

ON GROWING UP

by Ray C. Stedman

We have been examining the church, trying to learn from the words of the great apostle why the church is here on earth. We saw that it is not here to do what other groups can do; it is here to do what no other group can possibly do. It is here to manifest the life and power of Jesus Christ in this 20th century hour. This is the ministry of Christ exactly as it was detailed by the prophet Isaiah in his 61st chapter, which our Lord quoted in the synagogue of Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me ... to bring good tidings ... to bind up the brokenhearted ... to proclaim liberty..."

Then we saw how that ministry is to be carried out through the ministry of many, not just a few. It takes the whole church to do the work of the church. That the work is to be carried on by the exercise of certain gifts which were given by the resurrected Christ when he ascended on high to the Father's throne and took over the reins of the universe. "All power is given unto me," he said, "in heaven and on earth," {Matt 28:18b KJV}. In order to make that power manifest among men, he gave gifts unto men -- and those gifts are manifest in his church. Each Christian has received a gift for ministry, and the supreme task of his life as a Christian is to discover that gift and put it to work. That is the only way the church will ever be what it was designed to be. You can only fulfill that peculiar function in the body of Christ which is allotted to you. If you do not do it, the whole body suffers. Therefore, it is exceedingly essential that we know what our gifts are and begin to manifest them.

We saw not only that the reason for living centers around this gift, but that the full provision of our Lord for developing and operating these gifts is through the molding ministry of apostles and prophets who lay the foundations of faith; and evangelists and pastor-teachers, who use the Word of God to motivate the people of God and thus direct them and shape them into what God wants them to be. Now there is the whole program.

We come now to the final purpose, the goal of all this, in Ephesians 4, beginning with Verse 13. Verse 12 tells us the special gifts are given "for the equipment of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ." The work of the ministry is to the world; the building up of the body of Christ is a ministry to other Christians. But to what goal does it all aim? To what purpose? Paul says,

... 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 fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. 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 knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. {Eph 4:13-16 RSV}

That is a great statement. Did you notice it carefully? There is a really startling thing in that statement, and I wonder if you caught the full impact of it. The apostle is telling us what the end and goal of all God's far flung enterprise among men is. What is God doing? What is he after?

Note Paul does not say a thing about the evangelization of the world. The goal of God's working is not to evangelize the world. I know there is the great commission in the Bible. I believe in it fully. I know that Jesus sent us out to preach the gospel to every creature, and that this is often held up as the supreme aim and function of the Church. It is a very important function, but it is not the supreme thing, not the final goal. The apostle says nothing here about the establishment of the millennium. I believe in that too. I believe in the great vision of the prophets that there is coming a day when peace shall reign on the earth and men shall melt their spears into plowshares and make their swords into pruning hooks and never learn war anymore. I believe there is a day coming when righteousness shall prevail across the face of the earth, and all the stories of injustice and

heartache and tragedy that we are so exposed to now will be forgotten. But that is not the purpose Paul has in mind as the great and supreme reason for the existence of the church. He says nothing about bringing in world peace and justice. All of these will be accomplished, but they are not the essential things.

The supreme thing, the paramount thing, the thing God is after above everything else (did you catch it?), is mature manhood. It is you, fulfilling your humanity, being what God had in mind when he made man and woman in the first place. It is not that we should be white-robed saints, or that he wants to produce accomplished churchmen, or religious experts. He desires nothing of this kind, but that you may be mature, grown up, responsible, well-adjusted, wholehearted human beings, as God intended men and women to be.

Now it takes the church to do that. You cannot be that apart from the working of the church as God intended the church to work.

Deep down at the deepest level of your heart, is it not true that this is what you yourself passionately desire? You want to be a whole person, a complete human being. You want to fulfill what God has put into you. Well, that is exactly what he wants too. The proof that this is deep in every heart is the fact which psychologists confirm. We all have a mental image of ourselves which, to some degree, approximates this idea. We all think of ourselves in most ways as mature, much more mature than we really are, for our power to deceive ourselves is sometimes almost incredible. Take even those times when we think we are being ruthless and brutally honest with ourselves. Then we often describe ourselves in the most wretched terms. We deplore ourselves. We say, "I'm nothing but a stubborn, foolish person." Ah yes, but let someone agree with that and see what your reaction is. We say, "What do you mean? Why do you call me that?" It is because we all have this inner conviction that we are approaching maturity, because that is what we so desperately want, that is what we are basically made for.

Why is it that we are so mistaken on this? Well, it is obvious, is it not? It is because we have the wrong measuring stick. We have adopted the measuring stick of the world, and it is totally false. When we apply it, we find ourselves able to measure up to some degree because the measuring stick of the world is to measure ourselves by one another. We compare ourselves with someone else. Each of us has someone mentally tucked away in the back of our mind, whom we drag out whenever we need him and whom we consider to be less mature, less developed, less of a real human being than we are. What a comfort they are to us! It may be our mother-in-law, our boss, or someone else, and we say, "Well, at least I'm not like so-and-so," and thus reassure ourselves. But we are using the wrong measuring stick.

A little boy came to his mother one day and said, "Mother, guess what! I'm 8 feet 4 inches tall!" His mother, in great surprise inquired into it and found he was using a 6-inch ruler; he was actually 4 feet 2 inches.

Now that is the problem before us. We measure ourselves by one another and the apostle says in Second Corinthians that those who compare themselves with themselves or with someone else, "are not wise" {2 Cor 10:12 KJV}, they are deceiving themselves.

Now, twice in this great passage, Paul sets before us the only realistic measuring stick there is in the universe. Twice he reveals what will be the final standard by which we will ultimately be measured as to the progress we have made in life. It is the measuring stick of Christ, "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ;" and in Verse 15, "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." There is the measuring stick. It is not Christ the miracle worker, not Christ the incomparable teacher, but Jesus Christ the man, the Son of God and Son of Man. He is whom God measures us by, and the one whom we are to measure ourselves by.

This is tremendous, if you think about it, because it means we must understand something of the humanity of Jesus our Lord. We must realize what a thorough-going man he was. And that means exposure to the Gospels. We must live through those stories of our Lord again until we see him manifesting all the great qualities of manhood; we must see the tenderness and toughness of Christ, the humor and humility, the discipline and delightfulness that made him such a winsome companion, and yet see how he could be stern and unbending and inflexibly set upon a goal. We need to see both the serenity and authority of Jesus the man. The more you gaze at this man, Christ Jesus, the more you will find coming into focus a clear picture of what manhood is

intended to be, and what you can be, under God. He is the measurement of our maturity.

If you take that measurement and measure yourself by it, it is pretty discouraging, is it not? Yet the only realistic word we have to measure ourselves by is to ask ourselves, "How much am I like Jesus Christ?" It must not be only a feeble attempt to imitate him. Imitations are worthless; they can never be anything but shabby, cheap imitations. This is not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about becoming *like* Christ by *obeying* him, *appropriating* him. Not by hearing, but *by doing*. That is always the emphasis of Scripture.

I have been impressed anew in reading through the Gospels at the way Jesus continually comes back to this. He says, "not he who hears my words, but he who does them, he it is that is acceptable to my Father," {cf, John 5:45-47}. It is not those who say they have helped the weak and ministered to the sick, etc., but those who have done it. James writes with great bluntness and says, faith without works is dead," {Jas 2:20, 2:26 KJV}. He stresses putting faith into action and this is what Paul stresses in this phrase, "the knowledge of the Son of God."

You cannot know Jesus Christ until you follow him. You will never know him without that. The disciples had an acquaintanceship with Jesus Christ before they became his disciples, that is obvious from the Gospels, but they never knew him until they left everything and followed him.

Now, how does this measurement of maturity strike you?

Does it discourage you?

Are you saying to yourself, "If that is the standard, I'm giving up. I'll never be like him. If you expect me to measure my maturity by the maturity and manhood of Jesus Christ, then it is a hopeless cause." Well, then, I think you need to note something else in this great section the apostle brings before us. Notice the process by which maturity comes. This is very important. Twice again, in this great passage, Paul sets it before us. It is a process, he says, of growth. There it is in Verse 15:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way ... {Eph 4:15 RSV}

Then again, in the latter part of Verse 16,

when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth ... {Eph 4:16b RSV}

Growth is God's method. That immediately tells us two very encouraging things about this matter of becoming mature, not merely mature as a religious person, but mature as a human being:

First, it is something that does not take place suddenly. It is not something that happens overnight. It is a process; it is a matter that requires time. I suggest that is extremely important. I know many Christians who are greatly disturbed when, having become Christians, they do not find themselves suddenly, remarkably, completely transformed into angelic creatures. They are greatly disturbed when they find the old life still very much present, and some of the old attitudes are still gripping and controlling their lives. They do not know what to make of this. They wonder if they are even Christian at all. Of course, they are Christian, if they have exercised faith in Jesus Christ and are resting upon him, but there is a process of growth which must follow and it takes time for this to take place.

That is why the Scriptures warn against putting someone into a position of authority who is a novice. He simply has not been a Christian long enough to have gone through enough experiences to have matured him to the place of carrying responsibility. It takes some time, inescapably.

Remember how the writer of Hebrews points that up, in reverse. He says to these Hebrews, "when for the time you ought to have been teachers, you need someone to teach you again ..." {Heb 5:12}. That is, they had been Christians long enough to be teachers, but something else had arrested their development. Yet he makes clear that there is need for time.

Often this is the way the Christian life works. We come into it as newborn Christians, and for a long time we resist the great principles which make for Christian development. It takes quite a while for us to really learn that God intends to do something quite different with us than we thought he would when we grew up as natural men and women. We resist these changes. We do not like his dealings with us at times. Finally he brings us to the place where we give in and we accept and understand the principles, but then we learn it takes time to practice these principles even once we accept them and grasp them.

Someone has pointed out that it is like trying to learn how to swim by taking a correspondence course in swimming. You cannot learn it that way. You must get into the water. You have got to grow spiritually that way.

Then, as we go along, we discover that growth seems to be so slow, so discouraging. We think we have mastered something, we have at last overcome our hot tempers or our passionate natures, our lusts are subdued and we have learned how to be easygoing, friendly, outgoing people or to give up our bitterness, our grudges, our jealousies, and other ugly things, and then, suddenly, something will happen, we will be put with the wrong person and out it all comes again. Then we are so discouraged. We go to the Lord, and say, "Lord, what's the matter? Why don't you hurry up this process? I'm so tired of being immature." Have you ever felt that way? I have, many times. But God has his own time and sometimes it takes almost a lifetime to grow up fully. I do not mean that you cannot come into relative maturity within a few years of conversion, but many of us are going to be at this process a long time before we grow up fully into Christ. God expects it to take some time. After all, as someone has pointed out, it takes God years to grow an oak tree, but he can grow a squash in three months. God is not interested in growing Christian squashes.

Nevertheless, I love to see evidence of eagerness for growth. I remember asking a boy once how old he was. Quick as a flash he said, "I'm twelve, going on thirteen, soon be fourteen." I like that eagerness to grow up.

But it is encouraging to us to realize this is a process of time and we do not need to be discouraged if we do not find we are completely like Christ yet. What we need to ask is, are we on the way, is there progress, are we moving in this direction?

Now the second thing this need for growth reveals to us is that progress is discernible by stages. Did you ever watch a child grow up? All of you who are parents know that growth follows a physical pattern, in discernible stages.

My wife and I had lunch recently with Dr. Harold Englund, of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley. He was telling us about his fourteen year old boy and the amazement that he and his wife experience as they watch this boy shooting up into manhood. He has grown a foot in the last year! Dr. Englund illustrated that by saying that for fourteen years he had been able to wear a certain size of shoe without any rivalry, but this last year his son suddenly developed the same size of foot, and his father found him borrowing his shoes. But then he heaved a sigh of relief and said the last time he had bought a pair of shoes he found the boy had grown beyond him, and he was safe again.

Well, that is the way growth occurs. It is by stages, and you will find that the Scriptures reflect this as to the spiritual life. John speaks of children, young men, fathers, and there are other such comparisons in other parts of Scripture. There is a definite progression evident in the Christian life and there are definite characteristics of each stage along this line. We are to grow up stage by stage, and we can measure our growth by looking in two different directions. We can look back to the infantileness of childhood and see whether we are making progress away from immature attitudes and outlooks, or we can look at our present situation and see if the factors which made for growth are now present. Growth does not come by trying. You cannot, as Jesus pointed out, "by taking thought" {Matt 6:27, Luke 12:25}, "add a cubit to your stature." You cannot say, "Now I am going to try to grow." Children would love to do this if they could, but they cannot. Well, then, how do you grow? You make sure that the factors that make for growth are present. That is the way you can measure your spiritual maturity, in those two different ways. That is exactly what the apostle does here.

He says first, in Verse 14,

... that we may no longer be children [there is the backward glance], tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. {Eph 4:14 RSV}

Ask yourself, "Am I moving away from childish attitudes?" It is important to point out that the Scripture exhorts us to be *childlike*, but never to be *childish*. Those are two different things. Child-likeness is that refreshing simplicity of faith which believes and acts without questioning; but childishness is quite a different thing, and it is this which the apostle is talking about here.

There are two general characteristics of children:

The first is instability. Children are notoriously fickle, their attention span is very short. You cannot interest them in one thing very long before they are after something else immediately.

I made the great mistake the other day of trying to get my four-year-old to make one choice among 31 flavors of ice cream. She could not read the names, but I held her up so she could see the cartons -- and ten minutes later we settled for plain vanilla!

You see this instability in young Christians, and in Christians who are old in time, but still are immature. There is a flightiness, an inconstancy, an inconsistency.

You can see it in doctrine, as the apostle suggests here, "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine." Did you know there are fads in the religious life, and they come and go like fashions in clothes? Immature Christians are always riding the crest of a new fad, forever picking up the newest thing that has hit, and usually it is presented in some kind of book. I find Christians are continually discussing some new, exciting book that seems to have all the answers to every spiritual problem. I have come to recognize through the years that is a mark of immaturity. They do not talk about the Bible that way, yet this is the book that really has the answer, the most exciting book of all. But it is always some writer whom they think has grasped the basic and central truth. You can see this vacillation in various ways in this matter of doctrine. There are hobbies which people identify themselves with. Prophecy can become a hobby, and then the spiritual life becomes a fad, then some other aspect of Christian life is taken up. People make a great deal of these, shifting from one thing to another, constantly changing. That is a mark of childishness, immaturity.

You see it in actions as well. I have learned that the immature Christian manifests himself by unfaithfulness, by undependability. How many times have we asked someone to take on a task in the church and they assume it with some degree of eagerness, of vitality. But it is not very long before their interest wanes, they lose their head of steam, and become discouraged. Before you know it they either do not show up at all, or they call you up and say, "I'm sorry, could you get someone else to do this." That is always a mark of immaturity, of childishness. Have you ever noticed that part of the fruit of the Spirit is not only love, joy, peace, longsuffering, and gentleness, but also faithfulness? Faithfulness, dependability, responsibility; that is a mark of maturity.

You can see this childishness in immature Christians by their attendance at meetings. Most new Christians begin their Christian life with an eagerness to be at meetings. They love to hear the Word of God, they just cannot seem to get enough of truth. But watch them awhile. First, they stop coming to the midweek service, then the Sunday evening service, and after awhile they are sporadic at the morning service, attending, perhaps, only every other time. That is always a sign of immaturity, a sign that such have not yet learned to walk in full dependence on the Holy Spirit in Christian maturity.

There are some, of course, who mistake rigidity for stability. They narrow their Christian life down to a narrow routine and then are faithful at that, and so they say this is a sign of maturity, of stability. No, they are not stable at all; they are just stuck! The mature Christian life is a life lived in the whole range of human experience, but in all that entire range it is a life of responsible dependability. That is a true mark of maturity.

There is also a second mark of childishness, and that is to be undiscerning. Did you ever notice how children

are often unaware of danger? They may play in dangerous situations and be quite unaware that there is anything threatening them. New Christians, and older but immature Christians are like this. It is always manifest in their confident attitude, in the degree of almost arrogant certainty that they are not going to fall, no one need worry about them. You see this in Peter before the cross. "Lord, these others may deny you, I wouldn't put it past them. I know these fellows, they're that kind. But Lord, there is one fellow you can count on and that's Peter. I'll see you through, Lord, I'll stay with you to the end." But the Lord said, "Thank you Peter, but before the cock crows twice tomorrow morning you will have denied me three times," {cf, Mark 14:29-30}. That is how much his zealous, earnest immaturity was worth. It is so visible in immature Christians. There is an uncritical acceptance of whatever comes. They listen to anybody, and there is no fear that they will be trapped into anything. But those who have learned to walk with the Lord in maturity become like the Apostle Paul, they proceed in weakness and trembling. They realize that the enemy is subtle and can easily divert them, can easily trap them. They know they can easily fall into error if they are not walking constantly in careful expectancy that God will be with them, to keep them in the midst of perils.

Now, answer the question, "How about you?" How mature are you? Some of you have been Christians for years. Have you gotten away from childish tantrums, attitudes of inconsistency, undependability, and undiscerning naivete that leads you frequently into error so you find yourself again and again on the wrong side of things and did not realize how you got there? If you have, then you are maturing in Christ.

But there is a second thing, another factor that makes for growth, here in Verse 15. We measure our growth negatively by marking the distance we have moved from childishness, but there is a positive measurement also. It is found in the phrase, "speaking the truth in love." This is all one word in Greek, and a very interesting word. It could be translated "truthing in love," i.e. living the truth in love. I find this to be very revealing.

It is exceedingly helpful to check yourself by asking this question, "How much do I really want to see myself the way I am? How much do I want to know the truth about myself?" I find there are many who do not want to know the truth about themselves at all. We all at times do not want to hear anyone tell us what is wrong and we resist every effort to unfold it to us. We do not even want to admit it to ourselves. We would rather live in a dream world, to view the world with rose-colored glasses, than to listen to blunt and brutal truth about ourselves.

There is a phenomenon which is often present among missionaries who first go out to foreign fields, called "culture shock." Anyone who has lived at any length in a foreign country with a greatly different culture knows what this is. It happens when people find themselves plunged into a totally new situation where all the familiar cues that make them feel at ease with other people are absent. It can be a most shattering thing, a most disconcerting experience. You find yourself unable to communicate with others and thus to show them how intelligent, how educated you are. Especially is this true when there is a different language involved and even after months of study the most you can expect to do is to carry on a fairly intelligent conversation about the price of a sack of potatoes. You find yourself unable to display those qualities and virtues which won respect for you among others and you are reduced to regarding yourself almost as an idiot. This finds its manifestation in various ways, but essentially by way of rejection. Those who suffer from culture shock reject the country they are in; they cannot stand anything about it, everything is wrong -- they criticize and carp and find fault with everything that happens. Or sometimes this reverses itself and they reject the mission board that sends them out. They blame them and their fellow missionaries, saying that everything that has gone wrong is because they have not been told this or they were not trained to do that. Sometimes it takes other directions and turns inward upon themselves and they blame themselves for everything. They feel they are a total failure and a misfit and do not belong out there. This can also be very shattering.

But I am convinced, the longer I live as a Christian, that something very much like this takes place with every Christian. After all, Christianity is a totally different way of living. It is lived on a completely different level. The more we grasp that fact, the more we will discover that all the familiar props to our ego are taken away from us, and we are more or less suddenly confronted with the shock of self-discovery. We learn that much of our acceptance by others was dependent upon impressions we could make that did not find any reality in us. That can be a terribly disconcerting thing, a staggering, shattering thing. All these ego-salving techniques that the world employs, which we found perfectly acceptable before we became Christians, are unacceptable as

Christians. The philosophy which approaches life on a tit-for-tat basis, "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, etc." is totally unacceptable in Christian life, and no longer to be approved. We must love our enemies and do good to those who spitefully use us, and pray for those who persecute us. The effect that we made upon others by the beauty of our form or figure or the dazzling character of our personality we find to be totally unimpressive to the Holy Spirit. He is not impressed by it in the least degree. This produces the shock of self-discovery, which so many immature Christians find to be a frightening thing.

But if it is truly grasped it is not frightening at all. It is the most hopeful thing that ever happened to you in your life. The moment you began to take a good, square, honest look at yourself and to see yourself as you are, with all the facade stripped away, may be the most painful, but it is also the most hopeful moment in life. Because, from then on you can live in truth, open, unaffected, unashamed, protecting nothing, with no need for posture or for pretense any longer. You can be yourself, "truthing in love," the greatest experience there is. That is the mark and measurement of maturity.

There is one final thing here and I will quickly mention that. In Verse 16, Paul says,

... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love. {Eph 4:16 RSV}

The apostle uses a word here which is used only once besides in the whole New Testament (Ephesians 2:21). It is this word that is translated "joined and knit together." He is speaking about the body now, and he says that one of the factors that makes for growth is the acceptance of the ministry of other Christians to you, the fact that the parts of the body are designed to minister to each other, each part in it joined and knit together. The word comes from three words brought together. The apostle actually coins a word here to say what he wants to say. He takes a word which means "a joint," two things put together; and then he uses the word "with"; and with these he links the word "to choose," i.e., it's God's choice that has put you in the body of Christ, in the very place God wants you to be, among the Christians he wants you to be with, because you need them and they need you. In other words, there is to be a mutual ministry of acceptance, one with another.

Now that is very important. Do you know what that means? That means that you are where you are because that is where God wants you. He put you with the Christians in this place because they are the kind you need. That may be hard to swallow -- some of them are pretty prickly, rather thorny, hard to live with -- but they are what you need and you are what they need. It is as each part of the body accepts this and ministers one to the other, each part doing what it was designed to do, not all trying to be alike but each one content to be different and yet to acknowledge that others, too, have the right to be different, that there comes growth in maturity unto the full manhood of Jesus Christ. Then do not reject God's instruments.

To do so points up the fallacy, so common among American Christians, of moving from one church to another if you do not like the people where you are. That is totally inconsistent with the New Testament pattern. God put you where you are; you are to stay there and learn to live and walk and work there, and God will use that to make for growth in your life that you might be complete in Jesus Christ. That is what he wants. This is the only chance we have of being whole persons, to walk in honesty and acceptance in love.

Note that both of these are linked with that phrase, "in love." As we walk this way, remember that day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, the Spirit of God is effecting a miracle and you and I are becoming like the manhood of Jesus Christ, formed in all the glory of that well-adjusted, completely oriented, stable, solid, wholehearted manhood, the maturity and stature of the fullness of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Father, thank you for this look at ourselves and our need of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not only in our lives but in the lives of others about us, of their ministry to us as well as our ministry to them. Make us to accept this fully, and to walk in it, and grow in it until we fulfill this great desire of your heart and stand in maturity before you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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