

Let's get On with It

by Ray C. Stedman

The passage before us is so important and so provocative that I will waste no time in introduction. I shall follow the suggestion of our title and "get on with it." The section from 5:11 to 6:12 gathers around four figures, or pictures, though one is implied rather than stated. We shall call these four figures

- The milk drinkers,
- The meat eaters,
- The stillborn, and
- The fruit growers.

This first section describes **milk drinkers**:

About this [i.e., Christ being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek] **we have much to say which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. {Heb 5:11-14 RSV}**

Obviously, here is a case of arrested development. Here are people who have been professing Christians for many years. By this time they ought to have been teachers, but they need yet to have someone teach them the very ABC's of the gospel, the word of Christ. It is a case of retarded maturity.

We have at our home a three-year-old daughter. It is the undivided opinion of our family that she is the smartest, brightest, and cutest little girl that ever lived. And she says very clever things.

We all take great delight in her. But if, at this stage of her life, something should happen and her body kept growing but her mind stopped, and she went on saying the same clever things she is saying now all the while her body matured and grew into full womanhood, we would no longer find delight in what she says. Our joy would be turned to sorrow; we would feel great grief at the sight of our dear one suffering from arrested development.

That is what this author feels as he writes to these Hebrews. There is a cloud of threat hanging over these people due to their immaturity. The writer makes three very important and insightful observations about this problem.

1. First, there is the clear suggestion that age alone does not produce maturity. It is amazing how many of us think it does. We love this thought of inevitable growth. How often we say, "Just give us time. We have only been Christians for fifteen or twenty years. Perhaps we will yet grow out of these hot tempers, catty tongues and jealous spirits. Just give us time." But time never brings maturity.

I read recently 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."

That is exactly the situation with these Hebrew Christians. They had been going through the same experience again and again all the years of their Christian life, but had never grown. Instead of marching forward, they were simply marking time.

It is the problem with so many of us, is it not? Someone told me the other day that he had analyzed his difficulty and had decided he was suffering from prolonged adolescence, merging into premature senility! It is this process that produces the frequent phenomenon of Christians who come to sit, and soak, and sour. But the writer here makes very clear that age will never cure immaturity.

2. The second observation he makes is that immaturity is self-identifying. It has certain clear marks which provide a simple test that anyone can take to determine whether he belongs in this classification or not:

- The first mark is an inability to instruct others. Though these have been Christians for years they still cannot help anyone else. They have nothing to say to help another who may be struggling with problems. They cannot even point someone to Christ. There is no ability to help or instruct another. In fact, they themselves can only understand the very simplest doctrinal treatment. They need milk, the writer says, instead of strong meat. They do not understand the “word of unrighteousness,” i.e., the divine program which results in right conduct, because they are themselves children and want only milk. That is the first mark of immaturity, an inability to instruct others.
- The second mark is an inability to discern good from evil. It is such people who constitute what we may call consecrated blunderers, evangelical crabs, the ones who mean right and think they are doing right but are continually doing the wrong thing, creating problem situations, and difficulties with others.

They include the doctrinally undiscerning, i.e., those who are blown about with every wind of doctrine, who give themselves to the theological fads which come in repetitive cycles. Anyone who has observed the Christian

scene for any period of time recognizes there are certain fads which repeat themselves in cycles of interest, such as faith-healing, tongues, and legalistic practices. These are the doctrinally undiscerning; they go along with every movement that comes.

It includes also the emotionally gullible, i.e., those who are moved by some emotional appeal. This is especially true, perhaps, in the realm of missionary appeal. There are those who are affected easily by stories of starving babies, disfigured lepers, and naked savages; who respond to purely emotional stimulation and give their funds only to those organizations or mission boards that make their appeal along these lines. They are uncritical in their evaluation of a work. If it has this emotional content, that is all they look for.

Included in this class are those who are frightened by what we might call “religious bogey men” – certain names or personalities that are used as scarecrows because the very use of their name frightens people off from having any part in certain activity. These are the emotionally gullible.

- Then, this group includes those who are personality followers, those who make much of men, who fasten themselves to one particular, outstanding, sparkling personality and read only his books and play his tapes exclusively. I am not speaking against reading books and playing tapes, but I am talking about fastening on to one individual in this respect to the exclusion of others. Those who do this are children, immature, unable to distinguish the activity of the flesh, with its exhibitionism and egotism, from the manifestation of the Spirit. They applaud what God condemns; they resent what God approves.

3. The third observation the author makes is that arrested development is a very costly thing. “About this,” he says, “we have much to say which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” There is so much of the riches of the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ which I want to tell you,” he says, “which would make your starved humanity burst into bloom like buds in the spring if you could but grasp it, but you would not get it because you

are so dull of hearing.” The immature lose so much, and they risk even more. There is a very grave danger threatening these who continue in this condition of prolonged immaturity. He will describe it fully in this next section.

But first we have a brief view of the other side of the picture, **the meat eaters**, the mature:

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. {Heb 6:1-3 RSV}

It is from this section that our title comes, “Let’s get on with it.” He is urging these people to graduate from milk to meat, from immature diet to solid food, for, he says, it is this that is the mark of maturity. “Solid food is for the mature.”

In the Authorized Version the word for *mature* is *perfection*: “Let us go on to perfection.” I hasten immediately to add, this does not mean sinless perfection. John makes that clear in his first letter, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves [we do not fool anyone else, especially our wives, but we deceive ourselves], and the truth is not in us,” {1 Jn 1:8 RSV}. No, it is not sinless perfection he is talking about. Paul could write to the Philippians and say, “Let those of us who are mature [perfect] be thus minded,” {Phil 3:15a RSV}. Yet just three verses before he says, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect;” {Phil 3:12a RSV}. Notice, there is a maturity, a perfection, which he disowns. That is yet ahead. “I have not reached ultimate perfection, I am not claiming to be sinlessly perfect, I have not yet reached the place where there is nothing at all wrong with me – that lies beyond the resurrection, that is ahead,” {cf, Phil 3:12b-14}. But there is also a maturity which he claims. It is that which in Hebrews has already been called “the rest of God,” a moment by moment exercise of faith, a perfect understanding of God’s principle of activity, a coming of age, an entering into spiritual manhood.

This is what the writer means here. It is produced not by age, as we have already seen, nor by food, for milk will not effect it either, but it is produced by practice. “Those who have their faculties

trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.” It is produced by acting on what you believe, stepping out upon it, putting it into practice. That is what brings about maturity.

To reach this requires leaving behind the principles of the gospel, the ABC’s, the elementary truths, the familiar ground by which we came into Christian faith. “Not laying again this foundation.” Here is another figure of arrested development. A foundation is laid but nothing is built on it. Instead of building on the foundation, the owner tears it up and lays it again. Then he goes back and lays it yet again. There is nothing but a repetitive laying again and again of the same foundation; it is arrested development.

Major Ian Thomas once said to me, “You know, I have discovered an interesting thing about American Christians. They do not usually come to church to learn anything. Whatever they do not yet know themselves they think is heresy. What they want to hear is the same old stuff so they can say, ‘Amen, brother, Amen!’”

That is laying the same foundation over and over again.

The foundation is called “the elementary doctrines of Christ,” or, in Chapter 5, “the first principles of God’s word.” The elements of it are listed for us, and they fall into three very interesting groups:

- There are those doctrinal truths concerning conversion;
- Then teaching concerning church ordinances, and
- Doctrine concerning prophetic matters.

This is milk! This is proper for babies, but is very inadequate for anyone who wishes to go on to maturity, to full growth in the Christian life. He does not mean when he says “leave these” that they are to be forgotten, or denied, or neglected, but they are no longer to be the chief center of attention. That is the point he is making.

Is it not rather startling that these are often the sole topics on which many ministers dwell? They preach them over and over, and call them the simple gospel. Because this simple gospel is preached unendingly in our churches, we have Christians

who are weak, childish and immature. I have long been convinced that the greatest cause of the weak state of evangelical Christendom today is preachers who never realize that, in preaching what they call the simple gospel, they are feeding their people upon milk. They never get beyond the foundation.

Let's take a closer look at it. The introductory matters concern "repentance from dead works, and faith toward God." Now those are great themes. They are absolutely essential to the Christian life. But the point the writer makes is, they are only "A" in the alphabet of faith. The teaching about ordinances includes "baptism, and the laying on of hands." These are but figures of reality, they are not the reality itself. They are very blessed figures and can be very meaningful, but to get concerned over these shadows, these figures, these pictures; to fight over the mode of baptism or the procedure of ordination, is infantile.

Dear old Dr. A. T. Pierson used to go about and speak at many churches. When he was in a church that was arguing over the mode of baptism or some such thing, he would say to them, "Quit your baby-talk!" He was quite right. It is an over-emphasis on these things which leads to the Mickey Mouse regulations that are imposed so frequently in many churches.

The last two items, "resurrection and eternal judgment," obviously have to do with the themes of prophecy, eschatology. This would include the time of the rapture, the question of who the man of sin is, where the church will be during the tribulation, etc. All these are important truths, the writer does not deny that, but they are so inclined to puff people up with knowledge instead of to edify in love. "It is time," he says, "to leave these things. You know them, you have been talking about them for too long, now go on, go on, there is much more ahead. This," he says, "we will do *if God permits.*"

With those three little words he introduces the knottiest problem-passage in Hebrews, if not the whole Bible; a passage which has been a battleground of varying convictions for ages. He changes his figure now, and, beginning with Verse 4, he brings before us a picture of what I shall call "**the stillborn.**"

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlight-

ened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it was cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned. {Heb 6:4-8 RSV}

What a sobering passage!

There is, first, the elaboration of an awful possibility. It is impossible to restore again to repentance these who experience certain Spirit-given blessings, if they shall fall away. The problem of the passage is: How can anyone experience all of this and not be Christian? And, if he is Christian, how can he fall away, without any hope of restoration? It is over these issues that the battle has waged hot throughout the Christian ages.

It is important to see that all of this passage hangs upon the three words, if God permits: "This we will do, if God permits." Here is the danger of prolonged immaturity, of remaining in one place all your Christian life. It suggests that you may be one of those whom God will not allow to go further; we have already seen in Chapter 3 that God has said of certain ones, "I swear in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest."

Can we take these expressions here as describing anything other than Spirit-produced, authentic Christian life? Look at them again:

- "Those who have once been enlightened." That means, to have their eyes opened to their own desperate personal need, to realize they are in a lost world and need a Savior. That is being enlightened.
- "And have tasted the heavenly gift." What is the heavenly gift? Obviously, it is the gift God gave from heaven. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." These are those who have known a personal encounter with Christ, they have "tasted of the heavenly gift."

- “Become partakers of the Holy Spirit.” That is more than to be influenced by the Holy Spirit, it is to become companions of him, fellow travelers.
- “They have tasted the goodness of the word of God.” That means to enter into the joy of the promises of God.
- “And the powers of the age to come,” i.e., they have already experienced the miracle of release and deliverance in their life.

Yet the sentence stands, “when they commit apostasy” (not if, there is no if in the original Greek) it is impossible to restore them. Their case is hopeless!

The immediate question here is not, “Why can they not come back? We will look at that in a moment, but first we must ask, How can they fall away after such a God-honored start as this?”

I should like to propose an explanation of this which has long haunted me. I would like to raise a question for you to wrestle with which more and more suggests, at least to me, the correct explanation of this phenomenon. We have already noted that Scripture frequently uses the analogy of human birth and growth to explain spiritual birth and growth. We have that even here. The use of milk by children is an analogy drawn from the physical life. Here is the question I would like to ask: Is it not possible that we frequently confuse conception with birth?

If the spiritual life follows the same pattern as the physical life, we all know that physical life does not begin with birth. It begins with conception. Have we not, perhaps, mistaken conception for birth, and, therefore, have been very confused when certain ones, who seemingly started well, have ended up stillborn? Is there in the spiritual life, as in the natural life, a gestation period before birth when true Spirit-imparted life can fail and result in a stillbirth?

Is there not a time when new Christians are more like embryos, forming little by little in the womb, fed by the faith and vitality of others? Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul means when he writes to the Galatians, “My little children, I stand in doubt of you. I am travailing in birth again until Christ be formed in you,” {cf, Gal 4:19}.

If this be the case, then the critical moment is not when the Word first meets with faith, that is conception; that is when the possibility of new life arises. But the critical moment is when the individual is asked to obey the Lord at cost to himself, contrary to his own will and desire. When, in other words, the Lordship of Christ makes demand upon him and it comes into conflict with his own desire and purposes, his own plans and program. To put it in terms of what is used of the Lord Jesus in Chapter 5, we are called upon to learn obedience at the price of suffering. That is the true moment of birth. “If any man will come after me,” said Jesus, “let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me,” {Matt 16:24}. In grace, the Lord may make this appeal over the course of a number of years. But if it is ultimately refused, this is a stillbirth. The months, and even years, that may be spent in the enjoyment of conversion joy was simply Christian life in embryo. The new birth occurs, if at all, when we first cease from our own works, and rest in Jesus Christ. That is when the life of faith begins.

If this step is refused and the decision is made to reject the claims of Christ to Lordship and control, there follows, as Hebrews points out, a hardening, blinding process which, if allowed to continue, may lead such a one to drop out of church, and in effect, to renounce his Christian faith. Though only God knows the true condition of the heart, if that occurs, the case, he says, is hopeless.

Is this not what the Lord Jesus describes in that parable of the sower in Matthew 13? “Some seed,” he says, “fell on rocky ground” {cf, Matt 13:20} (not gravelly ground, but ground where there was an underlying layer of rock). These are those who receive the word with joy and endure for awhile, but when persecution or tribulation arises, immediately they fall away.

This brings us to the explanation for this hopelessness, this impossibility of return. “It is impossible to restore them if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.” Why is it that God will not permit them to go on in understanding more truth? It is simply because, as far as they are concerned, they are re-crucifying Christ. They are repudiating the principle of the cross. They become, as Paul terms it in Philippians, “enemies of the cross of Christ,” {Phil 3:18}.

From that point on their lives deteriorate and they shame the profession they once made.

Years ago, at the close of World War II, I frequently attended Saturday night meetings in the Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles, sponsored by Youth For Christ. A brilliant young man was the leader of the meetings and a frequent speaker at them. His name was Chuck Templeton. He had a gift for articulation and I heard him give several wonderful messages, simple, clear expositions of the meaning of the cross of Christ, and the offer of life in Christ Jesus. Saturday after Saturday I saw young people come down the aisles to receive Christ in those meetings. But some time after that Chuck Templeton entered a seminary, where he began to drift from his faith. He served for awhile as a national evangelist for his denomination. Finally, he quit the ministry entirely, and later openly and publicly renounced all faith in Jesus Christ, and went back into secular work. I do not know where he is now, but he no longer makes any Christian profession.

Is he a case like this? Only God knows the answer, but he could be. John tells us there are certain ones "who went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us," {cf, 1 Jn 2:19}. There is a conversion of the head that never reaches the heart.

This is Palm Sunday. This is the day we celebrate the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. I doubt if he would ever have called it a triumphal entry. He probably would have referred to it as a Day of Sorrows. That was the day when he left the donkey's back to go into the temple and, for the second time in his ministry, clean out the money-changers and the filth that had accumulated in his Father's house. It was then that he stopped the offerings of Israel and would not permit any man to offer sacrifice in the temple. Then he went up on the Mount of Olives and, looking out over the city, his heart broke in yearning over that wretched city, and he cried out those unforgettable words, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!" {Luke 13:34 RSV}. The tears coursing down his face, he wept for the city. One week later he was nailed to a cross outside that very city's gates.

Where was the multitude that greeted him when he came on the triumphal entry? Oh, they were there, but they were the ones who were now crying out, "Crucify him, crucify him! He said he was the Son of God, let him save himself!" {cf, Luke 23:35}

We have another picture of this apostasy in the case of Judas who for three years accompanied the Lord in his ministry, was sent out with the Twelve, and given power to heal, to cast out demons, to preach the gospel. But at the end, despite the manifestations of Spirit-given power, there was no faith and he turned and went out into the dark night of betrayal.

The last word on this is the illustration of its reality, the account of the two plots of land which have drunk in the rain. It is a very simple illustration, and it parallels the parable of the sower that our Lord told. There were two plots of ground, side by side, both containing good seed. The rain falls on each. One brings forth fruit but on the other the good seed sprouts but because it has no root, some of it dies and the thorns and thistles take over and choke out the rest. The rain pictures the Spirit-given blessings of Verses 4 and 5. What good does more rain do on ground like that? It can only mean more thorns and thistles. This is why God will not permit someone to go on in truth until he ceases his own works and depends on his. It is the principle of faith that alone will receive anything from God. The whole of Scripture testifies to it. For those who refuse to act on that, the end is to be burned.

Now the final figure and we are through, **the fruit growers:**

Though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation. For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. {Heb 6:9-12 RSV}

There were certain evidences that convinced the writer of this letter that the case was not one of embryo Christians being threatened with stillbirth. There had been a true birth, he thinks, for he has

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seen unmistakable evidence of love and concern for others, expressed in deeds of compassion. Not simply words but deeds, ministry, help to others. This is the test the Lord has said he will look for. "Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these my brethren [unconsciously, unknowingly, out of a heart filled with concern for me] you have done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:40}.

But as the writer thinks of these dear Hebrew Christians he says, "Your life is so weak and struggling. I am so anxious that you manifest an earnest, whole-souled, fervent hunger to learn and to act and to stay with it!"

That is the proven pattern of victory. That is what those in the past have done, those who "by faith and patience inherit the promises." The result will be the full assurance of hope. That is his theme for the next section.

- Do you live in uncertainty about your Christian faith?
- Are you constantly aware of a vague sense of guilt and questioning?
- Do you have times of real, troubling doubt?

- Are you still talking baby talk and drinking the milk of elementary things?

The word of the Holy Spirit from this great passage is, "Wake up! Get serious! Give full attention to this. Nothing will ever be more important. Begin to practice what you know, put it to work. And, as you do, you will discover that full assurance of hope that makes others stop and look. Our age, our poor, restless, troubled, bedeviled age, is hungering for the manifestation, the visible evidence, of the sons of God.

Prayer:

As before, Lord, these words have searched us, have found us out, have made us to see ourselves. We thank you for that. We do not want to live behind unreal facades, we do not want to be self-deceived. We thank you for telling us the truth even though it may hurt, for we know that it is always to the end that we may be healed. Grant that this may be true in the individual ministry of the Spirit to each life. In Christ's name, Amen.

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