

A Response to Bruce Douglass' Comments on Biblical Literacy
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I think that the one compensation for being asked to respond to someone else's remarks, rather than make your own presentation, is that you don't have to work out careful arguments for what comes to your mind, or figure out a way to assimilate every idea into a logical and coherent order. Nevertheless, I apologize for both those things as I offer you the thoughts that came to my mind as a long time educator in our presbytery and as a pastor hoping to use Bruce's ideas to make a difference in the congregation that I serve.

The lack of Biblical literacy in the culture is not only a civic problem, as Bruce explained. It is also a literary problem. We lose so much of our ability to communicate if we do not have the bible stories as common reference points. Our kids can't read classical literature and grasp all that is there. You can't read Moby Dick unless you know that no one in their right mind would get onto a ship captained by someone named Ahab, or recognize that the ship is owned by the friends of Job—and do I remember correctly they were identified as Presbyterians?? But it is the implications for the church that really matters to us.

The Church is always one Generation away from extinction! (I don't know who said that, but I've repeated it often, and believe that it is true. I have used it as a cover for all teaching materials that I delivered to Sunday School teachers for years.)

If our children don't know what it means to be Christian—if they don't know the gospel stories let alone the gospel message, why would they continue to go to church? Why would they want to call themselves Christians? Teachers giggle among themselves when an evangelical child joins our Sunday School and can quote the Ten Commandments and knows all the books of the Bible—as if we think its “cute.” But it merely points out that we are failing our students by not insisting that they, too, could have such basic information in their religious vocabulary. If you don't have these building blocks to start with, it is just way too hard to have those deep conversations about what it all means. There is so much we want them to know and if they will only give us a very small amount of their time, we dare not waste one moment of it.

Basic information does not make anyone a Christian, but it is difficult to imagine how one can be a Protestant Christian without the basic information. My understanding of Reformed heritage is that biblical literacy is not optional. Calvin started schools because all of us have an **obligation** to read scripture for ourselves. We are, at some level, responsible for our own salvation; to work it out “with fear and trembling.” Bruce is right—that view is not widely shared. I had a mother ask if she could take the Middle Schoolers out for breakfast every week during worship so they wouldn't have to sit through it. One Easter morning I sat next to high school girls whose parents

were very involved in church business and discovered they had never been taught to find the hymn numbers in our hymnal. Parents just don't believe they have any responsibility toward helping their children learn the basics of worship, let alone teaching them Bible stories or any theological ideas. Parents will accept just about any excuse to allow their children to skip Sunday School. We insist that our children go to their math class even if they believe they will never have a need for Algebra. (It is possible they might discover the joy of mathematics and become entranced by the way numbers work together to explain things to those who know how to listen.) So, why do we acquiesce when they say they don't want to come to Sunday School or don't want to worship with us? If we care about our children, worship should not be negotiable. They have to be there with us. They might just learn something they would like to know if only they would take the time to learn how to listen. Children need to see their parents at worship. They need to see their parents at prayer. They need to see their parents in class—learning as a life-long journey.

I think it is the parents who don't really believe that the church has anything to say to their children. If they don't think it's important, their kids won't. Parents tell me that their children just don't listen to them. I know that they are wrong. The problem is that the kids hear EVERYTHING—both verbal and non-verbal—that their parents tell them. They know what we really care about and what we give lip service to. They hear our ambivalence; they notice that we don't go to education classes; they know that we think they ought to go, but don't care much. (However, I say this to hypothetical parents out there who might be listening, but I could never bring myself to lay this additional load of guilt on a parent who is already struggling with all the aspects of raising children in our over stressed culture. Is my reluctance to actually say what I believe to real people in my congregations an important piece of the problem?)

It was the Boomers who grew up in those very successful Sunday School programs in the 50's and 60's who dropped out of church in droves. They told us that they wanted their children to choose religion for themselves. How can you choose if you don't know what you're choosing between? Does that mean that they rejected everything they learned in the church? Or just decided it didn't matter very much? Before there were education classes in the church, the pastor handed parents the Westminster Shorter Catechism and just told them to teach it to their own children. (There is still a Synod prize for memorizing the Shorter Catechism. It's only \$25, and I could never convince anyone it was worth the trouble, but it is still available if you know someone who might.)

Maybe we should abandon Sunday School for children and concentrate our efforts on educating adults? All surveys of what congregations want for Adult Education tell us that we must do more Bible study classes, but then they do not come. People seem to think everyone else ought to be doing Bible study. (Is that the only "safe" response—like when we ask a question at the children's time in worship and they always answer "Jesus," no matter what the question?) Why is it the same people come over and over again—willing to do introductory classes many times, but never feel like they are ready to graduate from 101?

They ask us for Bible Classes to help them understand scripture; for psychology classes to help them deal with the difficult people in their lives; and for current event classes to help them make sense of the world around them; but rarely for a theology class. That's the spinach of adult ed—they know it is good for you, but you probably won't like it all that much. I don't think many

members of our congregations really want to think about anything very seriously. There is a certain anti-intellectualism in our culture that says that if anything is too difficult, it can't really matter to my life—or my faith. We want to love God with our hearts and souls, but not with our minds.

“We worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.”¹

If we cannot get people to go to adult education classes, then pastors must be deliberate about taking the opportunity to do some teaching during worship every week. The easiest thing is to do a very short introduction to every scripture lesson. Tell them where it comes from and how it fits into the larger story and anything that is unique about it. (My preaching professor told me that the congregation doesn't care about such things—they are the “coffee grounds” of a sermon—you need them for the preparation, but you should throw them out before you serve up the final product. I think he was wrong.) If we take a moment with the children during worship, we need to resist the urge to be clever and entertaining, and try to plant one firm piece of information in their minds while we have their attention for that brief moment.

When I traveled in the Middle East with a group of Presbyterian Women, we met with a group of women from a Christian church in Amman. It was the very first stop on our six week journey. We were tired, and we hadn't yet practiced what it was we wanted to say as a group. The women wanted to know what they could do to inspire their children to love the Christian faith in the same way their neighbors were filling their children with a fire for Islam. They really thought we would know the answer. We could see it on their expectant faces. We didn't. But I still pray about it every day—for their children and for our own.

¹ Gordon Dahl, *Work, Play and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1972.