

3. Just like Aaron and his priestly offspring, Jesus obtained His priesthood through divine ordination and calling. And like them, He was fitted to execute His priestly ministration by His life and experiences as a human being. Thus Jesus' priesthood corresponded to its Aaronic counterpart, but it also differed from it in a critical way: The Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood was a matter of prophetic promise; it prepared for and anticipated what was to come in the Jesus the Messiah; His priesthood and ministration are the substance for which Aaron's were the shadow (9:1-10; cf. Colossians 2:16-17). And so Jesus, too, is suited to be God's High Priest on behalf of men because He is a *son of Adam* just like those under His charge. But unlike the Aaronic priests, Jesus' fitness for His calling involved His life as a *new Adam* – one who has triumphed over the bondage and condemnation of Adamic man; man existing as the image-son he was created to be.

Jesus executes His priesthood as True Man, but not simply that men should be forgiven and reconciled to God, *but that they should become what He is*. This is the sense in which Jesus' attainment of human perfection renders Him the source of "eternal salvation" for other human beings (5:9): His glorification as King-Priest (i.e., true Image-Son) has its goal in a new human family who, in Him, are also kings and priests to God (Revelation 5:1-10; cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10). The writer understood this, and this perspective underlies his parenthetical rebuke and exhortation in 5:11-6:20.

*Jesus' priestly ministration – in its nature, orientation and efficacy – established his readers' obligation of faithfulness. But it also informed that obligation, and so revealed the true culpability of their immaturity and wavering.*

They needed to recognize, as the author did, that their own human destiny as a royal priesthood marked out for them the same path that their King-Priest had walked. *They, too, were appointed to attain the same human perfection through the same obedience nurtured by the same suffering.* Their obligation as Christians wasn't simply to find resource and remedy in Jesus' effectual mediation; rather, through that mediation, they were to become all that He is. This was the writer's overarching burden for his readers, and it serves as the lens through which his letter's instruction, exhortations, rebukes and warnings must be interpreted and understood. He didn't view his readers' faithfulness in terms of religious and moral adherence, but growth in authentic conformity to the Messiah, and so to their own human identity and calling in God's purposes. Like Paul, he was concerned that the Father's children "grow up in all things into Christ who is the Head," and so become truly mature, attaining "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13-15; cf. Philippians 3:7-12).

This is the perspective that governs the writer's present challenge to his readers (5:11-6:20), which consists of three distinct, yet interrelated parts. He first *rebuked* them for their immaturity (5:11-14), and then *exhorted* them to hold fast to Christ and grow up in Him (6:1-8). Lastly, he *encouraged* them by reaffirming his confidence in them and the authenticity of their faith (6:9-20).

- a. Jesus' identity and role as God's singular High Priest is the marrow of the Christian's confession, and the Hebrews writer went to great lengths to unfold and explain this glorious reality. He wanted his readers to more fully comprehend Jesus in this way, but with the goal that their lives would conform to their understanding. *He desired that their practice would conform to their confession*, which is to say, he wanted them to order every dimension and aspect of their lives according to the truth and significance of Jesus' high priesthood. This was his goal, but he recognized an impediment in accomplishing it: He was constrained in what he could communicate to his readers by his readers themselves. The things he wished to convey to them were hard to explain because they were incapable of understanding them; they were "slow in hearing" (5:11).

The concern here was the *immaturity* of these Hebrew Christians, but immaturity that was entirely culpable. It wasn't that they were new to the faith, but that they were derelict in it. Two considerations make this clear:

- First of all, the problem wasn't their ignorance or lack of exposure to truth, but their *hearing*. They were "sluggish" hearers, which points to a deficient mind. Furthermore, this sluggishness has two primary connotations: First it connotes *dullness* – the quality of being *obtuse* (lacking a nimble and insightful mind); secondly, it connotes *hardness* – the quality of being *obdurate* (lacking an inquisitive and receptive mind). Their minds were unreceptive, and what did penetrate them was grasped in only a clumsy way.
- The minds of these Hebrews were dull and hard, but as an *acquired* condition; they had *become* sluggish in hearing. Their inability to grasp deeper things concerning the Messiah was self-inflicted, not the result of matters beyond their control.

These Christians had become sluggish, which implies that certain factors and/or influences had brought them to this state. Undoubtedly many things played a role, but the context seems to point toward two, both of which related to their Jewish ethnicity: The first is the *persecution* they were enduring from their Jewish countrymen; the second is their *Jewish background*, which necessarily affected the way they perceived and processed what they'd learned about Jesus' person and work (ref. 6:1-2).

- Persecution tends toward dullness because it preoccupies the mind and affections. Suffering in any significant degree takes center stage and presses out of view less compelling concerns. Here, the persecution and suffering these Hebrews were experiencing was directly tied to their faith in and confession of Jesus, which only increased their incentive to look away from Him and allow their hearts and minds to grow dull and disinterested.

- But their Jewish identity also played a role in their condition. All people perceive and process truth claims about Jesus through the lens of their own perspectives and experiences. But this dynamic poses a unique challenge for Jews, since Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish identity, heritage and history. *This means that everything a Jew understands about himself, his people, his heritage, and his faith and practice has to be rethought if he is to come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.* And this was precisely the point at which these Hebrew Christians were being confronted. Most everything about Jesus challenged their long-held notions about the messianic person and work, not least the idea of the Messiah holding a priesthood according to a new, non-Levitical order. It's not at all surprising, then, that they'd struggle with the writer's claims in this section. But beyond that, it was their embrace of Jesus as the Messiah that caused their suffering. Between the radical paradigm shift imposed on them and the heavy persecution resulting from it, it would have been very easy for them to shutter their minds.

The fact that their dullness came about over time indicates that these Christians weren't new to the faith. But the writer gave a clue as to how long they'd been followers of Jesus by his insistence that they ought to have been *teachers* by that time (5:12a). At that point in their walk with Him, they ought to have been able to instruct others concerning Him – who He is, what He accomplished, and what He requires of human beings.

Some have gotten tripped up here by connecting the writer's statement with the *gift* of teaching that the Spirit grants to certain individuals (ref. Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:27-29; Ephesians 4:7-13). But he wasn't referring to the gifting that marks out those who serve as recognized teachers in the Church, but to the universal obligation of *all* Christians to testify to Christ and His kingdom, both to believers and non-believers alike (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 4:14-16, 25, 29, 5:6-21; Philippians 1:27-38, 2:14-16, 4:1-9; Colossians 3:16).

These Hebrews had known Christ long enough that they should have been able to testify of Him to others, and their time in the faith made their immaturity culpable. Even more so because of their bad fruit; they'd become dull and hard over time, but their dullness had resulted in the forfeiture of the growth they'd already experienced. So far from being capable teachers, they'd been reduced to babes in the faith – neophytes in need of instruction in the very rudiments of Christian truth. They'd clearly walked with Christ for some time, and yet had regressed so as to again be able to ingest only spiritual milk and not solid food (5:12b). And though their circumstances helped explain their condition, they didn't justify it. *They stood before God anemic and infantile in their own faith and unprofitable to their Christian brethren, and for this they were culpable.*

Milk and meat are familiar scriptural metaphors for describing Christian maturity (1 Corinthians 3:1-3; 1 Peter 2:1-3), but here the writer specifically associated spiritual milk-drinking with inexperience with “the word of righteousness” (5:13). In contrast, mature Christians – those who feed on “solid food” – are marked by an active discipline that has nurtured their power of discernment such that they are able to discern “good and evil” (5:14). By juxtaposing these descriptions of immature and mature believers, it’s clear that the writer understood them in relation to one another. That is, experiential familiarity with “the word of righteousness” is related to one’s ability and success in discerning “good and evil.”

- Some, then, have interpreted vv. 13-14 as the author confronting his readers’ *practical disobedience*: Their immature condition (which was their own doing) left them unable to discern good and evil, which resulted in a pattern of life manifesting a lack of acquaintance (experience) with true uprightness.
- A more contextual interpretation views these statements in terms of *doctrinal error*. That is, these Hebrews’ sluggishness to hear had seen them drifting from the things they’d learned and believed, so that they had regressed to become spiritual “babes” again who needed instruction in the elementary principles of the oracles of God, i.e., the “word of righteousness” (cf. 5:11-12 with 6:1-6).

*But viewed within the overall epistle and its concerns and emphases, the writer seems to have been making a more encompassing point – one that acknowledges practical and doctrinal concerns, but from the perspective of what has come in the Messiah and the implications for human beings.*

The author’s language underscores his conviction that Christian maturity consists in the *experiential* knowledge of righteousness *in its true essence and substance* – hence the expression, “the *word* (logos) of righteousness.” In context (and consistent with the entire New Testament), *righteousness* is defined in terms of the “Christ event”: what God has affirmed and accomplished in His Son and the obligation it incurs for human beings. Righteousness is *conformity to truth*, whether on the part of the Creator or His creatures. Thus the knowledge of righteousness is *experiential*, and this knowledge expresses itself in true discernment of good and evil – not as men conceive good and evil, but as they are in truth; as they speak to the righteousness of conformity to truth (cf. Colossians 2:20-23; 1 Timothy 4:1-6; Titus 1:15-16; also Romans 13-14).

Thus the writer wasn’t confronting immorality or doctrinal error, but his readers’ failure to live authentically as image-children. Their immaturity indicted their *unbelief* – their failure to order their minds and practice according to the truth of their renewal in the resurrected Messiah (6:9-12).