



Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity

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What does it mean to be mature in faith?

Most evangelical Christians have an understanding of conversion that presumes they are “good to go.” They have prayed a prayer that “assures” them of a future life, and in the meantime they hear preaching on Sunday that, quite simply, does not either call for or rely on a theology of spiritual maturity. The dominant motif is that salvation can be experienced by believing certain things to be true, praying a simple prayer and then carrying on as best one can till Jesus “returns.”

This has left the church vulnerable to what has aptly been called “therapeutic deism,” and one wonders if this is indeed the religion of the land rather than trinitarian Christian faith. The goal of the church is to get people “saved” so they can be happy and live productive and civil lives, all with the assurance that in the next life they will be in “heaven.” Most words spoken in Sunday preaching in evangelical churches do not assume that spiritual maturity is integral to the gospel. The Barna Group came to a remarkable conclusion based on research conducted in 2009:

Our studies this year among pastors showed that almost nine out of ten senior pastors of Protestant churches asserted that spiritual immaturity is one of the most serious problems facing the Church. Yet relatively few of those pastors believe that such immaturity is reflected in their church. Few pastors have gone so far as to give their congregants a specific, written statement of how they define spiritual maturity, how it might be measured, the strategy for facilitating such maturity, or what scriptural passages are most helpful in describing and fostering maturity. Those pastors who made any attempt to measure maturity were more likely to gauge depth on the basis of participation in programs than to evaluate people’s spiritual understanding or any type of transformational fruit in their lives. Not surprisingly, our research found that a majority of churchgoing adults are uncertain as to what their church would define as a “healthy, spiritually mature follower of Christ” and they were no more likely to have personally developed a clear notion of such a life.

This research suggests there is a place, indeed an urgent need, for something that would help pastors and congregations define spiritual maturity more clearly. . . .

What does it mean to be mature in our faith? . . . This book focuses specifically on that question, contributing to the discussion of the goal or vision of the Christian life.

A focus on this question has implications for our understanding of conversion and our approach to evangelism. If conversion is a good beginning to the Christian life, that naturally

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raises a question – what, then, *is* the Christian life? The second question also has implications for spiritual discipline and practice. Indeed, we should only speak about practice in light of the grace for which we hope.

So, then, the following chapters focus on the question of what it means to be a mature Christian. If the Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage, what is the goal or objective toward which we walk? To what end are we converted? And to what end are our spiritual practices and disciplines? . . .

This book is offered to the entire Christian community – young, middle-aged and seniors. It seeks to challenge young people to establish early on the kind of life they will live: What goals are worth pursuing and what achievements are worth their due diligence? What patterns of life, work, relationship and worship will foster the life they want to have? This book also offers to guide those in midlife as they make midcourse adjustments to their priorities and thus to their lives, with close attention to what matters most. And finally, it proposes to encourage those moving into their senior years about the choices they make at this crucial juncture. For many people these years are the most rewarding and significant, the time when they ask themselves what kind of legacy they want to leave. For each group it is about stewardship: What does it mean to be a good steward of our early years, our mid-adult years and our senior years?

This book is also offered to church congregations that are eager to take seriously the call to foster maturity and bring about spiritual transformation in disciples of Jesus. What does this look like? What is the character of this maturity? And how is it expressed in congregational priorities and commitments?

Specifically, this book is both a call and invitation to live life “in Christ” – more precisely, to live a life that is the fruit of dynamic participation in the life of Christ.

--Adapted from the Introduction and Chapter 1, “Called to Be Saints: The Need for a Compelling Theology of Holiness”