

Reformation  
& Revival



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**W**ise men store up knowledge (Prov. 10:14).

One of the immense edifices on the skyline of Christian history over this century was the eminent leader, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981). He is noteworthy not only because he was a great preacher and the pastor of Westminster Chapel of London, but also because of his zest for learning. Having begun as a physician of exceptional quality, he carried over into his Christianity and ministry this unceasing hunger to know more. In a delightful little book titled *Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The Man and His Books*, I found this humorous cameo of Lloyd-Jones as an indefatigable learner, given by his daughter as a portion of a public address:

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I remember staying in Wales. I was again fairly young, it was the mid 1930's, on that lovely sandy beach in Borth. It was a boiling hot day. (I know we always tend to think it was like this when we were children, but this really was a boiling hot day.) I was gamboling about in a bathing costume, and digging and paddling and all the rest of it. Everybody else was on the beach, in the amount of undress that was allowed in the mid-1930's. We were all hot, and there we all were in this glorious sunshine sunbathing, as I said, and playing. In front of a rock, over to one corner of the beach, was my father, fully clothed, in a gray suit with a hat upon his head, his usual hat, shoes, socks, waistcoat, the whole thing, sitting bolt upright, leaning against the rock and reading....<sup>1</sup>

I identify. Not that I have the acumen of a Lloyd-Jones, and certainly not because I like to wear a waistcoat and hat, but because I have the hunger to know, to think, to acquire substantial understanding of the nature of God and the way He works in His universe and with man. In fact, I find it a bit frustrating not to make better advances. Time is much too fugitive, my schedule too uncooperative, and my mind too sluggish, for making all the progress I would like.

Perusing the half-price books at the antique mall one day, I remarked that I loved books and could not pass them by,

etc., and that television seemed to steal so much from people. You know the line of thinking. The kind woman who was sitting close by was candid in saying that she just could not get along without television and that she watched it incessantly. I said, not to be impressive, but to emphasize a great loss experienced by the Western world, that we in our home had chosen to get rid of our television ten years ago, and that it was, for us, an extremely wise decision.

"Why? Was it because of the quality of the programs?" she asked. "Yes, that certainly," I returned, "but perhaps as much because of the great loss of time. When there is so much to know that is important and television relates so little of it, while demanding more and more precious time, it causes concern. We miss some things," I said, "but we gain far more." This, of course, is my evaluation because I think there is much worth knowing about God and man, and there is little time to learn it. Understandably, for a nonbeliever, that particular pursuit does not generate near enough interest or energy to cause him to get up and "flip the switch."

This encouragement toward learning is not to say an endless chain of degrees has superior value, per se. It goes without saying that "A Ph.D. does not a doctor make." While in the Muir woods near San Francisco, feeling small among the giant redwoods, my wife and I happened to enter into a lengthy walk and discussion with a retired professor of rhetoric from a California university. The discussion ranged from its beginning place, rhetoric, to his liberal views on education, his philosophy of religion including his nominal Quakerism (actually nothing-ism), his desire to remove all negative labels (which he was not successful at doing, as you will see), the virtues of the ACLU with whom he collaborated, etc., etc. Unfortunately, his lofty degrees only made him wise in his foolishness, for he started with wrong premises and arrived at tragic conclusions.

"There is one kind of Christian I hate," he exclaimed, forgetting his prohibition on labels, "—the 'born-again type.'" (I thought, "What other kind is there?") "I don't perceive you are one of them." He misjudged, of course, but he was willing not to rule me out immediately because I listened and reasoned with him without being reactionary. I didn't compromise my convictions, but rather stated them as much as his verbosity would allow; I did not react by throwing back clichés and getting huffy. He was an able thinker, but his beginning statements led him logically, and yet hopelessly, toward a metaphysical cliff.

Christians ought to be the world's brightest thinkers. We should be best, not because we have the degrees ("Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth" [1 Cor. 1:26].), but because we start at the right place. We may or may not have the biggest hat size or be able to collect the most data, but we certainly ought to arrive at better conclusions. David said, "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for I meditate on Your statutes" (Ps. 119:99). Starting with the Word of God, we simply have more insight into all else that can be learned.

#### Why Learn?

We should develop the attitude that life is far better if we use our minds actively to whatever degree we are able, and that slothfulness of mind is an unfortunate misuse of the uniqueness God gave men. Consider these reasons for continuing our education through developing a learning posture to life:

**Learning is exercise with a purpose.** Constant accessing of new thoughts by reading and conversing cogently keeps our mind exercised for gaining and retaining the more significant biblical knowledge. The sheer joy with which we approach learning helps. I have a friend who never stops

thinking. He adds to his study an occasional mystery and works through difficult riddles with friends because they prepare him for understanding the mysteries and riddles of the Word of God. More often than not I find him thinking through some issue in the Bible, attempting to unlock an enigma. He works his mind.

It is well known that the Puritans, as an illustration, were devoted to learning the logic of Peter Ramus<sup>2</sup> which formed their approach to Scripture analysis by successive dichotomies. Ramus was a French humanist converted to Protestantism in 1561 and later killed in the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day.<sup>3</sup> There would be those who debate whether logic is useful in correct interpretation of Scripture in our day, yet I must side with those who use it for the glory of God without letting their philosophical tendencies overwhelm their exegesis. This is a day of many inconsistencies among evangelicals. How many of these inconsistencies would be thrown down with the most basic rules of logic. After all, hermeneutics must be logical.

**Learning in a broad spectrum of categories better prepares us for evangelism.** My wife and I read through one of the seminal New Age books over a couple of evenings, for instance—not a book about the New Age from a Christian perspective, but an important book in the movement's own judgment. This reading paid big dividends when we encountered the confusion of our bed-and-breakfast hostess one evening. Three hours of conversation cleared her thinking a great deal. I believe she was freed from some dangerous views and brought to think more soberly about "the only true God." It goes without saying that the study of the Word is that which filters and interprets all other information.

I might add to this that the very learning process which intelligent conversation with others brings to you can be evangelism itself. This is one of my most basic approaches. As I ask genuine questions, probing deeper and deeper into

the other person's philosophy throughout the dialogue, I am simultaneously uncovering the deficiency of his belief system, leaving the door open for the truth. Often my sincere interest in his beliefs evokes genuine questions from him as to my own philosophy. Ingenueness can be easily detected; we must want to know what he is saying.

**All learning teaches us something about God.** A case can be made for the Christian laying the preponderance of his study on the subject of God. Paul said that we are to be "growing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). The ocean of knowledge of God is in the Bible itself, yet there are other streams to fish which reveal much about Him. Since all things were made by Him and for Him (Col. 1:16), we can expect all things to tell us something of Him, however hidden.

In a certain sense then, knowledge in any field speaks of God as magnificent and excellent in all He has done to man, for man, with man, and against man. Whatever we learn will tell us something about God, either by thesis or antithesis. We draw a necessary line on reading what is designed as morally impure and destructive (because of the biblical injunction not to be polluted by our association with it—Rom. 8:6), yet even to know the raggedness of man, for instance, speaks volumes about God—whom He loves, rebukes, warns, tolerates, damns, and just how He does it. If God's glory is the manifesting of the excellent nature of God, then it is true that "the whole earth is full of His glory."

**Knowledge, though able to defeat us through pride, can, in fact, humble us.** "Knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). We are constantly reminded that any field of knowledge, even the spiritual, can leave a man proud. I have known many proud biblicists. Yet there is another man who is humbled by what he learns. I suppose that the difference is in his purpose for learning—does he seek to know God through what he learns, or to be known as one who knows

about God? With the proper desire, how could we contemplate the vastness of the universe, for instance, and fail to say, "What is man that You are mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:4). Why, God has created at least one star that we are aware of which has a diameter twice the distance from the earth to the sun!

**Learning tends to keep us from boredom, making us interested and therefore interesting.** Amusement ("a," not, "muse," thinking; the practice of not thinking), on the other hand, dulls us and creates an insatiable appetite for more. A man or woman who is interested in what he or she is seeing or hearing or reading, and approaches all things as opportunities to learn, enjoys life far more than the person who believes life is principally for the purpose of relaxing and making the mind idle and empty. I once heard an active eighty-year-old Christian leader in our church ride a group of senior adults pretty hard by saying something like, "If you would get up in the morning and read the Word of God and find out what's in the news and read some good books, and talk seriously to somebody, you wouldn't be so bored all the time." All of us had a difficult time keeping up with this lady. The result is that the learner is the most interesting of people, and this, again, is a great benefit in presenting the Gospel.

**Most importantly, pursuing knowledge of God and His creation, and all things excellent, is obedience.** We are commanded to love the Lord with all our mind, and to meditate on what is true. "Think about such things" (Phil. 4:8).

#### Useful Rules in the Learning Process

Five guidelines are necessary: **First, learn for the exaltation of God.** In other words, do not learn to make a show of erudition, but for more noble reasons. Learn in order to boast in the God who has made magnificent items and ideas

to be explored—such order, such immensity, such force, such complexity, such detail, such beauty.

**Second, learn "Christianly."** By this I mean to say that we must acknowledge God in all things sensed and reflected upon. Grind that new thought through the teeth of Scripture; let the enzymes of sound doctrine dissolve and digest it. This places the Bible first in our learning and the bringing together of Scripture in categories which answer the questions and posit the extensions (theology) as next in our pursuits. Who can judge life without sound criteria for judgment? The noble theologian Turretin considered his *Elenctic Theology* the best biblical work he could offer: "Let other books, then, be commended for their novelty. I do not want this statement to justify mine."<sup>4</sup> Something of this spirit should pervade our learning.

**Third, value the standard old works over the new.** Now I write this as an author, so I could never bring myself to say we should avoid all new works. But something destructive has happened in our day. Today an author writes on subjects he knows nothing of—he finds a subject people wish to hear about, gathers a bit of material, mixes in a catchy outline and a striking title, and he has a best-seller. Not all old books are worth your time, but at least most older authors wrote having some sense of their subject being a driving passion. There are many fine older works, numbers reprinted, readily available.

You will read so few books in your lifetime, you cannot afford to waste your time on contentless froth. "It is a good rule, after reading a new book not to allow yourself another new till you have read an old one in between," said C.S. Lewis.<sup>5</sup> And go to the original sources. Lewis said,

The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism. It has always

therefore been one of my main endeavors as a teacher to persuade the young that first-hand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than second-hand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire.<sup>6</sup>

**Fourth, despise an idle mind.** Paul said, “Be careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16). An hour wasted is never to be retrieved. Play hard when needed, but do not learn to enjoy mental emptiness. The idle brain feels a great deal of pain in thinking at first, but has all the potential to make progress if it is exercised. Take a book with you when you may have to spend time waiting, ask questions that lead to more significant discussions while eating dinner, pose a problem to solve when you are driving to work, or chew on a passage of Scripture while bathing (as did the early church father Chrysostom, by the way). It is commonly known that a blind person has an improved use of his other senses tending to help overcome the disability. Why? Because of use alone. His nose is no better than yours, nor his ears. But he has used them more carefully, paying attention, focusing the mental powers. This illustrates what concentration can do for a person. The practice of scriptural meditation is a great help in developing that concentration.

**Finally, do not let the gaining of knowledge of any kind, not even biblical knowledge, usurp the principal aim of knowing God.** Here is a subtle trap. I cannot make too much of this. I have fallen into this snare many times myself. Knowledge proper can be a substitute for intimacy. If one could love without knowledge and love were pitted against knowledge, then never learn another thing for the sake of your love for God. Adam and Eve, you remember, were the first to desire knowledge over intimacy with God. Rather, “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man

boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me” (Jer. 9:23-24).

### Conclusion

As I look around this room lined with books, I cannot help but feel a bit embarrassed how little I have learned so far when so much is available to me. My embarrassment is aggravated when I think of an acquaintance of Dr. Don Whitney’s on a mission trip to Kenya. Perhaps this story will be an eloquent argument for learning:

... I met a schoolteacher in his early thirties named Bernard. He lived in the back of a store that was one of four buildings in the Kilema community. He walked several miles even further into the bush country each day to the mud-brick elementary school where he taught. He returned home to his “cube,” an eight-foot by eight-foot by eight-foot room where he lived with his wife and infant son. A twin bed was against the back wall with a sheet hanging from the ceiling to separate the “bedroom” from the rest of the cube. Only a small table with one chair occupied the front half. What interested me most was what he had on the cement walls. On every wall were several pages from long-outdated magazines or pictures from old calendars. He explained that they were all he had to read. Though he’d been a Christian for many years, he was too poor even to own a Bible. The only books that ever came into his hands were a few secondhand books the teachers used at the school.

So as he holds his son to get him to go to sleep he reads the words on the magazines for the umpteenth time. While he eats at his table or lays on his bed, he looks at the pictures of far-off people and places and wonders what they are like. As I stood in that concrete cube, looking at a couple of dozen faded pictures and yellowing pages, I realized that before me stood a wise man. Bernard understands that knowledge really is like a rare treasure. Though it is more scarce than

gold, he had stored up all he could. That's the attitude all who are wise will have, for "wise men store up knowledge... The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out."<sup>7</sup>

**End Notes**

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- 1 Address delivered by his daughter and son-in-law, Frederick and Elizabeth Catherwood, Bryntirion, Wales: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1982.
- 2 See *Essays on Puritans and Puritanism*, Leon Howard, edited by James Barbour and Thomas Quirk (Albuquerque, New Mexico: The University of New Mexico Press), for a full treatment of this.
- 3 Douglas, J. D., general editor, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), 824.
- 4 Turretin, Frances, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1992), edited by James T. Dennison, Jr., xlii.
- 5 Lewis, C. S., *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 202.
- 6 Ibid., 200.
- 7 Whitney, Donald S., *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1991), 215.