



Church Health Profile

Maturing Faith Feature Article

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The healthy church nurtures spiritual maturity that shapes biblical beliefs and transforms behaviors consistent with a holy life.

The Bible is extremely clear in establishing spiritual maturity as God's will for every believer. Paul, the Apostle, wrote to the Colossians, "We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present every man perfect (mature, strong) in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). To the Ephesians he wrote, "We are not meant to remain as children at the mercy of every chance wind of teaching... But we are meant to speak the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head" (Ephesians 4:14, Phillips).

While most Christian leaders readily affirm this truth, the sad reality is that in many churches spiritual maturity is the exception rather than the norm. George Gallup found that while almost half the people in the United States attend church services, only 6 to 10 percent of them are what he terms "highly spiritually committed."¹ He went on to compare the daily behavior of church individuals and unchurched individuals in areas such as calling in sick when they weren't, lying on resumes, and cheating on taxes. He found "little difference in the ethical views and behavior of the churched and the unchurched."² Walk into a Christian bookstore today and you will find multiple books telling us what we already know about ourselves. In North America, we are living in the first post-Christian age since the time of Christ. We have seen a dramatic cultural shift in North America in recent years. Gone are the days in which we can expect even the average churchgoer to know how to read and apply God's Word. Most people no longer hold certain truths as universal. We are no longer able to use the word "god" and expect that a majority of people around us understand this to be the God of the Bible. Ask five members of most any church in North America today to explain why Jesus is the only way to God and why we, as human beings, need forgiveness, and you will be hard-pressed to find similar answers let alone correct Biblical theology. We live in a world in which spiritual maturity is not the norm, but the exception.

And yet, the Church is called to produce disciples, not just believers, who walk in the footsteps of Jesus (1 John 2:6). As leaders, we are challenged to follow Paul's example who wrote to the Galatians, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you ..." (Galatians 4:19).

Understanding the Maturing Faith Process

The million-dollar question for healthy churches in the twenty-first century is, "How do we lead our people to mature faith?" As usual, Jesus personally showed what creating a

culture conducive to maturing faith looks like when he "...went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted...He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons" (Mark 3:13-15). Jesus modeled with His disciples a process of teaching truth and then equipping them to put His words into practice. The Parable of the Wise Builder is a direct illustration of this active discipleship. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 7:24). The rich young ruler was told, "If you want to be perfect (complete, mature), go, sell...and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21). In other words, "Practice what you claim to know." This two-fold process of teaching them truth (educate) and helping them put it into practice (equip) is a distinctive method that works in any century. In fact, the Wesleyan tradition is one that is rooted deeply in just this style of methodical discipleship. John Wesley would often bring small groups of young believers together and give them a system of accountability, practices and studies with the goal of maturing them in their faith. This became known as "Methodism" and those in the small groups were called "Methodists". In the twenty-first century church the method is the same. Discipleship must encompass the process of educating and equipping believers.

Educating – Teaching Truth

The objective of teaching Truth is passing on principles in order to develop a matrix that filters the decisions and actions of the believer's every day life. To operate with a Biblical worldview there are certain truths that every believer must know and understand.

Equipping – Putting Truth into Practice

Simply knowing Truth does not bring the believer to maturity. Growth also involves our actions. It requires "walking in the truth." Scripture indicates that regular practice is necessary to produce qualities of Christ-likeness. "Solid food (the teaching about righteousness) is for the mature, who by *constant use* have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14, emphasis mine). A healthy church grows believers by assisting them in learning basic practices, those habits, skills and disciplines that put truth into play in their life.

A Final Ingredient

A healthy discipleship process teaches Truth and equips the believer to put Truth into practice in community. As we saw earlier, Jesus called the disciples to Him so that they might "be with Him." A culture that is conducive to discipleship educates and equips in the context of relationships.

Getting It Together

The Sabbath, field scene (Mark 2:23-28) from Jesus' life shows us what this looks like. While Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field, the disciples picked some raw grain (and probably ate it) on the Sabbath. Jesus seized a teaching moment by taking advantage of a question that was asked. He took them to a Biblical passage that illustrated and emphasized the principle of the Sabbath and then gave them knowledge and a working definition. In that one moment, He helped them understand

the practice of the Sabbath more clearly. He educated and equipped them at the same time.

There are other instances when Jesus equipped or educated his followers. For example, one day the disciples observed Him praying and they said, "Lord, teach us to pray..." (Luke 11:1). He equipped them with a practice and pattern of prayer. On another occasion, Jesus taught His disciples the nature of the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:18-21). He taught them Truth. Jesus was careful to give His disciples doctrinal principles (education) as well as basic practices (equipping).

It is important to note that these opportunities always came about in the context of doing life together. A healthy spiritual formation culture is one that allows deep and safe relationships to form and be sustained. It is only in this environment that the education and equipping fully form into maturing faith.

Challenges to Creating a Culture of Maturing Faith

Our primary challenge in creating this kind of culture is that, if we are honest with ourselves, we don't expect it. I distinctly remember an individual in the church where I grew up who was genetically cranky. Nothing was ever right in her eyes. Her native tongue was complaint. She would greet me with a grunt as she walked in the door. Years of Sunday school attendance, years of listening to sermons and serving in the church did not bring change. What confused me as a child was that everyone seemed okay with that. I would hear adults say, "Oh, that's just the way she is!" and then smile knowingly. No one expected her to change. As C.S. Lewis said in another context, we are, "like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."³

Another reason spiritual formation is a struggle in churches is that we don't plan for it. John Ortberg said it well, "Spiritual transformation cannot be orchestrated or controlled, but neither is it a random venture...we need a plan."⁴ Creating a culture for maturing faith calls for intentionality. Healthy churches have taken a considerable amount of time defining what mature believers "look like" and have created a clear and flexible, but not overly complicated, process. This may include classes, seminars, small group studies, and a plethora of other options.

One church took the model of the early Church found in Acts 2:42-47 and outlined five characteristics of those young believers as a basis for creating their culture of transformation. These broad strokes of education and equipping are principles mature believers need in each area. They then designed places where these can be passed on in community.

Here's an example of their basic framework:

1. Relationships ... Growing believers understand that we were designed to live in community by a God who exists in community. (Education: Trinity and character of God. Equipping: relational skills and practices, church membership, baptism)

2. Worship ... God is Holy and Righteous and He alone deserves our worship and devotion. (Education: character of God, surrender/sanctification, concept of absolute Truth. Equipping: personal & corporate worship)
3. Spiritual Disciplines ... Growing believers desire an increasingly closer relationship with their heavenly Father through a disciplined life-style. (Education: authority of Bible. Equipping: devotional & study skills, spiritual disciplines)
4. Evangelism ... God desires a personal-faith relationship with every human being and we are commanded to help others discover this truth. (Education: doctrines of sin & salvation. Equipping: evangelism skills)
5. Service ... Each believer was specifically designed by a loving God to serve Him by ministering to others. (Education: God's purpose and love, God as provider. Equipping: spiritual gifts, stewardship)

In our Wesleyan heritage, John Wesley defined his Methodist process this way:

Loves God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength
 In everything gives thanks
 Heart lifted to God at all times
 Loves every man as his own soul
 Pure in heart
 God reigns alone
 Keeps all the commandments
 Does all to the glory of God
 Adorns the doctrine of God in all things ⁵

Scripture is clear on the fact that creating a culture of maturing faith is an assumed function of the church. As Wesleyans, our own heritage is well grounded in defining clear strategies for spiritual formation. Healthy churches will have a clear strategy of maturing believers that balances education and equipping. Healthy churches have wrestled with such questions as: What values does a mature believer hold dear? What doctrines are foundational for the formation of good life decisions? What practices are vital for twenty-first century believers to quiet their hearts and hear God's voice? Where are we allowing people to wrestle with life and seek out answers with other believers in Scripture? The answers and conclusions to these questions will determine the level of a church's effectiveness in developing mature believers.

Notes:

1. Colson: *The Body: Being Light in the Darkness*, Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 31
2. Ibid, 31
3. Lewis: C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, New York: Macmillan, 1980, 4
4. Ortberg: *John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, 196
5. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*: John Wesley, 17

