



MATURITY

Tim Chester

ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES

Biblical Foundations

Ephesians 4¹ talks about how we “become mature” (13) and how we “become in every respect ... mature” (15). It illuminates a number of key features of a biblical understanding of maturity.

First, maturity is defined as being *like Christ*. We can so easily emphasize growing skills, knowledge, confidence, charisma and experience. And all of these have their place. But the standard for Christian maturity is Jesus. Verse 13 speaks of how we “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” And verse 15 says “speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” To be mature is to be Christlike. It means to love as Jesus loved, to speak as Jesus spoke, to sacrifice as Jesus sacrificed, to be angry as Jesus was angry, and so on.

In church planting it is easy to imagine success depends on the charisma of our leadership. When we recruit a team it is easy to be dazzled by the gifted individual. And, indeed, in the short-term these things typically make a big impact. But, without a genuine Christlike character, charismatic leaders build shaky foundations for a new church. And, without Christlike character, dazzling individuals wreak havoc. The short-term gain is so tempting, but the result is long-term pain!

Second, with this Christlikeness goes a *gospel-centered stability*. Christ is not only our example. Indeed he is not primarily our example. First and foremost he is our Savior. We do not achieve our identity by working hard to be like Christ. We are gifted our identity through the gospel. The identity we have as dearly loved children of God is given to us by grace. We are united to Christ by faith and therefore we are loved in him just as he is loved by the Father. Church planters who are working to establish their identity feel the need to prove themselves. As a result, they will suffer from insecurity or feel the need to control their world. These are significant weaknesses in leaders whose lives are constantly on display. If your identity is tied to your role then your emotional state will reflect the vicissitudes of ministry.

The importance of a gospel identity is reflected in a number of the skills identified under the heading of Maturity in the Acts 29 Competencies and Skills. The “ability to identify ... weaknesses” (§1), “accept constructive criticism” (§3) and remain “resilient and not prone to discouragement” (§4) all stem from knowing we do not need to prove ourselves. “Confidence without arrogance” (§2) comes from knowing who we are in Christ and the resources we have in Christ (hence “confidence”) along with knowing that these are not our achievements, but God’s gift (hence “without arrogance”).

Not only is the mature church planter stable in their identity through faith in Christ, but they are also well grounded in the truth of the gospel. Theological clarity, the second Acts 29 Competency, therefore contributes to maturity. Mature leaders are able to discern

¹ All Ephesians 4 references are from the NIV.

biblical truth from unbiblical emphases, true priorities from passing fads, appropriate contextualization from compromise with the culture.

Ephesians 4:13-14 says those who are united “in the knowledge of the Son of God ... will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.” The imagery is clear. The immature church planter is easily knocked off course. Criticisms will fill them with self-doubt or unrighteous anger because they are looking to establish their identity through ministry success. Praise will turn their heads because they find identity in the approval of others. Error will confuse them and the latest ministry trends will distract them. Maturity is being able to steer a clear and consistent course through choppy waters and changing seas.

So we can define maturity for leaders as follows: *maturity is increasingly finding identity in Christ and being grounded in the gospel so that your behavior is Christlike and your ministry has gospel priorities whatever is going on around you.*

Third, Ephesians 4 highlights *the means* of maturity. We grow in our maturity **through knowledge of the gospel**. We become mature, says verse 13, “in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature”. “We will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head,” says verse 15, by “speaking the truth in love”.

Paul calls Christians to live no longer like Gentiles who have futile thinking, darkened understanding, ignorance and hardened hearts (vv.17-18). The result of this culpable ignorance is indulged sensuality, impurity and greed (v.19). Instead he calls on Christians to live “in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (v.21) and “be made new in the attitude of your minds” (v.23). What is striking here is Paul’s repeated emphasis on truth and knowledge in contrast to error and ignorance. Maturity is not a technique we adopt or a state we attain, let alone some esoteric higher knowledge. It is a growing and deeper understanding of the truth we already have in the gospel – what Paul calls “the truth that is in Jesus” (v.21).

Fourth, Ephesians 4 emphasizes one more key component of biblical maturity: it is **a community project**. Throughout Ephesians 4 the context for maturity is the Christian community. Indeed, it is not just that an individual grows best in community – though this is true. But maturity is itself a communal reality.

Ephesians 2-3 describe how humanity’s ethnic and social divisions are reconciled in Christ through the cross. Ephesians 4 then describes how, as we live in line with our new united identity (vv.1-6), our divisions becomes a diversity that enriches the church (vv.7-13). So “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (v.13). Paul is not describing how I as an individual become mature. He is describing how *we all* become mature. Maturity is a church body that reflects its head: “We will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (v.15). So you cannot become mature on your own. Maturity is not my personal vanity project to which the church contributes. I grow with my brothers and sisters. It is “together with all the Lord’s holy people” that we “grasp

how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” (3:18, NIV) This is why church planting is so central to missional growth. We grow in and through community.

Theological Reflection

Christian theology has always emphasized that everything has its own teleology – an end or purpose that reflects its created order. The teleology of a spoon, for example, is to convey food to the mouth. That is the purpose for which it was created. The English words ‘mature’ and ‘perfect’ are a translation of the Greek word *teleios* (τελειος). We are mature to the extent that we fulfil or perfect the end for which we were made. So perfection is not simply flawlessness. It means realizing our created end.

The teleology of human beings is bound up with their creation in God’s image. We are made to live in relationship with God and share his rule over creation. We are to reflect the glory of God in his world. As the opening question of the Shorter Westminster Catechism famously says, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.’ The image of God is not just our origin, but our destiny.

After humanity’s rebellion against God, we still strive towards a *telos*, but now our purpose is our own glory. But Christ comes as the true image of God. “He is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3). Because Christ perfectly reflects God, to image Christ is to image God. But Christ is more than a model. Through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ our humanity is being restored. We are again becoming ‘fit for purpose’. We are again moving towards our true *telos*, God’s glory. C. S. Lewis says:

[Christ] is not merely a new man, one specimen of the species, but the new man. He is the origin and centre and life of all the new men. He came into the created universe, of His own will, bringing with Him the Zoe, the new life. (I mean new to us, of course: in its own place Zoe has existed for ever and ever.) And He transmits it not by heredity but by what I have called ‘good infection’. Everyone who gets it gets it by personal contact with Him. Other men become ‘new’ by being ‘in Him’.²

Cultural Engagement

The opposite of maturity – prolonged adolescence – has become one of the features of modern Western culture:

- Teenagers behave like children – postponing forays into the world of employment for a life of total leisure.
- People in their twenties behave like teenagers – postponing the responsibilities of family life for a life spent on computer games and over-dosing on entertainment.

² C. S. Lewis, ‘The New Man,’ *Beyond Personality* in C. S. Lewis, *Selected Books*, HarperCollins, 1999, 462.

- People in their thirties behave like twenty-year-olds –postponing responsibility in church and society.

Ageing – the close corollary of maturing – is seen as a curse. The new and the young are feted while the old are considered redundant. All this is in stark contrast to the culture of the Bible in which maturity is honored. “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” (Proverbs 16:31).

This juvenile culture has been fueled by the rapid increase in leisure opportunities and sustained by the growing spending power of young people. But its cultural roots are deeper. Professor Daniel Yankelovich of New York University has documented this shift in social attitudes over the last decades of the twentieth century.³ The old rules, Yankelovich says, stressed duty to others, particularly your family. People were not sacrificial all the time. But it was embarrassing to be seen to be selfish. The norm was self-denial. But all that has changed. It is been replaced with what Yankelovich calls “the duty to self ethic” in which our primary responsibility is our own self-fulfillment. Everything else must fit round that priority.

1. Self-expression has replaced self-restraint

This new world is all about me. So naturally what I want to talk about is me. I want opportunities to share, to talk about my feelings, to express myself, to process everything, to be understood. Any sense that you might *control* your emotions for the sake of others is seen in terms of repression.

2. Excitement has replaced virtue

What constitutes a good life is now defined in terms of experiences that bring self-fulfillment or enable self-expression. David Wells says:

By the 1980s ... a large majority had begun to think that what was worthwhile in life had nothing to do with its normal routines such as getting up each day and going to work. Nor with the traditional responsibilities of marriage and the raising of children. Rather, life is about its more exotic moments. It is not about what happens on Monday through Friday, but what happens on the weekends. Its real meaning, and its real rewards, are found when the self, unencumbered by routine and responsibility, can be found, nurtured, and satisfied.⁴

We do not value the routines of work or jobs that are mundane. It is not enough that a job should serve other people. We want the job *itself* to be fulfilling. We want a job that serves *us*. Instead of a life of virtue – doing the right thing, self-denial, sacrificial love – we are all chasing excitement.

³ Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, Random House, 1981.

⁴ David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant*, IVP, 2008, 136.

3. Self-promotion has replaced character

In a world focused on self-fulfillment our goal is not good character, but being an attractive, magnetic or exciting person. So our culture no longer has heroes – people with the courage to do the right thing at personal cost. Instead we have celebrities – people who are famous because of the way they express themselves. Heroes do self-denial. Celebrities do self-expression. So in a culture in which self-expression matters more than self-denial you get celebrities instead of heroes.

In previous generations, unrestrained self-expression and self-fulfillment were the epitome of immaturity. We have a toddler-culture.

It is not hard to see how these traits play out in church planting. A church plant can be the stage on which we can express ourselves, find excitement and further Project-Me. Or so it appears. The reality is normally somewhat different. Truly missional church planting is hard work. Results and rewards can be slow. The excitement of a launch event soon gives way to the routines of arriving early to put out chairs, many of which remain unfilled. The mature persevere, for their identity is not bound up in ministry success and their concern is the glory of Christ in the salvation of the lost. But the immature go off to find a new platform on which to perform.

Talk of self-denial and sacrifice might not sound like the good life. But here is where things get surprising. Yankelovich's instinct was that the self-fulfillment movement would be liberating. But he admits the evidence shows the opposite. After conducting 3,000 in-depth interviews and analyzing 100,000s of questionnaires, he concedes that so far the search for self-fulfillment has been futile. It has resulted in insecurity and confusion. David Wells explains:

Whereas the older kind of success was durable, this is not. This is fleeting. It is dependent not on its own quality but on the perceptions of others. Perceptions, however, are fickle, changing, quickly superseded, quickly forgotten. Success today, therefore, has to be constantly renewed, burnished, updated, recast, reinvigorated, made even more current, made freshly appealing, dressed up afresh, and reasserted. This is an on-going project, and if it does not go on, our success begins to evaporate.⁵

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:34-35). This is ultimately eschatological (as Mark 8:38 makes clear). But it begins now. Those who live for themselves are relationally and emotionally impoverished. Those who live for Christ and for others are rich beyond wealth.

If life is all about self-fulfillment then it is only as good as your last experience and if life is all about self-expression then it is only as good as your last performance. It is precarious. As a result, our culture is deeply insecure. So our generation suffers far more from depression, anxiety and emotional disorders than previous generations. But if life is about character and

⁵ David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant*, IVP, 2008, 152.

virtue, then that is lasting. It has substance. And if it is about doing the right thing then it does not matter what people think because it is God's opinion that matters. You can find joy in the routine and the difficult. This is Christian maturity and it is deeply satisfying.

The immaturity and insecurity of our culture is compounded by our individualism. If character is an individual project then everything is about me. I am the measure of my success. But a gospel identity is a communal identity. Colossians 3:9-10 says: "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Here is maturity: renewal in the image of God. This is the end, the *telos*, for which we were made and for which we are being remade in Christ. But verse 11 continues: "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." When Paul says "Here" in this verse he is referring to *humanity-remade-in the-image-of-God*. I do not become mature on my own. I only fulfil my *telos* or purpose as part of the new humanity being formed in the church. Fallen humanity defines itself in distinction from others - hence the divisions of Gentile and Jew, slave and free. But Christians define themselves in relationship to God and one another in Christ. This is why the vices we put off in Colossians 3:8 and the virtues we put on in verses 12-14 are all communal. Maturity is not a personal project I do on my own. I become mature by taking responsibility for others in the church. I become mature in community as we become mature.

Missional Significance

Two reasons will suffice to demonstrate the importance of maturity for church leaders. First, maturity defines one of the key roles of church planters. Ephesians 4 describes how the body of Christ grows together towards maturity by "speaking the truth in love". This is a communal project in which all are involved. But, though all are involved, leaders have a specific and vital role to play.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (vv.11-13)

The maturity of the body of Christ begins with leaders equipping Christ's people. The chain Paul outlines runs as follows: (1) leaders equip God's people; (2) God's people serve one another; (3) we all reach unity and maturity. So church planters need to set a culture of mutual discipleship in which we invest in one another's growth.

Second, maturity matters because the future of any church plant depends on it. The main reasons church plants fail are leadership failures or breakdowns in relationships. We easily focus on charisma. But far more important are leaders who are mature in Christ. Without such maturity leaders will feel the need to prove themselves. That has the potential to generate a range of damaging behaviors:

- micro-managing and manipulation;
- extreme emotional reactions to success, failure or criticism;
- self-reliance and self-confidence on a good day or fear and anxiety on a bad day.

At best this creates an infantile congregation in which individuals are not allowed to mature because there is no space for them to make mistakes or think for themselves. At worst it leads to spiritual, physical or relational breakdowns.

But mature leaders equip others to serve and give them space to flourish so that together we grow towards our true end, the image of God in Christ.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.