

## In Pursuit of Maturity

by J. Oswald Sanders

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*Let us go on to maturity...*

Hebrews 6:1

Two pastors happened to be walking in opposite directions on the main street of their city. One was striding along at a great pace, and as he passed by, the other pastor inquired, "Where are you hurrying to?"

"I'm hurrying on to perfection," was the rejoinder.

"Well, if that's the case," said the other, "I had better not hinder you, for you have such a long, long journey ahead of you."

Most of us would concede the appropriateness of the jest to our own case, for are we not very conscious that we have a long road ahead of us as we strive to attain mature Christian character? The example of the perfect life of Christ seems so far removed from the level of our attainment that at times we grow discouraged. Nevertheless the exhortation of Hebrews 6:1 is addressed to all believers, and it carries within a note of optimism.

In his commentary of Hebrews 6:1, Bishop Westcott points out that there are three possible translations, each of which warns against a possible danger:

"Let us go on to maturity" suggests the possibility that (1) we may *stop too soon*, feeling that we have arrived. Paul contradicted this complacency when he wrote, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect . . . I press toward the mark . . ." (Phil. 3:12, 14 KJV). (2) "Let us press on" suggests that we may succumb to *the peril of discouragement* and drop our bundle. No, we are to heed the warning and "continue progressing toward maturity," as the tense of the verb indicates. (3) "Let us be borne on," warns against the peril of *thinking*

*that we are left to do it alone*. In the pursuit of maturity we have the fullest cooperation of the triune God. It takes all three of these possible translations to convey the wealth and significance of these few words.<sup>1</sup>

In a very honest and self-revealing manner, Lane Adams describes his pursuit of maturity:

In this struggle after maturity I often sought the counsel of others by reading books and by veiled roundabout questioning of men I admired. Never admitting to the real specifics, I yet longed to know more about what brought maturity in the Christian life, because it was becoming obvious to me I didn't have it. (How hard it was for me to face and admit this to myself!)

There was a general agreement on what brought maturity. Serious in-depth daily study of the Bible; a living relationship to God in prayer; regular sharing of your faith in Christ through witness; involvement in the local church and other service to mankind as opportunities presented themselves. All of this I had been doing for several years. Why were the results not greater?

I received no help at all from others. Answers ranged anywhere from a conception of conversion that presupposed maturity arriving overnight, to an honest "I don't know."<sup>2</sup>

This poignant experience of a sincere seeker after maturity is not uncommon, and yet it need not be so. In the manifesto of His kingdom, our Lord gave this ringing assurance: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt. 5:6). An increasing spiritual maturity is an attainable goal, not a constantly receding mirage.

In Paul's exposition of the purpose he had in view in proclaiming Christ, he made it clear that his

objective was more than evangelism: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect [mature] in Christ” (Col. 1:28, italics mine). And he pursued his objective with intensity, for he added, “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Col. 1:29).

In another letter Paul further elucidated the standard of maturity that he held up before the Ephesian Christians. He prayed that they might “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13, italics mine). It was for this purpose Christ gave to His church the spiritually gifted men referred to in Ephesians 4:11-12.

Reaching for maturity is a dynamic process that continues as long as we live. The Christian life is not a hundred-meter dash, but a marathon that will test our spiritual stamina to the limit. There is no such thing as instant maturity or instant sainthood.

*Let no one think that sudden in a minute  
All is accomplished and the work is done,  
Though in thine earliest dawn thou shouldst begin it,  
Scarce were it ended in thy setting sun.*

F.W.H. Myers, “St. Paul”

Maturing is a slow process. It is achieved only with difficulty — physical, mental, and spiritual. It is a process that never ends, but it can be accelerated by obedience to the spiritual laws laid down in Scripture. This should save us from discouragement. As Henry Ward Beecher once said, “The Church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones.”

A Chinese proverb says: “If you are working for a year, plant rice. If you are working for a century, plant a tree. If you are working for eternity, plant a man.”

When God is developing a life for eternity, He is in no hurry. A pumpkin will mature in three months, but an oak tree takes a century, and there are no shortcuts. This principle of growth is equally applicable in the spiritual realm. Clement of Rome so applied it many centuries ago:

The process of growth in a tree is slow but inevitable.  
The foliage falls after the harvest, but then in the

Spring a bud appears, and later flowers. These in turn lead on to young unripe grapes, and finally the full cluster. It does not take very long, it is true, but the whole process must take place. No stage can be left out. There are no shortcuts to a crop of good, mature fruit.

Neither can God’s purposes be hurried. No stage can be left out. The whole process must take place. But let us be in no doubt that His promises will be fulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

The principle of growth in spiritual maturity is often taught and illustrated in Scripture. Jesus drew a parallel with the wheat harvest: “First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head” (Mark 4:28). John recognized this principle in his first letter when he wrote, “I write to you, dear children . . . I write to you, fathers I write to you, young men . . .” (1 John 2:12, 13).

In human life there are three stages of maturity. The first is *dependent childhood*, when the infant has to rely on others for almost everything. The child makes no decisions and needs constant care and nurture. The second stage of maturity is *independent adolescence*, when the developing child begins to realize self-hood and demands the right to make his or her own decisions. The child is no longer content to be dependent on others but feels competent to choose his own destiny. Finally the person moves into *maturing adulthood*. The person’s powers are developed, and he or she is now a responsible person in his or her own right. The person has attained adult status and accepts full responsibility for his or her own life and actions.

A similar progression is seen in our growth in Christian maturity. The new life that enters at conversion is the infant life. “Like newborn babies, crave spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2). The embryo life in the new believer is fragile and requires loving care and nurture in the dependent stage. A nursing mother is needed as long as the child remains a milk-drinking infant. Gradually the child will progress to solid food as he or she moves on to adolescence.

Next comes the independent adolescent stage when the young believer has found his or her feet and becomes impatient of restraints. Spiritual adolescence, like physical adolescence, is sometimes a rather tempestuous period. The sanctity of old institutions

and methods is challenged. The wisdom of age is questioned, and the young person steps out on his or her own. Provided it is kept within limits, this is a normal development, but the life must be brought under the Lordship of Christ and the control of the Holy Spirit if it is to attain full spiritual maturity.

The third stage is that of progressive maturity. Adulthood has been attained, but there is endless scope for growth. We are to grow up into Christ "in everything," every part of life finding its center and goal in Him.

Commenting on Paul's exhortation to "grow up into him who is the Head" (Eph. 4:15), Ronald Knox points out that a baby's head is very large in proportion to the rest of the body. But as the body develops, it grows up in correct proportion to the head. As the maturing believer grows to match the Head, he or she progressively moves toward the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13 KJV).<sup>4</sup>

There is to be no standing still in our pursuit of maturity. Oliver Cromwell inscribed in his Bible a pregnant motto: "He who ceases to be better, ceases to be good."

*Let me then be always growing,  
Never standing still,  
Listening, learning, better knowing  
Thee and Thy blessed will.*  
Anonymous

The attaining of spiritual maturity takes time, but time alone is no guarantee of growth. As has been pointed out, maturity sometimes outruns time. Do we not sometimes remark of some child, "She is mature for her age"? Or of another, "Will he never grow up?" Maturity, whether physical or spiritual, does not always progress at a constant pace, and this is especially so in the adolescent stage. Maturity is the natural outworking of the growing process of the soul and is organic, not mechanical.

"It is not the time itself that produces the maturity," writes Charles C. Ryrie, "rather the progress made and the growth achieved are all-important. Rate multiplied by time equals distance, so that the distance to maturity may be covered in a shorter time if the rate of growth is accelerated; and it will

be accelerated if none of the control which ought to be given to the Holy Spirit is retained by self."<sup>5</sup>

All growth is progressive, and the more complex and delicate the organism, the more time it will take to reach maturity. But it should be said that one is mature not merely after a certain lapse of time, but after the essential laws of spiritual growth have been obeyed. Physical growth is determined by observance of the laws of nutrition and health. Spiritual growth is spontaneous when the soul is fed consistently from the Word, when it breathes the pure air of prayer, and when it cultivates fellowship with the people of God. On the other hand, our growth can be stunted by failing to provide congenial spiritual conditions.

If we are to exercise an influential spiritual ministry, it will grow out of the soil of a faithfully observed devotional life.

*Thank God! A man can grow!  
He is not bound  
With earthward gaze to creep along the ground:  
Though his beginning be but poor and low,  
Thank God, a man can grow!*

C. Cowman

<sup>1</sup>As quoted in W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Let Us Go On* (Chicago: B.I.C.A.), p. 73

<sup>2</sup>Lane Adams, *How Come It's Taking Me So Long to Get Better?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 19

<sup>3</sup>David Winter, *Faith Under Fire* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1983) p. 14

<sup>4</sup>Ronald Knox, *St. Paul's Gospel* (London, 1053), p. 84

<sup>5</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 13



A native of New Zealand, the late **J. Oswald Sanders** (1902-1992) was a consulting director for Overseas Missionary Fellowship, the organization founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. He preached and taught in conferences in many countries and wrote over 40 books on the Christian life, including *The Incomparable Christ*, *Satan Is No Myth*, and *Enjoying Intimacy With God*.

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