirteen, but soon to be fourteen." That's the kind of eagerness for maturity we all should have! We do not need to ask ourselves, "Am I mature? Am I completely like Christ?" Instead, we should ask ourselves, "Am I on the way? Is there progress? Am I growing in the right direction?"

### No longer children

The apostle Paul gives us two practical means by which we may measure our growth toward full maturity. One is negative and the other is positive. He puts it negatively first: "So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles" (Eph. 4:14).

If you wish to know whether you are growing or not, do not measure yourself by comparison with someone else. That will tell you nothing. Instead, ask yourself, "Am I moving away from childish attitudes? Am I forsaking infantile behavior? Am I still governed by childish reactions and outbursts?" That is the first way to measure your degree of maturity.

The Scriptures often exhort us to be childlike, but never to be childish. These are two very different things! Childlikeness is that refreshing simplicity of faith which believes God and acts without questioning. But childishness is described here by the apostle as instability and naivete.

Children are notoriously fickle. Their attention span is short. You cannot interest them in one thing very long, because they quickly turn to something else. They are unstable, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every changing circumstance. This is the invariable mark of an immature believer in Christ--and an immature believer may be either brand-new in the faith or long-time believer who is undeveloped in his Christian experience. There are fads and fashions in the religious life, and immature Christians are forever riding the crest of some new fad. They are always running after the newest book or teacher, extolling them as the ultimate answer to spiritual need. This instability and "short spiritual attention span" are marks of immaturity. They do not seem to understand that the oldest book, the oldest teacher, is the most exciting of all: the Bible!

Immaturity and vacillation can be seen in the realm of actions as well. The childish Christian manifests himself by unfaithfulness and undependability. Many times new Christians will undertake some ministry or task with great eagerness and interest. But it is not very long before their interest wanes and they run out of gas. Soon they become discouraged, or fail to show up altogether! Unreliability can easily be forgiven in new Christians, but when it is manifested by those who have been Christians for many years it is much harder to bear. With experience and maturity in the Christian life comes visible evidence, as described by the apostle Paul--and that evidence includes faithfulness: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22,23).

A second mark of childishness is to be undiscerning and naive. Have you ever noticed how children are often unaware of danger? They may play in dangerous situations and be totally unaware that anything is threatening them. In the same way, young Christians are often caught by "the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles" (Eph. 4:14). This is an apt description of the many cultists, religious racketeers, charlatans, false prophets and teachers, and manipulative religious leaders who abound in our day. They trap many immature Christians (including many spiritually immature Christians who are chronologically "mature") with

their teachings that sound so right and enticing.

One of the surest signs of immaturity is a confident, arrogant certainty, "I'm established, I will never fall, I will never forsake the Lord or be deceived." It was childish immaturity in the faith that led Peter to say, just prior to the crucifixion, "Lord, others may deny You, these other disciples of Yours may fall away, but there is one man You can count on, and that's me!"

But the Lord said, "Thank you, Peter, but before the rooster crows twice you will have denied me three times" (see Mark 14:29,30). That is how much Peter's well-intentioned zeal, rooted in spiritual immaturity, was worth!

### **Reluctance to move**

A third mark of childishness is an unwillingness to move on to lay hold of the life and power of God which results in righteous behavior. Such a person clings instead to the initial phase of life as a baby Christian. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers"--and there, it seems to me, is a measuring mark of maturity: every mature Christian ought to be able to teach to some degree, whether or not they have a special gift of teaching--"you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word" (Heb. 5:12).

Those first principles are the limited understanding of the Word attained by new Christians or immature believers. He describes this as milk: "You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child" (v. 13).

I like to think of righteousness in terms of the modern concept of "worth." Someone who is unrighteous in behavior is always so because he is not resting upon a true basis of worth imparted to him as a gift, the gift of righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ. As he grows in the knowledge of righteousness and in the awareness of his full acceptance before God, he is increasingly delivered from the need to produce a feeling of acceptance before God by works, by activities, by self-righteousness, or by other false means.

The writer to the Hebrews then goes on to say, in that verse we've already examined, "But solid food"--that is, the "word of righteousness"--"is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (v. 14).

Now in Hebrews 6, which begins with the word "therefore," there is a tie with what the writer has just said in chapter 5. We tend to miss this because of the unfortunate interjection of the chapter break. His word really goes on and says, "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ." These are doctrines with which a new believer, still immature and understandably so, would be concerned. He lists them now: "not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works. ..." Our works cannot save us; only faith in the work the Jesus did on the cross can save. This is an elementary doctrine, the first truth which gives us admittance into the kingdom. Repentance from trying to save ourselves by our own works is the beginning of Christian faith.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to list other elementary issues of the faith: "faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions [rites such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, and so forth], the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (Heb. 6:1,2). Now all these things are *initial* stages, relating to the realm of children growing and learning the truth. It is a terrible thing for those who have been Christians for years to be still involved heavily, on an emotional level, with these elementary doctrines. They are like cases of arrested development, like children with a tragic glandular disorder that prevents them from growing.

God wants us to leave these things and go on to maturity; that is, to the word of righteousness which is the solid food that ought to occupy the thoughts of the spiritually mature. The point is, a mature (or maturing) Christian ought to be increasingly concerned with manifesting the character of Christ through obedience to the Word of God.

Now the question arise: What about you? How much have you grown? Are you moving away from these childish attributes of instability and overconfidence? Are you growing in the faith and in the knowledge of the

Son of God?

Growth does not always occur at a constant speed. The Scriptures indicate that it is discernible in stages. Did you ever watch a child growing? Parents know that growth follows a physical pattern in definite stages.

A friend told me recently about his fourteen-year-old boy and the way he was shooting up into manhood. He had grown a foot taller in the last year. The father said that for fourteen years he had been able to wear a certain size shoe without rivalry, but his son had suddenly developed the same size foot--and now he found his son was constantly borrowing his shoes! He concluded with a relieved sigh, "The last time we bought shoes for that boy, his feet had grown beyond mine. So now I am safe again."

Whether in the spiritual realm or the physical realm, that is how growth takes place: by stages.

We enter the Christian life as spiritual babies and may grow quite rapidly at first. Then for quite a while we may resist the great principles which make for Christian development. We may be surprised to learn that God intends to do something quite different with us than we thought He would when we first became Christians. We resist these changes and do not like the way He deals with us at times, so growth slows down. But finally He brings us to the place where we give in and accept the radical principles and give ourselves to understanding them.

Then we experience a new surge of growth. We feel we have at last overcome our hot tempers or our passionate natures, and we think we have learned to be easygoing, friendly, happy individuals. We give up our bitterness, our grudges, our jealousy and other ugly aspects of our old, immature nature. Then, to our dismay, we are put with the wrong person or into a sudden crisis, and the old garbage which we thought was completely washed out of us comes spewing forth again! We sag with discouragement and go to the Lord and say, "What's the matter with me, Lord? Why am I still so immature?"

Have you ever felt that way? I have, many times. But God is not through with us yet! We gradually learn how deceitful the flesh is and how it resists detection. Looking back we can see that we too are following the stages outlined by the apostle John--stages which are perfectly normal to Christian growth: "little children," then "young men," and finally "fathers."

We may come into a relative degree of maturity within a few years of our conversion, but we shall be engaged in the process of growth as long as we live in these earthly bodies. After all, it takes God years to grow an oak tree, but he can grow a squash in three months and a radish in a few weeks! The world has seen enough of Christian squashes and radishes. We need more strong, patient, mature oak trees!

But there is a second way by which we can measure our growth. Negatively we can mark the distance we have moved from childish attitudes, but there is a positive measurement also. Paul says, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way (Eph. 4:15). Previously we noted that this could be translated, "truthing in love"--that is, living the truth in love. As we have seen, that means developing an honest and realistic approach to life and to other people--not a brutal frankness but a gracious, loving acceptance of others that always seeks the benefit of others. It is an attitude which lives out the fundamental law of life which Jesus laid down: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

### **Face the failures**

Maturity means a return to realism about yourself. It means to accept yourself as God accepts you: a person with certain unchangeable characteristics which God Himself has given you and which therefore are advantages, no matter how much they may seem like disadvantages to you now. These characteristics include your physical looks, your temperament, your family and ancestry, and your mental endowments. Having all these characteristics, you now learn that as a Christian you are the dearly beloved child of a heavenly Father who patiently teaches you to rely upon the life of his Son. That resurrection life within you is the only resource you need to meet every demand that life can make upon you.

He knows that it's hard for us to learn reliance upon Him, and He has made arrangements in advance so that

no mistake or failure (deliberate or otherwise) which we make will ever in any way diminish His loving concern for us and His fatherly care over us. For our own good, however, He desires that we recognize these failures and sins for what they are and to be realistic (mature) about them, so that we can learn and grow to become more like Christ. He wants us to call our flaws exactly as He calls them--and until we are able to see ourselves as He sees us, we will have difficulty experiencing and realizing His undiminished love for us.

As long as we live in a state of unreality and denial about ourselves, we are susceptible to the lies of the enemy. Only by honestly facing our failures for what they are can we be freed to enjoy the warmth and enrichment of God's fatherly love, and to experience the power to live out the life of the resurrected Lord.

Your progress in maturity can be measured by the degree to which you accept the truth about yourself and others in love. That truth will be both shocking and healing. You will be shocked to learn how strong the human tendency is to preserve attitudes, habits, and behavior which arise (as the Bible says) from the flesh, the old nature. Healing and growth come by understanding that you no longer need to make yourself perfect by your own efforts in order to be accepted and loved by God. You are now free to be yourself, without pretense, without having to hide or defend yourself. You are committed to growth and change, but you no longer feel condemned and ashamed simply because you are not yet perfect. That is an attitude of maturity.

### **The shock of self-discovery**

When missionaries first arrive in a foreign country, they usually experience something called "culture shock." It happens when people find themselves plunged into a totally new situation where all the familiar cues that made them feel at ease are absent. They find themselves unable to communicate with others, and to show them others intelligent and valuable they are. This is especially true when a new language must be learned, and month after month of study scarcely enables you to carry on a conversation at the marketplace level. It can be a shattering experience.

Among new missionaries, this culture shock often manifests itself in some form of rejection. They reject the country they are in; they cannot stand anything about it, everything is wrong. They criticize and find fault with almost everything. Sometimes the rejection is leveled against the mission board which sent them out. Or they blame fellow missionaries for not properly preparing them before they came. Or they turn this rejection inward and blame themselves, doubting their fitness to serve God on the mission field. Older, wiser missionaries learn to recognize rejection as a symptom of culture shock, and can often help to steady the new missionary, so that he can get safely through the crisis.

Something much like this takes place with every new Christian as well, a spiritual form of "culture shock." After all, Christianity is a totally different way of living. It relies upon completely different resources and requires quite opposite reactions from those we utilized as "natural" men. It is a form of culture shock to learn that all the familiar props to our ego are taken away from us, and we are confronted with the shock of self-discovery. We learn that much of our acceptance by others was dependent upon impressions and images which we project, but which are not consistent with our inner reality. They were poses, roles we were playing, phantoms of our imaginations.

All the ego-salving techniques which the world commonly employs, and which we once found perfectly acceptable, are now unacceptable as Christians. The "you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours" attitude which is the basis for the relationships of the world is not the basis for Christian relationships, and is no longer approved. Instead, we must learn to love our enemies and do good to those who spitefully use us. We must pray for those who persecute us--and in our natural selves, we don't want to do that!

The world may be impressed by whether or not we are intelligent, attractive, charming, witty, skilled, or accomplished--but the Holy Spirit is not impressed at all. This produces a "culture shock" in the new Christian which can be terribly disconcerting and frightening. But once we accept this new and amazing reality of the love of a heavenly Father, we become free to live as God intended us to live when He created the first man and woman. The measure of spiritual freedom we experience from day to day is the measure of our maturity.

Is there anything we can do to spur ourselves on to greater maturity? Is there anything we can do to help others



in the body of Christ become more mature? Yes! That is the goal of every pastor, elder, youth leader, Christian education director, and Sunday school teacher! We accelerate our own maturity by developing our spirituality--that is, our spiritual health. The more our spirits are attuned to God and obedient to the Spirit, the better prepared we are to grow and mature in the Lord! Maturity comes by a constant endeavor to live spiritually and obediently.

Paul says this very plainly in 1 Corinthians, where he deals powerful and insightfully with the issue of Christian maturity. "Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom," he says, "although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages of our glorification" (1 Cor. 2:6,7).

Note that Paul says, first, that there are two kinds of wisdom: (1) wisdom of this age and (2) a secret and hidden wisdom of God. He says that the rulers of this age--that is, the wise and important leaders of the world around us--do not understand this secret wisdom of God. They don't understand the processes of the kingdom of God and the ways people react to one another within the kingdom of God. "None of the rulers of this age understood this," he said, "for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

### **The mind of Christ**

But there is a second kind of wisdom, a wisdom not of this age, a wisdom given by the Spirit--the secret and hidden wisdom of God. Paul then quotes from Isaiah 64:4, saying, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:9,10).

The Spirit, therefore, who has given the revelation of truth in the Scriptures, has given us a secret and hidden wisdom which is designed for our glorification--that is, to lead us to the place where we're ready for glory, a place of spiritual maturity. He goes on to say what this wisdom is: "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:10,11).

Here is wisdom. The wisdom of this age is the "wisdom" of human thoughts. But the wisdom from above is the true wisdom of God's thoughts. He says, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world"--which is involved with the wisdom of the world--"but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:12,13). These spiritual truths are the secret truths which prepare us for glorification. There is no way we can understand these secret truths apart from the Spirit of God within us, who teaches us these things.

Paul concludes the passage, saying, "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:14-16). The spiritual man is the man who has learned by the Spirit to think and view life as Christ does. He has the mind of Christ. He has learned to see all the daily circumstances of his life as God sees them, in God's perspective. He is not, therefore, likely to be influenced by natural thinking, a view of things that the world in its non-regenerate condition would take.

This is the difference between natural thinking and spiritual thinking. Spiritual thinking marks the mature Christian, the spiritual Christian, while unspiritual thinking marks the immature, or unspiritual, Christian. The immature or unspiritual Christian is still a Christian but he or she is given to natural thinking--the thinking and "wisdom" of this dying age.

Now what is this secret and hidden wisdom which Paul says is imparted for our glorification? Paul describes it clearly in Colossians, at the close of the first chapter, where he is speaking again about maturity. In Colossians 1:26 he says the secret wisdom of God is "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints." To them, he says, speaking especially of the Gentiles, "God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery [now here it is, here's the mystery], which is

Christ in you, the hope of glory."

What is the mystery? The mystery that we are saved by the death of Christ, yet living by His life in us! His life reproduced in us is the mystery that results in maturity and the secret of spirituality. Being spiritual means living on the basis of Christ at work within us.

"Him we proclaim," Paul continues, "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). Maturity comes as we grow in understanding this secret of how to live by His life in us. Paul adds, "For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me" (Col. 1:29). That is, Paul's own maturity comes from the secret source of Christ's life at work within him, reproducing His life in the life of Paul. As a result, Paul is empowered by God to teach others, encourage others, and bring others to maturity.

### **Joined and knit together**

We must always keep in mind that we are members of the body of Christ. In the closing lines of Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul puts the issue of maturity into perspective, showing us that maturity is not a purely individual matter. It is a process that takes place within a network of relationships, within the context of "the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly" (Eph. 4:18).

Paul here says that one of the factors that encourages growth in maturity is to allow other Christians to minister to you. The parts of the body are designed to meet one another's needs--they are joined and knit together. The apostle actually coins a word to express the mutual ministry of members of the body to each other. The word for "joined" is made up of three Greek words: one is the root from which we get our English word "harmony"; another is the word "with"; and the third is the word for "choosing." The richly complex idea Paul conveys to us by this one compound word is this:

God's design for the church is that Christians should relate to one another honestly yet lovingly. As they carry out this mutual "truthing-in-love" ministry, the result will be that choices and decisions will be made with harmony throughout the church. The end result of that church harmony will be that the church will be a witness to the world, and that clear witness will attract people, increase the numbers of the body, and strengthen the body spiritually.

All of this tremendous meaning is embodied in that one three-part word! Of course, this concept is easier said than done! It takes a Spirit-led blend of courage and compassion to speak the truth in love. It takes a willingness to accept others, forgive others, forbear with others, and compromising on *secondary* issues so that our *primary* issues our unity, our love, and our witness--may never be compromised.

The other people in the body of Christ are God's chosen instruments. Do not reject God's instruments! He knows what you need better than you do. You are where you are because that is where God wants you. He put you with the Christians around you because they are the kind you need and you are the kind they need. They may be rather prickly and thorny and hard to live with--and they may think of you in cactus-like terms as well! But they are what you need at the present time, and you are what they need.

So don't struggle with the place in which God has put you. Accept it, welcome it, and seek to relate in honest love to the other Christians around you. As each member of the body accepts his or her role in the body, and seeks to carry out that role, ministering to the rest of the body in truth and love, then the body will grow more healthy. Each member of the body will be doing what he or she was meant to do and equipped to do. As gifts are used and love is expressed throughout the body, a marvelous harmony will emerge--a harmony which leads to maturity throughout the body, and which produces a witness that will draw thousands more men and women out of their darkness and into the church.

Yes, there will be pain at times. But through the pain will come growth. As you go on, remember that day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, the Spirit of God is working a miracle. Individual Christians are growing into the maturity of Jesus Christ. The whole body together is manifesting in an increasing way the

wholesome, balanced, well-adjusted manhood and stature of Jesus Christ.

Our goal, and the goal of the church, must be the same as that of God, as expressed by Paul in Ephesians 4: The goal is *maturity*.

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