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Christian Maturity

Expository sermon on Ephesians 4: 12-16

J.H. Withers

Two misrepresentations of the Christian life, which are diametrically opposed, have beset the church through the ages, rendering it unacceptable in its mission to the world. There have always been those who consider Christianity as "inside stuff", an esoteric experience reserved for those who, as in the mystery religions, are intellectually introduced and initiated into a superior gnosis, which leads to pride and arrogance. St. Paul was continually troubled in the Corinthian church by those who boasted of their superior wisdom and dismissed his teaching as childish babbling. In 1 Corinthians 4:10 with biting sarcasm he writes, "We are fools for Christ's sake while you are such sensible Christians", and he fairly flays their intellectualism, when he contends that God "has chosen what the world counts folly, for this is wiser than the wisdom of men....God proposes to save the world by the foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor.1.27 and 21). The teachable heart of a child was needed if men were ever fully to enter into the mystery of God's love.

At the other extreme, however, are the people who make this truth grotesque by emphasizing their childishness and immaturity. They would sigh, "O for the faith of a little child", quoting with pleasure our Lord's saying, "Except you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven". When they fulfilled that condition by despising their intelligence, they wished to perpetuate it by a spiritual Peter Pan life, strenuously refusing to develop into spiritual maturity, confusing childishness with childlikeness.

These verses in Ephesians 4.12-16 represent Paul's appeal to the people to reach up to their full spiritual potential until "speaking the truth in love, they grow up into Christ in all things". The Greek word kataantesōmen ("attain", viz, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith....to mature manhood"), according to Moulton and Milligan, means "to reach a chosen destination", "striving to attain a goal". They

quote several extracts from the papyri to support this translation. "Reach up to the standard measurement" (eis metron helikias) - this suggests the picture of a little boy having his height marked by his father in progressive stages on the bathroom wall. How quickly he is growing up! Each mark is bringing him nearer to his full mature height by the mystery of growth.

In all this Paul is not depreciating the necessity for childlikeness in the growing Christian. When a man is 'born again', he is a little child, a mere infant in arms so far as the full adventure of the kingdom of God is concerned. But he dare not remain in that condition. Surely one of the major tragedies of life is to move on in other areas of personal living and to allow our Christianity to get pegged down in immaturity and to bring to the control of those other areas a faith and character which have sadly remained undeveloped. While Christian faith begins on the nursery slopes, it must progress to the thrilling slalom of adventurous movement.

In verses 9-12 of Ephesians 4, the apostle has given a list of God's gifts to the church, agencies through which the 'body of Christ' is developed and expanded....prophets, apostles, evangelists, etc. By their leadership the fellowship grows. Then the marks of such growth are succinctly stated. They are service, unity of faith and spiritual learning and understanding.

(a) Service - diakonia. Until the professional took over in the early church, when an order of 'deacon' was established for very practical purposes (see Acts 6), it seems to have been taken for granted that a maturing faith would issue in costly service to the church and the world. The pattern for this would be our Lord's example, who roundly declared that he was "among them as one who serves" (Luke 22.27)

Human pride often displaced this humble calling to serve, as the men with the big names contended for prestige and personal power in the expanding community, authority taking the place of diakonia. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul castigates those who make this their goal, reminding them that their Christ was a servant (a slave?) and the people of God were called to be the servant church. "Who

then is Paul and Apollos but agents?" (1 Cor.3.5 - diakonoi di'hōn episteusate )

The nature of Christian diakonia would require a whole volume to explore its challenge for the growing community of the church, but, in essence, it represents the sine qua non of the Christian life, a sensitiveness to recognize human need and a willingness to meet it.

(b) Unity of Faith - henotēs tēs pisteōs

At this stage the Christian church did not possess an extended creed, taking in the many facets of God's revelation through his historical acts. Indeed, for many a day, the early baptismal formula was a simple profession "Jesus is Lord", meaning that the candidate for baptism acknowledged his dependence on the exalted Saviour for life and salvation and his allegiance to his claims. Unity, then, was to be attained as Christians grew up into Christ, the focus of unity, finding an harmonious meeting place in his continual presence in fellowship and sacrament. The sign that a Christian was growing up was seen when he realised his membership in the sacred Body, subordinating his unredeemed self-assertion to a humble allegiance, shared with the others.

(c) Spiritual learning (or understanding) - tēs epignōseōs tou huiou tou Theou

In Biblical Greek epiginōakō means to "learn" rather than to "possess a body of understanding". Service, yes. Unity of faith, yes. But growing up also implies the humility to be teachable, to submit to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who, as the Gospel asserts, "will lead you into all truth." A growth in experience is a sure sign that the Christian is growing up into Christ, reaching upwards to a standard in Him who is the way, the truth and the life. Paul insists that this is not an attainment as though he had reached finality in thought and behaviour, but a reaching upwards --- "forgetting those things which are behind, I stretch towards the mark...".

I find verses 14-16 quite fascinating, as they depict the several facets of childhood, which must be outgrown if one is to grow up into Christ in all things. Oliver Wendell

Holmes captured this thought in his "The Chambered Nautilus":

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,  
 As the swift seasons roll!  
 Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
 Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
 Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
 Till thou at length art free,  
 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea.

The Christian must leave the outgrown shell of his childhood stage.

Notice, in passing, the apostle's unwonted tact, as he drives home this point to his readers by including himself in the general exhortation, "that we be no more children". Well Of course, what he really means is, "Come on now; stop being kiddies: be your age!" So often the Christian faith does not grow to fit an expanding world of experience and need. So often Christian character which is the expression of Christian faith, never seems to emerge from the nursery into full manhood. The Greek word 'teleios', which the AV translates as 'perfect', normally just means 'mature', and in this passage dealing with childhood and growth, it obviously has this connotation.

In four short phrases, then, Paul hints at the forms of spiritual childishness which, it would seem, were still exhibited by these Ephesian Christians, painting through a delicious choice of words a series of pictures which are sadly only too familiar in our own age. Each is a little window opening on a special view of the nature of childhood; each challenges the Christian to grow up. Let us study them.

(1) The first characteristic of Paul's typical child is his fluctuating enthusiasms. The Greek word 'kludōnizomenoi' literally mean "tossing up and down like the waves of the sea" (kludōn= a wave) and suggests the surface of the undulating sea, whose waves rise and fall with sea-sickening monotony. So, hints the apostle, it is time we stopped being children, bobbing up and down with vacillating enthusiasms.

That is an exact description of childhood, isn't it?

You bring home a new toy, a nicely painted engine for your little son, and a pretty doll for your daughter, and set them carefully in their cots. Their roars of excitement bring the neighbours to their windows and the tears of joy to your own eyes. Tomorrow when you go to see the children, the toys have been discarded, tossed impatiently from their prams with the basest contempt. Enthusiasm today is the prelude to tomorrow's utter indifference - bobbing up and down like the waves. "Let us stop playing babies", cries Paul, and the word nēpioi: literally means 'babies'. How many of us do not feel convicted by this thought? "Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down. Ah! Yes, Lord", sings the negro spiritual. It describes our common condition for we all experience the hilltops of excitement and enthusiasm for Christ, only to drop down into the troughs of despair with tomorrow's light. "Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?"

Now, of course, temperament is deeply ermeshed in this fluctuation of spirit. There are choleric people whose moods alternate, one day passionate and the next dull and listless. But we dare not blame everything on our temperament. The church is full of such waverers: they burst into song when a new minister is appointed, making all kinds of promises and endeavours, to which they cling - so long as he is new! When the novelty wears off, they become critical and negligent. Or a new organisation is started in a congregation with the blowing of trumpets: there is terrific enthusiasm and bags of good works until the spirit flags, and the leader's heart is broken by this strange apathy. Bobbing up and down like the waves of the sea!

Maturity of faith is the foundation of that perseverance of the saints which has strengthened the church in every age, that quality of fiery endeavour which scorns the shifts of mood. "That we be no more nēpioi, children of fluctuating enthusiasms, but rather grown men and women filled with the Holy Spirit."

(ii) Paul's second charge against immaturity is that it veers with the changing winds of popular fashion. How does he put it? "Carried around by every changing wind of teaching." Again we have a picture of typical childhood. It is either a weather-vane which alters its direction in accordance with the altering directions of the veering wind,

or else a small sailing vessel opening its sails to catch the prevailing wind, no matter from what art and without a goal in view.

This description fits perfectly the behaviour of many children we know for no group of people are more sensitive to the vagaries of changing fashion than a group of children. No child ever wants to be out of line. They come home from school mouthing the catch-words of the moment. These are replaced during the next term by even more terrifying phrases! When the Head Girl adopts a new hair fashion, soon all the lassies down to Form 1 have copied it. All heads must be dressed alike! It will soon change when the paragon loses her popular appeal.

So Paul is appealing to us to drop the habits of Form 1 and to graduate to a higher class of being. The sailor with whom he wishes to sail is one who has a goal in view and who is not afraid of tacking into the wind. No one can win a yacht race simply by following the prevailing wind. Was Paul thinking of his experience with the Athenians who seemed to follow all the popular intellectual crazes and were ready to adopt any new doctrine which invaded the city? The Vicar of Bray is more than an historical character.

The mature Christian must certainly take note of the changes in the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere of his time. He is no diehard, wedded to an unchangeable past. But he has a star to sail by and a port in view. So often the will of Christ will involve a deliberate stand against the blowing of popular ideas and opinions. Often it means a willingness to endure criticism in the interest of conviction. Veering with the veering winds of public favour is for the nursery. Christians know how to tack!

(iii) Again, Paul accuses the childish Christians of Ephesus of a tragic vagueness of character. How does he put it? En kubia ton anthropon - the Greek phrase which I translate "in the nature of a human dice" (RSV= "by the cunning of men"). The particle 'en' is often used in Biblical Greek as "in the state of", "in the condition of". Kubia, of course, is the ordinary word for 'dice'. This is a highly suggestive phrase when applied to childishness. For many a day I have played "Ludo" with a grandchild and watched with horror the vagaries of the dice, knowing that

I cannot move my piece until I throw a "six". You never know how the dice will fall and this can cause considerable exasperation. You do not know and neither do I. The dice is unpredictable. And there we are, back in childhood once more. The child's response to life is as vague as a falling dice because its little mind and character have not yet been fully formed. So when I drive my car in a street where children are playing, I take the utmost care for I shall never know how a child will jump, perhaps right into the line of the car. You have found the same behaviour when you take a child to buy a new dress. Normally she prefers blue but today nothing will divert her from a sickly yellow! Vague and unpredictable are the children.

But the mark of a mature Christian is that there is something clearly defined about his character, so that you can count on his response on any given occasion and almost know beforehand in what way he will react. But why so? Because the mature Christian is a man of deep convictions to which he will cling through fair weather and foul. There is nothing of the dice about him: he always shows the same face to the world and people put their trust in him because they know they can count on his loyalty. Unpredictable people are people without firmly-held convictions.

(iv) Finally, Paul suggests that the childish Christian is often the victim of plausibility. His phrase is exceedingly difficult to translate - en panourgia pros ten methodian tes planes (RSV= "by their craftiness in deceitful wiles"). It suggests the trickery of the charlatan, so I translate it, "Gulled by the plausibility of error". Personally I think it is a picture of a conjuror who can work all kinds of illusions by his sleight of hand, bringing rabbits out of hats and producing endless handkerchiefs out of his sleeve. You have seen him at work, the swiftness of his hand deceiving the eye! He directs your attention to some quite innocent action, while his hands are secretly manipulating his bag of tricks. You are easily taken in. What kind of a children's party would be complete without the conjuror? Children love his deceptions and some of us are still children - gullible!

The Acts of the Apostles has several examples of charlatans who worked on the gullibility of human nature and we know how Paul castigated them. Hitler used the same expert-



ise; by making enough claims and telling large enough lies, he succeeded in winning over a nation of some eighty millions, persuading them that he was God incarnate. He translated into political action the oft-quoted dictum of Al Capone, "It's a sweet racket, so long as you keep the folks kidded." The immature Christian is always at the mercy of evil's plausible approach for, as Paul told his friends at Corinth, "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." He puts pleasant names on evil dispositions, dressing them up to look attractive, and offering them freely from his prodigal hand. And the childish Christian falls under his spell.

So, writes Paul, we must grow up into Christ in all things.

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