

## “Around the Bases: Didache (Διδαχῆ)”

“These commandments . . . are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children.”  
Deuteronomy 6:6-7; responsive reading, “Spiritual Maturity”<sup>1</sup>

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Since the time of Moses, this affirmation of the oneness of God, known as the *Shema*, has been a symbol of Jewish faith, even more to be treasured than the Ten Commandments. This confession and attendant command opens the synagogue service. It is to be repeated twice each day. And for us as followers of Jesus, this confession has even greater significance, because Jesus said that it is the first and greatest commandment.

Significantly, Jesus also changed the *Shema* by adding to it. When Jesus stated the Great Commandment, He added “with all your **mind**” to “all your **heart, soul, and strength**” (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30).

You may know the name Elisabeth Elliot. Elisabeth’s first husband, Jim Elliot, was martyred in 1956 while attempting to make missionary contact with the Auca (now known as Huaorani) of eastern Ecuador. She later spent two years as a missionary to the very persons who killed her husband.

In an essay in *Christianity Today*, Elisabeth was talking about loving God with our minds when she wrote that “It appears that God has deliberately left us in a quandary about many things. Why did He not summarize all the rules in one book, and all the basic doctrines in another? He could have eliminated the loopholes, prevented all the schisms over morality and false teaching that have plagued His Church for two thousand years.

“Think of the squabbling and perplexity we would have been spared. And think of the crop of [spiritual] dwarfs He would have reared! He did not spare us. He wants us to reach maturity. **He has so arranged things that if we are to go on beyond the ‘milk diet’** [of which we read in our texts just now] **we shall be forced to think.**”<sup>2</sup>

My friend, David Garland, Dean of the Truett Seminary of Baylor University, noted that “Jesus did not strive to make things easier for the crowds to comprehend or to make them feel more comfortable. His enigmatic teaching served to separate those who were curious from those who were serious, those who were seeking only a religious sideshow from those who were truly seeking after God.”<sup>3</sup>

It was for these same reasons that Paul admonished the Corinthians to “*stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults*” (1 Corinthians 14:20). And the author of Hebrews, who may have been Paul as well, added that “*We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!*”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 28, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, “The Liberty of Conscience,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 31, no. 14. The original book was published by Word in 1968.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 165.

*“Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14).*

So how do we get there from here? How do we become wise in Christ? How do we make progress toward genuine spiritual maturity? The process that leads to maturity in Christ is actually not very different from the processes that lead to maturity in other areas of our lives. Somehow, though, it seems harder to realize that the same process that makes us mature in our vocational lives or in our sporting efforts is just as necessary if we’re to grow spiritually.

You may be familiar with Malcolm Gladwell’s best-selling book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*,<sup>4</sup> in which Gladwell posits the now-famous dictum that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master any complicated endeavor such as a musical instrument or a sport, preferably beginning in childhood. Gladwell argues that phenomenal success requires beginning with the right “equipment,” which in most cases has to do with what we might call “accidents of birth and genetics,” or being born to the right people in the right place at the right time. Add to that a mere 10,000 hours of training and practice, and, voilà! a master is made.

Whether Gladwell’s thesis is correct or not, I think we’d not miss the mark by much if we assumed that spiritual maturity is similarly the result of combining the right equipment with appropriate training and diligent practice over a long period of time. With that as our working hypothesis, then, let’s look briefly at spiritual maturity using the ideas of equipment, training, and practice.

There are two pieces of equipment that are absolutely essential in order to begin the journey toward spiritual maturity. The first of these is **a spiritually transformed heart**; the second is **a good study Bible**. The Bible says that *“the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 2:14). As Jesus told Nicodemus, *“If you’re not born again, you’ll not only never enter the Kingdom of God; you’ll never even see it”* (John 3:3). Without the new heart and mind that are granted to us when we place our faith in Jesus, we cannot begin the journey at all.

A good study Bible can help you *begin* the journey as well as help you *continue* it. A good study Bible will have a Bible dictionary, a concordance, maps, footnotes, and many other resources to assist you in understanding the text. There are many translations and versions of the Bible available these days, and there are many good study Bibles as well.

As beautiful as the language of the King James Version is, it’s four hundred years old, and for many of us, Elizabethan English is very nearly a foreign language. I suggest that you use either the New International Version or the New Living Translation, and I suggest that you get the Life Application Study Bible in one of these translations. If you have a computer or a tablet or a smartphone, there’s a great deal of software available these days that can make Bible study a new adventure altogether.

Second, let’s think about training. Being born again is not a complicated enterprise, but its result is a baby Christian, not a mature one. Maturity requires training and practice. It’s not enough merely to accept the Bible as God’s Word. If we’re going to experience the Bible’s transforming power in our lives, we’ve got to learn how to understand and interpret it. We need to understand something about the circumstances in which and to which the various books of the Bible were written. We need to develop understanding of the major themes and principles of the Bible, and much more.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (NY: Little, Brown, & Co., 2008).

For these reasons, serious Bible Study—both individually and with others—is really not optional for persons who are serious about following Jesus. So get yourself a study Bible, study the passage that will be discussed, and then show up on time, ready to discuss the Word. And don't be afraid to ask "Why?"

We sometimes avoid asking "Why?" about spiritual things because asking it challenges our assumptions. It challenges our comfort. It forces us to think. While some of our questions don't have definitive answers from our present location, it's usually possible to discern the direction in which the answers lie, and serious mental effort is just as necessary in faith development as it is in learning anything else of value.

What does the Bible teach us about biomedical ethics? Public policy? Marriage? Sexuality? Vocational direction? Music in worship? Persons with disabilities? Achieving peace in the world? Evil and suffering? Healing? Leadership? Grief? Addiction? Self-esteem? Personality? Abortion? Capital punishment? Gender roles? Hope? These are the kinds of questions that are worthy of our study, and growing toward spiritual maturity requires that we study them.

College students find their faith challenged on university campuses chiefly because their faith has not been sufficiently challenged at home or in the church. They've not been taught how to think about their faith with intellectual rigor. If students of any age compare the flimsy leaflets they're often given at church to the massive volumes they're required to master in the schools, it's pretty natural to conclude that there's really not much intellectual content to faith.

Professor James Fowler of Emory University did some very important research several decades ago in which he identified seven "stages of faith" that represent increasing levels of complexity and maturity.<sup>5</sup> Without going into detail, the major stages of Fowler's model include **Mythic-Literal Faith**, which is generally the faith of childhood; **Synthetic-Conventional Faith**, which is generally the faith of adolescence; **Individuative-Reflective Faith**, which is generally born—if at all—through the process of leaving home and establishing one's own separate identity; and **Conjunctive Faith**, which is born—if at all—through the crucible of the crises of mid-life.

One of Fowler's key ideas is that it is possible to be sixty or seventy years old and yet still be operating with the level of spiritual understanding we had when we were six or seven . . . and that's not a good thing. To quote Paul once more, "*Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults*" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

There's both good news and warning here. The teaching ministry of the church can play a vital part in the development of spiritually mature faith. But even with regular attendance, to depend on a maximum of something like twenty-five hours a year in Sunday School to ensure our children's spiritual growth amounts to something like criminal neglect. **The primary source of spiritual nurture must be the home**, assisted by the fellowship of believers and the church's training programs. When parents abandon their responsibility to teach and demonstrate mature faith to their children, the church can never fully make up the difference.

My friends, what do our children learn about mature faith when they watch our lives? Time and time again I hear parents talk about how much time they spend going to ball games and to band practices, more and more often on Sunday morning.

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<sup>5</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). Fowler's stages bear some similarity to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory\\_of\\_cognitive\\_development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_cognitive_development)) and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg%27s\\_stages\\_of\\_moral\\_development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohlberg%27s_stages_of_moral_development)).

Yes, good athletes and good musicians often get college scholarships, but whose need is that meeting? Is that meeting our children's needs or our own? Do we *really* mean to teach our children that money is more important than spiritual maturity? Sports and music for our kids are great . . . but what will you give in exchange for their souls?

God's Word assigns to parents the responsibility of teaching our children to "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*" But some parents, under the guise of broad-mindedness, make no effort at all to guide the religious development of their children. They say, "He needs to be able to decide for himself." "We'll not take her to church—she can decide on her own."

But why are we not so broad-minded about the other aspects of growing up? Why do we work so hard to teach our children not to take medicine or to swallow things that Mommy or Daddy didn't give them? Why do we put covers on electric sockets when our children are young? Why do we teach them how to safely cross the street and how to swim? Why do we send them to driver's ed? We teach these things to our children because it is a matter of life or death that they know them.

The risk involved in faith or unbelief is a matter of life or death as well, not merely here on earth, but for all eternity; and our Lord has given to us as parents the responsibility and glad privilege of passing on knowledge about Him, His love for us, and how we may have a relationship with Him.

The *Shema* reminds us that God's truth needs to have a constant place in our thoughts, and we need to take seriously our obligation to teach that truth diligently to our children. Reflection on and application of the principles of God's Word should be a normal part of our daily conversation in all the activities of the day, from morning until night.

But as important as it is that we give our children accurate and age-appropriate knowledge *about* God, it's even more important that we show them how to have a personal relationship *with* Him. Our children desperately need to see and know the difference God makes in *our* lives—how the Holy Spirit directs us and encourages us; how our relationships with other people are changed by the Spirit within us; how we share God's love with others through all our days.

Our children need to observe and to experience the fact that abundant life in Christ is still real and can still be experienced even when the bills are due, the family is sick, and the car doesn't work. When God's Word and God's will are a natural part of our daily lives, they will inevitably shape life and life's decisions, both when our children are small and when they have families of their own.

All this is to say that achieving spiritual maturity requires **practice**. Even if you've got the right spiritual equipment, and even if you take advantage of weekly Bible Study and the special studies that we have from time to time, what we do here at The Meeting House will never be enough to develop spiritual maturity in your life, or in your children's lives. Spiritual maturity requires daily and disciplined practice, in season and out, on every day of the week.

Some years ago I heard one of the Navy Blue Angels pilots talk about their daily regimen of practice flights. He talked about how important it is for the Blue Angels to repeat their maneuvers over and over until their muscles "remember" what to do with very little conscious thought. That's also how we become persons whose lives are prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful. We practice every day.

Peter's words in our text encourage us to "*make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance;*

*and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Peter 1:5-8).

My friends, you and I will never be *effective* and *productive* as followers of Jesus unless we spend daily time in prayer and Bible study. We won't get there unless we practice compassion and virtue every minute of every day.

Someone has said that **Bibles that are falling apart usually belong to people who are not falling apart**. What does the condition of your Bible suggest about *your* level of practice?