

Suited Ministry.

1 Peter 2: 2; 1 Cor. 3: 2; Heb. 5: 11-14.

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What is the suited ministry for believers generally at the present time?

A scripture often cited in answer to this question is: "As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby." (1 Peter 2: 2.) It is contended by many that this means that "milk" is the suited aliment for the young believer. To say nothing of the character of the word used (albeit it is very difficult of translation), the point in the scripture is simply that just as new-born babes desire milk, the believer should long for the word of God. It is, first, a question of appetite; and secondly, it tells us that as milk is the proper food for the new-born babe, so is the word of God for the saint. This is what the Spirit of God teaches by this scripture, and this is the more evident if we add the words, which are now generally accepted as a part of revelation (see New Translation), — "that we may grow thereby *up to salvation*." It is thus by feeding upon the word of God that we grow, and continue to grow, up to complete salvation.

If we now turn to another passage we shall obtain further light upon our subject. The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as [according to] men?" (1 Cor. 3: 2, 3.) It is clear in this case that the apostle fed these believers with "milk" because of their bad condition; that he deplored the necessity for doing so; and that had they been responding more fully to God's grace and love in redemption he would have fed them with "meat," and not with "milk." To assume, therefore, that the saints need "milk" is to proceed upon the supposition that they are in a Corinthian state; and to make provision for it is even to foster the condition which all should deplore. We learn moreover that the ministry suited to one assembly may be entirely unsuited to another; and the question may well be pressed home at such a moment upon the hearts of teachers, whether there has been the sufficient exercise of spiritual discernment, as to the state of souls, as a guide to their ministry. Nothing is plainer than that it would be an utter mistake to deal out Ephesian truth to a Corinthian assembly, or Corinthian truth to an Ephesian assembly.

Another scripture may be adduced to aid us in our investigation. Commencing to speak of Melchizedek, the apostle turns aside to add, "Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection." (Heb. 5: 11-14; Heb. 6: 1.)

There are several points here which need very earnest attention. The apostle mourns over the saints' inability to receive the truth he had to communicate. When for the time they had been Christians they might have been teachers, it was necessary to go back to the elements of truth; for they had become such as had need of milk — proof that they were unskilful in the use of the Word, and had become dwarfed in their growth. They were babes still, and hence the fervent exhortation with which chap. 6 opens. In a word, these dear saints were unwilling to go forward; and who that had the mind of Christ could be satisfied with such a condition? What teacher could calmly accept their state, and go on feeding them with milk, as if nothing more were necessary?

Surely we do well to attend to these solemn warning words; for might they not be addressed with equal reason to many believers in this day? Are there not hundreds — nay, thousands — who never care for anything beyond the gospel? Sad were it indeed if any saint of God ceased to have fellowship with the glad tidings of the grace of God. That which occupies the heart of God Himself may well occupy the hearts of His people. But this does not involve our feeding on nothing but the gospel or the simplest elements of the truth. By no means; for we need Christ in every character, aspect, and office in which He is presented; and if we fail to recognize this, we shall speedily become as dwarfed as were these Hebrew believers.

It will certainly be replied, "But remember how many newly-converted souls there are. These are truly babes, and would you not feed these with 'milk'?" The word of God is our only guide, and we have two instances at least of the way in which the Spirit of God ministers to such. The epistles to the Thessalonians were written soon after the Church there had been formed — both probably within a year after the saints had been turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven. (1 Thess. 1: 9, 10.) And what do we find? In the first epistle we have the return of our blessed Lord presented in every variety of aspect, and this too distinguished from His coming to the world, besides a deal of practical instruction for the building up of these saints on their most holy faith. In the second the apostle still goes further, and teaches the full character of the appearing of Christ, the truth of the man of sin, the blessed fact that the Church must be caught away from this scene before this son of perdition is revealed, etc. Now these can scarcely be termed elementary subjects; but they were intended for the instruction and comfort of these "babes," and were indeed necessary to them for the understanding of Christianity.

We have another example in John's first epistle. Dividing the whole family of God into fathers, young men, and babes, in what manner does he address this last class, the youngest of God's children? "Little children," he commences, "it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come," etc. (1 John 2: 18.) He then proceeds to point out the danger arising from antichrist's having already appeared. He puts them on their guard by giving the marks of the antichrist, and leads them to the source of their safety in their having the unction of the Holy One and the word of God. It is, in fact, a remarkable correspondence with the teaching of Paul in 2 Thessalonians.

Here then we have divine wisdom to guide us in teaching "babes." They must be nourished with the word of God; they must be fortified against danger by the revelations and warnings which it provides; and they must have a whole Christ — Christ in all that He is in Himself, in all that He is to God, and in all that He is to them, unfolded — that they may grow thereby up to salvation. This is a very different thing from occupying them with questions and controversies instead of Christ; and it may be added, that the maintenance of simplicity in the manner of instruction is entirely consistent with leading souls on in the knowledge of their portion in Christ, as well as of the dangers of their path. We hesitate not to say, that the falling away of so many young converts, and the yielding of many more to the influences of the world, may be traced back, in many instances, to our failure in supplying them with suited food. Knowing scarcely anything beyond the forgiveness of sins, they have little interest in the Scriptures, and thus the means of their growth and safety are neglected.

The doctrinal order of the epistles enforces the same lesson. Romans would undoubtedly be called the elementary epistle, but how many stop at Rom. 5: 1? And how many learn the truth of Rom. 6? Or if they learn it doctrinally, are there not many who never pass through Rom. 7 experimentally, so as to enter upon the enjoyment of the wealth of blessing contained in Rom. 8? But Colossians is a stage beyond Romans, and Ephesians is, once again, beyond Colossians; and certain it is that a Philippian Christian cannot be seen in this world without having learnt the truth of the first epistles named. Are these divine treasures then to be for ever withholden from the saints? Are we to surrender, even for the babes, the truth of death and resurrection with Christ? If so, the foundations of Christianity are gone, and we shall easily — and speedily - fall back to Jewish ground and to a Jewish experience.

May the Lord make us all, whatever our stage of growth, increasingly desirous of following after if that we may apprehend that for which also we are apprehended of Christ Jesus! E. D.