

MATURITY, THE SURE FOUNDATION OF MINISTRY

The hue and cry today in most denominations, our own included, is that to be a good Christian you must exercise the particular ministry God has given you, that gift of service for which you are especially equipped. Or lacking the equipment, the one you feel compelled to do anyway! There are varieties of gifts and variety of ministries, and the human condition, fairly diagnosed as terminal, is in desperate need of them all.

But in our haste, or dawdle, as the case may be, to be useful, we should not neglect the vocation shared by all Christians, one that comes before all our ministries. If we do not advance in our common vocation, all our ministries, however helpful to others, will profit us nothing. As St. Paul recognized, we can serve others and ourselves end up castaways (1 Corinthians. 9:27). Many of the scandals among clergy, which have so damaged the credibility of the Christian witness, are due in large measure not to a failure in ministry but a failure in this common vocation.

What is it? Growing up, becoming mature in Christ. St. Paul goes so far as to profess that this is the purpose of his labors as an Apostle. "...Christ in you the hope of Glory. Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:27-28). The foundation of effective ministry is maturity in Christ. It doesn't happen automatically. You must discipline (as in disciple) yourself to grow. That is the essence of living the Christian life.

All of you Greek scholars will recognize that the word in the original translated "mature" (*teleion*), quoted in Colossians above, is the same word used in that vexing command of Jesus, "Be perfect (*telieos*) as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Only in the army of heaven can you "Be all that you can be," which is indeed the meaning of maturity, and perfection.

Maturity in heaven's sense is the very antithesis of self-reliant. Ironically, the Bible is often used wrongly as a guide to self-reliance. "God helps those who help themselves" is not a biblical quote. The Bible does not encourage

dependence on oneself, but on God: not self-help but divine help. Neither does it encourage ministry based on our own strength.

The Prayer Book reminds us that God "always resists the proud who confide in their own strength." Seen from heaven, our strength is a joke. As the psalmist says, God laughs the powerful to scorn (e.g. 59:8). Self-reliance produces not the giants we suppose, but spiritual pigmies, wielding little tridents, knocking the furniture about, making pronouncements and improvements that only make the mess we're in messier. Nothing tickles the divine funny bone like our cocksure impotence. "We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves."

The stunted growth of spiritual pigmies can always be traced to the empty storehouses of pride. We are our own worst enemy because pride is a tea party of little children, going through motions empty of nourishment.

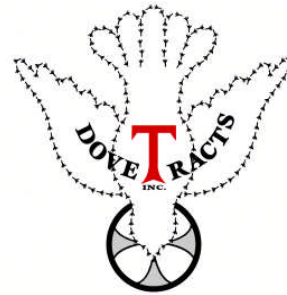
The measure of spiritual maturity, however, is not the "Muscular Christian," the Bible toting Rambo settling scores with the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is rather the believer for whom

faithfulness is everything; the one who has a widening trust that Christ will do in and for him all that He promised. Such a saint (for this is what defines saintliness) does not put his confidence in his own accomplishments, but in Christ's victories. He is concerned less with the fruits of ministry, like helpfulness, success, and influence, and more with the fruits of maturity.

St. Peter describes these fruits as if they were rungs of a ladder we climb toward our Father, who is the fullness of maturity: "...[Christ] has granted us His precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2Peter1: 4-8).

Christian maturity is finally to become one with the Father, which is nothing less than partaking of the divine nature. He who is love by nature makes us love by grace. As that happens the growing capacity for true ministry will follow.

The Rev. Steven McClaskey



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Maturity

The Sure Foundation of Ministry

