

PRESS ON TO MATURITY

C. Stephen David | *Ekklesia Evangelical Fellowship* | February 26, 2023

When children are born, delays in growth raise great concern in parents:

- ▶ **Cognitive delays** [intellectual functioning and learning difficulties]— Down syndrome
- ▶ **Physical development delays** [muscle growth, large and small]— Cerebral palsy
- ▶ **Social, emotional, behavioural and speech delays**—Autism and ADHD

Much more dangerous delays:

Kent Hughes: There is a massive tragedy few are aware of and with which fewer still concern themselves—namely, **arrested spiritual growth, perpetual infancy, never becoming a “big person” spiritually.** Set against eternity, this is a tragedy of incalculable proportions.

Background of Hebrews: The readers were tempted to drift away from Christ and lacked the spiritual maturity to tackle the trying situation. The author continues to speak about the supremacy of Christ, even over the Levitical priesthood.

What I am going to preach is sandwiched between these verses [interlude]:

- ❖ **Hebrews 5:9-10,** And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, **being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.**
- ❖ **Hebrews 6:19-20,** We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, **having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.**

The author is about to explain how Christ is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, and then gives a word of rebuke for their slow learning and not being in a position to receive this significant teaching:

THREE SAD STATES:

- 1) **Lack of understanding of great and deep doctrinal truths.**

Responsible hearing:

- ❖ **First warning, Hebrews 2:1,** Therefore we must **pay much closer attention to what we have heard,** lest we drift away from it.

- ❖ **Second warning, Hebrews 4:7**, Today, **if you hear his voice**, do not harden your hearts... (3:7-8, 15)
- ❖ **Third warning, Hebrews 5:11** About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become **dull of hearing**.

“**About this we have much to say**”: High priesthood of Christ in chps 5-10.

The word “**dull**” is only used here in the New Testament (Hapax legomenon) and means “sluggish” or “lethargic.” [మీరు వినుటకు మందులైనందున / जिन का समझना भी कठिन है] “**Dull in understanding**”

- ❖ **Mark 8:14-18**, Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? **Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?**

Hebrews 5:11 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become **dull of hearing**.

Why is it hard to explain? Not because the subject was hard but because people were dull hearers. They haven’t been growing in their spiritual understanding. They haven’t sharpened their cognitive/intellectual abilities.

Observe: THE RECIPIENTS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR DULLNESS. [NOT NATURAL BUT ACQUIRED CONDITION]. THE PROBLEM IS NOT WITH LOW IQ [Intelligent quotient] BUT WITH HIGH LQ [laziness quotient]

Comment: When believers don’t grow in their understanding of doctrinal truths, preachers have a hard time explaining to them.

- ▶ **The Puritan Richard Baxter, in his “*Directions for Profitably Hearing the Word Preached,*” gives wise advice for all Christians:** Make it your work with diligence to apply the word as you are hearing it... Cast not all upon the minister, as those that will go no further than they are carried as by force.... You have work to do as well as the preacher, and should all the time be as busy as he... you must open your mouths, and digest it, for another cannot digest it for you.

Hebrews 5:11 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become **dull of hearing**.

Note: If these are the words the author used for the people of the first century, where the literacy rate was not more than 3%, what must he say to the 21st century (3rd Millennium) saints with high literacy?

William Lane, Bible scholar: Deafness or dullness in receptivity is a dangerous condition for those who have been called to radical obedience.

2) Lack of teaching and encouragement to others.

Hebrews 5:¹² For though by this time **you ought to be teachers**, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

“For though by this time”: Seemingly long-standing believers

Question: How long have you been a Christian? How long have you grown?

Charles Swindoll: “Older” doesn’t necessarily mean “wiser” and “more spiritual.” Age should be an indicator of spiritual maturity...but in too many cases people fail to grow up as they grow older.

- ▶ Someone said that maturity doesn’t always go with age. Sometimes age goes alone. Why? **There is a price to pay for maturity.** It doesn’t descend upon us automatically.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers: The author isn’t speaking about the **formal gift of teaching** but **general mutual encouragement and teaching**. You must be now in a position of investing in others.

- ❖ **Romans 15:14**, I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and **able to instruct one another**.
- ❖ **Colossians 3:16**, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, **teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom**, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
- ❖ **Hebrews 3:13**, But **exhort one another every day**, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Point: If you don’t make efforts to grow towards maturity, you cannot invest in others and waste your life.

3) Lack of growth beyond elementary teachings.

Hebrews 5:¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again **the basic principles of the oracles of God. [Word of God]**

Basic principles (5:12): the Greek *stoicheia*, which can refer to a language's alphabet, the starting point of learning to read.

- ▶ **Philip E. Hughes:** Their spiritual comprehension corresponds, to their shame, to that of the children in the kindergarten, who, unable to read or write, have to start at the very beginning by learning their ABCs. (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pg. 190)

Similar to Elementary doctrine of Christ 6 ¹ Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits [not undermining].

Six factors in three categories [basic principles/elementary doctrine of Christ]:

(1) **Repentance** from dead works and **faith** toward God; [justified not by the works of the law but by faith in Christ]

(2) instruction about **washings** and the **laying on of hands**; [ritual cleansings, baptism of water and the conferring of spiritual gifts at the time of conversion]

(3) **resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment**. [the doctrine of last things]

Point: These elementary things are important but don't get stuck here. What is missing between **conversion** [one and two] and **eternity** [three] is **spiritual growth in doctrine and discernment** [the whole counsel of God].

4) Lack of solid theological and moral discernment.

Hebrews 5:^{12b} You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

How do you measure the growth of a child?

- ▶ Children grow from drinking milk to eating solid food.
- ▶ Children grow from basics to deeper learning.

Paul's similar caution:

- ❖ **1 Corinthians 3:1-3**, But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, **as infants in Christ**. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.

- ❖ **1 Corinthians 13:11**, When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

Ray Stedman has this illustration... I read of a principal in a high school who had an administrative post to fill. He promoted one of his teachers with ten years of teaching experience to the job. When the announcement was made, another teacher in this school came to him terribly upset. She said, 'Why did you put that teacher in this position? He has only had ten years of experience and I've had twenty-five years, yet you passed me over in favor of him.' And the principal said, 'I'm sorry; you're wrong. You haven't had twenty-five years of experience. You have had one year's experience twenty-five times.' (*What More Can God Say?*)

How do you measure the growth of a believer?

¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Milk: Basic principles and elementary doctrine of Christ [which are important]

Unskilled in the word of righteousness: Right doctrine and right moral discernment

Maturity: ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Solid food: The greater doctrinal truths about Christ that the author wanted to impart, which leads to adoring the supremacy of Christ.

Powers of discernment [mental faculties]: Distinguish good from evil [both beliefs and conduct]

Trained by constant practice: Studying/learning and practising

Point: Solid doctrinal understanding leads us to moral discernment [practical righteousness].

- ▶ Sound doctrine without devotion to practical righteousness makes you a clever devil.
- ▶ Devotion to practical righteousness without soundness in doctrine makes you a gullible child.

APPLICATIONS

Problems in believers similar to the readers of Hebrews:

- ▶ Failure to read/hear and understand hard and deep doctrinal truths.

- ▶ Failure to invest in other believers to grow towards maturity.
- ▶ Failure to lead a solid doctrinal and morally discerning life.
- ▶ Failure to defend their faith in the gospel with biblical reasons.

J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*: The role of intellectual development is primary in evangelical Christianity...if we are to have Christ formed in us (Galatians 4:19), we must realize the work of God in our minds and pay attention to what a Christlike mind might look like. As our Savior has said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). To do this, we cannot neglect the soulful development of a Christian mind.

- ▶ **Observe:** If we are to have Christ formed in us (Galatians 4:19), we must realize the work of God in our minds and pay attention to what a Christlike mind might look like.

Biblical Examples:

- ❖ **Luke 2:46-47** [when Christ was 12 years old], After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, **listening to them and asking them questions**. And all who heard him were amazed at his **understanding and his answers**.
- ❖ **Luke 2:52**, And **Jesus increased in wisdom** and in stature and in favor with God and man.
- ❖ **John 7:15**, About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. The Jews therefore marveled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, **when he has never studied?**"
- ❖ **Mark 12:34**, And after that **no one dared to ask him any more questions**.
- ❖ **Acts 4:13**, Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were **uneducated, common men**, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.
- ❖ **Acts 6:10**, But they **could not withstand the wisdom** and the Spirit with which he [Stephen] was speaking.
- ❖ **Acts 17:2-3**, And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he **reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving** that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

Misunderstandings:

1. **Belief** is devoid of biblical reasoning. Just believe. No need to reason what you believe. If you are sincere in what you believe, that's enough.
2. **Passion** is devoid of biblical reasoning.
 - ❖ **Proverbs 19:2**, Desire without knowledge is not good,
3. **Dependence on the Holy Spirit** is devoid of biblical reasoning.
4. **Emotional listening** to the oratory of preachers is devoid of biblical reasoning.
5. **Passive listening** to the preachers is devoid of biblical reasoning.
 - ▶ **Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?***:
“The mental secularization of Christians means that nowadays we meet only as worshipping beings and as moral beings, not as thinking beings.”
6. **Plain and simple things are sufficient**, avoiding deeper and hard truths of biblical reasoning.
 - ▶ **A W Tozer**, “Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth.”
7. **Personal/felt needs** are a priority over biblical reasoning.
8. **Character** is devoid of biblical reasoning.

The danger of not growing towards spiritual maturity [doctrine and discernment]:

- ▶ If you don't grow towards maturity and remain shallow, **you won't develop a solid doctrinal mind and deep moral discernment.**
- ▶ If you don't grow up towards maturity and remain shallow, **you may become a victim of false teachings.**
 - **Puritan Cotton Mather**, “Ignorance is the Mother not of Devotion but of HERESY.”
- ▶ If you don't grow up towards maturity and remain shallow, **you won't be able to invest your life in others.**
- ▶ If you don't grow up towards maturity and remain shallow, **you may have a shaky faith [drifting] in afflictions.**

J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*: If we are going to be wise, spiritual people prepared to meet the crises of our age, we must be a studying, learning community that values the life of

the mind...We need local churches dedicated to the task of training believers to think theologically and biblically.

How do you develop sound hearing [coming out of dull hearing]?

1. Keep praying for God's wisdom and understanding.
2. Study great biblical doctrines [Bibliology, Theology Proper, Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology...]
3. Study Bible Interpretation [study the Word of God to understand]
4. Study mental sweating books [along with inspirational books]—read hard books, persevere in understanding, and you easily understand them later.
 - ▶ [cut short your time with entertainment, social media and vain conversations]
5. Actively engage in listening to expositional preaching [pay attention, take notes, reason]
6. If you don't understand the doctrinal truths, learn and work hard to understand [don't keep saying "I don't understand"]
7. Cultivate the habit of asking questions and probing deeper [understand what and why of the issues]
8. Cultivate the habit of engaging in meaningful discussions
9. Grab church training (courses, bible studies, seminars)
10. Be devoted to humility and holiness [be highly intelligent and deeply humble]