

Maturity

Our topic for consideration today is the stage of growth known as maturity. It's tricky because I'm not entirely sure what it is! And the reason for that is that I'm not entirely sure what the Bible says it is.

A mature Christian looks like the Lord Jesus Christ, that much is clear. A mature church looks like what, though. It's not as straightforward. I've been helped by recognising that this is not so much a doctrinal description so much as a developmental stage.

During these few minutes together, I want us to consider what it is and then how we get it. At this stage, it's little more than a few ideas.

The Co-Mission criteria for a church plant reaching Established status are the following

1. Credible male leadership
2. Sustainable financial plans
3. Viable growth trajectory

In other words, it's a recognition by the Senior Pastors' Council that the church plant has developed to such an extent that

- It has found a way to pay for ministry
- It has found a way to raise new leaders
- It has found a way to grow with the gospel.

That's not an altogether bad place to start. It identifies the three critical factors for a church plant: consistent growth, competent leadership and convincing finance.

In their book, *Global Church Planting*, Craig Ott and Gene Wilson identify the following as three critical factors in identifying when a cross cultural church plant has reached its desired end

1. Self-sustaining
2. Self-governing
3. Self-propagating

Given that's the case we ought therefore to prioritise

1. Leadership Development: identifying, training and appointing elders
2. Fundraising: both internal and external where necessary
3. Discipleship: growing disciple making disciples

Before we go any further and with those initial comments in mind, let me throw it open.

Discussion

When is a church at the maturity stage? What would you look for?

In his book, *Planting Growing Churches*, Aubrey Malphurs identifies five indicators that demonstrate that a Church has reached maturity

1. The church no longer thinks of itself as a new church. It feels as though the description 'church plant' no longer applies to what it is.

2. Some of the founding members of the church begin to tell stories about the start of the church. In their minds at least, the church has entered a different stage.
3. The church has landed in a fixed location and may even have a permanent home.
4. The ministry portfolio is beginning to expand and you're exploring new ways to implement the strategy more effectively. It's no longer just about start up but about spread.
5. Some of the people are spiritually mature in that they are converted, committed and contributing.

That's helpful.

Here are five characteristics of a mature church that I think has reached the mature stage of its development.

1. **Viability.** It's workable. It's no longer fragile and vulnerable. You could carry on as you are and there is no real debate about its sustainability. There's a sense that, like a teenager moving into adulthood, they can make a go of this on their own and don't need to keep coming back to Mum and Dad for support. The church is able to care for itself.
2. **Activity.** It's busy. It has established ministry programmes in place. The disciple making pathway is clear and populated. There are numbers of people being engaged, evangelised, established and equipped. Stuff is happening. There's a healthy busyness about church life.
3. **Stability.** It's secure. I think this has to do with the ability to withstand challenges. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul says this, '14 Then we 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'.
4. **Credibility.** It's trustworthy. Others consider it an option. There's no debate as to whether it would be wise or unwise to join it. It's a genuine alternative that Christians would consider if they moved into the area or moved church.
5. **Predictability.** It's obvious. There's something mundane. Ordinary or unremarkable about it. It has a settled pattern of ministry that's on the verge of being the same old, same old! But I think this is the discipleship making process being in operation.

Now that we know what we're aiming at, the more important question is 'how do we attain it?' If that's where we're aiming, how do we get there?

In the Vine Project, Col Marshall and Tony Payne argue that 'Disciples are made by the persevering proclamation of the word of God by the people of God in prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God' p 83.

They identify four aspects of a gospel ministry that results in maturity.

1. Prayer
2. Proclamation
3. People
4. Persevering

I'd encourage you to look at their work for more detail. But that would appear to be entirely consistent with the words of Ephesians 4:11-16 which perhaps speak to this issue of a church reaching maturity more than any other passage I could think of.

¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until 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.

¹⁴Then we 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. ¹⁵Instead, 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. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Discussion

What are the different stages that Paul describes in these verses? It may help to draw a flow diagram.

The risen Christ gifts word ministers to his church

They equip the saints for their work of ministry (speaking the truth in love, literally truthing in love)

As they contribute the church is built up (edified, encouraged)

It reaches unity, maturity and stability

What are we talking about?

Asking God to be at work among his people growing his church. We're recognising our dependence upon him.

Who are we talking about?

When should we do this?

How should we do this?

Where shall we do this?

Why should we do this?

	Prayer	Proclamation	People	Persevering
What	Asking God to be at work among his people growing his church	Applying the Bible to every aspect of human existence	Releasing the congregation to become word ministers	Taking meaningful steps in the right direction
Who	Everyone but especially the leadership	Everyone but especially the leadership	Everyone but especially the congregation	Everyone but especially the newcomers
When	All the time	At every opportunity	Through all of life	Over time
How	Leadership half day of prayer Congregational prayer week Mission prayer night	Sunday sermon Early morning workers' Bible Study Growth Groups Autumn Bible School	Staff training Ministry Trainees Kids' Workers Training 2WTL Training	Annual Vision Events Celebrating Success
Where	Especially on Sunday	Especially on Sunday	Especially on Sunday	Especially on Sunday
Why	Because only God grows his Church!	Because God grows his Church through his word!	Because God uses His people as His fellow workers!	Because it's not going to happen overnight!

Conclusion

This is where we're aiming. We want to get to the stage that the church we're involved in leading is at the stage where we can walk away and know that it will survive and thrive without us.

The methodology for getting there is healthy gospel ministry of persistent, prayerful, personal, proclamation of the life-giving word of God by the people of God.

And churches that grow seem to be those who implement that ministry effectively so that the gospel ministry engine works, slows and produces disciple making disciples.