

‘Everyone Complete in Christ’

In **Colossians 1:28-29**, Paul makes it clear that he spares no effort to be able to present every single person complete in Christ. What is ‘maturity’? Is Christian maturity a practical goal? Paul thought so. How can we move towards maturity?

Personal Foundations

God is only doing one thing – he is building the Church. He uses the strong images of a body and a building. Each part of a body is necessary and needs to be related back to the head in order to function correctly. Each stone in a house need to be correctly bonded back to the cornerstone. Yes, the Body and the House are his main purpose and yes, he longs to bring everything to a glorious consummation in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Head and the Cornerstone. But (have we realised it?) he is totally committed to seeing that each of us comes to full personal maturity as well. We knew that he loved us, but *that much?* (See **Colossians 2:19**, **Ephesians 4:16**, **Ephesians 2:20-22**, **1 Peter 2:5**, **Hebrews 2:10** – “... bringing many sons to glory”)

How solid is our own relationship with the Lord? We cannot just look back and remember experiences, nor just repeat some accurate teaching; we need the foundations to be in place now. However long ago they were put in, foundations need to go on working. If they are not effective today, they are not effective. Any experiences we have had need to be based on truth and leading to increased reality, to a real and growing knowledge of God – objectively and subjectively, both in our knowledge and in our experience.

We need to beware of:-

1) any ‘truth’ which does not enhance our working experience and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. In other words, the objective truth should lead to greater subjective experience.

2) any ‘experience’ which does not lead to greater appreciation of what our Father has done for us in him. The subjective experience is designed to lead to solid knowledge.

In practice, what often seems to happen is that the Lord leads us into an appreciation of truth through the doorway of an experience. There is no problem with truth being stored in our minds, nor with experiences being stored

in our memories. What we need to learn to do is to draw on those truths and memories to bring us again and again into a fresh appreciation of what the Lord has already made real to us.

Neither the truth nor the experience alone are any guarantee of maturity. Learning to stand in the **reality** of what we **know** to be ours in Jesus is the key to effective living, and this is what Paul concentrates on in **Colossians 2 & 3**. He takes the truths which he hinted at in **chapter 1** and applies them to the practical problems which faced them there, problems of people trying to saddle them with human philosophy, trying to make them conform to man-made religion, and the all-too-familiar problem of temptation.

Paul takes them back to what they **know**, just like he does in writing to the Romans. He has not met them but has heard about them from Epaphras, who seems to have exactly the same burden as Paul to see these believers come to maturity (see **Colossians 4:12-13**). Epaphras probably led them to faith in Jesus and both he and Paul long to see them grow. See **Colossians 1:9-12**. They want them to grow by their knowledge of God and for that growth to show in the way they live.

So, in **Colossians 2:6** onwards, he reminds them of what is theirs in Jesus. Just as they started out by being joined to him, so they need to continue. They have been made complete in him, their old self has been removed, they are dead to the old life, buried in baptism, raised to new life, freed from the debt of failure and condemnation. He uses a very powerful word in **v.11** and **v.15**, translated as 'putting off' and 'disarmed'. It basically means shedding a layer of clothing away from yourself. You might think of it as stepping out of a set of overalls, or a butterfly stepping out of the chrysalis – scientists actually use the same word 'ecdysis' to describe this skin-shedding process! That is how involved we are with our old life and the way the world-system works – it has all been dealt with, done away with and left behind. **2 Corinthians 5:14-17** and **Romans 6:1-11** say the same – the more difficult bit is living it out!

We need to know this to be real. It is supremely unimportant whether we come to an appreciation of it through a mind-blowing experience of God or a simple hearing of his 'still small voice' assuring us that it is so. "*Through your faith in the power of God*" is how Paul describes it in **v.12**. The important thing is that we know it to be true, even if our faith is of the 'help my unbelief' sort. Paul knows that the Colossians are in exactly this sort of struggle and is writing to help them come through it to more maturity. In case their appreciation of what Jesus has done for them has become dulled, he reminds them of the facts and draws the conclusions in practical life. Here is the maturing process – learning to live!

Difficulties seem to come when we rely solely on the mind or the memory

to see us through. Sometimes we expect other people to have exactly the same appreciation of truth as we do, or to have had exactly the same experience as we have. Because the truth or the experience have been so important to us, we assume that everyone must have the same enlightenment or feelings as we have. Then, all too easily, we go on to think that anyone who has not had the same experience as us or who does not see truth in just the same way as we do is somehow lacking in their Christianity – really dangerous stuff, but we are all in danger of doing it. Our fellowship with each other (when it gets beyond the simple chat) often consists mainly of finding common ground of truth and experience and we automatically begin to get ourselves into cliques of people who have the same doctrine and/or experience. Instead of being united by a shared appreciation of the Lord Jesus Christ, we find ourselves divided by details of doctrine and varieties of experience.

Which brings us on to Paul's next priority:-

Corporate Foundations

In **Colossians 3**, Paul shows how these personal realities need to result in changes in their lives together. Remember, he is writing to **all the believers in Colossae**, not just to a select group who happen to have become comfortable with each other. They did not have the 'convenience' of our present-day denominations, where we can say 'we are one' with other Christians in the same town and area but in practice have little or nothing to do with them. Being one body is not much use unless we function as one body. We certainly have some maturing to do in these areas!

Paul goes on to look at some of the results which result from our oneness with Christ, and which will show in our lives, individually **and corporately**.

One of the first results is that our priorities shift. We can't get so excited about the 'normal' pursuits of life as we used to. Though we are still inevitably involved in day to day living, earning and spending money, raising our children, looking after people, developing our careers, enjoying social life and personal relationships, the perspective has changed and we see things differently. Why? Because we have died and our life is now hidden with Christ in God (**v.3**). The old life really **is** gone and we really **do** have a new one! The same reason gives us an excellent basis to resist temptation. These aspects of our old life are dead – let us count them to be so! In fact, Paul uses that 'shedding the old skin' word again in **v.9** and combines it in **v.10** with the opposite picture of 'putting on' the new man, who is being renewed (literally 'renovated') in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

This is certainly a graphic description of the processes going on in our lives as believers. We **have** died and our life **is** hidden with Christ in God, but we still need to act on that, deliver our old lives over to death and actively take

hold of our inheritance in Christ – count on what God has done for us in Jesus, make our home (abide) in him. This is where it is reality that counts, not exact agreement on detailed theology, nor carbon-copy experiences.

The first result of this which Paul mentions is truth and no lies (**v.9**). How easy it is not to deal truthfully in love (**Ephesians 4:15**), to cover up and avoid the cost of real loving honesty with our brothers and sisters! Remember, this is the whole local body of believers; Paul goes on to underline that there is absolutely no distinction at all between different backgrounds in the Body of Christ, as each is joined to Christ in just the same way. Part of being mature means including all those who are the Lord's, with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with each other and forgiving each other freely (**vv.11-13**).

On top of all this, he says, put on love, the perfect bond of unity (**v.14**). He doesn't ask them to do this in unreality or presumption, love is part of the 'new man' which we have put on in 'putting on' Jesus. It is ours – let us take hold of it!

Then we are to **let** the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, as we have been called to peace as **members of one body** (**v.15**). I think we all have to admit that, however much progress we may have made in other aspects of our walk with God, it is our relationships with others that test the reality. Unfortunately, the folks in the world can see it all too clearly and sadly we have to say that the way we live in relationship with other believers (or not!) may block the clarity of all other aspects of our witness. Jesus himself made that clear in **John 17:20-23**.

Of course, there is much more in Colossians; more about maturity and about other things. Perhaps we have been able to see here, though, a little more of Paul's expectations of the sort of maturity or completeness which he strove to see in each believer and each local church.

On the one hand, we cannot afford to be complacent about where we are in our development, neither personally nor corporately. On the other, we do not need to be depressed by the impossibility of the task, because we have been given all that we need to move on to maturity – we need to take hold of what we have been given and live in the reality of what we have in Jesus. If we lack wisdom or understanding of what our inheritance is, let us simply ask our Father to show us – he is longing for the joy of seeing us grow to maturity, individually as his beloved sons and daughters and corporately as members of his Son!