



A CALL TO CHRISTIAN MATURITY

Source: John Stott

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...Before I speak to you, I'd like to have a moment of quiet prayer with you, if I may. And as we remain seated, let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you for your Word, this wonderful revelation that you have given us of yourself, focusing as it does on the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray that this morning you will enable us to understand more clearly your calling to us to become mature and seasoned Christians. Grant your blessing upon us this morning, we humbly pray, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, let me come immediately to my text. You know the subject is, A Call To Christian Maturity, and my text is Colossians, Paul's letter to the Colossians, Chapter 1, verses 28 and 29. I hope by the end of this morning you will have learnt it by heart. It's a magnificent Word of Scripture.

[Colossians 1:28-29](#). Here it is. "We proclaim Christ, warning everybody and teaching everybody in all wisdom, that we may present everybody mature in Christ." And let me read it again or recite it again because I know it by heart as I hope you will do soon. "We proclaim Christ, warning everybody and teaching everybody in all wisdom, in order that we may present everybody mature in Christ."

You know, when you're studying a verse of Scripture, it's often a good thing to put it in the witness box and probe it with questions. And that's what I propose to do this morning. I have three questions that I want to address to our text.

Number one, what is Christian maturity? Because when you stop to think about it, there are many different kinds of maturity. There is physical maturity, having a well-developed and healthy body. There is intellectual maturity, having developed a consistent worldview. There is psychological maturity, being able to establish relationships with people and bearing responsibilities. But above all, there is spiritual maturity, and it is that that we want to delve into. What is spiritual maturity?



Well, the Apostle calls it maturity in Christ. To be in Christ is his commonest expression for what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is not just somebody who goes to church or has been baptized or reads the Bible. A Christian is a man or a woman in Christ. That doesn't mean inside Christ, as tools are in a box or as your clothes are in a closet. To be in Christ means to be united with Christ, as the vine is in the branches or as the limbs are in the body. To be in Christ is to be organically united to Jesus Christ.

So if to be a Christian is to be in Christ, related to Christ, to be a mature Christian is obviously to have a mature relationship with Christ, a relationship in which we trust Him, in which we worship Him, obey Him. Can we conceive a relationship like that, a relationship with Jesus Christ in which this union with Him has become mature? It's a wonderful prospect before us.

So that's my first question: What is Christian maturity? It is a mature relationship to Jesus Christ.

Now secondly, how do Christians become mature? Well, consider the skeleton of my text. We proclaim Christ in order that we may present everybody mature in Christ. You'll notice the repetition of Christ. So that's the skeleton of our text. And it's only logical because if Christian maturity is maturity in relationship to Christ, then the clearer our vision of Christ, the more convinced we become that He is worthy of our trust, our love, our obedience, our worship, and so on.

I think most of you here will have heard of Dr. J. I. Packer. He is one of our leading evangelical theologians in the world today, and his best known book, a classic of the 20th Century, is "Knowing God." Hope you've read it. Hope you will read it, if you haven't. It's a great book. And what he writes in the preface is that we are "pygmy Christians" because we have a pygmy God.

I know Jim Packer very well as a friend, so I think I may take the extreme liberty of slightly altering his statement, and saying we are pygmy Christians because we have a pygmy Christ. The truth is that there are many false Christs on offer in the world's religious supermarkets. There are caricatures of the authentic Jesus. For example, there is Jesus the Clown, of Godspell; there is Jesus Christ Superstar; there is Jesus the capitalist; and Jesus the socialist; and there is Jesus the founder of modern business. Did you ever hear of him?

Well, in 1929, an ad man in Madison Avenue wrote a book called—what was it called? "The Man Nobody Knows." 1929, "The Man Nobody Knows." And the last chapter is entitled, "The Founder of Modern Business." And in the course of that chapter he says, "Why, don't you remember that when he was only 12 yearsold, he said I must be about my Father's business." He really did write that. I've read the book. But it profited me nothing.

Anyway, there are many more of these false Christs, and they're all defective. None of them is calculated to elicit from us our faith and love and obedience and worship and so on. Each is what the apostle in another place calls, "another Jesus." A Jesus different from the Jesus the apostles taught. So if we want to grow into maturity in Christ, we need a fresh vision of the authentic Jesus. We need to see Him as He really is, not a caricature, but an authentic Jesus.

In one of the most sublime Christological passages in the whole New Testament comes just a little bit earlier than my text in verse 15. Just consider this as Paul's portrait of Jesus Christ. "He is the visible image of the invisible God. He is the Lord and heir of creation. For He is—for through Him the universe was brought into being and holds together. And He is before all things in time and before all things in rank." Moreover, He is the head of the body, the church. And thus He has a double supremacy. He's head of the universe, and He's head of the Church. He is the Lord of both creations.

Friends, when you begin to meditate on this portrait of Jesus Christ, it blows your mind. Our place is prostrate on our faces before Him, so great is He. For this is Paul's portrait of Christ. Away, then, with our petty, puny, pygmy Jesuses. Away with our Jesus clowns and our Jesus pop stars. Away with our political messiahs and our Christian revolutionaries. For these are caricatures. And if this is how we think of Christ, no wonder our immaturities persist.



So naturally you ask me, well where, then, shall we find the authentic Jesus? And the answer, naturally, is in the Scriptures. I would like to give you this definition of Scripture: Scripture is the furthest portrait of the Son painted by the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the furthest portrait of the Son painted by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is full of Christ. The Scriptures bear witness to me, He said, and He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

Jerome, one of the great church fathers of the 4th Century A.D., wrote in one of his commentaries, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." And we could state the opposite, that knowledge of Scripture is knowledge of Christ.

So dear sisters and brothers, if only the veil could be taken from our eyes. If only we could see Jesus as He is in his full authenticity, in the fullness of His divine human person, and of His saving work. Why then surely we would see how worthy He is of our faith and love and obedience and worship, and we would grow into maturity in Christ.

So far, then, we've asked two questions of our text. The first is, what is Christian maturity, and the second is, how do Christians become mature? Namely, by coming to know the authentic Jesus.

Now thirdly, who can grow into Christian maturity? Well, I think when I've read my text, which I've already done several times, you will have noticed the threefold repetition of the word, "everybody." Listen to it again. "We proclaim Christ, warning everybody, teaching everybody, that we may present everybody mature in Christ."

Well, the background to this threefold repetition is doubtless the so-called Colossian heresy which had invaded the church. Scholars are still debating the exact form which it took, but almost certainly it was an incipient Gnosticism, which became full grown only in the middle of the 2nd Century A.D. And these proto-Gnostics seem to have taught that there are two classes of Christian, two categories of Christian. On the one hand there is *hoi polloi*, the common herd who are united by faith, and on the other hand there are *hoi teleioi*, which is the word he uses here, namely, the elite who have been initiated into knowledge.

Now Paul was horrified by this Christian elitism, this division of the Church into two categories, and he set himself resolutely against it. And in his proclamation of Christ he borrowed the Gnostic word, *teleios*, meaning mature, and he applies it to everybody. He warns everybody, teaches everybody in all wisdom that he may present everybody *teleios*, mature in Christ.

So maturity in Christ is emphatically not open to an eclectic few, a kind of spiritual aristocracy. No, on the contrary. Maturity is open to everybody and nobody need fail to attain it.

How then shall I conclude? I think in two ways, both of which are concerned with Christian maturity. On the one hand, we could use our imagination and sit down alongside the Colossian Christians. And we could determine to listen to the Apostle Paul. And we could determine as we listen to Paul to study the Scriptures more deeply and more regularly. And we could look for Christ in the Scriptures in order that we may grow into maturity in Christ.

That's one thing we could do, use our imagination. There you are sitting alongside the Colossian Christians, listening to the Apostle Paul. We can often do that when we're studying the Bible, putting ourselves in the position of the readers and listening to their message. But on the other hand, we could stand alongside the Apostle Paul as he addressed the Colossian church. True, he was an apostle and we are not. Yet we do have pastoral responsibilities comparable to his.

Now, I don't have the pleasure of knowing more than a very few of you, but I guess that all of you, nearly, perhaps all of you, in fact, have pastoral responsibilities. Some of you are ordained ministers; some of you are lay leaders, elders, deacons; some of you are Bible class teachers, Sunday school teachers, and so on. In other words—and some of you are parents with responsibilities for your own children. So whatever it is exactly, all of us have these pastoral responsibilities, responsibilities for other people.



And I then turn—what I'm going to say now, I think, is the summary and very important, namely, no higher goal for our ministry, whatever your ministry may be. No higher goal for your ministry is conceivable than Paul's, and that is to go beyond conversion to discipleship, and to present everybody for whom he was responsible mature in Jesus Christ. To that end, Paul goes on. He bent his energies laboring with all the energy that God mightily inspired within him.

So I hope as I conclude that all of us have this same double longing. On the one hand we long to be like the Colossian Christians, learning from Paul in order that we may grow into maturity in Christ. On the other hand, we could long to imitate Paul in his responsibility, pastoral responsibility for the Colossians and others. And we can determine that whoever it is for whom we are responsible, our goal is to see them. We want to grow ourselves, but we want them to grow into maturity in Christ. May I say our text once again? If you feel you've learnt it by heart, you could even echo it with me. "We proclaim Christ, warning everybody and teaching everybody in all wisdom that we may present everybody mature in Christ."

Now I didn't hear very much from you. Do you think you could try it once more? Because it's such a wonderful text to tuck away in your mind and memory. Are you ready?

"We proclaim Christ, warning everybody and teaching everybody in all wisdom that we may present everybody mature in Christ."

Well done.