

# THE PANACEA TO SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY

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One of the most difficult challenges the church has had, besides evangelism, is absence of spiritual maturity. There have been those who have been in the church for many years yet are not mature in their dealings with the church. The Hebrew writer lays credence to this when he said, *For, though by this time, you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:12-14)*. The absence of spiritual maturity has made it such that the church is not growing as it should. It is also responsible for the many problems that has bedeviled the church especially with infighting, divisiveness and so on. The Hebrew writer hints that those who are mature are mature because they have their sense trained to discern good and evil. This paper affirms that there is absence of spiritual maturity in some congregations and the solution or the panacea to spiritual maturity will form the basis of the discussion in this paper. This paper will begin by examining some scriptural texts that hint on the spiritual immaturity in the first century churches of Christ. Finally, it will examine ways or solution to spiritual immaturity.

## Evidence of Absence of Spiritual Maturity

Before delving into the solution of the problem of spiritual immaturity in the churches of Christ today, it is appropriate to examine the meaning of spiritual and also hint on what the texts of the Bible say about spiritual immaturity. Spiritual according to W. E. Vines relates to “things that have their origin with God, and which, therefore, are in harmony with His character, as His law is, spiritual, (*Romans 7:14*).”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Spirituality, says R. Brown, can be seen as concerned with the conjunction of theology, experiential communion with God and practical Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

In the first place, the Hebrew writer reprimands the first recipients of his letter because of their inability to receive solid food. They still need milk (elementary teachings of Christ) and not solid food. Albert Barnes comments on the text of *Hebrews 5:12-6:1-3*, “Like little children. You can bear only the simplest nourishment. The meaning is that they were incapable of receiving the higher doctrines of the gospel as much as little

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. Vines, *Vines Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament words* (PDF Drive.com), 1433.

<sup>2</sup> R. Brown, “Spirituality” *New Dictionary of Theology-Historical and Systematic*. Ed. Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell and T. A. Noble. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 861.

children are incapable of digesting solid food. They were in fact in a state of spiritual infancy.”<sup>3</sup> On the nature of the phrase “**And not of strong meat**” in the Greek. He notes that the phrase is equivalent to “Strong food.” The word “meat” with us is used now to denote only animal food. Formerly, it meant food in general. The Greek word here means “nourishment.”<sup>4</sup> Today, in some Christian congregations, brethren are comfortable with the basic doctrines of repentance and baptism, eternal judgement and so on. Whenever, the issue of “church discipline” evangelism etc., arise, some do not want to hear it and grow to understand it. This is evidence of immaturity.

Moreover, the Hebrew writer insists further that the recipients of his letter ought to have become teachers but to no avail (**Hebs 5:12-14**). The implication in the words of Barnes is thus,

“You ought to be able to instruct others. He does not mean to say, evidently, that they ought all to become public teachers, or preachers of the gospel, but that they ought to be able to explain to others the truths of the Christian religion. As parents, they ought to be able to explain them to their children; as neighbors, to their neighbors; or as friends, to those who were inquiring the way to life.”<sup>5</sup>

This is another problem that manifests the immaturity in some congregations. Some have been around for many years and are unable to defend the faith they believe in. They are unskilled in the word (**Heb 5:13**). Inexperienced, who has not skill to perform anything. The word is properly applied to one who has not experience or skill, or who is ignorant. Here it does not mean that they were not true Christians-but that they had not the experience or skill requisite to enable them to understand the higher mysteries of the Christian religion. It is required that a child of God grows in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (**2 Peter 3:18**). Instead, what is seen are those who are emulating the denominational people, who, when you discuss with them will tell you they want to ask their pastor. Maturity requires that Christians should be able to communicate with others as it concerns their faith. Some are happy to be members of the church of Christ, but do not have the actuating force to share the message of the cross with others. This is one of the reasons why both the church and the individual Christians have not experience exponential growth. When Christians share their faith with others, they become knowledgeable and stronger. As they bring those whom they were able to convince in, the numerical strength of the church increases.

Furthermore,**1 Peter 2:1-3** hints on the issues of malice, deceit, hypocrisy and other unchristian behaviours in the church as signs of immaturity. *Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, <sup>3</sup> now that you have tasted that the Lord is good* (NIV). Peter, the apostles insists that immature attitudes exist in the first century church. They practiced malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. It is common to find unhealthy blocks in congregations. For instance, you may find two strong brothers or sisters who have followers in the church. The

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Barnes, Notes on the Book of Hebrews (Electronic Data Base, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Barnes, *The Book of Hebrews*.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes, *The Book of Hebrews*.

followers are so blind that they have stopped following Christ but men. The followers become envious of each other, they keep malice and live all forms of hypocritical lives. Regardless of what you do to help them, they never yield to each other. Paul admonishes Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the church (**Philippians 4:2**). These attitudes are evidence of immaturity in the church.

Next, Peter, the apostle, reveals of another immaturity issue in the first century church. There were those who were unstable. They were usually carried away by the error of lawless men (**Eph 4:13-14; 2 Peter 3:17-18**). Peter H. Davis comments on the text of **1 Peter 3:17-18**.

“Error” for our author is a situation of those who are outside the community of the followers of Jesus (**2 Peter 2:18; Jude 11**, where it characterizes Balaam, and **2 Pet 2:15**, where the verbal form of our word is used for Balaam), and “lawless people” for him were the people of Sodom (**2 Peter 2;7**); in both passages he is implying that “error” or “lawlessness” is also the situation of the false teachers, whose lack of morality he is unmasking in ch. 2. Being “carried away” is what happened to Barnabas in **Gal 2:13**, where, despite being a colleague of Paul, he lost his bearings and joined Peter and other Jews in separating himself from Gentiles.”<sup>6</sup>

From the foregoing, it is clear that such immaturity exists in some Christian congregations today. Every Christian must decide whether he/she is following after Christ or men. Heresy is flying around, and some brethren are usually caught in it and are led astray. I do not know what you make of a situation where a brother is holding a particular doctrinal position, a position which the preachers, elders and majority of the congregations do not agree with. In all, the message is for those who are quick to follow such person (s). Do not follow the error of unprincipled men.

Another immaturity issue relates to brethren who are mature in concocting all kinds of evil but are naïve in Christian principles. They are children in thinking but mature in evil. *Brothers and sisters do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature (1 Cor 14:20)*. Barnes explains the implication of the text as follows, “Be as free from malice, from any ill-will toward others, from envy, and every improper passion, as they are.” This passage, therefore, accords with the repeated declaration of the Saviour, that in order to enter into heaven, it was needful that we should become as little children; **Matt 18:3**.<sup>7</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton adds, “However, to be innocent of wickedness entails rejecting knowledge of devious strategies which may promote one’s own evil purposes, including here perhaps a hint that even religious contexts can offer subtle temptations to manipulate them on behalf of self-interests in ways which ultimately may come to be *wicked*.”<sup>8</sup> It appears, as is the case, that some Christians are immature to the extent of plotting against their brothers and sisters. They are experts in devising strategies to do evil for purposes of self-interests.

Carnality in the church (**1 Cor 3:3**) from “flesh,” signifies (a) “having the nature of flesh,” i.e., sensual, controlled by animal appetites, governed by human nature, instead of by the

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<sup>6</sup> Peter H. Davis, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 310.

<sup>7</sup> Barnes, *The Book of Hebrews*.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1119.

Spirit of God. Having its seat in the animal nature, or excited by it, **1 Peter 2:11**, "fleshly," or as the equivalent of "human," with the added idea of weakness, figuratively of the weapons of spiritual warfare, "of the flesh." The Corinthians were fleshly and that's why Paul fed them only with what they could receive. The fault was not Paul's since he could not feed them with solid food that they were not ready for. The reason further is as Gordon Fee reiterates, that the Corinthians Christians still have quarrels and rivalry among them. He insists that such attitudes belong to the present age, with its fallen, twisted values. Whatever they may be preaching, their behaviour betrays it. They may indeed be "people of the Spirit;" unfortunately they are living like the devil,"<sup>9</sup> It is therefore apropos to conclude that Christians must, "Walk by the spirit, you will not fulfil the desires of the flesh" (**Gal. 5:16**). Fee concludes, "He simply has no patience for belief that does not issue in proper behaviour; and this is not "perfectionism," it is rather growing up."<sup>10</sup>

### **Panacea to Spiritual Immaturity**

Having hinted on a few of many immaturity issues in the church attention is hereby turned to the solution to such problems. Relating to the spiritual man Vines posits, "The spiritual man is one who walks by the Spirit both in the sense of **Gal. 5:16** and in that of **5:25**, and who himself manifests the fruit of the Spirit in his own ways...."<sup>11</sup>

The Oxford advanced learners dictionary defines the word "Panacea" as something that will solve all the problems of a particular situation. Spiritual immaturity is replete in congregations. It is unacceptable and individual Christians and congregations must work hard, hand in hand, to grow their members to maturity. In fact, Vine relates,

The spiritual state is reached by diligence in the Word of God and in prayer; it is maintained by obedience and self-judgment. Such as are led by the Spirit are spiritual, but, of course, spirituality is not a fixed or absolute condition, it admits of growth; indeed, growth in 'the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,' **2 Pet. 3:18**, is evidence of true spirituality."<sup>12</sup>

This section is discussing things that must be done to solve the problem of spiritual immaturity. To attain spiritual maturity congregations must provide proper dieting. Secondly, those being fed must endeavour to feed well and grow. Furthermore, these Christians must train themselves in conjunction with what the church provides. They must put on the Christian graces, which are by themselves steps to maturity.

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 136. "According to the Scriptures, the 'spiritual' state of soul is normal for the believer, but to this state all believers do not attain, nor when it is attained is it always maintained. Thus, the apostle, in 1 Cor. 3:1-3, suggests a contrast between this spiritual state and that of the babe in Christ, i.e., of the man who because of immaturity and inexperience has not yet reached spirituality, and that of the man who by permitting jealousy, and the strife to which jealousy always leads, has lost it. Vines, *Vines Complete Expository*, 1433.

<sup>10</sup> Fee, *The First Corinthians*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> Vine, *Vines Expository*, 1433.

<sup>12</sup> Vine, *Vines Expository*, 1433.

## 1. Nutrition

Nutrition has been defined as the process of providing and receiving food necessary for health and growth. To attain spiritual maturity, one must grow (**Eph 4:15**). Growth is a natural phenomenon predicated on food intake. But balance growth requires balanced diet. Balance diet comes from a congregational leadership that knows what it means to feed the church appropriately. It means that when there are new converts, a class is worked out for them to enable them to enjoy the spiritual milk (**1 Cor 3:2**). Peter, the apostle, insists, “As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (**1 Pet 2:2**).

Furthermore, from the “new converts class” these one must further be disciplined until they are able to disciple others (**2 Tim 2:2**). There should also be divided classes for some groups. This is where the educational ministry of the church comes in. Curriculum design and implementation is one of the central foci of the education committee. The educational committee knows the different groups in the church as stated in **Titus 2:1-**,

*You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. 2 Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. ....3 Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.... 6 Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled.... 9 Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them....*

Thus, this different groups must be planned for and a healthy diet served. Rick Warren sums the thought thus, “In order to produce a balanced healthy believer one needs to plan a preaching schedule with a purpose, re-evaluating, reviewing and building revisions into the process in order to remain an effective church in the ever-changing world.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, balanced spiritual diet is a panacea to spiritual growth. One of the end products of growth and development is maturity or immaturity. However, with other relevant factors available spiritual maturity is attained.

## 2. Growth

To grow in this context means to develop into a mature or adult form. Growth means an increase and it is an essential characteristic of living organism. As such human beings, animals and plant grows.<sup>14</sup> Peter, the apostle, relates in **2 Peter 3:18**, *but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen* (NKJV). The word “grow” in the above verse is in the imperative form. It is a command that must be obeyed. Therefore, in order to grow, the individuals must receive the engrafted word which is able to save their souls (**James 1:21**). Concerning the phrase “And receive with meekness” Albert Barnes comments, “That is, (Christians must) open the mind and heart to instruction, and to the fair influence of truth. Meekness, gentleness, docility, are everywhere required in receiving the instructions of religion, as they are in obtaining knowledge of any kind.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Solomon, I. Usim, *Ministers' Training and Church Growth* (Enugu: Grand Heritage, 2016), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Book of James* (electronic Data Base, 2006).

Many Christians are not growing in proportion to the word of God dished out because they are not receiving it. Some become angry with the preacher and as such close their mind. Even when they hear the word, they do not allow the influence of the word to affect them. Moreover, relating to the phrase “the engrafted word” Barnes posits, “The meaning here is, that we should allow the principles of the gospel to be thus engrafted on our nature; that however crabbed or perverse our nature may be, or however bitter and vile the fruits which it might bring forth of its own accord, it might, through the engrafted word, produce the fruits of righteousness.”<sup>16</sup> They must hear the word and perform it. Anyone who hears and does not do it is likened to one who sees himself in a mirror and yet forgets what he looks like. However, the one who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in them shall be blessed in his deeds (**James 1:21-25**). The end product of hearing and obeying God’s command is maturity and subsequently, life eternal.

### 3. Training

According to Osisioma, B. C. “Training amounts to the development of certain skills and knowledge needed to perform a particular job by a cause of instruction.”<sup>17</sup> The development of those skills happens over a period of time following instructions. At **2 Timothy 3:17** it is stated that all Scripture is inspired of God and beneficial for teaching ... training in righteousness. Such that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. Paul tells Timothy that the knowledge of the word of God equips one thoroughly. A mature person is one who has been trained in the Word and as such can eat solid food (**Heb 5:14**). *But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.* The word used here means properly “the senses” - as we use the term; the seat of sensation, the smell, taste, etc. Then it means “the internal sense,” the faculty of perceiving truth; and this is the idea here. The meaning is, that by long experience Christians come to be able to understand the more elevated doctrines of Christianity; they see their beauty and value, and they are able carefully and accurately to distinguish them from error; **to discern both good and evil**. That is, in doctrine. They will appreciate and understand what is true; they will reject what is false.<sup>18</sup> A Christian is said to be mature therefore, when he/ has been trained to distinguish between good and evil.

### 4. The Christian Graces

In **2 Peter 1:3-11** the steps to Christian maturity is discussed.

*3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective*

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<sup>16</sup> Barnes, *The Book of James*.

<sup>17</sup> Osisioma B. C. *Comprehensive Revision Notes in Business Management* (Aba: Educational, 1986), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Barnes, *The Book of James*.

*and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. NIV*

The above qualities make for a mature Christian. Practice them.

## 5. Living by the Spirit

Maturity demands a walk by the spirit. Christians must live in accordance with Christian principles of life (**Gal 5:16**). The Christian life is often represented as a journey, says Barnes, and the word walk, in the scripture, is often equivalent to live; (**Mark 7:5; Romans 8:1**). Moreover, **In the Spirit**, suggests living under the influences of the Holy Spirit; admit those influences fully into your hearts. Do not resist him, but yield to all his suggestions. Living under the influence of the spirit means that you must not command fire from heaven against your perceived enemy (**Luke 9:51-56**). You must not wish a brother and/or an enemy dead; you must feed him when he is hungry, and you must not avenge yourselves (**Romans 12:18-21**). You must love your enemies, bless those who curse you and do good to those who spitefully use you (Matt. 5:44). Patience in tribulation works maturity (**James 1:2-4**). To become mature, you must learn to endure affliction (**Matt 10:22**). Walking by the spirit requires being alive in the spirit. Fighting spiritual battles by prayer and fasting (**Eph 6:12**).

What the Holy Spirit would produce, Paul states in **Gal 5:22-23**. If a man would yield his heart to those influences, he would be able to overcome all his carnal propensities; and it is because he resists that Spirit, that he is ever overcome by the corrupt passions of his nature. Never was a better, a safer, or an easier rule given to overcome our corrupt and sensual desires than that here furnished.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The concern of this voyage of discovery is spiritual immaturity that is replete among young and old in the church. The thesis affirmed that there is spiritual immaturity in the church. It laid credence to this fact by x-raying some scriptural texts that hints on spiritual immaturity in Bible times and laid emphasis on the presence of same in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. However, the study went further to show that the situation is not hopeless if certain maturity steps and principles are applied. It hinted on balance nutrition, strategic and conscious growth. Training of the church members and individual efforts to have their senses trained to discern what is good and evil, is hereby advocated. The result therefore spiritual maturity. Thus, **Hebrews 6:1-2** and **Eph 4:13-15** cap it all.

*Therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.*

*until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result,*

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<sup>19</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Book of Galatians* (Electronic Data Base, 2006).

*we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.*

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