



## 16: Let's Press On

"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, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits."

Hebrews 6:1 – 3

At the end of chapter 5, in verse 11, the writer of the book of Hebrews went off on yet another tangent to give us, his readers, yet another warning. I have things to explain, he said, but it's going to be difficult for me to explain them because you have become slow to understand. The reason you've become so slow is that you haven't grown in spiritual things like you should have. You are baby Christians: you need someone to teach you the basic principles all over again. But that's not the end of his warning.

### Not What You Would Expect?

Chapter 6 verse 1 might come as a bit of a surprise. After what he's just written you would expect the writer to start in, from the beginning, to explain the basic principles his readers need to be taught again. That's probably what we would do but it's not what he does. Far from saying, "You have come to need milk, solid food is not for you, therefore let me give you some milk," he says, "therefore let us press on," and that is what he does. You'll see when we get to chapter 7 that he goes on to teach them the very things he has just said they'll struggle to understand.

### What's The Therefore For?

And notice, he doesn't say "nevertheless let us go on"; he says "*therefore* let us go on".

"Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation..."

Hebrews 6:1

So it seems that as the writer sees it, the condition of immaturity that his readers find themselves in is such that only pressing on to the deeper things they're going to struggle with will cure it. Going over the basics again won't help. As he sees it, their senses — their abilities to hear and think and weigh up and understand spiritual truth — need to be stretched. They have been babies, drinking milk, for way too long so now he's going to feed them something solid.

- ◆ *How would you set about helping someone who says, of some Christian doctrine, that's beyond me, I can't understand it, I'm not clever enough?*

Or maybe the writer says, "therefore let us go on" because, as he sees it, there's no point in going back over the basics. Maybe he thinks that the baby Christians among his readers have sunk into such a state of spiritual stupidity that there's no hope of them ever making progress now. So instead of wasting time on them, he's going to feed the few among them who may be capable of understanding what he has to say.

- ◆ *Is there ever a time when it's right to move on and leave behind believers who haven't grown as they should have?*

We are left to decide, does the writer take the approach he does because pressing on to feed his readers some solid food will be the cure of their immaturity or because there's nothing more to be done for them? Perhaps what's in the writer's mind will become more clear later on but whichever is the case the conclusion we are meant to draw is clear. We must keep pressing on, get into solid food, go outside our comfort zones, push ourselves, stretch ourselves, grow up and leave the milk behind. If we can do that, there's hope for us; if we can't, there isn't.

## Leave The Milk Behind

The word "leaving" in verse 1 means "being done with once and for all and moving on."

What is to be left behind is "the elementary principles of Christ (Literally, the word of the beginning of the Christ). Elementary principles are first building blocks or what the writer also calls the foundation. What he has in mind is basic teaching upon which what we now believe is built.

- ◆ *In what sense can the basic building blocks of our faith be left behind?*

What we are to move on toward is perfection: full understanding of the things of God. We won't ever get there in this life of course, but it is what we should always be striving for.

- ◆ *In what ways are you going on to perfection?*

The writer goes on to spell out what the first building blocks that he has in mind for leaving are.

## Repentance From Dead Works

Dead works are sins — actions that lead to death — and they must be repented of. Some think this is a reference to the idea of seeking of salvation by trying to keep the law. It's true, that does lead to death and should be repented of but I think the broader idea of repentance from sin is the more natural understanding.

## Faith Toward God

Faith in God, like repentance from sin, is an essential fundamental of Christianity.

## The Teaching Of Baptisms

Teaching about baptisms may well be a reference to teaching about Christian baptism but the use of the plural "baptisms" suggests that maybe what the writer had in mind was some broader teaching about symbolic acts of cleansing.

## Laying On Of Hands

Laying on of hands could be a reference to an early Christian practice associated with the impartation of the Holy Spirit. But it could equally refer to the Old Testament practice of the laying on of hands in commissioning someone for public office (Numbers 27:18, Deuteronomy 34:9) or it could be seen as relating to the laying on of hands in the ritual of sacrifice, when a sinner symbolically transferred his sin to the sacrificial animal (Leviticus 16:21 – 22).

## Resurrection Of The Dead

Teaching on resurrection from the dead also is not peculiar to the New Testament (Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2, Exodus 3:6 cf Mark 12:26ff).

## Eternal Judgement

That God is the Judge of all the earth is another essential part of what we believe. That too is taught explicitly in the Old Testament as well as in the New (Genesis 18:25, Isaiah 33:22).

## Just For Jews?

It's been pointed out, and it's interesting, that every item in this list had a place in the Old Testament teachings of Judaism. Repentance is as much an Old Testament concept as it is a Christian one. So too is the need for faith (Habakuk 2:4). The idea of ceremonial cleansing would have been very familiar to Christians who had come from a Jewish background and so would teaching about the laying on of hands, resurrection and judgement.

A case can be made for saying that the specific foundational teaching that the writer of Hebrews has in mind and says should be left behind is teaching that you could imagine his readers, formerly Jews, would have been preoccupied when they first came to Christ: teaching about how the teaching and ways of Jesus squared with what they had grown up with: teaching that gave Old Testament ideas with which they were familiar a new, fuller significance.

So maybe there was a particular danger that their Jewish background exposed those who first read the book of Hebrews to. If a convert from paganism gave up Christianity and went back to his old ways the difference would have been obvious. If a former Jew drifted back into Judaism he could do that without abandoning any of the things on this list. If these were the things that preoccupied him — if the only teaching he took in was to do with these things — then it would be easy for him to turn his back on Jesus. The first readers of the book of Hebrews were, as you know well by now, on the verge of doing just that — that's why this letter was written. To go on insisting on these things and teaching them yet again, would not help them; it could make things worse. Better to press on with more mature teaching that is more uniquely Christian.

- ◆ *What would be the equivalent today? What basic teachings might it be unhelpful to focus on if someone is struggling to hold on to his or her faith?*

Perhaps, if I can be allowed to read between the lines, the fundamental problem that the writer was addressing in this part of his letter was not so much a general failure to grow and mature as a retreat by his readers into only thinking about those basic teachings that wouldn't put them at any risk. They were facing opposition and maybe even persecution from Jewish neighbours: maybe even friends and relatives. Easier to stick with doctrine that didn't rock the boat: doctrine that they could all agree on. Easier to paddle in the shallows than to get into anything that could be controversial. And so they regressed, so they failed to grow, so they became incapable of growing, so they placed themselves in great danger. Their only hope was to move on.

- ◆ *Again can you think what would be the equivalent of this today? Is there any specific warning here for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians?*

## If God Permits

Verse 3 — let's move on "if God permits" — could be seen as the writer sounding a further note of warning. Perhaps he's raising the possibility that their unbelief has so provoked God that He will not grant them further light. Or it may just be that the writer is thinking about how he, and his readers, will need God's help if he's to get across what he's about to teach. Maybe there's a bit of both in it.