

PREFACE

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.

So very often when studying the Bible we are reminded—if not from the text itself, in the various discussions *about* the text—of the universal truth written by the weary and cynical Solomon in his Ecclesiastes:

That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one might say,
“See this, it is new”?
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us. (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10)

Our letter to the Corinthians was written in the first century AD, addressing the situation in the Corinthian church at the time. To back up his argument, in v21 Paul cites something the prophet Isaiah wrote roughly 750 years earlier. We are now studying this letter in the *twenty*-first century—two thousand years after it was written, and when in 1887 Frederic Louis Godet commented on Paul’s call for the brethren to “not be children in [their] thinking” in v20, he wrote the following, which precisely describes the culture in which we live now in 2021: “to prefer the amusing to the useful, the brilliant to the solid.”

Being a student of history, the principal reason I am so uncomfortable in *this* time and place is its triteness, its superficiality, its preoccupation with the trivial and inconsequential. In other words, in my estimation, we live in a childish time of very little substance.

The church in Corinth was, in some respects, preferring “the amusing to the useful, the brilliant to the solid.” They were easily impressed by eloquent speakers, ignoring, or worse, not realizing that they were speaking against solid doctrine; they were following cultural fads rather than God’s word; and they were far too impressed with themselves. Sound familiar? They were in need of strong, sober counsel—as are we—and Paul is still doing just that.

In the remaining verses of Chapter Fourteen Paul puts the cap on his discussion of the superiority of prophecy over tongues, as well as concludes his discussion of orderly corporate worship in the church with specific guidelines.

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking;

Paul opens our Chapter Three bemoaning the fact that the Corinthians are still thinking and behaving as infants in the faith.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3a.

The Greek *nepios*, translated “infants,” means, literally, “not-speaking,” hence someone so young that they cannot even form words. In Chapter Thirteen Paul uses the same word, but in this context referring to someone who is simply immature.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:11.

In v20 the word translated “children” in all our versions is the Greek *paidia*, which means, depending on the context, an infant, an older child, adolescent, or even young man. David Garland writes that “this first child image in 14:20 calls to mind the natural tendency of children to be self-centered and vain, to call attention to themselves, and to be enthralled by what is showy.”

Paul is still speaking from the context of the use of tongues in corporate worship. For that reason some have drawn from this that Paul “considered speaking in tongues itself as childish behavior to be outgrown” (Fee), but not so. As R. Schnackenburg explains, “Not that [speaking in tongues] itself is childish behavior, but rather it is childish to have an unreasonable preference for this gift of the Spirit.” The apostle himself speaks in tongues (v18), and it is clear that he considers that gift a plus in his relationship with Christ.

Let’s back up a moment here. What is one of the marks of immaturity, childishness? One sign is a pattern of *inconsistency*. For example, the opening counsel in James’ letter describes the benefit of trials in moving someone from an immature believer to one who is “perfect and complete”—i.e., mature in the faith. He contrasts this with a description of the one who remains immature and unstable.

Read James 1:6-8.

“...like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

There is the picture of inconsistency: believing one thing one day, believing something else the next; or, as in the case of some in the Corinth church, running headlong into one area of the faith, but behaving inconsistent with the faith in other areas.

It is not a stretch to believe that those in the church proclaiming their deep “spirituality,” as evidenced by their exuberant glossolaly (speaking in tongues), were the same ones behaving so selfish and unloving at the Communion table ([Chapter Eleven](#)), and caring so little about how their license to eat meat sacrificed to idols was impacting the faith-life of their brethren ([Chapter Ten](#)). These individuals were childish in their thinking.

Paul has been repeatedly making the point that one cannot truly be “spiritual” while treating one’s brothers and sisters in Christ in such an unloving manner. That is the importance of Chapter Thirteen; it is not a sidebar—it is the central focus of most of this letter!

yet in evil be infants,

The second “child” term used by Paul, translated “infants” in all but the NKJV, is not *paidia*, but is a form of the word used in Chapter Three: *nepiazete*, which Paul uses in a positive sense to express the need for “innocence with regard to evil” (Fee).

Innocence gets a bad rap because it has been made synonymous with the more negative “naiveté”—and in some cases it is. I remember moments when I was a child—grade school age—when, in conversation with my schoolmates I was surprised to learn that a popular entertainer was a “negro” (in the fifties not considered a derogatory term for black people—especially in the Midwest). My mates were surprised that I was surprised, but when I saw entertainers such as Nat King Cole or Sammy Davis, Jr. on TV, I was just enthralled by their talent; it didn’t even occur to me that the color of their skin was different from mine. When you listen to the late, great Nat King Cole, the last thing you think of is the color of his skin; all you want to do is listen to that velvet voice forever. Was I naive? I suppose so. But mostly I was just innocent—even *ignorant* of the evil of prejudice against black people. It simply wasn’t part of my life.

My guess is that today one would have to search long and hard to find a grade school kid so naive. Would that I was equally so innocent of evil today.

And once again we look back in ancient history to discover that the same thing was going on then—that Israel was indeed quite well-versed in evil. In Jeremiah 6, through the prophet the Lord God was warning the people of Jerusalem that because of their rebellion and sin, He was sending the Babylonians to take the city. He speaks first in the voice of the invading army, then as Yahweh:

Read Jeremiah 6:4-8.

Then the Lord goes deeper into the cause for this punishment.

Read Jeremiah 6:10-15.

“They did not even know how to blush.”

If you no longer blush at evil, you are not an “infant” in evil. God wants us to be so ignorant of evil that when we are accidentally confronted by it, we turn away in painful embarrassment, blushing at the very thought that something like that exists on the earth.

For most, if not all of us, that possibility is already in our past. We have become so inured to the evil around us that, sadly, it has just become another part of life. And in this culture it is nigh impossible to be otherwise; daily the corruption of evil is thrown in our face from every quarter of society and the media to which it is enslaved.

I am convinced, however, that the influence of evil in a believer’s life can be at least minimized, and perhaps even extinguished—that the pattern can be reversed. We need not be enslaved to it. If you are studying God’s word—and you are—you already know the methods; I need not itemize them. But we too easily forget the power of God and His indwelling Spirit in a life. Part of being an infant where it comes to evil is purposely giving ourselves over—like a young child is dependent on his or her parent—to God’s rule over our life: *His* power, *His* wisdom, *His* answers, *His* love for us. We learn love for others through His love for us. Likewise, we learn how to live a life ignorant of evil through sitting at the feet of His righteousness and purity—much as David portrays in one of his songs of ascents. Here is how King David—no stranger to sin and evil—prepares his heart to encounter a holy God on his way to the temple.

Read Psalm 131.

but in your thinking be mature.

So much of this letter is about, or at least references in passing, Spirit-gifts. Living with our own year after year, we grow accustomed to believing they say something about us. But we are just the ugly clay pots into which the Lord has poured *His* glory.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:5-7.

The believer who is mature in his or her thinking is one who knows when to think like a child, and when to think like an adult. But over all this is the acknowledgment that God is the source and the power over it all. I would like to close with what Paul writes to the Romans near the end of that letter.

Read Romans 16:17-20.