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How Do Frequent Church Attenders Define Spiritual Maturity?

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As part of their statements of purpose, many churches include a commitment to help people grow spiritually. For instance, here are statements of purpose listed on a sample of church websites:

To present the Gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that turns non-Christians into converts, converts into disciples, and disciples into mature, fruitful leaders who will in turn go into the world and reach others for Christ. –New Hope Christian Fellowship, Honolulu, HI

Our Purpose here at Saddleback is to lead people to Jesus and membership in his family, teach them to worship the Lord and magnify his name, develop them to Christlike maturity, and equip them for ministry in the church, and a mission in the world. – Saddleback Church, Irvine, CA

To bring people to Jesus and membership to his family, develop them to Christ-like maturity, and equip them for their ministry in the church and life mission in the world, in order to magnify God's name. – United Christian Church of Marietta, Marietta, NY

Our purpose is to lead people to Jesus and Membership in his family here at Moses Chapel AME Church, develop them to Christ like Maturity, and equip them for their Ministry in the Moses Chapel AME Church and Life Mission in the world, in order to Magnify God's name. – Moses Chapel AME Church, Atlanta, GA

What does it mean to grow towards spiritual maturity? According to researcher George Barna, few in the Christian community can tell you. Barna (2009) notes, "People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process."

In this study, we take an in-depth look about how regular church attenders define spiritual maturity. Data are drawn from web-based surveys with 710 adults and 94 teens who regularly attend worship services at a large, mid-western, evangelical church.

General Themes in Teens' Responses

Most teens gave no answer to the spiritual maturity question or a vague definition. Examples of vague definitions include:

How far you have come in your spirituality

A walk with god often

How strong your relationship with Jesus Christ is.

How far you are with your path with God

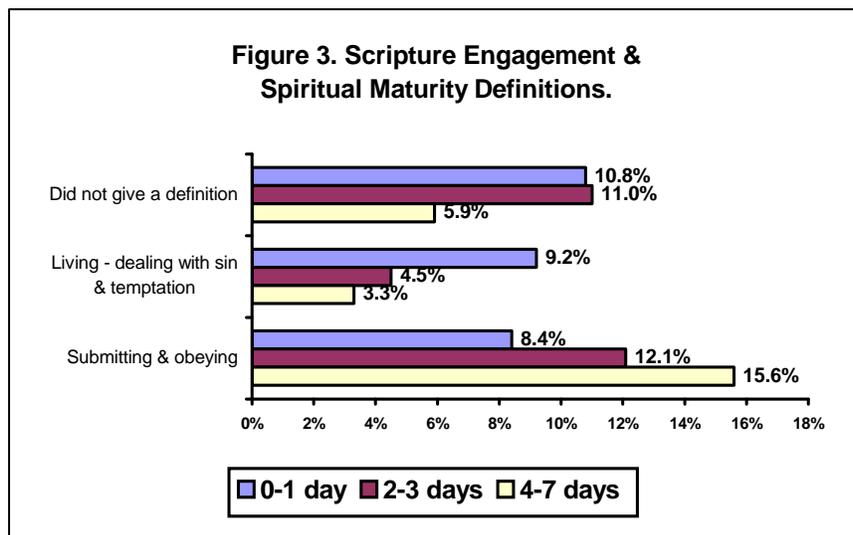
The next most common response included discussion of having Jesus be Lord of your life. That is, that your daily life is lived out in obedience to Him.

When someone is growing in their walk with God and is learning more about Him and trying to use it daily.

Others being able to see that you are a Christian and your actions show it.

Being able to do what god wants you to do even if it's not what you want, because you know it will have the better outcome

Having a strong faith and giving your life fully and totally to Christ



Teens also frequently mentioned reading the Bible or being knowledgeable about scripture in their definitions of spiritual maturity.

Being able to understand the Bible and its message

Understanding that Jesus died on the cross for us. Understanding the Bible and believing what it says. And having a relationship with Christ.

Getting deeper than the bible storys and actually know what they mean

Being able to resist wrong and knowing the bible front to back

Less frequently youth included other aspects of spirituality in their definitions. For example, they talked about salvation, having spiritual wisdom or understanding, obeying God's Word, evangelism, apologetics, and mentoring

Typically, the definitions given by teens emphasized only one aspect of spirituality. Out of the approximately 100 responses given, less than a dozen included two or more of the categories displayed in Figure 1. Examples of multi-dimensional definitions include:

When you know what you believe and are willing to share it with others and when you practice your faith continuously throughout your daily life by reading the Bible, praying, and being an active Christian example ect.

Seeking wisdom and understanding, following Christ's example, "doing" the Word of God- however He leads, and being excited about the plans God has for me.

Being wise. Correct view of God. Faithful and consistent with spending time with God. Work through hard things in life. Help others grown in their faith.

Listening to God, obeying His Word, reading the Bible, and being a good example to younger kids.

Spiritual maturity is understanding: that Christianity is a relationship and not a religion, the importance of getting in the word and praying on a daily basis, and that those who are born again are free in Christ.

When someone is growing in their walk with God and is learning more about Him and trying to use it daily.

Understanding the gospel and speaking on it with smarts

Having enough maturity to put mind over matter and not follow the first emotion that comes to mind but to use your spiritual wisdom and knowledge of God's word to make decisions.

Understanding that Jesus died on the cross for us. Understanding the Bible and believing what it says. And having a relationship with Christ

Being able to resist wrong and knowing the Bible front to back

General Themes in Adults' Responses

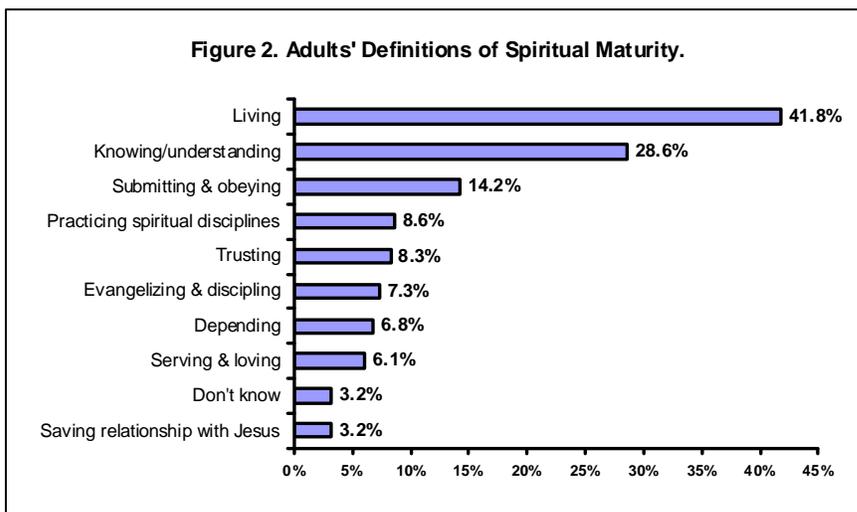
Among adults who regularly attend church, one out of four did not provide an answer to the question about defining spiritual maturity. A few indicated that they did not know and about one-fifth gave general responses such as:

The desire to grow closer to God.

*Being grown up in the faith.
Having a strength.*

Constantly seeking refinement

Learning to run the race with endurance



Among the remaining responses, common themes included how you live your life, what you know and understand, and submitting to God's will or obeying His Word.

How You Live Your Life

Many responses that talked about spiritual maturity as how you live your life simply used phrases such as "walk the talk" or "walk the walk". For example:

Growing daily with God. Walking the walk and talking the talk.

A person who walks the walk

Have Jesus as my Savior and trusting in Him and the power of the HS to change me daily--it is a process. Walk the talk.

Others talked specifically about becoming more like Jesus in thought, word, and deed:

The ability to live life the way Christ did.

Becoming more like Christ

Becoming more Christ like in our thoughts and actions. Fully recognizing that apart from God we are nothing.

Someone who is becoming more and more like Jesus through their thoughts, actions, deeds. Someone who recognizes sin in their life and confesses it and then repents. Someone who allows God to work through them knowing that is the only way to victory. Giving God glory in all circumstances.

Some definitions emphasized that spiritual maturity means exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit in daily living:

Living a life in pursuit of the Lord, living out this pursuit in everyday life. seeing the fruits of the spirit in the everyday life.

Living a life that is Christlike--living a life demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit and consistency in spiritual disciplines.

The fruits of the spirit should be evident

For others, sinning less and experiencing less temptation reflects spiritual maturity:

Being complete in Christ and with that being able to resist temptation

The ability to resist temptation and to take all our cares problems to the Lord

When thinking about what God wants us to do come so easily and doing wrong does not enter our thoughts as easily...helping us to not sin.

What You Know & Understand

Knowledge and understanding emerged as the second most common theme in adults' spiritual maturity definitions. Typically, respondents described knowledge and understanding of God's Word:

Knowing what the word of God says and knowing how to apply it to my daily life.

Been a christian awhile, understands the bible and doesnt deliniate from it or mix the meaning up.

That you know what God has taught you thru the scriptures, and you do it on a regular basis.

Knowing God's Word, what it says and is able to teach it to someone else

Specific scripture references mentioned:

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| The life of David | Matthew 25:31-40 |
| Matthew 28:18-20 | Mark 12:30 |
| John 8:12 | Romans 8:28 |
| Ephesians 5:1-2 | 1Corinthians 13 |

Reading the Bible and understanding that God wants a relationship with you, which in turn generates a lifestyle of holiness.

Being able to use scripture to back up things I say.

Adults also included knowledge and understanding of who God is, sin and grace, and God's purpose of your life in their spiritual maturity definitions:

Having a growing personal relationship with Christ that produces spiritual fruit. An understanding of who God is and who you are in Him.

Understanding that God can work through me if I allow it. Also just having an appropriate view of God impacts how I mature in Christ.

Wisdom to respond in a God honoring way to the circumstances of life. Deep knowledge of God and conformity to His will.

It's beyond understanding Spiritual Truths...it's learning the truth and then LIVING out God's truths in every day life. It's acting on those truths...

Knowing and doing the will of God

Submitting and Obeying

Submitting to God's will and obeying His Word represents a third theme in how adults define spiritual maturity. This theme overlaps somewhat with the first (Living), although the responses tended to emphasize more the conscious decision to follow God's will and not your own:

Understanding sin on a deeper level and how it affects my relationship with him. Engaging God more on a moment by moment basis. Wrestling with God and engaging him emotionally and spiritually through prayer and worship. Daily prayer and allowing God to move in my life. Allowing him to work in me in the inner most parts of my life.

Having your actions reflect a closer relationship and submission to God

Seeking God with my whole heart. Knowing that I am desperate for Jesus ALL the time. Asking God to have His dreams for my life be the dreams that I am dreaming for my life and my family's. Using God's word as a Live part of my life. Being completely submerged in thinking about what Jesus wants for me to do each minute of my day. Willing giving up what my flesh may scream for, for Christ's sake, as each minute, act and sentence are taken captive for His sake. And in the end, it is He that does it all, I am merely the grateful conduit.

When you turn your life completely over to our Heavenly Father and yield to the Holy Spirit all that you think do and say and know that God is in control and rely completely on Him.

Being able to pray about temptation and not yield due to the power received from the prayer. To read and study the Bible and obey what you learn.

Humility (not thinking of self), putting God's desires before your own.

Trusting & Depending

For some adults, trusting God completely is indicative of spiritual maturity:

Trusting God in all areas of my life. Reading His word, praying every day.

Trusting God completely and knowing it is always safe to trust the Lord. He will never ever fail me.

Fully trusting in Christ and growing daily to be more like Him

Trusting God to make the changes He has promised in my life.

Letting go of "control" of my life/circumstances, trusting God alone for every aspect of my life.

Others talked of depending on God at all times and in all circumstances:

Someone who continuously seeks God and knows Him deeply, yet remains humble and dependent on Him.

Being that you able to identify that you cannot do it alone and being able to rely on God for everything.

Knowing one's current state in relation to God. Truly knowing one's dependence upon God and living life in light of that.

I realize my need for others, and God. I realize I don't function well alone. Community is very important, both with other christians as well as God. A realization of our helplessness without God in our lives. Continually growing in our knowledge of his Word.

Spiritual maturity is knowing upon Whom you depend...Who the answer is to all questions...upon Whom I can trust and obey...the only One upon Whom I can rely. Without Him I can do nothing...with Him I can do all things. I know that I know that I know I will be with Him throughout all eternity.

Practicing Spiritual Disciplines

Not surprisingly, many spiritual maturity definitions mentioned the practice of spiritual disciplines, especially prayer and scripture engagement. However, it is important to note that practicing spiritual disciplines was not necessarily considered, in and of itself, as an indicator of spiritual maturity. Rather, they were often seen as a part of a larger package, including living out the truths found in scripture in some way or as a reflection of a heart that is seeking after God:

Confidence in faith, an awareness of God's presence, priorities in the right place, prayer and studying God's word on a regular basis, service to others

Spending time with God by praying regularly, reading bible.

An understanding of and adherence to the basics of Christianity, a continuing walk with Christ, daily time in the word and in prayer, and regular Christian fellowship.

Someone who is focused on God's plan not a human plan. Someone who is daily in the word and is in continual prayer with God. They seek him earnestly.

CLOSENESS TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER, SCRIPTURE READING, AND SHARING JESUS WITH OTHERS, AND HELPING OTHERS IN THEIR SPIRITUAL WALK.

Spending time in prayer and in the Word to develop continual understanding of the Lord's will for your life.

Someone who prays and studies the Bible daily, abides in the Lord, and has overcome his/her temptations.

Relating to Others

The last set of "spiritual maturity" themes deal with how the individual relates to others. For many adults, a spiritual mature person is involved with serving and loving others:

When you truly are in the mindset of sacrificial living and laying down your life in all aspects for those around you -- through your time, relationships, finances, gifts, and abilities

Walking in fellowship with Christ on a moment-by-moment basis and loving others

Being selfless, in the word, praying, reaching out to others, having knowledge in the word to draw on when times of trouble or temptations arise. Of course having that personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We never stop growing or learning. Being in the word and seeking wisdom on a daily basis.

Doing the right thing. Knowing the word of God. Serving in some sense, whether it be by giving of money, time, or labor. But not being cold to sinners.

Sharing the Gospel with others or helping them grow in their faith was also mentioned as a sign of spiritual maturity.

Able to stand in the storm and be a leader in the things of God

Someone who is reaching out to others with the truth of the gospel in light of their circumstances and not afraid to speak truth to that person or be relative or wanting their approval. Living for Christ and not self.

Transparency and willingness to help others with struggles or help grow spiritual being able to share Jesus with others

As an adult, knowing right from wrong, taking steps to ensure I am staying on the right path, and being able to successfully lead others down that path in love.

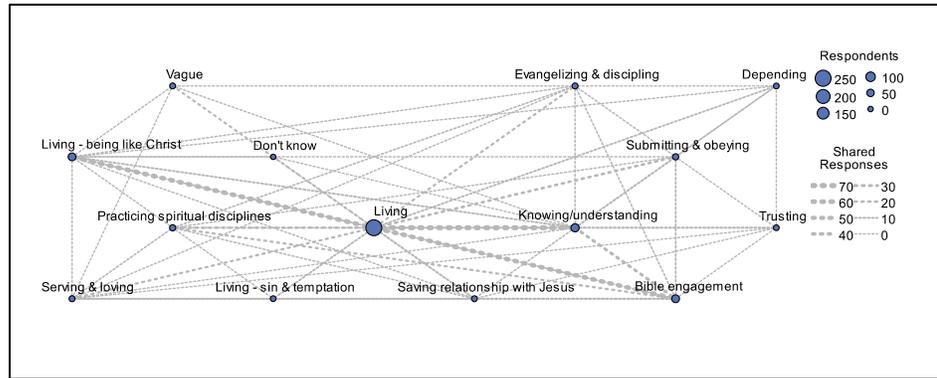
Growing more Christlike--"complete in Christ" Becoming a disciple; serving, sharing Jesus with others

Allowing the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you in your daily life. A spiritual leader to others, having a deep and meaningful relationship with Christ, putting that relationship above all else, being committed to helping other Christians grow spiritually

Multi-Dimensional Definitions

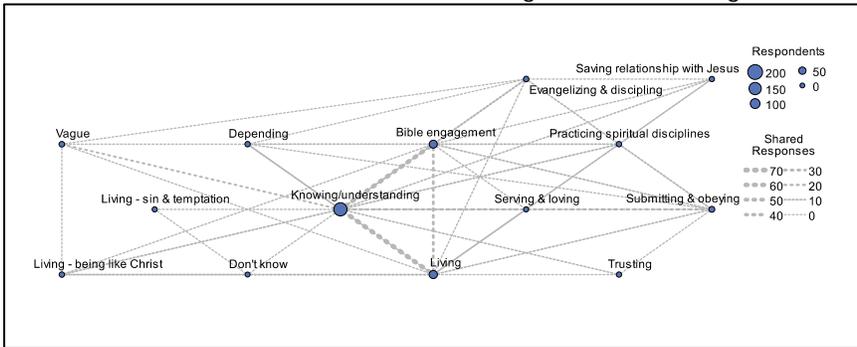
As some of the previous quotes suggest, adults' definitions of spiritual maturity frequently included multiple themes or dimensions. In fact, almost one-third of responses reflected at least two dimensions.

The figure to the right illustrates the most common links to other themes among responses that talked about living out your faith in daily life. This theme is strongly associated with Knowing & Understanding as well as Bible Engagement. One-quarter of "Living" responses also contained references to "Knowing & Understanding".



Similarly, one-fourth included a discussion of being engaged in scripture.

The second most common theme, Knowing & Understanding, is also strongly related to Living and to Bible Engagement. Two out of five definitions that included some aspect of Knowing & Understanding also talked about "Living" your life based on that knowledge. Bible engagement was a part of one out of three responses that mentioned Knowing & Understanding.



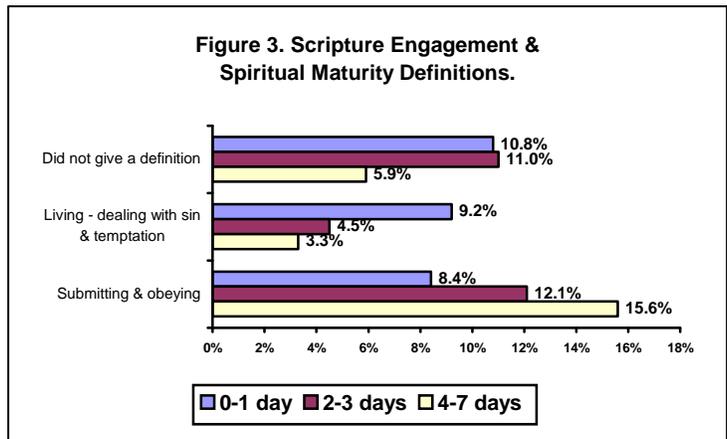
Relationship between Spiritual Maturity Definitions & Scripture Engagement

The following analyses exploring the relationships among spiritual maturity definitions and scripture engagement should be considered exploratory. From a statistical perspective, the data from this survey are limited because the key scriptural engagement measure, number of days spent reading or listening to the Bible in the past week, is not normally distributed. More than one-quarter of respondents said that they engaged scripture seven days, thus making the distribution of values skewed towards the high end of the scale.

Even with the data limitations, we find some statistically significant relationships between how much someone is engaged in God's Word and how they define spiritual maturity.

Those who are more engaged are

- ✓ Less likely to leave the spiritual maturity question "blank"
- ✓ Less likely to include overcoming sin and temptation in their definition
- ✓ More likely to include obeying and submitting your will to God in their definition



Conclusions

The Christian community generally agrees that Christ-followers should be growing towards spiritual maturity and that the church should play a role in that growth. In other CBE studies, four out of five Christ-followers report a strong desire to grow spiritually. However, the data presented here add to the growing body of evidence that many have difficulty defining what that means. Pastors desiring to help their congregants in this area can begin by laying the groundwork. This groundwork should include a clear definition of what spiritual maturity is and an examination of what the Bible has to say about growing spiritually.

References

Barna, G. (2009). Many churchgoers and faith leaders struggle to define spiritual maturity. Available online: <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/264-many-churchgoers-and-faith-leaders-struggle-to-define-spiritual-maturity>