

What about Spiritual Maturity as the Goal of Ministry?

Dr. Jerry A Collins

Identifying Maturity

The word most often translated ‘maturity’ in the Bible is *teleios*, “having attained the end or purpose, complete, perfect... fully developed in a moral sense” [BAG, a Greek Lexicon]. Maturity is a realm in which one emerges by means of their spiritual growth. That is, a follower of Jesus sets his or her sight on becoming a spiritually mature believer. This is the goal of ministry. Here is a working definition:



Maturity is that process of full comprehensive (end, purpose, complete, perfect) development that is reached through continual growth

Maturity in the Bible

There are several passages that specify maturity as the point or goal of the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 2:6, it says, *yet we do speak wisdom among those who are **mature**; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away.* So, there is a category for those who are mature, and that maturity is evidenced by possessing a wisdom that is not derived from this world. In 1 Corinthians 14:20, Paul writes, *brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be **mature**.* While a believer is to be innocent with regard to evil, one must be mature in reference to thinking that leads to understanding, in the context about spiritual gifts and tongues. But notice, there is a category of *mature* thinking that Paul believes the Corinthians can acquire.

In Ephesians 4:13, it reads, *until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a **mature man**, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.* This passage advocates the goal of ministry in the body of Christ is unity, knowledge, Christlikeness, and mature males. The word used here is *andros*, meaning *males* [BAG, a Greek Lexicon]. The emphasis is on the maturity of men as a basic goal of ministry within the body of Christ. Spiritually mature men, husbands, fathers, and leaders is the trajectory of growth that is the goal of ministry.

In Philippians 3:15, Paul remarks, *let us therefore, as many as are **mature**, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.* What attitude should we have? The one the Apostle Paul expressed in the previous verses regarding persistently pressing on toward the goal of Christlikeness (verses 12-14). A mark of spiritual maturity is the desire to go on into Christlikeness in one’s walk of faith. Mature believers share in the apostle’s ambition of growing into the image of Christ. So, maturity is consistent with the pursuit and acquiring of Christlikeness.

In Colossians 1:28, we read, *and we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man **mature** in Christ.* The word *anthropos*, used for *mankind* three times in the verse, emphasizes the Apostle Paul’s purpose that everyone he served had potential to mature. Looking at all of his ministry to everyone along the way, for the entirety of his ministry, the aim and absolute point of it all was to *proclaim, admonish with all wisdom, and teach* so all believers become spiritually *mature*. In other words, his ministry was designed to impact their spiritual growth in such a way that the trajectory of that growth led to their spiritual maturity, which was the preparation essential to be presented before Christ.

In Colossians 4:12, Paul states that Epaphras was *always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand **mature** and fully assured in all the will of God.* It seems that the close association of Epaphras with the Apostle Paul, as his disciple, taught him the necessity of pursuing maturity. He specifically prays for this on behalf of the Colossians. Not only that, his prayers are such that he *labors earnestly* that they would *stand mature*. Again, it is spiritual maturity that is the “end game” for believers.

In Hebrews 5:14, it says, *but solid food is for the **mature** who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.* A person who qualifies as spiritually mature is personally discerning. They possess the capability of making precise moral choices. Hebrews 6:1 states, *therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to **maturity**.* The point here is going on beyond rudimentary knowledge and experience by building on that with more knowledge and its skillful use in one's personal and spiritual life. These verses advocate for believers to emerge as spiritually mature in their spiritual development.

Implications of Ministry Focused on Maturity

First, ministry with the goal of spiritual maturity has an eternal perspective.

- It includes instilling wisdom not of this world (1 Corinthians 2:6).
- It involves influencing men to become spiritually mature (Ephesians 4:13).
- It impacts believers so that they are motivated to pursue Christlikeness (Philippians 3:15).
- It means preparing disciples by their maturity for their own presentation before Christ (Colossians 1:28).
- It encourages setting our disciples' sight on their own spiritual maturity (Hebrews 5:14).

All of this is eternal in nature, preparing disciples for heaven while they live their lives here in the world.

Second, ministry with the goal of spiritual maturity moves along a continuum of growth. Since maturity is a product of growth, **newness** is an essential component of that process. God uses newness in the Bible as a tool for growth and development of His people, His servants, and His leaders. God regularly calls His own to venture into newness, such as:

- New opportunities (Noah building the ark)
- New directions (Abraham entering Canaan)
- New hardships (Moses leadership over Israel)
- New conflicts (Elijah with the prophets of Baal)
- New experiences (Mary impregnated by the Holy Spirit)
- New priorities (Peter welcoming Gentiles)

These were new things never done before. Today, we grow and mature because of new things we learn from God's Word that create new understanding or new awareness of an application of God's Word in our lives. That would be true of anyone who qualifies as spiritually mature.

Third, there is a category for the spiritually mature, into which we should emerge. It is a realm which we desire our disciples to pursue. It takes time, but it is possible to do so, or that category would not exist in Scripture.

The way into the realm of maturity is through full comprehensive development into the image of Jesus Christ, which is reached through continual growth

Staying on this journey and entering into this realm is the challenge of discipleship, both for the disciple and the discipler. How do you know when and if you are mature? When your life matches the requirements associated with maturity in the Bible. The Bible recognizes maturity as something distinct and different from spiritual growth in general. One constant with maturity, though, is newness, which is the perpetual introduction of the unknown. Chaotic people can't handle newness. Ordered people don't want newness. But mature people invite newness and are capable of integrating it toward their full comprehensive development.

So What?

- Don't allow those you are discipling to settle for anything less than their spiritual maturity.
- Always serve and teach and lead as if your disciples are mature. This seems to be how Jesus disciplined.
- Your capacity to impact disciples is consistent with that of your own maturity.
- You may know something about something in Scripture or about God from Scripture, but how comprehensively do you know it? This is where growth, leading to maturity, takes place.
- Understand that spiritual maturity is significant to our evaluation by Christ. It is a game changer that impacts our rewards from Christ.