

Sermon for Sunday, July 13, 1975, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"NURSERY WARD CHRISTIANS"

I Cor. 2:14-3:15

Text: "But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ." I Cor. 3:1

St. Paul had a problem. He had been to the ancient city of Corinth and there he had preached about Jesus. As he himself put it, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (I Cor. 2:2) Yet, God had worked powerfully through the preaching about Jesus and the people of Corinth had responded. They had been born again--they were now reborn. They had become new creatures in Jesus. And that was where the problem came in. You see, when Jesus is preached, when men are evangelized, that might be called the obstetrics of Christianity. That's the way men get born again. When they hear about Jesus and respond to him, they do indeed become new creatures. But when a baby is born, right away he is put in the nursery ward. There in Corinth those born-again men, those babes in Christ, were still there. After their conversion, Paul had expected them to move on out of the nursery ward. He had expected them to grow from babes to children to mature men in Christ. He was ready to start feeding them solid foods but they were still on milk. As he put it in our text for today, "I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready..."

Actually, the problem St. Paul had with the Corinthians is a problem the Lord has with all of us. God wants us to mature. God wants us to grow up. God wants us to develop spiritually into mature men of God. Yet, too many of us are still in the nursery ward. Can you imagine a nursery ward in one of our modern hospitals where the babies never got out? Can you imagine what it would be like to have a fifty-year old baby, still in diapers with his beard down to his knees? Well, that is a pretty ridiculous picture. Yet, that is exactly what has happened to many of us born-again Christians--we have never gotten out of the nursery ward of the Christian faith.

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament had the same problem. He wrote, "by this time you ought to be teachers, (but) you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil."

Have you believed in Jesus? Have you received him as your personal savior? If so, you are a born-again person. You are a new creation. But let me ask you this, where are you in your Christian growth? Have you matured in Jesus? Are you able to eat solid spiritual food? Or are you still in the nursery, still a babe in Christ, still a bottle baby being fed with milk? Back in the days when street cars were still widely used, a man had jumped aboard a street car but almost immediately fell off. A crowd gathered around to see if he was badly hurt and someone asked the man, "How did you happen to fall off?" "Well," he replied, "I was standing too close to where I got on." And don't many of us have that problem? In the Christian faith, we are standing too close to the place where we got on. We are still in the spiritual nursery, still babes in Jesus.

This morning I would like to suggest for you several essentials to spiritual growth. The things I have to suggest to you are not new. Yet, all of us need them reinforced in our minds and hearts from time to time. It is sort of like training the children to shut the door when they go out. You tell them over and over until it begins to sink in. Then one day you tell them out of habit to shut the door only to discover they did!

One of the first essentials to spiritual growth, to getting out of the nursery of the Christian faith is prayer. Now, prayer is not easy, even for the mature Christian. The story is told about Charles Wesley, the great Methodist, and George Whitefield, the great Calvinist, who together came to America once on a revival. One night they came home to the place where they were boarding and they were bone tired. Whitefield knelt beside his bed and gave a very brief prayer indeed and climbed into bed. Wesley had hardly begun his prayer in that brief time and looked up at his friend. "Is that where your Calvinism leads you in prayer?" he said. Whitefield went to sleep with Charles Wesley still on his knees praying. Several hours later, Whitefield woke up and there was Wesley still on his knees. He went over to him and touched him on the shoulder to find Wesley was fast asleep. "Mr. Wesley," he said, "is this where your Methodism leads you?" I tell this to simply remind us that even for the spiritual giants, prayer can be difficult.

One of the ways for prayer to become real and exciting to you is to think of it as a conversation with God. Many of us slip into "thee" and "thou" in our private prayers and they become stilted and formal. We quickly run out of things to say. But if God is a friend and prayer is a sort of audience with him in which we can share our real feelings, our hurts, our frustrations--if prayer is someone to listen to us, to sympathize with us, to meet our needs, then prayer becomes an exciting sharing of life. R. A. Terry, a famous preacher of another generation, once said that when he discovered prayer was like that, he never had to worry about spending enough time in prayer. On the contrary, he now had to worry about how much time he could spend in prayer without neglecting other duties.

One of the things that may keep us from prayer is guilt. I know I often feel guilty before God because of things I have said or done or failed to do. I often feel ashamed and unqualified to ask anything of God because I know in my heart I don't deserve it. But then I remind myself that Jesus is my Savior. I don't come to God on my own. I come through the blood of Jesus. I come as one whose guilt has been removed, whose sin has been paid for and I am righteous before God. I have a right to come to him because my sin has been dealt with. And when I remember that, it frees me to pray.

Well, there are a lot of things I could say about prayer this morning, but I didn't mean to preach a sermon on praying as such. I do want to say if we are to get out of our spiritual diapers, prayer is one of the essential vitamins to help us grow. A second essential to spiritual maturity is Bible reading. With all of the modern translations today, the Bible is easy enough to read and understand. Let me suggest three reasons we need to read the Bible if we want to get out of the spiritual nursery. First, the Bible is the inspired word of God. The word "inspired" is the same word meaning "to breathe." Imagine a flutist breathing into his instrument to produce a sound. In the same way, God breathes His message through the Bible. Today, the biggest division among Christians is not what denomination they belong to. No, the dividing line among Christians is between those who accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God and those who do not. If the Bible isn't inspired, we are wasting our time. If it is truly God's word, then there can be no Christian growth and development without it. It is as simple as that.



A second thing we can say about the Bible is that it is the indestructible Word of God. The Psalmist writes, "Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in Heaven." (Psalm 119:89) And that means that God's word is fixed. Over the centuries, men have tried to destroy God's word. Back in the early centuries, a Roman ruler, Diocletian, persecuted believers and confiscated their Scriptures. He erected a sign saying, "The name of Christian is extinguished." Yet, within 12 years, Constantine came to power and Rome became Christian officially. Voltaire once boasted, "Another century and there will not be a Bible on earth." But Voltaire is gone, his books are found mostly in libraries or second-hand stores and the Bible is selling more copies than in any time in history. One of the Beatles boasted several years ago that they were more popular than Jesus. Fifty years from now few will remember the Beatles who have already broken up their team, but Jesus will still be winning the hearts and lives of people. So you can trust the scripture. You can read it and believe it and bet your life on it because it is the indestructible Word of God.

A third thing we can say about the Bible is this: it is the indispensable Word of God. Without the Bible we would know nothing of Bethlehem and the manger, of the sermon on the mount, of the teachings of Jesus. We would know nothing of his death on the cross and his resurrection. We would never have heard of the events of Pentecost and the development of the early church. We would not have heard of the messages of St. Paul and the other writers of the New Testament. As a consequence, we would never have heard of salvation. The Roman philosopher, Seneca, once wrote, "All my life I've been seeking to climb out of the pit of my besetting sins. I cannot do it, and I never will unless a hand is let down to draw me up." Well, God has let down a hand to draw us up. Praise God that he has reached down into the pit of our sins and through Jesus has pulled us up. But we know that because of the Bible. So, the Bible is indispensable to us. So, to get out of the nursery ward of the Christian faith takes prayer, it takes reading the Bible, the Word of God. A third element for spiritual growth is fellowship. The man who separates himself from his fellow Christians, who attends church but rarely, is a man who is spiritually immature. You see, God has chosen the gathered community, the fellowship of believers, as a special means of touching our lives. Where do most people come to know the Lord? Isn't it in the fellowship of a prayer meeting, the fellowship of a Bible class, the fellowship of worship that one ordinarily gets his life touched? And while a man may come to the Lord in some other circumstance such as Paul on the Damascus road, ordinarily it happens in the fellowship of believers. And while Paul may have met Jesus on the Damascus Road, he still needed the fellowship of another believer to complete his experience. The Holy Spirit fell on the disciples when they were gathered together in prayer and fellowship. The first conversions occurred as Peter in the fellowship of worship preached a sermon to which 3,000 responded. The conversion of the Gentiles began when in the fellowship of preaching, Cornelius and his family responded to the preaching of Peter. and the missionary enterprise to Europe began because the Christians at Antioch were gathered together in prayer and the Holy Spirit directed them to set apart Paul and Barnabas to become missionaries. No, you don't have to fellowship to have spiritual things happen to you, but if you trust what the Bible says, such spiritual experiences of growth are far more likely to occur when you do. So, the man who is growing in the Lord, who is moving out of the spiritual nursery ward, is the man who is in fellowship with other Christians. As a sort of afterthought, let me add this: the sort of fellowships you have, have a great deal to do with your spiritual growth. If you are not growing spiritually, you may need to change some of your present fellowships. Are the friends you have, are the

gatherings you attend, the sort that contribute to or hinder your spiritual development? You see, some of us may need to change some of our friends, change some of the fellowships we take part in. Indeed, some of us may need to develop some new friends who share the same faith we do.

Finally, in order to grow up in the Lord and to become mature Christians means we must begin to act out our faith. Sometimes a little baby is slow to learn to walk. He can watch others walk, he can imagine in his mind how it will feel to walk, and he can even imagine in his mind what he must do with his legs in order to walk. But the fact is, until he pulls himself up and tries to take that first step, he will never learn to walk. It is as he tries to walk, as he stumbles and falls, as he totters and weaves about like a drunken sailor, that he begins to learn how to make his little legs operate and how to keep his balance. The same is true with us spiritually. We can know in our minds what it is like to be a Christian. We can picture in our minds what we can and should do as children of God. But we will never get out of the spiritual nursery and grow up as Christians until we begin to walk, until we begin to do the things of the Lord. Admittedly, it will be difficult at first. Our spiritual legs won't function properly at first. We will stumble and fall and we will get so discouraged we won't want to try again. But then our heavenly father will come and bend over us and lift us up. He will say, "Come on. Try again. Hold on to my hand." Then there comes a great surge of power into our lives and we can act out our faith, we can live out what we believe because we are trying our best and the Father is holding our hands.

Where are you in your spiritual growth this morning? Are you a mature man in Christ? Are you still in the spiritual nursery, able only to drink milk? Where would you like to be? You see, that depends on you.