

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series: Exposition of Romans
Number: 171
Text: Romans 12:1,2; Hebrews 5:11-14; Jude 3
Date: Dec 2, 2012 (am)

Pastor/Teacher
Gary L.W. Johnson

A MIND IN THE SAD STATE OF STAGNATION

Recently, Paul Washer made this painfully true observation, "One of the greatest crimes committed by this present Christian generation is its neglect of the gospel, and it is from this neglect that all our other maladies spring forth. The lost world is not so much gospel hardened as it is gospel ignorant because many of those who proclaim the gospel are also ignorant of its most basic truths. The essential themes that make up the vary core of the gospel – the justice of God, the radical depravity of man, the blood atonement, the nature of true conversion, and the biblical basis of assurance – are absent from too many pulpits. Churches reduce the gospel message to a few creedal statements, teach that conversion is a mere human decision, and pronounce assurance of salvation over anyone who prays the sinner's prayer"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 and political issues, the role of music; while others are completely bogus, e.g., the pop-psychology and therapeutic gospel of self-esteem that has invaded the church)², 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. 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 This is especially the case in our day and time. Our *post-Christian* world displays open hostility to doctrinal distinctives that are essential to the Gospel. "The claim of Christianity is that it holds universal truth to which, in the long run, all particular, all lesser knowledge will prove to have a subsidiary, contributory status. This claim is unacceptable in the world of the media, which is imbued with post-Christian presuppositions. The claim of Christianity is that it is rooted in an eternal order overarching the limited events that take place within finitude. The post-Christian mind cannot bear such pretensions. But it does not therefore find it convenient to try to dispose directly of Christianity. The post-Christian mind is determined rather to recategorize Christianity, to shift it bodily from its transcendent moorings and to site it alongside systems of opinion untainted by authoritative supernaturalism. Situated thus, it sits alongside agendas that happily allow themselves to be overarched by the one real contemporary imperative which is presented as "freedom of thought." And, as now exploited, the expression "freedom of thought" is just another form of words to define total absence of conviction."⁴ Heb. 5:11-14 underscores the importance of knowing the doctrinal content of the Christian faith. If we ignore this, we are simply going to find our minds shaped and conformed to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2) and will *never* be able to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (II Cor. 10:5) - instead, we will be taken captive by the world's deceptive arguments. (Col. 2:8). The result will be instability (II Peter 3:17) and being tossed back and forth by waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (Eph. 4:14).

I. THE NEED FOR DOCTRINAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The writer to the Hebrews digresses from his theme of Christ's priesthood because it is "hard to explain," DUSERMENEUTOS. This word 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."⁵

- 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" (KJV, NASB). NOTHROS is a Greek word that comes from the combination of the negative NE, "no," and OTHEO, "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" (KJV), "the message they heard" (ESV), "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 souls, 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.'"⁶
- C. **Their Personal Responsibility** Notice the writer's emphasis, "You have become dull of hearing." The perfect tense conveys the idea that their condition is the result of negligence.⁷ 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)."⁸

- A. **Their Condition** They are babies (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-5). The noun translated "babe" (ESV, NASB), "child" (ESV) is NEPIOS, to which the Latin INFANS corresponds exactly (literally, one unable to speak: NE 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 be 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."⁹
- B. **The Contrast** Note the contrasts in vv. 11-13. (1) Infants--men; (2) milk--solid food; (3) infants--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), in teaching about righteousness (NIV). To what does this refer? I concur with the judgement 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)."¹⁰ Note how the mature

are described: "Who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (NASB). The word translated trained is GEGUMNASMENA. Our word "gymnasium" is directly derived from this word. The word for senses is AISTHETERIA, 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 need¹¹ 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. Calvin comments, "This reproof contains a goodly measure of goads to prod the Hebrews out of their laziness. He says that it is absurd, and they ought to be ashamed of it, that they are still in the primary classes when they should be teachers. You are the people, he says, who ought to be the master of others, but in fact, you are not even pupils capable of grasping ordinary teaching. You do not yet properly understand the first rudiments of Christianity. In order to drive home the shame even more, he use the words *first principles*, just as one speaks of the alphabet. We must learn from the whole of life, because the truly wise man is the one who knows how far short he comes of any complete understanding. But we must progress in our learning, so that we do not always stick at the first beginnings."¹² 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ Thomas Oden, has written, "There is a fantasy abroad that the Christian community can have a center without a circumference. Since we gather around Jesus, it is argued, it is our center, not our boundaries that matter. But this is the persistent illusion of compulsive hyper-tolerantism. A community with no boundaries can neither have a center nor be a community...The circle of faith cannot identify its center without recognizing its margins."¹⁵ Today we have spread across the evangelical landscape a cacophony of voices all claiming to be faithfully proclaiming the Biblical good news to modern society. We have those who emphasize civil religion, accenting the theme that America needs to get back to her *Christian roots*. Change is sought primarily in terms of political activism. Others, carried away with claims made by Charismatic extremists, make outrageous pretensions to divine inspiration and contend that barking and howling like animals or laughing uncontrollably are sure signs of the Holy Spirit's activity. A still larger segment of evangelicalism is obsessed with marketing charts, graphs and numerical growth. This usually goes hand in hand with a therapeutic approach to ministry. This emphasizes inner healing, sees sin in terms of sickness and dysfunctionality. "The Bible," as British theologian Peter Toon has recently commented, "is used as a support base for psychological theories."¹⁶ The real danger of twisting the Scriptures (II Pet. 3:16) to fit some preconceived notion is an ever-present reality. "Give me understanding," prayed the Psalmist, "and I shall live" (Psalm 119:144). Five times between verses 144 and 159 the theme of life is accented. The Hebrew word translated *life is* CHAYAH. It means not merely to stay alive, but to enjoy a rich and meaningful life, one that is strong and full of vitality. This thought is echoed in the words of Jesus: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). What is the link between this kind of life and understanding? "The understanding," wrote Thomas Manton, "is the great wheel of the soul, and guide of the whole man."¹⁷ It is true that the rest of our faculties follow the dictates and decisions of the understanding. In the quaint words of the King James translation of Proverbs 23:7, "as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." The quality of our life is dependent then on how we think. How do we naturally think? The Bible describes the natural condition of the human mind with terms like: foolish (Titus 3:3); ignorant (I Peter 1:14); futile (Ephesians 4:17); depraved (Romans 1:28); and likened to darkness (Acts 26:18; Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18; Colossians 1:13). This language is used to describe how men think in reference to the true God and spiritual realities. It is not simply a question of intelligence, for we recognize that fallen man can use his mind to accomplish many things. John Owen observed: "Be men otherwise and in other things never so wise, knowing, learned, and skilful, in spiritual things they are dark, blind, ignorant, unless they are renewed in the spirit of their minds by the Holy

Spirit."¹⁸ Psalm 10:4 says of the wicked, "in all his thought there is no room for God." Who are these wicked people? The wicked are unbelievers, which is what we all once were. Wickedness is indeed a harsh word. We tend to think that that word is reserved for a special class of people like a Hitler or a Stalin. If that is the way you think, then perhaps you have never considered how great is the weight of sin. John Howe captured the essence of the matter when he wrote, "a wicked man's life is nothing else but a continual forsaking of God, or departing from him."¹⁹ The Psalmist prays for God's assistance in order to understand. Why did he want understanding? In order that he might know and do the will of God. How often the question is asked, "How can I know the will of God for my life? This was the Psalmist's concern. "The only fear of his heart," remarks G. Campbell Morgan, "is that he may not understand the revelation. This fear drives him to prayer that he may understand."²⁰ The reformers spoke of the clarity of Scripture. (PERSPICUITAS SCRIPTURAE—perspicuity refers to clarity of thought. This is called one of the traditional attributes of Scripture.) By this the Reformers meant that the essential content of the Bible is clear enough to be understood easily. Biblical Christianity, therefore, is not an esoteric religion. The Bible is not a book that requires some sort of mystic insight or special intellectual powers or pneumatic gift in order to understand its basic message. "The Bible," writes R.C. Sproul, "speaks of God in meaningful patterns of speech. Some of those patterns may be more difficult than others, but they are not meant to be nonsense statements that only a guru can fathom."²¹ There are, however, two senses in which the word understand can be used in reference to the Scriptures: (1) we can know something of the meaning of the texts of Scripture without (2) having an understanding of the message. Note the words of John Owen: "There is an especial work of the Spirit of God on the minds of men, communicating spiritual wisdom, light, and understanding unto them, necessary unto their discerning and apprehending aright the mind of God in His word, and the understanding of the mysteries of heavenly truth contained therein. And I shall add hereunto, that among all the false and foolish imaginations that ever the Christian religion was attacked or disturbed withal, there never was any, there is none more pernicious than this, that the mysteries of the Gospel are so exposed unto the common reason and understanding of men as that they may know them and comprehend them in a useful manner, and according to their duty, without the effectual aid and assistance of the Spirit of God."²² We are *all* called to search the Scriptures, to apply our hearts to wisdom, and to study to show ourselves approved. If we don't, we will remain children in our understanding, subject to being tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of false doctrine (Eph. 4:14).

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul Washer, *The Gospel's Power & Message* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2012) p. VIII.

² William Kirk Kilpatrick in his critically acclaimed *Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology* (Thomas Nelson, 1983), demonstrates the massive inroads pop-psychology has made into practically every aspect of society, including its pervasive influence on the Evangelical church.

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

⁴ Harry Blamires, *The Post-Christian Mind: Exposing Its Destructive Agenda* (Vine Books, 1999), p. 146.

⁵ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1983), p. 133.

⁶ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews IV* (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 549.

⁷ 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.

⁸ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards II*, ed. E. Hickman (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 161.

⁹ Owen, op. cit.

¹⁰ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 191.

¹¹ "You have need," CHREIAN ECHETE, describes a glaring fact--they have through their own neglect become infantile.

¹² *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries XII* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 67.

¹³ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament V* (Broadman, 1933), p. 371.

¹⁴ Owen, op. cit., p. 553

¹⁵ *Christianity Today* (March 4, 1996), editorial page.

¹⁶ P. Toon, *The End of Liberal Theology: Contemporary Challenge to Evangelicalism* (Crossways, 1995), p. 215.

¹⁷ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton III* (rpt. Maranatha, 1973), p. 423.

¹⁸ *The Works of John Owen III* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 244. C.H. Spurgeon warns, "Where there is much traffic of bad thinking, there will be much mire and dirt; every wave of wicked thought adds something to the corruption which rots upon the shore of life. It is dreadful to think, that a vile imagination, once indulged, gets the keys of our minds, and can get in again very easily, whether we will or no, and can so return as to bring seven other spirits with it more wicked than itself; and what may follow, no one knows." *John Ploughman's Talks* (rpt. Baker, 1976), p. 52.

¹⁹ *The Works of the Rev. John Howe I* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 422.

²⁰ G. Campbell-Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Revell, 1917), p. 229.

²¹ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (IVP, 1977), p. 17.

²² *The Works of John Owen IV* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 124.