

DON'T WALK AWAY

Hebrews 5:11 - 6:8

Modern-day methods of raising children seem rather strange to some of us who were reared (no pun intended) with the idea of spare the rod and spoil the child. In today's environment, the "application of the board of education to the seat of learning" is considered to be child abuse. The modern day approach is to "reason" with the child and explain why he or she should behave in certain prescribed ways. An even more radical approach is to just let the child do anything and everything without any limits because we might damage their esteem or creativity. The "radical" approach produces anarchy and the "reasoning" approach produces confusion in the mind of the very young child who doesn't have a clue as to what the parent is saying since the child is not mature. As a child matures, the inclusion of reasoning and learning the "whys and wherefores" should be increased and can be quite effective. Before that approach can work, some basic reasoning ability must be developed and basic foundational principles laid so that the child can understand what is being taught.

These fundamental principles (maturity and foundation) are needed in all walks of life including our relationship and interaction with God. Prior to salvation or being born again, we find a situation of futility in attempting to communicate spiritual truths to people. As Jesus told Nicodemus, unless you have been born again (of the Spirit) then you cannot see (comprehend) the Kingdom of God. Paul made a similar statement with regard to the preaching of the gospel being "foolishness to those who are perishing." After the new birth and becoming alive in our spirits, then we need to grow and mature spiritually in the same way that a (physical) newly born baby need to grow, mature and learn to become a functioning adult in the community in which he or she lives.

If a child does not grow and mature physically, then we become very concerned and interventions are implemented to attempt to correct the abnormal situation. Lack of spiritual development is often overlooked and Paul found such arrested development among the Gentile believers in Corinth as evidenced by his statement in 1 Corinthians 3:2 "I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready." The writer to the Hebrews made a similar discovery among the Jewish Christians of that day. Evidently, these early Christians had learned some truths but had become neglectful in following the leading of the Holy Spirit and applying the word of God and the teachings of the Apostles to their everyday life situations.

Is such arrested spiritual development a problem in the church today? It is not difficult to answer that question. We see all levels of spiritual development among church members ranging from those who have not grown much beyond just being born to those who are being used mightily by God to advance His Kingdom. What makes the difference in whether we grow spiritually or not? Perhaps we can discover some ideas as we examine the third of the five warnings that were given in the letter to the Hebrews. As a reminder, these warnings can be described as Disregarding the Salvation of God (2:1-4), Disbelieving the Sufficiency of God (3:7-4:13), Discrediting the Son of God (5:11-6:20), Despising the Spirit of God (10:26-39), and Disregarding the Special Grace of God (12:14-19).

The overall theme of this letter was to present convincing evidence from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He was fully God and fully man. He fulfilled and continues to fulfill the positions of King and High Priest which were significant offices of the culture of which they were familiar. He is the perfect sacrifice to which the

sacrificial system had pointed. He is the ultimate Word of God to Whom the written Word of God had focused. Just as people pleased God through faith under the old system, faith remained as the means for being pleasing to God under the new and better covenant. Throughout these thematic arguments, the writer continued to provide warnings and encouragements to not even think about going back to the old system but to diligently press on in confident faith to receive the “kingdom that cannot be moved.”

As the writer was in the midst of developing convincing proof that Jesus is the Great High Priest Who had been foreshadowed in the person of Melchizedec, he realized that what he was about to write may have been beyond the readers’ ability to understand it because of spiritual immaturity.

Causes of Immaturity – 5:11-14

¹¹ Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² 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. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Hebrews 5:11–14 (NASB95)

The first problem that was identified was “dullness of hearing.” This concern is part of an ongoing malady that affected these believers. The first concern was drifting from the word and just letting it slide by, the second was doubting the word and not following where the Holy Spirit was leading them, and now we find dullness of hearing the word which implies an inability to really listen to the message of the word, neglecting to make it a part of who they were and then failing to act on the meaning of the message.

The consequences of this trifecta of errors toward the word showed up in immaturity and the inability to get beyond the ABCs of what being a part of the kingdom of God on the earth was all about. This inability was pictured in terms of a physical baby who still needed milk since he had not developed enough to take solid food. The problem with this was that they needed to start taking solid food so they could grow enough to take more solid food. They needed to learn a lesson from the Christians in Thessalonica who “received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” 1 Thess 2:13

Just as solid food is needed to make the child stronger, the meat of the word of God is needed to perform its “work” (growing the believer spiritually) in those who believe. Those who do grow and mature spiritually are assumed to be those who are involved in helping others mature and those who have their spiritual sensitivity developed and sharpened so they can exercise discernment with regard to spiritual things. Warren Wiersbe notes that it is a characteristic of little children that they lack discernment. A baby will put anything into its mouth. An immature believer will listen to any preacher on the radio or television or even some local churches and not be able to identify whether or not he is true to the Scriptures.

This ability to be spiritually discerning was very important for these Hebrew believers since many were wrestling with the idea of returning to Judaism or continuing to depend on the rites and rituals of Judaism that had been fulfilled (completed) in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It is not too difficult for us to understand why there would be an enticement to go back to what was familiar. Even today, missionaries find that failure to let go of the past to be the situation when people who had been brought up under the influence of pagan religions become believers. They still hold on to many of the ideas of the past and practices that are rooted in paganism.

The Jewish believers to whom this letter was written were constantly reexamining, wondering, rather than accepting the basic teachings of Christianity and growing toward maturity.

Grow in Faith – 6:1-3

¹ 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, ² of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do, if God permits. Hebrews 6:1-3 (NASB95)

We start this chapter with a list of six basic doctrines of Christianity. These doctrines would be foundational and would need to be understood before we could move on with growing and maturing in our spiritual development. These would be considered to be the ABCs of our Christian faith.

It is entirely possible that these early first century Jewish believers had a better understanding of these doctrinal truths than do most Christians today. One reason for that possibility is that these basic foundational truths are closely connected with traditional teachings of Judaism. While the details and extent of understanding from Judaism needed to be put into the light of the revelation of God in Christ, these Jewish believers still were somewhat familiar with the ideas.

For example when John the Baptist came preaching “Repent!” they knew what he meant. What John called for was a turning around and not just being remorseful. The idea of “dead works” would have likely made a more meaningful connection with these Jewish believers than it does with most Christians today. The dead works mentioned here were the religious rites and rituals that many Jews exercised without any element of faith. Their understanding was that these were actions and activities (“works”) to be performed since these were “what the law prescribed.” What a difference it would have been if they had seen these rites and rituals as pointing toward the coming of the Messiah and God’s salvation that would be available.

We find repentance from dead works paired with faith toward God since these are closely interrelated. Just how close these are is evident in the teaching of James in his letter to a similar group of Jewish believers. In chapter two, he argued that faith that does not result in “works of faith” is a dead faith. The reverse argument is that without true faith the only works that can be produced are dead works.

These early Hebrew believers would have been familiar with the Jewish practices of “washings” and would have compared that to Christian baptism. It would have been important to teach them the difference between the two and for them to understand the significance and meaning of being baptized in Christ. We find different Greek words being used in this letter for “washings” verses Christian baptism. In this verse as well as in Heb 9:10 the Greek word is baptisimos (plural of bapto) which literally means “to dip” into water as one might do to a cup or pot to clean it. This was the idea of the Jewish practice of dipping proselytes in water and of various ceremonial washings. The Greek word that is used for Christian baptism is “baptisma” which is a derivation of “baptizo” and means immersion rather than just being dipped. This is also the same word that is used in connection with the baptism that John was doing in the Jordan River.

The significant thing that we should understand is that the Great Commission is not for us to go and just dip new believers in water as symbolism of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and our identification with Him, but we need to be immersing them in the very character, nature, and essence (name of) God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If we are only doing the

ritual and not following through with the reality, then it is likely that we haven't really learned the first principles.

This teaching on various washings is paired with laying on of hands which would also have been familiar to the Jews. In mentioning matters like these, the writer may have been consciously countering sectarian teachings which may well have offered initiations of their own involving "baptisms" and "laying on of hands." I recently saw a "recruiting" film for Al Quida in which men were "baptizing" teenagers in a river as they became part of that group. There are pseudo-religious organizations that have initiation ceremonies that involve laying on of hands.

Laying on of hands as practiced in the church was not just an initiation ceremony but there was an understanding that there was a transference of spiritual empowerment from one person to another. For example we see in Acts 8:18 "And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money." Also in 1 Timothy 4:14 "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery (elders)." Baptism and laying on of hands are seen together in Acts 19 in which Paul found some "disciples" in Ephesus who had been baptized with John's baptism which Paul described as a baptism unto repentance. He then baptized them in the name of Lord Jesus and then laid hands on them so they would receive the Holy Spirit.

That should cause us to be curious about how much of these two doctrines do we in the church today really understand. Are baptism and laying on of hands just rituals that we are taught that we should do "as acts of obedience and fulfilling traditions" or do we enter into the reality of what these represent?

The other two doctrines of Resurrection of the Dead and Eternal Judgment would be classified by most in the church as "mysteries" that are too difficult to really understand. Does it surprise us to see these listed as part of the "elementary teachings" of the faith? Most of us would have to admit to needing additional understanding if we were to be able to teach others these "foundational truths" or "elementary teachings."

It has been noted that the writer did not take time to teach a refresher course to his readers but admonished them that they needed to be diligent and grow in the faith and press on to maturity as God allows and makes possible.

Lest You Walk Away – 6:4-8

⁴ For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. ⁷ For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸ but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. Hebrews 6:4-8 (NASB95)

We have just read one of the most difficult passages in Scripture. There are at least four different views of what this passage means. (1) Some would say that the message is that a Christian can lose his salvation. This idea conflicts with the Biblical assurances that salvation is a work of God that cannot be reversed. (2) Others take the view that the warning is for those who had not fully surrendered and been born again of the Spirit of God. This would be the same as saying they were just professors of faith and not partakers of salvation. (3) A third opinion is that the writer is presenting a hypothetical situation that would argue that IF a Christian could lose his salvation, there is no provision for regaining it through repentance and identifying with Christ's death on the cross. (4) A generally accepted idea is that the danger is that of getting sidetracked or walking away from true faith and, therefore, they would not be involved in the

work for which God had saved them. Not only would they miss the blessings of obedience and a closer walk with God, they would find that what they did would be viewed as “wood, hay and stubble” and would not lead to eternal reward. (See also, 1 Cor 3:12-15)

Support for the view that this warning was for Christians is found in such descriptions as “those who have been enlightened” which is a reference to the conversion experience and “who have tasted of the heavenly gift.” This could be a reference to eternal life as used in Romans 6:23 “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Another description that would point to these being true believers is “who have shared (partakers) in the Holy Spirit.” The final supporting words are “who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come.” In every way the language easily fits true Christians.

We still need to deal with the expression “and then have fallen away.” A person who becomes sidetracked or disengaged from their relationship to God is in a “fallen away” situation or condition. Living in such a condition is as if they are re-crucifying Christ and making a statement that the work of Christ on the cross was ineffective. Such behavior brings shame to the name of Jesus by effectively saying that it really did not matter that Christ died for that person. If they continue to live in such an estranged way from God and will not stop sinning, then they will never be restored to a position of repentance toward God.

An argument can be made that if they do stop the errant behavior and thoughts, then they can repent and be restored. On the other hand, “while they *are crucifying...* and while they *are putting* Him to an open shame” repentance is impossible. You cannot turn back to God while you are running away from Him. Such a hardening of heart will resist efforts to win them back, not to Christian conversion, but to Christian commitment.

The illustration of the ground that is blessed with rain and then just produces thorns and thistles and winds up being burned should not be equated with the idea of the fires of hell. There is nothing in the text to suggest that outcome. The burning of a field to destroy the rank growth it had produced was a practice known in ancient times. Its aim was not the destruction of the field itself (which, of course, the fire could not affect), but the destruction of the unwanted produce of the field. Thereafter the field might once again become useful for cultivation and producing good crops.

This would speak of the discipline of God for those who do stray away from the path of righteousness and wind up sidetracked and ineffective (unproductive) for the kingdom of God. It is God’s intension that we produce a beneficial crop, not thorns. In the remainder of this chapter, the writer is sure that his Jewish Christian readers are not a wasteland and he wants to stimulate them to be faithful. This should be our approach with each other in the Body of Christ.