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The Mature Christian

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THE Authorized Version does not use the term "mature." But the idea is completely Biblical. It assumes that a Christian, as a Christian, is not a statistical, either-or being, but that he is the product of a birth, a growth, and an expanding life. To speak of a Christian as mature suggests that he has arrived at the peak of that growth, that he has arrived at the climax of the development of his faith and his life with God.

We must realize at once that this side of the grave we do not see men who are mature as Christians, and the better Christians they are, the more they are aware of this. St. Paul said of his aim to be found in Christ and to "know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead," that he had not already attained it or was already perfect: "I count not myself to have apprehended" (Phil. 3:10-13). St. John includes himself in the number of Christians who must confess:

If we say that 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. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us. (1 John 1:8-10.)

This passage confronts the Christian with the fact that this side of the grave God deals with him on only one basis — as a sinner who needs forgiveness. This was the lesson that God sought to teach St. Paul through the thorn in the flesh:

My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . when I am weak, then am I strong. (2 Cor. 12:9, 10.)

Yet we can speak of the maturing Christian, the one who is growing toward an ideal which, though he knows it will elude him, is still the passion of his life and power for his concern for his fellow Christian (Phil. 3:12 ff.) The great picture of birth and growth in God is given in 1 Peter 1:22—2:3:

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently; being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away; but the Word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the Word which by the Gospel is preached unto you. Wherefore, laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby, if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

Ephesians has a number of great summaries of the growth of the Christian, especially in his relation to the other.

For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. (3:14-19.)

He gave some, Apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things which is the Head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and

compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (4:12-16.)

The writer to the Hebrews discusses the idea of growth particularly with regard to the enlarging ability of the teacher of the Christian religion (Heb. 5:12—6:2). The Second Epistle of Peter includes several definitions of spiritual maturation. The one describes it as the increase of Christian virtues:

Besides this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity. For if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind and cannot see afar off and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. (1:5-9.)

The other underscores the basic equipment:

But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (3:18).

I. CHRISTIAN MATURATION CAN BE MEASURED IN TERMS OF OVERCOMING THE FLESH

Man is born into the world dead. But God in His love does not leave man under wrath, but seeks to return to him with His life and Spirit. That Spirit comes because of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, through whom the world is reconciled to God and because of whom God seeks to bring man to the knowledge of the truth, the Word of Reconciliation (John 3:1-16; Eph. 2:1-10; 2 Cor. 5:15-21).

When, now, man has been born again of the Spirit, it means that the life and power of God takes over the impulses and desires of the individual.

If ye, then, be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our Life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in

glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry; for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience; in the which ye also walked some time when ye lived in them. But now ye also put off all these—anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him. (Col. 3:1-10; cf. 1:21-23.)

These two sets of impulses, the old man with the flesh, and the new man driven by the Spirit of God, are in conflict throughout the life of the Christian. The struggle hampers the spiritual maturation of the individual in one sense, in that he can at no time say that he is complete. But it serves his spiritual maturation in that it drives him at every moment down to his dying day to God and the redemptive work of Christ that the process of maturation continue.

Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the Law. Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and such like; of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no Law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16-25. Cf. Rom. 7:24, 25; James 1:2-12; 3:13-18.)

II. CHRISTIAN MATURATION DEPENDS ON THE INTAKE OF THE SPIRIT THROUGH CHRIST

Almost all the passages already quoted stress the essential ingredient in the maturation of the Christian man. This is basic for our entire consideration and particularly for our calling as servants of the Word who are in the business of helping fellow Christians

mature and to be helpers of that maturation in others. That ingredient is the message of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Right down the list of all of the passages thus far reviewed — and this fact would be true of their parallels likewise — this accent is evident.

In Philippians 3 St. Paul is describing the malady of self-righteousness, that is, the "things which are behind," which he forgets in order to reach the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus; conversely his goal is to be "found in Him, not having mine own righteousness which is of the Law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (3:9).

St. John reminds of sin and the need of forgiveness and then promptly gives the assurance:

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father — Jesus Christ, the Righteous; and He is the Propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1,2).

1 Peter emphasizes that the seed by which the growth is initiated and the milk by which it is continued are the same, the Word "which by the Gospel is preached unto you" (1:23,25; 2:2).

Ephesians is unusually crisp in defining spiritual childishness as being "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (4:14). The spiritual maturation is therefore "speaking the truth," which does not mean merely speaking truthfully, but speaking the redemptive message carried out by Christ Jesus, who is the Truth, "the truth as it is in Christ Jesus" (4:21); that story has been sketched out especially in the first and second chapters.

The writer to the Hebrews, having a didactic purpose, seems to limit his goal of spiritual maturity to the ability to progress beyond the first principles of the Christian Gospel; and he makes clear that the means for fostering the slackened maturation is the restating and clarifying of the "principles of the doctrine of Christ — repentance from dead works, faith toward God, doctrine of baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment (6:2).

Peter repeatedly bases the entire enlargement of Christian faith

and virtue on "the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1, 5-9; 2:3, 18).

The Colossians need to remain "in the faith grounded and settled and not moved away from the hope of the Gospel" (1:23).

The Galatians are going to be men of the Spirit if they remain in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, "who gave Himself for our sins that He might deliver us from this present evil world" (1:4). "Christ is become of no effect unto you whosoever of you are justified by the Law; ye are fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith" (5:4, 5).

Notice that when we thus retrace our steps, we are saying: the intake of the Gospel of Christ is the one source for the growth in the Spirit of God, the receiving and the enlarging within us of the Spirit. The intake of the Spirit of God is the one means, through the Gospel and Baptism and the Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, for the overcoming of the flesh. The intake of the Gospel of Christ is the one basis for the increase in good works. The epistles are largely driven by the desire of the Apostles to foster spiritual maturation of their readers in one form or other, and they invariably thrust this gift of grace in Christ Jesus into the center of their message. The Christmas Epistle, a brief to a young minister how he should foster spiritual life among the people on the island of Crete, is a useful summary:

The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. These things speak and exhort and rebuke with all authority. (Titus 2:11-15.)

Spiritual maturation is often regarded as predominantly an ethical procedure, getting people to behave in more satisfactory patterns of conduct; hence it is inferred that the most important process in spiritual maturation is to provide people with a code for their morality. The stress of the quotation from Titus above is paralleled interestingly by 1 Tim. 1:9-11:

We know that the Law is good if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust.

It is not without deep underlying purpose that the Scriptures clustering about the concept of spiritual growth contend for the purity of the doctrine that we are saved, and that we are helped to good works, by the free grace of God, which is ours through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and by the preaching and teaching of that message. Here a warning is in order on two counts. The one is against the idea, current through C. H. Dodd, that the Christian religion comprises a *kerygma*, or proclamation of the Gospel which converts to faith, and a *didache*, or ethical instruction which impels the converted person on the road of good works. The other is to be aware of the lurking *opinio legis* in the heart, fleshly speaking, also of every Christian, who is willing to believe that after he has paid lip service to the doctrine of grace, he can forget it and apply himself to carrying out the rules of the church and of religion; and that this application is the source of God's good will. False doctrine of the way of life in Christ Jesus is the first false doctrine that the human heart is willing to believe, the ever-menacing danger for the maturation of every Christian. The false teacher, whether he be so intentionally or unintentionally, on this count can be sure of having willing listeners, and here is the first responsibility upon Christians for the spiritual life of their brethren.

III. CHRISTIAN MATURATION IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EACH CHRISTIAN FOR HIS BROTHER

The maturation of the Christian is not so much an ideal to be carried in the mind as a process to which every Christian should contribute on behalf of every other Christian. It is this phase of our subject which renders it of practical and professional concern.

St. Paul writes to Galatian Christians who were in danger of falling from grace. Yet he encourages each one of them to undertake responsibility for the spiritual life and improvement of each other one.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For every man shall bear his own burden. Let him that is taught in the Word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things. Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:1-10.)

Similarly he writes to the Ephesians. The great passage on the growth of the Christian begins Eph. 4:1 with the reminder that it is each Christian's calling to contribute to the spiritual life and growth of each other one.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. (Eph. 4:1-7.)

At the end of the First Epistle to the Thessalonians — and these were people who were quite imperfect in their devotion to Biblical truth (Acts 17:11) — St. Paul gives this counsel:

Now, we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever

follow that which is good, both among yourselves and to all men. Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess. 5:14-23.)

A similar encouragement to personal concern for the brother is at the end of James.

Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit. Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death and shall hide a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20.)

For that matter, our Lord Himself portrays a similar concern for the brother in the familiar words of Matthew 18, from beginning to end of the chapter. Note especially vv. 10-14:

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven. For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Ephesians 4 gives us the place that the professional workers of the Church occupy in this process of mutual edification. The Weymouth translation puts it more literally than most translations:

And He Himself appointed some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, in order fully to equip His people for the work of serving—for the building up of Christ's body—till we all of us arrive at oneness in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and at mature manhood and the stature of full-grown men in Christ (Eph. 4:11-13).

This work and ministry of every Christian to every other one is carried out in all of the ways in which they can be related to one another. Thus to the Ephesians St. Paul describes this work in worship:

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. (Eph. 5:18-21).

The same thing proceeds in Christian marriage where men are to love their wives not just in the domain of physical relationship, but in the business of building the Church.

This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32).

Parents are to rear their children not simply physically, "but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). The functioning of this task in the Christian parish is described by St. Paul in Romans 12—16. There he stresses the importance of building the body of Christ (12:5) and to that end nurturing the weak person.

Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace and things wherewith one may edify another (Rom. 14:19).

St. Paul gives an urgent warning against any person who will in any way break down this process by which Christians will edify one another.

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple. (Rom. 16:17, 18.)

A review of these and the many parallel passages indicates that when Christians carry on their responsibility of edifying one another—and this applies also to the professional workers in their midst—they need to do several things simultaneously. They need to speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. They need to keep the channels open by which the needy person listens to the one who is helping, and to that end they need to forgive to the uttermost and to be at once patient and persistent in their dealing with one another. They need to work together in the church to constitute a climate in which many Christians move down a solid front toward each other one to sustain him and protect him in his spiritual life. This implies that the individual Christian must himself be growing, that he is utilizing the common activities of the church in which he speaks the Word of God to his brother, and that he employs whatever other devices he can in order to build him up.

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (for He is faithful that promised); and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more as ye see the day approaching. (Heb. 10:22-25.)

Together with the will to forgive, which is the same readiness not to regard the offender's sin with which the heavenly Father views us (1 Peter 4:8: "Charity shall cover the multitude of sins"), must come the quality of meekness. It is amazing how frequently this quality is described as a characteristic of Jesus, of the Christians, and of professional church workers in their dealing with one another (Matt. 5:5; 11:29; 1 Cor. 4:21; Gal. 5:23; 6:1; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; James 3:13; 1 Peter 3:15). Of those instances concerning the worker in the Word, note especially 2 Tim. 2:23-25:

But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes. And the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.

What emerges out of all of this Christian activity? Answer: a church whose members are moving toward the goal of maturity. As they so move, they are simply fulfilling their function as members of the body of Christ, for the maturity which they seek is ultimately not their own, but it is that of the Church of Christ itself, altogether. "Till we all of us arrive at oneness in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and at mature manhood and the stature of full-grown men in Christ" (Weymouth, Eph. 4:13; better: "to the measure of the adult stature of the fullness of Christ").

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