

## **EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

### **Identifying Education Rejection and Psychological Learning Deficiencies**

#### **Identifying Barriers to Learning**

I recall sitting in a church in which the pastor's wife was teaching on a Sunday evening. Midway through her message she proclaimed that she did not care how many academic degrees one had or how many times one had read the Bible cover to cover. She concluded that if God did not speak audibly to an individual, then all reading and learning was ultimately futile. In this statement she failed the congregation pedagogically and theologically. She revealed a lack of understanding of the multifaceted nature of God's communication with His people primarily through Scripture, but other avenues can include through study, reason, experience, and the godly teaching of others.

The assumption that God must audibly speak from heaven as if His words were suspended in the air like raindrops coming from above betrays a poor understanding of God's chosen mode of revelation. Were God's voice so palpable, and the experience of hearing Him so overt, it would actually be easier to be deceived rather than the other way around. Satan is the great deceiver and counterfeiter, so were the Lord to make Himself known in that manner Satan could mimic the experience as supernatural.

The Lord, on the other hand, desires His people to know Him and to be so trained and formed by their study of Scripture, their interaction with the wisdom of His people over the centuries, their submission to authority, and their exposure to godly community that, in time, they come to discern His voice by His forming grace. This discernment comes by a process of formation, learning, reflection, obedience, and interaction with others, and is not primarily by sensational experiences, dramatic encounters, and daily audible utterances supposedly from on high.

Sadly, the role of Christian education is devalued in this culture, even by the Church itself. In a tragic irony, some Christians will eschew or even deride the idea of theological education, biblically useless degrees, or the like,

while cheerleading their children on to earn four-year or advanced degrees in the secular, non-biblical disciplines. At least anecdotally, in my time in Christian higher education, those who have most vociferously spoken against biblical or theological training have been those with no experience in the biblical, theological, or ministerial training themselves.

It is rare to have those who have earned degrees speak disparagingly against their own educational experience; more commonly those who have finished encourages others to follow in their footsteps. The dichotomy is there and undergirds a profound confusion about Christian education and formation and, in some ways, about vocation and call.

Learning itself takes place in various ways and at different levels. Visual learners absorb best by watching and reading, auditory learners by listening, conversational learners by discussing, and experiential learners by actually doing. These learning styles are roughly equated with the five natural senses through which we know the world of matter and sense: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell.

We may think of a level of learning, or knowledge that is so weak or impaired that the process of learning is inhibited. The mechanics of learning or sensory reception may be dysfunctional or disturbed, making the whole learning process more difficult. This constructs an exasperating experience for the individual in which the desire to learn is inversely proportionate to one's frustration and, likely, inability to master the material. This is all the more frustrating when the other students **appear** to be progressing so well.

Age is an important factor as well. A three-year-old child simply does not absorb information in the same way as a twelve-year-old. The twelve-year-old has the physiological capacity to take in and master information, but still lacks the life experience to understand or be formed by various realities that only time can convey. There are innumerable variables at work, but of the greatest detriment are the negative attitudes or approaches toward learning, as well as a lack of self-discipline.

Consider the basic formula for academic failure: a lack of application, a lack of study, and a lack of focus will produce the product of a lack of

learning. When this is the case, the students have essentially wasted both their time and their money. In the field of psychology, Jean Piaget developed a theory of cognitive development which attempts to describe the way that people mature and learn thinking skills throughout their lives. Cognitive development is that process by which our mental processes become more orderly, better differentiated, complex, and generally more sophisticated. This gives rise to the question of how do these factors relate to distance education.

Distance education is, in general, cheaper for students than learning on campus. Many of the commuting, housing, and incidental expenses associated with attending a traditional on-campus program are removed, reducing the overall cost to the learner. The learning process, however, is not purely cognitive and other psychological factors come into play. It is a time when the learner will need self-discipline to succeed when removed from a corporate environment.

In terms of a behavioral approach, one may list a number of other factors that might impact a distance learner. Included in these would be a number of learning disabilities, blind or vision impairment, hearing or deafness, an inability to read or write without assistance or learning from books. Even in early life, some childhood hang-ups such as trauma or a sense of loneliness, an absence of hugs, and various other psychological factors that shape one's growth and development. The person who must be in the constant company of others or who has no internal motivation to study, work, or perform a variety of basic functions may well have a difficult time in the more isolated situation of a distance learning student.

Humanistic factors are other equally significant forces. Some humanistic factors may include a person having to work more than one job to cover the expenses of tuition and living costs, personal and family problems, a lack of motivation, a lack of proper study and learning habits, and a multiplicity of personal concerns or competing needs that short-circuit the person's ability to study and perform well. Humanistic variables such as these may be the bane of the instructor's existence. Yet, to some they are simply trivial matters, while to others they are the daily reality. These may be things that many do not advertise or make public because they do not want to look

weak or insufficient in the eyes of the teacher, other students, or even friends and family members.

The foregoing realities and factors may shed light on why some students' grades and performance may be so good while others have a more difficult time, even in the same class, at the same school, with the same teachers. The proper response to these truths is not to be judgmental or arrogant, but to be humble and careful not to look down upon others who struggle when one has not also struggled in the same way. At times, God uses situations like these to display our own inadequacies and weaknesses to us, so that His grace would produce in us compassion and forbearance towards others in their struggles and weakness.

In my own experience with distance education the process has worked remarkably well. I have not found it to be an obstacle to learning. In some ways I think it has enhanced my learning. I am able to access the same lectures as are heard in the on-campus lecture halls; the only difference being that I can replay those lectures as many times as necessary to make certain I understand the material. It has also proven far more economical. I saved on commuting and housing expenses and still get to study out of my home at my own pace and in my own time. The flexible schedule (more time, no deadlines, no physical presence required) has allowed me to balance the rigors of education with my other responsibilities.

My remarks are not intended to be exhaustive, but only to point out some psychological and educational variables that impact on learning in general and distance education in particular. I have found the process of distance education to be one that can work well. With sufficient discipline, humility, and support the experience can be productive, and is especially valuable for theological and ministerial formation.

### **The Necessity of Education in Church Leadership**

The Christian Church is unique, almost alone among professions, in not requiring (or at least, not uniformly requiring) a recognized system of formal education for its leaders. In some Christian circles, education is not simply neglected, but actually resisted. It is even at times represented as a spiritual threat, which might well expose a person to error or lead them to

lose a biblical foundation. This perception of education and even outright hostility to it has had the effect of leaving tens of thousands of church leaders with little or no formal training while being placed behind a pulpit and charged with teaching, preaching, and offering spiritual guidance to others.

And not only are many church leaders ill-equipped by training to do the work to which they say they are called, many of them proudly proclaim a low level of education as a badge of spiritual authenticity, rather than as a scandalous testimony to their lack of preparation and learning. As might be expected, this has led to many problems in the Church of all ages including today where so many more opportunities for it is available.

Why is education resisted so strongly? One reason is from one's own personal perspective where it reveals self-insufficiency and inadequacy. Another reason is from not wanting to invest one's time and money particularly when no one seems to require it in order to achieve their ends. Yes, education is expensive, at least in terms of money, time, and discipline but very rewarding. Study requires the accountability to and authority of a teacher and the submission of one's ignorance to the need for learning. These are threats to leaders who are afraid of being found out and looked upon as unqualified to do the work they now lead.

Today, we are out of excuses. Pastors and teachers at many levels have no education beyond the high school level, and some have not even completed secondary education. This fallacy is paraded as a spiritual credential, the pride of which the Church would do well to lament. After all, what field other than the pastorate and Christian teaching would not require at least a modicum of training? And for those whose business it is to handle the Word of God, we might ask how it is that the Bible, the most theologically dense and hermeneutically complex text ever written, is given to those with less preparation than anyone else in human history.

Perhaps the most common verse used by pastors who spurn education to bolster their views is Acts 4:13: "But when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were ignorant and common men, they were amazed..." This verse is sometimes cited as a mark of biblical approval for

Church leaders to eschew formal study. As with most such things, there is much more to the story than this.

The text does not say that Peter and John were “ignorant,” in the way we would understand the term today. The term ἀγράμματοι (*agrammatōi*) is better translated as uneducated or unschooled. The point of the Jews was that Peter and John had no record of being formally educated as rabbis in the inner circle of Jerusalem schools; they were only common fishermen. The latter part of the verse catches the eye repeating a fact the text points out immediately afterward in the same verse. It says “but they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” To this end, the theological acumen of the apostles far exceeded their audience’s because they were taught and trained directly by Jesus Christ for over three years.

The point here is not to assume that Peter and John were anti-learning, but rather that their learning was such that their teacher was the Messiah Himself. We cannot point to teachers like that today. Christ is present in the Church, but He is not present in the sense that He is physically with us in a classroom of instruction. The Holy Spirit does, and will, make His presence known to every child of God. He guides, instructs, corrects, convicts, and grieves. But He is not the antithesis to formalized study. He uses study, He does not supersede it. The Holy Spirit has led the Church to this point by means of Scripture, and will continue to do so until the end.

Church leaders today must turn to care and diligent study, to history, and to others who have been trained and equipped to handle the Word faithfully and carefully. To put it simply, everyone can interpret for themselves, but that is not at all the way the Church is built, and it is often disastrous to do so. Private interpretation apart from the structures, accountability, and guidance of Scripture and the Church almost always ends poorly. There is safety and wisdom in submission to the authority of other, wiser teachers and students of God’s Word.

According to Ephesians 4:11, every pastor is a teacher (but not all teachers are pastors). They cannot do the job without teaching and must do so with the knowledge and wisdom that they handle Scripture faithfully. Bible colleges and seminaries were established as a response to that need. Formal education at these levels provides comprehensive training in

theology, biblical languages, biblical and theological history, hermeneutics, exegesis, and practical ministry.

Formal education and training in these and related disciplines are not a threat to the Church, but one of the gifts of God's common grace and His providence. The Bible would not be in our language if the Church had not had educated scholars committed to preserving, transmitting, and making intelligible to others the Word of God. Scripture was not translated from the original languages in neat packages from heaven. It came down to us in three guarded languages of treasure most of us will never learn.

Jesus confirmed the role and function of scholarly teachers of God's Word in Matthew 23: 34 when he said, "Therefore I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes." The historical background of this text in first-century Judaism was that γραμματεῖς ("scribes" in the KJV) were scholars, and teachers, interpreters, and transmitters of Scripture. Jesus stated even though they were sent of God they would be persecuted (vv. 35–39). This verse is a place in the Gospel of Matthew where we are given to know that what happened in the larger biblical history to the prophets and those gifted with wisdom, was also true of scholarly figures: to be faithful to God's work in history is often to be persecuted, not praised.

Education trains church leaders for life-giving, accurate biblical interpretation. It equips and helps guard against error. Education, especially within a Christian community under the authority of good teachers and the Word of God, will promote biblical literacy and help the more to guard against distortion. Education will protect the Church against over-emphasizing one minor part of the truth, and will promote deeper understanding and learning. Formal training will connect the individual believer with the rest of Christ's mission in the world, to a theological heritage, and better equip to hurdle major issues of faith and life.

Ignorance on the other hand can bring grave injury. At best, leaders will misinterpret the Bible, make the secondary primary, and teach what has been formed by experience over Scripture. At worst, many of the movements and gnostic idols within the Church which have been tearing it apart and crushing souls were built not of malice but of ignorance, given the pulpit, and of power to act on self-inspired interpretations.

Education is not contrary to, but is the faithful stewardship of, a calling and a gifting. Even as we aspire our children to earn an education for a secular career, earning it for the sake of Christin ministry is ever as important. It is the careful and diligent use of spiritual gifts to learn in community under and with other people. It provides accountability, multiplies understanding, and awakens critical thinking. May the Church be known for her love of learning, for the edification of the people, and to the glory of God.

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