

LARGE LETTERS

by ps jim mcinnes



Stop being such babies.' That's essentially what the Apostle Paul tells a bunch of squabbling believers in Corinth. 'I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready,' he says, chastising them for their slow spiritual growth and failure to love one another (1 Cor 3:2).

He wonders whether they have grasped anything of the gospel.



don't be such a baby: learn to feed yourself spiritually

Paul uses the image of a baby transitioning from milk to solids to exhort the church to digest and put to use what they have already been taught, so that they can move onto higher truths. We can stretch Paul's growth metaphor to think of a baby moving not only from milk to solids, but also learning to feed itself. The trajectory Paul envisioned for Christians in his churches was that they 'no longer be children' but rather 'grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.' (Eph 4:14–15). Paul doesn't want passive dependents who wait for the next meal to arrive from the apostolic kitchen. He wants to see believers harvesting the raw ingredients from the word of God for themselves, and producing meals for themselves and each other through prayerful, obedient Christian living. He wants a church full of chefs.

I wonder how many of us still require milk (the basics) when we should have progressed to solid spiritual food. Or, how many of us are dependent on others to feed us when we could have learned by now to feed ourselves? As Vine church members you may know that our vision is to see you grow to Christian maturity

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(Growing Big People). Our framework for helping you take this journey is called the *Pathways of Maturity* [pictured below] because Christian maturity is attained step by step (in ways that mould your character, heal your soul, fill you with truth and love, and apply your faith to the world around you). It's an active exploration, a journey of discovery, a set of disciplines.

We are of course spiritually fed by others in lots of important and appropriate ways. A Sunday sermon from a thoughtful preacher is food for the soul that someone else prepared, cooked, and metaphorically put in our mouth so we have something to chew on for the week ahead. That podcast devotional that got you thinking on your way to work today, and better still got you praying and determining to live for God's glory, is spiritual food from the hand of another. It was either snack food, or healthy and nutritious, depending on its depth. We have much to learn from others. God speaks to us in valid, life-giving ways through church pastors, Christian authors, conference speakers, friends, family and fellow believers. We rightly teach and encourage one another in the Body of Christ. We are indeed fed by others, and that's not a bad thing. Unless of course we never learn to also feed ourselves.



As in human development, so also in spiritual development: feeding ourselves is a mark of maturity. Furthermore, if the personal responsibility we need to take for our spiritual growth is akin to learning to feed ourselves, then our knife and fork, or chopsticks, are the spiritual disciplines by which we do that. You need a tool in your hand to put food in your mouth. Prayer, the reading of scripture, public and private worship, the confession of sin, giving thanks to God; these acts, and many more besides, are spiritual disciplines that nurture the soul and shape the life of the believer. Without them we are dependent on others to feed us.

God has in fact given us two magnificent means by which we may hear His voice for ourselves and grow in relationship with him directly: Scripture and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's living presence within us, and scripture is a faithful witness to God's nature, including the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. To open the bible for yourself, or welcome the presence of God through prayer and private devotion, is to invite God to speak into the depths of your being, and by doing so to mould and transform your life so that it conforms to His.

The cultivation of personal spiritual disciplines is one of the most important things we can do to nurture our growth in Christ. Admittedly church attendance is also a discipline. So is authentic engagement in a Christian small group, or accountability to a spiritual friend. Participation in Christian community, where we share our lives with fellow believers, is no less formative than individual spiritual disciplines. Besides, we need other believers to help us interpret scripture and the voice of God safely. We are meant to be interdependent as the body of Christ, not a loose collection of solitary spiritual pilgrims. However, in order to contribute to a life-giving body of believers we also need to learn to go to God ourselves, and drink from the source directly. That way we too have something to offer the body of Christ.

We are actually called to teach one another – all of us. Not only are we to learn to feed ourselves, but a mature Christian community is one where every believer is a fountain of truth. Like Paul, the writer of Hebrews urges us to move from milk to solids in a passage that explicitly envisions every member of the Christian community then teaching one another:

‘We have much to say about this [Christ as ‘priest’ in the previous passage], but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² 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 need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Heb 5:11–14)

Like Paul, the writer of Hebrews laments the immaturity of a bunch of believers who should by now be spurring one another on in the faith, but instead are stuck, as the Corinthians were, in spiritual infancy and ignorance. What’s particularly interesting about the characterisation of Christian maturity in this passage—aside from the startling suggesting that we should all be teachers—is that those who are mature have ‘trained themselves,’ in discernment and righteousness. Training implies discipline, repetition, or ‘constant use’ as this writer puts it.

What are you doing with your time in this season of social distancing and disruption to normal rhythms? The Vine church has sought to minimise the loss of fellowship through moving to Church Everywhere, and helping community groups still meet via Zoom. That’s a wonderful thing, but don’t miss the opportunity that this unique season presents to also practice feeding yourself spiritually. Get into the Word of God for yourself. Use the isolation to draw near to God in prayer. These life-giving disciplines may feel unfamiliar and require effort, but then all training does. Ask any athlete or language student. But just as fitness and language proficiency grows with ‘constant use’ so too does our ability to discern the voice of God, or be still in His comforting presence, or comprehend scripture and revel in its truth and beauty.

Have you learned to feed yourself? Do you know where to source the ingredients and how to nourish your own spiritual life? Or is the Christian equivalent of Deliveroo the only way you get fed? Do you order it all in? We sincerely hope you watch Church Everywhere, and have stuck with your community group online (minus the food sadly). This keeps you connected to the wider body and strengthens your faith through church teaching. But to stop there is to deprive yourself of so much more. Use this strange season to go deeper with God yourself. Pick up your chopsticks and discover the joy of feeding yourself.

'When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear Your name, Lord God Almighty.' (Jer 15:16a)



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helpful resources

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- Visio Divina: Listening to God through image: <https://bit.ly/35zr40x>
- Visio Divina: <https://bit.ly/2Wxdma9>
- Guided contemplative prayer: <https://www.sacredspace.ie/>
- Self-study Spiritual Retreats (paid): <https://bit.ly/2WoUn1q>
- Self-study Spiritual Retreat (free): <https://trustinggodretreat.com/>

apps available for iOS and Android

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- Reimagining the Examen