

Discussion: Spiritual Maturity - Theory and Practice

George Kong, Augustine Presbytery Retreat, 2018-04-30

Some Bible Texts That Mention Maturity

τέλειος - (adjective) mature, adult, perfect, complete

νήπιος - (noun) infant, child, minor

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all 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 by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 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 held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. [Eph 4:11-16]

The "mature manhood" and the "fullness of Christ" may be referring mainly to the church corporately. If so, I would argue that individual maturity is an essential component of that corporate maturity.

The gifts of the whole body are the instruments, with emphasis on pastoral gifts and callings.

Stability in thought and practice is the result.

Love is the environment.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. [Col 1:27-29]

The emphasis here is clearly on working with each person individually.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation... [Heb 5:12-6:1]

"The immaturity ... was due to a disinclination to press on in the Christian way. ... ethically mature men ... can pass discriminating judgment on moral situations as they arise" (F. F. Bruce)

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? [1Cor 3:1-4]

Maturity avoids unnecessary sectarian controversy.

Theory - What is Spiritual Maturity?

The Bible texts that explicitly mention maturity or childishness do not present a fully-elaborated model of spiritual maturity, but, at least, they indicate that the concept exists in the Bible, that bringing people to maturity is our responsibility as presbyters, and, therefore, that reflecting on its theory and practice is a legitimate and necessary activity for us.

Dictionary definitions of maturity include (1) the telos of a growth process and (2) a state of completeness or perfection.

We asked our committee members and a small sampling of additional Augustine presbyters about spiritual maturity and got a variety of answers, which are included below in an appendix.

Respondents were divided between giving a very succinct characterization of the essence of spiritual maturity ("spiritual maturity is being like Christ," "spiritual maturity is living by Biblical principles," "spiritual maturity is being able to disciple others") vs. summarizing the different components of the biblical doctrine of the Christian life to various degrees.

Pretty much everyone included some characterization of the "state of completeness or perfection" perspective. Only a subset mentioned the "growth process that unfolds over time" perspective.

Discussion Questions

Do you feel you currently have an understanding of spiritual maturity that is sufficient for overseeing your church's ministries effectively?

What answer do you give to the question, "What is spiritual maturity?"

Which books or other resources do you find helpful in understanding spiritual maturity?

Practice - How Do We Bring People to Spiritual Maturity?

All Saints, Lancaster, PA

Discipleship programs - The Navigators, Campus Crusade, Randy Pope's "Insourcing"

<https://www.amazon.com/Lost-Art-Disciple-Making/dp/031037281X>

<https://www.amazon.com/Master-Plan-Evangelism-Robert-Coleman/dp/0800788087>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/bring-discipleship-back-to-the-church-for-crazy-busy-christians/>

Laurence Windham's age-based small group curriculum (currently under development)

Discussion Questions

How can we evaluate the spiritual maturity of individuals?

How can we move individuals forward in maturity?

How do the roles of the church and the family differ in developing maturity?

In what ways are the organized ministries of your church addressing these needs now?

How might they in the future?

Appendix - Resources

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2043016295930985&id=1619110878321531

<https://www.amazon.com/You-Are-What-Love-Spiritual/dp/158743380X>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/parents-take-note-spiritual-practices-common-kids-flourish-adults/>

<https://document.desiringgod.org/habits-of-grace-en.pdf>

<http://thefederalist.com/2018/01/22/new-harvard-research-says-u-s-christianity-not-shrinking-growing-stronger/>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-things-pastors-should-learn-from-calvin/>

<http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=31-02-042-f>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralistic_therapeutic_deism

“As rational persons, we were made to bear God’s moral image - that is, our souls were made to ‘run’ on the practice of worship, law-keeping, truthfulness, honesty, discipline, self control, and service to God and our fellows. If we abandon these practices, not only do we incur guilt before God; we also progressively destroy our own souls. Conscience atrophies, the sense of shame dries up, one’s capacity for truthfulness, loyalty, and honesty is eaten away, one’s character disintegrates. One not only becomes desperately miserable; one is steadily being dehumanized. This is one aspect of spiritual death. Richard Baxter was right to formulate the alternatives as ‘A Saint - or a Brute’: that, ultimately, is the only choice, and everyone sooner or later, consciously or unconsciously opts for one or the other.” - J. I. Packer, Knowing God.

Appendix - Answers to the question, "What is spiritual maturity?"

Spiritual maturity is knowing Christ as He is revealed in the gospel and abiding in Him through fellowship with His people producing the fruit of good works (Eph. 2:10).

Spiritual maturity, in short, is Christ-likeness. It is God's work by God's power. It is not earned nor is quickly learned. It is revolutionary and requires much unwanted renovation in us.

I can't tell you how to get there but I know what it looks like when I see it. It is marked by a deep love for God, a deep love for others, by much prayer and humility, by wisdom born of adversity, and by a faithful and fruitful dependency on Christ.

I have significant reservations about the tendency for we reformed-types to create check lists for what this looks like. We are so prone to try to fashion others into our own images and to deem someone as immature if they do not remind us very much of ourselves.

An individual displays spiritual maturity when in Theory and Reality (practice) their lives are based on God's promises/truths as revealed in scripture.

Spiritual maturity is the formation of our loves to fit with reality. First, we come to this recognizing that we can not do this. We are sinful broken and weak. The Spirit must work in us to form our loves toward maturity. Those mature loves recognize our weakness, our need for God's grace, and our abiding in Him. Thus, spiritual maturity looks like the structuring of everything in our lives using the means of grace (worship, prayer, reading the scriptures, fellowship, singing) to grow to resemble Jesus more. We do this in the community and communion of the church.

I would say that it would be at that stage of spiritual growth where the person in question could disciple another person. While many may exhibit tremendous love and gratitude toward Christ and others may know their theology backwards and forwards, unless they are qualified and engaged in some form of training and leading of others (small groups, one-on-one, their own children, etc) to 'grow in Christ' then they have not reached the principal goal. (Acts 2:41-47/1 Corinthians 13/Ephesians 4)

My short definition of spiritual maturity: "Living out the reality of knowing and being known by God."

This would manifest itself in a person practicing the means of grace (Bible study, prayer, corporate worship, sacraments, fellowship); exercising their spiritual gifts (evangelism, discipleship, service, giving, hospitality, teaching, etc.); and exhibiting Spirit filled wisdom (can give council and lead others).

A spiritually mature person is one who has an experiential knowledge of Christ and has grown up into Him, is doctrinally sound in faith according to the unity in Christ, and builds up the body of Christ through ministry and discipleship.

Faith

Do they exhibit a lively and active faith in Jesus Christ for:

1. The forgiveness of sins.
2. Assurance of pardon
3. In the Providence of God in good times and bad times.
4. In a lack of ongoing fear about just about anything.
5. In forgiving others so that there is not active and ongoing bitterness that divides families, churches, friends.
6. In faithful attendance at church, believing (faith) that this is a primary means of God's grace.
7. In Bible reading, again believing (faith), that God's Word is the basis of doctrine and practical Christian living.

Absence of scandalous living

Mature Christians are sinners but they do not 'live' in sin. If confronted, they drop it and repent, making restitution where needed.

Holiness or Sanctification

A mature Christian is growing in grace and so exhibits the fruit of the Spirit in an ever increasing manner. They do not possess all aspects of spiritual fruit equally and may be more or less advanced in various areas but ALL of the fruit of the Spirit are present and growing.

Submission to the 'Absolute' Lordship of Jesus Christ.

(We might call this an active Biblical Worldview)

This mark manifests itself in a willingness to do all things for Christ. This would include vocation, hobbies, gifting of music, art, etc. A willingness to submit all that you are or can be to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in expanding his kingdom to the ends of the Earth.

Faith

... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. [Rom 10:9-10]

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. [Heb 11:6]

Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." [John 6:28-29]

Union with Christ, Resulting in Radical Transformation

A Christian is a person who is united with Christ, in his death, in his resurrection, and in his present life, through the Holy Spirit. This includes a radical reorientation in thinking, priorities, life purpose and goals, use of time and money, relationships, etc.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. [Gal 2:20]

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. [Phil 1:21]

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. [1Cor 5:17]

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it..." [Mark 8:34-35]

... In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. [John 14:18-23]

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [John 15:4-5]

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. [Col 1:27-29]

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. [Rom 8:13-14]

Reading, Meditating, Internalizing, and Living According to the Bible

The mature Christian not only makes a regular habit of Bible reading, but also meditates on it and has internalized it to the point that he can, for example, talk about it with his children extemporaneously throughout the day. It inform his decision-making in large and small things.

... man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. [Deut 8:3]

... these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. [Deut 6:6-7]

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. [Ps 1:1-3]

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. [Ps 119:97-98]

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. [Psalm 119:105]

Prayer and Living Coram Deo

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. [Mark 1:35]

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." [Luke 11:1]

... pray without ceasing ... [1Thess 5:17]

On-Going Sanctification

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. [Ps 51:11]

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! [Ps 139:23-24]

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [1John 1:8-9]

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ... For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. [Rom 6:5-14]

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. [Rom 8:15]

Pro-Activity in Seeking and Knowing God, Growth Mindset

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually! [Psalm 105:4]

... for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. [Heb 11:6]

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; [Isa 55:6]

I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. [Phil 3:10-14 (NIV)]

Horizontal Relationships - Family, Church

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” [Matt 22:36-40]

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... [Eph 5:22-33]

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” [Eph 6:2-3]

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. [Eph 6:4]

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. [Gal 6:2]

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ... Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. [Rom 12:10-18]

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. [Heb 10:24-25]

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ [Matt 25:34-46]

Passion, Prayer, and Work for the Advance of the Gospel and the Kingdom

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. [Matt 6:10]

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. [Matt 6:31-33]

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. [Matt 5:14-16]

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” [Matt 9:36-38]

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. [Col 4:5-6]

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” [John 13:35]

Awareness of Calling/Vocation, Spiritual Gifts

Our family, community, culture, social status, government, wealth, health, abilities, etc. are not the results of random, impersonal processes. God "assigns" them to us; He "calls" us to them.

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. ... Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. [1Cor 7:17-22]

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [Rom 13:1-4]

When we eat bread, we may think about our work, which earned money to buy bread, as well as the work of the farmers, millers, bakers, truck drivers, and grocery store workers. Yet the Lord's Prayer instructs us to ask God for our daily bread.

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." [Matt 6:9-13]

What does God have to do with our daily bread? How are other people's callings an outworking of God's providence for you? How is your calling an outworking of God's providence for others?

[spiritual gifts - Ex 31:1-11, 1Cor 12, Eph 4, Rom 12, and 1Pet 4]

How should an understanding of the diversity of gifts and callings affect parenting? education?

[diligence, laziness, over-work, sabbath - Prov 22:29, Prov 10:4, Ps 127:1-2, Gen 2:1-3, Ex 20]

[gender and calling - Eph 5, Prov 31, 1Tim2, 1Tim3, Titus 2]

Experience of Suffering as Calling and as Sharing Christ's Suffering

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ... [2Tim 3:12]

... through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. [Acts 14:21-22]

But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. [1Pet 2:18-23]

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church... [Col 1:24]

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. [1Pet 4:12-14]

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him... [Heb 5:8-9]

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. [Phil 3:8-11]

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. [Rom 8:16-17]

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "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. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. [2Cor 12:7-10]

Skill in Distinguishing Christian From Secular Thinking

This is relevant to conversations with people and also to cultural artifacts, like movies, songs, books, TV shows, Facebook posts, websites, blogs, etc. Peer pressure can be a strong influence.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom... [Ps 111:10]

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [Rom 1:21-23]

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. [Ps 1:1-3]