

## XII. Christian, Grow Up!

March 6/7/8, 2018

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

**Aim:** To commit to progress in spiritual maturity by continued focus on the Word of God to progress beyond the elementary principles or basic doctrines of the Christian faith.

*Schreiner:* The author has embarked on explaining the greatness of Jesus' priesthood. It is a superior priesthood, for Jesus has been appointed by God as a Melchizedekian priest, not as a priest after the order of Aaron. But the author interrupts the flow of the argument here to warn and assure his readers (5:11-6:20). Indeed, he doesn't take up again the theme of the Melchizedekian priesthood until chapter 7. The argument is split into the following sections: the author shames the readers (5:11-6:3), warns them (6:4-8), encourages them (6:9-12), and then assures them (6:9-20).

*Phillips:* The exhortation the writer begins here is short, but intense. Indeed, it is perhaps the most severe warning that appears anywhere in the pages of the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews deals first with immaturity and then the danger of outright apostasy, or falling away from the faith altogether, before concluding with encouragement that is based on the security of God's promise.

### A. Rebuke Against Spiritual Immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-14)

*Schreiner:* In 5:11-14 the author indicates that his desire is to speak more about Jesus' priesthood, but he is unable to do so because of the readers' spiritual sluggishness.

#### 1. Spiritual Childishness (5:11-13)

##### a) Dull of Hearing (5:11)

<sup>11</sup>*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*

*Schreiner:* The author's desire is to explain in more detail the significance of Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood. The author will, in fact, expand upon the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus in chapter 7, but he pauses to note the difficulty he is encountering. The problem isn't the readers' lack of intelligence, nor is it even the case that the subject is intellectually stretching. The entire problem lies in the spiritual inclination, or better disinclination, of the readers. They are 'sluggish' (NET) or 'dull' (ESV) or 'lazy' (HCSB) and lethargic in their hearing. The word 'sluggish' (*νωθροί, nōthroi*) frames this section, concluding it in 6:12. The author writes hyperbolically and rhetorically. The readers are verging toward lethargy, and hence he warns them against it so they won't be lethargic (6:12). The readers won't understand the truth if they don't want to understand it, and so the fundamental issue facing the readers isn't intellectual but moral.

*Bruce:* With the repeated reference to Ps. 110:4 in v. 10, the logical sequence of our author's argument would have led him on to expound the significance of Christ's being a high priest 'after the order of Melchizedek.' This he does in Hebrews 7:1ff., but first he turns aside to address some words of practical admonition to his readers' spiritual condition. Melchizedek's person and office are subjects of deep import, he says, but his readers may not be in a position to

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grasp what he has to say in this regard because their minds are so sluggish (*νωθρος, nōthros*, in the NT only here and in 6:12; in the LXX, Pr. 22:29). The immaturity of the people addressed by our author, which caused him to doubt whether they were able to appreciate his teaching about the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ, was due to a disinclination to press on in the Christian way. Their sluggishness showed itself in a disposition to settle down at the point which they had reached, since to go farther would have meant too complete a severing of old ties.

*MacArthur*: ‘Dull’ comes from the Greek *nōthros*, which is made up of the words for ‘no’ and ‘push.’ Literally, therefore, it means ‘no push’—slow, sluggish. When used of a person it generally meant intellectually numb or thick. In the context of this passage, however, it primarily indicates spiritual dullness.

*Hughes*: This is a powerful indictment, especially when we see the form of the language in the phrase, ‘you have become dull of heaving.’ The word ‘dull’ is only used here in the New Testament and means ‘sluggish’ or ‘lethargic’ (cp. Pr. 22:29). Literally the phrase reads, ‘you have become sluggish in the ears.’ Therefore we understand that their problem was an *acquired* condition characterized by an inability to listen to spiritual truth. They were not naturally ‘dull,’ they were not intellectually deficient, but they had become spiritually lazy. They listened with the attentiveness of a slug. They had become unreceptive and closed.

*Phillips*: No sooner does the writer begin to explain the high priesthood of Jesus Christ, however, than he realizes that he has a pedagogical problem on his hands. This is what he writes in verse 11: ‘About this we have much to say’—namely, about the priesthood of Jesus Christ according to the order of Melchizedek—‘and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.’ That being the case, our writer turns aside to deal with the matter of his readers’ immaturity and lack of spiritual commitment. Until he has corrected this, there is no point proceeding into deeper matters of the faith.

*Hughes*: As we hear God’s Word, we ought to keep our Bible open and follow the textual argument, look up the references mentioned, take notes, identify the theme, list the subpoints and applications, and ask God to help us see exactly where He wants us to apply the Scriptures being preached. Are we ‘sluggish in the ears’? If so, we are self-condemned to perpetual infancy.

### b) *Ignorant Learners (5:12ab)*

#### (1) Teachers (5:12a)

<sup>12</sup>*For though by this time you ought to be teachers...*

*Schreiner*: The readers should have grown sufficiently to be able to instruct others in the truths of God’s oracles. When he says that they should be ‘teachers’ (*διδασκαλοι, didaskaloi*), he does not use the word ‘teacher’ in its technical sense, as if they should all be teachers able to instruct the congregation publicly. He doesn’t expect every member of the congregation to be a pastor or elder. What he means is that every member of the congregation to be a pastor or elder. When he means is that every member should be able to explain the elementary and basic elements of God’s word to others. The context here clarifies that it is the fundamental truths of God’s revelation that they should know and be able to communicate. In that sense they should be able to teach others.

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*Phillips:* This is one of the passages that indicates that the readers of this epistle were not recent converts or new believers. ‘By this time you ought to be teachers,’ he says. He does not mean by this that they should all be ordained ministers, but that they ought to be able to instruct others in the faith, whereas in fact they haven’t yet grasped the most elementary truths of God’s Word.

*Hughes:* Some in the tiny storm-tossed church should have become teachers (not necessarily preachers as such, but able to instruct others in the faith due to the progress of their own faith), but they had tragically failed. And they were losing their own grip on the truth to boot!

### (2) Basic Principles (5:12b)

*...you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.*

*Schreiner:* But instead of being able to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith to others, they need to relearn what they were taught at the beginning. They need to learn the ‘elementary truths of God’s word.’ The word ‘principles’ (*στοιχεια, stoicheia*) refers to the elements that make up something. For instance in Greek philosophy the word often is used to discuss the ‘elements’ from which the world is made: earth, air, fire, and water. The word may also denote the elementary or fundamental principles or rules of life. It clearly has the latter meaning here, and in context the elementary principles are those found in God’s ‘oracles’ (*των λογιων, tōn logion*). ‘God’s oracles’ probably means the Scriptures interpreted in the light of the death and exaltation of Jesus. The principles they need to learn are ‘basic’ (*της αρχης, tēs arches*) or ‘elementary.’ As Christians we need to review the basics of our faith, but in this case the readers are indicted for needing to be taught when they should be teachers. They need to relearn all over again the basic teachings of the Christian faith, which are derived from Scriptures.

*Bruce:* Not only do you need to learn the mysteries of deep import like the priestly order of Melchizedek, but the very ABC of divine revelation. In Greek, the ARV ‘rudiments’ is *στοιχεια (stoicheia)* has the primary sense of the letters of the alphabet. In addition, it is used in the NT of the ‘elements’ which make up the material universe (2 Pe. 3:10, 12) and of the ‘elemental spirits’ of the world which seek to bring men into bondage and from which the gospel delivers them (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20).

*MacArthur:* *Stoicheia* (‘elementary principles’) means that which comes first. In reference to language, it meant the letters of the alphabet as the basic parts of words—the ABCs. In science it was used of the basic physical elements, and in math of the basics of proof. Again they are told, ‘you have come.’ A baby does not come to need milk. He is born with that need. The only person who *comes* to need milk, to need baby food, is one who has gone back to childhood. Instead of becoming more mature, these Jews were becoming less. They were slipping back into spiritual infancy. If you do not progress you regress.

*Hughes:* The writer goes on to deepen his indictment in verse 12. Here the author is most graphic because the Greek translated ‘the basic principles’ actually means something like, ‘the ABC’s of the beginning of the words of God.’ This refers to the basic truths of God’s Word. There was an important spiritual principle at work among the lazy minds of the Hebrew church, which is: *truth heard but not internalized and maintained will be lost to the hearer.*

*Phillips:* The recipients of this letter were like many Christians today who think that theology is a waste of time. What difference does it make, people ask, whether God is Trinity or not, whether Christ’s righteousness come by imputation or by infusion, and whether regeneration comes before faith or after? What is important, they say, is that we get along with each other. Then

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they cite passages commending a *childlike* faith, as if that were the same as a *childish* faith, that is, one that is indifferent to or ignorant of the Word of God. This attitude is so prevalent today that perhaps the majority of professing believers try to nourish themselves on the weak diet of milk alone. Not that there is anything wrong with milk. It is just that those who are no longer babies require a stronger diet if they are to grow. Yet we are living in a time when most church members are immensely ignorant of the Bible and its doctrines. Evangelicals heartily agree that the Bible is true, but they simply don't take time to learn what it teaches. No wonder, then, that the secular culture is unimpressed by teachings in which we ourselves are so disinterested.

*Hughes*: The church was certainly entitled to more from them than this—just as today's church is entitled to expect more from us. Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 2:16 that as Christians 'we have the mind of Christ.' Thus through the Holy Spirit our minds can be constantly renewed—we can think God's thoughts, share His knowledge, relay His message. But the great scandal of today's church is *Christians without Christian minds*—those who ought to be teachers, but need someone to teach them the elementary truth of God's Word all over again. We must ask ourselves some frank questions: Do I know the elementary truths well enough to help others? Am I hard to teach because I have become 'sluggish in the ears'? Am I a growing, learning Christian?

### *c) Infant Food (5:12c)*

*You need milk, not solid food...*

*Phillips*: The writer of Hebrews minces no words regarding the importance of understanding what the Bible teaches, using a comparison that the apostle Paul also uses in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2.

*Hughes*: Next we observe that the author resorts to some biting, caustic sarcasm in an effort to stir his readers to spiritual growth. He assaults his friends with a grotesque image—adult infants who are still nursing. Think of the tragic absurdity of full-grown men and women in diapers who are neither capable of, nor desire solid food and who sit around sucking their thumbs. Such full-grown infants amount to a huge disgrace and drain on the Church. Obviously the writer's grotesque images are meant to shock and to motivate some of his hearers to pull out their thumbs and say, 'I'm no baby.' They had begun to eat solid food early on but were not back on the bottle. The truth is, there is simply no such thing as a static Christian. We are either moving forward or falling back. We are either climbing or falling. We are either winning or losing. Static, *status quo* Christianity is a delusion!

*Schreiner*: The author uses milk and solid food to illustrate his point. Infants can only digest milk and are unable to handle solid food. The readers are like spiritual infants in that they are only able to digest spiritual milk, not solid food. What does the author have in mind by spiritual milk? Are we able to identify the basic teachings he has in mind? The most satisfactory answer is that the list found in 6:1-2 represents the elementary teachings with which they should already be familiar.

*Bruce*: The contrast between milk and solid food in this spiritual sense appears to have been commonplace in the early church, as it was in Greek moral philosophy. Paul makes it in 1 Cor. 3:1ff., where he tells the Corinthian Christians that, for all their claim to be 'spiritual,' they cannot be treated as such, since their fostering of party spirit in the church shows them to still be 'carnal.' They must therefore be treated as spiritual infants, and fed on the 'milk' of elementary Christian ethics. The 'milk' corresponds to the ABC of the divine oracles; some of the 'first

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principles’ of which the ABC consists of are mentioned in 6:1ff. Those who have not proceeded beyond this stage are still infants.

### d) *Unskilled in Righteousness (5:13)*

...<sup>13</sup>for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.

*MacArthur*: A spiritual infant is ‘not accustomed’ or ‘unskilled’ (*apeiros*) to deeper truths. He cannot digest them, any more than a physical infant can digest a steak. The idea is that of being inexperienced, unskillful, and therefore unprepared and incapable. The spiritual system, like the physical, has to grow in order to handle that which is more difficult.

*Phillips*: The hallmark of spiritual infants, he says, is that they are ‘unskilled in the word of righteousness,’ or as the NIV puts it, ‘not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.’ This could refer to moral rectitude, our need for righteous conduct, but it more likely refers to the righteousness that comes from God in the gospel through the work of Jesus Christ and is received by faith. The point is that these perpetual infants were not able to articulate the basis of their salvation. They formed a community identified with Jesus Christ, but they didn’t grasp how the Christian faith works.

*Hughes*: Helpfully, the writer has been very explicit as to who remains a spiritual infant. ‘The word of righteousness’ has been understood in two ways—one doctrinal and the other practical. Those who think the emphasis is *doctrinal* argue that being ‘unskilled in the word of righteousness’ has reference to a solid grasp of the doctrine of imputed righteousness—that is, the divine bestowing of an alien righteousness from God in effecting one’s salvation (cp. Rom. 3:22). But others understand ‘the word of righteousness’ to be *practical*, arguing that the following context (v.14) demands that we understand this as righteous *conduct*. Thus, those who live righteous lives will be enabled to eat the solid food of God’s Word. I personally believe it is both/and. Those who would move beyond the milk stage and feed on the meat of God’s Word must first have a clear *doctrinal* understanding of the radical righteousness of God. However, if one is to increasingly feed on the solid Word, there must be more than this *doctrinal* understanding of righteousness—there must also be practical *righteous living*. These two together, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, enable one to feed more and more on the solid Word of God.

*Schreiner*: Those who live on milk are spiritually immature and are ‘not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness’ (NIV). The author doesn’t mean that they have never been taught what it means to live righteously, as if they were ignorant of God’s standards. The point is that they haven’t put into practice what they were taught. They haven’t lived righteously to the extent they should as believers in Jesus Christ. They are living as if they are still spiritual infants, when they should have progressed beyond that stage.

*Schreiner*: The text could easily be misread. The author does not believe there is a permanent state of spiritual infancy that believers can occupy. The entire purpose of the book is to warn believers about the danger of falling away. Indeed, this text segues into one of the strongest warning passages in the whole of the NT. What worries the writer about the spiritual infancy of the readers is the danger of slipping into apostasy. He doesn’t contemplate the possibility of drinking spiritual milk for years and years and still obtaining eternal life. It is urgent, rather, to leave spiritual infancy behind, for one is either drawing nearer to God or falling away from Him. Their spiritual slackness is a matter of greatest concern to the author.

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### 2. Spiritual Maturity (5:14)

<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.*

*Phillips:* The spiritual infant may say that understanding Christian doctrine doesn't matter so long as you are saved. But the writer shows just what the problem is in verse 14. Does it matter whether or not you become mature in the faith? Yes! Immature believers are easily led astray, which has been the writer's concern all through this epistle. Those who do not progress in the truths of the faith are tossed back and forth, particularly when faced with deceivers and their false schemes (see Eph. 4:14), as we always will be.

*Hughes:* Lastly, the writer of Hebrews nails down the necessity of a profound personal righteousness as being essential to spiritual maturity. The universal fact is, a nursing baby has little or no capacity to distinguish good from evil. Only the mature—those who *understand* the teaching about righteousness and who *practice* it—will be able to make discerning judgment on the continual moral issues that arise in life. But a righteous life that feeds on the solid food of God's Word will be able to exercise mature judgment between what is good and what is evil. Precisely because the righteous are not 'sluggish in the ear,' they hear the voice of God. What blessings mature believers are to their families and churches. They save their loved ones from pitfalls. Their words are words of life.

*Schreiner:* If milk is for infants, then solid food is for those who are mature. Milk designates the items mentioned in 6:1-2, and solid food has to do with the teaching about Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood. Those who are mature have their faculties trained to discern good from evil. In the illustration those who eat solid food are those who are spiritually mature. They have no need to relearn basic and elementary teachings, and hence they are able to instruct others in spiritual truths. The word 'maturity' (εξίς, *exis*) is often translated as 'habit' or 'custom.' We see this interpretation in the ESV 'by constant practice,' NET 'by practice,' and the NIV 'by constant use.' But the word often refers to that which is grown up and mature (e.g., Jdg. 14:9; 1 Sam. 16:7; Dan. 1:15), referring to the state of a person because of their training.

*Bruce:* It is ethically mature people, those 'who through practice have had their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil,' who have built up in the course of experience a principle or standard of righteousness by which they can pass discriminating judgment on moral situations as they arise.

*Schreiner:* The writer's purpose is to emphasize the capacity of those who are mature to discern between good and evil. Those who are mature and able to discern what is good and evil perceive that returning to the Levitical cult isn't the pathway of righteousness. They understand that such a move is actually deleterious, even if on first glance it seemed to be helpful. Those who are spiritually mature, those who have eaten solid food, will choose what is good rather than evil. Their 'tastes' and desires will incline them to what is good, just as wisdom brings delight to those who pursue it.

### 3. Rebuke Summary

*Phillips:* Many observers of the church today point to a false antithesis between the heart and the mind that has led to anti-intellectualism among evangelicals: if you care about theology, then you must be spiritually cold and unloving. In other words, theology bores today's Christians, which is another way of saying we are bored with God Himself, except as He feeds our

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consumer needs. The writer of Hebrews points out the price we pay for this. Perpetually infant Christians are unable to distinguish between genuine and ungentle expressions of the faith, between the sound and the dangerous, between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the age. In recent years, this has been demonstrated by vast hordes of shallow Christians, who chase after one or another of the bizarre movements emphasizing strange experiences or quick riches, but which have no discernible connection with the ‘teaching of righteousness’ that is in Jesus Christ.

*Phillips:* What does an infant believer look like? Hebrews 5:11-14 shows us three marks of milk-drinking Christians, who cannot handle meat. First, they are shallow in their understanding. If you say, ‘So long as I love Jesus, it doesn’t matter what else I believe,’ then you will never grow in your faith, in your character, or in your usefulness to God. Furthermore, there is no subject more worthy, no study more beneficial to us, than the study of God and His saving works. Baby believers know little or nothing of this, instead remaining fixed on their own little problems, their own petty kingdoms, little imagining the great and noble themes of eternity.

*Phillips:* The first sign of an infant faith is shallowness, and the second is that such Christians are of little use to others in the things of the faith. Christians need to be aware of spiritual reality, tuned to danger, and ready to employ the resources of their faith. Many people assume that they can leave all the spiritual instruction to the ordained ministers. But whatever your situation in life, your responsibilities require that you grow in understanding of Christian teaching (cp. 1 Pe. 3:15).

*Phillips:* The third mark of the toothless, infant believer is an inability to discern the sound from the unsound. In contrast, the mature have trained themselves ‘to distinguish good from evil,’ an expression that seems to include both teaching and moral choices. In each of these cases, that of the shallow, the useless, and the undiscerning, there is one simple remedy. Apply yourself to the truth, train your mind, getting the ABCs of the faith right, and then advance toward a deep and profound grasp of biblical truth.

*Hughes:* Spiritual maturity—being full-grown—is possible if we simply take God’s Word seriously: 1) by listening with all we have; 2) by becoming fully acquainted with its ‘word of righteousness’ and living it out; and 3) by constantly applying God’s Word to the decisions of life.

*Schreiner:* Spiritual maturity, the author teaches, doesn’t depend fundamentally on intellectual ability. It isn’t correlated with theological depth or the ability to grasp theological truths. The readers were spiritual infants because they weren’t putting into practice what they had learned. They needed to be instructed in the fundamentals of the faith because they hadn’t progressed on to spiritual maturity. There is no idea here that we can be confident of the salvation of those who remain ‘spiritual infants’ for years and years. The readers, because of their infancy, are slipping toward apostasy. Those who are spiritual infants can’t remain where they are. They will either go forward or fall away and be destroyed forever. Hence the warning that follows is urgent since death and life are at stake.

### **B. Exhortation to Spiritual Maturity (Hebrews 6:1-3)**

*Schreiner:* The author continues to shame the readers, so these verses belong with the previous section conceptually. The readers must not remain in spiritual infancy. They must progress to maturity and understand the significance of Jesus’ Melchizedekian priesthood and apply it to

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their lives. Progressing onto maturity should not be understood as the goal of elite Christians who are particularly godly. All believers must pursue maturity to avoid apostasy.

[DSB Note: Alone of the five commentaries, MacArthur sees this section as an exhortation for unbelieving Jews to leave behind Judaism and pursue Christianity. The rest see this as an exhortation for Jewish Christian believers to mature beyond the basic fundamentals of Christianity to deeper and more mature truths. Because MacArthur's viewpoint is contrary to the majority opinion (and unlikely given verse 1—'the elementary doctrine of Christ'), it has been omitted from these notes].

### 1. Pursue Maturity (6:1a)

<sup>1</sup>*Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity not laying again a foundation...*

*Schreiner*: The word 'therefore' (*διο, dio*) links the text with the previous paragraph. In 5:11-14 the writer lamented the spiritual immaturity and infantile state of his readers. He draws a conclusion from the previous discussion here, exhorting them to go on to maturity.

*Bruce*: The opening words of this section are surprising. Our author has just told his readers that they are not really able to assimilate the solid food which he would like to give them—the teaching about the priestly order of Melchizedek—because they are immature. We might have expected him to say, as Paul says to the Corinthians (cp. 1 Cor. 3:2) in a similar situation: 'Therefore I must continue to feed you with milk.' But he does not say this; he says: 'Let us press on.' He judged that no good purpose would be served by going over the first principles again. That being so, we might have expected him to say: 'You are not ready for solid food yet, you still need milk; *nevertheless* I am going to press on with the provision of solid food.' But he does not say 'nevertheless'; he says 'therefore.' '*Therefore* let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and press forward to maturity.' Why 'therefore'? Probably because their particular condition of immaturity is such that only an appreciation of what is involved in Christ's high priesthood will cure it. Their minds need to be stretched, and this will stretch them as nothing else can. They have remained immature too long; *therefore* he will give them something calculated to take them out of their immaturity.

*Schreiner*: The call to progress on to maturity (*τελειότητα, teleiōtēta*) is another way of saying they should hold fast their confession (4:16). The readers cannot and must not remain in their infantile state. They will either go forward to maturity or fall into apostasy (6:4-8). The word 'leaving' does not mean abandoning the fundamental teachings about Christ. The context helps us understand what is intended. They should get beyond the place where the foundational teachings are rehearsed over and over (cp. 5:11-14). They should never leave the foundational teachings behind, precisely because they are fundamental. On the other hands, such teachings should be the basis and platform for further growth.

*MacArthur*: 'Leaving' in the Greek is *aphiēmi*, which means to forsake, to put away, let alone, disregard, put off. It refers to total detachment total separation, from a previous location or condition. [DSB Note: MacArthur teaches that Jews are to abandon the old covenant 'milk' for the 'solid food' of the new covenant, as opposed to all other commentators, who see this exhortation for Jewish Christians to move beyond the basics of Christian faith to more advanced topics.

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### 2. Elementary Doctrines (6:1b-2)

*Phillips:* The writer of Hebrews proceeds to put forth an interesting set of subjects that compose, as he says, ‘the elementary doctrine of Christ,’ and also ‘the foundation’ for all other matters of the faith (v. 1). The early church employed creedal formulations as a means of preparing converts for baptism. These basic summaries were foundational for any profession of faith. It is likely that the list of items in 6:1-2 served that kind of function. We must admit, however, looking at these items, that their meaning is not transparently obvious to us. The point is not to abandon these truths, but to establish them as a sure foundation for later building. There seem to be three sets of two items each, all of which comprise the elementary or foundational truths.

*Bruce:* The rudiments (‘the elementary doctrines of Christ’) and the foundation are the same thing described in two separate figures. Before he goes on, however, he lists some of the rudiments, quoting perhaps from a catechesis familiar to himself and his readers. Six matters are listed, which fall naturally into three pairs. We are thus given some insight into what was regarded as a suitable foundation of Christian teaching in a non-Pauline church, and one which had a Jewish basis. When we consider the ‘rudiments’ one by one, it is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community. Each of them, indeed, acquires a new significance in a Christian context; but the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth.

*Schreiner:* The author divides the foundational teachings into three pairs. A number of interpretations of the pairs have been proposed. Some have suggested that the teachings are not even Christian but are fundamentally Jewish since nothing about Christ is included and all the matters mentioned are found in the OT. [DSB Note: this is actually the position of MacArthur, who sees this section as a rehash of Jewish teachings; the exhortation is thus for non-Christian Jews to leave Judaism behind and come over to Christ. However, 6:1 specifically says these are the ‘elementary doctrine of Christ,’ so MacArthur’s position seems doubtful and is thus not included in these notes herein]. Such a reading is certainly possible, but it seems doubtful, for the readers should see Christ as the fulfillment of the OT and must not revert to the OT cult. Indeed, the writer specifically says the elementary teachings are about Jesus Christ. It seems then, that the list here pertains to the revelation mediated through Jesus Christ.

#### a) *Repentance and Faith (6:1b)*

*... of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God...*

*Phillips:* The first couplet—‘repentance from dead works and... faith toward God’—is straightforward. The movement from unbelief into Christianity begins with awareness of, conviction over, and then repentance from acts that lead to death. Dead works are sinful deeds that stand under God’s condemnation (see Rom. 6:19-21), as well as vain religious exercises. Coupled with repentance is faith for forgiveness and salvation. That is the great theme of this whole letter: holding fast to the way of salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ. True repentance always leads to saving faith; we turn from our sinful allegiances and to God who offers forgiveness and new life. Put together, this most basic layer of the foundation corresponds to the *doctrine of justification*.

*Bruce:* ‘Dead works’ are works which must be repented of; in 9:14 they are works from which the conscience needs to be cleansed. Therefore they are probably not works of the law, not even the sacrificial ceremonies prescribed by the cultic law. They are works which issue in death

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because they are evil; they belong to the way of death and not the way of life (cp. Rom. 6:21). Repentance from such things was insisted upon in the Old Testament, and in all the strains of Jewish thought and life which were derived from the Old Testament. The keynote of John the Baptist's preaching was a call to repentance (cp. Mk. 1:4; Mt. 3:2, 8); and when Jesus began to proclaim the kingdom of God in Galilee, He called upon His hearers to 'repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mk. 1:15; cp. Acts 20:21).

Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21 illustrate the close association between repentance and faith. The foundation of faith in God was, of course, well and truly laid out in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 15:6; Hab. 2:4). The readers of this epistle had already been reminded that it was unbelief that kept the generation of the Exodus from entering the promised land, and they were urged to apply this lesson to their own situation. Faith in God must include faith in His messengers, and in the gospel faith in God included—or indeed became tantamount to—faith in Christ.

*Schreiner*: The first pair is 'repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.' The author is not minimizing the importance of repentance and faith. The first pair pertains to the inception of the Christian life, consisting of repentance and faith. The meaning of the phrase 'repentance from dead works' is captured nicely by the NIV: 'repentance from acts that lead to death.' The works are dead in the sense that they result in death, which is both physical and spiritual (i.e., separation from God). When one becomes a believer, one turns away from such evil works and gives himself to God. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. They are distinguishable but inseparable. Salvation is given to those who put their faith in God, trusting in Him to deliver them on the day of wrath. We have here a staple of the NT message. The evangelistic preaching in Acts calls unbelievers to repent and believe (e.g., Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:12; 10:43; 11:18, 21; 13:39; 15:7; 16:31; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20; cp. Mk. 1:14-15). The centrality of repentance (cp. Rom. 2:4; 1 Th. 1:10; 2 Tim. 2:25) and faith (cp. Rom. 3:22, 28; 4:24; 9:33; 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:2; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9) is also prominent in the Pauline letters. Hebrews reflects here a fundamental and shared teaching among early Christians.

### b) *Washings and Laying on of Hands (6:2a)*

...<sup>2</sup> and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands...

*Phillips*: The next pair is a bit more difficult to understand. We would expect a list of fundamentals to include instruction regarding baptism, particularly since most of these catechisms took place in the context of that sacrament. It is also evident that in the early apostolic church, baptism and the laying on of hands were closely related; laying on the hands signified the coming of the Holy Spirit, which was linked with the inception of the Christian life, symbolized by baptism. That seems to be the reason for their coupling here. There are some difficulties, however, beginning with the fact that the writer of Hebrews does not use the ordinary word for baptism, and also that he writes here in the plural. Instead of the normal word for Christian baptism, *baptisma*, he uses *baptismōn*, which more generally describes washings or ablutions. A survey of the various religious movements in first-century Judaism will find a great variety of teaching on the matter of ceremonial washings.

*Schreiner*: The next pair is particularly difficult to decipher. The word translated 'ritual washings' (*βαπτισμων*, *baptismōn*) could refer to the cleansing rites required in the OT. Later in the letter, when speaking of the OT cult, the author mentions the requirement of 'various washings' (9:10). The importance of washing for cleansing is hard to overestimate in Jewish circles. It is also possible that the washing in view relates particularly to baptism. The plural for

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‘washings’ here probably indicates that the readers were instructed on how Christian baptism was distinct from the cleansing common in Jewish circles (cp. 9:10).

*Bruce:* ‘Teaching about ablutions’ has commonly been regarded as a reference to Christian baptism, but it is doubtful whether Christian baptism is directly in view here at all. Apart from the fact that the word translated ‘ablutions’ is in the plural (*baptismois*), it may be significant that our author does not use *baptisma*, the Greek noun regularly employed in the New Testament to denote Christian baptism (and the baptism of John), but *baptismos*, which in its two other indubitable New Testament occurrences refers to Jewish ceremonial washings (Mk. 7:4; Heb. 9:10). There is no lack of instruction about ablutions in the Old Testament, and this provided a further foundation on which the Christian truths could be erected. Later in the epistle (9:13) the ritual of the red heifer in Num. 19, one of the most important of the ceremonial purifications prescribed in the Old Testament, is treated as a counterpart in the temporal order to the cleansing efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ in the spiritual order. The prophet Ezekiel in earlier days had used the terminology of the old ceremonial ablutions to describe God’s inward cleansing of His people in the age of restoration (Ez. 36:25).

*Phillips:* Meanwhile, the laying on of hands in the New Testament era was associated with blessing, healing, and especially ordination for office. In general, hands were laid on to signify the coming of the Holy Spirit. Taken together, washings and laying on of hands have to do with our empowerment for the Christian life; that is, they point us to *sanctification*. We see something similar in Romans 6:2-4, where Paul teaches on baptism as an incentive to the godly life.

*Schreiner:* Hands were laid on people in the OT for blessing (Gen. 48:14), on sacrificial animals who atoned for sin (Ex. 29:10, 15, 29; Lev. 4:15; 8:14, 18, 22; 16:21; Num. 8:12), to commission someone to service (Num. 27:23; Dt. 34:9; Num. 8:10), or on one about to suffer the death penalty (Lev. 24:14). In the NT, the laying on of hands was for blessing (Mt. 19:13, 15; Mk. 10:16), healing (Mk. 5:23; 6:5; 8:23, 25; Lk. 4:40; 13:13; Acts 9:12; 28:8), to commission people for service (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim. 5:22), for receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17-19; 9:17; 19:6), and for receiving spiritual gifts (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6), although this last one may fit with commissioning someone for ministry. The sheer diversity of matters associated with laying on of hands makes it difficult to determine what the author has in mind. If the washing refers to baptism, which seems likely, then the laying on of hands would perhaps refer to the idea of receiving the Holy Spirit, for then the pair would both refer to what occurs at the inception of the Christian life.

*Bruce:* The imposition of hands was an early Christian practice (cp. Acts 6:6; 8:17; 9:12, 17; 19:6), associated with the impartation of the Holy Spirit, and that is most probably its significance here. But it too was inherited from the Old Testament, where it is used especially in commissioning someone for public office (cp. Num. 27:18, 23; Dt. 34:9), or as part of the sacrificial ritual (cp. Lev. 1:4; 3:2; 4:4; 8:14; 16:21; etc.). In later Judaism the term appears regularly in the sense of ordination (of rabbis).

### *c) Resurrection and Judgment (6:2b)*

*...the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*

*Phillips:* The final pair that finishes off this list of Christian basics is ‘the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.’ If the first couplet deals with justification, and the second with sanctification, it makes sense that the collection finishes off with a pair that deals with the matter

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of *glorification*—that is, the destiny of believers after death. Essential to the Christian hope is the resurrection that waits us after the grave, the hope of glory. Indeed, all the dead will be raised in the great day of judgment; those who are in Christ will be received with joy while all who reject Him are condemned forever in their sins.

*Schreiner*: The last pair clearly belongs together, looking forward to the final day of salvation and judgment. The ‘resurrection of the dead’ refers to the physical resurrection that will occur on the last day. The future physical resurrection is an essential element in Christian preaching (e.g., Acts 4:2; 17:18; 23:6; 24:22; Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:12-19; 2 Cor. 4:14; Phil. 3:11; Heb. 11:35). ‘Eternal judgment’ refers to the final judgment on the last day. The word ‘eternal’ signifies that the judgment is definitive. There will be no second chance (Heb. 9:27). Again, a final judgment is a widely shared Christian teaching (e.g., Acts 24:25; Rom. 2:2-3; 1 Pe. 4:17; 2 Pe. 2:3; Jude 4; Rev. 20:11-15). Both of these teachings are fundamental to Christian proclamation, so we have further evidence that the writer is not relegating these issues to secondary matters.

*Bruce*: The resurrection of Jesus gave special importance to the doctrine in the church of the resurrection of the dead, but the doctrine as such was no innovation in New Testament times. It was held, as we know, by the Pharisees (cp. Acts 23:8), who found in it the guarantee that Israel’s ancestral hope would be realized in perpetuity; it was taught expressly in the Old Testament (cp. Is. 26:19; Dan. 12:2), and, as Jesus pointed out, it was taught implicitly at an earlier stage when God, who is the God of the living, not of the dead, proclaimed Himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 3:6; cp. Mk. 12:26ff.).

*Bruce*: The Jewish belief in resurrection was closely associated with the expectation of judgment to come. That the God of Israel is Judge of all the earth is general and of His people in particular is an essential part of the Old Testament revelation (Gen. 18:25; Is. 33:22); His recurring judgments in history will be summed up in the eschatological judgment of Dan. 7:9-14.

### 3. Sovereign Permission (6:3)

<sup>3</sup>*And this we will do if God permits.*

*Bruce*: It was on a foundation already laid in the Old Testament, then, and one on which their way of life was already based, that these people had received the gospel. All these things were now given a fresh and fuller significance because of the coming of Christ into the world. But the ‘Hebrews’ were exposed to a subtle danger which could not be experienced by converts from paganism. If a convert from paganism gave up Christianity and reverted to paganism, there was a clean break between the faith which he renounced and the paganism to which he returned. But it was possible for the recipients of this letter, yielding gradually to pressures from various quarters, to give up more and more those features of faith and practice which were distinctive of Christianity, and yet to feel that they had not abandoned the basic principles of repentance and faith, the realities denoted by religious ablutions and the laying on of hands, the expectation of resurrection and the judgment of the age to come. For the writer to go on insisting on these things, therefore, would not really help them; it would be better to press on to those teaching which belonged to spiritual maturity, in the hope that the maturity would come with the teachings. ‘This, then, we will do, God permitting’—that is to say, not merely will our author go on to give his mature teaching about the Melchizedek priesthood, but he and his readers together will advance to full growth in Christ, please God.

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*Schreiner:* On the one hand, the readers are held responsible for their spiritual infancy and immaturity. They should be able to grasp what is being taught. They are only drinking milk and need to hear the elementary truths of the faith repeatedly because of their own dullness and spiritual sluggishness. At the same time the writer acknowledges that a spiritual breakthrough will only come ‘if God permits.’ Spiritual maturity is given by God and is a result of His gracious work in the lives of His people. It is imperative to see that these two themes are complementary. The Scriptures regularly teach that human beings are responsible for their actions and that God is sovereign over all that occurs (e.g., Gen. 45:5, 7-8; 50:20; Is. 10:5-34; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). Here the writer acknowledges that progress will only be made if God allows it. True spiritual understanding is always a miracle.

### 4. Exhortation Summary

*Phillips:* The summary of the Christian faith in 6:1-2 constitutes the minimum creed, the foundation that must be laid if one is to build safely and fruitfully: *justification*, the act of God’s grace by which sinners are declared righteous through the blood of Christ; *sanctification*, the process by which believers grow in holiness; and *glorification*, the great hope of all who look to Jesus Christ and the day when we will be transformed in glory and received into the heavenly city for an eternity with God.

*Phillips:* It was the great desire of the writer of Hebrews to lead his readers into a mature understanding of Jesus Christ and His saving work so that their faith may endure to the end. The key to perseverance and endurance is not some fleeting emotional experience, not this formula or that program—these are the marks of the immature, tossing back and forth on the passing waves. Not so the wise, or the mature, who do not build on shifting sand but upon the rock that is God’s Word (cp. Mt. 7:24-25). That is where you want to be found, firm and secure upon the rock that is the Word of our Lord.

*Schreiner:* Christians never leave or abandon the elementary teachings of the faith. They are, as Hebrews says, foundation and fundamental. On the other hand, something is radically wrong if the same teachings need to be defended and explicated repeatedly. The fundamental teachings should become the platform for further growth and understanding. We are responsible for our spiritual growth and understanding. We should progress in the faith and in maturity. At the same time the author acknowledges that growth only comes ‘if God permits.’ Finally and ultimately, we are not in control of our destiny. Spiritual maturity is a gift of God. This truth does not cancel out human responsibility and the authenticity of our choices, but it does remind us that God rules over all things and that any growth in holiness results from His grace.

For next time: Read Hebrews 6:4-12.