

When we were children, didn't it seem to take forever to grow up? And now doesn't it seem like it flew by in a flash? I remember always wanting to be older and bigger when I was a boy. Around age nine I dreamed of being a teenager. Then at thirteen or fourteen I couldn't wait to be sixteen and have a driver's license. Have you ever noticed that when young children play their pretend roles are always that of grownups, whether it's a firefighter, or an athlete, or mommy or daddy? In the same way there are many Christians that long to grow up. They desire a deeper awareness of God in their lives. **They hunger for solid food to live mature Christian lives as “co-workers in God's service” who solve problems so that God's kingdom comes.**

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he mentions this hunger and expresses a concern for those who have never desired a mature faith. Chapter three begins with a reprimand because Paul could speak to them only as infants. *“I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food”* (vv. 2-3). Of course, there's nothing wrong with being an infant or a child. As you know, we have Time with the Children in every service of worship here at Ken Mawr. But if we grow physically and still only have a child's capacity for understanding things of the Spirit we will not be able to function as God wants us to. **God wants us to grow up! He wants us to move beyond milk to digest solid food.** Yet there are steps in growing more spiritually mature that we ought to remember.

THE FIRST STEP in Christian maturity is to recognize *distortions* of our faith. **Paul stresses that the person who led us to faith is not the primary actor in our spiritual maturity.** *“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth”* (vv. 5-6). It's important to understand that it doesn't matter whether we do our growing under Paul or Apollos or Karl; whether we worship in a Presbyterian church or a non-

denominational church. All play a part in God's plan. It's not so much the *place* that matters but letting God grow our faith wherever we are. The ecclesiastical implication of Paul's message is simply this: The goal is not merely to move higher on the spiritual food chain but to bring others with us.

**A second distortion** that attacks maturity of faith is the feeling that solid food must taste *different* than milk. We begin to believe that if some truth isn't *different*, if it isn't new, then it isn't solid food. But that's how cults begin! They say, "What you learned in the past is immature. Our teaching is new and sophisticated, and it makes sense to modern thinking." Newness is not a requirement for solid food. Solid food can also be more of the simple solid faith that God gave us years ago that nourishes us throughout our lives.

**A third distortion is the feeling that we have grown in our lives to a level of superior truth.** When this happens, pride may grow within us and a judgmental spirit distorts our relationship with God and others. For example, perhaps you, like me, learned the books of the Bible in Sunday School. Now, what's the value in learning the 66 books of the Bible? Isn't it to locate the books more easily? So that knowledge, in and of itself, is of little value if we never open a Bible. **Knowing the books of the Bible should never give us a feeling of superiority or spiritual pride, especially if we never use it!** It is essential to grow in our relationship with Christ, however, growing for the sake of growing is not God's intention. God expects growth to lead us to live more Christ-like lives. Authentic Christian maturity is purposeful.

THE SECOND STEP in our move toward maturity is to remember that **familiarity and personal bias can and does limit our growth in faith.** Not long ago I was reading a daily devotion. The Scripture that day was the prodigal son in Luke chapter 15. Throughout my ministry I have preached on this classic parable numerous times. I've studied the parable carefully. I've consulted resources on its meaning. So, what did I find myself doing that morning? I said, "*Oh, I know this. It's familiar to me.*" So, I hurried on to the devotional summary and a quick prayer because **familiarity** closed my mind

to the message God wanted me to hear. I consciously had to return and reread the Scripture later that day to allow God to impress on me more of the story's meaning. If you think you've got nothing to learn in your walk of faith, chances are that's exactly what you'll learn—nothing. Absolutely nothing!

Besides familiarity, **personal bias** can inhibit our maturing in faith. When the pastor of a certain church resigned to take another post, the lay leaders decided that this would be a good time to survey the membership to get a feel for what they wanted in a new pastor. One of the presbytery leaders designed and administered a survey. While the results indicated a basic unity concerning the church's ministry and mission, it was interesting how many of the expectations concerning the new leader contradicted each other. One member said, "The new pastor needs to be available to every church member all the time." While another said, "The pastor shouldn't be too busy. The new pastor needs to have more time to study and nourish their spirit." One member wanted a pastor who "was respected in the larger Christian world and invited to speak other places," while in the same church there were those who expressed resentment at the pastor being away too much "except for family vacations." Some wanted a minister who was a good counselor and others wanted to be sure the pastor was not "always counseling."

Personal bias can severely inhibit spiritual maturity, which in turn inhibits the church's mission. In this chapter Paul illustrates how the divisions in the church had grown out of the fact that members did not understand the role of the apostles and the teachers of the church. The church is God's field, and Paul and Apollos are human instruments in that field. They are *servants* who played different roles in bringing the Corinthians to faith in Jesus the Lord.

Paul uses an agricultural analogy in which he says the role he played in preaching the gospel was like planting the seed and Apollos' role was like watering the plants. They were not in competition but were partners in a common venture, team members in a common task. And while their ministry

was very important, it was less important than the role of God has, who provides the growth. The inference is that there were divisions caused by giving **more devotion to God's servants than to the Lord of the church.**

This Corinthian problem continues to plague the church today. In every community there are Christians that are divided because of some who have a greater loyalty to one of God's servants than they have to *that servant's Lord*. **It's a personal bias that sometimes leads to personality cults** in business, in education, in medicine, and at times in ministry. In each of these fields there are strong personalities who gather around themselves disciples to their way of thinking and acting. In most cases this fact of life has a divisive effect on the organization, or the church. It can result in ministers and churches and denominations competing with one another. A divided church is created by forgetting that we are ALL servants of the ONE Lord Jesus and that both the field and the harvest belong to God.

THE THIRD STEP in developing problem-solving Christian maturity is to remember that **one person's solid food may be another person's milk.** Paul faced this with the Corinthian church. Paul reports *jealousy and quarreling* among the believers so he reminds the church of places of spiritual blindness in their individual lives. No doubt there were individuals in the Corinthian congregation ready for "solid food," but like most any church, those leaders had areas in their spiritual lives where they were *mature* and areas where they were *immature*—like all of us have.

On any given Sunday morning, in any given church, almost any sermon preached contains milk for some and solid food for others. A particular sermon may be solid food for you, producing insight, encouragement and maturity. If that happens, take the sermon and apply its message to your life. On the other hand, it may be that what you hear in a sermon will be what you already know and practice. When that happens, listen to what God is saying to you, but also pray for others that they will grow from what they hear, and ask that God will develop in every one of us a taste for solid food.

Every service contains milk and solid food, but every service always contains opportunities for maturing in faith and understanding. In other words, **MATURITY IS A CHOICE**. A pastor in Fort Lauderdale, FL writes that growth builds on faith foundations already in place. In the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus taught the need for a strong foundation, not built on sand, but on the solid rock. It's true that maturity can only grow on what is already there. **For instance, the difference between most high school students and most college students is this.** A high school student will assume learning is limited to what their teacher says in the classroom. A college student recognizes that understanding is more than what we hear in the classroom. It includes studying, researching and conversations with professors. College students know that much more learning takes place *after the lecture is over*.

Whether in a classroom or sanctuary, maturity is what happens after the class is over or after worship ends. Do you see? Why should we expect God to supply additional wisdom until we have applied the learning we already possess? You and I have been fed the “milk” of God’s love and grace. Why should we expect God’s “solid food” of truth and spiritual gifts until we have dealt with the milk of God’s love and removed all “*jealousy and quarreling*” from our lives? **Why would God multiply his blessings in our lives until we’ve chosen to live lives based on what we already know?**

Paul’s teaching means that we are partners with everyone else in the church and with those who have gone before and those who come after us. **We can complain; we can criticize; we can create problems in the church. But “co-workers in God’s service” are problem solvers** who are led by God’s Word and Spirit to accomplish the work of God’s kingdom. I’ll never forget what I once heard Bishop Joseph Garlington of Covenant Church, Pittsburgh say: “With the Word alone we will dry up; with the Spirit alone we will puff up; but with the Word *and* the Spirit *we will grow up*.” **In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is saying that in the church, mature “co-workers in God’s service” are problem solvers who hunger for solid food.** Are you hungry? Amen.