

Theological Literacy

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At the outset, before talking about theological literacy itself, I want to talk briefly about the book that spawned all this talk about adjectivalized literacy – religious literacy, biblical literacy, computer literacy, etc.. It is, of course, E.D. Hirsch's 1987 *Cultural Literacy*, which at the time set off a heated debate. But it wasn't so much the book itself that set off the debate, but the appendix, titled "What Literate Americans Know," which contained a list of about forty five hundred items to be known. Its importance was highlighted by the book's subtitle, "What Every American Needs to Know" and by a banner on the dust jacket of later editions that proclaimed this book a national bestseller, and that it contained "The Thinking American's List."

The list was controversial because people took it to define what is worth knowing and what isn't, an assumption that the publishers clearly wanted to encourage. A lot of people saw a sort of cultural imperialism and hegemony here. African-Americans attacked it for being too white, and feminists attacked it for ignoring the contributions of women. Conservatives, who like lists that define social orders, fought back saying that the list really did divide the literati from the illiterati. However, it appears that most arguers never read the book itself, just the list. If they did, they didn't get it. Hirsch really didn't seem to have much of an agenda about cultural values; rather, his point had to do with what knowledge we need in order to acquire other knowledge. Without certain basic bits of knowledge we fail to get what is going on around us.

Here is an example to illustrate his point. In one study a group of community college students were given a passage titled "Grant and Lee" which talked about Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox. The test group found the passage extremely difficult to follow, not because the vocabulary was too difficult (it contained several words of several syllables) but because they

had no idea who Grant or Lee was. If you don't know who Grant or Lee were, then what happened at Appomatox won't make sense to you.

Hirsch wanted to suggest that there are certain cultural things that we need to know in order to think well and to learn. Or, perhaps, more simply, there are things that we need to know in order to know what other things are going on around us. So, the list certainly was *not* what the thinking man knew, but rather what the thinking man needed to know if he were going to be able to move forward in his thinking and to understand what is presented to him in all sorts of media. The list did not name what is or isn't valuable culturally. In fact, it could be argued, cultural literacy is just as much for somebody who wants to *criticize* cultural values as it is for somebody who wants to praise them. Criticizing dead white men for the deadliness of dead, white thought isn't going to go very far if the people you are talking to don't know who the dead white guys are that you're talking about. So the list was not an end point, but a beginning point. Cultural literacy means being able to read; it doesn't have to mean that you are well read.

Similarly, I want to say that theological and biblical literacy are not endpoints but beginning points. What is at stake is having enough knowledge to think biblically or theologically: to understand a theologically informed sermon; to follow a scripture reading; to put forth anything like a scripturally based reason for doing one thing rather than another. Theological or biblical literacy is what is required for drawing on the intellectual and spiritual resources of the Christian faith. It is what is required for further growth.

I also bring it up because we are so theologically illiterate in the church today. Anecdotal evidence is enough to show it. For several years when teaching undergraduates at a Presbyterian college where over 90% of the students self-identified as Christian, and many of whom had gone to parochial schools, I gave students in the beginning of my classes a brief quiz on their religious

knowledge. Over the years, consistently well over 80% of them did not know who the Trinity is. A glimmer of light would go on for some if I said “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” but few could say anything about it. The kids who had gone to religious schools were no better. These kids, folks, are the products of *our* churches, homes and Sunday schools. They, in short, do not know who God is. This is the problem of theological literacy.

But I don’t want to dwell on a problem which is patent, and needs little discussion, much as we like to shake our heads over it. What I would like to do with our time together today is talk about what it means to be theologically literate, and how one gets there.

I

In the most obvious sense, theological literacy is simply knowing what the doctrines of the church are, at least those held for the most part by all Christians. It is also desirable that one know how her own tradition holds them. These doctrines are, I would suggest, the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, the Two Natures of Christ, Eschatology, Creation, Providence, the Church, Sacraments, Justification, Sanctification, and what it means to call the Bible the Word of God. One should also know what prayer and worship is about. I suspect simply knowing what these *words* mean would probably go a long way to becoming theologically literate in the most basic sense; being able to define each of these terms accurately would be doing pretty well.

At first it seems that these twelve doctrines are pretty tough sledding. Terms such as “ecclesiology” or “eschatology” scare even research scientists. Certainly, all of them can be discussed at very high levels that are not at all easy to follow unless one has graduate training. But that doesn’t mean that it is all that difficult to simply say what they are, and it isn’t all that difficult either to teach them or learn them. In fact, they are all easily taught in a quite objective manner. One can in the first instance simply go through the Apostles’ or Nicene Creeds, item by

item, and you will have pretty much all of them.

Or, more helpfully, one can use a catechism. That, at least, has until recently, been the standard way of teaching Christian doctrine. As confirmation students I and my classmates had to memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and then in front of the session and our parents answer its questions as the senior pastor posed them one by one to the members of the class. Fortunately, since the confirmation class was over fifty members, we each only got two. Anthony Trollope's nineteenth century novel *Framley Parsonage* tells of a parson who each day walked his parish, visited his parishioners and catechized them. The great seventeenth century poet and Anglican pastor, George Herbert in his treatise *The Country Parson* recommended that a pastor value catechizing highly, "one, to infuse a competent knowledge of salvation in every one of his Flock; [two] to multiply and build up this knowledge to a Spiritual Temple; the third, to inflame this knowledge, to press, and drive it to practice, turning it to reformation of life, by pithy and lively exhortations." (Chapter 21). Richard Baxter, the Puritan theologian, in the same century, in his book *The Reformed Pastor*, also insisted on catechizing as a primary pastoral duty. In both cases, they were talking about catechizing adults.

Now, I will admit that if the way that we get to theological literacy were still a matter of memorizing the Westminster Shorter Catechism and having the minister come over to quiz the family on doctrine from time to time, our current theological illiteracy would puzzle no one. However, we have new useful materials for catechetical instruction. And, of course, it is always possible to exercise our imaginations in order to teach the material well and in ways that can make it meaningful.

Here let me simply point to the catechism that the PCUSA developed about a dozen years ago. It is available in several different formats – a shorter version for confirmands, a larger

version for adults with scriptural citations and references from the Book of Confessions, as well as a first catechism for third and fourth graders. It is a first rate effort. It doesn't dance around the objective issues of what things are, and yet it is never dogmatic in tone. It is sensitive to questions of our times. It raises, for example, questions about the relation of science and religion, as well as the existence of other religions even as it teaches us that we confess without embarrassment that Jesus is Lord. It is one of the best things that the PCUSA has done.

But catechisms don't teach themselves. For convenience's sake and for the sake of focus, the new one like the old one is a series of questions of answers. Simply memorizing it, then or now is not very enlightening. But it can be a reference and a starting point. As such, it is helpful to teach what Christians believe by simply stating it in an objective way. While there is certainly a great deal of subjective involvement in our faith, nevertheless there *is* objective content. There are things we do believe and that we don't believe, and that really are not up in the air. Until one knows what they are, one is in no position either to affirm or deny them.

It is important to teach this objective content. It is not difficult to do, and in appropriate settings, it is not at all a problem for kids. Some years back when I was teaching a confirmation class, I decided that I wasn't going to confirm them as full members of the church without their knowing who some of the key players in the Bible are, what the four gospels are, or even what it means to be justified by faith alone. So I told them that at the end of the year, before they were confirmed, they would be given a test. It had thirty or forty questions, most requiring only a one sentence answer, and I gave them a copy of the test several months ahead of time. They went at it in exactly the way junior high students do – they studied together, they formulated their own ways of giving the answer, they checked with the teacher. At the end, they all passed, and for a little while knew who the Trinity is, how many Gospels there are, and what the sacraments are.

But in teaching this material objectively, it is also necessary to teach it in such a way that what is learned makes sense of what Christianity is. I mean this in a very specific way, and in teaching Christian doctrine it is helpful to keep this in mind.

Let me explain what I have in mind by explaining what doctrine is, and how it arose in the Christian church. The original Christian confession was simply to say, “Jesus is Lord!” The problem is that what that *means* can very quickly be contested. It still is, and if you don’t believe me, I am sure I can find a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses to send over that you can chat with. It was contested very early on in the church. At first, it was easy enough to settle these issues. Since the question was about what Jesus meant, as long as the apostles were alive, the ones whom Jesus picked, and who had been with him, they could give the answer. After the passing of the apostolic age, questions like these were harder to answer. In fact, after the apostolic age, it is fair to say that the church was occupied by three chief questions: “What do we really believe, anyhow?”, “How are we supposed to act?”, and “Who is in charge here?”

So how do you answer the question of what do we really believe? We know that all sorts of people were giving all sorts of answers, even though they shared a story in common, or so it seemed. Well, you go to your authorities. You go to the Bible, especially words of Jesus, and when those are in dispute, you go to the letters of the Apostles where they explain what Jesus meant. Now, what happened in that process fairly early on was that the church developed early forms of creeds, called *regula fidei*, rules of faith. What they were, were what might be called the grammatical rules for how we talk about God and Jesus. They were, to put it another way, rules for how to read the story of God acting among God’s people in Jesus Christ. While the Apostles’ Creed actually was not written by the Apostles, and was not, in fact, fully finalized until the fifth century, what it is and what it means to do, is to take statements from the Apostles’ letters and

put them together in such a way that they answer pretty much the questions of creation, incarnation, providence, etc.. Thus: “Well, *what* is the relation of God to the world? Some folks say that matter is evil.” “The answer is that ‘We believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.’ We don’t believe creation is evil; God made it.” There may be a lot more to say than that, but making it clear at the outset that God created the whole world does delimit the range of answers; the world isn’t an accident nor is it necessary. The Nicene Creed is even more explicit, especially on questions about who Jesus is and his relation to God.

Now, if doctrine is a matter of the rules we use to read the story, then doctrine should be taught like that, i.e. in relation to the story. It needs to be taught in relation to the Bible, and the Bible itself needs to be taught as the story of who we are and how we got here. The *whole* of it, the drama of salvation, needs to be understood. So none of this should be a matter of parroting answers to preset questions. Bible stories that are not related to the overall narrative are not good enough and do little to promote biblical literacy. All should be related back to the story of the world as we read it, and as we continue to read the world. Teaching it is then a matter of teaching the story as a matter of life. You can do this in a confirmation class, in a fourth grade class, and you can do it especially well in an adult education class.

II

So, an intelligent and imaginative use of catechisms and the Bible can start to lead people to theological literacy. It is a use particularly demanded where people don’t even know what the basic teachings of the church are. But by itself catechizing isn’t enough. For theological literacy, one also has to understand what they mean at a somewhat greater depth than the definitional.

My long time friend, Diogenes Allen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Princeton Seminary, tells the story of a man whom he had met several times while speaking at

the man's church. At one point, the man wrote Allen a letter laying out some of his questions about the faith, particularly his wrestling with the basic question, "Do I believe in God?" He cited what he had been told by his parents and the church, but he also pointed to numerous times when things in the world, the death of a child he had once known was one example, contradicted the claims of the Christian faith, such as "God is love" and "God can do everything." At the end of the letter, he sort of threw up his hands, and simply said, "I pray, therefore I believe, whether I understand it or not." Allen goes on to claim, and I think he is quite right, that this sort of troubled reflection is typical of any number of thinking persons today. He observed that the man was like someone who had been given a few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle who was trying to make them fit together. Allen observes: "His heart is in the right place, and he has been moved by God's Spirit to respond in prayer, yet he cannot put together what he knows as a modern person and what he hears said in churches. He needs many more puzzle pieces. He also needs to develop some skill in how to put them together if the Christian religion is to make sense to him" As Allen put it to me, nobody had ever given him the conceptual tools to think the Christian faith.

Thus Allen wrote a book (*Theology for a Troubled Believer*) to help people – lay and otherwise -- develop the sort of theological literacy that is needed to put the pieces of the puzzle together, to be able to move effectively beyond having just information or definitions about what Christian faith teaches. I highly recommend it, particularly for adult ed. classes that are willing to meet over a period of weeks and discuss at length the issues it presents. But here let me highlight what Allen has observed. Theological literacy may, indeed, be in the first instance, a matter of information that Christians should have, but it is also a conceptual matter. One needs to be able *think* with the doctrines we have. And if we have a problem with informational illiteracy, the problem is even worse with respect to folk having the conceptual ability to put the pieces of the

puzzle together, of putting the information together. Having this ability is absolutely crucial, because theology and theological literacy is not just informational; it is a way of thinking. It makes certain critical judgements, and it makes some very important distinctions.

While time doesn't permit deep conceptual analyses here, let me simply provide a couple of examples of where we do need to become conceptually adept and not just informed. The first is what Christians mean by "God," and that God creates. The second is the concept of faith.

Now, what "God" means seems to be obvious. God is the highest, we might say. But what does this mean? For the Greeks, the gods who were the highest, lived on Olympus, but they came into being, succeeded other gods as rulers of the world and they could be succeeded, and they were subject to Fate. Some of them had the morals of alley cats. In short, they were pretty much a part of the natural world, just bigger. The Greek philosophers recognized this, and saw that "God" is above nature. That's a lot closer to us. Yet, even they thought that God naturally and eternally created. God was needed to get nature going, but in a way was always inextricably connected to it, even if above it. For Christianity, however, God can exist without a world; the world adds nothing to God and takes nothing away from God. So, why, we might ask, did God create? God didn't have to. How did God create, if not by natural processes? God created freely, not by a process but by a Word, and creation is a gift. So God is not a part of nature in any sense, and natural categories don't apply to God. This is something we need to think long and hard about because I suspect we often treat the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as if God were Zeus.

As a second example, let me suggest that we need to think through what the concept of Christian faith is. It is not biblically, as it is not in Paul or John, nor in thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, or Calvin, what we usually take it to be: that is, a choice to accept, say, doctrine or ideology, an action for which we think God will reward us. Rather, faith is an openness whereby

God enters, and lives within us. When we are baptized, baptism is not a strictly symbolic action, but according to the Bible, the beginning of a literal and mystical indwelling of the living Christ within us. So, faith, too, is a gift, for it a life lived with Christ at our center, and by that I don't mean just having good thoughts about Jesus present to one during waking hours.

I'll let you ponder all this over the course of the next few years. Let me simply say that what we have just gone through is essential conceptuality about our talk about God. It is *not* abstraction cooked up by people in Princeton; it is *important*. Why? Well, think about how often people talk about God as if God were a thing or part of the stuff we handle on a day to day basis, or a part of the universe. Think how often we treat belief in God as if it were an exercise similar to believing that the Wizard of Oz is the image on the curtain while ignoring the evidence of the little man behind the curtain working the ropes.

Now, I am willing to guess that the prospect of making the effort to think through what we are saying in our religion sounds a bit daunting. But just as I earlier suggested that Christian doctrines need to be understood as rules for reading our story, so I want to suggest that this sort of conceptual deepening also needs to go hand in hand with many of the issues of life and that story, and they have something which they to say to us. A couple of years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in *The Christian Century*, that when she was a pastor that parishioners were constantly asking for Bible classes. When they were provided, the people who asked for them didn't tend to come very often. What Taylor discovered, she says, is that classes in Bible, say, Bible history, were not actually what they wanted.. "Bible classes" was actually more like code for "we want to talk about God." Well, Bible classes should talk not just about the book, but about the light that the book casts on our lives. Similarly, as we seek to develop deeper theological conceptuality, we need to do so in such a way that it does put the pieces of the puzzle

together for us. That doesn't mean that we always have to be relevant, or that we should rush to get our agenda out front, and dismiss what doesn't serve us immediately. But it does mean that we should work to see where in life the conceptual knife cuts. For example, recognizing that God is not a thing nor a part of the universe has immense implications for thinking about God in our lives. We live and move and have our being because God freely chose to create us. God didn't have to. There is nothing in heaven and earth that is not ultimately in God's control. So, if we are going to know what God is like, we have to look and listen wherever God has chosen to reveal himself. These are important existential issues and if one is willing to work at it, one can find this work interesting and rewarding.

III

So the first step in acquiring theological literacy is to learn the facts, and the second is to develop the conceptuality. The two are not necessarily the same, but when they are not, they have to be brought together. Let me now make a final observation about theological literacy.

In learning pretty much anything, at least learning it with understanding, there are two essential components. First, there is training and practice to get the facts and the concepts; second, to go very far or deep, one has to give attention to the issue at hand. So far, I have dwelt on the first. I have suggested that there are resources for gaining theological literacy, and have suggested ways of training people in them. To a great degree, the cause of theological and biblical literacy appears to be the lack of specific training and practice in biblical and theological knowledge, objectively considered. In part, I would even suggest, that a good part of the problem we have this lack is because we have concentrated too much on issues of attention insofar as we have tried to make the material interesting in order to get people's attention, and hence have not been very demanding with respect to *what* they should know.

That is something to criticize. A bare appeal to interest will not solve our problem for the simple reason that the interests of the uninterested tend to run counter to the point of the biblical story you are trying to teach them. It is hard, really hard, to get worldly people interested in following Christ if that means following another instead of being in charge or if it requires self-sacrificial behavior. Worldly people just don't get the point of it; they always want a "take-away." Simply appealing therefore to present interest isn't going to fix the problem, because the problem of attention in education is getting oneself to be open and to be moved and used by what you learn, even when it is new and challenging, and changes you.

But if that sort of attention is worthless there is another sort of attention that is absolutely crucial to knowledge, and the issues surrounding this sort of attention are perhaps the ones where we are in the most trouble with respect to becoming theologically and biblically literate.

First is the issue of simply putting in enough time and being patient to wait for insight. Attention requires time, and, as the Germans say, *Sitzfleisch* – a hard butt. It certainly requires whatever efforts are necessary to be exposed long enough with open ears and minds to be taught. How have we fared on this score in Christian education? Not well. Consider this fact: It has been known for a very long time that Sunday Schools have an effect on their students only when students are getting the material at home as well. That makes sense; Sunday School is, after all, only an hour a week – assuming that a student comes every week, usually a very naive assumption. Biblical illiteracy is, on this score, therefore less a failure of the churches than of the parents. We have all encountered students who do have some biblical and theological literacy. There's always the one kid who can actually answer the minister's questions during the children's sermon. Now, I hazard the guess that what these kids all have in common, rare as they might be, is that they are getting it at home. Correct me if you think I'm wrong.

Adults for their part, if they don't know, then have to make an effort to know. They have to work at it. If they don't, the next generation will not get it, as they now don't. Now, there certainly are adults who are doing this. Last week, I led a retreat for the Men's Group from Westminster Church in Alexandria on St. Augustine. They weren't all experts, but they were pretty literate, and if they were, it was because they took time to learn, that weekend and others. All the Reformed Institute junkies that there are here today, I know are all pretty theologically literate in the sense in which I have been using that term, and they are because they put in the time. I had a wonderful Monday evening Bible Study with about thirty people at Georgetown. They became more literate because of the time and effort. So the attention we need to learn is the sort that gives us the patience and will that lets us be open to being moved by what we learn.

But there are also a couple of other things that we need to consider when discussing issues of attention. Becoming biblically and theologically literate is not a matter of simple objective knowledge and conceptual depth in the way that, say, learning chemistry might be. The very nature of the subject requires that we think about it in a different way than we think about science. Why? Because theological knowledge and biblical understanding is not an ideology nor a set of historical facts, but something that involves the whole person. It is rooted in practice and in the living out of the story we are learning at the same time we are learning it.

Theological literacy is not just in the head. It is in the body, and in many cases, theological concepts only come to the head through the body. They come in the bending of the knee, in the bowing of the head, in the singing of hymns, in eating, and pouring water, in *listening* particularly, in hugging and shaking hands, in crossing oneself, in how we talk and in which words we use. It comes in going to church every Sunday. A lot of times, I have to admit, layfolk who have not had a theological education may have a hard time saying why and how

something smells right or wrong, but because of the way they live they can smell it. They know when something is fishy.

In the second place, I would also note that theological literacy is not only learned by the body as well as the mind, it is also something that is learned, and probably can *only* be learned within a community of practitioners. One can learn math on one's own, at least up to a certain level. It is reported that Blaise Pascal at the age of five produced the first thirty five propositions of Euclid's *Geometry* on his own. You don't, however, learn "to love one another as I have loved you" from a book, or by yourself, or even *just* in a classroom setting. That is why Sunday schools are so important as is being in worship. Even if your prep school requires sacred studies, and even if you pay close attention, the concepts aren't going to sink in until you find yourself in a community where they are practiced. At best, otherwise, you are just an anthropologist of religion. But you can't be said to believe. You rarely get it, anymore than you can be said to get Spanish just because you can order at Taco Bell and know the names of the streets in Santa Fe.

Does this stress on the practice of Christian faith as a crucial part of theological literacy mean that explicit teaching, such as catechizing or working through the concepts of faith, is not so important after all? Not at all. As the late English Catholic theologian, Herbert McCabe once said, "We do not know how to talk to God because we do not know how to talk about God." We always need to teach people how to talk about God in order that they might talk to God.

Why? Well, while it is true that the conceptuality of faith often enters the body first, and while what we believe is inextricably embedded in our practice, the problem is that often our practices, our actual practices, are done in and out of ignorance. Or, more exactly, the problem is that too often we *do* learn from our practices, but they don't belong to the conceptual world of Christian faith but we fool ourselves into thinking they do. Too often, our practices are an ersatz

of faith. Lacking any explicit doctrinal or conceptual knowledge we don't even know that they belong to some other conceptual world, or that they are just plain worldly.

Thus in order to become theologically literate, to be able to think faithfully and to come to some sort of understanding of what faith requires of us, we need both parts of learning. We need objective knowledge about God and we need to work through its conceptuality. But we also need to recognize that the knowledge of God is rooted in the practices of Christianity and has its sense in them, and without the theological virtues of attentiveness, fellowship and heart we won't get it. Without both, we will fail at being theologically literate, and we will no longer be able, as so many are no longer able, to give an account of what we think we are doing. Without both, we will not have the skills of mind and heart to correct what we have been doing wrong for too long.

Thus, what it takes to become theologically literate is to practice, to live out the story, and to teach what the faith is, and how think it, and then to reform our practice, and to start the whole process again. That is, I think, what it means to say that we are "reformed, and always reforming."