Is Your Faith Childish - Or Childlike?
By Dr. John Byl

There is a life-and-death difference between the childlike faith commanded in Scripture, and the childish counterfeit promoted by liberal theologians like Dr. Peter Enns.

Editor's note: We are reproducing this timely article by the kind permission of the author. Dr. John Byl holds a Ph.D. in Astronomy from the University of British Columbia, and is professor emeritus and former Chair of the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Trinity Western University in Langley, BC, Canada. He has written two books, God and Cosmos: A Christian View of Time, Space and the Universe (2001) and The Divine Challenge: On Matter, Mind, Math & Meaning (2004), both published by the Banner of Truth Trust. He has also written numerous articles on a Christian worldview and science/religion issues. Born in the Netherlands, Dr. Byl is now a Canadian citizen. He was blessed to be brought up in a Christian home and came to personal faith in Christ as a young boy. This article first appeared on his blog called Bylogos, http://bylogos.blogspot.ca.

We have also published several other articles about the apostasy of Dr. Peter Enns on our website. To view them, go to our Search Page and search by his last name.

Do You Have a Childish Faith?
by John Byl, Ph.D.

In a recent post [on his website, called Reading Genesis: Let's Be Adult About This, Shall We?] theologian Dr. Peter Enns belittles belief in the historicity of Genesis as "childish". He approvingly cites the rationalist German Old Testament scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), who stated:

A child, indeed, unable to distinguish between reality and poetry, loses something when it is told that its dearest stories are "not true." But the modern theologian should be further developed. The evangelical churches and their chosen representatives would do well not to dispute the fact that Genesis contains legends - as has been done too frequently - but to recognize that the knowledge of this fact is the indispensable condition to an historical understanding of Genesis.
According to Dr. Enns, we should be adults, acknowledging that Genesis contains legends and thus deepening our understanding of Scripture. Enns laments:

However, instead of helping people process the information, the evangelical tradition has a strong track record of minimizing the deep impact of historical study on how Scripture is understood, or providing answers that strain and groan to maintain the old ways despite the evidence - in other words, of working hard to legitimize a childish reading of Genesis.

I really, really, really wish that hadn't happened. I really do.

Dr. Enns comments:

Jesus' call is to be childlike, not childISH. I think 1 Cor. 13:11 is very appropriate here. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me."

**Childlike Versus Childish Faith**

So what is the difference between childish and childlike? Both are related to childhood. However, childish has negative connotations (e.g., immature, foolish, ignorant, selfish), whereas childlike is more positive (e.g., innocent, pure, trusting).

In the Bible, a childlike faith is one that takes God at His word, without doubting (Cf. Hebrews 11). Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

Likewise, David wrote, "I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Ps. 131:1b-2).

As to Enns' reference to the putting away of childlike things (1 Cor. 13:11), this -- when read in its proper context -- refers to our current partial knowledge of God being superseded by the fuller knowledge that we shall have in the next life. It certainly does not entail -- as Enns would have it -- that our reading of the Bible must be driven by worldly wisdom. Indeed, Paul starkly contrasts the "foolishness" of faith with worldly "wisdom" (I Corinthians 1).
Eliminating Childishness From Faith

Why did Gunkel believe Genesis was legend rather than history? Because it contained accounts of miracles. Gunkel writes:

The clearest criterion of legend is that it frequently reports things that are quite incredible... However cautious the modern historian may be in declaring anything impossible, he may declare with all confidence that animals, serpents and she asses, for instance, do not speak and never have spoken. That there's no tree whose fruit confers immortality or knowledge... (The Legends of Genesis, p.7).

Gunkel's view of Genesis was based on his acceptance of evolutionary naturalism, which left room for only a deistic God who did not intervene in the physical world.

Gunkel -- like Enns -- simply dismissed the fact that New Testament writers considered Genesis as historical:

The objection is raised that Jesus and the apostles clearly considered these accounts to be fact and not poetry... Suppose they did. The men of the New Testament are not presumed to have been exceptional men in such matters, but shared the point of view of their time. Hence, we are not warranted in looking to the New Testament for the solution of questions about the literary history of the Old Testament. (The Legends of Genesis, p.3).

What about New Testament miracles? As far as I know, Gunkel did not address these specifically. But his student, theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976), certainly did. Bultmann, in the same vein as Gunkel, asserts:

We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament. And if we suppose that we can do so ourselves, we must be clear that we can represent this as the attitude of Christian faith only by making the Christian proclamation unintelligible and impossible for our contemporaries. (New Testament and Mythology, 1941)

Consequently, Bultmann rejected the physical resurrection of Christ as primitive nonsense, to be interpreted as merely symbolic of man's mastery over his passions.

More recently, theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann has written a book with the descriptive title Putting Away Childish Things: The Virgin Birth, the Empty Tomb, and Other Fairy
Tales You Don't Need to Believe to Have a Living Faith (1995). If even Christ's physical resurrection is to be given up as childish, what does this leave of Christian faith?

We are reminded of Paul's words: "If Christ has not been raised then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17).

Clearly, once we permit worldly wisdom to dismiss belief in Biblical miracles as childish, our faith becomes shipwrecked. That is the logical conclusion of Dr. Enns' mocking of childlike faith in the plain sense of Genesis.

The Bible, on the contrary, urges a childlike trust in God's Word and admonishes against a childish faith that is immature and superficial, not grounded sufficiently in the truth of Scripture:

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith...to mature manhood...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes... (Eph. 4:13-14).

Such is the childish faith exhibited by Dr. Enns in his foolish capitulation to worldly scholarship.

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