

## **First Steps - 1/08/12 - Beech Mennonite Church**

*Scriptures: Mark 1:4-11 Hebrews 5:11 – 6:3*

“Name that tune”: (Hum) *“Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start”* – Julie Andrews - *Sound of Music*. How about this slight change to her song: *“...when you read, you begin with ABC, when you walk you begin with 1-2-3.”*

It’s a moment of great excitement for parents, as we heard from Jeanette, to see their child’s first steps. One or two shaky ones, then “boom” - down on his diapered bottom he goes. Next time it’s a few more steps until he falls. And before you know it, he’s off, getting into everything. No more rest for parents! Something is quite wrong with a young child’s development, however, if she continues to take baby steps only, falling down frequently. Likewise, we expect changes in diet. We heard the writer of Hebrews say that babies drink milk only, but they go on to solid food as they mature.

It is thought that the book of Hebrews was written primarily to Jewish Christians who were familiar with the OT. But within that wide range of readers, the writer must have had a particular group of immature believers in mind as he writes this reprimand in Ch. 5. *“By now you should be further along in your faith journey. You should be eating solid food at this point, but you’re still on the bottle.” You should be teachers, but instead, others have to teach you the ‘elementary truths of God’s word’ all over again.”*

I have a hunch that as Jesus looks down on his children today, particularly in this country, he sees a lot of spiritual immaturity as well. Our culture, giving lip service to the Christian faith but majoring on entertainment and materialism, makes it easy for us to stay on the baby bottle. But this is nothing new. Barclay’s Commentary notes that this is *“a problem which haunts the Church in every generation, that of the Christian who refuses to grow up.”* Whether it be a limited knowledge/understanding of biblical truth or childishness in one’s behavior, Barclay laments the fact that there are *“Christians who after fifty or sixty years ...insist on remaining content with the religious development of a child.”* ( 1 ) We see the word **“elementary”** again as Ch. 6 begins. *“OK, folks, let’s move beyond the elementary (or basic) teachings of Christ and go on to maturity. No need to keep on building foundations. Time to start building something on top of the foundation.”*

This is a fitting passage to study as we begin a new year with the theme *“Come Grow With Us.”* The next 6 Sundays we’ll look at specific ways to grow in our faith. Today we *“start at the very beginning”*. Notice how our text, in saying that we should go on to maturity, first backs up to mention six foundational truths in v. 1 & 2. We’ll look at each of these so-called “first steps”. But I decided to add four more as well that we find in other scriptures. This is the time of year when we tend to see a lot of “Top Ten” lists. Like Cook & Fox on WHBC’s early morning show. Once a week they have a contest with listeners on some sort of “Top Ten.” So we could call these *“The Believer’s Top Ten”*. On second thought, if we

are talking about them as basic foundation stones for growth, perhaps we should say “*The Bottom Ten.*”

1. Repentance – a radical change of heart and mind. Paul tells the crowd in Athens that God overlooked the ignorance of idol worship in the past, “*but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.*” (Acts 17:30) Repentance is a change of direction, a 180, from the path we have been traveling to God’s path. Rejecting the lies of the world and accepting God’s truth. Agreeing with God’s assessment of ourselves – sinners in need of forgiveness and cleansing. Understanding that to call Jesus our “Lord” means doing what he says, not what we want to do. (Sounds to me like “repentance” might be an ongoing task, not just a one-time event.)

2. Faith in God. Leaving behind the false gods of our culture to follow Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. The triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Believing that this God of ours is a loving and benevolent God, who forgives us and invites us to come to him with all our needs. Reminds me of another passage in Hebrews, Ch. 11 – “*Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*” (v.6)

3. Instructions about Baptisms. We notice the word “baptisms” is plural. Jewish readers would have known of several kinds. First, John’s baptism for repentance. They, like us, might have wondered why Jesus would come to John for baptism. Matthew’s account of this event includes John’s protest – “*Why you, Lord? You don’t need baptism because you don’t need to repent...you are perfect.*” (Matt 3:13-15) But Jesus insisted, among other possible reasons, to provide an example for us to follow. Readers in those days would also have known about a deeper meaning of baptism, as seen in Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost – “*Repent and be baptized, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” (Acts 2:38) Here are two baptisms - the physical baptism with water, by which a person gives witness to another baptism that has already happened – the entrance of the Holy Spirit into one’s life.

4. Laying on of hands...could have at least three possible meanings. Tradition of laying hands on someone who is sick, praying for their healing. (Mk 6:5; Luke 4:40, Acts 28:8) Ordaining or commissioning someone to a particular ministry. (Acts 6:6) Bestowing a blessing. (Matt 19:13-15) All three of these include prayer. Certainly a foundation stone for the follower of Jesus is to develop one’s prayer life.

5. Resurrection of the dead. The faith and hope that Jesus’ victory over death has guaranteed another (better) life after this one for all of his followers. That which we can see and hear and touch around us is NOT all there is. Paul assures us in I Cor. 15 that believers in Christ will receive a new imperishable body after we die.

6. Eternal judgment. The certainty of facing God when we die and needing to answer to him for the way we’ve lived our lives. “...*(human beings are) “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.”* (Heb. 9:27) It should certainly cause us to lose sleep at night if there are things in our lives that we haven’t settled with God. On the other hand, there is

nothing to fear if we've accepted the forgiveness that Jesus offers and have lived in obedience to him.

And now the other four, found in other passages, that are also basics of our faith:

7. Scripture reading – There may be nothing more foundational to our faith than reading and studying God's Word regularly. The Psalmist David, in Psalm 119:105 declares that God's Word is a "*lamp to (his) feet and a light for (his) path.*" Furthermore, he tells God in v. 11, "*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*" A person who does not read God's Word will remain a spiritual infant. Prior to last year, a certain brother-in-law of mine was not that avid a reader. Then his church gave one of these Bibles to every family (show *One-Year Chronological Bible*) at the beginning of 2011, encouraging them to use it to read through the Bible in a year. It totally changed things for him. Every time I have bumped into him lately he's talked about what he has learned in his reading. I'm going to do it this year. You are welcome to join me, using any plan you'd like, to read through the whole Bible this year.

8. Worship attendance - The writer of Hebrews, in Chapter 10, says, "*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" (v.25) Worshipping regularly with God's people is an important and basic growth step. Sure, there are those legitimate times to miss – sickness, vacation, etc. But it seems like the list of exceptions is getting longer and longer...hunting, shopping, a test to study for...so many more exciting or "urgent" things to do!

9. Giving – You hear this from me too much, I suppose. But like it or not, it's another basic growth step. The Prophet Malachi tells the people they are "robbing God" by not tithing. (Malachi 3:8-12) That, as I see it, is the beginning point, not the final goal. God even tells us to test him on this one!

10. Serving – I have this Chinese proverb on my filing cabinet: *I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand.*" There will be little growth for persons who sit in the pew Sunday after Sunday without putting any of their learning into practice. On the contrary, growth happens when followers of Jesus begin to use their gifts to build up His body, the church. (I Peter 4:10)

Looking back over this list begs the question: If these ten matters are the spiritual milk of our faith, "*Where's the beef*"? (to steal an old Wendy's commercial) (2) If these are the basics, what are the deeper, more mature levels of our faith? If you are asking that question, you should eagerly anticipate the next 5 sermons, as I answer, "*Wait and see.*"

Let's conclude with a little self-examination. Look back over this list again. It's possible that even though you've been a follower of Jesus for many years, there might be one or two of these areas where you could improve. Does anything jump out at you? Maybe this is the year for you to be baptized – to identify yourself publicly as a follower of Jesus. Maybe you will join me in reading through the Bible. Or perhaps get involved in some activity – there are many options. Whatever God's Spirit is showing you, take that step, with courage and

determination, knowing that it will result in growth. Here again is our invitation in 2012:  
“*Come grow with us.*”

- Credits (1) *Letter to the Hebrews (Revised Edition)* – William Barclay, p. 50  
(2) [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Where's\\_the\\_beef](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Where's_the_beef)