



Leaving the Elementary Teaching

“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 an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. 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 5:12-6:2

While recently studying through Hebrews in concert with the Walk with the Word reading plan, this particular passage was in no small way deeply disturbing. The writer of Hebrews provides a specific list described as “elementary principles” and “elementary teaching” for which he admonishes Christians as falling far short of the “solid food” needed to attain spiritual maturity in Christ. This list disturbs me because so many Christians’ exposure to God’s Word has been so greatly minimized today that I would be elated if they actually knew these basics.

There are six things specifically identified as “*elementary teaching*”:

1. **“...repentance from dead works...”** This refers to the old way of only adhering to the Old Testament Law. This was the message of John the Baptist, to repent of going through the motions of being religious and to become truly changed from the heart, to repent in

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order to accept the “live” works, so to speak, to come to the Messiah.

2. **“...faith towards God...”** This is the distinction of having a relationship with God based not on keeping the Old Testament Law, but upon a faithful relationship with Him through Christ. [Note: “Faith” and “faithfulness” are interchangeable words in both the Greek and Hebrew.]

3. **“...instruction about washings...”** Although some translations use “baptism”, “washings” is the better term as the Greek word for baptism isn’t actually used here. The plural form of the word is also inconsistent with the concept of singular baptism, as we are baptized but once. Therefore it refers to the act of regeneration which is performed by the Holy Spirit when one receives Christ and stands in contrast to the Old Testament’s myriad cleansing requirements and rituals which were a shadow teaching of the work of the Holy Spirit. *“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”* (Titus 3:5)

4. **“...laying on of hands...”** Most likely this refers to the laying on of hands to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, probably an “elementary” teaching following the point of salvation as evidenced in the Early Church (e.g., Acts 8:17-18; 9:17). The gift provided generally identifies a calling to perform greater works/deeds on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

5. **“...the resurrection of the dead...”** Another teaching that would logically follow closely to the early stages of a Believer’s salvation experience referring to the hope of the resurrection of Believers as a result of Christ’s resurrection.

6. *“...eternal judgment...”* That Jesus will return to judge the nations and the unrighteous.

Just honestly take the time to score yourself, your local church, and the Christians you know best as to the quality and depth of knowledge each one has when it comes to this laundry list of “elementary” teachings:

1. Repentance of sin/the old life.
2. Walking in faith/faithfulness towards God.
3. Walking according to the Spirit.
4. Receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
5. The hope (future fact) of our resurrection in Christ.
6. Final judgment.

I’m not trying to be elitist or overstate my own understanding of God’s Word and ways, but coming to terms with the fact that so many are going improperly fed in many Western churches. If you or your local church aren’t thoroughly versed in these basics of Christianity, what exactly has been your focus instead? If we don’t know the basics, why would we even suppose to have a grasp on the deeper things of Christ?

And then as the reading schedule moved me on through the book of Romans, I was struck with the number of times Paul asks rhetorical questions using some form of “Don’t you know?” Whereas many a seminary treats Romans as the centerpiece to developing and teaching what they term “Pauline Theology”, the proper context is that this, too, is not the most advanced of all teachings but something he expects every Christian to have a basic and thorough understanding of. This epistle, which goes into so much detail of the working of Christ’s righteousness in the forms of salvation, justification, and sanctification is, in Paul’s estimation, simply the basics. If someone doesn’t have a handle on items 1 through 6 listed above, what are the odds they’re even close to digesting the “basics” presented in Romans?

Perhaps there is no better testimony to the degraded state of the average Christian's grasp of God's Word than a trip to the local Christian bookstore. 20 or 30 years ago such stores were filled with tomes written by Spirit-filled teachers exegeting Scripture and not just teaching the basics, but moving us into more advanced areas. Today, however, such have been replaced by the voluminous sections "Christians Fiction" and "Christian Living" which only seem to vaguely reference Scripture, if at all.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.
Colossians 2:8

It would seem that many have been taken "captive...according to the elementary principles of the world rather than according to Christ", much less achieved anything further advanced beyond the basics. This is what happens when pulpits and small groups move away from the Bible to books and programs rooted in the world's principles.

It's with a very heavy heart that I acknowledge that this is most likely one of the strongest indications to date of the imminent return of Christ, because a great falling away is predicted as one of the most prominent signs of His return. If Christians don't understand what God's Word says about the basics of sin and salvation, how will they possibly understand the prophetic things of Scripture? If they can't articulate the nuts and bolts of faith in Christ, how can they possibly navigate the End Times deception come upon us?

There is probably no greater concern for which we can pray on behalf of the church at large and our fellow Christians personally than a return to His Word, a hunger for the basics giving way to the deeper things of Christ.

In His Love,
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