

## Leader's Insight: So Many Christian Infants

Why are we so good at leading people to faith and so bad at prodding them to maturity?

by Gordon MacDonald, Leadership editor at large

I have been musing on the words of Martin Thornton: "A walloping great congregation," he wrote, "is fine and fun, but what most communities really need is a couple of saints. The tragedy is that they may well be there in embryo, waiting to be discovered, waiting for sound training, waiting to be emancipated from the cult of the mediocre." "Saints," he says. Mature Christians: people who are "grown-up" in their faith, to whom one assigns descriptors such as holy, Christ-like, Godly, or men or women of God. Now mature, in my book does not mean the "churchly," those who have mastered the vocabulary and the litany of church life, who come alive only when the church doors open. Rather, I have in mind those who walk through all the corridors of the larger life—the market-place, the home and community, the playing fields—and do it in such a way that, sooner or later, it is concluded that Jesus' fingerprints are all over them. I have concluded that our branch of the Christian movement (sometimes called Evangelical) is pretty good at wooing people across the line into faith in Jesus. And we're also not bad at helping new-believers become acquainted with the rudiments of a life of faith: devotional exercise, church involvement, and basic Bible information—something you could call Christian infancy. But what our tradition lacks of late—my opinion anyway—is knowing how to prod and poke people past the "infancy" and into Christian maturity. A definition of a mature Christian is lacking. Best to say that you know a mature Christian when you see one. They're in the New Testament. Barnabas is one. Aquila and Priscilla are others. Onesiphorous impresses me. And so is the mother of Rufus of whom Paul said, "she has been a mother to me." That's a short list. The marks of maturity? Self-sustaining in spiritual devotions. Wise in human relationships. Humble and serving. Comfortable and functional in the everyday world where people of faith can be in short supply. Substantial in conversation; prudent in acquisition; respectful in conflict; faithful in commitments.

Take a few minutes and ask how many people you know who would fit such a description. How many? Apparently, Paul, pondered the question when he thought about Corinthian Christians and said, "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ." As usual, I'm long on questions and short on answers. Right now I'm wondering—assuming that Martin Thornton is right—if we church people have forgotten how to raise saints. And if the question is worthy, then what's been going wrong? Bad preaching? Shallow books? Too much emphasis on a problem-solving, self-help kind of faith? Maybe the answer is deeper or more profound than that. Perhaps it has to do with the penchant in churches (the last forty years or so) to package everything into programs. You need programs to make large churches go: kind of like the automakers need an assembly line that stamps out fenders as fast as possible. I suspect you can do evangelism programmatically. And you can do infant-level discipleship in programs. Just put the information in little booklets and get groups going. It can be done. But mature Christians do not grow through programs or through the mesmerizing delivery of a talented speaker (woe is me) or worship band. Would-be saints are mentored: one-on-one or, better yet, one-on-small group (three to twelve was Jesus' best guess). The mentoring takes place in the streets and living-places of life, not church classrooms or food courts. And it's not necessarily done in Bible studies or the like. Mature Christians are made one by one through the influence of other Christians already mature. Additionally, mature Christians become mature by suffering, facing challenges that can arouse fear and a sense of inadequacy. Mature Christians learn to wrestle with questions that defy simple answers. They learn to say strategic and tactical "no's" when others are indulging themselves by saying "yes." Oh, and mature Christians wrestle against the devil, you could say, and sometimes even lose. But they learn to get up again. Could I add, while I'm on a roll, that mature Christians are experts at repenting and humility. Again, they learn this stuff under the tutelage of one who has gone before them and is willing to open his/her life so that it becomes a textbook on Christ's work in us. But we have a rising (I daresay, a life-threatening) problem in the modern church. Older people—above 50, let's say—don't want to be tutors or mentors. Too busy, too distracted, too secretive, too afraid. So a younger generation of spiritual infants is really struggling because an older generation doesn't want to tell its stories, doesn't want to get involved. They prefer Christian cruises, Christian golf tournaments, and more Bible studies where information can be piled upon information. Forgive my generalizations, my edgy sarcasm. But I'm prompted to let some my thoughts hang out because I'm meeting too many infant Christians who tell me that they're looking for fathers and mothers in the faith to help them grow up. And they're not finding them. And many churches aren't cultivating them. Result: we could lose a large part of a new generation of Christians who couldn't get past spiritual infancy and went somewhere else.

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