

1-1-2012

## How Can We Crave the Milk? A Response to Jobes, Liebengood and Barbarick

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### Recommended Citation

Durham, Ken (2012) "How Can We Crave the Milk? A Response to Jobes, Liebengood and Barbarick," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss3/8>

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# How Can We Crave the Milk? A Response to Jobes, Liebengood and Barbarick

KEN DURHAM

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**A**s primarily a homiletics person, I have been delighted and inspired to return to these texts in 1 Peter as the basis for a fresh and compelling word of exhortation to the church—one which stands to re-center our preaching, and in so doing provide a most helpful corrective to a lot of unhelpful moralizing, both within the pulpit and without.

A reconsideration of the subject of moral transformation is ever and always a good thing. Take for instance the so-called “sexting” escapades of Representative Anthony Weiner, who may have managed to successfully twitter away his political future, leaving a lot of folks wondering once again just where to look these days for worthy public exempla of character and integrity. David Brooks commented on the Weiner affair in his column in *The New York Times* Op-Ed section in a piece entitled, tongue-in-cheekily, “Politicians Behaving Well”:

One reason many politicians behave badly these days is that we spend less time thinking about what it means to behave well... If more people spent their evenings at least thinking about what exemplary behavior means, they might be less likely to find themselves sending out emotionally-stunted tweets late at night.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Peter

The writer of 1 Peter (hereafter referred to as “Peter”) clearly spent a lot of time thinking about good moral behavior and how it is formed. His is the voice of a passionate pastor equipping his flock to weather the trials and tribulations of counterculture living. This in fact is one of the real challenges of preaching 1 Peter: Peter assumes a cultural antipathy toward the community of Christ that we scarcely recognize or can even imagine today. I have to look pretty hard to come up with examples of serious social ostracism and ridicule of Christians in my town, Nashville.

Whether or not recent trends in church attendance portend a future time of persecution (or at least, increased marginalization) of the Christian faith, 1 Peter and the rich milk metaphor that occupies our attention in this issue nonetheless have much to offer our preaching, our teaching and our greater spiritual lives.

A wonderfully provocative and crucial question posed here in our text is: How does one become a spiritual grownup? How do I even know what that looks like? Where do I find the resources that make for maturity in Christ? If I am to, as Peter says, “rid myself” of such immature behaviors as “malice, deceit, hypocrisy, evil, and slander,” where will the transformative power come from? If I hope ever to survive and grow beyond spiritual adolescence, how do I proceed? Peter takes his place among a chorus of inspired voices beckoning us to grow up in Christ, lest we live undeveloped, gullible, spiritually vulnerable lives.

The writer of Hebrews, deeply concerned about spiritual anemia (or, as he describes it in 12.12, “feeble arms and weak knees”) in his church(es), writes: “Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest

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1. David Brooks, “Politicians Behaving Well,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2011.

whom we confess” (Heb 3.1). And later: “Let us fix our eyes [our steady gaze] on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12.2).

Paul says in Ephesians, if the body of Christ is to grow up—“built up” and unified “in the knowledge of the Son of God”—it will only be as the grace-gifts of the Spirit are distributed to all in the family of faith, preparing each for our unique service...as we “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Then he adds, “Then we will no longer be infants,” vulnerable to every ideological breeze that blows (Eph 4.7–14).

So now Peter, also profoundly concerned for the health of his churches as they find themselves more and more in the crosshairs of Roman scrutiny, says in effect: “Milk—it does a body good.”

### The Milk Metaphor

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet 2.2).

As one who was always comfortable with the explanation that “milk” simply means “scripture,” I now stand convinced and corrected, and thank you, Karen Jobs, for your very helpful analysis here. I must admit that I’m still not altogether clear as to what the “pure spiritual milk” is, but as I grow older I am increasingly more comfortable with mystery than I once was. It makes sense that Peter’s curious term *logikon* was not intended as a simple referent, but suggestive of a bigger and broader experience of the reality of Jesus Christ—certainly including and not without the revelation of Holy Scripture—by which we are nourished in the spiritual formation of our moral character.

Jobs’ social-contextual comments on the nursing of infants in the Greco-Roman world are most interesting and helpful in expanding my thinking about our “new birth” into Christ. In particular, this obvious but (for me at least) very-missable truth: in the pre-baby-formula world, all babies were nursed, or they died. Thus, a spiritual life that is not properly nurtured—by the “pure” milk, the “good” milk, the un-“deceitful” (and thus absolutely trustworthy) milk of Christ, will not stand; it will not long endure. Indeed, Peter—unlike Paul’s and the Hebrew writer’s uses of the milk-metaphor—seems never to imagine a time, this side of heaven, when our spiritual nursing will ever come to an end.

The term that most captures my homiletical imagination is “crave”—“crave pure spiritual milk.” I wished for even more amplification from my colleagues of this potent word, which suggests a particularly strong yearning for something, even the eager pursuit thereof.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that Peter is appealing to something that rests in the heart of hearts of all those created in God’s image: a soul-deep hunger for what fills, what lasts, what truly “tastes good.”

One of my more nontraditional sermon series while preaching at Pepperdine’s University Church was “Cry of the Heart: Listen to the Music,” an attempt to pay attention to the messages conveyed in contemporary roll and roll music. Working my way through *Rolling Stone* magazine’s list of the greatest rock songs of all time, I endeavored to do a bit of cultural exegesis on some of their lyrics, listening for the *cri de coeur*, the cry of the human heart therein. As I did so, what I thought I was hearing—loud and clear, above and beyond the pulsating beat and rhythms—were the persistent (even anguished) cries of a youth culture craving spiritual meaning. I heard an unmistakable yearning for something authentic, something desired, we might say, “so much you can taste it.” A desire for dignity and respect (as per Aretha, R-E-S-P-E-C-T)...for “satisfaction” (Mick Jagger and the Stones)...for a world at peace (John Lennon “imagined” it; Bono and U2 have sung their anthem “One” at every concert for the past twenty years)...for “Help!” (another Lennon song)...and over and over again, the craving for love, even the “Love Supreme” (John Coltrane).

Thanks to Kelly Liebengood’s insight, I now hear Augustine as a most helpful “framer” of Peter’s exhortations to his churches in our efforts to speak a gospel word to our world today. It seems that much of our contemporary music (and film and fiction and poetry and art) is in one way or another an attempt to “order

2. The gloss of *epipothēō* in the NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon reads: “to long for, desire; to pursue with love, to long after,” <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/epipotheo.html> (accessed August 21, 2012).

our affections.” I don’t know of a more attention-getting—or for that matter, a more crucial—question that we can be asking than this: Whom do we love? Who deserves our love? Who first loved us? (“What’s love got to do with it, got to do with it?” Only everything, Tina, only everything.) For we are, finally, what we love... whom we love.

Peter is confident that one supreme love, once we have tasted its pure and satisfying goodness, will come to trump all competing loves. Having come to love this Jesus and know through him our Creator’s unconditional love for humankind—that there is, incredibly, nothing we can do to make him love us more and nothing we can do to make him love us less—we can stand. Having been succored by this unadulterated love-experience, we can hope to be sustained through anything: doubt and loss and grief and “all kinds of trials”—even fiery ones (1 Pet 1.6–7).

There is here an invigorating call to the church and to her leaders and other teachers to be (in Liebengood’s apt wording) “In our hyper-individualized iWorld” families of faith who are asking, “What kind of desires are being cultivated by my community?” and “What is my church’s vision of the good life?” Peter gives us a lot of good stuff to work with here as we seek to think more Christo-centrally and to reflect more critically on our true ecclesiastical cravings.

Like newborns, we drink the milk of God, or we die—we lose our life in God. That’s why (at least one of several good reasons why) Christ built a church. As Liebengood reminds us, Peter casts his churches within the continuity of God’s nation of old: “a chosen people... a royal priesthood... a holy nation... a people belonging to God” (1 Pet 2.9). While the writer of Hebrews remembers Israel’s pilgrimage as a time of weary whining in the desert, Peter instead describes life in Christ as a risky but bracing pilgrim adventure.

Again, for Peter, notice how inextricably linked our personal spiritual and moral formation is to our body life. “Growing up in our salvation” is no mere private experience of the purity and sweetness of the goodness of Christ; it orders our affections toward one another so that (with the transforming Spirit at work within us) we are increasingly able to rid ourselves of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander—those immature behaviors that dishonor my neighbor, weaken my church and generally make life less sweet

### Exempla

I am attracted to Cliff Barbarick’s notion of the power of exempla—“models that refract the pattern, or example, of Christ”—as presented in 1 Peter. Given that our contemporary list of cultural moral exemplars seems to be growing shorter by the hour, and given that we are more image-driven than ever, we would do well to identify and broadcast in living color our worthiest heroes of faith.

We badly need those models of faith and moral courage in action to fire the missional imaginations of young and old. At a recent conference on outreach to young adults, I learned that what resonates with younger folk (their strongest spiritual “craving,” if you will) is a worship experience that is “EPIC”: Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven and Connected. I think we could make the case that Peter’s word of exhortation more than satisfies them all.

As Barbarick suggests, our resources when it comes to compelling exempla are actually quite ample: heroes of Jewish and Christian history (including those “holy women”); contemporary, even local, “instantiations of Christ”; the sacraments and rituals of our congregations; and as well, reflections of grace and glory in the natural world.

But we must not fail to play our very best card: Jesus, first and last. We who lead the church and craft her worship have not begun to use all within our creative and techno-rich capabilities to allow men and women and teens and toddlers to “taste and see” Christ in all his richness and humanity and passion and mystery and humor and authority and *joie de vivre*.

At a recent conference that I attended, N. T. Wright made the case that many of our churches suffer from—astoundingly—precious little time with our “eyes fixed on [the actual life of] Jesus.” The culprit? He says, the creeds. The great creeds, when they refer to Jesus, pass directly from his virgin birth to his suffering and death. The four Gospels don’t. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all seem to think it’s hugely important that they should tell us a great deal about what Jesus did between the time of his birth and the time of his death. In

particular, they tell us about what we might call his kingdom-inaugurating work: the deeds and words which declared that God's kingdom was coming then and there, on earth as in heaven. They tell us a great deal about that; but the great creeds don't.

The canonical Gospels give us a Jesus whose public career radically mattered as part of his overall accomplishment, which was to do with the kingdom of God. The creeds give us a Jesus whose miraculous birth, saving death and resurrection and ascension are all we need to know.<sup>3</sup>

If he's right, then let us consider what it will take to give Jesus true center stage again, shall we? It is, after all his church (or was so once upon a time), so a fresh serving of "the Word-milk," the Living and Incarnate Word-Milk, might definitely be in order.

### Conclusion

The challenges we experience in our twenty-first century pilgrimages as kingdom resident aliens are of course very different in very many ways from the ones addressed in 1 Peter. But whatever forms of "deviancy-control" we may experience within our culture, our faith will be tested, one way or another. It should be. It must be. And, Peter argues, it's never mature until it is.

That's why our need for God's pure milk—beyond mere information and proposition, beyond mere homiletical and worship technique, but the very experience of this Christ "who though we have not seen, yet whom we love" (1 Pet 1.8)—is no less great than that of the persecuted saints Peter is pastoring so tenderly here. For we, like they, have chosen—and been chosen—to receive "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1.3). Augustine was right: the true measure of a man or woman is, what or whom do they love?

Tim Keller says, if we are to reach the next generation of young hearts and minds, we'll do it only by introducing them to the One they truly crave, the only One who truly nourishes. Here is our truest model and resource for moral transformation. Look at Jesus closely, and you'll see character, moral virtues combined in him that you see in no one else—you have tenderness, without any weakness...and yet you have strength, without the slightest gram of harshness; you have tremendous humility without one ounce of a lack of self-confidence; you've got holiness, and complete approachability; you've got power, yet without any insensitivity; total integrity, and yet without any rigidity. What have you got? Moral glory.<sup>4</sup>

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3. N. T. Wright, from his personal lecture notes, "Why We've All Misread the Gospels: Kingdom and Politics Then and Now: Lecture 1: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels" (presentation, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Nashville, TN, May 21, 2011).

4. Paraphrased from Timothy Keller, "Splendor in the Furnace: Principles of Christian Growth 2" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, NY, December 5, 1993).