

Hebrews 5-7

1. Hebrews 5:11-14 gives four marks of spiritual immaturity: dullness toward the Word (11); inability to teach others (12); a diet of elementary teaching (12-13); and difficulty in using the Word for practical discernment (14). We read elsewhere that Christians are meant to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 2:18). Paul also rebukes the Corinthians for their lack of maturity and encourages spiritual growth so one isn’t vulnerable to “every wind of doctrine” (1 Cor 2:6; 3:2; 14:20; Eph 4:13+). As Calvin says, “We must, indeed, learn through life. We ought... so to exert ourselves, that our progress may correspond to the time allowed us.” Or as Barclay says,

There are Christians in whose faith there has been no development for thirty or forty or fifty or sixty years. There are Christians who have deliberately refused to try to understand the advances that biblical scholarship and theological thought have made. They are grown men and women and yet insist on remaining content with the religious development of a child. (50)

Wright agrees:

So why is it, in the twenty-first century as in the first, that so many Christians are not only eager to stay with a diet of milk, but actually get cross at the suggestion that they should be eating something more substantial? This is a question that has puzzled and bothered me for years... There are many places in the world where there is a great hunger to know all these things, and an eagerness to grasp and take in as much teaching as one can. Some Christians are indeed eager and ready for solid food. But I deeply regret that in many churches in Western Europe at least, it seems that the most people can be persuaded to take on board is another small helping of warm milk. (52)

Is Wright’s complaint also true of RCRC? If so, what can be done to draw members into the practices that lead to spiritual growth? What are the stakes of failure, and what are the impediments to success?

2. The transition statements in Hebrews 5:11-6:8 provide a guide to the flow of the argument:
 - a. The author starts with the statement, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again” (5:12). In 5:14 we read, “**But** solid food is for the mature...”, and in 6:1, “**therefore** let us go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ...” And indeed, the arguments which follow later in chapter 6 and beyond are anything but spiritual milk. So, are the readers spiritual infants or are they mature?
 - b. The author promises to rehearse the spiritual basics “if God permits,” but then turns away from them in 6:4, with the ominous “**For** it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have

once been enlightened...” What do the spiritual basics have to do with those who convert, experience the Holy Spirit (etc.), and fall away?

3. A typical list of the means by which Christians grow spiritually includes Bible study, prayer, fellowship (broadly considered), suffering, and ministering to others. Setting aside suffering, which of these do you benefit from most? Which do you find most challenging?
4. Among the foundations of Christian belief in Heb 6:2 is the tantalizing reference to “the laying on of hands.” This being a list of the basics, the author does not elaborate, leaving us to wonder what exactly he has in mind.

Laying on of hands is used various ways in Scripture:

- *To transfer guilt*, as in the sin offering (Lev 1:4; 16:21)
- *To impart or withdraw blessing*, as in Isaac and his sons or Jesus with the children (Gen 48:8-20)
- *To commission*, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:2-3)
- *To impart the Holy Spirit*:
 - “Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him.” (Deut 34:9)
 - “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 8:14-17)

Which of the above do you think the author is referring to? (Recall Heb 2:4.) How have you seen the LOOH practiced? Is our practice different from that of the readers of Hebrews, and why?

5. Earlier in Hebrews the author warned his readers “about drifting away from the truth through negligence (2:1-4), and failing to continue trusting God and walking by faith (3:7-19).”¹ The warnings of 5:11-6:12 are surrounded by responses to intellectual objections to Jesus as Messiah: evidence from Scripture of Jesus’ superiority to the high priest, evidence that the Messiah can also be the high priest, etc. One imagines that the readers, facing threat of persecution, are being drawn by the comparative safety of the synagogue, while stumbling over arguments against Christian belief. Hebrews reaches out to them in an attempt to keep them from wandering and put their faith on a firm foundation.

1 Dr. Constable’s *Notes on Hebrews* (2014), p. 59 (<http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/hebrews.pdf>).

In her book *Walking Away From Faith*, Ruth Tucker compares the lives of two friends, of whom one retained his faith and the other didn't. They attended Princeton seminary together and both successful careers as evangelists. The two men are Billy Graham and Chuck Templeton. Despite professional successes, Templeton was plagued by doubts, leading him to pray for a clear sign from God. This prayer was followed by an experience of the palpable presence of God, a revelation of God's compassion for suffering humanity. Nevertheless, Templeton's doubts eventually led him to resign his leadership positions in the church. While many factors played a role in this, the problem of pain and suffering was for him a key stumbling block. Yet he never stopped *wanting* to believe.

Graham, in contrast, when confronted by Templeton with doubts concerning the trustworthiness of Scripture, replied, "Wiser men than you and I have been arguing questions like this for centuries. I don't have the time or the intellect to examine all sides of each theological dispute, so I've decided, once and for all, to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God's Word."

- a. How are Graham's and Templeton's struggles with faith similar to those of the readers of Hebrews? What do you think of Graham's decision to set aside his doubts and questions and simply trust? If Hebrews were written to a young Graham and Templeton, how might it be different?
 - b. Are there any questions which trouble your faith? How do you respond to them?
6. In chapter 7, the author leverages the Messiah's priesthood of the order of Melchizedek to describe the superiority of Jesus' priesthood. (Remember, the author isn't arguing that Jesus is the Messiah; he is arguing for the superiority of the Messiah.) He also shows how the "law" of the new covenant is superior to that of the old, which is passing away:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. (7:11-12)

The author later, in verse 19, describes the Mosaic law as "weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect," using "perfect" not in the sense of moral perfection, but in the same sense we've seen earlier in Hebrews as complete or according to the intended purpose.

Christians have long pondered how they stand with respect to the OT law, typically retaining the moral elements (including the ten commandments) and discarding the ceremonial and civil elements. (This author makes no such distinctions!)

How is the OT law (of which Jesus said not a stroke would pass away Mt 5:18) “weak and ineffectual”? How is the “law” of the new covenant able to lead us to perfection? And how does this tell us we should observe the law of Moses?

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Fun quote: “It is told that on his pocket Bible, Cromwell had a motto written in Latin—*qui cessat esse melior cessat esse bonus*—he who ceases to be better ceases to be good.” (Barclay, 52)