

THE AUTHENTIC JOY GROWTH PROCESS MODEL

INTRODUCTION

The Authentic Joy Journey charts the seasons of our lives from an external viewpoint but there is another, more important journey, that we are simultaneously going through on the inside. That is, the journey of maturation. In fact, this internal growth is the objective of our external processes. Our destination is beautifully described in Ephesians 4:13-16 (NKJV):

...till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

This passage describes maturity as:

- Unity of the faith
- Unity of the knowledge of the Son of God
- Perfect (mature) man/woman
- The stature of the fullness of Christ
- No longer children being tossed to and fro
- Growing up in all things into Christ

There is another aspect of maturity captured in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV):

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This passage describes maturity as:

- Complete (fully trained)
- Equipped for every good work

The final passage from which we will derive our definitions of maturity has to do with suffering. To capture this let's look at James 1:2-4 (ESV):

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

This passage describes maturity as:

- Perfect and complete (tried and tested)
- Lacking in nothing (well experienced)

These descriptions from these three passages are the **goals** of maturity. These cannot be achieved solely through activities such as bible reading and church attendance. Becoming a mature person (far more a mature Christian) involves much deeper and holistic work. A mature Christian evidences the fruit of the Spirit in all his relationships and under all circumstances. In short, it involves becoming Christlike. The mature Christian lives the cross-shaped life that Jesus embodied:

- Intimately connected to the Father.
- Sacrificially and powerfully demonstrating the unconditional love of the Father to the world.
- Discipling, empowering and unifying the family of God.

The problem for most Christians is that we don't know how, practically, to get to this lofty goal of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

To figure this out, let's turn back to the passages, looking at what it says about the *process* of maturing:

- We need to be connected to Christ Himself to mature (*Christ - from whom the whole body*).
- We need to be connected to others within the Body of Christ to mature (*joined and knit together*).
- We mature when each person supplies something that others need (*by what each joint supplies, every part does its share*).
- We can only mature when we and others are working properly (*effective working*).
- We mature when we can speak the truth to each other in love (*speaking the truth in love*).
- We mature when we build each other up (*edifying itself*).
- Love permeates the environment that builds maturity (*speaking the truth in love... edifying of itself in love*).
- We mature through allowing scripture to teach, reproof, correct and train us (*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*).
- We mature through enduring trials of various kinds (*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces...*).
- We mature when our faith is tested (*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces...*).

These are the **processes** of growth. This is **how** we grow in maturity. All these processes have one objective: to make us more like Christ. And since God *is* love, we can also say that these

processes are designed to make us more like love. This is captured in the core commandments of Christ:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength you shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Mark 12:30-31)

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (John 13:34)

The fully mature Christian expresses love perfectly to God and others. Furthermore, the entire growth process is nurtured and accelerated by an environment of Godly love. In addition, at Authentic Joy we have identified five processes of maturation that incorporate the dynamics of Ephesians 4:13-16, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and James 1:2-4:

- Intimacy (with God)
- Identity
- Responsibility
- Wholeness
- Resilience

These five processes are very interdependent but making a distinction between them empowers us to powerfully engage in our own journey of maturity.

The combined fruit of all of these processes is purpose. As we walk more and more closely with God, clarify our identity, take responsibility for our lives, heal our brokenness and suffer well we begin to walk more and more in God's purpose for our lives. Purpose gives our lives meaning as we journey through its ups and downs. Increasing purpose is synonymous with an increasing connectedness to being who we were created to be and doing what we were created to do.

When we start our journey, we may be engaged in a lot of good activities. We may serve in our local church. We may feed the poor. We may even be a pastor and bring thousands to Christ. None of these, in and of themselves, are necessarily indications of a purposeful life. Engaging in good works is not always the same as purpose. Purpose means that you are connecting with the dream that God has for you. *The purpose* for which He made you.

To do this we need two things:

1. To know what that purpose is.
2. To have the capacity to do it.

Often, we are obsessed with the first thing - knowing *what* God wants us to do. However, God seems to have a different sequence of growth. He usually starts by building our capacity. He does not give us the *what* of our dream until we have the capacity to execute it well. First, He wants us to be crystal clear about *whose* we are and *who* we are and to be a fully functioning

saint. The 40 years in the desert and the battle to take the promised land must precede the peaceful dominion over it. Joseph had to be processed in the pit and the prison before his dream was realized in the palace. Jacob served Laban for many years before God prevailed in his life and the trickster became Israel (God prevails). Consider that Jesus spent 30 years preparing for only 3 years of ministry. And that was Jesus! That should make us seriously re-evaluate our life expectations.

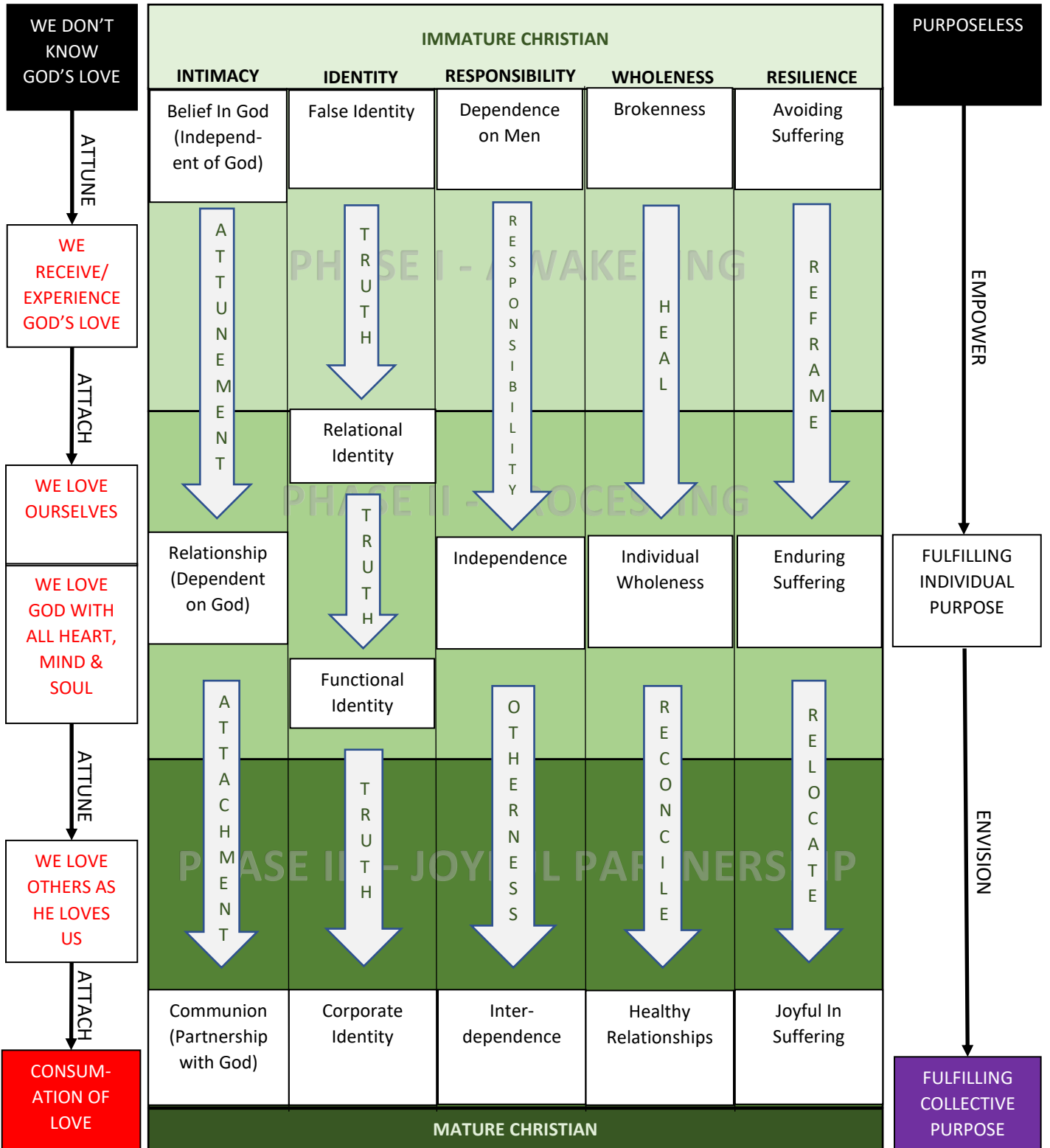
The reality is that the greater part of our lives may be spent being empowered and equipped so that we can represent God well in whatever capacity we are called to serve. As a side note, there is a narrow view in the Christian world that places five-fold ministry (apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher, evangelist) at the pinnacle of service to God. This is a distorted and very limited view of the grandeur of what God wants to do in the earth. These spiritual gifts are actually meant to equip every saint to activate apostolic, prophetic, pastoral, teaching and evangelical ministry within their calling as businessmen, engineers, nurses, cleaners, technicians, artists, performers, etc.

As wonderful as it is to be in a place where we are empowered, whole and using our gifts and talents to serve others, that is not the ultimate place of purpose. There is a higher purpose. At the highest level of maturity, we are engaged in fulfilling purpose together with others in a very synergistic way. It is no longer about me achieving the vision that God has given me but about us participating together in God's vision for the world.

The Authentic Joy Growth Process Model (below) depicts the processes and how they relate to the different phases of the Authentic Joy Journey. We start off at the beginning of the Awakening Phase of the journey as immature Christians. As we journey through the Processing Stage, God gradually matures us in intimacy with Him, identity, responsibility, wholeness and resilience. His goal is that we be fully mature by the time we are approaching the end of the Joyful Partnership Stage. Unfortunately, many have not awakened to this sacred work of inner transformation. Thus, they have misconstrued and wasted the gift of these ups and downs of life and wasted many years living a life of vanity. "All is vanity!" demeaned Solomon. It was the cry of a man who had lost his way. It is the cry of all of us unless and until we see that life on earth is not an end in itself but a means to an end. "Awake oh sleeper!" is the invitation that God extends to us at whatever age and stage we may be in life. It is never too late to begin the journey of maturity.

Is 'fully mature' possible on this side of heaven? I don't know. Maybe that's what happened to Enoch; he outgrew this earthly training ground and graduated to the eternal. Whatever the case, we do know that the Bible has set the standard and that is what we must go after – the fullness of the stature of Christ.

THE AUTHENTIC JOY GROWTH PROCESS MODEL



OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL

The first thing to note about the diagram is that it starts at the top with the Immature Christian. The Authentic Joy Journey presupposes that the individual is already a believer in Jesus Christ and has made the decision to live a Christian life. By that, we mean someone who believes that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, was crucified for our sins and rose again that we may have eternal life in Him. This person has responded to this truth not only with belief in their heart but also with a commitment to follow Jesus.

In other words, the Authentic Joy Journey is focused on what happens *after* we convert to Christianity. Our calling, at Authentic Joy, is to move Christians from immaturity to maturity. We (Christians) have spent hundreds of years focused on preaching and teaching truth, thinking that accurate doctrine alone is sufficient for us to achieve maturity. Experience has taught us that it is not enough. Becoming mature Christians requires much more than just believing the right truths. The Authentic Joy Growth Process Model attempts to capture a more holistic view of the means that God uses to bring the Body of Christ to perfection.

The model not only moves from top to bottom but also from left to right in the sense that we must begin to mature along the processes on the left before we can begin to see progress in the processes further to the right.

The model traces the believer's progression in maturity through her Authentic Joy Journey by showing the three phases of the journey in three bands moving down the diagram. The immature believer starts the journey in Phase I where there is an Awakening to something more at work in the life of a saint. Should one heed God's call to go deeper, one enters into a season of intense processing and testing (Phase II). This is the crucible of refining where one must undergo the sufferings of life that produce the character of God. One eventually emerges from the heat a more mature and authentic version of oneself. At this point the saint is ready to engage more powerfully and deeply with others in pursuing kingdom purpose together (Phase III).

The fully mature Christian is something few, if any, Christians have attained as it remains the final state of the perfected bride before Christ returns. We may spend a lifetime and never achieve the stature of the fullness of Christ, but it is important for us to at least aim for it and pursue it with everything we've got.

Along the left we have illustrated the formation of love in our lives throughout the maturation process. You may find it strange that we define the immature Christian as one who doesn't know God's love. That is because when we say *know* we do not mean know *about* or being familiar with God's love as a truth. We mean *know* as an *experience*. We mean the experiential reality of *feeling* loved, like a child knows the love of a good mother by her care and attention. This psychological process is called attunement. God attunes to us by being responsive to our emotional needs and we attune to others when we are responsive to their emotional needs.

After experiencing God's love, we begin to value ourselves because we experience being treated as valuable. At the same time, we begin to reciprocate this love back to God in increasing measure and quality. We also begin to treat others with the same value with which He treated us. We attune to others. The ultimate aim of attunement is secure attachment which is a long-term bond between two persons. God wants His children (individually and corporately) to be bonded to Him forever in covenant. Therefore, the final phase is when we are united in love with Christ and His church. We become one with Love Himself. Love flows throughout all of the processes of maturation. It is needed in every process and at every stage which is why it is located outside of the five processes.

Similarly, greater and greater purpose is the fruit of growth in all the five processes and so is also located outside of them and to the right. We walk in greater individual purpose through being empowered and we walk in greater collective purpose when we catch sight of a God-sized vision.

INTIMACY

Intimacy with God is the starting place for the growth process. The immature believer starts with only a knowledge of God but no tangible experience with Him. Even for believers who have attended church for a significant number of years, this is more common than one might think. The person who has only heard about God in sermons or read about God in the bible has a cognitive understanding of who God is, but no experiential knowledge. Usually, at this stage we try to live 'by the word' meaning that we try to extract principles, models and patterns from the bible and apply them to our lives. Not having a direct relationship with God, and thus no ability to hear from Him directly, we become very dependent on spiritual leaders for direction. If we need God's direction for an important decision (especially if our particular circumstances are not easily found in scripture) we rely on our spiritual leaders to discern God's will on our behalf. For example, should I marry this particular person or take this particular job? This can be dangerous ground if the leader is led by personal biases and not by the Spirit.

Our ultimate goal is one of constant communion and direction from God, like Jesus had with the Father. The more mature we are, the more we work in partnership with God. We enjoy a constant sweet fellowship with Jesus that is the epicentre of all fulfilment. In Hebrews 10, we are exhorted to enter the Holy of Holies through the new and living way opened by the sacrifice of Jesus. The Holy of Holies is where God's Presence dwells. This is one of the ultimate reasons that Jesus died; so that we can draw near to God without his holiness consuming us in our sin. At this stage, being with God is our greatest treasure, that satisfies us continually. John Piper says it this way, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." David says it this way in Psalm 16, "...in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

There are many gradations of proximity to God in between no intimacy and complete consummation. However, a noteworthy middle stage is where we have had experiences of God, but our greatest treasure is still something else besides God Himself. Even though we have had occasional experiences with God, we are still controlled by other desires. We use God like a middleman to attain what we ultimately desire; material 'blessings' for example. Our thinking is that our reward for obeying God's commands is His blessings in the form of protection, comfort and riches. What we really want is the comfort and the riches, not God. Some may expend their lives in the pursuit of some great cause or serving in some great ministerial capacity but what they are really after is the great sense of significance and purpose that this gives them. This is still using God to attain some other treasure. That is not God's best desire for us. God wants us to live *with* Him not *for* Him. In his book, *with*, Skye Jethani says that living with God should be the ultimate aim of every Christian. He goes on to say that the aim of living with God is not to attain anything else, the aim *is* God. This is the life of a mature Christian.

Another way to look at this process of increasing intimacy is to use the analogy of the relationship progression of a fictional couple. The man in our analogy, let's call him Joshua, is the CEO of a company and an accomplished author. At first, Isabelle has only heard about him from others, but she has read his book, repeatedly, in fact. He speaks of a love interest in the book that, amazingly, resembles her but she doesn't believe it could really be her. She admires him from afar for his integrity and success and seeks to implement the wisdom shared in his book in her own life. Meanwhile, unknown to her, he has had his eyes set on her for a long time and has a plan to make her his wife. First, he instructs HR to headhunt her to work for his firm. She jumps at the opportunity, of course, and works extremely hard to prove herself and move up the corporate ladder. Then he begins to drop love notes and invitations to go for coffee on her desk. However, she doesn't believe the notes could really be from him because she is just a low-level worker, and he is the CEO. Eventually, when he sees that his notes are going unheeded, he drops by her office and introduces himself. She is stunned that he is actually interested in her and that she can get to know him on such a personal level, not to mention, his intentions are serious from day one. He wants to marry her. She's not sure. A lifetime is a long time, and her career is just getting started, and it just seems to be crossing a forbidden line to date the boss. But she agrees to date and see how it goes. It's a bit rocky at first. She is really committed to her career and has less time for him than he would like, but as time passes, she realizes the genuineness, depth and steadfastness of his love. Her love for him slowly grows, and she becomes more and more in love with him than with her career and the trappings of a successful life. Eventually, she is ready for the ultimate commitment of marriage. On that glorious and mysterious wedding night, Joshua and Isabelle become one in the consummation of love. Many of us have accepted a job with the company (the church), but few have responded to the courtship of the Bridegroom.

The process of increasing intimacy is about how we actively participate in deepening our relationship with Jesus.

IDENTITY

Our identity is how we think about ourselves or our self-image. We have divided identity characteristics into two buckets:

- Relational
- Functional

Our relational identity comes from our closest relationships as a child. We first infer who we are from how our parents/caregivers treated us in words and in action. If our caregivers treated us as though we were valuable and worthy of honour, then we most likely grew up believing that we were valuable. Sadly, the opposite also is true. If we were repeatedly called stupid as a child, that is what we may come to believe about ourselves.

However, when we enter the kingdom we are born again. That means that we are now children of God with a new identity because we have a new parent – Father God. The first step of maturity with regards to our identity is to replace our old belief system about who we are, with who God says we are. If our beliefs about ourselves are not how God sees us, then we have a false identity.

Regardless of how wonderful an upbringing we had, most of us start off with some areas of false beliefs in our identity matrix. We can also call the false identity the ego. The ego is defined as our sense of self-esteem or self-importance. When we get our worth and importance from our selves – what we have achieved, our social status, what we do, etc – we are operating under a false identity. We are not our job, for example. If we get a demotion, are we less valuable? You see the problem with attaching our significance to temporal things? Our identity is secure only in God's value for us, because His love for us is eternally steadfast.

Embracing our God-given identity frees us to truly live from our most authentic selves. This is why the process of intimacy needs to precede the process of identity. Deep changes in our self-beliefs do not come from receiving information about the love of God but from experiencing the love of God first-hand through His spoken words to us and His demonstrations of care in our lives.

To change our self-image we must receive the truth of who God is and who we are in relation to Him. We are sons and daughters of God (Galatians 3:26). We are brothers and sisters of Christ (John 20:17). We are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). These truths are not received in our head but in our heart through our relationship with God and within a loving community. When we drift from behaving like who God says we are, it is the job of our kingdom community (our family) to lovingly remind us of our true identity in Christ.

Our functional identity, on the other hand, is about our role in relation to the rest of the world. For example, growing up, we may realize that we have a knack for fixing things and that helping people by repairing broken items for them gives us a sense of fulfilment. Before long, we may become known as the local handyman. Put another way, our functional identity is

9

Copyright Matik Nicholls 2021. This document may not be copied, reproduced, or distributed in full or in part without the prior written consent of Matik Nicholls.

how we perceive that our peculiar mix of personality traits and strengths/gifts can add value to others which may well become clarified within the context of a relationship with God and a loving community.

Finally, the fully mature Christian also has a strong corporate identity which is a belief about who we are together as the global body of Christ as well as the unique calling of our local assembly. We must become carriers of not just who God says I am but also who God says we are.

Our relational identity is a key part of becoming whole as we are healed of false beliefs about ourselves. Our functional identity is a key part of finding purpose. We are able to find meaning in life when we can do what we enjoy doing and do it well for the benefit of others. However, the most meaningful lives are lived in service of something much greater than ourselves, and this is where our corporate identity becomes instrumental.

RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most fundamental differences between a child and an adult is that a child is dependent, and an adult is independent. We see this most readily in terms of physical independence. A baby is completely dependent on its parents for all its needs. As the child grows, she takes greater and greater responsibility for taking care of herself. She learns to eat, walk, go to the bathroom, and so on. This is also true for all our other needs; spiritual, emotional, mental, social.

An immature Christian shifts the responsibility for their needs to someone else. They may expect the pastor to feed them every Sunday and counsel them through every decision. They may expect their spouse to meet all their emotional and social needs. When things aren't going well, they are then able to blame the pastor or their spouse or their boss or their circumstances; anyone but themselves. The first step of adulthood is accepting full responsibility for our lives. We have to take responsibility, with God's help, for the decisions and outcomes of our lives.

After we become independent, then we can enter into healthy relationships where we give and receive in a mutually satisfying way. An immature person cannot engage in healthy relationships because they are unable to contribute meaningfully to the relationship. They form unhealthy co-dependencies where their partner becomes their idol or scapegoat.

It is also a sign of immaturity if we are so independent that we believe that we can achieve our purpose without anyone else's help. The truth is that we need others to actualize our full potential. Likewise, there are people who will not achieve their full potential without our input. We complete and perfect each other. The power of the church as designed by God is diversity AND unity. That's why the analogy of the human body is used to describe the church. Different parts, joined together, working together. Often what we practise today is unity

through sameness. That model is not the church and does not promote maturity. The final frontier for the church is the joyful unity of God's people (even people with theological and doctrinal disagreements); where we empower each other to live the dream God has placed in our hearts and we all receive from the unique expression of Christ that each person embodies.

When we are whole and independent and we press into a life of achieving purpose together with other believers who are different from us, that is a life of inter-dependence. That is the life of a fully mature Christian.

WHOLENESS

As we go through life, we inevitably get emotional scrapes and bruises called trauma. We get trauma from bad things happening to us (Type B trauma) and trauma from good things being withheld from us (Type A trauma, like malnutrition or lack of affection). There is also Type 1 and Type 2 trauma. Type 1 trauma is a single-incident unexpected shock such as severe illness, a road accident or a robbery. Type 2 trauma is repetitive trauma experienced as a part of childhood or early stages of development, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, bullying or emotional neglect.

It is easy to see how our childhood context plays a major role in our emotional health as an adult. In fact, through the work of psychologist John Bowlby, we now know that every person has an attachment style that is formed in our developmental years and which determines how we approach and behave in relationships for the rest of our lives. This attachment style is formed based on what we learned about love and relationships from the first significant relationships in our lives - our parents or caregivers. Our attachment style even affects how we relate to God. We may view God as disinterested in us like our parents were, which then has knock on effects in our view of ourselves (or identity). (You can see how all of these processes are intertwined).

These wounds in our soul caused by trauma prevent us from engaging in life fully, and especially from engaging in healthy relationships. Many of us have shut down areas of our personality as a self-preservation response to trauma in our lives. Then if we experience something that reminds us of our trauma it triggers us to react in unexpected or exaggerated ways (this can happen consciously or unconsciously).

These wounds also act as open doorways for demonic strongholds to be established in our lives. To become whole, we must become free of the demonic oppression, but we must also close the doorway to the enemy by healing the wound that gave him entry in the first place. It is interesting to look at generational curses through the lens of wounds passed down from parent to child until someone decides to heal the wound and end the cycle. Of course, there

can also be cases of demonic oppression that did not gain entrance through wounds. This could be due to habitual sin, addictions or dabbling in the occult.

When we come to Christ, we come as we are, with all our brokenness and baggage. The renewed spirit is the starting point for what could be a lengthy process of progressive sanctification, healing and deliverance. We start out broken but we cannot stay there. Healing is necessary if we want to become mature. In order to have healthy relationships and thrive in every way we must seek deliverance and healing.

Often, the first step is focused on inner healing but eventually we need to reconcile the relationships that have been affected by our woundedness, bondages and dysfunction. This can be a beautiful process of healing the relationships in our lives and engaging fully in a loving community life experience that brings rich satisfaction. In addition, some types of wounds can only be healed in the context of a loving community. Jim Wilder, Chris Coursey and Marcus Warner have all written extensively about emotional and relational transformation and a much of what I have learned on this topic is thanks to them. One of the things their studies have shown is that we learn new, healthier ways of relating to others not through new information but through observation and imitation of others who are more mature. Healthy communities, then, are not optional for the maturation of the body of Christ.

RESILIENCE

The typical human sees suffering as something to be avoided. We believers can also view suffering as punishment and believe that the reward for obeying God (following the rules) should be a blessed life (aka a life free of suffering).

However, Hebrews 12:10 says that God disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness. This is the key to a healthier attitude toward suffering. When we reframe suffering as a tool for our growth then we can endure knowing that the outcome is well worth the pain.

A more mature saint may well understand this perspective. However, the fully mature saint has so internalized the benefit of suffering and lives so fully in the internal weather of God's presence that she can genuinely rejoice in suffering. Thus, the mature believer has relocated the centre of her experience of life from earth to heaven. The greater reality for her is not the outward man that is wasting away but the inward man that is being renewed day by day (as Paul said – 1 Corinthians 4:16).

Consider that Jesus was the most blessed man that ever lived, and He endured more unjust suffering than we ever will. Blessedness, therefore, is not always equivalent to comfort and ease. The bible says that Jesus learned obedience through what He suffered and for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. Because He was willing to endure the cross, the Father has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name!

THE PROCESSES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE AUTHENTIC JOY JOURNEY

The circumstances of our lives are the training ground that God uses to process and refine us. Every difficulty, trial or obstacle in life is an implement in God's hands that He is using to cause us to grow in some way. Maybe we will need to heal some old wounds to move forward in our marriage. Maybe we will need to discover our true identity and discard limiting beliefs to become the kingdom engineer (for example) that we were meant to be. Maybe we will need to learn to receive help and collaborate with others in order to meet the needs of the staff under our care. Maybe we will need to learn how to hear God accurately and walk with Him daily to be a Spirit-led counsellor for at-risk children in our community. Every challenge is an invitation to growth.

The Authentic Joy Journey is a path of transformation. We will come back to these processes time and again as we link them to each stage of the journey and the barriers we will face to our growth. Our mission at Authentic Joy is to give you the tools you need to keep moving forward no matter where you are on your journey. The Growth Process Model helps us to identify how God is using our stage of the journey to change us, pinpoint areas of resistance and thereby empower us to intentionally partner with Him in our transformation process. That is the life we want for every believer – a life of joyful transformation in partnership with God.