



Mature Disciples of Christ

In one of his books J. I. Packer wrote about the spiritual strength and maturity of the English Puritans.¹ He compared them to the great redwoods of northern California, some which are over one thousand years old. They are tall trees with a massive diameter; all their strength is in their huge trunks. *"They dwarf you, making you feel your smallness as scarcely anything else does."* In New Zealand we are more familiar with the great kauri trees, of similar size and shape and age. The redwoods and the kauris are giants among trees. In the same way the English Puritans were giants among Christians in their *"mature holiness and seasoned fortitude"*. By comparison the Christians of other eras, including our own, are mere dwarves.

What are the characteristics of a mature Christian and what should you be doing now in order to become a mature disciple of Christ? That is the subject of this article. My purpose is to encourage and direct all of us, young and old, to become mature disciples of Christ.

Characteristics of a mature Christian

When parents raise their children they want to see them grow and mature to be independent, able to stand on their own two feet, capable of making wise and sensible decisions. The apostle Paul holds out the same goal for all Christians. In Ephesians 4:1ff he explains that Christ has given the church pastors and teachers so that believers may *"become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* Paul's aim is that *"in all things" we "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."* (v 15)

One of the features of maturity is **stability**. Young Christians are like small children, easily influenced and led astray by others, drawn away by the latest ideas and ready to believe the last person who spoke to them. In the wider church we see plenty of evidence of this sort of immaturity and instability. New and heretical ideas quickly gather a following. But mature Christians *"will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."* (v 14) Are you stable? Can you discern what is true from what is false?

Paul sees this maturity taking place in the context of the church. Mature Christians are **committed to Christ and his church**. The goal is that *"we all reach unity in the faith"*. (v 13) From Christ, *"the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* (v 16) We regularly meet a person who claims to be a Christian but has no connection with a church. The Scriptures do not support such an individualistic approach. In both the Old and the New Covenant the believer is always described as being part of a community of people who share the same faith. Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 is that *"you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God."* (v 17ff) It is *"together with all the saints"* that we come to grasp the amazing scope of Christ's love for us!

Mature Christians give evidence of **well-rounded Christian character**. These characteristics are comprehensively described in the qualifications for office-bearers in the church. (1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1) The qualities required for elders and deacons are very similar. These qualities must be evident in those elected to office in the church, yet they ought to be evident in all Christians. No Christian ought to be overbearing, quick-tempered, quarrelsome, violent, a lover of money or a drunkard. Every Christian ought to be self-controlled, hospitable, disciplined and blameless. All of

us ought to be temperate, respectable and sincere. Those who are married and have children ought to have only one wife and must manage their families well. Every mature Christian ought to keep hold of the deep truths of the faith. These are qualities of Christian character to strive for! Our Lord sets us a high standard! This is a full description of the mature believer!

Such followers of Christ will seek to serve Jesus, not only in his church, but also in **his kingdom**. They will be active citizens of his kingdom, taking their place in society, fulfilling the various callings God has given them, being a salt and a light in this world. Mature Christians will not hide away in the church, sheltered and protected by other believers, comfortable and cosy in the fellowship of the saints; rather they will seek to promote the rule of the Lord Jesus in the place God has put them. That may be in education, politics or medicine. It may be as a lawyer, teacher or judge. It may be as a drain-layer, builder or joiner, or as a mother, home-maker or home-schooler. Each one of us has a task to do in the kingdom of Christ. Doing that task diligently and faithfully is another mark of a mature Christian.

Living as a citizen of Christ's kingdom will **set us apart** from the people of the world. God's people are to be holy, different from unbelievers. The world will try to squeeze us into its mould, seeking to make us conform to its pattern; but mature disciples of Christ will go on being transformed by the renewing of their minds. (Rom 12:2) If you are going to follow Christ you need to do that wholeheartedly and without compromise.

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Matthew 7:24

You cannot have a dollar both ways. You cannot have a foot in both camps, one in the church and one in the world. You must make a decision. Serving Christ as Lord is a serious business; it is not merely going through the motions of Christianity but rather being 100% committed to following Jesus.

This is why Jesus warned would-be disciples to **count the cost** before making a commitment to follow him. He told two parables, of the man wanting to build a tower and the king going to war, to illustrate the foolishness of committing yourself to a project without first making a realistic assessment of the cost. Then he warned, *"Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple ... Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."* (Luke 14:27, 33) Being a disciple of Christ is not for the faint-hearted; it is for the committed and courageous.

Becoming a mature Christian

We do not expect a little child or a newly planted tree to be mature in two or three years. Maturity takes time and growth. But there must be **a first step**, a beginning, a start. For a baby that begins at conception; for a plant it begins at germination, for a Christian it begins with the new birth brought about by the Holy Spirit. This regeneration is a supernatural and hidden work of God's Spirit. It becomes evident in your life when you repent of sin and believe in God. These are the two elements of conversion. This conversion may come suddenly or gradually, but these two elements must be present in every believer – you must repent and believe. After that we expect to see steady and continuous growth in the life of the believer – growth towards maturity in Christ.

What do you need to do to grow and mature?

Just as a small child needs food in order to grow, and a young plant needs sunshine, nutrients and water to develop, a Christian needs **the food of God's Word**. Peter wrote, *"Like new born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."* (1 Peter 2:2) This pure milk of God's Word is available through family devotions and through the reading and preaching of the Scriptures in our worship services. To make the most of this you need to listen carefully to what is read, taught and preached, and apply it to your life.

It is not enough, however, to be spoon fed like this; you need to learn to feed yourself in your own personal reading of God's Word. You will not become a mature disciple of Christ unless you read the Scriptures personally and prayerfully, thoughtfully and carefully, regularly and systematically. This deserves a entire article in itself, and thankfully Dr Pieter van Huyssteen has written just what you need in the October 2011 issue of *Faith in Focus*. He points out that you must not only read the Bible but meditate on it, that is, think about it and ponder on it and apply it to your own situation.

Along with reading the Bible you need to memorize it. In Psalm 119:11 we read; "*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*" The Navigators have a Topical Memory System that is a great help to memorization. You can develop your own system by writing out Bible verses on small cards and carrying them around with you, consulting them often. Or photocopy a psalm or a passage of the Bible and carry that with you. The key to memorization is repetition; go back over your verse until you have it word-perfect, and then keep revising what you have learned. You will also find it much easier to memorize the Scriptures if you team up with another person and test each other regularly.

Prayer is essential to Christian maturity. God speaks to us in his Word and we speak to him in prayer. Prayer is communicating with God. Just as a marriage will not grow without communication, your relationship with God will not grow without prayer. We need to pray regularly, morning and evening, and before and after meals; but also spontaneously through the day, praising God for a beautiful sunrise, thanking him for his gifts, asking for his help when facing a decision, praying for someone we meet who is in need. In the Pukekohe church I have just started going through the marvelous exposition in the Heidelberg Catechism of the Lord's Prayer. You will find it helpful to read that part of the Catechism as an aid to prayer.

Much more could be written about the other disciplines of the Christian life. In addition to reading the Bible I encourage you to read good Christian books. Three that you would find especially helpful on this subject are *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, by Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of a Godly Man* by Kent Hughes, and *Practical Religion* by J C Ryle.²

Our Lord does not want us to remain infants in the faith, living on milk, but rather to bite into solid food for the mature.³ We need to develop from young saplings into solid kauris, deep rooted, firm and stable in our faith, displaying evidence of Christian character, being committed to the church and active in Christ's kingdom, and living as salt and light in the world. These are the marks of mature disciples of Christ.

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Notes

¹ J I Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 11

² His chapters on *Prayer and Bible Reading* are superb!

³ Hebrews 5:11ff