

With All Your Mind

sermon digest

November 8, 2009

1 Corinthians 14:13-19

larry dipboye

The popular series of books “for dummies” began in 1991 when computer sales were soaring and somewhat intelligent people found themselves trying to navigate in the strange new world of cyberspace. Dan Gookin published *DOS for Dummies* in response to a desperate request from a novice for just enough information “for us dummies.” It turned out that computers were not the only furniture of the modern world that needed to be “dumbed down” to a user level of understanding. Folks born before the electronic age fortunate to have grandchildren around to program the TV set or recording equipment do not need Gookin. For people without grandchildren, a new class of technicians has emerged in recent years known affectionately as “Geeks.” I heard a twenty-something “Geek” interviewed about the service he delivers to your home. He explained that while you are spending your Saturday afternoon watching the Vols football game, he is reading the tech manuals for your new electronic equipment. He comes into your home and fixes electronic equipment that is not broken. He programs the remote controls and integrates the home theater for dummies like us who do not have time, interest, or ability to read the manuals.

If you have tried to read IRS regulations for doing your income taxes, instructions for assembling a child’s gym set, the manual for your DVD recorder, or— for heaven’s sake—the Bible, you can appreciate people who work to break down the intellectual encryption of documents to put them in reach, and you may be more than willing to pay for Geek service. But I suspect that the trend has gone too far. Education, for example, is not about dumbing down the world so that any dummy can understand. The whole purpose of school is to cause the student to stretch and to grow. Instead of dumbing down the subject, why not trying smarting up the student?

The mind is a terrible thing to waste. The Great Commandment cited in the Gospels calls disciples/students to love God “with all your mind.” In a world where literacy was the exception rather than the rule and where folks were expected by government and religious leaders to submit to authority without question or understanding, the suggestion that one should be mindful of God or thoughtful about religion was radical stuff. The word in the Gospels is not the usual Greek word for the mind, *nous*, believed by the Greeks to be independent of the body. The word in the Great Commandment is *dianoia*, “understanding.” To strive for understanding in our love for God not only calls for using our mental capacity in the exercise of religion, it points beyond the usual understanding of a commandment that suggests nothing more or less than obedience.

The slogan of the United Negro College Fund has taken on a larger application and an expanded meaning in recent years. In the early 1960’s, Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Hofstadter decried *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. In search of ideological and political communists, the McCarthy Hearings of the 1950’s attacked social-political heretics wherever they could be found or were thought to be found. The intellectual community was prominent in the parade of exposés. Out of fear, freedom of thought became a criminal activity. Guilt by association and attack on the human conscience were the order of the day. Although his primary interest was the cultural- political problem in American life, Hofstadter traced the roots of anti-intellectualism to the Christian religion, first to the Inquisition and prosecution of heresy, then to the frontier churches of American history and the demise of an educated clergy.

Frontier Christians are to be commended for their affirmation of faith and the building of churches in a time and place when education was often beyond reach. But frontier churches often lost sight of the importance of understanding in their faith. Education that originated in the church, was viewed as the enemy of the church. The Primitive Baptists believed that one should serve in the condition in which he was called. If one were unable to read when called to ministry, no further schooling was needed. Prepared sermons were not of the Spirit. The preacher would open the Bible in the pulpit, read (if able) where the book fell open, and preach for an hour or more on the text.

The Apostle Paul may have been the best educated person in the early church. He is certainly the person most responsible for the earliest Christian scriptures and probably the primary mover for the expansion of Christianity in the Roman world. Paul’s broad understanding of both the Hebrew and the

Greek cultures was a key to bringing the two worlds together.

In Corinth, the Greek Christians struggled to understand their new faith and to adapt their ways to the demanding Christian ethic. Paul took issue with a man who was sleeping with his father's wife (5:1). A strong interest in the Spirit and the quest for spiritual gifts led to arrogance and competition in the church. Conflict over spiritual gifts led to the poetic exposition of Christian love in chapter thirteen. Much of the conflict had come from the practice of speaking in tongues, so Paul declares: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Love is greater than tongues, greater even than faith and hope.

It seems that much of the problem in Corinth was familiar. People wanted to take a shortcut to God. They preferred miracles made to order, immediate communication from the Spirit, over the struggle to understand the faith. So Paul concludes his discussion of tongues with the principle: "in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue."^(v. 19)

The spiritual self is inseparable from the mind. Certainly we are not saved by the number of degrees we hang on the wall, our IQ scores, or our accumulated knowledge of facts. Some of the stigma on education and educators has been earned by a snarling cynicism toward all things sacred. But be assured, you have to go through your head to meet your God. Paul noted the importance of Christian education. Christ is taught, and the understanding of Christ is learned. Jesus, who is the Truth incarnate, has encouraged his disciples to know the truth and be set free.

I encountered an article by R. Wayne Stacy, a seminary professor and dean, on "The Dumbing of the Church." He expressed his despair with the rising crescendo of demands from both clergy and laity for the motto he calls KISS, "keep it simple stupid!" He blames three events in our time. (1) The consumer church movement that has stressed the selling of the faith like selling houses, cars, or soap. In order to make it sell, we have to water it down so that the laziest among us will not have to strain to grasp our faith. (2) The abdication of the clergy from the role of the church's chief teacher. Stacy suggested that it is ok for the clergy to be the best informed person in the church on matters of faith. Not everyone has to read Greek, but if someone does not devote himself/herself to biblical languages, we have no Bible to read in English. (3) The transfer of ownership of the church from the clergy to the laity. The explosion of the laity movement took place when I was a student in seminary. Findley Edge, one of our professors wrote *The Greening of the Church* that insisted that the leadership of the laity was behind every major reformation. When Luther was condemned for reducing the priest to the level of laity, he insisted that his task was the priesthood of all believers. We do not need a ruling clergy or a dominant class of Christians, but we do need to accept the challenge to be priests to one another.

Charles Barton told me the story about his friend Dr. Paul Brewer who often preached at a local Baptist Church in Oak Ridge. Dr. Brewer was a professor of philosophy at Carson-Newman College. When some of the members complained that he spoke over their heads, he did not apologize for the gospel and treat the people as poor dumb laity who could not keep up. He simply said, "get your heads up!"

One of my best friends in seminary was a year ahead of me and eventually became a professor of theology at our seminary. We had grown up together in the same town and the same church and had faced problems of Christian education in an industrial community. He commented to me one day that he was tired of the cliché about the "simple gospel." He had finally come to the conclusion that there is nothing simple about God. If we dumb down our faith so that God is in reach, we have created an idol.

In my teens, I responded to a sense of the calling of God to serve God through Christian ministry. I had a youth director who pointed out that the next step was to get an education. In the process of getting an education, I discovered that God meets us in our minds. The best Christians I have ever known have been my teachers, and the clearest windows to the reality of God have been my books, beginning with the Bible to be sure, and continuing in the lives of God's people through the ages.