

Christ, Discipleship and Maturity

This paper is an introduction to a book being submitted to NavPress for publication with the same name and where the topics are developed in much more detail.

Christ, Discipleship and Maturity

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Matthew 7:13-14

The meaning and concept of spiritual maturity has been highly elusive. George Barna leads perhaps the largest clearing house on earth for collecting data on trends and statistics in the present day church. Consider the following statement published by his group last summer: *"America may possess the world's largest infrastructure for nurturing human spirituality, complete with hundreds of thousands of houses of worship, thousands of para-church organizations and schools, and seemingly unlimited products, resources and experts. Yet, a new study from the Barna Group identifies an underlying reason why there is little progress in helping people develop spiritually: many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity. People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process."*

The critical point of this finding is that many Christians and Christian leaders do not understand the endpoint of the Christian life. They may understand the gospel and the wonderful forgiveness and grace we inherit as children of God when we are born again, but they do not understand spiritual maturity, or what the born-again baby in Christ is to grow up to. Our focus here is on the endpoint of the growth process, or spiritual maturity. In the New Testament we will see that maturity is based on conformity to Christ. The implication is that the reason most Christians do not understand maturity is because they do not understand Christ. In this introduction to Christ, Discipleship and Maturity we will first look at the biblical concept of maturity, then at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as the model of maturity, and finally at the practical implications of following Christ as a mature disciple in our daily lives.

Maturity

The Greek word *teleion* is translated in the New Testament using the words *mature*, *perfect* and *complete*. Let's first look at how this word is used by Christ and the apostles and then we will look at an illustration that might help us to understand the practical pursuit of maturity in our lives.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that God Himself equipped and organized the church to bring every believer to maturity.

"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 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."
Ephesians 4:11-13

Note in this passage that (1) the mature man resembles Christ, and (2) maturity in the life of every believer is the major intended purpose of the church, as well as of God Himself.

Jesus used the same word *teleion* when He told His followers that they were to be *perfect*:

"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Matthew 5:48

Christ commanded His followers to be perfect and that the standard of perfection is the character of God. Jesus modeled the personal behavior of God perfectly. The Hebrew writer said that Jesus is the "*exact representation of God's nature*" (Hebrews 1:3).

Most of us realize that we will never reach perfection this side of heaven. So did the apostle Paul. However, this does not mean that we cannot reach maturity this side of heaven. This seeming contradiction is spoken to indirectly by Paul when he wrote to the Philippians:

"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect (teteleiomai), but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I

press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect (teleiol), have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us."

Philippians 3:12-17

Paul says that he is not perfect, but that he is mature. In fact he says that there are others along with himself who serve as examples of maturity, and implies that if his readers want to be mature, they need to follow his example.

Paul wrote to the Colossians that the goal of his personal ministry was the same as that of God's intended ministry goal for the church, and that is to bring every believer to maturity in Christ.

"We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete (teleion) in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me."

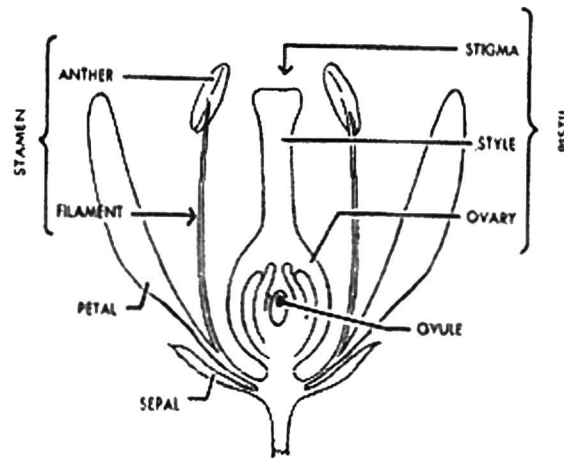
Colossians 1:28-29

Here the word *teleion* is translated as *complete*. Paul said that his goal was to bring every man to being complete in Christ. The measure of completion is Christ.

Biblical scholars have translated the word *teleion* as *perfect*, *mature* and *complete*, depending upon the context in which the word is used. Although not a Greek scholar, it seems to me the translators have chosen the right word to use for *teleion* in each of the passages we have looked at, based on the context. How then are we to define maturity as the goal for followers of Christ? For practical application, I believe the biblical concept of maturity as the goal for a follower of Christ is best communicated in today's language by the word *complete*.

How are maturity, completeness and perfection related? I have spent a large part of my professional career conducting applied genetic research in corn and soybean. These two plant species have two different kinds of flowers. Soybeans have what botanists refer to as a "perfect" flower. This means all the male and female parts needed for sexual reproduction are located within one flower. It is a "complete" flower. At maturity, when all the sexual parts are present and fully developed, it is

able to produce a seed within itself. A picture of a perfect and complete flower is seen following this paragraph where you can readily identify the male filament and anthers (stamen); and the female stigma, style and ovary (pistil). In contrast, corn has what botanists refer to as an “imperfect” flower. The male anthers and pollen are located in the tassel at the top of the plant and the female silks and ovaries are located in the middle of the plant where the corn ear forms. Each part of the flower alone is “incomplete” in that it does not possess all it needs for sexual reproduction to produce a new seed.



The word perfect as used by botanists does not necessarily mean that the flower is free from all defects. It does mean that all the parts needed to reproduce are present. It is a complete flower. When all the sexual parts have become fully developed, the male pollen is able to supply a gamete to fertilize the female egg, resulting in the production of a new seed. It is able to fully reproduce itself. If one of the essential parts is missing, it cannot produce a seed.

This is in a sense how the word complete is used by the apostle Paul to describe a mature follower of Christ. Complete does not necessarily mean perfect as in free from defect. It does mean that all the essential parts needed for living and reproducing the life of Christ are present and functioning satisfactorily in our lives.

I want to emphasize the two aspects of a perfect or complete flower at maturity that applies to our subject of spiritual maturity. One is that all the essential parts are present. The second is that all the essential parts are functioning satisfactorily. This is exactly what spiritual maturity is in relation to Christ. This does not mean that we are free from defect. It does mean that we have identified the essential aspects of the life and ministry of Christ and are following His example and practice of those aspects in a satisfactory manner.

The critically important question now becomes; "What are the essential aspects of Christ?" A short answer is that they are those aspects of His life and ministry that are so essential to His being that if you removed them from His life, He would no longer be Christ. A longer but still succinct answer is contained in the next section.

The Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ

The apostle John said that all the books on earth could not contain all the information related to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus is ultimately defined by God. Jesus is who He is because God is who He is. However, there is much of God that we cannot readily understand. The good news is that although the Bible says that we cannot fully understand God, we can understand the mind of Christ (see I Corinthians 2:16). Jesus is not a dark and mysterious abyss. He is understandable.

About the first two words Christ spoke to His disciples were "*Follow Me*". He promised His disciples that if they followed Him, He would make them fishers of men (Matthew 4:19). Later, near the end of His life, Jesus told the disciples that the way they glorified God was to bear much fruit (John 15:8). At the same time, He told them that He had chosen and appointed them to not only bear fruit, but that their fruit would remain (John 15:16). They were appointed to make a permanent lasting impact in the lives of others. Jesus was crucified soon after this and rose from the grave. He spent 40 more days on earth before He ascended into heaven. At one point during this 40-day period, while cooking some fish, Jesus again said

to Peter "*Follow Me*". It was clear that His intention was for His disciples to continue doing exactly what they had seen Him doing for the past three years. It is no different today.

How do we follow Jesus? We believe and value what He believed and valued. We relate to God and others as He related to God and others. We adopt His goals as our goals. We do what He did. I have found three key passages in the scripture that allow a good introduction for understanding the life and ministry of Christ in a way that you can follow as a disciple. The first passage captures His inner life. The second captures His outer ministry. The third captures everything He did on earth.

The Inner Life of Christ

"But now faith, hope, love, abide these three..." I Corinthians 13:3.

Jesus had perfect **faith** in God. He knew and understood the eternal, all-powerful God and had perfect faith in Him at all times and in all situations. He knew and believed that God was completely faithful to His word and that He was completely able and willing to meet His every need at any time. One small illustration of faith in the life of Christ is when we see Him sleeping in a boat during a storm while His disciples were in great fear and hysteria, thinking that their lives were coming to an end. Think about what it would be like to have perfect faith. You would have to believe in the deepest recesses of your mind and heart that God was completely sovereign and faithful. Jesus did. He lived and walked every day of His life having perfect faith in God the Father.

Jesus had perfect **hope**. He knew that the end of every man is to stand face to face before God and then to enter into their eternal destiny. He lived with complete confidence and conviction of this ultimate reality point every day of His earthly ministry. He greatly valued above all else the place where God and man would live eternally together. In Matthew 13 Jesus gave a series of parables conveying the reality and value of the eternal kingdom. In one of these parables called the *Pearl of Great Price* Jesus said that when a man discovered a great and magnificent Pearl, "*he went and sold all that he had and bought it*". The Pearl was the Kingdom of

God. Jesus seemed to expect that when a man discovered the reality of the Kingdom of God, he would lay his entire life down and invest everything he had to invest in it. The earth in reality had comparatively little value to Jesus. He knew in His mind that it was a temporary creation made for God's greater purpose. Jesus also possessed the knowledge of eternal hell. He spoke more plainly of hell than any man who ever lived. To understand Christ you must understand the eternal perspective he held concerning the absolute reality of heaven. If you do not understand the value Jesus held toward the Kingdom of God in His inner life, then you do not understand Jesus.

Jesus had perfect *love*. He did not merely attempt to show love or make people feel loved by acting nice, but He loved people. He valued them. He was inwardly committed to their welfare and cared about what happened to them. I am impressed that Jesus forgave sinners before going to the cross. I think He forgave them and accepted them because He loved them. Imagine going through life with the same value toward everyone you meet as you have for members of your own family. You may often be direct in communications, but your commitment is never in question. You would never cease to love your own son even if he murdered someone. Jesus loved people this way. He cared greatly about how people were related to God and where they would spend eternity. In the end these are the two most important things that affect every person on earth.

Faith, hope and love are basic and simple. They are often taken for granted, but these are the three characteristics that make up the inner life and compass in the mind of Christ. Knowing and believing God, knowing and valuing the kingdom of God, and knowing and loving people were the inner realities that led Him to live and work the way He did. There is only one logical life to live if you possess these convictions and perspectives. You cannot believe these things and hold these values and give your life to trivial things. You would be inwardly driven to help others come to know God and to make peace with Him and to inherit eternal life. This mission is the only one He could pursue and be true to Himself. He delighted to do so. He said His food was to do so.

Faith, hope and love directly led Christ in His earthly ministry. His outward ministry was the outworking of His inner convictions, values, and perspectives.

The Outer Ministry of Christ

Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.” Matthew 4:23.

For three years, day after day after day, Jesus traveled throughout Judea and Israel doing three things. He taught the word of God to others, He proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom, and He healed people.

Jesus taught the word of God in their synagogues. He also taught the word outside of the synagogues. Jesus taught the word wherever He went. His teaching went beyond mere instruction. Jesus told one group of brand new Christians that *“if you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine”* (John 8:31). Jesus imparted His own life through His words and actions. At the end of His life Jesus told the twelve disciples *“No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you”* (John 15:15). Jesus imparted to His disciples what the Father had imparted to Him. At the end of His ministry these men were fully trained, although there was still at least one major step to take before they were fully empowered to accomplish their mission. The real goal of Christ was training leading to maturity, not mere instruction.

Jesus **proclaimed the gospel** of the kingdom. The most important issue for every person on earth is where they will spend eternity. Jesus told His listeners that He *“came to give life, and to give it abundantly”*. He told them that *“unless you are born again, you will not enter the Kingdom of God.”* Jesus was devoted to sharing the good news of the kingdom with all who would listen. This was His life and message. How could He have devoted Himself to anything else?

When the Holy Spirit came to rest upon Jesus at His baptism, He received every gift in perfection that the Holy Spirit can bestow upon men. After this, Jesus went about and **healed every kind of disease** and every kind of sickness. He was not one to turn away from pressing needs. He helped people overcome things that they otherwise could not without His help. His healings proved that He cared about the welfare of others and that He was the Son of God. He manifested the love and power of God to those He helped.

Jesus helped people, won people to the Kingdom, and trained disciples through His teaching and life example. The apostle John said that; "*the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked*" (1 John 2:6). To follow Christ, or to walk as He walked, we have to help people, win people to Christ, and make disciples who do the same. Two of these pursuits make up what has been called the *Great Commission*. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus commanded His disciples to preach the gospel to every person on earth. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples of all the nations. To follow Christ and obey His commission, the followers of Christ must share the gospel and make disciples.

He Did All Things Well

They were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." Mark 7:37

There is one other aspect of the life of Jesus that characterizes everything He did. Mark records the testimony of others who observed Jesus and said "*He has done all things well*" (Mark 7:37). The inward character of Christ led Him to do everything He did in a good and satisfactory manner. It is safe to say that this applied to all that He did throughout His life, including His day to day work in the carpenter shop before beginning His earthly ministry.

Every follower of Christ is obligated to do all things well. Paul exhorted slaves to do their menial tasks, or perhaps even their hard labors, with a whole and sincere heart. We have the choice to take a certain job, go to

school, marry, purchase property and so on. However, we are obligated as followers of Christ to do all things well. The practice of doing all things well places a limit on the number of things we pursue. Paul exhorted his readers to live a simple life.

The life and ministry of Christ is illustrated in the following figure. The inner faith, hope and love of Christ are depicted on the left. These inner convictions and values led Christ in His outer ministry of helping, winning and training, depicted on the right. The dove above represents the empowering baptism of the Holy Spirit received by Christ at the beginning of His earthly ministry. Finally, Christ did all things well.



Perhaps you have been thinking through the implications of the convictions and practices of Christ on your own throughout this article. To be a disciple of Christ you must follow Christ. It is not a random pursuit left up to personal desire or feelings. It is not a mere concept but is a real life that

Jesus intended for us to follow and live. In the final section we will look at what it means to follow Christ as a disciple.

Following Christ in Discipleship

The goal of a disciple of Christ is to conform to the life and teachings of Christ. There are two primary paths that lead to conformity. One is following the written word and the other is following the living Word. Remember what Jesus said to the Jews who had just become believers only minutes before; *"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine"* (John 8:31). The word disciple is translated from "mathetes" which literally means a learner or a pupil. If we continue to learn and obey the teachings and commands of Christ, we are His disciples. Jesus used a house to imply that the process of learning and obeying leads to a certain life. He considered it a foolish endeavor to build our lives on or around anything other than Himself.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall."
Matthew 7:24-27

Peter said that *"like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord"* (1 Peter 2:2-3). The apostle clearly desired for the believers he addressed to continue learning and obeying the word of God in order to grow. They had already experienced God's mercy and kindness in Christ.

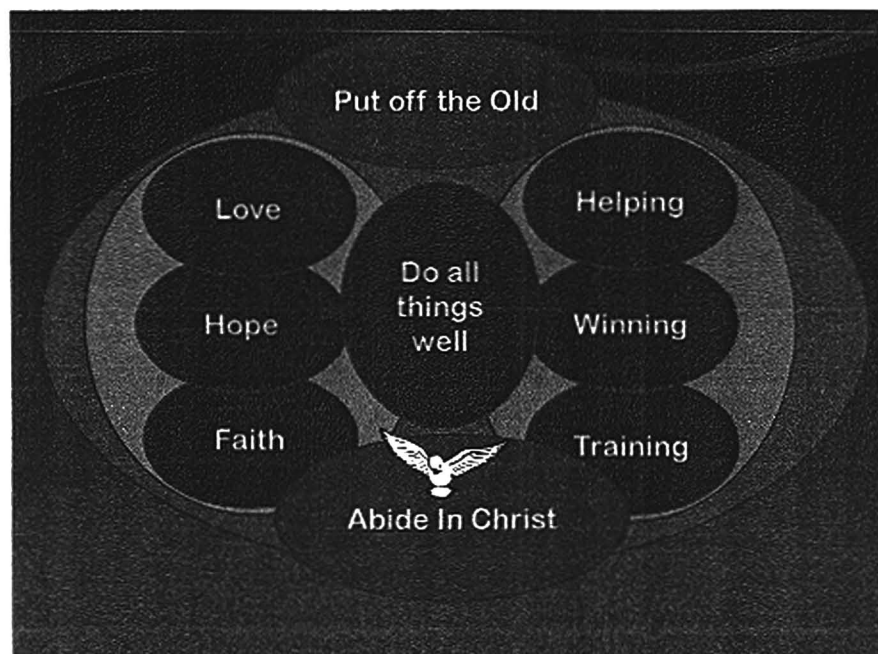
The second major path of discipleship is to simply follow Christ in His life, teachings and example. An illiterate person could follow Christ by simply listening, observing and obeying what Christ said and did. The living word

of Christ perfectly illustrates the spoken word of God. In practice, both of these paths come together.

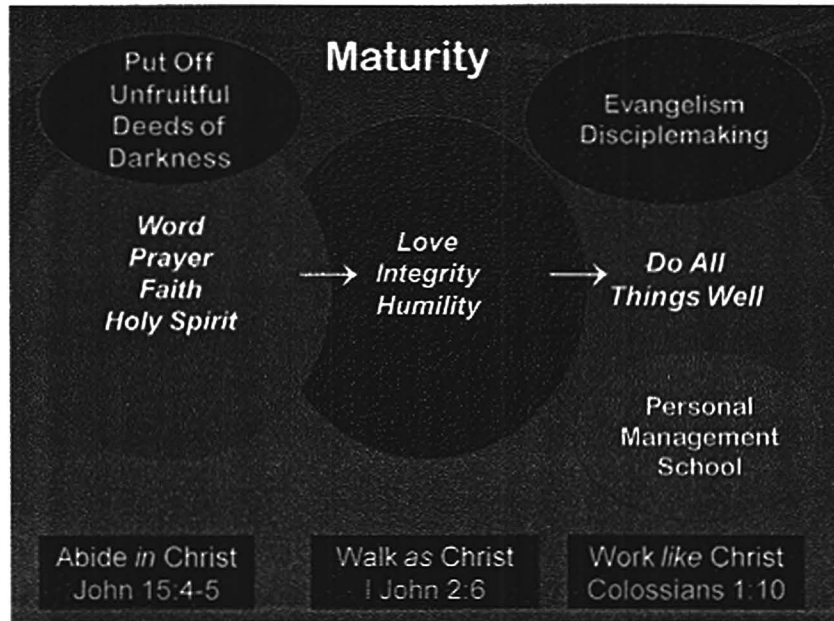
A major difficulty we quickly encounter in following Christ is that we are different from Him in our inner person. We have a selfish and sinful nature. This is why Jesus said that we have to abide in Him. We must abide in Christ and draw help from the Holy Spirit to make a clean break from sinful practices and embrace His life and ministry.

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. John 15:4-6

The following illustration depicts a mature and complete disciple of Christ. It is the same as the life and ministry of Christ except that we have to abide in Christ to make a break with sin and to draw enablement to follow Him.



The preceding illustration depicts the mature disciple. The next illustration presents the same truth from another perspective that may help identify the specific aspects of discipleship training needed as a university student more clearly.



So, what does it take to follow Christ to maturity? First, we have to abide in Christ. This requires a meaningful and effective practice of abiding in His word, in prayer, in obedience, in faith and ultimately in the Holy Spirit.

Second, we must walk in a worthy manner. Above all else, this means relating to others in love. To do so we have to continually forgive and accept others. Walking as Christ also requires purity, integrity and humility.

Finally, we must do all things well. To follow Christ we must share the gospel effectively and make disciples of those who respond. "Doing all things well" extends to our profession, marriage, family and personal life.

Jesus lived a rather simple life but said that few would ever find the life He lived and offered. Jesus promised or implied that those who followed Him would bear much fruit. In fact, He said "*you will know them by their fruits*". This may be largely related to the quality of fruit we bear. Just as good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit, so you can use fruit as an indicator of how effectively you are following and abiding in Christ. The ones who we observe to be the most successful after the lifetime of Christ were those who followed His example as disciples. There are perhaps two things you can do to most enhance your growth to maturity. One is to set your primary goal in life to follow Christ in His life and ministry (see Matthew 6:33). Focus on Christ and deliberately follow Him in every aspect

of His life presented here. You do this by daily learning and obeying His word. Second is to associate yourself with other mature followers of Christ. Become part of a Christ-centered fellowship and pull up alongside others who are now following Christ. Find someone that you can ask to mentor you.

One final and sober note. Why are so few believers bearing fruit today? I believe one reason is because we have ceased to primarily follow Christ and instead we tend to pick and choose which part of Christ we will follow. We tend to largely exclude ourselves to our gifting and interests, such as mercy ministry, evangelism, disciple-making, worship, teaching and others. These are all good and we should major on our strengths. But we are all called to follow Christ first. Exclusivity works against the whole idea of completeness or maturity as defined in the first section. The apostles seemed to follow Jesus in a complete manner, even though they had much leadership responsibility in overseeing the emerging church. I believe we are generally called to follow Christ in completeness first and then assume our special roles in the body. Let me say this more simply, the reason you may be seeing little fruit in your ministry is because you are not following Christ in the most simple sense that He communicated to His small band of disciples. These men turned the world upside down by doing so. If every believer follows Christ, we will see the biggest expanse of the gospel in the history of the church. If the church is a well funded and finely organized institution of incomplete and immature believers who do not follow Christ, we will lose ground.

Summary

Some years back I visiting alone with Jim Downing in the fellowship Hall of our church. Jim was a Pearl Harbor survivor, former Naval Captain and one of the original sailors who most helped to start the Navigators Christian organization shortly before World War II. The Navigators went on to spark the largest missionary movement in the history of the church following World War II and now operate in over 80 nations around the globe. Jim

had just spoken to a group of students on the subject of discipleship. Somehow the subject of Christian maturity crept into our conversation. I'll never forget Jim simply stating "Daws was obsessed with maturity". He was referring to Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, a man who Billy Graham once said had impacted more lives than any man he had ever known. I now understand why Dawson Trotman was obsessed with this subject. Maturity is the endpoint God intends for our growth in Christ and it is the number one requirement for living a meaningful, fruitful and productive life.

Few believers understand spiritual maturity and even fewer walk in maturity. However, spiritual maturity is the goal of God in our lives and is His intended purpose for the church.

Jesus Christ is the exact representation of Gods nature and is the ultimate model for us to follow. Jesus knew and believed God without wavering. He genuinely loved and helped others. He worked daily to win others to the Kingdom and to train them to conform to Himself. He told His disciples "*Follow Me*" and He meant exactly what He said.

Maturity in our lives as followers of Christ requires that we follow the essential aspects of His life and ministry in a satisfactory and effective manner. The first requirement is to abide in Him through the word, prayer, obedience, faith and the Holy Spirit. Abiding in Christ enables and empowers us to overcome the flesh, walk in a worthy manner and to be successful in every good work. To follow Christ we must do the work of an evangelist and help those who respond to become mature followers of Christ as well. In addition, we must also fulfill our family, professional, and personal responsibilities in an excellent manner.

A vital part of our growth to maturity is to first set our top priority on earth to follow the life and ministry of Christ. It is greatly helpful and perhaps almost essential to pull alongside other mature disciples. A picture is worth a thousand words.

May God bless you as you seek to follow Christ!

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