

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

The Danger of Perpetual Infancy

written by Bob DeWaay

“Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” (**Hebrews 5:11-14**)

Spiritual Babes

Babies are wonderful, so are baby Christians if one means those who have recently come to the faith. The author of Hebrews, however, is speaking of babes of a different variety. These “babes” are in a state of perpetual infancy. They lack the interest and ability to understand Biblical teaching of any complexity and consequently lack discernment. Geriatric spiritual babies love to be entertained and amused like their counterparts in the nursery, but balk at the notion of learning and understanding theology.

Hebrews 5:11-14 is perplexing to many modern Christians because it is not compatible with their priorities. Think about it. Why would the author of Hebrews rebuke his readers for not being able to understand the difference between the typological implications of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods (this topic is picked up in **Hebrews 7** after the extended parenthetical section of **5:11 - 6:20**)? The problem is not that they did not **already** understand this point of theology, it was that they could not hear it (**Hebrews 5:11**). The same is true today. Today many cannot have such matters

explained to them either because they would not attend a church that tried, nor would they tolerate learning enough theology and hermeneutics to tackle passages such as **Hebrews 5-7**. Many remain babies today because they do not think growing up is worth the effort.

Hebrews 5:11 explains this condition. These Christians were “dull of hearing.” The Greek word used here means “. . . no push in the hearing, slow and sluggish in mind as well as in the ears.”¹ Thomas Hewitt comments on this, “. . . his readers had become confused and limited in their minds through apathy and mental listlessness. They had become *dull of hearing*, which was a common Greek ethical term for a sluggish intelligence.”²

The word in **Hebrews 5:11** translated “hard to explain” comes from the Greek word from which we get the word “hermeneutics.” In **Luke 24:27** Jesus “explained” Old Testament, Messianic passages to some disciples on the road to Emmaus. “Explained” here is also from *hermeneuō*, Greek for “to explain in words, expound.”³ It was difficult to expound the theological point concerning the high priesthood of Jesus and how it finds its Biblical roots in that of Melchizedek because the readers were not accustomed to thinking in such terms. They were only accustomed to the “elementary principles of the oracles of God.” This was not a commendation of those to whom it was addressed.

Many who fall into the category of “babe” as used in **Hebrews 5** do not consider themselves such. Their lack of hermeneutical skill and willingness to study causes them to miss the point of this passage. They think that a baby Christian is one who has not preached on a street corner, given a prophecy in a meeting, received spiritual revelations and visions, testified of performing miracles, or given substantial amounts of money. Rarely do they think in terms of lacking the ability to understand theology and Biblical exegesis. Some have even suggested that the “milk” is the written Scriptures and “meat” the revelations of modern day prophets. Those who stumble so badly over the clear meaning of **Hebrews 5:11-**

14 belie their own baby status.

The “oracles” to which the author of Hebrews refers are probably brief, easily understood sayings such as the ten commandments. As A. T. Robertson states, “*Logion* is a diminutive of *logos*, divine oracles being usually brief. . .”⁴ Hewitt says that oracle (*logion*), “. . . originally meant a brief, condensed, divine saying.”⁵ Babes never progress beyond briefly stated basics of the faith. These elementary principles are necessary, as **Hebrews 6:1-3** shows, but it is wrong to consider them all that is necessary for spiritual maturity. The babe knows **John 3:16**, the Lord’s Prayer, perhaps the 10 Commandments, and little else. He understands only the most basic summary of the Christian message and has no hunger for more. Sometimes, slogans or formulas loosely based on Scripture serve as trite answers to every question, effectively cutting off serious theological discussion.

It is not that baby Christians never go to meetings where teaching is present. It is that they seek out teachings, teachers and churches that do not require them to think about theology. Many consider “theology” to be a pejorative term. They claim that their pastor teaches more “practical” matters. These are often inspiring stories, pop psychology, motivational sayings, personal testimonies of spiritual experiences, “how to” seminars, or “touchy-feely” meetings of group encounter - anything but hermeneutically sound, theologically solid, Biblical teaching that requires the hearers to think and digest the material. This (more detailed Biblical study and exposition) is expressly what the passage under consideration (**Hebrews 5:11-14**) urges as necessary for maturity and discernment.

Biblical Education and Judaism

There exists in some parts of evangelical, American Christianity an anti-scholastic bias that mitigates against the sort of teaching needed for Christian maturity. It is argued that study and thinking are dangerous to one’s spirituality. Those with such beliefs probably do not realize how contrary they are to those of the Jewish writers of Scripture. Certain “proof texts” are adduced to justify this addiction to ignorance. A favorite passage is **Acts 4:13**, “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and

untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.” Since God had done a mighty miracle in Jesus’ name and those who resisted the work of God were “rulers, elders and scribes,” (**Acts 4:5**) it is assumed that study is a hindrance and ignorance a help to the power of God in one’s ministry. It is further supposed that God does not expect Christians to be well educated in theological matters.

However, this contention does not do justice to the proper interpretation of **Acts 4:13** or the degree of education to which these disciples had attained. Were these men actually as ignorant as their adversaries claimed? Were they lacking knowledge of Scripture? What happened while they spent those years with Jesus?

To understand this verse, we must first understand the educational system to which the scribes (**Acts 4:5**) were comparing Peter and John. They were not asserting that these two apostles were ignorant of the Scripture. As Jews they were trained in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) from their youth.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia states under the entry for synagogue, “. . . teaching the Law to children was part of Israelite religion from the time of Moses (Dt. 6:7). The first school was the home. The first textbook was the Hebrew Bible.”⁶ Going to the synagogue was an extension of this Bible training. This was not just for special students. Under the same entry it says, “In communities where numerous small synagogues may be found in proximity, men and their sons may be seen going to the house of prayer on any day.”⁷ We know that there was a synagogue in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus taught (**Mark 1:21,22**). This incident shows that synagogue teaching was a part of the life and culture of these Galilean fishermen. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, there was also a synagogue in Tiberias which is on the Sea of Galilee.

Alfred Edersheim eloquently describes the training of Jewish children at the time of Christ’s earthly ministry:

Thus, encircled by his pupils, as by a crown of glory. . . , the teacher . . . should impart to them the precious knowledge of the Law, with constant adaptation to their capacity, with unwearied patience, intense earnestness, strictness tempered by kindness, but, above all, with the highest object of their training ever in view. To keep children from all

contact with vice; to train them to gentleness, even when bitterest wrong had been received; to show sin in its repulsiveness, rather than to terrify by its consequences; to train to strict truthfulness; to avoid all that might lead to disagreeable or indelicate thought; and to do all this without showing partiality, without undue severity, or laxity of discipline, with judicious increase of study and work, with careful attention to thoroughness in acquiring knowledge - all this and more constituted the ideal set before the teacher, and made his office of such high esteem in Israel.”⁸

The study that occupied these students is discussed by Edersheim, “Roughly classifying the subjects of study, it was held, that, up to ten years of age, the Bible exclusively should be the text-book; from ten to fifteen, the Mishnah, or traditional law; after that age, the student should enter on those theological discussions which occupied time and attention in the higher Academies of the Rabbis.”⁹ The description of Jewish education and particularly of Messiah and His family is brilliantly described by Edersheim in his classic work on pages 229 - 234 of volume I. Any who would read this description will come away with a heightened appreciation for Biblical education.

The “ignorant” Jewish fishermen of **Acts 4** were better educated in Scripture and theological issues derived from it than the vast majority of modern Christians even with all our modern communication helps.

What the Jewish leaders meant when they called Peter and John “uneducated and untrained men” was that they had not received special training in any of the formal rabbinical schools. This was also true of Jesus Himself (**John 7:15**). These schools gave training in the rabbinical traditions. The schools consisted of disciples of particular rabbis who had gained prominence and reputation in their knowledge of the Law and the traditions that surrounded it.

The Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament states, “The *talmîd* [Hebrew for ‘disciple’] is the first step towards the rabbi, who in later Judaism is the religious authority for those who are

bound by traditional piety. He who would follow the Law in all things cannot do without the constant instruction and guidance of the rabbi.”¹⁰ To study under a great rabbi was a tremendous opportunity and achievement. One great rabbi, Hillel, reportedly said, “He who does not learn is worthy of death.”¹¹ To enter a sort of “rabbinic guild”¹² one must have mastered not only Torah, but also the Mishnah, Talmud, and the other rabbinical teachings and traditions. To be ordained one must have also have been a male of at least 40 years of age.¹³ No matter how well one knew the Torah, if he had no teacher, he was not considered a true “*talmîd*”¹⁴

In this setting, it is easy to understand the opinions of the rulers and scribes who were assessing Peter and John. Since these men had not been trained in any of the rabbinical schools, they were technically “uneducated.” They could not be considered true disciples of Torah or Moses (see **John 9:28** where the Jewish leaders claimed to be Moses’ disciples, which was what rabbinic training was all about), no matter how well they knew the

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Scripture. **Acts 4:13** ends, however, “. . . they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”

They had previously encountered another similar person. Jesus was also eloquent in the Scripture, brilliant in theological debate, and powerful in the Holy Spirit, yet not trained in the rabbinical schools. **These men had been trained after all - by Jesus Himself.** Three intensive years of personal discipleship under Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, can hardly be considered a poor, inadequate education! This was on top of the lifetime of studying Scripture they had received as Jewish men at home and in the synagogue.

Acts 4:13 hardly gives comfort to those who would see ignorance of Scripture and theological issues as a virtue. It also should be kept in mind that the inspired text merely reports the opinion of the “rulers and elders and scribes” (**Acts 4:5**) without commending it. Peter and John were “laymen” (which is in effect what

was being said of them) but were in no way lacking training and preparation for the ministry to which Christ had called and commissioned them.

Later, God called Saul (who became “Paul”) into His service. Paul was trained under Gamaliel I who was either the son or grandson of a great, famous rabbi, Hillel.¹⁵ Paul, whom God used to write much of the New Testament, was a brilliant and well educated man.

Justification for theological ignorance and satisfaction with only the most simple and basic understanding of Scripture is not to be found in the New Testament. To the Jews, being a babe in these matters when they ought to be eating strong meat was a serious rebuke, and the author of Hebrews delivered it to a Jewish readership. He obviously wanted to get their attention.

Why Biblical Education

“But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (**Hebrews 5:11-14**). To go from being babies to being mature Christians, we need “practice.” The author of the book of Hebrews shows by his own method the sort of practice he has in mind: the study and application of the “word of righteousness” (**Hebrews 5:13**) that causes growth in the faith. Faith in and obedience to Messiah that is rooted and grounded in His Word (**Hebrews 1:1,2**) leads one to the promised rest (**Hebrews chaps. 3, 4 & 11**). The author of Hebrews shows the pattern in his use of Scripture to correct error and encourage truth and obedience. We ought to be able to do the same, but without practice we will always need to have someone again teach us the “*logion*” and never progress further.

Practice at anything is hard work. Perhaps this is what causes so much resistance to the Biblical command to become students of Scripture. “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (**2Timothy 2:15**). Paul also told Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (**1Timothy 5:17**). To become teachers as Hebrews 5:12 says we ought we must first be diligent in study, which is hard work.

The call to hard work probably will never be popular in the age of television where everything is done for us and we are passive spectators. Modern Christianity has produced a generation of spiritual consumers, many who are from the “baby boomer” generation whose wants and needs dictate which churches will be successful. This generation is repulsed by the idea of a lifetime of hard work with little recognition or immediate pay off. As consumers we want to be the center of attention and if a waiter or waitress does not attend to our needs **now**, we make a fuss and move on. This is sadly how many from our modern generation approach church life. We want the church administration to hire professionals to do everything for us, including teaching our children. We want to be comfortable, happy, entertained, never put upon, never made to feel guilty, and certainly never commanded to do anything that would be more work and responsibility. If the author of Hebrews was concerned that his admonitions could not be heard by his first century, Jewish audience, how much more difficult is it for twentieth century, pampered, “baby boomers”?

God’s Word is changeless and we will be judged by it even if it seems incompatible with our modern priorities. We must allow God’s Word to speak to us and not be content to compare ourselves with others of our own ilk. We could stay babies and never notice it or stand out because we live in a culture of babies. However, what a sad waste of a spiritual life!

Maturity and Discernment

Practice is necessary for spiritual sensibility and discernment. The type of practice referenced here is the study of Scripture and its application to the issues of life. Faith and obedience are the envisioned outcomes of this process. “Trained senses” (**Hebrews 5:14**) means the ability to differentiate between good and evil because of having continued in the Word of Christ (**John 8:31,32**) and become disciples. Many think discernment depends on a “metaphysical impression sensor” that differentiates between the feelings and sensations produced by different spiritual beings.

For example, I received a phone call from a person who announced, “I have the gift of discernment.” She told a strange tale of demons, angels, human spirits, etc., that would be fit for the pages

of a supermarket tabloid. The answer to various problems for individuals and churches was to use her secret, spiritual knowledge to manipulate the spirit world so that things would go God’s way. This concept of discernment that makes it out to be a mystical ability to view into the unseen spirit world has many counterparts in the occult, but it is not what **Hebrews 5:14** is about. The example of the author of the book of Hebrews was to use Biblical passages to correct error, warn against sin, urge to faith, and differentiate truth from falsehood. One need not enter an altered state of consciousness to exercise this type of discernment.

Thomas Hewitt comments on **Hebrews 5:14** and how one gains the discernment that comes with maturity, “It is gained by the regular exercise of the spiritual faculties in the Word of God and in the doctrines of the Christian faith, for there is no easy way to spiritual maturity. From this position those of *full age* can discern both good and evil; they have an exact, or right, judgment in all things. When different viewpoints are placed before them they can at once distinguish the good from the evil, the right from the wrong.”¹⁶

The word “discern” means “to judge or distinguish between.” The immature are more easily deceived. This is why people warn small children not to talk to strangers. They cannot distinguish between a person who is legitimate and one who has bad intentions. Discernment is the ability to make necessary distinctions. According to our verses in **Hebrews 5**, it comes from the study and application of Scripture.

Discernment and the

In the book of Genesis, the Serpent tempted Eve to partake of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, claiming that she would not die as God said but would become like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:4,5). This deception was believed and the entire human race plunged into spiritual and moral darkness. The knowledge gained was not the type of knowledge of good and evil that **Hebrews 5:14** urges. It was the opposite. The lie of Satan (“you shall be like God”) obliterated necessary categories. Since its first reception by gullible humans, it has caused them to fail to distinguish between the most important categories. “For they exchanged the truth of God for a [lit. the] lie, and worshiped and served the creature

rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (**Romans 1:25**). Rather than gaining the ability to differentiate good from evil, they gained an experiential knowledge of evil from which God was shielding them. This knowledge led to creature worship, the ultimate deception. Like the Evil One, they sought to transgress the boundaries and erase the line between themselves and God.

Biblical discernment is the ability to judge between truth and error, right and wrong, good and evil. The knowledge of good and evil offered by the forbidden tree was a rebellious, experiential knowledge of evil that destroyed discernment and led to the erasure of God ordained categories. The big lie of the New Age movement is that there are no valid categories. “All is one” they say. The creation is the Creator and we are “gods,” only we do not know it. They claim that all apparent categories are illusions. This is a prescription for the ultimate deception. There really, then, would be nothing to discern since good and evil are one.

Too Many Categories?

Many Christians are taken in by this thinking. Some have told me, “you have too many categories.” They think categories are bad and resist study, because the more you study the more distinctions between finer points you can make. What they do not understand is that they are promoting perpetual, spiritual infancy. A baby distinguishes few categories. As a child grows, he learns to identify more categories. We consider this good progress and if it is not happening we bring the child for testing to see what is wrong.

All education and progress require discernment in the sense that identifying and typifying categories is involved. For example, the difference between a paramedic and a brain surgeon is in the number of categories that can be discerned. The one is able to see that an injury has occurred and perhaps that the brain has been affected. The other is able to deal with the workings of the human brain down to the microscopic level, distinguishing myriads of different anatomical entities and functions. All education involves identifying, understanding, naming, and working with an increasingly complex series of categories. This is why it is hard work, “exercise.” If one chooses to remain an infant throughout life, then very few categories need to be understood:

mommy, daddy, food, sleep, comfort, etc. are all that is needed.

In order to “discern good and evil” as **Hebrews 5:14** exhorts, study and hard work that result in maturity are necessary. Many more Biblically defined categories can then be distinguished. Before the author of Hebrews began his parenthetical exhortation about infancy and maturity, he was showing his readers the difference between the Melchizedek and Aaronic priesthood and their typological ramifications concerning the high priesthood of Jesus the Messiah. He realized that these were more categories that his immature, Christian readers cared to be concerned about. Perpetual infants go so far and stop, having no hunger to learn more about the faith.

How many Christians in modern, American, Evangelical churches would attend a lecture on the typological significance of Melchizedek and Aaron with regard to the priestly ministry of our Lord? A few perhaps, but church growth experts warn against emphasizing such things. What we may not realize is that discernment is lacking because we do not care about this and numerous other Biblical issues. This is one reason why cults and charlatan preachers prosper, recruiting many of their followers from our own ranks.

Heeding the Warning

The warning of **Hebrews 5:11-14** is clear. The need for maturity and discernment is evident. The Holy Spirit inspired this passage and preserved it for us (as with all other Scripture) for “. . . for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (**2Timothy 3:16b,17**). The idea that study, Biblical education, and doctrine are superfluous or even harmful is creating a generation of perpetual infants.

The author of Hebrews entreats, “let us press on to maturity” (**Hebrews 6:1**). Pressing on to maturity is God's answer to the problem of perpetual infancy. **Hebrews 6** contains a vivid and frightening warning against apostasy. A failure to press on to maturity creates a severe danger to those who do not heed this Biblical call.

God will give grace to help us obey the Holy Spirit's call to grow up. If we respond to it, we will be equipped for the

work of the ministry and can be sure that God will use us in these perilous times.

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End Notes

1. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1933) Vol. V. page 371.

2. Thomas Hewitt, The Epistle to the Hebrews, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) page 101.

3. Joseph H. Thayer, Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) page 250.

4. op. cit., Robertson.

5. op. cit., Hewitt.

6. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) Vol. 4, page 684.

7. *ibid.*

8. Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971 [written 1886]) Vol. I, pages 231-232.

9. *ibid.* page 232.

10. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, edited by G. Kittel & G. Friedrich, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) Vol IV., page 432.

11. *ibid.*

12. *ibid.*, page 433.

13. *ibid.*

14. *ibid.*, page 434.

15. *ibid.*, page 436 note 161.

16. op. cit., Hewitt, page 102.

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