

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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We can't stop with what we learned in kindergarten

"All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten," says the author of a best-selling book. Many church members apparently make the same claim about their knowledge of God, the Bible, and the Christian life, but this claim is false. For coping with adult life and doing the ministries that God calls all of us to do, what we learned in kindergarten isn't enough.



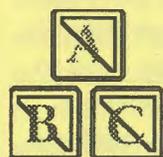
Limiting ourselves to what our parents, Sunday School teachers, and other early religious mentors taught us is more comfortable than moving beyond it, however.

For this reason we often forget that no matter how admirable our mentors may have been, they were human. They had shortcomings and blind spots. Besides, our abilities, our experience, our present circumstances, and our calling from God aren't exactly like theirs.

We must no longer be children . . . But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . .
—Ephesians 4:14-15

Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.
—1 Corinthians 14:20

Growth involves risk



To grow in faith, just as in other aspects of life, we must evaluate what we've been told, and revise some of it. This means risking the pain that change usually brings. We have to venture into unknown territory and dare to do some things that we fear. In order to grow, we must go beyond our comfort level.

When we refuse to do this, we keep ourselves from developing strong faith. We also drive thinking people away from God and the church. ❖

Beyond Mother's explanation

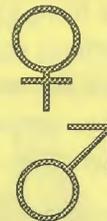
I've often been slow to realize that some of my mother's views were wrong and that she didn't know everything. Because she was loving and smart, she seemed confident, and she was my mother, I tended to see her as my ultimate source of lifelong authority.



In my kindergarten days I didn't even see that my mother wasn't always telling me all she knew. I

remember asking her why babies came only to married people. "Because every child needs a mother to stay at home and

look after it," she answered, "and a father to go to work every day to earn the money that the family needs." "Of course!", I thought. "Why didn't I think of that?" It didn't occur to me that there was any more to know about the subject. What a shock, when on the school playground I heard that there was!



What seemed impossible was true

What I heard went against everything I thought was right. Besides, it sounded repulsive. I thought, "That can't possibly be true!" But it was true, of course, and in time I saw it differently.

New information about God and the Bible may also seem unacceptable at first, merely because it is foreign to our way of thinking. But it may still be valid. God isn't limited to what we consider reasonable or proper.

Refusing to look further is dangerous

To mature as Christians we must continually look beyond our own experience and beyond what we've been taught in earlier years. What we were told early in life may contain important truths, just as my mother's explanation about babies did. But like that explanation, some of what we were taught was incomplete. Some was incorrect. If we never go beyond it, we're in danger. We are easy targets for religious charlatans and false teaching.

Besides, if we don't go beyond what we learned about God and the Bible at kindergarten age, we lack the faith resources that we need for facing the inevitable problems that life brings.



If we don't grow we miss a lot

We miss having a real relationship with God when we hang on to these kindergarten views about God—

▪ **God is an old man who resembles Santa Claus.**

Most of us would insist that we don't believe this, but many of our actions say that we do. We use only male words for God. We assume that if we do what is right God will bring us what we want, and that if we don't he'll bring things we don't want.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.
—1 Corinthians 13:11



▪ **God commanded my favorite style of worship.**

When people in our churches advocate changes in our worship, we accuse them of letting today's culture have too much influence, but all of our worship practices reflect the cultures in which they arose. Even the worship we read about in the Bible is in styles typical of particular cultures. No single style of worship is God's style.

We miss having real relationships with other people when we hang on to these kindergarten beliefs about being a Christian—

▪ **A good Christian is always sweet and nice.**



This insidious teaching comes in many forms. "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything." "Nice people (meaning real Christians) don't get angry."

"Always avoid conflict." "Don't use dirty words." This fake sweetness requires a constant smile and a sugary style of talking. It has traditionally been expected of girls and women, but many people also consider it essential for clergy. It's deadly, and it has nothing to do with real Christianity.

▪ **Never think of yourself.** This harmful teaching says, in effect, "Don't admit (even to yourself) that you have any ability." It also says "Never attend to your own needs or wants until after you have satisfied all of everyone else's," which really means "Never attend to your own, period." This is another teaching

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
—Mark 12:31

We learn what we see

What we're taught isn't limited to what people deliberately try to teach us. The most powerful teaching comes from observing how other people act. This kind of teaching is dangerous because we don't realize it's happening.

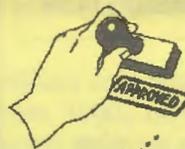
Actions speak louder than words

We may hear our parents, Sunday School teachers, or pastors claim that all people are equally valuable, but if we see them treating women or people of other races as if they were inferior, that's what we learn. If we hear only masculine words for God, we learn to think of God as male. If we hear clergy advocating honesty and self-sacrifice but we see them using manipulative, cutthroat tactics to get the top positions in the church bureaucracy, we learn that power and money have supreme importance. If we hear people making pious statements at church but see them using dishonest practices or putting people down in their daily life, we learn hypocrisy. Actions really do speak louder than words.



that is emphasized especially for women and clergy. And like some of the other harmful and incorrect messages we've been given, this one is deceptive because it resembles a valid Christian teaching—Jesus' command to deny ourselves and to minister to others. But it ignores what Jesus also said about loving ourselves, and what the Bible says about acknowledging and using our God-given gifts.

▪ **Being a Christian requires using special words.**



*He leadeth me ...
Thou art my hope ...
attribution
salvation*

We've been taught that using today's everyday language for speaking to God or stating Christian beliefs is not permissible. But we urgently need to use ordinary conversational words to reach today's people.

▪ **Older people always know better than younger ones.** My mother stated this as "When you are older you will realize that I am right." In the church we act as if Christians who lived in earlier years knew all there was to know about God. We act as if all long-time members of a local church congregation deserve a larger voice than any newer or younger



members. Because we stifle new voices, we miss doing new things that God is calling us to do. We also miss valuable relationships with Christians of different ages.

We miss being nourished by the Bible's message when we refuse to turn loose of these kindergarten beliefs about the Bible—

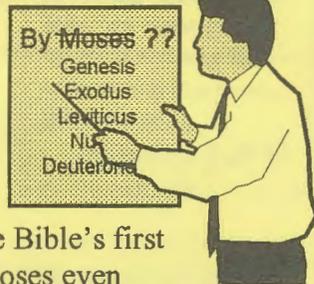
▪ Christians should worship the Bible.

In my kindergarten days Bibles didn't even look like other books. They had black leathery covers, tiny print, and tissue-paper pages with gold edges. This said that no one really expected to read them. Writing in a Bible was definitely forbidden. Fortunately most of us have gotten past this view of the physical book, but many of us still treat the words of our favorite Bible translation with inappropriate reverence. We make the Bible into an idol by revering its words and format instead of its message.



▪ God personally put the Bible into its present form.

We refuse to acknowledge the process by which an assortment of fragmentary manuscripts became the Bible as we now know it. We make mistakes like thinking that the Bible's first five books were written by Moses even though they describe his death. We assume that every author whose name is on a book of the Bible took word-for-word dictation direct from God somehow. As a result, we miss a lot of what God is really saying to us through the Bible.



▪ If something isn't stated in the Bible, it isn't from God. This implies that God stopped speaking when the last word of the Bible was put into its present form. It implies that God doesn't communicate with people today, and that all recent insights are worthless. It keeps us from receiving God's current guidance and hearing God's call.

▪ We can't expect the Bible's contents to make sense, and we shouldn't question what we're told about them. Getting past this false teaching at midlife was life-changing for me. For years I had been baffled by Bible stories that preachers and Sunday School teachers so often presented as if

their meanings were logical and obvious. They weren't at all obvious to me, but I never heard anyone question them, so I was afraid to.

For about forty years I felt this way about the story of Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and deriving the nation's policies from them (Genesis 41). I knew



no one who paid attention to dreams, and I certainly didn't know of any government officials who used dreams for setting national policy, yet I never heard anyone question the apparent craziness of this story. When I finally discovered how God actually uses dreams to guide us, it was a crucial factor in my becoming more than the lukewarm, robot-like churchgoer I had been for forty years. Kindergarten faith hadn't been enough. ❖

During a discussion about whether to use a contemporary translation of the Psalms in a new hymnal, I was appalled to hear one of the United Methodist Church's most popular and influential clergymen say that we should stick with an outdated translation. He acknowledged that the words of the newer translation were more accurate. "We know they are," he said to the group of church insiders, "but we can't say this to our laity." It might cause some members to leave, he implied, and we must avoid that at all costs.



If we can keep our present members only by using this kind of deception—by keeping them at the kindergarten level of faith—we're not doing them any favor. More important, we're not communicating the real Christian faith, which can't be destroyed by the truth.

Many lay Christians, however, encourage clergy to conceal what they know. Laity attack their pastors or even drop out of the church in order to avoid having their kindergarten faith disturbed by pastors who try to lead them beyond it. When this happens, both laity and clergy are keeping the church at kindergarten level.

What difference does it make?

Why worry if what we learned about God and the Bible in our kindergarten days isn't accurate? Sticking with it seems easier and more comfortable than examining and revising it.



One problem with staying at kindergarten level is that it isn't really easy. Trying to keep ourselves

convinced of something that doesn't really make sense to us is hard. Trying to banish questions that won't go away but that we're afraid to admit takes a lot of energy. Asking the questions and finding real answers is easier and much more satisfying in the long run.



In addition, when we fail to go beyond kindergarten answers in the church, we drive serious questioners away. Perceptive people who come to our churches and find us deluding ourselves with kindergarten viewpoints aren't likely to stay. Even worse, they're likely to give up on God without

ever having seen the real God. What they give up on is the Santa-Claus-like god. They may never discover the difference if we don't make it clear.

When we're long past kindergarten age and we've been in the church for many years, it's time to move beyond kindergarten faith. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

Lay voices in the church



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Starving churches?

What I'm calling kindergarten faith, author J. Edward Carothers calls starvation. In his book *The Paralysis of Mainstream Protestant Leadership* (Abingdon Press, 1990), he says the church body is suffering from malnutrition. Although he doesn't think we're facing anything like death yet, he fears that's where we're heading if we don't make some changes.

"What I dread as a possibility," Carothers says, "is a stagnated mainstream Protestant movement that becomes a dragged-out case of continuing care—spoon-fed and kept quiet by tranquilizing tid-bits of superstition disguised as religious faith." Carothers observes that today's mainstream churches include many people whose education and experience outside the church has given them the best current information from secular fields and has encouraged them to think for themselves, but that our churches haven't provided that kind of teaching about the Christian religion. And we haven't let our members know we weren't providing it. "One pastor after another," Carothers reports, "has told me, 'I do not wish to disturb my people with ideas that upset them.'" In Carothers' view, "When belief is solid enough . . . we will be ready to act on the basis of that belief."



That's the kind of mature faith we need. In our Sunday School classes, worship services, and conversations, both clergy and laity must risk going beyond kindergarten faith. God needs us to get into action.