

## **1 Peter 2:1-3 (1984 NIV)**

### ***Responsible Teaching and Learning***

#### **Introduction**

Counterfeiting is not only about faking lives. In the province of Anhui in Southern China, it is also about the tragedy of losing lives.

It was reported (*BBC News*, 22 April 2004) that 13 infants had died from drinking fake milk formula. Investigators sent by the Central Government had found 45 types of substandard powdered milk on sale in Fuyang City, Anhui. These brands were produced by 141 factories all across China.

Doctors in China claimed that this baby milk scandal was responsible for the worst malnourishment they had seen in 20 years. An analysis of one fake formula found it contained as little as 1/6<sup>th</sup> the required amount of protein and other nutrients needed for a baby's proper development.

Every parent would want the baby to be fed well. Why? Because growth unto maturity is desired. What a tragedy it would be if the baby keeps feeding on milk, but instead of growing unto maturity, the baby is going into malnutrition.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/3648583.stm>)

God the Heavenly Father desires that all His children (you and I) grow unto maturity. It would truly sadden His heart if He finds us not stronger, but weaker or stagnating, in our Christian life in spite of all the sermons we hear and Bible truths we learn week after week.

In 1 Peter, the writer is challenging and encouraging the Christians to remain strong in the face of persecution and suffering. Spiritual growth is possible and, indeed, very much needed in times of persecution and suffering.

In times of persecution and suffering, it is tempting to lose heart, to compromise, to give in, and to give up. But 1 Pet. 2:1-3 is a strong call for Christians to keep their bearing and focus; to grow strong spiritually even in difficult times.

We in Singapore may not be experiencing the same kind of persecution and suffering that the Christians in 1 Peter were undergoing. But even in our relative comfort today, it is not always easy to keep our bearing and focus; to grow strong spiritually. In fact, the pressures of seduction in a climate of comfort have the same impact as that of persecution in a climate of

suffering—i.e. being tempted to lose fervency, to compromise, to give in, and to give up.

God the Heavenly Father desires that His children grow unto maturity. You have been taught much about God and His Word. But the Lord is asking, “How much have you grown in Christlikeness in view of all that you have been taught?” God desires that His children be taught for the goal of growing unto maturity.

What does this mean for those of us who are teaching and those of us who are learning? For the teacher of the Word of God, 1 Pet. 2:1-3 gives a strong word on one significant responsibility, and that is ...

**I. For spiritual growth to take place, teach to forsake the “childish” things in the Christian life (v. 1).**

My mother used to help us take care of our older daughter (Vera) when she was a baby. To help her sleep better, my mother would let our girl hold a little handkerchief in her hand. This then gradually became a “security item” in her life. She would wake up in the middle of night looking for the handkerchief.

As she grew up, Vera would not only hold a handkerchief in hand every night, but also sniff it until she fell asleep. This has been her indulgence even when she was in her early teens. And how as a parent, I would wish for her to forsake this “childish” habit.

Indeed, every parent would desire that his/her child puts away certain relics of childish behaviour—a handkerchief, a doll, a bear, etc. It would be of great concern if the child still refuses to discard such a thing even in his/her later years. Why? Because when one is an adult, he/she is supposed to put away childish things (1 Cor. 13: 11).

The writer of our text today (Peter) has his own list of childish things that he wants Christians to forsake as they grow unto spiritual maturity. He tells them in v. 1, “So rid yourselves of ...” The idea here is to take off an old shirt and put on a new one. He is reminding the Christians that since they have taken off some negative things, and put on some good things at a point in time in the past, they are to continue to do so as a lifestyle.

- The first “childish” thing that Peter calls Christians to forsake is all forms of malice (plural). The term “malice” has to do with wickedness. It is an attitude that hopes (or even strives) for the downfall of another, not to hope for the edification and blessing of another. In other words, it is an ungodly attitude that wishes ill rather than good upon others.

- The second “childish” thing that Peter calls Christians to forsake is all forms of deceit. The term “deceit” has to do with craftiness in using devious words and actions to get what we want. It is an impure motive that distorts and deceives for one’s own benefit.
- The third “childish” thing that Peter calls Christians to forsake is all forms of hypocrisy. It is the pretence of appearing to be one thing when we are really another. It has to do with play-acting, and it is opposed to the “sincere love” that Peter talks about in 1:22.
- The fourth “childish” thing that Peter calls Christians to forsake is all forms of envy. It is the displeasure that comes about because others are enjoying something without you. Others are having something that you think you should have, and because you don’t have it, you find it difficult to love them or to be happy with yourself.
- The fifth “childish” thing that Peter calls Christians to forsake is all forms of slander. It is to speak against someone. It can be in the form of backbiting, cutting down, gossiping, or character assassination.

When we piece all these “childish” things together, what we get is one wrong thing leading to another. One who is filled with malice and deceit will try to hide these, and this produces hypocrisy. And envy often results in evil speaking or slandering. And if these attitudes and actions are in our lives, we will lose our appetite for the Word of God. Why? Because God’s Word confronts these attitudes and actions. And if we stop feeding on the Word of God, we stop growing, and we stop enjoying the grace we find in the Lord.

For spiritual growth to take place, we are to forsake the “childish” things of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. What then are the implications for those who teach—i.e. those who are used by God to teach others to grow in the way of the Lord?

One significant implication is that of teaching Christians to express their love for God with their love for others. The “childish” things that Peter talks about in v. 1 have very much to do with someone who finds it difficult to love or to be happy with others. How then should we teach against these “childish” things?

- Firstly, in our “childish” malice and deceit, we hope and work for the downfall of others. A lot of the competitive spirit these days has to do with making others look bad. We compete not so much to hit our personal best, but to put down others so that they feel lousy and we feel good. To be a witness to the world today, the church needs to teach her people to love one another by cooperating in their life together. For example, when the one church ministry is big-hearted enough to release its best people and facilities to help the another church ministry instead of fighting each other for the best people and

facilities, the church has demonstrated her love for God by loving and working with one another. When one Christian brother/sister does well or better, we are to rejoice and feel happy for him/her.

- Secondly, in our “childish” hypocrisy and slander, we hide our true selves and put up pretences so that we can attack others when their defences are down. There’s too much plasticity and not enough authenticity these days in our daily dealings with one another. Relationships are much more superficial because we are afraid to be true to one another with who we are and what we feel/think. People dare not share their struggle sincerely and honestly with one another because of the fear of being judged, rejected, or disadvantaged. To be a witness to the world today, the church needs to teach her people to love one another by being sincere and honest in their life together. It is sad when people speak the truth just to destroy and cut down one another. Under the guise of speaking the truth, we speak against someone with malice in order to discredit him/her. But the Bible teaches Christians to speak the truth to one another in love. In the context of love, one has that bonding/responsibility to speak the truth (even if it is some hard words) to another because the intention is to build up, not to tear down. This means that before the words of hard truth are said, the works of Christian love must have already been a lifestyle.
- Thirdly, in our “childish” envy, we are angry with others for having what we don’t possess, and we are angry with ourselves for not having what others possess. The spirit of discontentment is prevailing much these days. Those who don’t have wish they can have. Those who do have wish they have even more. As local movie director Jack Neo would say, “Not only money, but everything also no enough!” To be a witness to the world today, the church needs to teach her people to love one another by helping and not hoarding in their life together. To demonstrate a lifestyle of living by faith is to learn to be generous to one another as we help one another by giving to one another. And God in His sovereign grace will not only bless those who receive, but also those who release.

One evening when my two daughters were still very young, I told them that I would be home early the next day to play badminton with them. They were all so excited. We had bought two new rackets and the girls were all eager to try them out. I myself was looking forward to the fun together.

But as things turned out, the next day was unexpectedly busy for me. I had to stay back to clear up some work. So I called home. My younger girl (Stacey) answered it. Hearing my voice, she asked

excitedly, “Daddy, are you on the way? We are all changed and ready.”

I told her that I had to stay back to complete some work. In a matter-of-fact manner, I said, “But we will play another time.” No big deal to me—badminton with kids can always wait; I have more important things to handle.

One Sunday evening, we were having our family devotion. The topic was letting our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no”. When it was time for the sharing, my younger daughter commented, “But daddy, why then do you break your promises!”

I was a little stunned. So I asked, “Why do you say that?”

Stacey replied, “You remember that day when you said we would play badminton together. You didn’t keep your promise.” I could see from her face that she was still very hurt by it.

Sensing the Lord’s leading, I apologized to my younger daughter not only for the last-minute cancellation, but also for being insensitive to how disappointed she had felt.

My wife then gave me some wise counsel—better not to promise in advance, but to surprise with the unexpected. But I learn something even more important that evening as a father, I don’t just teach my children, but also model what I teach before them.

For spiritual growth to take place, the church needs to teach her people to forsake the “childish” things. Not only that, the one who teaches (e.g. teacher, pastor, elder, parent) must not only teach contents, but also live out the conviction by appropriate role modelling. Therein lies the heart of the responsibility of one who teaches the Word of God.

And for the learner of the Word of God, 1 Pet. 2:1-3 also gives a strong word on one significant responsibility, and that is ...

## **II. For spiritual growth to take place, learn to feed on the right things in the Christian life (vv. 2-3).**

Peter calls on the Christians to be “like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk” (v. 2).

Have you ever come across a newborn baby who does not like milk, but prefers Coca Cola instead? It is interesting that you don’t have to teach an infant to desire milk. The infant just has an innate longing for milk.

Peter is saying that Christians are like newborn babies—i.e. they should have an innate longing and hunger for pure spiritual milk. This milk is unadulterated. It is free from the impurities of the malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander that Peter talks of in v. 1.

What is this “pure spiritual milk”? It is commonly understood to be the Word of God. This is an acceptable understanding—it is the Word of God that leads us into spiritual birth and growth (1:22-23).

The Word of God teaches us the difference between truth and error; between good and evil. The Word teaches us the very heart and mind of God. And as we feed ourselves on these teachings and live by them, we become spiritually mature and healthy.

Peter says that the result of this longing and hunger for the pure spiritual milk is “you may grow up in salvation” (v. 2). We are not saved to remain stagnant, but to grow. No Christian can say that he/she cannot grow or doesn’t need to grow. Yes, salvation is at a point in time when we receive Jesus Christ into our lives as Saviour and Lord. Yet salvation is also a journey in that as a saved person, we are to keep growing spiritually until we are eventually perfected in the presence of the Lord one day.

In v. 1, Peter calls for a negative action—i.e. rid yourselves of (destroy) the “childish” things of spiritual immaturity and impurity. Here in v. 2, he calls for a positive action—i.e. desire (hunger, long for) like babies for the pure spiritual milk so that spiritual maturity and purity can come about. Indeed, when we stress more of the positive action in our lives, we will automatically do less of the negative action. When we want more of the pure spiritual milk, we want less of those impure, “childish” things in v. 1.

Note also that the pure spiritual milk in v. 2 has to do with tasting the goodness of the Lord in v. 3. Connecting these two verses together, we have Peter saying something like this—“Long for the pure spiritual milk since you have tasted the goodness of the Lord.” In other words, the pure spiritual milk is not merely the Word of God, but the goodness of the Lord as experienced through His Word.

For spiritual growth to take place, we need to learn to feed on the right things in the Christian life. And as the church teaches the Word of God, there is one important implication for the learner of the Word—to hunger and to look for God in the right place.

Many look for the goodness of God everywhere except in the Bible. Why? Because the Bible has become so familiar that it has become boring (familiar?). You may have experienced this with children in your Sunday School Class. When you tell a story in the Bible, they would say, “Oh no! Samson again—so boring!”, or “Hmm! Samson’s that strong—true or false?”

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But when they come together to talk about (say) Harry Potter, they get all so excited as if everything is so real and happening right in front of them.

For adults, their problem of finding the Bible boring is often because they read it the wrong way—i.e. primarily as a rule book, rather than as a window through which to see God. This is not to say that the rules don't matter at all. But the Christian life is not a relationship with a book. It is a relationship with a Person. The book is priceless precisely because it is a window through which we are invited to see and to know the Person. If we reduce the Bible to a rule book, we've missed the point.

Christians sometimes refer to the Bible as the “ultimate authority” in our lives. But the Bible is authoritative only because it is inspired by and reveals the One who is the Ultimate Authority in our lives. We must avoid relating to the Word of God as the Pharisees did—i.e. nothing more than a rule book. Otherwise, Christianity becomes nothing more than dos and don'ts.

The Bible is God's Word because it is a window through which God is revealing Himself and His good purposes and love for me. When I so tasted the goodness of God through the Word, feeding my mind and my soul on the Word will be an enriching experience. I don't have to look for God in the wrong places—like the TV, Hollywood, or the oceans of questionable information that flood the bookstores and internet.

Zhang Boli was a former student activist in China. In fact, he was a Tiananmen dissident who, by God's own providential grace, was later converted and became a pastor in America. He was interviewed by *TIME* magazine (30 Sep. 2002) about his harrowing flight from China to the US.

Within hours of the Tiananmen massacre on 4 June 1989, the Beijing government launched the largest manhunt in the history of the People's Republic of China. By mid-July, Zhang, then a 26-year-old graduate student at Beijing University who helped organize the Tiananmen Square hunger strikes, was one of the last activists at-large. He was being sheltered by friends and relatives in his native Heilongjiang province. But the Public Security Bureau was determined to smoke out the remaining rebels, and Zhang's arrest was made a top priority.

He hid in a cellar beneath an uncle's home, then fled for the Soviet border. Zhang braved a Siberian winter to cross the frozen Heilongjiang River and seek refuge in the Soviet Union, nearly dying of exposure. The KGB denied him entry but allowed him to sneak back into China undetected. He finally slipped into freedom via Hong Kong.

But it was in the snows of Siberia that Zhang was born again as a Christian. He is now a pastor in the US. He said this of his conversion experience:

“When I was on the run in northeast China, I found my way to a village, and came to hide in the house of a Christian farmer ... He would ask me to read the Bible to him. His Bible was handwritten—transcribed with a fountain pen. I read him the Gospel of John. He treated me well, shared with me the little he had—even killed his chicken for me to eat ... It was at that time that I started believing there was a God in this world.”

Zhang Boli was looking for answers to a better life. He found none in communism. He turned to democracy. His pursuit in such an ideology led him not to a better life, but to a bitter life. But in the Bible, he found something better than a better life—he found eternal life. He found more than the answers he was looking for—he found God Himself.

I had the privilege to be briefly acquainted with Zhang Boli when he enquired about the DMin. Programme at the Singapore Bible College. I was the Director of the DMin. Programme at that time. As I talked with him, I sensed a man who found God primarily because of his attitude towards the Word of God. As he was reading the Bible to the old Christian farmer during his fugitive days, God spoke to him. He tasted the goodness of God in the Word of God. He found that the Bible was about a relationship and not about rules. As he read the Bible, he felt embraced by God and His love. He was looking for answers in all the wrong places. But in the Bible, he found God and His love.

For spiritual growth to take place, we need to learn to feed on the right things in the Christian life. And as the church teaches the Word of God, there is one important implication for the learner of the Word—i.e. to hunger and to look for God in the right place.

All the options we have today can stray us to look for God in all the wrong places. But God is found in the Word of God. That's where He has chosen primarily to speak and reveal Himself to us. Know the Word of God; live out the Word of God; experience God in real life. You then would know the Word of God, and the God of the Word. Without this balance, we can end up having a big head for knowledge, but a small heart for God.

The modern man does not like rules and regulations. Little wonder many find it burdensome and boring when we see the Bible as a rule book for life. Our attitude towards the Bible must change. We must see it as a book that leads and keeps us in a relationship—a relationship of love with God Himself. A Christian must always hunger to taste this love relationship with God as he/she meets God in His Word. Only then will the so-called commands of God



be seen not as duties to perform, but as devotion to please our God. Duties often cause us to act legalistically as keepers of God's law. But devotion causes us to act lovingly as lovers after God's heart. Therein lies the heart of the responsibility of the one who learns from the teaching of God's Word.

## **Conclusion**

God the Heavenly Father desires that His children grow unto maturity. You have been taught much about God and His Word. But the Lord is asking, "How much have you grown in Christlikeness in view of all that you have been taught?" God desires that His children be taught for the goal of growing unto maturity.

For spiritual growth to take place, the church must teach her people to forsake the "childish" things in the Christian life. For spiritual growth to take place, the church must teach her people to learn to feed on the right things in the Christian life.

Let's seek the Lord to:

- One, grant us who teach His Word the wisdom to teach for transformation and the conviction to model the life transformed.
- Two, grant us who learn His Word the right attitude of desiring to know Him in His Word, and to experience Him in His world.

Amen!