



Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

MARCH/APRIL 2007

ISSUE NUMBER 99

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Unbiblical Teachings on Prayer and Experiencing God How Mysticism Misleads Christians

BY BOB DEWAAY

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15, 16)

To a Christian, praying to God is privilege, a blessing, and a Biblically defined responsibility. We are called to pray. But a genre of literature exists that I call “prayer secrets.” Practitioners claim to have discovered new avenues of prayer that can create power, excitement, success, and even new revelations from God. These “prayer secrets” add unbiblical practices and claims to prayer in the hope of spicing up the topic to make it more interesting. And this is not a new development; mystical practices have been brought into the church under the guise of prayer since medieval times.

However, since these teachings change in form and packaging, I will review three books about prayer and “experiencing God” subjectively. What they have in common is a form of pietism that promises better things than to go before the throne of grace to find help in time of need, as well as other basic Biblical teachings on prayer.

Experiencing God by Henry T. Blackaby

Blackaby’s book, co-authored by Claude King, promises readers that they can come to know God by experience and come to know God’s will beyond what is revealed in Scripture, thereby living out a life full of adventure.¹ Blackaby promises his readers that they will, among other things, learn to hear God speaking to

them and learn to identify God’s activities.² He promises to alleviate their problem of being frustrated with their Christian experience.

Experiencing God does start out with some basic facts about the gospel and has a place for people to check to indicate that they have made a “decision for Jesus.” I am glad he told his readers about such things as sin and repentance but am disappointed in the “make a decision for Jesus” approach. We have addressed that elsewhere.³ But having checked the appropriate box, the reader is quickly ushered into the realm of subjectivity that permeates Blackaby’s approach from beginning to end. For example, we are urged to evaluate our “present experience with God.”⁴ However, I have known people who are totally deceived and in bondage to false doctrine who are very excited about their experience with God, so such evaluation doesn’t do much good. For example, I once met a pastor who just returned from the Toronto laughing revival and was so very excited because he had seen “God” cause people to bark like dogs and quack like ducks. That is just one example why what one thinks about his own “experience with God” is immaterial. What we need to know are the terms God has laid down for knowing Him and walking faithfully with Him.

In Blackaby’s theology, the importance of God’s self-revelation through

the Scriptures is de-emphasized while personal experience is given priority. He writes, “We come to know God as we experience Him. God reveals Himself through our experience of Him at work in our lives.”⁵ I am not disputing that God is at work in our lives if we have truly been converted. But, like other subjectivists, Blackaby de-emphasizes specific revelation (Scripture) and puts unwarranted emphasis on general revelation (what can be observed in the created order). Our personal, spiritual experiences are unreliable. People observing general revelation and interpreting their own spiritual experiences in light of it have created the host of the world’s false religions.

For example, Blackaby writes, “Find out what the Master is doing—then that is what you need to be doing.”⁶ Here he suggests that by observing what is around us and studying human history we can determine God’s will. He further suggests that God reveals His will by some process in history—that He hasn’t revealed it once for all. But this subjective approach cannot reveal God’s moral law which is His revealed will. Someone’s estimate of “what God is doing” is likely to be based on their own prejudices and inclinations. Let’s look at another example. Consider a person who believes the social gospel. If they see a situation where social services are being provided, they will conclude that they are witnessing “what God is doing.” In the previous example of the laughing revival, that pastor was a charismatic. His thinking led him to believe that anything that appears to have a supernatural cause done in the context of a Christian meeting must be “what God is doing.” So he saw people behaving oddly in such a context and joined it so as to participate in God’s activities. Subjective evaluations can lead to falsely attributing things to God that in fact are not from God.

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God's providence unfolding in history is what we actually observe. But providence contains good and evil. We cannot know what God's revealed will is by observing providence. We can only know His will through inerrant, infallible, special revelation—Scripture. Even our dreams and inner impressions are part of providence and they too are a mixture of good and evil (and indifferent). They do not reveal what God is doing or His will for our lives.

Blackaby fails to distinguish these categories, and thus uses stories of God revealing things to prophets and apostles in the Bible to suggest that these experiences should be normative for us. For example he includes a section about Moses, not to prove that Moses was an authoritative spokesperson for God, but to prove that God expects all of us to gain revelation like Moses did. This is false, and we have shown it to be false in a recent article.⁷ In the Moses section of his book Blackaby writes, "His desire is to get us from where we are to where He is working. When God reveals to you where He is working, that becomes His invitation to join Him."⁸

Such a search for "where God is working" makes no sense. God is working always everywhere as He holds all things together by "*the word of His power*" (**Hebrews 1:3**). Blackaby's concept "where God is working" is vague. Is he talking about geography? God's revealed will is to preach the gospel to all people everywhere. God works through the gospel to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment and to convert those who will be saved. There is no place off-limits, and this great work of God is not limited by geography. Blackaby's kind of thinking causes people get on airplanes scurrying to the latest hot "revival." But how do they know God wants them in Pensacola, for example, chasing a spiritual experience rather than preaching the gospel where they live? The simple answer: they don't.

Blackaby's book is filled with claims that we all need personal revelations from God, that these are binding upon us, and that if we do not gain these "words from God" we are going to fail God and live frustrated and empty lives. He claims that we are to obey these

words seemingly without question: "When you do what He tells you, no matter how insensible it may seem, God accomplishes what He purposed through you. Not only do you experience God's power and presence, but so do those who observe what you are doing."⁹ This is simply wrong and is a version of works righteousness.

All that I can possibly know as God's binding, authoritative will is what God TOLD me (Scripture) not what God "tells" me (subjective ideas that may or may not be from God). It is abusive to bind people to non-authoritative, fallible words (even insensible ones) and tell them that obeying such words is the key to God's presence in their lives. This, in my opinion, is an attack against the gospel. We have the promise of God's presence because of what He did for us through the cross, not because we have become mystics following ideas that enter our minds which we decided might be from Him. But Blackaby reiterates, "Obey whatever God tells you to do."¹⁰ So, on that point I think I'll choose to follow his advice based on what I know God has told me in the Scriptures. I know God told me not to listen to people who teach false doctrine; I am going to obey that and not listen to Blackaby.

Beyond promoting these personal revelations as laws to be obeyed (as if they were God's revealed moral law), he further claims they are also infallible: "When we come to God to know what He is about to do where we are, we also come with the assurance that what God indicates He is about to do is certain to come to pass."¹¹ This is another problem, because the only things certain to come to pass are those God has predicted in Scripture. Personal revelations that we think might be from God are not certainly from God [we can't be sure they are] and they will not "certainly come to pass." Blackaby calls this type of word "revelation": "When He opens your spiritual eyes to see where He is at work, that revelation is your invitation to join Him."¹² Subjective impressions are now to be considered revelation? This approach could lead to every imaginable error.

Blackaby makes personal revelations not only binding (they must be obeyed)

and infallible (certain), but he also declares that they are necessary for everyone's spiritual well-being: "If the Christian does not know when God is speaking, he is in trouble at the heart of his Christian life!"¹³ Furthermore, he says, "If you have been given a word from God, you must continue in that direction until it comes to pass (even twenty five years like Abraham)." That means that if someone should get one of these "words from God" and if it actually was not from God, he would be obligated to follow whatever foolhardy, insensible path the "word" led him down. Such teaching, in my opinion, is foolish and abusive to the flock.

God physically appeared to Abraham many times as "the angel of the Lord." Abraham received special revelations. We don't. We do not have the same certainty that our subjective impressions are "the word of the Lord." Amazingly, Blackaby sees the problem with his approach but still presses on with it: "If you have not been given a word from God yet you say you have, you stand in judgment as a false prophet . . . [cites Deut. 18:21-22]."¹⁴ EXACTLY! That is the very claim I made in the last issue of *CIC*.¹⁵ If these personal words from God are taken as binding, and we speak them to ourselves and they are not totally accurate, we have become false prophets to our own selves. Blackaby evidently agrees, yet he pushes on.

The flaws of Blackaby's subjectivism are rather obvious when you examine his claims objectively. God's revealed will is not found by subjective experiences, but in Scripture. Looking around in the world hoping to discover "where God is working" is impossible since God is always working everywhere as He providentially brings history along toward His ultimate purposes. We will be fooled by our own prejudices because we think "God working" must look something like whatever our religious inclinations tell us it will look like. Furthermore, he has elevated fallible words that may or may not be from God to the level of infallible Scripture and elevated every believer to the status of Moses and Abraham as recipients of special revelation. Following his approach is not how we "experience God." We cannot not know

if we are experiencing God in any way other than to come to Him on His own terms, by faith. When we do, we are assured that God is with us no matter what experiences we have.

Body Prayer by Doug Pagitt

Doug Pagitt, Emergent Church leader, wrote a book (coauthored by Kathryn Prill) that claims that using various body postures can bring people closer to God and deepen one's life of prayer.¹⁶ Here is an example of some of the claims of this book:

Engaging the body in acts of being present with God, including certain ceremonial practices, opens us up to God in new ways. People of faith in ancient times understood that such physical acts and practices as rest and worship, dietary restrictions, and mandated fabric in their wardrobes were of great value to their faith and life.¹⁷

The problem is that the Bible says that these types of practices are of NO value:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)-- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:20-23)

Furthermore, creating dietary restrictions for religious reasons is called a "doctrine of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1-5).

Pagitt claims that we can connect with God through body prayers. He calls his approach a "deeper" form of prayer: "This book is meant to be a companion and a guide into deeper forms of prayer;

this book is not a specific prescription of how prayer must be done."¹⁸ I appreciate that he does not claim that these postures are mandatory. But that introduces an important question—if his postures are not mandated by Scripture (and they are not) how can they be "deeper" than the sort of prayer the Bible does teach? Such claims are the problem with all the "prayer secrets" books. Why is praying to God in the manner taught in Scripture so inadequate that people need to discover new practices that are superior to those Jesus and His apostles taught? Would God withhold something so good and important to all but those spiritual innovators who discover the secret? The Bible says, "*Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence*" (2 Peter 1:3). God did not forget to reveal to the Biblical writers key practices we need.

Pagitt teaches the same "breath prayers" that we have discussed in other articles:

As you begin to pray, close your eyes. Then inhale and exhale with deep breaths. Put your hands in a comfortable position—consider turning both hands palms up. Notice the tension in your head ... and let it go as you take in a deep breath ... and then exhale. Notice the tension in your shoulders and let it go, again by breathing in and then out. Notice the tension in your stomach and let it go. Move down your body doing the same.¹⁹

Concentrating on one's breath is a way to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Jesus told us to ask the Father in His name, which we can do when fully conscious and requires no prior stress relief practice.

Some of the postures are similar in that they seem more like a technique for self awareness. One is pressing fingertips together: "There is a theory that pressing each fingertip to its corresponding fingertip activates a certain portion of our brain. Also, it is one of the gentlest ways to feel our own pulse."²⁰ Doing some of

these practices is even confused with reconciliation which one comes through the finished work of Christ received by faith:

Start in a sitting position. Then use your arms to push your body up so you are standing. Inhale deeply through your mouth. Let your shoulders fall, release any stress in the top of your legs, and let your hips fall forward. Feel pressure on the bottom of your feet—and in that space alone. Keep breathing deeply. Allow the deep breaths to prepare you and arm you for the work of reconciliation.²¹

Reconciliation does not happen through some physical process, but through Christ's blood atonement which we have received by faith (Romans 5:9-11).

It is not surprising, given the theology of the Emergent Church, that Pagitt's approach is infused with theological immanence at the expense of transcendence. He writes, "So we extend to the rest of the world this hope: that good will be saved and increased and that God's dreams will be done on earth as they are in heaven."²² Pagitt claims that we are co-re-creators of the world: "God is never finished with creation, and God is never finished with us. We are constantly being re-created, and we are invited to join God as co-re-creators of the world."²³ There is no cataclysmic, future judgment of the cosmos in the theology of most Emergent Church leaders. Rather God is working in the world to transform it into a better place through the processes of history.

Pagitt's terminology reflects a rather panentheistic worldview that is infused with God in some not totally explained way:

There is a rhythm to life. We find it in the ocean tides, in the rising and setting of the sun, in the beating of our hearts. And there is a rhythm of God—a rhythm that encompasses life, both the life we can readily see and the unseen life of the spirit. The rhythm of God beckons us, guide

us, and dwells in us.²⁴

This highly immanent theology implies that God is in the creation to be discovered, and not as the transcendent One who can only be known by His self-revelation in the authoritative Scriptures and in Christ who came in the flesh and ascended into heaven. Pagitt says, "As those who are created in the image of God, we are endowed with this rhythm."²⁵ Since all human beings are created in God's image this is a universal statement, not limited to those who have been converted through the gospel. He continues, "We can find it [the rhythm of God] step into it, and live in it. This is the kingdom of God—to live in sync with the rhythm of God."²⁶

Sadly, the processes of "body prayer" described in this book reflect a theology that is gleaned not from authoritative Scripture but from creative efforts to create a version of prayer that is in keeping with the sensibilities of the postmodern culture. Key ideas that the Bible teaches about prayer (coming to God on His terms, grace for sinners, how we have access to God only because of the blood atonement, that God hears Christians who ask according to His will, etc.) are missing from this book. The techniques and teachings found in the book are not taught in the Bible. So the bigger question is whether God has spoken and revealed how we can come to Him or whether the means of access to God are discovered in the creation. Pagitt and his co-author leave us searching for the "rhythm of God" in the creation by means God has not ordained.

Prayer Quest by Dee Duke

The subtitle to this book is "Breaking through to your God-given dreams and destiny." Duke speaks of our dreams and God's dreams throughout his book. In the Bible God gave dreams to certain people. Those dreams, if interpreted by an infallible prophet, revealed God's will and God plans. In the Bible, the dreams were from God, but they were not God's dreams. They were the dreams of the people who dreamt them (for example Nebuchadnezzar's in Daniel 2). Here we

have to add a point of clarification: Only the dreams that are interpreted in the Bible by God's prophets and spokespersons can be considered to authoritatively reveal God's will.

The term "dream" in English can mean "hope for an ideal future," as in, "I have a dream." This denotes the hope for some better state of affairs that may or may not come into existence. Duke, in his book, is clearly not using the term in the Biblical sense as a dream a person has that has been interpreted by an authoritative prophet. Instead he says, "He calls us *now* to dream His dreams, to ask Him daily to display His power."²⁷ Duke is speaking of a hoped for future when he uses the term "dream":

Welcome to the reality where dreams come true! God has a dream, and it is certain to happen just as He imagines it. He has placed the stamp of His image on our souls, so that we also dream great dreams. As we learn to passionately share and enjoy God's dreams, we will see Him work in amazing ways . . .²⁸

This statement involves some serious category problems. Supposedly God's dream is His imagination about the future. We (all humans evidently because all humans are created in God's image) can dream like God. Either this is anthropomorphism run amok or some seriously bad theology. God is the one who says this about Himself: "*Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'*" (Isaiah 46:9, 10). God does not dream, He decrees. God calls things into being and works all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). He doesn't imagine a potential future that may or may not happen.

Concerning us, the only thing we know about what God "dreams" (using Duke's terminology) is what is revealed in Scripture. Our own dreams about what we would like the future to bring

are not going to make God do anything. Duke says, "This book is intended to help you learn to walk so intimately with God that you will see Him fulfill His dreams in and through you."²⁹ This brings us back to the typical "prayer secret" genre of Christian writing. Supposedly there is some key to "intimacy with God" that is not based on the once-for-all finished work of Christ, not based on availing ourselves of the means of grace by faith, but based on our own level of personal piety and the use of practices not revealed in the Bible.

Duke asks his readers, "Do you feel as though you've given up on dreams you had when your faith was new?" The implication is that our "dreams" (i.e., hopes for an ideal or optimal future) somehow authoritatively reveal God's will and that we must make these come to pass by some process. But our ideas about what we hope life will be like are nothing more than ideas and may have nothing to do with God's purposes. Our dreams are part of providence, but providence contains good and evil. Duke is treating personal imaginations about the future as if they were infallible guidance to be nurtured and followed. But personal dreams are not God's moral law.

Here is a further definition of what Duke means by "dream,"

A dream is a desire felt so strongly that we think and meditate on it constantly until we see it in our mind as clearly as if it were reality. A dream believes that what is desired will happen; it is accomplished by anticipation and positive expectation. People who dream tend to be upbeat and enthusiastic.³⁰

This is a very much the type of mind over matter thinking that has enjoyed popularity in self-help circles.

He gives people some practical guidance on releasing their "imagination" in prayer: "Envision yourself embarking on a day trip into the presence of God. . . . Envision yourself approaching God in His glory."³¹ This is strikingly similar to guided imagery. He gives more examples of how to manage your dream time with God, including making lists of dream

notes. This is a journey into the subjective realm under the guise of “prayer.”

Much bad teaching comes into the church by route of mysticism, subjectivism, and having faulty theological categories. In previous articles I carefully defined categories to help my readers avoid these pitfalls. Risking redundancy, I must again assert that there is God’s revealed will in Scripture as well as God’s providential will (containing good and evil) that is revealed as history unfolds. Though Duke wants us to dream God’s dreams about the future, he admits that these dreams we might have come from various sources. He lists thoughts from God, your own thoughts, thoughts from the world, and thoughts from Satan.³² His readers are supposed to sort through their dream notes to find ones that they think are from God. But how? God’s future providential will is not revealed and cannot be known until it unfolds in history. Our dreams about the future cannot be determined to be from God by any means available to us because they are not revealed in Scripture.

Duke reveals his lack of Biblical understanding when he cites the scripture, “My sheep know my voice,” as proof that we can figure out which of our dreams is God’s voice. That passage in John 10 is about those whom the Father has given to the Son and who consequently will respond to the gospel and follow Christ, not about listening to various subjective voices in our heads and trying to figure out which one sounds the most like Christ.

There is no need to belabor how bad this book is theologically. It starts from a series of faulty premises and bad theology and builds from there a concept of prayer that is not taught in the Bible. The term “dream” as he uses it is basically the idea of one’s imagination. The Bible tells us about those who speak in this manner: “*Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the Lord.’*” (Jeremiah 23:16).

That a publishing house like Navpress produced this book shows how little discernment there is in the evangelical movement these days.

Conclusion

God has not left us to fish around in the world of spirits and subjective experiences to know Him and speak to Him. God send His Son, who pre-existed as God and with God, to be born of a virgin and live in history in the flesh. The apostles heard Him, touched Him and saw Him (see **1John 1:1-3**). He died for sins on the cross, shedding His blood to avert God’s wrath against our sin. He was bodily raised on the third day and He bodily ascended into heaven where He sits at the right hand of the Father. Before He left He promised His followers that they could ask the Father anything in His name. He inspired eyewitnesses to write His inerrant words so that we would know the truth from Him. The Bible promises us that He hears us. It doesn’t give us a set of techniques to hear inner voices and call these techniques “prayer.”

The mystics are confident that their extra-biblical techniques and extra-biblical experiences are certainly from God and are making more pious Christians than those of us who only have prayer as taught in the Bible and the Word of God to go by. Having discovered the secrets to increased piety and “intimacy with God,” they write books so that others can become similarly “enlightened” and be saved from their “ordinary” Christian lives. Dear readers, they are selling you a bill of goods. They are not infallible apostles and prophets, they do not speak authoritatively for God, their theology is unbiblical, and their practices are not ordained by God. I have touched on three examples of this approach but there have been literally thousands of them in church history. The simple application is this: do not listen to them. They can only deceive you; they cannot make you more holy or pleasing to God. Only the finished work of Christ and His ordained means of grace can do that.

End Notes

1. Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994). For simplicity, I will refer to Blackaby as

the author with no slight intended to King as the co-author.

2. Ibid. 4.
3. see *CIC* issue 73.
4. Blackaby 5.
5. Ibid. 9.
6. Ibid. 48.
7. see *CIC* issue 97
8. Blackaby 55.
9. Ibid. 61.
10. Ibid. 63.
11. Ibid. 128.
12. Ibid. 129.
13. Ibid. 132.
14. Ibid. 140.
15. see *CIC* issue 98.
16. Doug Pagitt and Kathryn Prill, *Body Prayer*, (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2005) For simplicity I will refer to Pagitt as the author with no slight intended to Prill as the co-author.
17. Ibid. 3.
18. Ibid. 8.
19. Ibid. 11.
20. Ibid. 36.
21. Ibid. 53.
22. Ibid. 103.
23. Ibid. 27.
24. Ibid. 127.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Dee Duke, *Prayer Quest*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004) 11.
28. Ibid. 15.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. 26.
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32. Ibid. 29

Critical Issues Commentary

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Published by Gospel of Grace Fellowship
www.cicministry.org
www.gospelofgracefellowship.org

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Discerning Discernment

The Meaning and Significance of Hebrews 5:12-14 in the Christian's Call of Discernment by Ryan Habbena

"What's your spiritual gift?" I have heard this question asked and answered many times. In my experience, the most common response to this inquiry is: "I have the gift of *discernment*." When asked what this means, the person often answers, "I can automatically tell when something is evil."

The Scriptures speak to the subject of discernment in various ways. While the Bible indeed affirms "discernment" as a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:10),¹ the truth is that *all* Christians are called to be "discerners" (see 1 John 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). The question then naturally follows: "How do we acquire the ability to discern?" There are those who would answer in unison with the above example, simply stating: "I just know it my heart! I just know."

Note, for instance, Neal Anderson's take on this subject: "Spiritual discernment is our first line of defense against deception. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in every believer, and He is not silent when we encounter the counterfeit. Discernment is that little 'buzzer' that goes off inside when something is wrong."² While the Holy Spirit has indeed taken up residence in every believer, rather than relying upon an automatic, subjective "buzzer" that is supposed to "go off inside," we are informed in Hebrews that believers are equipped with discernment via different means.

Hebrews 5:12-14 speaks directly to this subject. In what follows I will engage in some "basic exposition" on this central text regarding discernment. Following this I will apply its teaching to how we *all* are called to be trained discerners in order to avoid the deception that surrounds us.

The Context of Hebrews 5:12-14

The author of Hebrews³ recognized the danger in the midst of his readers. Many who repented and believed in Jesus the Messiah were being tempted to return to

the stipulations and practices of the Mosaic Covenant. Those who had the yoke of the Law removed needed to be warned against apostasy in order to stand firm in the word of Jesus Christ. In both comforting and convicting fashion, the author of Hebrews systematically demonstrates that Jesus is superior to all that was held dear under the Old Covenant. He is greater than the prophets who came before Him (vs. 1:1-2), He is greater than the angels (vs. 1:4-13), He is greater than Moses (vs. 3:1-6), and He is greater than the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood (chapters 5-10). In establishing his case and exhorting his readers, the author wants to teach his readers about the significance of Jesus being of the priestly "order of Melchizedek" but laments: "Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing" (Hebrews 5:11). This, in turn, brings us to the significant passage pertaining to discernment.

Expounding Hebrews 5:12-14

"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." (verse 12)

Good Biblical interpretation will examine context and usage to discover meaning and function.⁴ In light of this, the author's use of imagery in this text must be carefully considered. He first notes his frustration at their spiritual "*dullness of hearing*" which indicates an inability to receive further instruction.⁵ Shifting metaphors, he then uses food imagery to describe the word of God and further diagnose their condition. The need for "*milk*" in this context is an indictment of the reader's spiritual maturity.⁶ Needing "*milk*" indicates spiritual *infancy*.⁷ Just what is "*milk*" and "*solid food*" in this context? Recalling the brief discussion in chapter 5 prior to this text, and looking forward to what will be resumed in

chapters 7-10, the author wishes to teach his readers about Jesus' priesthood. This entails going in-depth regarding the order of Melchizedek, biblical typology and fulfillment, and applying the significance of these truths to their current situation. These theological truths are considered "meaty stuff" and, thus, solid food. These truths were necessary to hear, understand, and heed, in order to avoid the temptation in their midst – returning to the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant.

"Milk," on the other hand, is synonymous with the "*elementary principles of the oracles of God*" (vs. 12). These would be considered the "basics" one learns upon initiation into New Covenant community. Many have postulated as to what specifically the author is referring to with this phrase.⁸ The most compelling definition comes through reading the immediate context. In chapter 6:1-2, the author exhorts: "Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment." (Hebrews 6:1-2)

These are the "elementary principles" of the New Covenant. These are the "foundation" of the faith. These truths are the "milk" of which all believers partake. The problem was that of perpetual infancy. Commentator George Guthrie well notes that the author of Hebrews is "describing in no uncertain terms a level of immaturity among his readers. Spiritually they are like babies still suckling at a mother's breast, unconcerned with the rich, hearty foods of the adults' table."⁹ Rather than remaining in this infantile state, the call is to *maturity*. This leads to the further admonition: "For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:13, 14).

In this portion of the text the author

makes clear his concern regarding maturity: Only partaking in the “milk” of the elementary principles of the faith stunts spiritual growth. What then is the solution to this state of “spiritual infancy?” The answer? Become accustomed to the “**word of righteousness.**” The believer in Christ is called to grow in order to be able to process and be nourished by “solid food.” The author of Hebrews has carefully constructed this “word” throughout the flow of the epistle. This “word” was referred to in the introduction of the letter, and subsequently at the beginning of chapter two:

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world . . .” (Hebrews 1:1-2)

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard.” (Hebrews 2:1-3)

Thus, given the context of the epistle, the “**word of righteousness**” is the message of the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is the message that comes from the righteous One and produces righteousness in those who respond in faith. This message entails the teachings of Christ, His Apostles and Prophets,¹⁰ and the proper view of the Old Testament in light of the coming of the Messiah. In our contemporary context, it is the Scriptures, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments upon which the Holy Spirit has placed His seal. We are called to become “**accustomed**” to this word spoken through Christ – to become well acquainted with the Scriptures. The way we become accustomed is through the “**practice**” of engaging the word.¹¹ This produces the ability to “**discern good and**

evil.”

Discernment is presented at the culmination of the admonition. Again, we must allow the context to speak to what the object of discernment, “good and evil,” meant to the original audience. Discerning of *moral* good and evil certainly comes through devotion to the word and is implied in this text, however “good and evil” has a more specific application in this passage. The Hebrew Christians who were being tempted to return to the terms of the Old Covenant knew the moral stipulations of the Law well. What they lacked, however, was the ability to discern what was permissible and what was forbidden now that age of Messianic salvation had arrived. They needed their “**senses trained,**” (their rational faculties) through growing in the teachings of the New Covenant. This is in accordance with the overall intent of the epistle – to teach them what had been “bound” and what had been “loosed” under the terms of the New Covenant.¹² Thus, the way to discernment was laid out: Become well-acquainted with the message of Christ and see all things through His perfect, completed work.

What Maturity Produces

As we consider this admonition we do well to note the author’s central concern: The people of God are called to grow in the knowledge of *Jesus Christ*. He wasn’t calling them to move past or away from the Gospel. He still recognized that faith and repentance towards God was “foundational” (6:1). His desire was for the *maturity* of his readers *in the Gospel*.¹³ When we become well-acquainted with the sovereign power and sufficient work of Jesus Christ through the word, discernment is cultivated and deception is avoided. Be sure, the aim of maturity in the word of God is not simply the accumulation of academic knowledge. Rather, the aim is to become well-acquainted with the person and perfect work of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures, spanning from Genesis to Revelation, are the account of God’s purpose to save through His promise.¹⁴ And as Paul proclaimed regarding Jesus: “*For as many as are the promises of God, in*

Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us” (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Growing in the Word: The Way to Discernment

The applications that arise from Hebrews 5:12-14 are convicting. This passage speaks to the prime reason why discernment is lacking and deception is rampant in the church. We are failing to grow in the Spirit-led means of discernment – devotion to the word of God. This passage indicts the seeker-sensitive streams of Christianity that strain out any difficult or deemed “offensive” Scriptures and thus neglect the whole counsel of God. This passage indicts the contemplative and emergent streams of Christianity that toss aside pure devotion to the word and place man-made practices and philosophies in its stead; thus neglecting the means God has chosen to train His people for godly living. Ultimately, this passage reveals every believer’s urgent need to be trained for discernment through faithful devotion to the Scriptures.

Discernment comes through training. When Christians fall prey to deception we should not think it is because an automatic buzzer has failed to sound. Rather, it is because *we fail* to avail ourselves of what God has provided to train us in discernment. The thoughts, world-views, and beliefs of this world have been embedded in our minds. This is every person’s “default position” until regeneration occurs. When we believe in the Gospel, the battle for our minds *begins*. Because of this reality, we are called to the transformation that comes through the power of the word: “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).*

Since all of eternity will not exhaust the depths of the word of God, there certainly is no point in this life where we have “arrived,” where we may cease our growth through feeding upon God’s word. No matter where one is at in Christian maturity, we *all* need to continue to grow in the knowledge and

grace of Jesus Christ. Doing so will train our senses for discernment and cause His word to be hidden in our hearts so we will not sin against our Savior.

May we all then heed the call that is for our own safety and spiritual growth:

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And this we will do, if God permits. (Hebrews 6:1-3)

End Notes

1. An in-depth discussion of this gift and the related question of the continuation/cessation of spiritual gifts is beyond the scope of this work. For a more in-depth discussion of the “discerning of spirits” see: CIC issue 81. For an examination of the continuation/cessationist debate of spiritual gifts see CIC issue 47.
2. Neil T. Anderson; *The Bondage Breaker*; (Harvest House: Eugene, 2000) 179.
3. As opposed to most other books of the Bible, there is no clear consensus regarding the authorship of Hebrews. Apollos, Barnabas, Silas, and Paul have been four of the most popular speculated authors. However, since the author does not identify himself, and other means of determining authorship (historical and linguistic studies) are inconclusive, the mystery of the authorship of Hebrews remains.
4. “Function” is an interpretive term that refers to how a particular author is intending to use a certain term, event, or theological idea in their respective theological purpose in writing.
5. The historical and biblical concept of “hearing” in the midst of Hebrew Christians is to be seen as underlying this rebuke (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:3-4, Mark 12:29). “Hearing” did not simply entail “taking in” and understanding the information proclaimed, but also a faithful response to the call.
6. Peter also uses the concept of “milk” in his first epistle. “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). Where “needing milk” in Hebrews is pejorative, “longing for milk” is positive in 1 Peter. This demonstrates the diverse “function” of the “milk” imagery in each respective context.
7. Lane compellingly argues that the author is using irony to call the original audience out of their spiritual dullness. He argues that in “vv 11-14 the writer uses irony effectively to summon the house church to resume their status as adults with its attendant responsibilities.” William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8: Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 139.
8. MacArthur argues this should be understood as the basic principles of the Old Testament. John MacArthur, *Hebrews: The MacArthur New Testament Commentaries* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983) 132-133. Guthrie, however, sketches compelling reasons to take these as the basic teachings at the beginning of Christian commitment: He writes: “Two other parts of verse 12 suggest that the author has in mind basic teachings, perhaps offered at the beginning of one’s Christian commitment. (1) He states that the hearers need these basic lessons “again” (*palin*), a word that in the context points to a time in the past which they all did receive the instruction . . . (2) The woodenly translated phrase . . . contains the word “beginning” (*arche*). This word adds emphasis to the rudimentary nature of the teachings.” George H Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 202. This combined with the parallelism of 6:1 well establishes the Christian nature of these “elementary principles.”
9. Guthrie, 202.
10. Ephesians 2:20 tells us of foundation of the church being the proclamation of the New Covenant through Christ the cornerstone and the “Apostles” and “Prophets.” Apostles, in this context, were those who were specifically commissioned by Christ to carry His message and were witnesses to His resurrection. “Prophets,” in this context, were those who were given revelation to further expound the ramifications and implications of the salvific work of Christ. These, “foundational” Apostles and Prophets were used by the Spirit to establish the “faith delivered one for all,” and thus have no equivalent after their ministries were fulfilled. See CIC issue 66 for further commentary.
11. See Lane, 131 note h, for reasons why this term implies “activity” rather than a “state.”
12. Contrary to much of the modern Christian usage of the terms “binding and loosing,” the biblical usage of these terms referred to the “forbidding and permitting” of things under the New Covenant by Christ and His representatives. See CIC issues 1 & 2.
13. Lane notes regarding this dynamic: “When the writer urges his readers to leave standing . . . the elementary Christian teaching, he is not dismissing it but regarding it as so well established that the urgent need is a fuller appreciation and application of that teaching” (Lane, 139).
14. The first instance of the promise of Messianic salvation is given in Genesis 3:15. This promise runs through the Bible being fulfilled by Christ and finally proclaimed by Him in Revelation 22:16.

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