

Reformed Institute – Why Religious Literacy Matters

David Roden, Elder, teach youth Confirmation Class and Presbyterian 101 for adults at Westminster.

Both youth and adults lack a basic knowledge of Biblical facts – virtually all knowledge focuses on “good stuff” – Jesus loves me and hero stories. Hardships / suffering / captivity / destruction / wars / doubts / laments are not taught. Youth don’t understand how Bible stories fits together or the basic theological message of the Bible. The message from the church is be good and do what you are told and you will get into heaven when you die. The purpose of life and a special calling from God are not understood. They also have no sense of personal sin. They know about evil – they may feel worthless, depressed, purposeless, but not a sinner. If God is love, God should be sugar daddy.

Knowledge, however, is not just book learning. This is the “entertain me” generation – even school text books are filled with eye candy. But there is a fine line between entertainment and using all forms of learning at our disposal – book learning can be reinforced or made real and personal through drama, games (Bible Jeopardy), and especially music – hymns, spirituals, Bible story songs – kids learn quickly and retain the text longer if it is set to music – unfortunately kids don’t sing as much as they use to and much contemporary Christian music has questionable theology – can we offer Presbyterian alternatives? Learning is also made real through art and architecture –Holy space, stain glass windows, statues of martyrs – and atmosphere – reverence, humility and rituals – we need to be intentional about the theology communicated through worship.

Our youth also need tools for learning and discernment. Rhetoric – learn to listen critically to political or religious speeches / sermons / debates – to identify the assumptions and the logic of the arguments. They also need to know how to read the Bible and place all passages in the context of the sweep of scripture. If we believe God relates to all things with Loving Justice and Just Loving, we need to read scripture from that perspective. The Bible is the record of faithful people’s struggles to understand how God was active in their lives – They may or may not have understood God correctly or fully, but they believed God was involved and committed to their spiritual health and wellbeing.

Do we want to have a covenant relationship with God? If we are a chosen people – blessed to be a blessing, we need to understand chosen-ness to be something very different from popular American culture. Being chosen by God places additional expectations and demands on our lives and includes greater responsibilities for leadership, discipleship, service and mission. Being chosen means we need to act like a minority – to believe we have something special and different that needs to be cherished and nurtured at all cost or it will be lost forever. Can we / should we expect our children to be set apart (like the Jews) for special training – being different rather than belonging to the majority culture?

Our youth programs often pamper and seek to entertain our kids for fear we will lose them. I tend to take the opposite approach – demand more of them, challenge them with the difficult questions of faith. We will surely lose them if there isn’t anything meaningful to hold their attention. If faith education is not more important than school home work, soccer games, or sleeping in after a late night of entertainment, our kids will hear the message loud and clear. Religious literacy is not an important part of life.