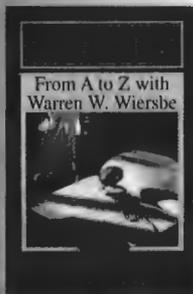


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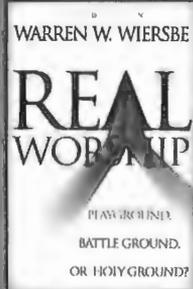
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Reflections on Christian Maturity

Richard C. Oudersluys

The editor's kind invitation to contribute some pages on this theme pushed me into a pensive mood. What made him think I know something about maturity? What do I know about it? My advanced and advancing years (I am now past ninety), while not irrelevant, should not deceive the reader. The old are not necessarily mature nor are the mature always old. Most of us have heard more than once those quips about "old heads on young shoulders" and "no fool like an old fool." Chronological age simply provides a vantage point of accumulated events and experiences that makes possible some reflection and life-review, which in turn may bear significantly on what we now term maturity. Since I now have chronological age on my side, let me do a little life-review and reflection and recount something of my personal journey toward the cherished goal of maturity.

I

As I look back on the years of my discipleship journey, I believe they evidence some discernible phases,¹ and the first was that of a youthful, naïve Christian idealism—a wanting to follow Jesus, a wanting to be like him. From Bible and catechism classes and the hymnology of our church, I gathered that that was what being a Christian was all about. My early teen years coincided with the influx of gospel hymns into Reformed Church worship, and on most occasions, the hymn selection included "More About Jesus," "More Like the Master," and "I Would Be Like Jesus," with its refrain:

Be like Jesus, this my song,
in the home and in the throng;
Be like Jesus, all day long!
I would be like Jesus.

This idealism was simply reinforced when I received as an award a copy of Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (first published in 1896), with its repeated question: "What would Jesus do?" Only in later years did I come to see the pervasive subjectivity of Sheldon's *imitatio christi*, and that it "has a tendency either to reduce Christ to the human level or to exalt man in his capacity for Christ-likeness."²

In my later teens, study and discussion of the Heidelberg Catechism brought both reinforcement and perplexity to my idealism. Comfort emerged when we reached Q. 59 and learned again that Jesus' death and resurrection are what acquit us before God (justification), and that this justifying grace of God is what

makes possible the beginning of our life in, with, and for Christ (sanctification). My discipleship journey was reaffirmed, but with the salutary remainder that in its beginning, it is the opposite of all do-it-yourself religion. All subsequent following and obedience to Christ are simply gratitude begotten by divine grace. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

My comfort increased when we took up the third part of the Catechism, dealing with this new life of gratitude which follows from God's free grace. While a little daunted by the imposing term "sanctification," for my subsequent discipleship and following in the steps of Jesus (1 Pet. 2:21) I was ready to swallow twice, accept it, and gladly say that the new life of the believer is one of "wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a strong desire to live according to the will of God in all good works" (Heidelberg Catechism: A. to Q. 90). What daunted me was Q. 91: "What are good works?" and the answer: "Only those which are done out of true faith, conform to God's law, and are done for God's glory, and not those based on our own opinion or human tradition." In other words, when faced with ethical dilemmas, no more asking, "What would Jesus do," but rather, "What does God require in his commandments?" as spelled out in Q. and A., 91-113.

Yet more perplexity was awaiting me. After a careful and sometimes lengthy exposition of what the commandments require of us, Q. 114 asks: "Can those converted to God obey these commandments perfectly?" The A.: "No, in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments." To be told that, in this life, even the best and holiest make only a small beginning in Christian obedience intruded into my boyish, naïve idealism a generous measure of realism and no little continuing perplexity about the nature of Christian growth and progress. But despite the limitations and subjectivity of my early *imitatio christi*, it did start me on the way to some maturity by providing me with a life-centering, all encompassing, transcendent relationship to Christ as my Saviour and Lord that served as an all-important integrating and unifying force for all my young aspirations and energies.

II

As I now recall, my next tussle with some of the realities of Christian maturity coincided with my now ancient seminary-student days. When, with a Greek New Testament in my hands, I began to probe the sanctification vocabulary of the New Testament, I was intrigued by the family of words built on the Greek stem *tel*, meaning "end/goal." I soon discovered that in many contexts it means to complete or bring to completion, to be or make perfect; thus suggesting that anyone or anything that reaches its *telos* is complete, perfect.

My interest in these concepts of maturity-perfection followed me to Milwaukee and my first parish experience. There I encountered living

embodiments of the immature, the relatively mature, and the mature. When some years later I returned to Western Seminary to teach, the probing and pondering accelerated. And what have my probing and pondering yielded for me? Too much, I fear, to relate here in its fullness, but the following seem deserving of mention.

For one thing, maturity or perfection is not an elective but rather a requirement in the curriculum of the Christian life, something expected of every believer. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught, "Be perfect (*teleioi*), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*)" (Matt. 5:48). In his Corinthian correspondence Paul charged believers, "Strive for perfection" (2 Cor. 13:11, TEV), and in a letter to his Colossian friends he said that the whole aim of his missionary journeys and labors was to "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28f.). Nor did he hesitate to say what he had in mind with all this talk about being and becoming perfect (*teleioi*). It is coming to the "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). A sentence or two later, he says that "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). In other words, this pursuit is both a "growing up into Christ," and a "growing up in every way," embracing body, mind, soul, and strength, both aspirations and expectations. The spiritual wholeness under description in Ephesians 4 is obviously corporate and horizontal as well as individual and vertical. All that describes Christ as our Saviour and Lord, the sum of who and what he is . . . all this is "to be imaged in the Church (cf. 1:23), and when these are in us we shall have reached our maturity and attained to the goal set before us."³ In other words, what we already are in Christ by faith, mature or perfect (1 Cor. 1:30), will one day in the resurrection be full reality.

In the meantime, the mature Christian lives in an eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet," a tension that demands we keep evidencing ourselves as mature by looking to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who "will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord," (1 Cor. 1:8-9). The mature and perfect in Christ know that short of the final resurrection, they are only in the process of becoming who and what they are in Christ, and so must strain every nerve to reach the goal.⁴ Despite the claims of certain holiness groups, Christian maturity or perfection is not reached in a moment, a day, or a year. It is a matter of growth and progress, and is not without its dangers and pitfalls. Already in New Testament times, we read of some who sought to evidence their maturity by separationist tactics, refusing to eat with Gentile believers (Gal. 2:11ff.), or refusing to eat meat once sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1ff.). Others advertised their maturity by pushing Christian freedom to the very limits of moral irresponsibility. Their proud flaunting of even pagan moral standards (1 Cor. 5:1ff) met with firm apostolic rebuke (Rom. 6:1ff.). Still others went so far as to equate Christian maturity with ethical sinlessness, an act that also met with

strong apostolic protest (1 John 1:8f.). As then, so now, there are no shortcuts to spiritual wholeness or maturity. Being and becoming who and what we already are by faith-union with Christ is a lifelong journey comprising much joy and peace, together with defeats and failures. As such it is a salutary reminder that John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* may not be as dated as some think.

III

Although advancing years bring to us numerous frailties and limitations of body and mind, they also provide the experience and perspective so essential to maturity.⁵ The experience of accumulated years does provide a vantage point that enables us to see more clearly and convincingly that spiritual wholeness is an indispensable factor in the contemporary understanding of maturity.⁶

And now, what is my place in this picture? Am I a mature person? The answer is both yes and no: Yes, because I am united by faith to Christ who became my wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30), and who is my advocate with God (1 John 2:1); No, because I am still maturing, still on the journey, still growing in my awareness of how victories and defeats, joys and sorrows, health and suffering, grief and death have all contributed significantly to my Christian faith and service. Reflecting on the past, I see now more clearly than in earlier years the decisive, determining impact of God's providence and unfaltering faithfulness, and how my active involvement in a supportive community of faith has been a positive, shaping force not only in my Christian life and work, but also in effecting what maturity I possess.

Even better than when I stood in the classroom, I now understand why Paul said, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Cor. 15:10a).⁷ Each day still brings on new occasions for growth in thankfulness and such service as comports with my age and ability. For the believer, Christian maturity is both gift and promise. Now, on the last lap of my discipleship journey, I find that the goal is still receding and that I can make Paul's self-descriptive words my own: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12). And when my life journey ends, what then? Promise will become full and final reality: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3). Meanwhile, between this now and then of our discipleship journey, we who are maturity bound draw our strength from both gift and promise.

ENDNOTES

¹ The term "phases" is used instead of the more familiar "stages" because of the overly constrictive way in which Fowler's eight stages of faith development are adopted and used by others. See James W. Fowler, "Faith Development and

Spirituality," in *Maturity and the Quest for Spiritual Meaning*, Charles C.L. Lao, ed. (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1988), 19-40; and Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

² Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, I "Foundations," (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 185f.

³ W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), III, 333.

⁴ Rudolf Schnackenburg, "Christian Adulthood According to the Apostle Paul," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 25 (1963), 367f.

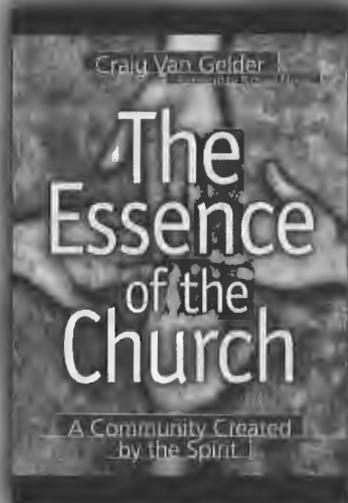
⁵ R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934), 41-72; and Hans K. La Rondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1971), 183-93.

⁶ John L. Maes, "Maturity in Pastoral Counseling," in *Maturity and the Quest for Spiritual Meaning*, Charles C.L. Kao, ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 160f.

⁷ In his exposition of "The Renewal of Man," Hendrikus Berkhof ventures a somewhat similar conclusion: "The more the believer, prompted by his security in God, ventures the life of new obedience, the more he needs, as he struggles along, the certainty that God's faithfulness and Christ's substitution will carry him through." *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 476.

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