The Marks of Spiritual Maturity

Steven R. Cook, D.Min., M.Div.

Spirituality assumes spiritual life. A person receives spiritual life through the regenerating work of God the Holy Spirit at the moment he believes in Jesus as Savior (John 3:5-8; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3). Maturity, however, assumes spiritual growth. All Christians begin as spiritual infants (1 Cor. 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:2). This is normal. Remaining immature is not. God expects His children to grow toward maturity through the ministry of the Holy Spirit as they consistently learn and live His word (John 16:13; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:18; Col. 3:16).

Spirituality and maturity are related but distinct. A new Christian may be spiritual because he is governed by the Holy Spirit and walks according to God's word (Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:18), yet he is not mature because maturity requires spiritual growth over time. The Spirit of God leads the child of God into the will of God by means of the word of God.

Time provides opportunity for growth but does not guarantee it. A believer may be a Christian for many years and remain immature (1 Cor. 3:1-3; Heb. 5:12-14). Charles Ryrie states, "Being a Christian for some time does not guarantee spirituality, since the person may not have allowed the Spirit control of his life during some of those years."[1] Time provides opportunity for growth, but maturity requires sustained positive volition toward God, His word, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Ryrie illustrates this principle from the Corinthian believers:

> Paul apparently expected the believers at Corinth to have reached a level of maturity whereby they could be called spiritual in five or six years. The Gospel was first preached in Corinth on his second missionary journey (about AD 50), and his first letter to the church, in which he chided the Christians because he could not treat them as spiritually mature people, was written about AD 55.[2]

Tony Evans confirms, saying, "Since there had been approximately a five-year gap between Paul's visit to Corinth and this letter, we can conclude that a new believer can attain a basic level of spiritual maturity in five years, if he or she prioritizes

[1] Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 434.

[2] Ibid., 433-434.

spiritual development."[3] The Corinthians had sufficient time to mature but chose carnality instead. Spiritual development requires the word of God, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, positive volition expressed through faith and application, and time.

Defining Spiritual Maturity

Christian spiritual maturity is the progressive development of Christlike thinking, character, and conduct through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the consistent learning and application of God's word. Biblical truth moves beyond information and increasingly governs how the believer thinks and lives. Paul describes the objective as attaining "to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). Lewis Chafer states, "A Christian is a Christian because he is rightly related to Christ; but 'he that is spiritual' is spiritual because he is rightly related to the Spirit, in addition to his relation to Christ in salvation."[4]

Spiritual Maturity Is Not Automatic

The Corinthians were "saints" and "in Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2), yet Paul called them "infants in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1). Their jealousy, strife, arrogance, immorality, lawsuits, selfishness, and misuse of spiritual gifts demonstrated their carnality (1 Cor. 3:1-4; 5:1-2; 6:1-8; 8:9-13; 11:17-22; 14:12, 26-33). Spiritual immaturity, therefore, should not be confused with unbelief. Eternal life is received by faith, but maturity requires continued learning and application of God's word. Thomas Constable states, "Immaturity is not blameworthy if one is very young. But if a person has been a Christian for some time, and is still immature, his or her condition is blameworthy (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6; Eph. 4:14). Such was the condition of the Corinthians."[5]

From Spiritual Infancy to Adulthood

Hebrews 5:11-14 contrasts spiritual infancy with maturity. The readers had become "dull of hearing" and still required "milk and not solid food," though by that time they should have been teachers (Heb. 5:11-12). In contrast, "solid food is for the

---

[3] Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1152.

[4] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (Moody Press: Chicago, 1918), 9.

[5] Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), 1 Cor. 3:1.

mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Heb. 5:14). The word translated "mature," *teleios* (τέλειος), describes one who has developed beyond infancy. The key is "because of practice." Truth must be learned and repeatedly applied until it becomes part of the believer's habitual frame of reference. Hebrews 6:1-2 therefore urges believers to advance beyond foundational doctrines. Mature believers do not abandon foundational truth; they build upon it and advance into the deeper truths of God's revelation (Heb. 5:12-6:3).

Biblical Knowledge and Discernment

A major mark of maturity is biblical discernment. As biblical truth accumulates and is applied, the believer develops a doctrinal framework for evaluating ideas, circumstances, temptations, relationships, and decisions. The immature believer is vulnerable to being "tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). The mature believer knows what he believes and why he believes it because Scripture teaches it. As Ryrie observes, "As one matures, his knowledge and perspectives will deepen and broaden."[6] Genuine maturity combines doctrinal stability with humility and willingness to be corrected.

Handling Personal Sin and Failure

Another mark of maturity is how the believer responds to God when he sins (Jam. 3:2; 1 John 1:8-10; 2:1). The immature Christian may rationalize his conduct, blame others, become defensive, or persist in carnality. The mature believer increasingly accepts responsibility and responds according to God's provision. First John 1:9 states, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Maturity does not mean sinless perfection. It means recognizing sin, taking responsibility, confessing it to God, and quickly returning to the spiritual life. According to Henry Holloman, "Christians will not attain perfect Christlike maturity in this earthly life. Yet they can grow enough through sanctification to become characterized as 'spiritual' or 'mature in Christ.' The apostle Paul denied that he was perfect, but he was certainly mature and was aggressively pursuing further growth in Christ (Phil. 3:12-14)."[7]

Stability Under Pressure

---

[6] Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 437.

[7] Henry W. Holloman, "Sanctification Is Vital for Spirituality" in *Understanding Christian Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 951.

Another mark of maturity is stability under stress. The mature believer experiences emotions, but his emotions increasingly respond to rather than control his thinking. Paul had "learned to be content" in abundance and need (Phil. 4:11-13), while James explains that testing produces endurance and maturity (Jam. 1:2-4). Trials expose the believer's actual spiritual resources. Kenneth Osbeck states, "One of the chief characteristics of spiritual maturity is the ability to persevere—even in the face of adversity. God often permits difficulties to come into our lives simply to allow our faith in Him to become stronger. A faith that is never tested and strengthened soon becomes a shrinking one."[8]

Developed Christian Character

Spiritual maturity also produces developed Christian character. The fruit of the Spirit includes "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). The mature believer increasingly demonstrates humility rather than arrogance, grace rather than retaliation, patience rather than impulsiveness, gratitude rather than chronic complaining, and self-control rather than enslavement to appetite or emotion (Phil. 2:3-5; Col. 3:12-13; 1 Th. 5:18; 1 Cor. 9:25-27). Knowledge is necessary, but knowledge alone does not constitute maturity. Maturity becomes visible when doctrine produces Christian virtue.

Grace Orientation Toward Others

Another significant benchmark is grace orientation toward others. The mature believer increasingly understands that other Christians belong to the Lord and are themselves objects of divine grace. Consequently, he becomes slower to judge motives, slower to take offense, quicker to forgive, and more willing to bear with the weaknesses of others. Paul commands believers, "with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3), and "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other" (Col. 3:13). Paul also warns against despising or condemning fellow servants who ultimately answer to the Lord (Rom. 14:4, 10-13). This does not mean maturity ignores sin or refuses biblical correction. Rather, truth is administered without arrogance, vindictiveness, or personal hostility. One of the best measures of maturity is how a Christian treats people who disappoint him, disagree with him, irritate him, or can do nothing for him in return.

---

[8] Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 321.

Christian Liberty and Love

Christian liberty provides another test. Believers may possess different levels of understanding concerning morally neutral matters (Rom. 14:1-6). Paul warns that "knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" (1 Cor. 8:1). Knowledge without love can become another expression of immaturity. The immature Christian insists upon his rights without considering how his conduct affects others. The mature believer understands his freedom yet willingly restricts it when another believer's spiritual welfare warrants it. His question is not merely, "Am I free to do this?" but also, "Will this glorify God and edify another believer?" (1 Cor. 10:23-24, 31).

Control of Speech and Emotions

Maturity is also revealed through control of speech and emotional reactions. James commands believers to be "quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger" (Jam. 1:19). He later states, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man," that is, a mature man (Jam. 3:2). Immaturity speaks impulsively, reacts emotionally, gossips, retaliates when offended, and allows anger to dictate communication. The mature believer increasingly exercises restraint because biblical truth governs his thinking before emotions become words or actions. This does not mean that mature Christians never become angry, speak forcefully, or confront error. It means their responses are increasingly governed by truth rather than impulse.

Obedience, Service, and Application

Another benchmark is consistent obedience and wise application of Scripture. James commands believers to "prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (Jam. 1:22). Mature believers move beyond knowing biblical principles to skillfully applying them to marriage, work, money, speech, sexuality, suffering, relationships, ministry, and personal decisions. They recognize their spiritual gifts and employ them for the benefit of others (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Pet. 4:10). Maturity, therefore, moves the Christian toward responsible Christian adulthood. The mature believer still needs teaching, fellowship, encouragement, and correction, but he increasingly possesses the doctrinal resources and spiritual discipline necessary to stand upon his own biblical convictions. He becomes dependable, serves without requiring recognition, accepts correction, and fulfills his responsibilities even when motivation is low.

The Biblical Benchmark of Maturity

The clearest overall benchmark is Christlike thinking producing stable Christian character and conduct over time. Paul describes his ministry objective in Colossians 1:28: "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, **so that we may present every man mature in Christ**." Spiritual maturity is not measured by age, vocabulary, academic degrees, years in church, ministry position, or even the quantity of Scripture one knows. It is measured by developed spiritual capacity. Does biblical truth increasingly govern the believer's thinking? Has he developed discernment? Can he control his emotions rather than being controlled by them? Does he remain stable under pressure? Does he extend grace to difficult people? Can he recover from failure and continue advancing? Does he persevere under testing? Does he faithfully fulfill his responsibilities? Does he increasingly manifest the fruit of the Spirit? According to Henry Holloman:

> Sanctification is a lifetime spiritual journey that requires human effort and God's empowerment. We may have crises and dramatic turning points in our spiritual pilgrimage that can accelerate our sanctification. Yet there is no experience in this life that can make Christians perfect so that they no longer need progress in sanctification. *Perfect* Christlike maturity always lies before us as the goal of sanctification (Phil. 3:12).[9]

Conclusion

Spiritual maturity, then, is **the developed capacity to think and live from divine viewpoint under the changing conditions of life**. It develops through the sustained learning and application of God's word under the teaching and enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit. Maturity does not mean sinless perfection. It means measurable spiritual development in which biblical truth increasingly governs the believer's thinking, character, decisions, and conduct.

[9] Henry W. Holloman, "The Holy Spirit Sanctifies Christians" in *Understanding Christian Theology*, 989.