

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: The Church
Number: 21
Text: Hebrews 5:11 – 14
Date: November 27, 2011 (A.M.)

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PERFECTING THE SAINTS (Part II)

It is impossible to over-stress the importance of knowing Scripture. When I speak of knowing Scripture, I am principally speaking of knowing the *doctrines* of Scripture. Old Bishop J.C. Ryle rightly wrote “That old enemy of mankind, the devil, has no more subtle instrument for ruining souls, than that of spreading false doctrine. “*A murderer and a liar from the beginning!*” Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour!” **Outside** the Church, he is ever persuading men to maintain sinful lives, and destructive superstitions. Human sacrifice to idols, gross revolting, cruel, worship of disgusting and abominable false deities, persecution, slavery, cannibalism, child murder, devastating religious wars – all these are a part of Satan’s handiwork, and the fruit of his suggestions! Like a pirate, his object is to “sink, burn, and destroy!” **Inside** the Church he is ever laboring to sow heresies, to propagate errors, to foster departures from the faith. If he cannot *prevent* the waters flowing from the Fountain of Life, he tries hard to *poison* them. If he cannot destroy the remedy of the Gospel, he strives to adulterate and corrupt it. No wonder that he is called “Apollyon, the destroyer.” The Divine Comforter of the Church, the Holy Spirit – has always employed one great weapon to oppose Satan’s plans. That weapon is the *Word of God*. The Word expounded and unfolded, the Word explained and opened up, the Word made clear to the head – and applied to the heart. The Word is the chosen weapon by which the devil must be confronted and confounded. The Word was the *sword* which the Lord Jesus wielded in His temptations. To every assault of the Tempter, He replied, “*It is written!*” The Word is the sword which His ministers must use in the present day, if they would successfully resist the devil. The Bible, faithfully and freely expounded – is the safeguard of Christ’s true Church.”¹ Whenever the church as a whole has neglected *doctrine* and emphasized other things (some of which have their proper place in the life of the church, i.e., social awareness, political involvement, music; while others are completely bogus, i.e., the pop-psychology that has invaded the church in the form of “Christian” counseling), the church has suffered. *Doctrine*, we are told, is of little importance – what is of importance is life. I submit that this is a serious distortion, and one that historically has done untold damage to the Church.² The Christian life is founded upon truth. The third question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism states: “What does the Bible primarily teach?” The answer is: “The Bible primarily teaches what man must believe about God and what God requires of man.” Note the order, first, what man is to believe and, second, what man is to do. Doctrine is the basis for conduct and life. “What, after all, is peculiar to Christianity is not the religious sentiment and its working, but its message of salvation – in a word, its doctrine. To be indifferent to doctrine is thus but another way of saying we are indifferent to Christianity.”³ The text before us underscores this point. The Hebrew Christians are reproved, not merely for their deficiency in *spiritual, practical, and experiential* knowledge of the Bible, but also for their dearth of *doctrinal* knowledge. This deficiency had an adverse effect on their Christian lives.

I. THE NEED FOR DOCTRINAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE CHURCH

The writer to the Hebrews digresses from his theme of Christ’s priesthood because it is “hard to explain,” DUSERMĒNEUTOS. This work means “difficult to explain or interpret.” This is not because of the nature of the subject or the writer’s inability to unfold this doctrine, but because of the condition of his readers. “It is noticeable here that a direct relationship is assumed between spiritual condition and understanding.”⁴

A. The Problem Stated

The writer states that the Hebrews have not made progress in their Christian lives because of their inability to understand doctrine. Sufficient time had elapsed so that they “ought” by now to be teachers. The word translated “ought” is *OPHEILONTES*. It implies an obligation and not just a desired characteristic. In other words, like Jesus’ parable of the man who planted a fig tree, and after

three years of looking for the expected fruit found none, expresses his sore disappointment. The writer to the Hebrews likewise expresses the same kind of disappointment.

B. The Problem Explained

There is an identifiable reason for their problem. “You are *slow* to learn” (NIV), “*dull* of hearing” (ESV, NASB). *NOTHROS* is a Greek word that comes from the combination of the negative *NĒ*, “no,” and *ŌTHEŌ*, “to push,” thus difficult to move. It was used by Homer in Classical Greek in reference to someone being “an ass, a slow beast.” Plato used the word to describe *stupid* students. The word occurs only here and in Hebrews 6:12 in the New Testament. Notice the stress on “hearing.” In Hebrews 4:2 the writer calls the gospel “The word of *hearing*” (ESV), “the message they *heard*” (NIV), “faith comes by *hearing*” (Romans 10:17). To hear, in this sense, means to diligently attend to so that what is heard is accepted and embraced (cf. James 1:19). John Owen aptly amplifies: “A neglect hereof the apostle chargeth the Hebrews withal. ‘You stir not up,’ saith he, ‘the faculties of your soul, your minds and understandings, to conceive aright and comprehend the things that are spoken unto you; you attend not unto them according to their importance and your concernment in them; you treasure not them up in your hearts, consciences, and memories, but let them slip out and forget them’ ”⁵

C. Their Personal Responsibility

Notice the writer’s emphasis, “You *have become* dull of hearing.” The perfect tense of the verb conveys the idea that their condition is the result of negligence.⁶ He expected these Christians to have made sufficient progress so as to be able to understand such doctrinal themes as the Priesthood of Christ.

II. THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ADVANCE IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Jonathan Edwards wrote, “God hath in the Scriptures plainly revealed it to be His will, that all Christians should diligently endeavor to excel in the knowledge of divine things. It is the revealed will of God, that Christians should not only have some knowledge of things of this nature, but that they should be *enriched with all knowledge* (1 Corinthians 1:4,5). Paul prayed this for the Christians at Philippi (Philippians 1:9); the Apostle Peter did the same (2 Peter 1:5).⁷

A. Their Condition

They are babies (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-5). The noun translated “babe” (KJV, NASB), “child” (ESV) is *NĒPIOS*, to which the Latin *INFANS* corresponds exactly (literally, one unable to speak: *NĒ* and *EPOS*). The rendering of the NIV “infant” properly conveys the original word. As infants, they have a very restricted diet – only *milk* – and are, therefore, not able to chew *solid food*. Why? What prevents them? Again, listen to John Owen: “It is not a natural imbecility of mind that he blames in them; nor such a weakness of understanding as they might by obnoxious unto for want of improvement by education; nor a want of learning and subtlety to search into things deep and difficult; for these, although they are all defects and hindrances in hearing, yet are they not crimes. But it is a moral negligence and inadvertency, a want of the discharge of their duty according to their ability in attending unto the means of their instruction, that he chargeth them withal. The natural dullness of our minds in receiving spiritual things is, it may be, included; but it is our depraved affections, casting us on a neglect of our duty that is condemned.”⁸

B. The Contrast

Note the appositions in vv. 11-13. (1) Infants – men; (2) milk – solid food; (3) children – teachers; (4) without experience – mature; (5) unskilled – trained. The *milk-Christian* is “unskilled” (ESV), *APEIROS*, lacking experience. The lack of skill is specifically linked with lack of practice, which in turn is traceable to a lack of interest. Solid food is for the mature. They are underdeveloped and, as a result, are not skilled in *the word of righteousness* (NASB) and in *teaching about righteousness* (NIV). To what does this refer? I concur with the judgment of Philip Hughes that this expression has a *theological* sense and “indicates the teaching about righteousness which is fundamental to the Christian faith, namely, the insistence on Christ as our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21) as opposed to self-righteousness or works-righteousness (cf. Philippians 3:9; Titus 3:5; Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:21ff; Luke 18:9ff).”⁹ Note how the mature are described: “Who because of practice have

their senses trained to discern good and evil” (NASB). The word translated *trained* in *GEGUMNASMENA*. Our word “gymnasium” is directly derived from this word. The word for senses is *AISTHĒTERIA*, literally the organs of perception. These denote those special faculties of the mind, which are used for understanding and judgment or discernment (cf. I Timothy 4:7; 2 Peter 2:14; Hebrews 12:11).

C. The Remedy for Their Condition

“They stand in need (“You have need,” *CHREIAN ECHETE*, describes a glaring fact – they have through their own neglect become infantile.) of someone to teach them again the first principles of God’s Word.” They had lost their understanding of the ABC’s of Christianity! This is the exact thought of the original Greek. “Even ‘the beginning,’ the simplest fruitful presentation of the Gospel, is complex. The divine message includes from the first distinct elements, which require growing together. It is one, not as monotonous, but in virtue of a vital unity.”¹⁰ In other words, they have to go back to square one. They have to “earnestly desire the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow” (I Peter 2:1).

CONCLUSION: “Alas,” bemoaned A. T. Robertson in his handling of this passage, “What a commentary on modern Christians.”¹¹ It is our slothfulness in hearing the Word that is the sole cause of our not maturing in our Christian faith. It is our own slothfulness that prevents us from profiting from the means of grace. “All our miscarriages,” wrote Owen, “with respect unto the gospel, are to be resolved into our own sloth, negligence and depraved affections. For it is not any one particular vice, fault or miscarriage in hearing, that the apostle intendeth and reproveth; but the want in general of such an attendance to the Word as to be edified thereby, proceeding from corrupt affections and neglect of duty.”¹²

Listen to the words of Edwards:

Divine truths not only concern ministers, but are of infinite importance to all Christians. It is not with the doctrines of divinity as it is with the doctrines of philosophy and other sciences. These last are generally speculative points, which are of little concern in human life; and it very little alters the case as to our temporal or spiritual interests, whether we know them or not. Philosophers differ about them, some being of one opinion, and others of another. And while they are engaged in warm disputes about them, others may well leave them to dispute among themselves, without troubling their heads much about them; it being of little concern to them, whether the one or the other be in the right. – But it is not thus in matters of divinity. The doctrines of this nearly concern every one. They are about those things, which relate to every man’s eternal salvation and happiness. The common people cannot say, Let us leave these matters to ministers and divines; let them dispute them out among themselves as they can; they concern not us: for they are of infinite importance to every man. Those doctrines, which relate to the essence, attributes, and subsistencies of God, concern all; as it is of infinite importance to common people, as well as to ministers, to know what kind of being God is. For He is a being who hath made us all, “in whom we live, and move, and have our being;” who is the Lord of all; the Being to whom we are all accountable; is the last end of our being, and the only fountain of our happiness.

The doctrines also which relate to Jesus Christ and his mediation, his incarnation, his life and death, his resurrection and ascension, his sitting at the right hand of the Father, his satisfaction and intercession, infinitely concern common people as well as divines. They stand in as much need of this Saviour, and of an interest in his person and offices, and the things which he hath done and suffered, as ministers and divines. – The same may be said of the doctrines which relate to the manner of a sinner’s justification, or the way in which he becomes interested in the mediation of Christ. They equally concern all; for all stand in equal necessity of justification before God.¹³

Let us heed the words of Scripture. Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21).

ENDNOTES

¹ http://gracegems.org/23/Ryle_strange_teachings.htm

² I would urge a reading of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 1946) and *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Eerdmans, 1947). Machen provides a devastating critique of the mentality that seeks to make Christianity doctrineless by declaring, "Christianity is life, not doctrine!" This mentality is not the exclusive property of liberals. Jack Deere, a zealous advocate of the "Signs and Wonders" movement that is making headway among many Evangelicals, takes a very similar approach. In his book *Surprised By the Power of the Spirit* (Zondervan, 1993), Deere warns his readers about the dangers of putting the Bible above Jesus (p. 188). Jesus, he tells us, "is not a doctrine, a theology... Jesus is a person, a real person" (p. 191). Of course Jesus is a person – but what makes the Jesus of the Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses (they believe that Jesus is a person who is alive, etc.) different from the Jesus of historic Christianity? Deere has fallen prey to an unbiblical mysticism that places his experience above the Bible. He contends that God speaks directly to him and, despite his denials to the contrary, the authority of the Scriptures is, as a result, seriously weakened.

³ *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield II*, ed. John E. Meeter (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 226.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1983), p. 133

⁵ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews IV* (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 549

⁶ The perfect tense implies a process, but views that process as having reached its consummation and existing in a finished state, c.f. H.E. Dana and J.R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (MacMillan, 1955), p. 200.

⁷ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards II*, ed. E. Hickman (rpt. The Manner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 161⁷

⁸ Owen, op. cit

⁹ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 191

¹⁰ B.F. Wescott, *The Epistles to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 133

¹¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament V* (Broadman, 1933), p. 371.

¹² Owen, op. cit., p. 553

¹³ Edwards, op. cit., p. 159, 160.