



What Are The Marks of “Elder Maturity”?

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What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “elder maturity”?

About a decade ago a pastor friend of ours used this phrase in a conversation we had with him over coffee. The wording of it immediately captured our attention. When we asked him more about it, he told us that “elder maturity” was actually a concept that he had learned from [Dr. Jim Wilder](#), a Christian psychologist who specializes in neuroscience and social science .

Wilder maintains that “elder maturity” is cultivated in the context of community over extended periods of lived and reflected experience. He suggests that there are developmental phases through which all adults must pass. Some adults progress fairly well through these life stages, others stumble and crawl forward, and others remain stuck.

Over the past decade I have spent some time getting familiar with the work of Dr. Wilder and his colleagues. I have also taken a deeper look at what the Bible has to say about this topic (especially those texts that address the qualifications for church elders: Titus 1:5-9; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; and 1 Peter 5:1-4).

My curiosity has also led me to consider how different Christian traditions through the centuries have understood “elder maturity.” Throughout our lives Denise and I have also been blessed by the mature wisdom of a number of remarkable older Christians.

SOME DISTINGUISHING TRAITS

Bringing all these factors into consideration, we have come up with a list of twenty qualities. These qualities are what we believe to be reliable indicators of “elder maturity.” We don’t see this list as exhaustive, but as a template that is a work in process.

Initially, it can be said of these folks that they have . . .

- a firm grasp of their identity in Christ, rather than in what they do, what they have, or what others think of them
- an ever-expanding sense of self-awareness that translates into repentance and greater love for others
- the capacity to love others well even when their own lives aren’t going so well
- extraordinary humility, particularly in their service to others (i.e., they have given up the need to be seen or appreciated)
- an ability to rebound relatively quickly from troubled emotional states (e.g. shame, anxiety, guilt, anger, or discouragement)
- perception when it comes to the foolishness of others and how to navigate this with love, grace, and agility

By the way, these qualities are not male-specific, or reserved simply for those who function as elders in churches. But these qualities should be true of older, seasoned Christians. Lest there be any misunderstanding, Denise and I are not claiming that we embody these characteristics! Instead, we aspire to become these kinds of people.

As I write about “elder maturity,” I am reminded of the words of the poet Robert Bly, “The distance between the adolescent and the true adult is about five thousand miles, but the distance between the adult and the elder is almost as large.”

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Of all the marks of “elder maturity” listed above, which of these needs to be more fully formed in you?

COMMITTED TO “THE VILLAGE”

Some of the most difficult leadership decisions I have had to make have been decisions that put the good of “the village” over the good of any one person or a small group within “the village.”

Making hard decisions like this can produce anger and deeply hurt feelings for those who are on the receiving end of these decisions. This is especially true when someone’s livelihood is at stake. This is also true when someone is asked to step down from a ministry role.

These kinds of decisions can create confusion, suspicion, disunity, sleepless nights, and other sorts of unwanted chaos within a church or organization. Unfortunately, these decisions can also create awkward, relational tensions that never get resolved.

Those with elder maturity have experienced messy community situations. And, they have gained wisdom and endurance from those experiences. They remain humble, gentle, and lovingly steadfast in their commitment to "the village." The Apostle James, puts it this way, "Who in your community is understanding and wise? Let his example, which is marked by wisdom and gentleness, blaze a trail for others" (Jas. 3:13) (VOICE).

Those with elder maturity know that the pursuit of wisdom is of supreme importance (Prov. 1-9). They also know that their wise choices can benefit others. But they also know that their wise choices may not always be met with reward or recognition (cf. Eccles. 9:13-18).

Bearing all of this in mind, here are some marks of "elder maturity" that become necessary for life in community, whether a church, an organization, a family, or your own specific "village."

It can be said of those with elder maturity that they . . .

- see the bigger picture of communal realities (i.e., what's best for the community versus what's best for them)
- are aware of power dynamics (both positive and negative) in organizations, marriages, families, and relationships
- are willing to give their power away, rather than to keep it to themselves for their own gain
- want to resolve conflict as much as it is possible to do so
- have received a supernatural ability to live with a lack of closure regarding relational rifts (i.e., "unfinished stories")
- can identify the complexities of life (e.g., they avoid oversimplifying and/or making sweeping generalizations)
- are good listeners, especially to those who are different (e.g., ideologically, ethnically, socially, or generationally)
- navigate cross-cultural differences with sensitivity and ongoing teachability

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Do any of the points above apply to a current situation in which you find yourself?

SPECIFIC SINS OF OLDER CHRISTIANS

Have you ever thought about the kinds of sins that older Christians commit?

Puritan pastor Richard Baxter (1615-1691) believed that Satan tempts Christians in age-specific ways. Older Christians, he maintained, are vulnerable to “covetousness, and unmovableness in their error, and unteachableness and obstinacy in their ignorance and sin” ([Christian Directory](#), 97).

It's generally true that older people deal with failing bodies, changes in family and work, and life in an ever-changing, chaotic world. Could it be that Baxter is saying that older Christians can be set in their ways, especially in the ways that they love their comfort? Is he also saying that older believers can be fearful, stubborn, unteachable, and willfully ignorant?

If that is the case, he recommends a two-fold remedy:

“1. To be distinctly acquainted with the temptations of your own age; and watch against them with a special heedfulness and fear. 2. To know the special duties and advantages of your own age, and turn your thoughts wholly unto those. Scripture hath various precepts for the various ages; study your own part” ([Christian Directory](#), 97).

Baxter's view of age-specific sinning got me thinking. Sometimes encrusted patterns of sin in older saints can be broken by suffering, but not always. Sometimes I meet Christians who are my age or older who have not experienced significant suffering in their lives. Despite this they still can be helpful to others.

But in other instances, older saints who have suffered little can sometimes be short in their supply of empathy, tenderness, and patience. We sometimes speak of “aging gracefully.” If we mean, becoming more gracious, less grouchy in our old age, that is an outcome that is worthy of our pursuit. An older Christian who is teachable regarding spiritual things is a precious sight to behold.

Bearing all of this in mind and as I conclude this article, consider the following distinguishing features of elder maturity. These become particularly important when living in a faith community where there are significant generational differences.

Christians with elder maturity have . . .

- a first-hand knowledge of prolonged suffering with the capacity to comfort and guide others
- emotional steadfastness and self-regulation during suffering
- patience and composure when they are personally criticized or rejected
- expertise in "speaking the truth in love" in ways that are helpful
- discernment when it comes time to recommend needed growth and change
- soulful delight when observing younger people's gifts, skills, and strength (i.e., they are not jealous of or threatened by younger people)

Generational differences in a church can be a wonderful gift; especially so in times of suffering. Again, Baxter's wisdom is apropos: "The aged should have most judgment, and experience, and acquaintedness with death and heaven; and therefore should teach the younger, both by word and holy life" (Christian Directory, 97).

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- Who are the older, seasoned Christians that you look to in the midst of life's painful and perplexing challenges?
- What were some of the deeper heart changes that you experienced as a result of prolonged suffering?
- Do you need to seek a more Christ-centered, more age-appropriate identity for yourself?

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"Even when I am old and gray, O God, do not abandon me, until I tell the next generation about your strength, and those coming after me about your power" (Ps. 71:18) (NET).



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