

Maturity for Ministry

Rodney Smith

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Christians are to grow up in all things pertaining to the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:15) and become like Christ himself (Rom. 8:29; 1 John 2:6; 1 John 3:2-3). While standing on Earth 2,000 years ago, Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Long after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:13-16:

Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.” (see also, Leviticus 11:44-45; 207)

When the church takes seriously this idea of achieving such a high level of Christlike spiritual maturity, it becomes apparent that such a lofty endeavor seems nearly if not totally impossible, on one’s own, apart from the Christian community. Indeed, spiritual maturity must be achieved together or not at all. Within God’s redemptive plan, the church has been designed to function as a spiritual family—a family that is not of this world but of God. Just as no baby or even an older child can possibly hope to grow up to be an optimal, functional, successful member of society absent the context of a healthy physical family environment, a healthy spiritual family is necessary in order to attain to the two premier Christian goals of spiritual maturity and usefulness in God’s kingdom. In God’s church, unity must be a priority, a unity of purpose in which all travel together toward the goal of becoming more like Jesus Christ and learning to love as he loves.

Both the physical family and the spiritual family are gifts from God. God himself has founded and ordained both of these institutions, and without controversy both are important. What is controversial, however, is the question as to which one is to be preferred above the other in the context of God’s will. Rodney Clapp pictures the primary purpose of the Christian family as a “missionary base” which serves to support the mission of God’s church, which Clapp calls the “first family” (Clapp, 1995, 166). The church is not solely an earthly institution as is marriage and parenting (cf. Matthew 22:30), rather it is a sacred institution founded by God himself which exists simultaneously in both an earthly as well as a heavenly reality. As is so in the case of Adam and Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45-49), the Old and New Covenants (Hebrews 8:13), and natural and celestial bodies (1 Corinthians 15:40-44), “the spiritual is not first but the

natural” (v. 46). The first, physical creation was “very good” (Genesis 1:31), but the second, spiritual creation is much better (Hebrews 11:40).

Probably the most profound realization at which I have arrived in my Christian walk is the need for spiritual family. In his infinite and divine grace, the Creator of the universe chose to save humanity from the hideous grasp of sin and its consequences and, in his wisdom, created the church so that no believer would be left to their own devices. In the New Testament, alienation of a Christian from the church was one of the severest manners of disciplinary action, referred to by the apostle Paul as delivery of a person “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh,” and, even in such extreme cases, the purpose was clearly stated, “that his spirit may be saved” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

As partakers of the spiritual new creation still living in the first creation, Christians are susceptible to weakness and failure because we still possess a fallen human nature (cf. Romans 7:15-25). God has apparently not chosen to totally eradicate the tainted and handicapped human state of being (nature), but he has provided a way to overcome and conquer it within the context of the present human condition. By placing his children in a spiritual family, God allows Christians the privilege of undergoing the process of transformational sanctification not only in cooperation with his indwelling presence but also with fellow members of his family.

God has not placed Christians in spiritual family solely for the benefit of individual believers but for the edification of the whole body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12). The edification in Ephesians 4:12 is presented as the means to the end goal stated in verse 13. This goal is twofold. In one sense, God desires individual Christians to mature until they become “perfect,” which is defined as “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” On the other hand, the author precedes this statement with the qualifier, “till we all come to the unity of the faith,” and, grammatically, the “all” still applies to the goal of continuous maturation until perfection, or maturity, is reached. So the maturity of Christians, which is ordained by God, takes place in the context of the Christian family. This truth is implicitly found in the description of the overcomers in Revelation 12:11. On the one hand they overcome Satan “by the blood of the Lamb,” referring to salvation of the individual person and entry into the church. On the other, they overcome “by the word of their testimony” which is their continued ministry for the edification and growth of the church.

The purpose for which God has called us to be his children and included us in his own special people supersedes our own individual transformation and spiritual wellbeing. He has called us “to be conformed to the image of his Son” so that Jesus might be the first “among many brethren” (Romans 8:29) and so that Christ’s ministry might continue

to be carried out in the world (John 14:12). Certainly, God is concerned with and has provided for the salvation of the individual souls of humanity. By necessity, his divine plan goes beyond the individual and works to establish unity within the body of Christ so that the continued maturity of all Christians and the ministry of the gospel not only remains possible but actually takes place. “As Paul had it,” Clapp writes, “we show—no, we *are*—*Christ* to the world by being his body, by worshipping together, helping one another materially and spiritually, using gifts of the Spirit for the common good” (Clapp, 1995, 157).

Bibliography

Clapp, Rodney. *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond traditional & modern options*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995. 157-166.