



## **Spiritual Maturity:**

### ***A Rare yet Essential Requirement for a Healthy Church***

#### **Spiritual Immaturity: A Systemic Problem**

Many problems in the church can be traced to a deficiency of spiritual maturity of its members. Many reveal by their conduct that they are spiritually immature, even after they have reached their senior years.

The apostle Paul has often had to deal with this problem in his ministry. In all his letters he stressed not only the need to be justified by faith in Christ, but also that after having received Christ they should be "*rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith*" (Col. 2:6-7). He was often disappointed when he found believers lacking in this respect. The apostle to the Hebrews, recognizing the same problem, reprimanded the readers of his epistle that they were not ready for "strong meat," even though they had been Christians for years. While you ought to be teachers by now, he complains, you still need to be fed with milk and taught "*the first principles of the oracles of God*" (Heb. 5:12).

Spiritual immaturity was not only a problem in the early church. Also among us there are many professing believers who never seem to rise above the infantile stage of spiritual life. No matter how advanced in years they may be, their conduct and speech is such that one thinks, how childish these people are! I do not say *childlike* – that we may always remain – childlike in faith, trusting the Lord fully like little children trust their parents. But *childish* is something else. That is a word we apply to people who are annoying, combative, dissatisfied, easily hurt, petulant when they don't get their way, etc. There were many people like that in the congregation of Corinth, but also among the Galatians and other Christian communities. We have them in our congregations as well.

Spiritual immaturity shares many characteristics with natural, physical immaturity. That should not surprise us because God is both the Creator of our natural, psychological or mental life and the re-Creator of our spiritual life

#### **God Creates and Re-Creates the Whole Man**

When, by God's grace, we become new creatures in Christ, we need to emphasize both the new and the creaturely aspects of believers. God's redeeming work aims at the restoration of our total humanity. It is the whole man, body, soul and spirit, who is restored into a reconciled, loving relationship with God, our neighbour and ourselves. In conversion, great changes take place in a sinner. But this does not mean that all of a sudden his less desirable character traits will disappear. If he was an angry and impatient man prior to his conversion, he does not immediately or overnight become a calm, and patient type of person. He remains the same person with all his weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, but with this difference that he begins to fight against his ugly character faults. Believers who don't do this or make little or no progress in this respect remain spiritually immature and should really examine themselves whether their conversion was genuine.

It is important, therefore, to know what are some of the marks or characteristics of physical maturity. I will mention just five.

#### ***1. Stability and Flexibility***

A physically mature person is stable and yet flexible. Children are neither, because they still depend on their parents for everything. There is no stability yet because their character is still

being formed. Stability comes gradually as they pass through their crisis years of puberty. A distinct personality develops. Convictions are internalized and a specific life style is adopted. Choices and decisions are made. By the time they reach their twenties, their character is formed and maturity is attained. The truly mature person, however, is not just stable and set in his convictions but at the same time there is flexibility. There is openness and receptivity for self-criticism and correction from others. He has the ability to discern between what is and what is not important and therefore knows when he needs to stick to his convictions and when he can afford to be lenient and tolerant. One meets people like that in the world. They are unbelieving but nice people and sociable, easy to get along with. Often they compare favourably with Christians from whom more can be expected.

With spiritually mature people you see the same stability and level-headedness, yet also flexibility. The apostle Paul longs to have people like that in the congregation. In Philippians 1 he asks the Lord that the Philippians may “*abound more and more in knowledge and in all judgment*” so that they may “*approve things that are excellent*” (Phil 1:9-10).

Spiritually mature Christians possess the spirit of discernment. They have learned to apply the Word of God to all kinds of situations and problems. The spiritually immature person cannot do this. He does not see through the situation and the problem and cannot come up with the proper solution. He is unsure of himself, needs help and guidance, but instead of admitting this, he often acts as if he knows it all. He is quick to judge, makes decisions that make no sense and goes at it like a bull in a china shop. Pity the congregation that has people like that in leadership positions! Such people often know deep down that they are not fit for the office but they act as though wisdom began with them. They present themselves as defenders of orthodoxy and will not tolerate the smallest changes, even when it concerns peripheral issues. They cannot distinguish between what is important and what is (relatively) unimportant. For them everything is essential to salvation.

What a blessing it is, therefore, for a congregation to have men at the helm who are able to speak and act with conviction but who also recognize that others may have opinions that are worth considering, especially when it concern *adiaphora* or things indifferent.

## **2. A Balanced View of Self And Self-Worth**

A second mark of spiritual maturity is a balanced view of oneself and proper self-esteem. Children do not yet have self-knowledge. They are not able to evaluate themselves properly because they go by what parents and other people say or think of them. Children are very sensitive to this, especially when it concerns the opinion other children have of them. Their sense of self-worth is based almost entirely on their peers` approval or disapproval. This is not so bad. It belongs to the normal development of the child. Eventually, it will grow out of that stage and as every parent knows, this brings other problems with it because now Johnny thinks he knows everything.

What is serious is that many physically mature people stay at the mental level of children with the result that they never attain to a healthy knowledge of themselves. This lack of proper self-knowledge often leads to two opposite results: either to *overestimation* or *underestimation* himself. A mature person has a more realistic view of himself. He will not, in false humility, think less of himself than is necessary. But neither will he rate himself higher than is biblically warranted. He is not afraid to say that he believes he has the gifts to take on a certain task or position. But on the other hand, he will readily admit that he lacks the qualifications for accepting a certain assignment for which others are better equipped. In other words, this person has a proper understanding of his limitations but also a healthy awareness of his gifts and abilities.

Some people think that these two things cannot go together. But watch out for Christians who seem to be so humble. They think nothing of themselves, they say, but wait until someone steps on their sensitive toes and they will reveal just how proud they really are and how important they think they are.

The apostle Paul shows us what true humility is and how it can go together with proper biblical self-worth. In his epistles he states repeatedly that he is deeply conscious of his sins. He cannot forgive

himself that he has persecuted Christ and His Church. And that he, of all people, had been chosen to become a servant of the Gospel is a source of great amazement to him.

But while he often speaks of his sin and guilt and unworthiness, we also find in his letters many statements pointing to his many accomplishments as church builder and preacher. This was not bragging on his part, but a realistic assessment of what he had become by the grace and power of God. Of course, none of us can compare ourselves with Paul and what he has accomplished in the service of his Saviour, but it is not wrong to acknowledge God for what He has done for us, in us and through us.

### ***3. Judging Objectively and Impartially***

A third mark of spiritual maturity is that we learn to judge other people and issues objectively and impartially. No one can be completely objective and impartial. We are all people with heads and hearts. That is to say, in all our evaluations of people and things that happen, both our minds and feelings play an important part. With reference to objectivity and impartiality I mean that we need to make a serious effort to evaluate a person or a matter in as open and honest a way possible. Many people are unable to do this and that causes serious difficulties in church and society. True, our judgments are always influenced to a certain degree by sympathy or prejudice.

However, the question, especially for Christians, is to what extent we allow ourselves to be so influenced. It belongs to spiritual maturity that we are aware of this danger. We need to resist all subjective and partisan tendencies because these can easily lead to injustice toward fellow Christians. We must face the ugly truth that we are by nature prone to hate God and our neighbour. And even where this hatred is removed in principle as a result of the new birth, believers still have to fight against remaining corruptions.

One manifestation of this corruption is that we tend to be suspicious toward fellow Christians whom we do not like because they don't agree with us in everything. We tend to view these others as "light" or "heavy" and evaluate what they say or do from that perspective. Spiritually mature believers do not take sides with one or the other party but they will take the side of Christ. Only the Son of Man can set us free from the prison of partisanship. He is the only Party who is always right and never operates from ulterior motives. His Word alone must be our standard and guide for assessing difficult problems and seeking solutions for them.

Problems in a congregation are resolved only when everyone realizes that he or she is part of the problem and stands in need of forgiveness. As imitators of Christ we will try to be impartial, honest, fair, merciful and mild in our judgments.

### ***4. Knowing how to Deal with Adversity and Disappointments***

A fourth mark of spiritual maturity is the ability to deal with adversities and disappointments in a positive manner. Many Christians cannot do this. They are thrown into a tizzy at the slightest difficulty that comes their way. When something happens that does not fit their expectations, they panic. Usually such immature behaviour can be traced to their having been spoiled as children. They always had to have their way and parents gave in to their every wish. Everything revolved around them and this self-centred attitude stays with them throughout their lives.

Part of a healthy development of children includes that they learn to reckon with others and their rights. Where such social skills are not taught and internalized, people become impossible to live with. One finds such people also in the church. They are egocentric in everything they do. They view others and judge them solely from their own selfish perspective and advantage. When they are not recognized for their accomplishments they complain that no one appreciates them. They cannot handle adversities when these inevitably occur. When sickness strikes loved ones or them, they go to pieces and wallow in self-pity.

The spiritually mature person is able to leave everything to God and His wise providence. He lives by the motto. "Father knows best." Not that such resignation comes easy. We read of Joseph in Egypt that the Lord was with him and showed him mercy. But there must have been many

questions in Joseph's mind. Here I am in prison. Is this my reward for resisting temptation? Yet Joseph does not collapse spiritually. He does not become bitter and rebellious. He does not lose his faith but keeps on trusting the Lord that He will bring everything to a good end.

Such acceptance has nothing to do with stoical resignation to whatever fate has in store for us. We do not have to suppress our feelings and refuse to let things bother us. Spiritual maturity allows us to feel pain and experience grief and to shed tears. But it does keep us from despair and from childishly asking, why me?

## **5. Accepting Responsibility**

Our fifth and final mark of spiritual maturity is a willingness to accept responsibility for our words and actions. God has created man as a rational being with a sense of responsibility and accountability. Maturity in this connection means accepting one's accountability toward God and man. People who never accept this principle remain immature. Like children, they always have an excuse. They have never done anything wrong. It's always someone else who is to blame: the wife, the husband, the boss at work, the minister, or the consistory. They always find a way to justify their actions.

It is true that this tendency to shift the blame is in our blood. That is why spiritual maturity includes a willingness (worked by the Holy Spirit) to let God's voice speak to us, accusing, judging and even condemning us so that we end up saying with David in Psalm 51, *"Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."*

This is no simple matter because there are also other, competing voices that address us. Daily, we are told by advertisements, fashion designers and especially our own sinful hearts, just do it, everybody does it, there is no harm in this, you are only human, etc. These voices are idols, false gods that seek our destruction. What we need, therefore, is to hear above all these other voices the Voice of God.

One of the biggest problems facing the church today is that so few of its members seem to be hearing this convicting voice of God. As long as we keep listening to voices that encourage greed, lust, pride, vindictiveness, selfishness and other vices, we can neither have a healthy personal spiritual life nor a healthy church life.

Accepting responsibility for our actions is essential to our own well-being and that of the church. Only when we ask ourselves, to what extent have I contributed to the problems besetting the congregation, will we contribute to the solution of these problems. Then we don't say either, let the consistory fix the problem. Such an attitude is tantamount to saying, am I my brothers keeper? Mature Christians know they belong to a body, namely the body of Christ of which He is the Head and they the members. All the members of that body need each other, especially when there are difficulties and tensions that threaten to tear the body apart.

I have given five marks of spiritual maturity. No doubt there are more that could be mentioned, but these few may suffice in helping us find out where we are in our spiritual development. Maybe the first question we should ask ourselves is: am I a child of God at all? Yet, important as this question is, we should not think that it is the only question we need to ask. Even if all our members were truly converted we would still have to face the fact that many of us seem to be stuck in the infant stage of spiritual life. We saw that the apostle Paul was grieved when he realized how many believers in his day were still immature in the faith. He took this very seriously. Do we? Is it enough of a problem for us to bring it to the Lord in prayer, as Paul did?

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