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O'Neill, *Sermon IBS* 16, January 1994

I HAVE MORE UNDERSTANDING THAN ALL MY TEACHERS. A SERMON PREACHED AT A COMMUNION SERVICE, BRITISH NEW TESTAMENT CONFERENCE, ST ANDREWS, SATURDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 1993.

Rev. Professor J. C. O'Neill

Perhaps you as students have used my text. We teachers all have students who are saying under their breath the words of Psalm 119. 99 as they listen to us teaching:

I have more understanding than all my teachers:
for thy testimonies are my meditation.

Our first reaction is annoyance. We say back (under our breath), You don't know very much, and you understand less. You can't read Greek and Hebrew at all well yet, and you do not understand half the difficulties of holding your position. True.

Our second reaction (out aloud, perhaps). Let us have a truce. I am not going to tell you what I believe but there are some things you don't know that I can teach you. I'll show you the difficulties of holding (say) the doctrine of the Incarnation, and how you may get round them if you wish to believe it. This is a strict separation of Faith from Knowledge.

You might go on to disclose something of your own faith and say to the students: It is good that you meditate on God's precepts. I do, too. You may well have got further in discipleship than I have. But here we are, like historians and anthropologists, trying to understand from outside. This detachment is not just a device to preserve peace in a secular university. This detachment is a necessary part of the understanding the Psalmist is talking about. Job examined the comfort of his comforters for adequacy. No one can distinguish hypocrisy from true piety without comparing the evidence in words with the evidence in deeds. You can't obey

a command if you can't understand its meaning. What does 'Judge not!' mean?

We cannot deny that the connection of knowledge to faith holds dangers for faith. Our scholarly work can lead us to think we have discovered insuperable barriers to believing in the God in whose presence this meditation is conducted. Yet our scholarly work can discover that the path is in fact clear of obstacles. Our scholarly work may make it harder or easier to meditate on God's testimonies. Or so we think.

We may be wrong in our knowledge. Dr Johnson, needled by Boswell, said 'All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it.' (AD 1778) He knew that all the best arguments of his day were against free will and moral responsibility but he stuck to all experience, and went on believing in free will. The one who meditated on God's testimonies was in fact cleverer than all his teachers. We now know that Dr Johnson was right and the philosophers of his day wrong.

The text must be taken seriously. 'I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation' is the organizing principle of all knowledge. The centre must hold. This centre is accessible to everyone. Teachers need it more than anyone, and if they miss it, they are lost.

The saying is not an attack on teachers as such. The writer of the prayer is of course also teaching us, who read his prayer and repeat it. 'I have more understanding than all my teachers' means, If my teachers fail to meditate on God's testimonies then the student who does has more understanding than they. The path of faith is open to everyone. Once you see the goal, it is dumb not to take the road. And anyone can see.

Teachers who should meditate on God's testimonies can so easily stop meditating. It is fatally easy for the clever

teacher to be so fascinated by the subject-matter that the meditating on the testimonies gets forgotten.

Henry Chadwick used to say, 'An historian is someone who is always talking about important questions without ever asking them.' We may add: A theologian is someone who is always asking important questions without ever walking by the light that is given.

— Indeed Jesus almost made it sound as though God was playing games with us clever teachers.

I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight.

That is an awful thought. The clues God has given to humanity are the sort that the wise and the calculating easily miss because of their cleverness and the sort the child-like can see more easily.

Melchizedek, king of Salem, has brought forth bread and wine. He is ready to bless us, as we go on our journey from Ur to the new Jerusalem. Let us come as hungry children to the feast. We have meditated on thy testimonies and are ready; we need this food and drink.

Rev Professor J. C. O'Neill

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