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An interview with Mark Finley

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14 WEANING BABIES: A MEDITATION ON HEBREWS 5:11–6:8

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Ministry
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12501 Old Columbia Pike,
Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600 USA
www.ministrymagazine.org
ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org
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ELIZABETH OSTRING



Weaning Babies:

A meditation on Hebrews 5:11–6:8

Elizabeth Ostring, MBChB, PhD, a physician, theologian, and former medical missionary, resides in Helensville, Auckland, New Zealand, and works with the "Incredible Journey" Bible School and the Hope Channel Bible School.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

A group of young adults and I studied Hebrews, and I can testify that it changed my life. Hebrews is the perfect bridge between the Old and New Testaments, explaining the meaning of the Old in the radiant light of the New.

But after magnificent chapters highlighting the absolute supremacy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we were puzzled by the accusation of babyhood at the end of the fifth chapter: "When you ought to be *teachers* because of the length of time that has passed since you first heard the gospel, you still need someone to tell you the simple elements of the very beginning of the message of God. You have sunk into a state when you need milk and not solid food"[1] (v. 12, emphasis added).

The problem

Hebrews thus declares *all* Christians should move from a new birth experience to a teaching role. The milky doctrines appear to be the core of the Christian message, but "let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (Heb. 6:1, 2).[2] For the author of Hebrews, a major problem for Christians is not that of regressing to a pre-Christian state but prolonged, unproductive babyhood.

If the milky doctrines are so important, what is wrong with spiritual babies? The apostle says that having tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the gift of the Holy Spirit, they crucify the Son of God again and hold Him up to contempt (vv. 4–6). Worse, it is impossible to restore such persons to repentance because they put the Son of God to open shame. This shocking indictment sounds like apostasy. But the next verses suggest another problem: "For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned" (vv. 7, 8).

What kind of land grows thorns and thistles? Surely it is land not used for the good purpose for which it was intended. Spiritual babies are interested primarily in their own salvation, in their own chance to escape judgment and reach heaven. They have lost the vision of extending the kingdom of God and are unfruitful, doing nothing to share the knowledge of Jesus with others. They have lost their first love.

Pastoral focus

Layer by layer, illustration by illustration, example by example, the author of Hebrews builds a dazzling picture of the glorious nature and supremacy of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice and mediatorial work. Insistently and persistently, the focus of Hebrews is Jesus. This vision of Jesus is the source of both preaching and outreach.

But the Word of God can be distorted. There is a demand, even industry, to promulgate riveting sermons recorded with the finesse of modern technology for the benefit of those who are confirmed in the milk of the Word. Congregants spend Sabbath afternoons reviewing and

critiquing the words of charismatic preachers expounding on end-time events or fulfillments of prophecy. The viewers congratulate themselves with the thought that they have superior knowledge that will save them from last-day horrors.

This is nothing new. Long ago, these words were written: "Sermons have been in great demand in our churches. The members have depended on pulpit declamations instead of on the Holy Spirit."[3] Nodding in agreement with the pastor's words is not plowing the field and planting a useful crop for the rain of the Holy Spirit to fall on. Should pastors, therefore, abandon preaching? Of course not. Clearly, preaching is essential to educate and nurture.

But pastors need to help milk-imbibing babies grow and become mature teachers of the Word. The first step is to uplift Jesus, His sacrifice, His mediatorial ministry, and His enthronement in glory. When people look unto Jesus, the founder and perfecter of their faith, they are able to run with endurance the race that is set before them (Heb. 12:2, 1). Hebrews suggests the pastor's work is not only to offer the beautiful milky doctrines of Christianity to newborn babes in Jesus but also to encourage those believers to grow and uplift Jesus to others, to share the good news that has blessed them so much. When the preaching message focuses on Jesus and uplifts Him in all His wonderful perfection and sacrificial love, people will be encouraged and inspired to share Him with others.

Anointing all believers

Perhaps you are now nodding in bored agreement: all pastors recognize the obvious need to encourage people to share their faith. But too often, Christian witnessing is presented as mini-pastoring—that good witnessing for Jesus is doing the same type of work as the pastor, only on a smaller scale. This is not to deride pastoral work, but might the witnessing abilities of others be cramped by this approach?

Pastoral leadership might better be regarded as coaching—not coaching in pastoral methods but coaching people to be whom God intended them to be and showing them how they, in the areas of their own daily work experience, can share the message of Jesus Christ.

I was a practicing physician when I enrolled in a master's class called The Theology of Ministry. To my dismay, most in the class were youth pastors—and the lecturer, a renowned youth leader. But Dr. Wayne French did not try to turn me into a pseudo-or semi-youth minister. He coached me to think of how to apply the principles he taught to my daily work with patients, introduce spiritual concepts, and pray with people more effectively. It was a life-changing experience.

Recognizing the connection

If pastors came close to their congregants and learned what their daily God-ordained work entails, they could powerfully influence and encourage people to move from spiritual babyhood to Christian maturity. It is highly significant that when Jesus called Simon and his brother Andrew, He said, " 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men' " (Matt. 4:19). Their call to ministry was couched in words that connected with their daily work and even intimated that their methods might be related to skills that they had already developed.

What congregants need to learn is how to turn ordinary labor into witnessing opportunities. It is easy to forget that the three angels' messages encompass more than just "a day" but Jesus as Creator; our rest in His salvation; and, significantly enshrined in



the pivotal Sabbath command, God's mandate for humans to work six days a week. Witnessing for Jesus Christ is not merely a Sabbath-afternoon activity but a whole-life focus.

Work is not an unfortunate survival necessity to be (reluctantly) relinquished each week to somehow honor God but an opportunity for Christians to extend their influence, a natural mingling with the people[4] that offers many chances to bless others in practical and spiritual ways. The Bible begins with work: the creative work of God. In fact, Genesis is built around the theme of God's work.[5] Even more pertinently, Genesis focuses on the theme of "blessing," and forms of this word appear about 88 times in Genesis, more than any other book in the Bible.[6]

Of course, blessing is at the core of the Sabbath. Thus work (rightly appreciated) and Sabbath are intimately linked by the concept of blessing. For the mature Christian, this link both *leads* to practical assistance to others and *sharing* the good news of Jesus. This daily focus on others, on both their spiritual and physical needs, transforms milk-dependent baby Christians into mature teachers of their workplace colleagues. It also allows people to be creative, to work with God in their own Holy Spirit–anointed skills.

The mature Christian

The pastor does not need to be the expert lawyer, car mechanic, computer programmer, hospital cleaner, or supermarket supervisor when he or she coaches members of his or her congregation. By patient listening, the pastor can discover what the different types of work essentially involve. Then *together*, the pastor and congregant can learn how to meet the needs of the people in these various work environments and how to bid these fellow workers to follow Jesus.

A pastor will lead mature Christians in appropriate Bible study, training and equipping them to develop skills in the presentation of God's Word, enabling them to reach others by word and example, which is in the truth of Jesus Christ, not just doctrine. As the pastor joins congregants in understanding the Bible, he or she helps spiritual babies become teachers of God's Word. Importantly, this coaching partnership extends the pastor's immediate sphere of influence into the community.

An example of the value of lay initiatives is church planting, usually lay-led enterprises. While church plants represent only a small proportion of the total attendance within a conference, they contribute a noticeably higher proportion of total baptisms.[7] But imagine if the workplace of each congregant was a lay-led outreach initiative! What a harvest for Jesus there could be. All too often, outreach is seen as a pastoral activity, and the skills of others lie dormant and unrecognized until they become confirmed milk-sucking babies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how drastically both work and worship can be impacted and how important both these activities are. People have had to rapidly learn to do both in very different ways, and this has not been easy. But this challenge gives us an opportunity to rethink not only how Christians "do" church but also how they approach work.

Milk-dependent Christians need more sermons to watch in the comfort of their homes. But pastors can help move congregants from being mere consumers of Christian milk to thinking about how they can use their work opportunities to bless others. The disaster of underemployment or unemployment can become an opportunity for learning a new approach to combining work with outreach. May God help us lift Jesus and His righteousness high so that, through His Holy Spirit, spiritual babies can be turned into teaching witnesses and point others, as Hebrews says, to look "forward to a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

1 Translation from William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, UK: Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 47.

2 Scripture is from the English Standard Version.

3 Ellen G. White, "The Need of a Revival and a Reformation," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 25, 1902, 1, https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19020225-V79-08.pdf.

4 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1905), 143.

5 Elizabeth Ellen Ostring, *Be a Blessing: The Theology of Human Work in the Narrative of Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

6 Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 95 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 185; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 275; Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 20, footnote.

7 Personal communication from Sven Östring, North New South Wales Conference, Australia, where church plant baptisms were 2.8 times the conference average.

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