

A COMPELLING REASON FOR RIGOROUS TRAINING OF THE MIND

Thoughts on the Significance of Reading

By John Piper, July 13, 2005

I WAS READING AND MEDITATING ON THE BOOK OF HEBREWS RECENTLY, WHEN IT HIT ME FORCEFULLY THAT A BASIC AND COMPELLING REASON FOR EDUCATION—THE RIGOROUS TRAINING OF THE MIND—IS SO THAT A PERSON CAN READ THE BIBLE WITH UNDERSTANDING.

THIS SOUNDS TOO OBVIOUS TO BE USEFUL OR COMPELLING. BUT THAT’S JUST BECAUSE WE TAKE THE PRECIOUSNESS OF READING SO FOR GRANTED; OR, EVEN MORE, BECAUSE WE APPRECIATE SO LITTLE THE KIND OF THINKING THAT A COMPLEX BIBLE PASSAGE REQUIRES OF US.

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS, FOR EXAMPLE, IS AN INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGING ARGUMENT FROM OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS. THE POINTS THAT THE AUTHOR MAKES HANG ON BIBLICAL OBSERVATIONS THAT COME ONLY FROM RIGOROUS READING, NOT LIGHT SKIMMING. AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF THESE OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATIONS IN THE TEXT OF HEBREWS REQUIRES RIGOROUS THOUGHT AND MENTAL EFFORT. THE SAME COULD BE SAID FOR THE EXTENDED ARGUMENTATION OF ROMANS AND GALATIANS AND THE OTHER BOOKS OF THE BIBLE.

THIS IS AN OVERWHELMING ARGUMENT FOR GIVING OUR CHILDREN A DISCIPLINED AND RIGOROUS TRAINING IN HOW TO THINK AN AUTHOR’S THOUGHTS AFTER HIM FROM A TEXT—ESPECIALLY A BIBLICAL TEXT. AN ALPHABET MUST BE LEARNED, AS WELL AS VOCABULARY, GRAMMAR, SYNTAX, THE RUDIMENTS OF LOGIC, AND THE WAY MEANING IS IMPARTED THROUGH SUSTAINED CONNECTIONS OF SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS.

THE REASON CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS PLANTED SCHOOLS WHERE THEY HAVE PLANTED CHURCHES IS BECAUSE WE ARE A PEOPLE OF THE BOOK. IT IS TRUE THAT THE BOOK WILL NEVER HAVE ITS PROPER EFFECT WITHOUT PRAYER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. IT IS NOT A TEXTBOOK TO BE DEBATED; IT IS A FOUNTAIN FOR SPIRITUAL THIRST, AND FOOD FOR THE SOUL, AND A REVELATION OF GOD, AND A LIVING POWER, AND A TWO-EDGED SWORD. BUT NONE OF THIS CHANGES THE FACT: APART FROM THE DISCIPLINE OF READING, THE BIBLE IS AS POWERLESS AS PAPER. SOMEONE MIGHT HAVE TO READ IT FOR YOU; BUT WITHOUT READING, THE MEANING AND THE POWER OF IT ARE LOCKED UP.

IS IT NOT REMARKABLE HOW OFTEN JESUS SETTLED GREAT ISSUES WITH A REFERENCE TO READING? FOR EXAMPLE, IN THE ISSUE OF THE SABBATH HE SAID, “HAVE YOU NOT READ WHAT DAVID DID?” (MATTHEW 12:3). IN THE ISSUE OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE HE SAID, “HAVE YOU NOT READ THAT HE WHO CREATED THEM FROM THE BEGINNING MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE?” (MATTHEW 19:4). IN THE ISSUE OF TRUE WORSHIP AND PRAISE HE SAID, “HAVE YOU NEVER READ, ‘OUT

OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF'?" (MATTHEW 21:16). IN THE ISSUE OF THE RESURRECTION HE SAID, "DID YOU NEVER READ IN THE SCRIPTURES, 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED HAS BECOME THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE'?" (MATTHEW 21:42). AND TO THE LAWYER WHO QUERIED HIM ABOUT ETERNAL LIFE HE SAID, "WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE LAW? HOW DOES IT READ TO YOU?" (LUKE 10:26).

THE APOSTLE PAUL ALSO GAVE READING A GREAT PLACE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH. FOR EXAMPLE, HE SAID TO THE CORINTHIANS, "WE WRITE NOTHING ELSE TO YOU THAN WHAT YOU READ AND UNDERSTAND, AND I HOPE YOU WILL UNDERSTAND UNTIL THE END" (2 CORINTHIANS 1:13). TO THE EPHESIANS HE SAID, "WHEN YOU READ YOU CAN UNDERSTAND MY INSIGHT INTO THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST" (EPHESIANS 3:3). TO THE COLOSSIANS HE SAID, "WHEN THIS LETTER IS READ AMONG YOU, HAVE IT ALSO READ IN THE CHURCH OF THE LAODICEANS; AND YOU, FOR YOUR PART READ MY LETTER THAT IS COMING FROM LAODICEA" (COLOSSIANS 4:16). READING THE LETTERS OF PAUL WAS SO IMPORTANT THAT HE COMMANDS IT WITH AN OATH: "I ADJURE YOU BY THE LORD TO HAVE THIS LETTER READ TO ALL THE BRETHREN" (1 THESSALONIANS 5:27).

THE ABILITY TO READ DOES NOT COME INTUITIVELY. IT MUST BE TAUGHT. AND LEARNING TO READ WITH UNDERSTANDING IS A LIFE-LONG LABOR. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS ARE IMMENSE. EDUCATION OF THE MIND IN THE RIGOROUS DISCIPLINE OF THOUGHTFUL READING IS A PRIMARY GOAL OF SCHOOL. THE CHURCH OF JESUS IS DEBILITATED WHEN HIS PEOPLE ARE LULLED INTO THINKING THAT IT IS HUMBLE OR DEMOCRATIC OR RELEVANT TO GIVE A MERELY PRACTICAL EDUCATION THAT DOES NOT INVOLVE THE RIGOROUS TRAINING OF THE MIND TO THINK HARD AND TO CONSTRUE MEANING FROM DIFFICULT TEXTS.

THE ISSUE OF EARNING A LIVING IS NOT NEARLY SO IMPORTANT AS WHETHER THE NEXT GENERATION HAS DIRECT ACCESS TO THE MEANING OF THE WORD OF GOD. WE NEED AN EDUCATION THAT PUTS THE HIGHEST PREMIUM UNDER GOD ON KNOWING THE MEANING OF GOD'S BOOK, AND GROWING IN THE ABILITIES THAT WILL UNLOCK ITS RICHES FOR A LIFETIME. IT WOULD BE BETTER TO STARVE FOR LACK OF FOOD THAN TO FAIL TO GRASP THE MEANING OF THE BOOK OF ROMANS. LORD, LET US NOT FAIL THE NEXT GENERATION!

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