

The Marks of Immaturity, and How to Keep Growing

Scripture: Ephesians 4:14–15; Hebrews 5:12–6:1

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Editor's Note: This post is adapted from *Reckless Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994, pp. 63-66). As you read, think about the fact that these words were written *17 years ago*. For many of you YRR folks, John was writing to your *parents*!

The immaturity and lack of discernment that marked your *parents'* generation explains much of what we're living with today. On this, I think we agreed: The YRR generation simply *cannot* follow the same course. So, listen to what your parents ignored, and together, let's get this ship heading in the right direction.

Selfishness is one telltale sign of immaturity. Babies are completely self-centered. They scream if they don't get what they want when they want it. All they are aware of are their own needs and desires. They never say thanks for anything. They can't help others; they can't *give* anything. They can only receive.

And certainly there's nothing wrong with that when it occurs in the natural stage of infancy. But to see a child whose development is arrested so that he never gets beyond that stage of helpless selfishness—that is a tragedy.

And that is exactly the spiritual state of multitudes in the church today. They are utterly preoccupied with self. They want their own problems solved and their own comfort elevated. Their spiritual development is arrested, and they remain in a perpetual state of selfish helplessness. It is evidence of a tragic abnormality.

Arrested infancy, in turn, results in *a lack of discernment*. Just as a baby crawls along the floor, putting anything it finds in its mouth, spiritual babies don't know what is good for them and what isn't. Immaturity and failure to be discerning go together; they are virtually the same thing.

The tendency to stall in a state of immaturity also existed in New Testament times. Paul appealed to Christians repeatedly to grow up spiritually. In Ephesians 4:14-15, he wrote, “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; but speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up* in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (emphasis added).

How do we grow spiritually? By “speaking the truth in love” to one another. We grow under the truth. It is the same truth by which we are sanctified, conformed to the image of Christ, made to be mature spiritually (John 17:17, 19). As we absorb the truth of God's Word, we grow up and are built up. We might say accurately that the process of spiritual growth *is* a process of training for discernment.

Hebrews 5:12—6:1 underscores all this:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the

elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity.

The writer of Hebrews was telling his readers, “You're babies. You've been around long enough to be teachers, but instead I have to feed you milk. I have to keep giving you elementary things. You can't take solid food. You're not accustomed to the rich things of the Word—and that is tragic.”

Notice that in verse 14 he says discernment and maturity go hand in hand: “solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Knowing and understanding the Word of righteousness—taking in solid food—trains your senses to discern good and evil.

The word “senses” in that verse is not a reference to the feelings, emotions, or other subjective sensory mechanisms. The writer of this epistle is explicitly encouraging his readers to exercise their *minds*. Those who “because of practice have their senses trained to discern” are the wise, the understanding, people who thrive on the solid food of the Word of God. As we have seen from the beginning, discernment results from a carefully disciplined mind. Discernment is not a matter of feelings, nor is it a mystical gift. Notice from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament how closely discernment is linked with a seasoned, developed, biblically informed mind.

-Psalm 119:66: “Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Thy commandments.”

-Proverbs 2:2-5: “Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God.”

-Proverbs 10:13: “On the lips of the discerning, wisdom is found.”

-Proverbs 16:21: “The wise in heart will be called discerning.”

The path to discernment is the way of spiritual maturity. And the only means to spiritual maturity is mastery of the Word of God.

Most people are discerning about things that are important to them. People who regard a healthy diet as crucial watch carefully what they eat. They read the fine print on the package to see how many grams of fat it has and what percentage of the daily required nutrients it offers.

People who work with pesticides or dangerous chemicals must be very discerning. They study the procedures and the precautions very carefully to avoid any potentially lethal exposure.

People who make investments in the stock market usually practice discernment. They study the cryptic listings in the newspaper on the stock market and watch the ticker tape.

Lawyers are very discerning with contracts. They have to figure out the legal jargon and make sure they understand what they are signing.

People who undergo delicate surgery are usually very discerning. They try to find the doctor with the finest skills—or at least verify that he has plenty of experience in whatever procedure he will be doing.

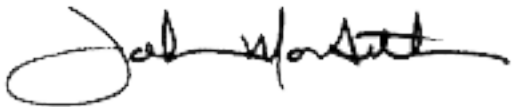
I know lots of people who are very discerning sports enthusiasts. They watch a football game and can assess any offense, any defense, any play. They often feel they are *more* discerning than whoever is calling the actual plays. They study statistics and averages and take it all very seriously.

Did you realize those are essentially the same skills that are required in spiritual discernment? Careful thought, keen interest, thorough analysis, close observation—together with alertness, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, and above all, a love of truth. All of us have those skills to some degree, and we use them in whatever field of endeavor is important to us.

Yet what could be *more* important than spiritual discernment?

There is no valid explanation for why contemporary Christians are so *undiscerning*—but it reveals a spiritual apathy that is deadly evil.

Can the church regain her ability to be discerning? Only by growing up spiritually. That means confronting the spirit of a relativistic age and diligently applying ourselves to the unfailing Word of God. We cannot gain discernment overnight, or through a mystical experience. Understanding the problem is not the answer. Discernment will come only as we train our minds to be understanding in the truth of God's Word and learn to apply that truth skillfully to our lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John H. H. H." with a stylized, flowing script.

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