

Dear Children of God Living Under His Grace,

When parents take little children for wellness check-ups, besides receiving immunizations they are also weighed and measured. Why? To determine if the child is growing and developing properly. Is everything ok? Are there any concerns? They even have fancy growth charts to plot the progress.

Just think if there were such a thing as a *spiritual* growth chart to plot our spiritual progress as we pass through life. Here was my level of faith then, and here it is now. Here was my knowledge of the Word then and here it is now. Has there been a steady trend upward? Has the line leveled off? Has it declined?

Today Paul tells us about **God's Plan for Proper Spiritual Growth**. (1) *When it comes to evil, be infants* (2) *When it comes to the way we think, be adults*.

1

"Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults." 1 Corinthians 14:20

Paul sincerely loved the young-in-the-faith Corinthians Christians. He proved it by putting his life on the line to bring the Gospel to them. Like any good teacher, he wanted these Christians to grow. He found he needed to lovingly admonish them: **"Stop thinking like children,"** he writes. He's not coarsely saying, *"Oh, come on you guys. Grow up!"* No, he considers them **"brothers and sisters."** He wants them to evaluate their Christian lives as part of their growth plan.

Some of the Cor. Christians had a "hang up." God had given a number of them a special gift of the Spirit called speaking in tongues. That doesn't mean "gibberish" or non-intelligible babbling, but rather they were able to speak in foreign languages without having to study them -- like on the day of Pentecost. Imagine if you would suddenly be able to speak Chinese or Italian in an instant! Apparently some in Corinth thought this gift to be so spectacular that they considered others gifts given to their fellow Christians to be less important -- like gifts of teaching, administering, encouraging, or generous giving.

Paul is telling them here not to be childish in their fascination with this gift. Like children, they seemed to prefer the "amusing and amazing" rather than the more mundane, common gifts needed to proclaim the good news to the world. So he says, **"Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children."**

However, he makes one important exception: **"In regard to evil, be infants!"** Be ignorant, be infantile about wickedness and sin. Oh, certainly we need to recognize what evil is so we know what is right and wrong and what to avoid, but we don't need to jump into evil and experience evil to know that it is bad! For example, how much do we need to know about the occult or Satanism to understand that it's pure evil? When I lived in Guayama, PR, a city whose welcome sign said, **"Bienvenidos a La Ciudad de Brujas"** (*Welcome to the City of Witches*), I didn't need to go to séances or visit a fortune teller or get involved in black magic to know how perverse this was to the Lord. Stay away! **"In regard to evil, be infants!"**

Fellow adults, wouldn't it be wonderful to be *infants* again in regard to evil -- to not even have in our heads the **bad words** that bubble up when we get angry or frustrated? Wouldn't it be wonderful to know nothing about **back-biting** or gossip; or never have to worry about **loving and depending on money** or becoming materialistic to try to be happy? Don't you long for such days of innocence? Well, those days will come, thanks to Jesus. They will come to us in heaven. Jesus had no evil and died for our evil so that we can live where there will be no evil: heaven. What a relief and joy it will be to live far away from all the oppressive complications of sin! We will be like children again singing and dancing in the streets of the Jerusalem the golden!

2

So, God's plan for proper spiritual growth entails being infants about evil. However, he also says, **"But in your thinking, be adults."** God wants us to have a mature way of thinking and under-

standing as we live in this world. Remember that spiritual growth chart? God wants the line to keep going up. The end of confirmation class in 8th grade should not be a stopping point, or a drop off point -- as happens so often in our Lutheran churches today.

The author of Hebrews once put it this way: ***“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 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 (still) need milk, not solid food!”*** (Heb 5:11-12). He’s saying that by this time in their lives they should have been eating spiritual steak and potatoes, but they were still drinking milk from baby bottles because they were not maturing spiritually and growing in their knowledge of the Word.

As we Christians get older, we branch out into more things in life. Let’s not forget that as the branches grow, the roots need to get deeper and stronger.

There’s an old fable about a big, stately tree that kept branching out and had a beautiful canopy. But when a big wind storm blew through, it started snapping and falling into a neighboring tree. When the tree recovered from the shock, it said to its supporting neighbor, ***“How is it that you have stood your ground in this storm and were able to hold me up as well?”*** The neighboring tree said, ***“It is quite simple, really. While you were busy growing branches, I was busy strengthening my roots.”***

This truth is actually summed up well for us in Psalm 1. The one who ***“meditates on his law (Word) day and night”*** is ***“like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither”*** (Ps. 1:3). The roots of Christians who are into the Word in their homes, schools, and churches, and who take the Word to heart, are constantly in the life-giving, faith-strengthening water for proper spiritual growth. ***“Their leaf does not wither.”***

Eating a Mediterranean Diet may help us be healthy, and spinach may help us grow strong like Popeye, but it is a steady diet of the Word of God that gives us spiritual maturity to withstand the storms of life and helps us ***“think like adults,”*** as Paul put it in his letter.

Recently I’ve looked a bit at our WELS statistical report. It gives congregational statistics about many things: membership, baptisms, confirmations, etc. But it also gives attendance stats. What is true in American churches in general is also true about the WELS: our average weekly attendance is declining. The graph line is going down. “Christian adult thinking” includes thinking properly about the importance of corporate worship and fellowship -- as God teaches it in the 3rd Commandment and elsewhere in Scripture. It recognizes the connection between hearing the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. God help us prayerfully to take that truth to heart as his mature people.

So, thank you for being here today. You understand and take seriously that this, gathering together to worship and hear God’s Word, is part of *God’s Plan for Proper Spiritual Growth!*

Amen.