

MATURITY



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*Growing Up and Going On*  
*in*  
*The Christian Life*

Sinclair B. Ferguson



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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In Gratitude  
for  
F.C.B. & M.B.T.



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## *Introduction*

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**M**aturity is not a *new* book on a new subject, but it is a renewed and recalibrated one on an old subject. Originally published in the United Kingdom in 1980 as *Add to Your Faith*, it subsequently appeared in the United States in 1981 under the title *Taking the Christian Life Seriously*. Thus a book originally written in one country to encourage progress in the Christian life became in another country a challenge to seriousness.

During the years it has been out of print I have received requests to have it reprinted. To these the almost inevitable response has been that it would need to be worked over again; it was a young man's book.

Yet I have not been able to shake off the possibility of reworking it. And in the interim I have been moved to discover that, for some, this was the very first Christian book they had read. I particularly prize the story of a woman who had become burdened with a desire to find peace with God. One day as she was passing a Presbyterian manse, she plucked up the courage to ring the door bell and ask for spiritual guidance. Happily (for us both!) the minister gave her a copy of *Add to Your Faith*. She read it through. The minister told me that when she returned it she commented on how amazing it was that the book's author had such a wonderful idea—to write a book helping people to understand what it meant to be a Christian. Little did she know that there was an entire world of Christian literature in which *Add to Your Faith* was but a tiny island. Any author would

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be thrilled to meet such a reader, which I later had the privilege of doing.

Re-reading and reworking these pages has clarified in my own mind what this book is meant to be and to do.

All of us as Christians can benefit from biblical teaching that is ‘old’ or ‘new’ (Matt. 13:52). But *Maturity* will, I hope, help especially new and younger Christians to discover that there is much more to the Christian life than any of us imagine at the beginning of it—perhaps dauntingly more, but at the same time exhilaratingly and wonderfully more. At the same time I hope it will be a refresher course for Christians at every stage.

*Maturity* also expresses the conviction that the best way to come to grips with a topic related to the Christian faith, whether ‘doctrinal’ or ‘practical’, is not by collecting individual Bible verses but by studying larger central passages that touch on the theme. The truth of Scripture needs to be understood within its proper context in Scripture so that it breathes the spirit of Scripture. For true understanding is more than possessing information in the form of propositions or isolated texts. It involves breathing in the atmosphere in which the truths of the gospel are presented and then breathing it out in our lives.

This, then, began life as a young author’s first book, originally written over thirty-five years ago. But if a cat may look at a king I take encouragement from the fact that the great French reformer John Calvin rewrote his first published book on Christian faith and life, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Over a period of a quarter of a century he kept refining and revising it (and, it should be said, greatly enlarging it from what was originally a six chapter book into the fifteen-hundred pages it eventually became!). It is said that he wasted virtually nothing he had already written. It is actually possible to trace in the various revisions material that goes back to the first edition. *Maturity* has certainly not grown to such massive

proportions, but I suspect there are few sentences that remain the same.

I am especially grateful to the publisher's Editorial Director Jonathan Watson for his persistent enthusiasm and encouragement. Otherwise my debts remain unchanged from the first edition. The passage of time has only increased them: chiefly the unrepayable debt I share with all Christians to the Lord himself. But in addition, the other debts I cannot repay, to my wife Dorothy and to our children and their families. Their love throughout the years has been a constant support and source of encouragement.

I have retained the original enigmatic dedication to two 'behind the scenes' ladies who through what to them would have seemed a small act of kindness, humanly speaking changed the course of my life.

I hope that, in this revised form, these pages will continue to help my fellow Christians to become 'mature in Christ' (Col. 1:28).

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

*January 2018*



# *GROWING UP*

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## *The Importance of Maturity*

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**W**hat are the most important lessons the New Testament has to teach us about being a Christian?

Live for the glory of God is one of them. Live out and speak up about the gospel is another. But alongside these we find that the writers of the New Testament had a deep-seated concern to see Christians grow to spiritual maturity. Paul tells us that this was a central goal in his ministry: he worked hard to ‘present everyone mature in Christ’ (Col. 1:28-29).

If that was the concern of the first believers and one of the burdens of the teaching of the New Testament, it should be ours too. But it is easy to neglect our calling to grow up to be mature Christians. Paul’s words may be all too painfully appropriate: ‘Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready’ (1 Cor. 3:1-2).

I remember hearing a talk at a young people’s group. The visiting speaker belonged to a well-known evangelistic mission. He described how he made a decision to go to Bible School for a year ‘to get maturity’—and during that year he apparently ‘got it’!

But we cannot ‘get’ the maturity of a fully-developed Christian character, expressing itself in consistent Christian living, quite so easily. It requires time and patient progress. It is developed only

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in the school of discipleship, in which extensive courses have been designed to produce the maturity that expresses itself in Christ-like character. And we will not travel far along this road before we discover that there are obstacles and hindrances on the way.

### *Hindrances*

It is not easy today to devote ourselves to long term spiritual growth.

*(1) Contemporary society discourages spiritual maturity.*

Our world is fast-paced, consumer-centred, image-focused, media-dominated, and has become accustomed to immediate responses. It does not encourage the slow-burning disciplines that produce character. Nor does it produce many ‘characters’—men and women whose moral stature makes them stand out in society, and who contribute to it in part because they are so different from it. On the contrary, we are encouraged to become replicas of the icons of our time, moulded by the transient fashions they create. A pathetic sameness and unoriginality emerges as we are swept downstream in the flow of society’s priorities.

Surrounded by these pressures, many people, especially young people, find it difficult to resist. No, it is not easy to devote ourselves to the counter-cultural gospel influences that will pay *long term* spiritual dividends.

But if we are going to be mature Christians, we must not allow ourselves to be dominated by hunger-pangs for immediate gratification. In that sense we must resist the pressures of the age to squeeze us into its mould.

*(2) Our personal background can hinder growth to maturity.*

That may seem a strange statement. After all, it is not my background that makes me a Christian. True, but it does contribute to the basic stuff of my character, the ‘me’ that becomes a Christian, and goes on to live the Christian life. We may never have

been exposed to influences that help to shape and develop mature spiritual character. As a result we may feel it is almost impossible to recapture lost ground, or to make up for lost time. If it is true, as Wordsworth wrote,

The world is too much with us, late and soon,  
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers<sup>1</sup>

then the recovery of those wasted powers will not be the task of a single day.

(3) *'Christian' influences may not encourage maturity.*

Sadly, that is the conclusion to which we may be driven if we read the various contemporary surveys analyzing the belief and behaviour patterns of Christians.

Two symptoms of a malaise can be identified as causes of this particular concern.

One is a lack of *seriousness*. Ours is an entertainment-orientated society. Following that model, seriousness in lifestyle, speech, and purpose is often discouraged. Few things are more feared than the fear of God! But the gospel is not a pantomime; it is a matter of life and death. We therefore need to learn the difference between being serious and being lugubrious; happy Christians take the gospel very seriously, and it shows in their lives.

Another is a lack of *teaching*. God's word is solid food which builds Christians up in their faith (Heb. 5:12-14).

Earlier generations of Christians—from Paul onwards—realized that for spiritual growth we require constant feeding. By contrast, some churches today expect us to grow to whatever maturity is desirable on the basis of a meagre diet of teaching from God's word. Yes, we need to grasp the basic elements of the gospel; but that is surely not enough. In addition, a premium is placed on personal activism rather than on the knowledge of God and his word that

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, from his sonnet 'The world is too much with us'.

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comes from patient study and meditation. The result is that life-changing, character-building knowledge of God is sidelined. The effect is, as Professor David Wells has suggested, that God becomes 'weightless' to us.<sup>1</sup> We lose sight of the true knowledge of the Holy One who makes us feel endangered as sinners (Isa. 6:1-7). As Ezekiel saw, we then fill our lives with false devotion and take idols into our heart (Ezek. 14:3-7).

Perhaps readers of a book with a title like this one are predisposed to agree. We are serious enough to want to make progress, to become useful, mature, and consistent Christians. We realize we face obstacles. It is not a judgmental spirit of criticism that makes us recognize the difficulties around us, but a spirit of humble realism. If so we have an important source of encouragement: in one form or another, the hindrances we experience were well known to the writers of the New Testament. None of our challenges is novel.

In fact, the letter to the Hebrews was addressed to Christians struggling with pressures to compromise their faith. The details of their circumstances were different of course. But, like ourselves, they faced situations that threatened their spiritual progress. Persecution was on the horizon; some of their number had already suffered (Heb. 13:3). They knew what it was to feel overwhelmed and experience lethargy setting in as they felt increasingly weary in the battle. Would they go back, give up the race, and sink under the pressures?

The unnamed author of this letter—a 'word of exhortation' as he calls it (13:22)—encourages them instead to 'go on to maturity' (6:1).

The word 'mature' (*teleios*) belongs to a family of words in the New Testament which convey the idea of wholeness. It is sometimes translated as 'perfect' or 'complete'. It could describe a sacrifice that was without blemish, or denote something that was complete, without anything lacking, left out, or out of place—for example, a *full*

<sup>1</sup> See David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 88ff.

year, or a *full* life. The Greek mathematicians described as *perfect* any number which was the sum of all the other numbers by which it could be divided—like 6 (the sum of 1, 2, and 3) or 28 (the sum of 1, 2, 4, 7 and 14). It was complete and ‘perfect’ in itself.

The word had other uses. It meant to reach a high level of competence—as a doctor, or teacher, or even as a thief! In this sense it meant someone whose powers and talents had been fully developed. It could mean ‘complete’, or ‘finished’, in the sense that we might speak of something as the ‘finished article’—exhibiting workmanship of high quality, or someone whose character was mature and well-rounded. Thus, naturally, in ordinary use *teleios* came to denote adult behaviour, maturity, the opposite of childishness (to be carefully distinguished from *childlikeness*).

These different examples help us capture the sense in which the New Testament speaks about a Christian as mature. He or she is someone in whom God’s recreating purposes are clearly illustrated, a person who expresses the true qualities of a servant of the Lord (Eph. 2:10).

As we shall see, such maturity is in part brought about by the trials of Christian experience. They are the Master Craftsman’s chisel marks on our lives. James (the half-brother of Jesus) understood this: ‘Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect [*teleioi* the plural of *teleios*] and complete, lacking in nothing’ (James 1:4). ‘Lacking in nothing’—stable, capable Christians whose gifts and graces have been developed; those who by God’s grace have become masters of themselves, and are able to use all the gifts that God has given them in his service. The mature Christian has been finely shaped by the Holy Spirit and has been ‘filled out’ in a character which shows the fruit of the Spirit. Mature Christians possess the qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce, because he alone has exhibited them perfectly. This is maturity.