

## Arrested Development

11 of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits. (Heb. 5:11-6:3)

One of those candid camera pranks once put together a joke using a baby pram. They modified it so that an adult man could kneel or sit, and his torso and limbs would be hidden, but only his head and face would protrude from the pram. They then placed it in a mall, and put a baby blanket over the front concealing his face. They placed the sound of a baby crying, and inevitably, some concerned and compassionate lady would see this pram apparently abandoned and come over, and gently lift up the blanket. On every occasion, when the woman saw a bearded man with a beanie and a dummy in his mouth, she would scream and jump back in shock and horror before laughing. The sight of a grown man's face where a baby's should be actually caused fright, so jarring was it, followed by amusement when the women realised it was absurd, and had to be a prank.

The reason it invites shock and laughter is because a grown man in a cot is ridiculous. If it were not a joke, it would be a tragedy. In medicine, there is a broad term for a number of conditions called *arrested development*, when something should have matured, and hasn't, when something should have taken place, and has not. It is always sad to find that the passing of time hasn't brought a natural development that one wanted to see.

It's never more tragic than in the spiritual realm, where arrested development is not a condition you are born with, it is a condition you bring upon yourself. That kind of spiritual arrested development is what this passage deals with.

Just as the writer is about to plunge deeper into the discussion of Jesus being like Melchizedek, he stops for a pastoral and practical reason. He apparently knew many of these readers and knew their spiritual state. He can picture their eyes glazing over, getting the faraway stare that so many Christians have perfected while listening to sermons, wherein the listener is able to look at the preacher and yet through the preacher, outwardly looking like a listener, while inwardly scampering away to some other mental playground.

He knows his listeners have spiritual problems, and it gives him the opportunity to divert from his topic, address their spiritual state and give the book's third major warning. He'll also speak about the promises of God before coming back to his theme in 6:20. But for now, the writer speaks like a doctor: his readers have certain symptoms, which reveal an underlying condition, for which there is a cure.

### I. The Symptom: Spiritual Indigestion

11 of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

The symptom of their problem is their difficulty digesting harder doctrine. He says, I have a lot to say about Melchizedek, but saying it is going to be hard to explain it. The difficulty is not so much with the subject matter, though it's obviously more advanced than the basics, as he'll make clear. The real problem is the state of his hearers. The symptom he describes is one of having become dull

of hearing.

That word *dull* is a word meaning sluggish, lazy, deliberately slothful. Slothful to listen. We might simply say, bored with the truth. Too tired or indifferent to apply themselves to the task of concentration. His readers are people who have neglected a faculty God gave them, and it has weakened to the point of now being unable to carry the weight of what he wants them to handle and think about. They can't handle teaching about Melchizedek, not without serious difficulty, because they are now so spiritually limp that it will just overwhelm them.

If you have ever been forced not to use a muscle because of injury or an operation, you know how quickly it can shrink. God has made the body in such a way that if you don't use it, you lose it. Unexercised muscles weaken. What's true of muscles has also been shown to be true of the mind. While the research isn't conclusive or definitive, some links have been shown between those who keep their minds active and preventing or delaying the onset of Alzheimer's disease or perhaps certain kinds of dementia.

So it is true of the soul. Spiritual capacities are just like those of the body. They can be developed. They can be grown. They can be exercised, strengthened, refined. There is a spiritual version of fitness, just as there is a spiritual version of being a lethargic couch potato.

Some people have the idea that spiritual development just happens with time. They think that if you just go to a church every week and broadly be around Christian people, that you'll be developing and growing spiritually. Now that may be the case, depending on what you do when you go to church. See, if you go to a library once or twice a week for an hour and watch all the people reading, you won't grow much in knowledge. If you go to gym four times a week and sit in the restaurant admiring all the fit people you see, your body isn't getting any stronger. These original readers of Hebrews were obviously attending church: that's where they were going to hear it read out to them. But they had allowed spiritual laziness to weaken their capacities until they were actually too unfit to handle what he wanted to share with them. The book of Hebrews was written to some people who would be bored with the book of Hebrews.

The symptom of laziness in understanding actually reveals a deeper condition.

## II. The Condition: Arrested Development

12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

Here is their condition. The problem is not simply that they are young in the faith. If they were newly saved, and little time had passed since their conversion, he would have no problem with them. The problem is precisely the relationship between how much time has passed since their conversion, and their current state.

*By this time*, he says, you ought to be teachers, and instead, you still need teachers to give you the first principles of Christianity.

Now notice two things about immaturity. First, there is an expectation that every Christian develops into a teacher. He isn't singling out some Christians. He is speaking broadly to all Christians. He expects that after a reasonable amount of time, every Christian ought to be a teacher. That doesn't mean every Christian becomes a preacher, or a public teacher or a teacher of groups. James actually warns against that: **James 3:1** My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. Instead, this section means that every growing Christian is able to impart

what he or she has already learned to others. In normal development, you begin to explain to others what you have learned.

And Scripture makes it very clear that believers should be teaching other believers.

**Romans 15:14** Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another. (Rom. 15:14)

**Col 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

So that we are within Scriptural bounds to say, if you have been saved for longer than a few months, and you do not at some point share Scripture with another, pass on truth to another believer, explain what you have learnt to someone else, there is a problem with arrested development. Scripture expects every believer to turn into a teacher: one who makes disciples of others.

Haven't you noticed how five year-old girls are already explaining to three year-olds the way things are? The only ones unable to teach are the infants in arms who cannot yet speak. Almost as soon as a human can speak, he begins instructing others. That's exactly the illustration he picks up on in verse 12.

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The only humans who cannot chew their food and digest it and develop into humans who can provide food for others are infants. Infants need pre-digested food in the form of milk. They cannot handle food that needs chewing, they haven't even developed their milk teeth yet. But unless there is a problem, a baby that keeps drinking its milk develops those teeth, and moves on to solids.

Unless a Christian refuses to chew and swallow, he or she will grow into a teacher of others.

But notice a second attribute of this condition of immaturity. Not only have they failed to develop into teachers. The second thing he points out is that these Christians who have already been in the faith for some time, need to be re-taught the first principles.

you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God;

No doubt, when they first got saved, someone taught them the first principles of God's oracles, which just means God's sayings, God's Word. They learned the elementary basics of Christianity. He gives us a list of the elementary principles in 6:1-2

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

The first of the ABCs is your relationship to God: repentance from dead works and faith toward God. What is that another term for? The Gospel! Repent from dead works (works that are either dead in their ability to bring life, or works that brings death), believe on God the Son for salvation. This is the absolute starting point.

The second of your ABCs is your relationship to the local church. The doctrine of baptisms. The very first public identification with Christ is water baptism. Once you have repented and believed, the Holy Spirit has immersed you into Christ's death and resurrection, and immersed you into His

body, so now you are immersed in water to signify to everyone that you are in union with Christ and in union with His body. Now it's possible that this also refers to the ritual washings that his Hebrew readers would have been familiar with, but it is likely that they would have been talking about both: how the ritual washings and baths under the Mosaic law were similar to and different from John's baptism, and Christian baptism.

Laying on of hands seems less apparent to us, but remember that in the early church, the laying on of hands always accompanied baptism. In the Hebrew context, it meant transference. You laid hands on an animal for the transference of guilt, you laid hands on your son to bless him and transfer the inheritance to him, and you laid hands on one being set apart for an office, as it were transferring trust, accountability, authority. Baptism and laying on of hands was membership in the local church, and setting apart for service.

The third of the ABCs has to do with life after death: Resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgement: the basic truths of Heaven and Hell, life after death, and how Christ will raise your body when He returns.

The writer assumes that these are doctrines that you do not struggle to understand if you are growing. Yes, you will obviously revisit them. Yes, you will keep seeing more and more layers of complexity and truth to even the most elementary doctrines. Yes, when it comes to the Gospel, those who know it best, are hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest. But you should not be confused and puzzled and ignorant of the gospel years after your conversion.

But this is what he describes. He describes people who need a refresher course on what the gospel is, on eternal destiny, on the church itself. These are people who heard it, but something has happened, and they couldn't seem to retain it, or digest it, and here they are, still in spiritual kindergarten.

Arrested development not only prevents you from becoming a teacher of others. It seemingly erodes your ability to even retain and comprehend the basic principles you heard at the beginning. The Christian life becomes more and more confusing, more and more jumbled, you don't know where it begins and where it ends, what's important, what isn't. Once again, when it comes to truth, you have to use it, or you lose it.

18 "Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him *more* will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him." (Lk. 8:18)

Arrested development is not being young. It is being stubborn. It is not simply being new in the faith. It is being deliberately uninterested in the faith. When you should be a feeder you need to be fed, fed again the most basic truths.

If you find the things of God boring, it may be because you are in a state of arrested development. Like a child who tunes out a conversation when the vocabulary gets too large for him, you tune out the moment it doesn't seem immediately applicable to you, immediately gripping, immediately fun and fascinating.

Well, it's fine for infants to have hanging stars over their cribs, and big yellow teddy bears, and books with four pages three inches thick and three words on each. But if you saw that in an adult's room you'd be justifiably concerned. So pastors are justifiably concerned with people who have attended church for 5, 10, 15 years, and still glaze over unless the sermon is in bright red, blue and yellow, who are still complaining that this message didn't "touch me" or "I didn't get too much out of that."

So how do we emerge from this condition with its symptoms?

### III. The Cure: Deliberate Development

14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God 2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.<sup>3</sup> And this we will do if God permits.

Here comes the cure to this condition. If the problem is arrested development, perpetual spiritual immaturity, the cure is spiritual maturity. Solid food belongs to those who are of full age. Digestion of tough meat is not a problem for a grown adult. In the same way, sound doctrine, deeper theology, more intricate understanding is for Christians who have progressed beyond infancy. They are no longer babes-in-arms, needing pre-digested food from another which they just swallow. They have grown to be able to chew, and sometimes, if necessary, spit out bones.

The word for full age is the word sometimes translated *perfect*. It's basically the same word in 6:1 – let us go on to perfection. This is not sinless perfection; it means reaching the target, drawing closer to spiritual wholeness. In the physical realm, our bodies are in development for about the first 18 years. During that time, things are sometimes out of proportion, a little oversized here and there, and some things develop first, and others catch up. But when that is complete, everything is in proportion, the body has reached maturity.

Something similar happens in the Christian's life: there is an infant stage, where everything is new and absorbing; there is an adolescent stage where the Christian wakes up to the battle out there and begins defending the faith and fighting everyone everywhere; there is a mature stage where the Christian has settled the major doctrines and practices and now becomes responsible for shaping and discipling others. But it doesn't take twenty years in the spiritual realm.

This is maturity. What does it mean?

Verse 14 gives us a concise description of what the mature can do, and why they are able to do it.

The description of the mature: have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil  
The mature are those who have certain senses, and the Greek word here is *aestheiteiria*. Our English word *aesthetics*, the perception of beauty, comes from this word. It means a faculty that can perceive and understand the meaning and value of what it sees. When you look around a room, it is not just a muddled blur of shapes and random colours, you can right now distinguish one thing from another, and so make sense of it all. God has given us faculties that can perceive, and then discern what we perceive.

What kind of spiritual discernment do the mature possess? Their senses can discern both good and evil.

They have *diakrisis*. *Dia* mean through, and *krisis* means judgement. They can judge between things, and tell what is good, and what is evil. Those are very general terms because good and evil can refer to many things. It can refer to distinguishing between true statements and false statements. It can mean discerning between righteous choices and wicked choices. It can mean distinguishing between wisdom and foolishness. It can mean distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate, between fitting and unfitting.

The man with degenerative vision cannot perceive the difference between objects in a room, so he

cannot discern what to do. The child cannot perceive the difference between putting a marble in its mouth and a sweet in its mouth, so it cannot discern which is good to swallow. The immature Christian cannot perceive the difference between true and false doctrine, between godliness and worldliness, between what is profane and what is sacred, between what is trivial and what is serious, between what is irreverent and what is serious, between what is sentimental and what is joyful, between what is kitsch and what is beautiful. The mature Christian is doing exactly that. His *aestheiteiria* has good *diakrisis*.

He has good discernment.

There are other ways of saying the same thing. He has good judgement. He has wisdom. In previous generations, they used to say, he or she is discriminating, which didn't mean the man was racist, it meant he could discriminate between good and evil. Another way of saying this was to speak of good taste: the ability to judge well.

Now how do the mature get this discerning judgement that is the mark of maturity? That's the second description of the mature: first what they can do, and second, why they can do it. Why are they discerning, while others remain in arrested development?

The answer is repeated three times in this passage. First, it's put negatively in verse 13. 13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

The immature, who only can handle milk are *unskilled* in the word of righteousness. Unskilled means unaccustomed to, inexperienced in. This is someone who hasn't tried, hasn't exercised these faculties. Positively, verse 14 gives us the same thought another two times.

those who by reason of use have their senses exercised

Look at the second half of that phrase: The NKJV has senses exercised, which is a good translation of a Greek word which is the ancestor of our word gymnasium. They've exercised, trained, gymned their powers of perception and discernment. The immature leave those faculties to atrophy, weaken and become dull, but the mature exercise them and keep doing so, to make them sharper, stronger, better.

The first half of the phrase makes it even clearer: who by reason of use. Again this means, a skill gained by exercise, a habit gained by practice.

What is the single biggest difference between the immature and the mature? The mature apply their faculties to wanting to understand the truth. One of the first signs of growth is appetite: the person who wants to hear the truth as often as possible, who wants to read as much as possible, who wants to learn as much as possible. The mature become that way not because they have superior intellectual gifts, or are naturally better readers, or like books more than others. The mature become that way because they are willing to do the heavy-lifting of thinking, learning, and sorting out the truth. They will do the push-ups, sit-up and planking of reading, comparing, and harmonising the truth. They're willing to concentrate, analyse, until they have come to a good judgement.

But the immature are that way for the very same reason the Solomon describes why some people starve physically: **Proverbs 26:15** The lazy *man* buries his hand in the bowl; It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth. (Prov. 26:15)

Mental and spiritual laziness. If it takes effort to grow, if it takes effort to discern, if I have to apply myself, if it is one more thing I have to do, I don't want to. Can't the preacher just mush it up, open my mouth, and spoonfeed me? Can't he set up an intravenous drip with spiritual nutrients?

And so a sad cycle gets going. The lazier you are to chew your spiritual food, the weaker your spiritual digestion becomes, and so the less you can handle. The less you apply yourself to spiritual things, the more boring they become. The more boring they become, the less interested you are in applying yourself.

There's another cycle. You give yourself to the effort of learning and discerning. Harder doctrines become easier, and you find your appetite for meatier stuff has grown. You still enjoy milk, but it's not enough, and you now want and need deeper doctrine. And the more you keep seeking and applying it, the more enjoyment you get from learning and teaching the Word.

Here is the exhortation in 6:1

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, (Heb. 6:1)

Leave the milk-like first principles, don't lay the foundation again, go on to maturity, develop sound judgement through use.

Time plus spiritual laziness equals arrested development, even backward development.  
Time plus deliberate discernment equals continual maturity. Verse 3 says, we will do this, if God permits. If God gives us more time in the world, we will use it to apply our hearts to wisdom. This we will do, if God permits.