

Remarks from Rob Hunter on Eric Springsted's "Theological Literacy" talk

(The reader needs to know that I reconstituted these remarks using the notes from which I spoke. They are as accurate as my recollection and notes can make them, but will not be verbatim, and are probably longer in the written form than when presented.)

Listening to Eric, it occurred to me that what we are talking about when we speak of the need for theological literacy in our conversations is really a missionary effort—we are in a similar position to those who are bringing the Word to new hearers. We lack, or at any rate I lack, historical polling data, but I'm not sure that the situation is as different from the recent past as we might think. I believe it's quite likely that in the 60s or 70s, or even in the 40s and 50s, what Eric has defined as theological literacy was not so widespread—although certainly some of the very basic knowledge, like the four gospels, was more common. We just had more members in the pews who were theologically illiterate. And I also suspect that, even though we say this is not about "numbers," we'd be less concerned if there were 10 million members in our pews, theologically literate or not (except for Bruce Douglass, who would certainly still worry about it.)

My wife and I joined Lewinsville Presbyterian after returning from living overseas for a few years. I was raised in the Lutheran tradition, and my wife in the Presbyterian, so we began searching for a church by visiting congregations from those two denominations. After dropping our daughter off at the Sunday School at Lewinsville one morning, we went looking for an adult class. It happened that that Sunday there was a class on Paul Tillich. That there was such a class was one of the reasons we returned and eventually joined Lewinsville. I became a member of the adult education committee, and discovered that in those days, about 15 years ago, Lewinsville taught a class on a specific theologian or theological topic on a regular rotation of two or three times a year. We no longer do that, and one of the things we have learned is that today it doesn't take a word like Eric's example, "ecclesiology," to scare people off; just the word theology will do it.

So despite Eric's remarks about the dangers of struggling to make our programs "interesting" and "relevant," that is, appealing to the currently uninterested, I think we do have to persuade people that this stuff matters, and that it is worthwhile to do the work. If I may use an analogy, and here I will drag in my professional background in Chinese studies, it's a bit like learning a foreign language. There's a lot of work involved in that, of course, and learning a language can be viewed in a very utilitarian way—it's about ordering dinner and finding the train station. But the real point of it is to get into another way of thinking, of looking at the world. For example, when I was teaching at the University of Washington, there was an interdisciplinary faculty seminar whose purpose was to bring together people from a variety of disciplines and look at a "big question" using the tools and viewpoints of those different areas of scholarship. At the first meeting, when we were looking for topics, someone suggested the problem of individualism. A colleague from the Chinese Languages and Literature department pointed out

that we on the Asian Studies side wouldn't have much to say—it was simply not a problem those cultures wrestled with in the way that the question was framed; in fact, until contact with Europe made it necessary, there was no word in Chinese for individualism. In the same way people have to acquire not just a few words and phrases, but the language of theological literacy. But once that is done, they can begin really opening up a whole new way of thinking.

Several people this morning have raised the need to have discipline in doing this, that is, to do the work. Eric discussed in his paper the importance of “practice:” getting to Sunday School, reading the Bible, attending worship, taking communion, and being with others in the community. When I read this section, I was reminded of advice given to a friend by, if my memory is correct, the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckart. (I tried to find this citation the night before the roundtable but failed.) In any case, this friend wrote to Eckart that he was having a crisis of faith, that he no longer could say he truly believed, but wished to regain his faith. He asked Eckart for help. Eckart wrote back that the friend should continue doing as he had done—attend mass, go to confession, take the Eucharist, pray. By being disciplined about the practices of religion, Eckart said, he could find his way back to faith. So you gotta put the time in.

We have had an excellent presentation this morning on the real nature of the problem we sense we face, and of what a solution might look like. These are critical steps; of course, it's essential to know not just what's wrong but where we want to be. But I'd like to toss out some thoughts on practical steps to take in our congregations to start moving in the direction we have heard discussed this morning. I am a fan of old movies. There's a famous comedy called *Ninotchka*, which stars Greta Garbo. The set-up is that there are three functionaries from Russia during the Stalin years who are in Paris on some sort of mission, I don't recall what. But they have gotten pretty fond of Paris and have not been doing too well with the assignment, so Garbo—a hard-line commissar from the home office in Moscow—is dispatched to straighten them out. This takes place during the Stalin purges. When the three meet her at the train station, they are very anxious about the purges and ask her what's going on in Russia. Her answer: “There are going to be fewer but better Russians.”

This brings us back to numbers, I guess. Because the question I'm asking is are we willing to expect more, even demand more, from our people to get where we think we should be. That might mean losing some folks. For example, our church has a lot of parents who faithfully drop their children off for Sunday School every week, and then drive down the road to Starbuck's or Giant. What about requiring each parent, or grandparent, or whoever is responsible, to sign a covenant with the church—something that makes it clear that we are not a free day care center, and that we expect parents to be part of the Sunday experience. Eric noted how vital it is for children to get some reinforcement during the week. Maybe to help encourage that we could send home a short assignment, suggestion for an activity, question, or something else that requires the parent to do something with the kid that reinforces the message, to counter the tendency to see church school as just a once a week, check the box, deal. I do recognize that this would have to be easy, brief, and non-threatening. Even so we might lose some children, and this raises the perennial debate about whether it's better to have the kids (or the

adults) there, at least. It's a tough question, but it is clear from the presence of so many of us this morning that we don't think what we are doing now is working out too well. So I think we really need to ask ourselves if that risk of losing numbers is not worthwhile. Maybe something that borders on the coercive—this is what we do, this is what we expect, and this is what participation/membership entails—is worth the risk.

The pulpit has a critical role here; lay leadership is necessary, and part of our tradition, but there are some things that the pastor can bring that no one else can. It is not enough to challenge the congregation during the sermon to take a class, read a book, whatever—though that's important too. I'd like to see the pastors not only teaching a class or part of a class pretty often, but giving some real programmatic leadership, by which I mean such things as using a sermon now and then specifically to teach a point of doctrine or church history, as used to be more common (didactic preaching), or by setting aside ten minutes to meet with a small group of parents to talk up education and the parents' role in it—maybe even occasionally shortening a service to do so. We are all under the tyranny of time, but that would emphasize the importance of the educational ministry.

Another issue is that in my church, and I suspect in others, we have to some extent become what Bruce has called a collection of interest groups. That there is competition among them will be no surprise to anyone. The mission part of ministry—what we used to call at Lewinsville “Church in the World” and now call “Mission and Outreach”—seems to become the whole ministry (besides worship) for a lot of people. When I was a sitting elder, there was very heavy pressure on us to join a Christ Care group and set an example for that small group ministry, which our church had recently adopted. I did not do so in part for time reasons—one more meeting—and in part because I really felt that the education committee filled that role for me, but that approach to small group ministry clearly had a favored role then. I am emphatically not saying that mission or small group ministry are not as important as education; the point is that we tend to fall into these stovepipes, and if we are engaged in a common enterprise, that needs to be addressed. St. Paul, in that famous passage, talks about the various members of the body, but he is also making the point that it is after all one body. One idea for breaking down these stovepipes is to have the pastor actively encourage mixing—and I think it would work best if the professional leadership were clearly behind it. Maybe have the mission and education committees meet together now and then, for example—not just to plan some joint activity but to get to know another interest group and to let each side see what issues are on the minds of the other.

I have gone on long enough. I'll just conclude by restating my core point here: that Eric is right when he emphasizes that theological literacy is a valuable, indeed vital, goal for us, and that it takes hard work to attain it—but if we can get people started, they will see that it brings real rewards.