

# Pressing on to Maturity

## *Milk and Solid Food*

- <sup>11</sup> About this we have much to say, and it is **hard to explain**, since you have become **dull of hearing**.
- <sup>12</sup> 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**. You need **milk**, not **solid food**,
- <sup>13</sup> for everyone who lives on **milk** is **unskilled in the word of righteousness**, since he is a child.
- <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for **the mature**, for those who have **their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil**.
- <sup>6:1</sup> 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**,
- <sup>2</sup> and **of instruction about washings**, the **laying on of hands**, the **resurrection of the dead**, and **eternal judgment**.
- <sup>3</sup> And this we will do **if God permits**."

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

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## Milk and Meat

THERE ARE THREE STAGES a Christian can find themselves in with relation to the Bible and its teachings.

The first is **ignorance**. The second is **immaturity**. The third is **maturity**. In the broadest American church culture, we can easily stereotype that the first of these is probably the biggest problem today. In a recent blog, Al Mohler described this ignorance as **illiteracy**. He explains how according to Gallup, “**Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don’t read it. And because they don’t read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates.**” Barna said the same thing, “**Increasingly, America is biblically illiterate.**” As an example, Mohler cites how 82% of Americans believe that “**God helps those who help themselves**” is a Bible verse, but those who identified as Christians came in at only 1% better!<sup>1</sup>

Now, obviously a true Christian cannot be completely ignorant of everything in the Bible, because that would mean that they are not actually Christians. Christians have

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<sup>1</sup> Al Mohler, “The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It’s Our Problem,” *Albert Mohler*, Jan 20, 2016. <http://www.albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/>; last accessed Jan 27, 2016. The *wiki* on this phrase is fascinating. The origin of the phrase is sometimes attributed to Benjamin Franklin, though it seems to have roots in Aesop and the Greek poets. There are Bible verses that can be read in a general way along these lines, but not in terms of salvation. Only in terms of “reaping what you sow.” The Quran actually says, “Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.” (Surah 13:11). So one could probably make the argument that the idea is more Islamic than Christian! It also goes deeper into Barna’s research and explains that 75% of teens believe that this is the Bible’s central message, and even though it isn’t even in the Bible, it is constantly cited as one of its most widely known verses.

to believe *something* in order to be Christians. Ours is a faith rooted in certain tenants and doctrines. One is not born a Christian. One becomes a Christian through assenting to believe certain things over other things.

In any single local church, it is possible if not probable that you will always find a mixture of these three kinds of people. It is the latter two that we are concerned with today. Some Christians are mature, and others are immature. But **what does it mean to be a mature Christian** and **what does it mean to be an immature Christian**. Then, once we know, what are we supposed to do about it?

Many years ago I asked a pastor, “**Do you think we could maybe have a series of sermons on some of the more difficult doctrines of the Bible?**” This was in back in the day when I really wanted some help thinking through things like **predestination**. His response was, “**We can’t really do that here. The people just aren’t ready for that yet. That’s meat. Our people still need milk.**” From the time I first arrived at that church to the time the pastor left, every sermon I can remember was a variation on a gentle teaching of morals to try and be better people the next week, by

God's grace of course. Thus, *on his own definition*, the people never got meat. The banquet was always withheld.

I bring this story up because the idea of milk and meat (“solid food”) comes from three passages in the NT, one of which is part of our passage today:

- Paul: “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.” (1Co 3:1-3).
- Peter: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1Pe 2:2-3).
- Hebrews (Luke?): “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. You need milk, not solid food” (Hebrew 5:12).

The Hebrews text is **the first part of a longer literary unit**, a unit which (perhaps ironically, given that we are supposed

to be talking about “milk”) contains one of the most controversial if not also difficult passages in the Bible. This unit is a kind of parenthesis of sorts between a larger discussion of Jesus as a great and better high priest. And that, as you recall was itself a discussion that began even earlier in the letter, but was interrupted by another parenthesis of warning the hearers to enter into God’s rest. Both of these parenthesis might be called “warnings” to the Christians. And believe it or not, these the first warning passage is actually important and helpful in helping us interpret this second, more difficult one, as we will see today and in coming weeks.

Our unit goes from **Hebrews 5:11-6:20**.<sup>2</sup> Today we will be looking at its introductory verses: **5:11-6:3**. It will be important to keep in mind **as we study the whole unit** to see, understand, and remember that **its theme** is the necessity for **pressing on to maturity as believers**.<sup>3</sup> “Solid food is for the mature ... Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity...” (**Heb 5:14-6:1**). As such, its concern is our **sanctification**. Maturity is about

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<sup>2</sup> This can be further divided into 5:11-6:12 and 6:13-20.

<sup>3</sup> David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 345.

sanctification. Therefore, immaturity would be about the lack of sanctification. In fact, one way to describe sanctification is, “Becoming mature in the Christian Faith.” But what does this mean? Perhaps there are different thoughts among us here today on the answer to this. Perhaps what we will find when we look at the text itself may just surprise us all.

## Dull or Sharp of Hearing

As I look at the passage, I find four traits or characteristics that exemplify the immature and mature Christian. If one trait is explicitly stated in the chapter (let’s say the immature person), then its opposite would be implicit (for the other). We find the first of these four traits in the introductory verse. This is a verse that seems in some ways to come out of thin air. He has been talking about Melchizedek and Christ and the priesthood, when suddenly he says, “About this we have much to say” (Heb 5:11).<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> “About which” can also be translated, “concerning *whom*” as the relative pronoun οὗ can mean “who, which, that, what.” This is curious because “we have much to say” in the ESV leaves untranslated, “the *logos*.” The YLT reads, “we have much discourse and of hard explanation to

other words, he isn't going to say it. Not just ... (and this is very important) ... not just *yet*. In other words, he is going to say it. But before he does, he has to say something else. This is how I want to frame our thoughts now, even as Hebrews uses it to frame its own.

This is important because since he is going to talk about milk and meat, we need to realize that our passage is only a digression. He isn't going to let Christian immaturity stop him from saying what he wants to say. And what he wants to say is that which is able to move them on to maturity. This, I believe, deserves a comment.

You see, o

Over the years, I've heard other people say the same kind of thing my pastor said, that people aren't ready for "meat," and therefore they should continue to be fed milk. The thinking seems to be that if we give them more milk, then they will move on to maturity and suddenly, miraculously, be able to start eating meat. That isn't exactly

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say (*legein*).” It is very awkward in English to say this, of course. *Logos* here can certainly have the sense of “many words.” But having just talked about the *logos* and, as I argued, it has a double meaning of both the Scripture and the Son, it is curious to say the least, especially given that what he will go on “to say” is all about the Son!

right. In order to eat meat, you have to be introduced to the meat.

Furthermore, and I think this needs to be said as well, something has always struck me as suspicious when I hear someone say that a thing like [predestination](#) is “meat” (and I’ve heard that on more than one occasion as well, and [at the end of the sermon](#) you will understand why I’m using this topic as the example of what people want to call “meat”). My guess is that most who say this usually don’t like the doctrine in the first place, or at least they don’t like the controversy it generates. Yes, it can be difficult to work through, but I really don’t think that is because the doctrine is hard to understand. God predestines. God chooses. God decides what he will do with this world and with men. That isn’t hard to understand. But it does make some people [angry](#). Yet when considering whether something is milk or meat, we must not confuse something that is difficult to understand with something that makes people mad.

But let’s return to the text. Something has come into the Apostle’s mind. It is based on what he has just said about Melchizedek, but it is also related to what he has just said about their need to enter God’s rest. He says, “[You have](#)



become dull of hearing” (Heb 5:11). This is the first characteristic of their immaturity.

The natural question becomes why have they become dull of hearing? The verses that follow help explain the answer. But what he said in the previous warning also needs to be coupled with that answer. When we interpret them together, we see something that far too many Christians fail to grapple with as they consider what it means to be mature and immature. We will come to this in due time.

Being dull of hearing is a sign of Christian immaturity. We may be tempted at this point to move ahead and answer the question, but we need to see the last important part of vs. 11. It says, “it is hard to explain.” What needs to be seen is that it is hard to explain *because* they have become dull of hearing. I don’t think this rules out the idea that it really is deep water that he is about to have us go swimming in and therefore, in some sense it is hard to explain. Yet, clearly the focus here is that it is hard to explain because they are dull of hearing.

I’ve seen this before, and it can be difficult to hear. Sometimes, what people pass off as being impossible to understand is really only difficult because there is some

moral problem going on beneath the surface. We've already talked about it with something like predestination. Someone doesn't like that idea because they want to have a say in the matter. Therefore, they say it is hard to understand. Or how about a person who comes to a church, a church that they have a problem with for one reason or another (they don't like the music, the pastor has said something that makes them mad, they don't like the person sitting in front of them, they don't like the God they are hearing about, etc.), and suddenly, they are not able "to hear" a sermon because their attitude is wrong. It can be very hard to explain something to someone who doesn't want to hear what you are talking about in the first place. That is what seems to be going on here with the original audience of Hebrews. Therefore, you need to take stock of your own heart when you find yourself frustrated at what you are hearing. It could certainly be the way a thing is presented. No question. But it could also be that plenty of people are "getting it" around you, and you aren't because something is going on in your own heart. But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

## Teachers or Taught?

So being dull of hearing is a mark of the immature Christian, and therefore being sharp of hearing is a mark of the mature person. The **next three traits** will all enhance our understanding of this. Let's turn to the **second** identifying mark of the immature Christian. They “**need someone to teach them**” (5:13). Or, to put it the opposite way, the second mark of a mature Christian is that they “**ought to be teachers**” (Heb 5:12).

Before getting into this, understand that this isn't saying that all mature Christians have specific gifts of teaching. Clearly, some are more gifted at this than are others. So for the Apostle this isn't some kind of passive-aggressive way of guilting people into teaching Sunday School. Yet, every Christian is a teacher, because every Christian has non-Christians that they are to be engaging in their lives. You have children, neighbors, co-workers, friends, relatives, and other people in your lives who need to know Jesus. And among Christians, there are old men and young men, old women and young women, mentors and the mentored with many needs. At some basic level, that means you have to be

able to others them about Christ. And to do this means you are teaching.<sup>5</sup>

But his focus here is on **what they ought to be teaching** at the very least. There is a content of doctrine here and it is called several different things. It is called in this same sentence, “**the basic principles of the oracles of God**” (5:12). What does that mean? A couple of verses later he has a parallel phrase, “**the elementary doctrine of Christ**” (6:1). Are these the same thing?

They are very close. Let’s see how. **First**, take note of the language used to describe these things. I find it more than interesting. The “**elementary doctrine**” is two words. The first is *arche*. It is used in Genesis 1:1 LXX for “**the beginning.**” This is followed by the *logos* (doctrine). This is the *logos* “of Christ.” So it is literally, “**having left the word of the beginning of the Christ.**” This language takes us right back to the double edged sword of the word of God, but also to the very beginning of the book where he spent all that time explaining how the Son is superior from the OT, and this included allusions to Genesis 1.

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<sup>5</sup> This specific reference to them being teachers may take on added significance if one of the primary groups of people the letter was written to was converted Jewish priests. Of all people they ought to be teachers, yet they were lacking the maturity to teach anyone.

Curiously, *arche* is also in the other verse, but it is untranslated by the ESV.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they translate the word *stoicheia* (principles). This is a word that is closely identified with the supernatural in **Galatians (4:3, 9)**, entities that teach the church wicked doctrines. Here, it refers to the beginning of the oracles (*logios*) of God. And given the other phrase, these oracles seem to refer to the Christ and what it means to be a Christian. Such knowledge is supernatural knowledge from God about Jesus.

**The second** is by looking at the six specific things that are mentioned in **Heb 6:1-2**. He actually gives us a list:

### **The Elementary Doctrine(s) of Christ**

- Repentance from dead works
- Faith toward God
- Instruction about washings (*baptismos*)
- Laying on of hands
- Resurrection of the dead
- Eternal judgment

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<sup>6</sup> It literally reads, “You have need that one teach you what *are* the elements of the beginning of the oracles of God” (Heb 5:12 YLT).

We might be able to divide these into **three groups of two**.<sup>7</sup> They seem to take on a temporal significance of past, present, and the future. Repentance and faith would be what happens at **justification**. Baptism and laying on of hands would be related to **sanctification**. Resurrection and judgment then deal with **glorification**. The beginning, the middle, and the end. In other words, these are the basics of the Christian life. Let's look at the individual items and then do some reflecting.

### *Repentance from Dead Works*

What would repentance from dead works mean? The word "**repentance**" (*metanoia*) is essentially a "**turning**."<sup>8</sup> You turn away from a thing. "**Return to me**," says God in **Zechariah 1:3**. Here it is a turning "from dead works." Dead works would seem to be **any kind of good work that you think makes you right with God**. They are dead works because they result in death (this could be physical, but in

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<sup>7</sup> David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 341. John Owen sees four rather than six items, as he considers the middle two an explanation of the first two. I think it is better to be six things grouped into three sets of two.

<sup>8</sup> People will often say that it is a "changing of mind," but that is only part of what repentance must be. It is not merely inward, but also outward. The outward turning is "toward" God. It is returning to him as Lord. For a good study see Mark J. Boda, "*Return to Me*": *A Biblical Theology of Repentance*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 35, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015).

the sense used here it must at least be spiritual). Taken the way most do, “God helps those who help themselves” could be the perfect mantra for someone who believes that works make one favorable toward God. And of course, it is utterly wrong.

Something that might be of help in understanding not only this first phrase, but the other five as well is that, “Each of the six articles ... is related to the high priestly christology developed in the subsequent chapters” and that this makes all six items distinctively Christian in nature.”<sup>9</sup> This confirms the Christian nature of these six things. “Dead works” comes up later in the book and there it refers to “external regulations associated with the Levitical priesthood in the earthly sanctuary” (Heb 9:10, 14).<sup>10</sup> And thus, from the perspective of a Jewish priest (who again may have been a primary audience of this letter) who dealt with things like instructions about washings/baptisms or the laying on of hands, these could have been stumbling blocks to faith in Christ. In fact, we know that the OT law was very much a stumbling block to Jews all over the ancient world,

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<sup>9</sup> See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, vol. 47A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 140.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

as they trusted in law and their own law-keeping rather than in Christ alone. Many still do this today, be it with the OT or the NT or laws that they make up themselves.

### *Faith Toward God*

That leads to **the opposite of repentance from dead works**. If you turn away from something, you have to turn to something else. That is what **faith** is. Faith is a turning to God. Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see. These things are the promises of God in Christ. Faith is believing God as Abraham did, which was credited to him as righteousness. Here, then, faith and dead works are contrasted as complementary yet opposite things that must take place at the beginning of a Christian's life.

There will be much more to say about faith later on in Hebrews. It devotes a very long chapter to this topic. It is a major theme of this book, just as it is a major theme of the NT. There are reasons why the Reformation made *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) its chief article and the doctrine upon which they believed the whole church stands or falls. It is because the opposite of it is dead works. It is the opposite of the innate human view of religion, which is to save



ourselves. It is what makes Christianity different from all other religions on the planet. It is basic, elementary doctrine about Christ.

### *Instructions about Baptisms*

As said a moment ago, two things that an OT priest would have known very well were the **various kinds of washings** in the law and **the laying on of hands**. These belonged to their lives *as priests*. As for these “washings,” our word is *baptismon*: **baptisms**. Though the ESV seems allergic to the word here (hence “washings”), many translations have “baptisms”. Indeed, there were baptisms in the OT. Though almost no Christian today realizes this, any Jew back then certainly would have. Where do people think the Christian idea originated? John and Jesus didn’t just make it all up.<sup>11</sup>

The Jews put water or blood on everything. Based on Jesus’ own statement that he was baptized not only in the Jordan but also on the cross (**Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:5**), I view the sprinkling of blood, the sprinkling of water, and the washing and immersions in water in the OT all as various

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<sup>11</sup> Nor did the Qumran community by the Dead Sea, which is sometimes traced to be the fountain of Christian baptism. See my book *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism* for more.

kinds of baptisms. When this comes up again later in the book (**Heb 9:10**), it will talk about “various baptisms” which were “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”

The priest himself had to undergo various water baptisms. One occurred at his ordination (**Ex 29:4**). (He was also sprinkled in blood later on in the ritual). But each time he entered the tabernacle, he had to be re-baptized (i.e. wash his body). Either could have become a “dead work.” Yet, in Christianity, it actually becomes the first living work (if I might call it that), in that baptism is the first act of obedience in the NT once people profess faith in Christ. It isn't living in that it leads to life, but that it comes from new life. Indeed, baptism and confessing the faith are often equated in the NT and in the early church.

### *Laying on of Hands*

As with baptisms, **the laying on of hands** would have been very familiar to a Jew and especially a priest—and we mustn't forget that this warning comes right in the middle of Jesus' as our High Priest. The Christian practice of laying on of hands, especially right there at conversion, would, like

baptism, have originated in the OT, though it was then adopted to life in light of Christ. The priests had to do things like lay their hands on the sacrifices (cf. **Ex 29:10**, etc.). It was their priestly duty. It symbolized the impartation of the Spirit but also the setting apart for a special work. But also, just like baptism, they had hands laid on them by the community when they were ordained into their Levitical service (**Num 8:10**). Hence, both baptism and the laying on of hands take us right back to life lived by faith in Christ. These must not be understood as dead works in the Christian life, but as works that spring from faith in Christ.

### *Resurrection of the Dead and Eternal Judgment*

The final two doctrines deal with **the future**. The first is the **resurrection of the Dead**. The second is **eternal judgment**. We find both in **the earliest creeds** of the faith. In the Apostle's Creed for instance we confess that Jesus "**will come again to judge the living and the dead**," and we also confess that we believe in "**the resurrection of the body**." (Baptism and Faith, i.e. "we believe..." are also in the creeds). The Jews argued about both. Christians confess both.

When we die, we do not believe that this is the end of life. But when we die and leave our bodies, we also do not believe that this is a natural state. Instead, we believe in the resurrection of our bodies in the age to come. This becomes a major theme of 1 Corinthians. Paul says that this is **our great hope**, especially because it is tied to our union with Christ who was himself raised from the dead as the first fruit.

Curiously, this **resurrection takes place on the day of judgment**. When Christ judges the dead—as we saw in **Heb 4:13** is the task assigned to him, he will give to each a new body which will then be assigned to heaven or hell. But this again takes us back to faith and dead works. For this judgment, though it will be a judgment of our works, is not a judgment that is rooted first and foremost in our works. Rather, what is judged is whether our works were done in order to gain God's favor or because we believed God is favorably disposed to all who trust in Christ, rather than their works, alone.

Obviously, much more could be said about each of these doctrines, and given that they all come up again and again in this book, we will say more about them in the future. But we want to get back to our topic of **maturity**. These

doctrines are things that are given to the *immature*. They are “elementary,” “basic principles.” They teach us about the very essence of the Christian life and belief. They move us from ignorance and illiteracy to immaturity.

A third way of thinking about the content of what they ought to be teaching is to think about it as “milk.” We talked about milk earlier. Hebrews uses this language to describe these elementary doctrines. In the context of all three NT passages, the milk drinkers are “babes.” This is **not a compliment**, but **neither is it a putdown**. Peter wants them to continue to yearn for the pure milk of the word. So drinking spiritual milk *is* a good thing. Paul and Hebrews both want people to move on to maturity. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive. People continue to drink milk throughout their lives, but they also eat real food. It is only in a Peter Pan culture where everyone wants to stay a little boy that this becomes a bad thing. Forty-year-old men don’t continue to just drink milk. The thought is actually disgusting.

Something we see here about the milk is that the content is basic doctrine. All of these things are things **you believe and put into practice**. The way I like to help people

understand this is by taking the outline of any of Paul's letters and see how he develops it. He always starts with doctrine. Sometimes, that doctrine includes things like predestination or God's sovereignty. In fact, something similar to it is found even in our passage today.

For example, “go on” to maturity (6:1) “should be taken as passive [verb], suggesting God as the one who moves the readers along to the desired goal. Christians are dependent upon God and his grace to enable them to press forward to maturity.”<sup>12</sup> This isn't something to save until a person becomes mature. It is something that feeds them while they are still new born infants in the faith. What is interesting is that in almost every letter of Paul, he puts the “doing” at the end, after he gives you the doctrine. The idea is that the doctrine helps you “do.” Good theology is supposed to lead to good practice. If this is right, then the milk would be the very things that so many people think are the solid food. And so to not talk about them isn't merely to deprive them of food, but of even the milk of God's word. No wonder we have churches full of biblically ignorant and illiterate people.

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<sup>12</sup> David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 340.

They haven't even gotten to immaturity yet.

## Distinguishing Good from Evil

The text gives a third trait of an immature Christian and it is also related to the milk. In all three milk passages in the NT, the Apostle immediately starts talking about the behavior of those who drink milk. Their immaturity is not merely doctrinal. It is also ethical. In Hebrews, the basic things that they know are not leading them to wisdom and righteousness. Notice that it says, “Everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness” (Heb 5:13). You might think, this must mean they don't know the basics of the faith. It is an educational problem. But as we have seen, they do know them! They already know the six things we saw earlier.

The key to understanding this phrase is the word “unskilled.” What does this mean? It is put in parallel in the next verse with the mature “who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (14). So one is unskilled in the word and the other by constant use is able to distinguish good from evil.

Do you remember the **Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**? Do you remember when our parents ate of its fruit? It said, “**You will be like gods [KJV; God in the ESV] knowing good and evil**” (**Gen 3:5, 22**).<sup>13</sup> What does this mean? We let Scripture interpret Scripture. It says in 2 Samuel, “**And your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest,' for my lord the king is like the angel of God to discern (lit. to hear) good and evil. The LORD your God be with you!**” (**2Sa 14:17**).” Also in 1 Kings, “**Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern (lit. “understanding in the middle”) between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”** (**1Ki 3:9**).<sup>14</sup>

To discern good and evil is **to make moral judgments**. It the role of the king especially. However, the people were not exempt. In **Num 14:23 LXX**, which “just so happens” to be the same passage that has been in mind throughout

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<sup>13</sup> The KJV's gods is in line with every single older translation of the Hebrew, including the LXX and the Latin Vulgate. It is only modern translations that decided to change *elohim* here to “God.” The “us” in vs. 22 does not refer to the Trinity, but to the divine council where the heavenly beings judge between right and wrong (see for example Dan 7:9-10). See my sermon “The Covenant with Creation: Adam and the Covenant of Works; Gen 2:15-17,” p. 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> A good article on this is William N. Wilder, “Illuminatio And Investiture: The Royal Significance Of The Tree Of Wisdom in Genesis 3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (2006): 50-69.



Hebrews with the people not entering God’s rest, and also “just so happens” to have the word *apeiros* in it—a word found in the NT only in Hebrews 5:13 where they are “unskilled” in the word (*logos*) of righteousness, it says, “Surely they shall not see the land, which I swear to their fathers; but their children which are with me here, as many as know not good or evil, every inexperienced (*apeiros*) youth, to them will I give the land; but none who have provoked me shall see it.”

This is the immediate context of Hebrews when it says of the mature that “their powers of discernment [have been] trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb 5:14). This then takes us back to the previous warning to enter God’s rest, to actually believe what Christ tells you, to look to the promises and enter by faith. The opposite of this is sin.

Let me bring his home a little. I was talking with a fellow pastor about all this recently and he suggested that milk is not an end in itself.<sup>15</sup> But too many Christians treat it just that way. Whether it is the milk of God’s law or the milk of basic theology including the gospel, too many people treat

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to pastor Nick Kennicott for this and for some of the following thoughts.

both as if they are an end unto themselves. I have been absolutely beside myself the past couple of years witnessing first hand a whole group of men that love to talk about theology, but don't seem to give a rip about their brother. In fact, they even say things like telling the truth is all that it means to love someone. This is a complete disconnect between behavior and doctrine. And it is, at best, a mark of great immaturity in the faith. When your doctrine does not lead you to discern good and evil, when you are not practicing righteousness, when you are not behaving the way God commands you to behave, then what good is your doctrine? Knowledge puffs up, says the Apostle.

## Pressing on to Maturity

So what is the solution to all of this? There is one more trait of the immature Christian in the passage. They are constantly having to “**re-lay the foundation**” of the faith. To put that another way, they **love talking about the basics of the faith, and never seem to want to move on to anything else**. This can include both deeper **doctrine** (especially biblical theology like Melchizedek in Hebrews) and,

importantly, Christian **ethics** (i.e. “love”). Have you ever been around a group of Reformed people where they only two topics they seem to want to talk about are the TULIP and baptism (or maybe the Sabbath)? I have. But these are not meat. They are milk. At the same time, it is not hard to find such discussions quickly devolving into personal attacks, as the ability to discern good from evil seems utterly lacking. I’m picking on Reformed people only because that is what our church is, but we could do the same thing with any group (how about tongues or spiritual gifts [that is “I want this fun gift” not “how can I use my gifts to help others] or don’t smoke or dance or being a “victorious Christian” or Contemporary Christian Music or mystical spiritual disciplines, or decisions for Christ or tithing, the list is almost endless). This is hardly something that is unique to us. But it is something that is part of “us” (meaning the Reformed community as a whole), and I say that to our shame.

Instead of relaying the foundation all the time, mature Christians are able to move on past the elementary doctrines. “Therefore, let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the

foundation...” (Heb 6:1). But let’s not misunderstand this. Using Peter again, he does not mean that we should never want milk again, as if the elementary doctrines are *only* for immature Christians. Indeed, even Hebrews started off this book with the elementary doctrines of Christ (and if they don’t seem elementary, it may sadly mean that this simply shows our ignorance of the faith). He talks about them again here. He talks about them later.

No, to leave them does not mean to abandon these basic teachings.

You never grow out of the Apostle’s Creed or the Lord’s Prayer or the Ten Commandments. Rather, you realize that they are foundational to everything else. Like building a house, you spend lots of time on the foundation, but sooner or later, you have to build the rest of the structure. You don’t just stay in a slab of concrete that is a basement with no roof and say, “What a nice house I have built here.” Mature Christians love foundational doctrine. They go back to things like baptism or predestination or the basics of the doctrines of God and Christ time and again like drinking from a cool glass of water on a hot summer day. But once you are refreshed again, those things no longer hold the

obsessive place they once did. I don't mean that in a bad way. Rather, you love them like you love your wife of 50 years instead of the when you were dating. The love is actually deeper, but you are also able to think about other things.

You are able to start chewing on the richer meats of the word, things that build upon the basics and necessitate them, but which bring you into deeper communion with God and neighbor. Mature Christians **love to think** about doctrines that are new, that are challenging, that show them Christ in ways they never thought possible. But they also **love to practice** things like being kind and tenderhearted, dying to self for the advantage of others, loving your neighbor as yourself, loving your enemy, Christian liberty for the sake of others, turning the other cheek. Notice I said “practice” and not just “think.” Putting the basics of the law of God into practice is part and parcel of being mature in all three “milk” texts in the NT. It is difficult to do this, but not difficult to understand it. I think that is part of what makes it “meat.” I don't really have to sit here every week and scold you to be a better person as so many sermons and preachers do, because you know this already.

Why? Because of the milk. Immature Christians *think* about these things too, but they don't seem too concerned about actually practicing them. Also, they often think about them from the wrong side of the cross. Too often, they are seen as ways to get God to like and approve of you, rather than as we find them in Hebrews 11, as they come from the outflow of faith in Christ. Beloved, this is what it means to grow up into maturity. But I see far too many Christians either obsessing over works because they don't even get the milk, or often in Reformed circles, obsessing over basics often to the exclusion love of neighbor. In fact, I know men who should and even are teachers who often confuse love with doctrine and truth, showing that on this subject, they actually know neither. It is disgraceful.

True meat of the word reinvigorates the faith, as it may be new to us. Milk can do this too, but not if that is all you ever have. But meat is necessary to help you see the vital importance of the foundation. Like going through a difficult time in life as a true believer in God's sovereignty. You come to see how precious the milk actually is. But you also learn what it means to suffer. The meat shows us the depth and the riches of the knowledge of God in different ways. And

it is important for all of us to crave growing up into maturity and greater conformity into the image of Christ.

In my own life, I have had many moments where I discovered some new meat to me, by God's grace this has not stopped and I am very thankful. Indeed, even this very discussion has been reinvigorating to me these past couple of weeks, and I have plans to take this study much further with a fellow pastor. Did you know that [the average pastor in America lasts something like 2 ½ years in a church, and less than five in ministry altogether](#)? It is because they dry up. Often, they dry up because they are busy doing things that others in the church should be doing. But often, it is because they themselves stay in the kiddie pool and never take their people to the deep end to teach them how to swim. They never see the kind of spiritual growth in the people, because they never see it in themselves. I'm talking not only about doctrine again, but also about the ability to discern good from evil. This is deadly to the church because it is deadly to the life of the pastor.

But Hebrews doesn't have us live like this. The key to moving to maturity is to give both the milk and the meat and to encourage the people to press on, to take hold of

Christ, to enter his rest, to treat one another as we are supposed to, to discern good from evil in matters of doctrine and living. Hebrews does not say, “OK, you only can take milk, so we’ll just stay there.” Instead, he warns them to move on, and then rests himself on a basic elementary doctrine that it will happen for them.

“And this we will do if God permits” (Heb 6:3). David Allen has said this is the key verse to interpreting the whole unit, as we will look more at it next time as well. But for today, simply notice that this is the Apostle’s own trusting in God’s sovereign good pleasure (more “milk”!) to sanctify his people through means of grace, through the food, through the milk and the meat that he is giving them.

May God be pleased to do that for us as well.



Christian "Maturity" (vs. 14)			Christian Immaturity				
(Sharp of hearing)			Dull of Hearing (11)				
	(Makes it easier to explain things are easier to understand)			Makes it Harder to explain and understand (11)			
Teachers (12)			Need to be taught (12)				
	Solid food (5:12)			The basic principles of the oracles of God (12) The elementary doctrine of Christ (6:1) Milk (5:12) Spiritual Infants (5:13)			
				Past	Repentance from dead works	and	Faith toward God
				Present	Instruction about washings	and	Laying on of hands
				Future	Resurrection of the dead	and	Eternal judgment
	Able to move on past the elementary doctrines ("let us leave..." 6:1)		Constantly having to re-lay the foundation (6:1)				
	Constant practice (5:14)		Lack of Practice				
		Distinguishing good from evil (5:14)		Unskilled in the word of righteousness (5:13)			
		Skilled in the word of righteousness		Powers of discernment untrained in Distinguishing good from evil (14)			