

*As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.*

**EPHESIANS 4:14**





CHAPTER 14

## Spiritual Infancy, Spiritual Maturity

I would like to challenge you to take an objective look at your journey of personal spiritual growth. Let us embark on an introspective investigation based on what Scripture reveals about spiritual maturity. I pray you will be prompted by the Holy Spirit to ponder your development in Christ. May God richly bless you as you embark on a journey of personal spiritual evaluation!



In at least four separate New Testament passages there is an association between the two Greek words *teleios* and *nepios*. *Teleios* speaks of maturity, while *nepios* denotes a child. These four passages therefore provide a clear and striking contrast that drives home the need for continuous personal spiritual growth in the life of every believer.

The contrast between the two words should not be interpreted as good versus evil, because every believer goes through a period of spiritual infancy—not to mention that we all act immature at times, no matter our age in Christ. Complete sanctification only occurs when we go to be with the Lord. The bottom line of these passages is that one should not remain in a state of infancy! Unfortunately for American Christianity, many believers are characterized by spiritual immaturity. How long have you known Christ as Lord and Savior? If it's been a good while, do you nevertheless remain in a spiritual fog?

Here, then, are the four passages that illuminate this contrast between spiritual immaturity and maturity:

#### **First Corinthians 3:1–4**

*And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?*

#### **Hebrews 5:13–14**

*For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.*

#### **Ephesians 4:13–14**

*Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.*

#### **First Corinthians 14:20**

*Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.*

Before we look more closely at each of these passages, you may be asking yourself how we grow from spiritual children to mature believers. Romans 12:1–2 spells out the means by which the believer grows:

*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

As seen in this passage, *spiritual* growth occurs when you are “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” And the *renewing of your mind* happens when you learn Scripture and obey it. Remember, importantly, Scripture states of itself in Hebrews 4:12:

*For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Scripture has the power, since it is “living and active,” to transform you from child to adult, to the degree that you allow it to *renew your mind*. Therefore, renewal and transformation occur when you know and obey the *Word* of God. To elaborate further, 2 Corinthians 10:5 instructs the believer to:

[Take] every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Do you in any way block the Word from transforming your thinking? Is the Word or the world preeminent in your thinking? Let’s examine some of the specific characteristics of infancy and maturity from these four passages. Which do you see in yourself?

### Three Characteristics of Spiritual Infants

#### 1. INFANTS DO NOT LISTEN

*I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men.* (1 Corinthians 3:1)

Paul’s use of the word *brethren* indicates that he is addressing believers in the church of Corinth—those who are saved. His point is that even though they are saved he can’t communicate with them in a manner normal between mature Christians. Mature believers can reason with one another from the Scriptures because they hold the Word



in common as authoritative, as the final arbiter for all of faith and practice. However when ones calling themselves believers will not respond to the clear teachings and authority of the Word of God, it is fair to classify them as *infants*. These infants Paul must address as “*men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.*” He can only give them “*milk to drink, not solid food; for [they are] not yet able to receive it.*” Milk, contrasted with solid food, is a fitting picture of the believer’s inability to digest the Word of God. Many American believers today are similar to children who want candy and dessert instead of a regular, rich, nutritious meal that will supply their needs for strong, healthy growth—empty calories versus protein. The mature in Christ dine not only on the Word, but commentaries, teachings on systematic theology, Church history, Christian biographies, etc. How would you describe your reading habits? How is your library coming along?

**Metaphorically, believers need to be in the weight room, downing protein shakes and watching their junk food intake.**

Having said that, all passages of Scripture contain milk *and* meat, and are capable of ministering to the needs of all who are intent on listening to the Word, no matter their level of spiritual maturity. It is incumbent on both teacher and pupil to ascertain what God wants each person to learn from any passage under study. What is tragic is when pupils demand the teacher offer *only* milk, or when teachers never go so deep as to challenge their students in areas where they are immature, and even sinning. For instance, as a teacher of God’s Word I must say that those believers who sponsor the National Prayer Breakfast should be canceling it instead. Why would mature believers sponsor an event historically characterized by religious syncretism (that is, combining different forms of belief) that hurts rather than helps the propagation of singular saving faith in Christ alone? Syncretism invokes God’s wrath on our nation, not His blessing.

The firm footing for a Bible teacher is found in Paul’s admonition of his understudy, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. The spiritual leader/Bible teacher will undergo “*a stricter judgment*” (James 3:1) and cannot shrink from declaring “*the whole purpose of God*” (Acts 20:27), no matter how those within the sound of his heralding may choose to respond to him. (Keep in mind the example of America’s greatest theological mind, the uncompromising Jonathan Edwards, who was thrown out of his church because he wouldn’t marry an elder’s child to a non-believer.)

As you examine yourself you may ask, do I intently desire to hear and obey the Word, or am I intent on remaining at my present level of thinking and way of doing things? Remember:

*For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant.*  
(Hebrews 5:13)

Babes in Christ tend to avoid strong doses of the Word because they know the Word will convict them of their wrongdoing, and their consciences will prod them to change. Although they may publicly accede to *Sola Scriptura*, when God's Book trumps personal desires, infants reject the Book's authority. Like a baby trying to digest a steak dinner, they are "not accustomed" (*apeiros*) to bowing to its *right-way-ness*. Believers who shrink from studying the Word telegraph their spiritual immaturity. Infants may even attempt to discredit the Word in their compulsion to rationalize and justify self-serving actions.

## 2. INFANTS REBEL

*Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly.* (1 Corinthians 3:2–3a)

The Corinthian believers have heard and received the Gospel at a much earlier time, yet they still walk as though they aren't saved by God through Christ. This is grossly abnormal for any Christian. They are passive and rebellious regarding their new life and position in Him. They are rebelling against God's command for all believers to "*walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh*" (Galatians 5:16). What is the desire of the flesh? It is evident in 1 John 2:16: "*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life.*" Elsewhere Paul states similarly, "*Do not quench the Spirit*" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer that secures the victory over sexual lust, covetousness, and self-centeredness—sins all too present on the Hill. The power of the ministry of the Holy Spirit can function to the degree that you allow the Word of God to "*richly dwell within you*" (Colossians 3:16; cf. Ephesians 5:18).

It is Biblically infantile for anyone to claim the name of Christ yet refuse to adhere to the precepts of His Word. Throwing protein-rich food from the high chair is unacceptable! It is rank rebellion.

## 3. INFANTS DISPLAY JEALOUSY AND CAUSE STRIFE

Notice the progression of these three characteristics: immature believers don't listen to good counsel, they rebel, and now we will see how they affect others in the Body of Christ:

*For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?*  
(1 Corinthians 3:3b)



Where *jealousy* exists inwardly, *strife* will result outwardly. The former is a sinful, immature emotional feeling and the latter is a manifestation of selfishness and provocation. Accordingly, immature believers cause division in the Body of Christ. Why? Because in their infancy it's still all about them, versus God's glory. Babes in Christ have difficulty putting away the old self, their self-centered ambitions, and their quest for significance (cf. Ephesians 4:31). In contrast, as Paul said of himself in Galatians 2:20, "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live.*" Every mature believer must live with an attitude of being dead to self.

So why the quest for personal glory? Our goal as believers should be God's glory, not our own! When faced with a decision pitting personal interests against those of the Body of Christ, we are to choose the latter. Infants in Christ, as we saw, walk "*like mere men.*" Or said another way, they act like non-believers.

## Four Characteristics of Spiritual Adults

### 1. ADULTS ARE TRAINED AND DISCERNING

*But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.*  
(Hebrews 5:14)

We've examined spiritually infantile believers; let's look now at the spiritually *mature*. Because of their regular diet of the Word, they have the ability to *discern* truth from error. They are trained to see life through the lens of the Book penned by the Author of life. An illustrative passage is 1 John 2:12–14:

*I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

Similar to Paul and the writer of Hebrews, the apostle John uses the analogy of the physical to depict spiritual growth, although the Greek words for these levels of growth are different. In this case, as we look at the three levels of spiritual maturity, *children*, *young men*, and *fathers*, we see that the young men and fathers differ from the child in that they "*have overcome the evil one.*" We have already discussed this passage, but for now let it reinforce the concept that the mature believer can discern spiritual truth from error, whereas the infant cannot. Babes can get caught in the web of false doctrine or religion, while the spiritually mature have come to grips with the truth of 1 Peter 5:8:

*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

Satan thrives on sidetracking young believers into false religious systems that seem to the less discerning to be similar to Biblical Christianity. But the spiritual adult can distinguish true saving faith from false religions and cults, as we found in the third of our original passages, Ephesians 4:14:

*As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.*

The *child* in the faith tends to go with the flow (the wrong flow!) i.e., “*tossed here and there by waves,*” which may or may not be doctrinally sound. This could also refer to following those who cause schisms in the Body of Christ. They are doctrinally deceived. Notice Paul says they are carried by “*every wind of doctrine,*” i.e., they cannot discern correct doctrine as supported by the Word of God from falsehood. They lack knowledge of the Word; all they know is that “Jesus loves me, and I know my sins are forgiven.” It is not uncommon for those at this level of maturity, babes in Christ, to attend a religious institution that teaches of a salvation attained in some other fashion than by faith alone in Christ alone. A common thread among false religions is an unbiblical understanding of the person and work of Christ, often combined with extra-Biblical revelation of some sort. At the risk of sounding arrogant or self-righteous, I will say that the majority of believers today in the American Church are spiritual infants.

Most are grossly under-taught in the Word of God, in part due to the impact of the seeker-sensitive and other non-Christ-centered movements in many churches. They may be headed for heaven but in the meantime their usefulness to God here on earth is quite limited.

As Public Servants who desire higher office you can understand this particularly well: rarely does a president or king appoint infants to important tasks. First they must grow up and come to know the king personally and intimately, and earn the king’s trust by living maturely in accordance with his principles. It is only then that they could possibly think they might be appointed to important positions. In a similar sense, do not expect God to appoint you to a higher level of service before you have matured in your relationship with Him.

## 2. ADULTS UNIFY THE BODY

*Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man.*  
(Ephesians 4:13a)



In this Ephesians passage, again contrasting *teleion* and *nepios*, another characteristic of *mature* believers comes to light:

**Mature believers are critically sensitive to unity and hold it as a high priority because the corporate unity of the Body of Christ is the strongest form of evangelism to the secular world.**

Jesus addresses God the Father regarding this point:

*... that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:21)*

The unity of the Body is extremely important and those who are mature in Christ will avoid disrupting it. In contrast, the spiritually immature are characterized by jealousy, which leads to strife, which leads to disunity.

### 3. ADULTS DISPLAY CHRISTLIKENESS AND ARE GROWING

*... to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13b)*

As the believer grows closer to Christ through prayer and obedience to His Word, he becomes more and more like the One who saved him. This is an ongoing process that is aided by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It should be noted again that perfection in Christlike behavior will never be fully attained in this life; not until we go to be with our Savior is perfection (glorification) achieved. We must be gracious and patient with others in godly, or *agape*, love, not self-righteously thinking we have a lock on orthodoxy and orthopraxy—that is, belief and practice. Interestingly, Paul uses the word “complete” (*teleios*) in Colossians 1:28 to explain the unending goal of the pastor-teacher in this sanctifying process:

*We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.*

Continuous maturation is a sign of adulthood; moving toward *completeness* is normal for the Christian life. Paul says to the Philippians (Philippians 1:6):

*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

It goes without saying that those who are maturing are also characterized by humility when they discover that they are out of sorts with Scripture.

#### 4. ADULTS KNOW DOCTRINE AND ARE MATURE THINKERS

*Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.*  
(1 Corinthians 14:20)

This passage is from the final verse listed in the opening of this chapter. The context of this passage from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians has to do with spiritual gifts, but in a broader sense Paul is addressing believers with the admonition to be *mature* in their *thinking*.

Mature believers are characterized by mature thinking: they have an ability to understand the principles of Scripture, reason from them and making sound, principle-based applications of the truths therein not only in their personal lives, but in the case of Public Servants, in their policy formation. All their decisions accurately reflect the principles and precepts of God's revelation through Scripture. Mature believers are not disconnected from Scriptural truth and application in any area of their lives; that is to say, mature believers have integrity with the Word of God.

**Mature-in-Christ Public Servants are Biblically based  
thinkers who reason from the epistemological basis  
and everlasting authority of God's Word.**

Proverbs 2:6 states this same idea: *"For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding."* Continuing with Proverbs 7:4, *"Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister,' And call understanding your intimate friend."* Therefore, unlike infants, characteristic of mature, spiritual adults is a true *knowledge* and deep *understanding* of the fundamental issues of life. The mature believer is a profound person, a wellspring of wise counsel for all of society—especially in the committee rooms on the Hill. How our nation needs more Public Servants who are trained and discerning, unifying, growing, mature thinkers! They are born from an intense, Holy-Spirit-given desire to continuously grow in Christ.



## Are you a spiritual child or adult? What list best characterizes you?

### SPIRITUAL INFANTS

- Do you react negatively to the admonition of Scripture?
- Are jealousy and personal ambition more important to you than the unity of the Body of Christ?
- Are you uncomfortable in Bible-teaching environments?

### SPIRITUAL ADULTS

- Are you trained by the Word and discerning of false doctrine?
- Do you seek to unify, purify, and protect the Body of Christ, even at your own cost?
- Are you Christlike and habitually growing?
- Do you know doctrine and reason from it?

My prayer is that you will be encouraged in your quest for spiritual maturity as you reflect on these definitive passages on the subject. In your examination of these questions, remember the words of Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, to his son:

Be sober and vigilant. Remember at all times that while you are seeing the world, the world will see you. Recollect further that you are always under the eye of the Supreme Being.<sup>1</sup>

May God bless you as you ponder and measure yourself against this Scriptural plumb line!

One could argue that if there is a single book of the New Testament that has most impacted history and can instruct us personally on Christian doctrine and the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in public service, it is the book of Galatians. Let's dig deep into that book next.

### Notes

1 Dorie Lawson, *Posterity: Letters of Great Americans to Their Children* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2004), 268.

