

3. All ages maturing in Christ by the power of the Spirit

God desires all his children to be growing as disciples. The transforming work of the Spirit never stops. Recognising and using our gifts within and through the church is a mark of health. Fruit of the Spirit comes by abiding in, and obeying Jesus.

Core Texts

Philippians 3:10-16, Hebrews 5:11-6:4, 1Corinthians 2:6-3:3
John 15:1-17, Ephesians 4:7-16, Luke 8:11-15

Core Teaching

- ❖ Maturing / maturity – is perhaps the sign of healthy Church
- ❖ ‘Growing up’ gets a bad press > recapture as positive
- ❖ Spiritual maturity is about growing up and being grown up
 - Growing into all Christ has done, living out all God made us to be
 - Key is a healthy, evolving relationship with Jesus
- ❖ As with physical cells, growth is programmed in [2Pet.1:3-6]
- ❖ Growing up requires passive and active...
 - Proper feeding on, and applying the Word of God [Col.3:15 & 16]
 - Evolving diet; moving from milk to solids [Heb.5:11-6:4]
 - Faith that interacts and engages with surroundings
 - Using what we have > Spirit’s ‘exercise programme’ [2Pet.1:5-7]
- ❖ Being grown up means ...
 - *Let us live up to what we’ve already attained* [Phil.3:16]
 - Exploring and using our gifts in context of Church [Eph.4:11-13]
 - Maturing the Church as we grow up together [Eph.4:14-16]
- ❖ Jesus’ view? Fruitfulness > Parable of Sower [Luke 8:11-15]
 - Heart – living in the life of our transplanted ‘heart of flesh’
 - Hearing – listening to the word and putting it into practice
 - Hanging On – Persevering [James 1:2-4, 2Thess.3:5]

Some Initial Questions

- How has your relationship with Jesus grown in the last year?
- When was the last time you were spiritually ‘out of breath’?
- Are you accountable to anyone for your spiritual health?

Knaphill with Brookwood - Value 3

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- Each time I’ve preached on one of these values there’s come a point where I’ve asked myself, ‘could this be the most important value?’. Of course you can’t take any of them in isolation and they all depend upon each other, but I could argue that Value 3 - *all ages maturing in Christ by the power of the Spirit* - is the sign that all the other 8 values are fully at work and is the evidence above all others of a healthy Christian and a healthy Church.
- What kinds of behaviour or attitude constitute ‘immaturity’ in normal human life? We often speak of people behaving immaturely but perhaps we spend less time deciding positively what maturity is about! Mature cheeses seem to be those with greatest taste and with mould all over them! What does a mature person look like? More to the point, what does a mature Christian, or a maturing Christian, look like?
- Reclaiming human and Christian maturity is very important in this part of the world and in our current culture, which increasingly applauds permanent adolescence. ‘Grow up?’ asks the advert, ‘why bother?’. The idea is put across that ‘growing up’ means not having fun any more, but in the background there’s another agenda because those who don’t grow up are more easily manipulated – materially, morally and spiritually.
- I believe that one of Satan’s stratagems at this time is to tell people that fun is at the centre of a fulfilled life and that being mature means having no fun. I fear we can easily let that attitude affect our faith, but Jesus spoke about joy being our fulfilment, and maturity, or fruitfulness, as being the measure by which he will recognise us – more of that later!
- When the New Testament talks about Christian maturity, it seems to allude firstly to how a Christian grows up into a fuller awareness of all that Christ has done and is for them, and secondly to the way a Christian is to live out all that God made them to be, fulfilling all their potential; physical, mental and spiritual. It’s about growing up and being grown up. I don’t think the Bible sees this as dependent upon human age nor upon how long someone has been a Christian. We know that Jesus used

children as examples to adults of mature faith. And I guess we all know of people who've been Christians for a short time yet who seem to have a more mature faith than some who've been a Christian for ages.

- In physical terms, after being born we grow up and then over a period of time become fully grown. The first stage comes about by a mixture of natural process – given the right diet you can't stop a child growing – and positive interaction with the world around – relationships, challenges, decisions. Once we're grown up it doesn't mean we've stopped developing but it does mean we've now become responsible and accountable in a way a child can't be – you can't drive until you're 17 or vote until you're 18.
- Spiritually it seems very similar. Paul urges us to *live up to what we've already attained* [Phil.3:16]. In one sense that's about living fully as those who are born-again children of God, but I think he's also implying that we should seek to attain maturity and then live up to what that maturity demands of us. There's no resting on our laurels as Christians – the only laurels come at the end of the race as victors in heaven with Christ our champion!
- So how do we set about growing up as Christians? All the way through it's about our relationship with Jesus Christ. If our relationship with Jesus is static we're not maturing however mature we may think we have become. Read again the passion of Paul in the passage we read just now; *I want to know Christ...*
- Whatever we may do or desire if it steers us away or distracts us from Jesus it's not going to be growing us up. For a moment ask yourself how you have changed as a Christian over the last year. Compare yourself now to a year ago and honestly ask what's different in your relationship with Jesus. If you can't think of anything it may be that you're just not thinking straight so ask a friend who knows you well. But if at the end of it you still can't think of anything it's time to take an urgent spiritual health check.
- When we became Christians we became spiritually alive. Maturing in Christ means growing up that spiritual person. Just as human cells have the capacity to reproduce & the DNA to do it in the right way so God has put the Holy Spirit into us. Growing up comes through a balanced lifestyle of breathing the Spirit,

feeding on the word of God and obediently following Jesus' exercise programme! Peter puts it like this [2Pet.1:3-6]

- *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*
- Peter is telling us we've been saved by God's grace in Jesus and we've nothing missing for maturing. As with a human child within us we have the spiritual mechanisms for growing up. The Spirit is given to instruct & construct our spiritual lives. In Col.3 Paul tells us to let the peace, or presence of Christ rule in us, & to let the Word of God dwell in us richly [Col.3:15, 16].
- We've been given good food in the promises of God and in God's word. But as with a human child our diet must develop if we are to grow. My niece was telling me how well her baby, James, has moved on as they've begun to give him solids.
- If we remain on liquid biblical food we can expect not to mature beyond the spiritual baby stage. The writer to the Hebrews summarises this milk as the basics of understanding righteousness and repentance [Heb.5:13-6:1].
- The basic promises of God in Christ that are spiritual milk are what the Freedom-in-Christ material addresses. But just as a child moves on from milk to solids so we are to do the same. Paul was frustrated that he couldn't give more than milk to the Corinthian church because their thinking was still dominated by worldly wisdom and therefore worldly behaviour. They blamed one another and didn't learn. The Writer to the Hebrews expresses similar frustration.
- It's a form of spiritual laziness. Too many Christians still remain satisfied with milk – going round in the same circles, never progressing beyond Alpha, never changing behaviour. Are you one of them? A church is meant to be filled with Christians at all stages of maturity but all in the process of growing up. A church is not meant to be a permanent spiritual crèche with tantrums and moodiness!

- If you're afraid that this might be you then its time to do something about it. The first stage is to digest and apply the milk perhaps through a Freedom-in-Christ course – I'm happy to set up one of these for those that want. For a healthy baby the shift in diet comes when milk is no longer enough because they have grown & are more active. Their activity demands more substance.
- So, alongside the shift in spiritual diet, perhaps you also need to begin more spiritual exercise. We're told that it's good regularly to do the kind of exercise that gets us out of breath and makes our heart work. It's similar spiritually. We are meant to operate on the edge of our comfort zone, asking God and then obeying his direction – taking risks!
- When was the last time you were spiritually breathless, with your heart beating fast & feeling your faith pushed? The last time you obediently responded to God's call? The last time you risked using the Spiritual Gift God has given to you – praying, speaking in tongues, showing hospitality, teaching, loving...?
- This kind of development goes in parallel with our spiritual food. No promise of God is understood until it is acted upon, no truth is grasped until it is applied. So alongside this move to spiritual solids comes challenge to our behaviour and the call to explore our Spiritual gifts. That's why, going back to 2Peter 1, we read that we are not passive in this process.
- *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love [2Pet.1:5-7].* You can feel, almost see, Peter's image of a Christian growing before your eyes! Of course, Peter assumes you'll be praying, worshipping, being encouraged within a church, not just acting in your own strength nor in isolation. This is growth in the spiritual person we're talking about.
- In fact personal commitment & accountability to others go hand in hand if we want to co-operate with the Holy Spirit and desire to mature as Peter describes. Why do you think groups like Weight-Watchers are so popular and successful? That mixture of self-discipline and mutual encouragement is so important.
- To whom are you accountable in your desire to grow up into Christ? Are you part of a home group or in a prayer triplet or seeing a Spiritual Director regularly? These won't be set in stone, indeed as you mature and grow up your relationships and accountability may shift sometimes has to.
- As I said earlier, growing up is the first stage in maturity and Peter is describing a mature person up to this point. But as Paul says, we should *live up to what we've attained*, so this maturity carries responsibility to be exercised - but where? Well, certainly within the body of Christ. In Ephesians 4 Paul encourages us to explore and use our gifts together to build one another up so that the whole church can grow up into Christ and fulfil the whole measure of its calling in the world. Paul's image is of a body working well together with each maturely fulfilling God's purpose and constant in purpose. I'm sure that's in Peter's mind as well as he goes on...
- *For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ [1Pet.1:8-11].*
- So maturing in Christ is about growing up spiritually through proper spiritual and scriptural diet, and exercise. Once mature, grown up, you are then meant to utilise all that you have become for the good of others, for the good of the church and all in the service of Jesus. This later maturity is about being responsible for yourself and towards others. I came across this comment in a book called *Wind, Sand and Stars* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It's not a book written about being a Christian but I think it carries here a truth. *To be a man is, precisely, to be responsible. It is to know shame at the sight of poverty which is not of our making. It is to be proud of a victory won by our comrades. It is to feel, as we place our stone, that we are contributing to the building of the world.*
- But what was Jesus' take on maturity? In Jesus' mind, maturity and fruitfulness are one and the same. Just as we know when a

plant has matured by its ripeness of fruit so Jesus said we'd be known only by our fruit [Matt.7:15-23]. As far as I can tell, Jesus only once spoke directly in terms of 'maturity' and that was in the parable of the sower.

- *The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering, produce a crop* (Lk.8:14 & 15). We discover here that it is possible to think we are Christians but not to be recognisable by our fruits because of the choking weeds. There is a danger we will not mature.
- Looking at the fruitful plants in the parable we see what positively encourages maturity, and we find echoes of what we've thought about already. Jesus speaks of, *those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering, produce a crop* - maturity and fruitfulness come from **Heart, Hearing and Hanging on**.
- The **heart** speaks of our new identity and life that come by faith in Jesus. In Christ we have become spiritually alive, born afresh. We are those who have had a heart transplant, *a heart of flesh for a heart of stone* [Ezek.36:26]: lives where Jesus has made his home through the Spirit: lamps lit with the light of Christ. And Jesus goes on, after the parable, to say that lights are not lit to be hidden under the bed. He urges us to build upon what we have and then more will come.
- The Bible has a key role alongside our hearts as our life coach and Jesus speaks next of **hearing** and retaining the Word. Mal-nourished Christians under-develop and have no energy to act.
- In Bible-speak, a heart of stone is unresponsive whereas a heart of flesh listens and acts. Just after the parable of the sower Jesus says, *be careful how you listen*, and a few verses later he says, *My mother and my brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice*. Maturing Christians read their Bibles and seek the Spirit's wisdom to understand and absorb its goodness, and by that same Spirit choose let the word of God shape and change their lives.

- But Jesus, by his example and teaching showed that spiritual maturity also requires effort. The fruit of the Spirit will come as we open ourselves to Spirit but maturity also comes through co-operation between will and spirit, faith and grace. Those who persevere, who keep **hanging on** even when the ride gets rough, will be fruitful.
- I think I should add here that maturity and fruitfulness can never be instantaneous. The fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5 only come when the Christian exercises the gifts of the Spirit and submits to the heavenly Gardener's pruning. Maturity cannot come without grace and struggle. James 1:2-4 says, *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*.
- Maturing in Christ, both growing up and living as grown ups, is implied in our overall Church Vision Statement; *In Jesus becoming distinctive, through Jesus making a difference*. Its just as clear in the vision the Ju:C team have adopted: *Our aim is for children to live enthusiastically with God today, tomorrow and forever*. I long for Value 3, *All ages maturing in Christ by the power of the Spirit*, to be true of this church because then I believe we will be bringing greatest pleasure and glory to God because we will be fulfilling his purposes & filling His kingdom!
- And finally, as a postscript, as I was praying this week I had a sequence of thoughts and pictures. I'd like to share them with you for you to test because I felt they were for this sermon and if they are, I pray God will use them as He wills. Picture of a child's development in drawing. The image that doesn't fill the page. The separation of earth and sky. The full page with earth and sky joined by a horizon we journey towards....
- Final Prayer - *Brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold to the teachings passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.* [2Thess 2:15 -17, 3:5]