

Part of the process of encouraging a dysfunctional congregation is telling them like it is. That is exactly what the author of *Hebrews* does in the next segment of his letter (5:11-6:8). He criticizes them for refusing to grow in their understanding and practice of their faith. His reason for doing so is to give them an opportunity to do some serious reflection before he lays on them some weighty theological discourse.

Couched in his criticism is a phrase almost identical with one Paul used in 1 Corinthians 3:2. "You need milk, not solid food." We have no way of knowing whether this was original with Paul or a common saying within the early church. If it was Pauline, it could serve as an argument for the dating of *Hebrews* from or to the church in Rome or Italy in general in the early 60s CE. It could also serve as an indication that the letters of Paul were already circulating when *Hebrews* was composed in the 90s CE

The passage also contains a strong call for moral growth as well as encouraging theological and spiritual maturity. Vss. 5:14-6:1 give this basic disciplinary directive that should speak to our modern congregations as well as to the author's audience. One can even detect a tone of exasperation in what he/she says in 5:11 and later in 6:12.

Of this exasperating attitude Frances Taylor Gench gives us a reminder of the vitality of Christian faith. Too often we assume that Christian education is necessary only for the children. "Growth in faith is a continual process throughout our lives – with no graduation day in sight." She then goes on to identify five ways in which continuing growth occurs. These are worth noting specifically.

1. We are to study the scriptures, our primary tradition as to our own identity, our God, and our behaviour in the world as people of faith.

2. The "great cloud of witnesses" who have proceeded us still speak to us through their confessions, hymns and the traditions of the church.
3. We join with other Christians in worship, service, study and fellowship.
4. Through reading and study we stretch our understanding of what we believe.
5. We reflect together on issues that face us today and seek to make real God's purposes for human life.

Another emphasis *Hebrews* lifts up is the need to move toward "perfection." Unless these Christians leave behind their sluggish state they will be in danger of falling away entirely. A severe warning follows this call to maturity (6:4-6). Gench notes that similarly strong warnings also occur in 10:26-31 and 12:15-17.

In some respects this warning appears to deny the possibility of repentance committed after conversion or baptism. Martin Luther did not respect *Hebrews* for this reason. He even felt that it should be regarded as a less valuable part of the canon along with *James*, *Revelation* and *Jude*.

Looking at the passage more carefully, we can see that the author was not speaking of sin in general but the specific sin of apostasy, the denial of Christ by anyone who had experienced forgiveness and newness of life. Such people deliberately cut themselves off from the source of forgiveness.

Secondly, *Hebrews* has a definite pastoral rather than a theological approach to the problem of falling away. They are in grave danger of a spiritual disaster. It is time for a strong note of warning, not a soft reassurance that God's mercy is everlasting. On the other hand, the recipients of the letter had not yet gone as far as apostasy. Hence the warning is given instead of outright condemnation. "Judgement without mercy is not gospel!" writes Gench.

OPENING PRAYER

Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path. Lead us by your Spirit, O God, through our meditations on these Holy Scriptures today. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it appropriate for a church leader to issue a strong warning to a congregation that they are in danger of falling away from the way of faith?
2. Is conflict within a congregation a reasonable cause for issuing such a warning?
3. Are individual attitudes and opinions more likely the causes for people to leave their congregations than differences about what they believe?
4. Should clergy be guided in preaching by the wishes of a congregation or by her/his perception of what the congregation needs to hear?
5. How do you feel a congregation should respond if such a warning is given?

CLOSING PRAYER

Go before us, O Lord, in all our ways that our doing may be begun, continued and ended in you and be to the glory of your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

7 – A NOTE OF WARNING

Hebrews 5:11-6:8



Mayan Calendar

Supposedly Predicting the End of the World

December 21 or 23, 2012