Holding Center: The Theocentric Unity of Truth in the Postmodern World

by Timothy R. Nichols

Most of the articles in the *CTS Journal* explain a controversial point of doctrine or elucidate an oft misunderstood passage of Scripture. This article will do neither. The doctrines at issue here are so basic to the Christian life that it would be difficult to disagree with them, and the passages of Scripture that inform this article are generally understood. However, Christians often do not understand certain applications of these doctrines and Scriptures to life in the modern world.

The basic doctrine at hand will be the biblical teaching on the Christian's enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Specifically, this article will focus on one particular way the world opposes the Christian life. A key passage for the discussion will be 1 John 2:15-17:

> Love not the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him; for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

Scripture uses the term *world* (κοσμος) in different ways,[1] but here it refers to all that is temporary: the things of this life and our desires (of sight, body, and ego) for those things. The sense of the command is quite plain: believers are not to love the things of this world because this world is temporary, and believers must value the eternal above the temporal.[2]

The negative connotations associated with the term *world* become clearer further into the book:

> Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you.[3]
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> And this is the spirit of Antichrist, which you have heard was coming and is now already in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than He who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.[4]
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> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.[5]

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[1] See BDAG, Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:311.

[2] For a helpful discussion of this passage, see Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 101-6.

[3] 1 John 3:13.

[4] 1 John 4:3b-5.

[5] 1 Jon 5:19.

In these passages, John is speaking of the world around us as it opposes God. The believer who is comfortable in that world is, in Christian parlance, *worldly*. David F. Wells offers a particularly insightful definition: "Worldliness is that system of values and beliefs, behaviors and expectations, in any given culture that have at their center the fallen human being and relegate to their periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness look odd."[6]

The items in our environment that fit into Wells' definition are not just ideas but also social forces—a point Wells expounds in his pamphlet *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* and the books it summarizes (*No Place for Truth*, *God in the Wasteland*, and *Losing our Virtue*). Conservative author Dinesh D'Souza offers a particularly good example of such a social force with reference to the family. That Christianity promotes tightly knit families goes without saying, but today the American family is in an advanced state of decay. While it is tempting to assign all the blame to liberal and pagan ideology, some blame belongs to ideologically blind social forces. D'Souza explains:

> I can think of three major factors responsible for the decline of traditional families. The first is technological capitalism. The problem began during the Industrial Revolution because it separated the workplace and the home. Before that, most people worked at home. Read Peter Laslett's wonderful book *The World We Have Lost*, a study of pre-industrial England. Laslett shows us how the baker, his wife, his children, his servants, even the journeymen he employed, all worked, ate, and slept under the same roof. In a sense, they were all one family. But this arrangement was destroyed by the coming of industry. The Industrial Revolution drove the man, and later the woman, out of the house and into the workplace. Naturally, the family was transformed. The first stage of this transformation occurred when the man went to work and his wife stayed home. We consider this the "traditional family," but it is not. It is a transitional stage away from the traditional family and toward what we have now. In our current situation, most American children are born into families in which both parents work outside the home. I cannot help but suspect that this is a dysfunctional system despite the Herculean efforts of many parents to raise their children well within this framework.[7]

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[6] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 29.

[7] Dinesh D'Souza, "Family Values Since Oedipus" in *Letters to a Young Conservative*, The Art of Mentoring (New York: Basic, 2002), 179-80.

Having discussed technological capitalism, D'Souza goes on to show that the welfare state and the moral revolution are also contributing factors in the breakdown of the family. While the latter two have definite ideological components, technological capitalism is largely ideologically blind. The Industrial Revolution was not the fruit of some pagan conspiracy to undermine the Christian family. It was a natural economic and technological development, and yet it had profound repercussions for believers. Such natural developments are not always movements against Christianity: today, the continued development of computing and communications technology has made it possible for some parents to telecommute, with the result that the family once again lives and works under the same roof.

The important point here is that, while many social forces are ideologically blind (i.e., not motivated by a particular ideology), they are nonetheless not ideologically *neutral*. The Industrial Revolution made it harder for parents to raise their own children; the communications boom is making it easier again in some respects. This article will focus on one particular social force that is making life harder for Christians today. Like technological capitalism, it is not ideologically motivated, and yet it has profound consequences for believers everywhere.

Relating to Revelation

Introduction

The very foundation of our faith is the Word of God, which He revealed in written form. Thus, the printed word is at the very center of Christianity. If Christians cannot read, remember, reflect upon, interpret, apply and internalize the Bible, then they will fail in their Christian lives. Unfortunately this is precisely the situation in which American Christian culture finds itself.

Eulogy for a Medium: The Death of Print

On both social and ideological levels, America is in the process of creating a culture that is profoundly hostile to print. On the surface, it seems as though this could not be true. Several large online booksellers are flourishing. Cramped mall bookstores have given way to book superstores like Borders, Barnes and Noble, and Books-A-Million. J. K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series, has almost single-handedly created a reading boom among children—to say nothing of the adults that took to reading as a result of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon.[8]

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[8] Christians have debated about the ethics of the *Harry Potter* series since the appearance of the first book in 1998. Without going into the details of the

Unfortunately, the bad news is overwhelming, and it has a name: aliteracy. In general terms, an aliterate person is able to read, but chooses not to. Most people today can read in the gross sense, i.e., they can understand the labels on packages at the store, learn from the marquee what time a movie is showing, or read the road sign that tells them how many miles to Richmond. However, aliterate people do not exert the sustained attention necessary to draw meaning out of a longer written text like a poem, novel, or biography. And because they choose not to, they lose whatever skill they might have developed in school. An aliterate person who has been out of school for ten years will be very rusty indeed at understanding a printed text of any length.

For Christians, the problem inherent in aliteracy is obvious. Believers need to understand the Bible. They need to read it, comprehend its context, interpret its concepts, and apply its teachings to their lives. Discovering the meaning in the text is foundational to the Christian life—and the culture is training fewer and fewer in this skill. In 1901, a Christian pastor who exhorted his congregation to read their Bibles could take it for granted that those with an appreciable amount of schooling were skilled readers. This is no longer the case.

There is also an ideological problem. While fewer and fewer people are really learning how to read in anything more than a gross sense, the ones that are learning will have problems as well. Beginning with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, literary critics have argued that poetry has no publicly accessible meaning. This argument has been expanded to "literature" generally (as opposed to "non-literary" works like *Algebra for Dummies*) then to "texts" as a whole, including all written and spoken expression. Children are now being taught in their high school English classes that written works have no intrinsic meaning. Interpretation is about how the reader experiences the text or responds to it. Thus, even those who are learning to interact intelligently with the printed word are not learning to discover the author's intended meaning in the text.

This miserable approach to the printed word has borne bitter fruit in Christian circles. Many Bible studies now involve each participant explaining "what the passage means *to me*," with the result that at the end of the session, participants have heard a half-dozen or more mutually

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debate, it is appropriate to say that any phenomenon that induces a few hundred thousand formerly aliterate children to read passionately is not entirely a bad thing. Christianity absolutely depends on written revelation. If we disapprove of what the children are reading, then it is incumbent on us as Christians to give them something better—a project many Christians have been slow to embrace.

exclusive interpretations, yet have no idea which of them the author meant. Worse, many of these people seriously entertain the notion that the text means *all* of these interpretations, even the ones that contradict each other.

Before this ideological development, the average reader understood that the presence of multiple interpretations meant that someone (maybe everyone) was wrong. The conflicting interpretations became a spur to learn how to discern the true intention of the author. Today, the average believer tolerates conflicting interpretations, and as a result sees no need to improve his ability to understand the Scriptures.

Obviously, one cannot ascribe authority to Scripture in any meaningful sense while maintaining that any given passage can have multiple, contradictory meanings. If "Do X" and "Do not do X" are both *legitimate* interpretations of the same passage, how does one decide what to do?

The History of the Problem

While aliteracy is a relatively new problem, illiteracy is not. The twenty-first century is not the first time the church has confronted a populace largely unable to deal with the printed word. In fact, widespread functional literacy is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of the church.

So how did the church handle the problem before? When the culture did not teach people how to handle the printed word, the church taught them. During the Medieval era, the church only taught its monks and priests, but it nonetheless preserved literate culture through a millennium.[9]

The lesson of history on this point is simple enough: if the culture does not teach the people to read, then the church must. Indeed, this is precisely what missionaries working with nonliterate people groups do today. And the American church, working with an increasingly aliterate populace, must be prepared to do the same.

Although it is true that an illiterate (or aliterate) believer can live a successful Christian life, it would be a mistake to conclude on that basis that reading is not crucial to Christianity. As long as there are some readers who accurately convey the text to the rest, the church can tolerate a shortage of readers. However, the fewer the people who access the

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[9] Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1995), offers a readable account of the role of the Irish church in preserving Western civilization. Cahill does not mention that the Byzantine and Islamic empires also made a significant contribution in this area.

Scriptures directly, the more power those who do will have. This is dangerous—witness the many doctrinal and other abuses perpetrated by the medieval Catholic church. Popular facility with the text prevents a "priesthood of skilled readers."

One might object that many believers in the first and second centuries could not read either, yet that was a time of great expansion in the church. This is true. So what did the non-readers have that enabled them to prevail in trials and temptations? They could not *read* the Word, but they could *remember* it and *reflect* upon it, and therefore they were able to apply the Word despite their handicap. Indeed, ability to remember and reflect on the Word is crucial even for those who can read.

The Lost Disciplines: How to Save Western Civilization by Accident . . . Again

Most literacy efforts are campaigns against illiteracy. This campaign will have to be more than that. The goal is not just to teach people to read, but to teach them to *relate to the printed word*. The Christian should not just read the Bible, he should *learn* it, apply it, and use it in his life. The printed text should become his own; it should be engraved on his heart.

Accomplishing that goal involves surrounding the printed word with a constellation of disciplines that allow a practitioner to interact intimately with the text. The following discussion will offer a short instructional manual on a crucial triad of disciplines: reading, remembering, and reflecting.

Reading

Definition

As already mentioned briefly above, reading can be defined in a gross sense (differentiating between cans of cream of tomato and cream of mushroom soup) and a much finer sense (understanding the message of Golding's *Lord of the Flies* or Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*). This discussion has to do with the finer sense.

Learning to Read

There are three major strategies you can use to develop and hone your reading ability, depending on the resources available to you. They are not mutually exclusive; if possible, you should use them all. Learning to read well is a matter of intelligent practice, and the more practice you get, the better off you will be. Although you can improve alone, your development will be faster and of a higher quality if you are interacting with others. The critical thinking skills involved are best transmitted

through close contact with someone who already has them, and this fact gives rise to the first strategy: apprentice yourself to a good reader. This involves three important facets:

1. You are both reading the same material.
2. You meet regularly to discuss your reading.
3. Your discussions center on comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation of the material.

In this sort of relationship, the "master reader's" job is to challenge you, the "apprentice reader," to explain what the author means, to prove your interpretation from the text itself, to wrestle with parts of the text that your interpretation may not explain well, to consider alternate interpretations. This should not be an exercise in inclusivism, celebration of diversity, and mutual support for each other's opinions: the aim is to reject poor interpretations and accept the proper one. If this is not possible, then the goal is to enter a verdict of "insufficient evidence"—but this should have especially rigorous support, lest it become an escape from the labors of interpreting a difficult passage.

The second strategy involves the same basic structure (discussion of common reading material) with an important difference: it is a gathering of peers. Rather than a "master reader" and an "apprentice reader," this is a free-for-all where any interpretation of the material is discussible for exploratory purposes. However, again, the goal is not to celebrate diversity and support one another's mutually exclusive interpretations, but to find ways that the material supports one interpretation and rejects the others. Humility is of the utmost importance in this kind of interaction: it is human nature to become attached to one's interpretation and to become invested in winning the argument. The goal, however, is to have an argument where the winner is truth and all the people involved are its faithful servants. This will of necessity involve a select group of people: too many are not capable of separating their value as individuals from the value of their opinions, and therefore take a rejection of the latter as an attack on the former. The separation between personal value and the truth of an opinion must be ruthlessly maintained for this strategy to work. Thus, this strategy is also a valuable exercise in humility.

The final strategy is a program of self-study. A major part of this strategy is voracious reading. Bankers train to distinguish between real and counterfeit bills by constant, intensive exposure to the real thing. Would-be Navy SEALs learn to work efficiently in an aquatic environment by spending literally days at a time in the water. Do not underestimate the importance of practice and exposure: you will learn to

read well only by reading. But a cautionary note is in order here: improvement is the result of *proper* practice. In order to guide your practice and protect yourself from developing poor habits, there are some works to which you should give your attention. Adler and VanDoren's *How to Read a Book* is a prime example. Another is Frank's *The Evelyn Wood Seven-Day Speed Reading and Learning Program*—some people find this approach to speed reading more effective than others, but even if your overall reading speed does not increase, practicing the Evelyn Wood method will improve your comprehension.

At a more specific level, there are a number of books in various subjects that come equipped with study guides, complete with questions for review and discussion of the material. You may wish to begin with a few of these, and then proceed to develop your own study guides for books you wish to read that do not come equipped with them.

The Practice of Reading

As with all skills, reading is developed and maintained by constant proper practice. The question of what to read therefore comes to the fore. The first and most obvious answer is the Bible. The Bible has a long history as a reading textbook, and for obvious reasons should not be neglected. Read the Bible voraciously. Give particular attention to the reading of large blocks of text at a time—whole books in a single sitting, if possible. In Genesis or Isaiah this is quite a challenge; in Colossians it is readily attainable. As you read, pay attention for the author's clues telling you how the material is organized.[10]

However, it will be wise to branch out beyond the Bible, indeed beyond Christian literature altogether, in order to hone reading ability and acquaint yourself with the foundations of your culture. There are some legitimate Christian classics, and lest they be forgotten, Christian readers should attend to them. Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God*, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, Donne's *Devotions*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Space Trilogy*, and many

[10] This could easily form an entire article, but the following are a few pointers. At a lower level, watch the conjunctions that tie clauses and sentences together (e.g., and, but, therefore, for this reason). See Timothy R. Nichols, "Reverse-engineered Outlining: A Method for Epistolary Exegesis," *CTS Journal* 7 (April–June, 2001): 16–58. At a higher level, look for repeated phrases (e.g., Eph. 1:6, 12, 13; 1 Cor. 7:1, 25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, 12), purpose statements (1 Tim. 3:15, 1 John 1:4, 2:1, 26, 5:13), and pithy summaries of the whole book (Eph. 4:1-6), its major sections (James 1:19, 1 Thess. 1:9-10), or portions (John 20:30–31).

other works have edified generations of Christian readers. Nor are the achievements of Christians limited to prose: a reader interested in poetry may turn to C. S. Lewis, John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot's Ariel poems, and others.[11] However, one must read these works with discernment: the authors may be renowned saints of towering spiritual and/or intellectual prowess, but they are invariably fallible human beings. Augustine invokes a decidedly unbiblical Platonic view of God, and Lewis espouses loss of eternal salvation in the final volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In particular, the gospel of grace is one of the most frequently rebelled-against doctrines in the history of the whole church; a significant number of the famous Christian writers of the past have by one heresy or another placed themselves under the curses of Galatians 1:8-9.

The skilled reader should not limit himself to Christian works; he should invest some effort in the literary foundations of our culture. I am speaking, of course, of the much-despised classical Western canon: Plato, Milton, Shakespeare, Locke, Dickens, Franklin, Whitman, Twain, and others. There is a large body of literature that has been tested by time and endured, thus proving its value to succeeding generations. Not every work will appeal to everyone, nor should it. There are adult lovers of English literature who despise Dickens; George Bernard Shaw frequently grumbled about inordinate adulation of Shakespeare. I acknowledge that Jane Austen is a masterful writer, but I do not enjoy her novels. You may find yourself developing an unaccountable hatred for the works of Walt Whitman. This is natural and normal, but do not allow it to deter you from spending some time with Whitman. Remember the goal is not (just) entertainment; the goal is to *understand* what you read. Do not become a slave to your preferences.

Neither should you become a slave to reading classics and highbrow works that are supposed to be "good for you." In the contemporary literary world, much of what passes for cutting-edge, avant-garde material is in fact simply bad writing. Authors who care about telling a good story have often had to take refuge in genre writing (e.g., suspense, mystery, science fiction/fantasy) because the literary set tends to frown on books that Joe Sixpack can understand without a professor to interpret them for him. If you enjoy a good puzzle, try Edgar Allen Poe's detective stories, the Sherlock Holmes tales of Arthur Conan Doyle, or Rex Stout's work. If you like your fiction with moral sensibility and

[11] There are a variety of "lesser lights" in the poetic world as well, some of whom are principally known only in the poetic community, e.g., Michael Kramer or Jack McCarthy.

difficult moral choices, explore the works of Orson Scott Card. If you want to see scientific ideas pushed to their limits and mined for good story potential, Larry Niven may be for you.

By all means, feel free to depart from Western literature (after all, over half the Bible is Semitic literature), but if you are looking for a multicultural education, do not content yourself with the predigested pap that fills the reading lists of contemporary multicultural studies classes. Instead of reading the works of 20th-century Marxists and poets, read the *real* classics of foreign cultures, the works that have stood the test of time: *The Tale of Genji*, the *Bagavad Gita*, the *Rubaiyat*, *Hagakure*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. (And learn that contrary to popular stereotype, nonwestern cultures are just as parochial and vicious as the colonial western powers ever were. Western uniqueness lies not in the achievement of colonialism and slavery, but in the willing surrender of both—an occurrence unparalleled in world history[12]).

In all your reading, keep your eyes fixed firmly on Scripture. Seek to understand what you read, but do not stop there; evaluate it against the truths of Scripture. Reject what is opposed to God and His Word. Everyone has blind spots, and you will possibly absorb some ideas from your reading that are decidedly unchristian. Make no mistake: you need a safety net. The importance of fellowship in this endeavor cannot be overestimated: interchange of ideas with mature believers offers a valuable safeguard. Lest you think that you might safeguard your thinking with a quarantine that seeks to shut any source of pagan ideas, you should remember that not even works by Christians (or any particular subset of Christians) are 100% reliable. Discernment is always required—and discernment is not enhanced by avoiding opportunities for its exercise. However, it is also not enhanced by overexposure to every foolish idea that comes along. The solution is not quarantine, but inoculation with a healthy focus on Scripture first.

Remembering

Remembering may be even more important than reading. Someone who cannot read but remembers well can have someone read to him, and he will remember what he heard. By contrast, someone who can read but does not remember well forgets what he has read as soon as his book is taken from him. Since the goal of reading Scripture is to apply it, a believer must remember what he reads.

Definition

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[12] See Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2002), for further discussion on this point.

The discipline of remembering takes on two important aspects: remembering concepts and remembering language. Remembering concepts is a necessary adjunct to skilled reading. A reader must understand the concepts in the text and be able to recall at need what the text is about and the structure of its arguments. Remembering language takes this one step further to recalling the actual words of the text. This is what believers usually have in mind when they think of memorizing Scripture.

Both parts of remembering are valid. In fact, both are biblical skills. A number of the references to the Old Testament by New Testament authors take the form of skillful summaries or paraphrases rather than word-for-word quotations.

Learning to Remember

Learning to remember is widely considered a difficult practice. The degree of difficulty varies from one practitioner to another, but generally it is made more difficult than it really is. Unfortunately, this skill set is more individual than reading, so help from a skilled practitioner may not help very much. Some skilled practitioners cannot even explain how they remember things, because the process is entirely intuitive for them. Others will be able to describe their techniques, but what works for one person may not work very well for another. We will return to the question of techniques in a moment.

Of the two kinds of remembering, remembering concepts comes more easily: if you are actively engaged in reading and seeking to understand a book, you will find that remembering the concepts involved takes little extra effort. If the work is complicated, jot a few notes down to help you remember. Keep them brief: the goal is to jog your memory, not write an essay. Make it a point to discuss it with others. This will not only improve your understanding, it will improve your recall.

Remembering the language in which the concepts are expressed (i.e., the actual words of the text) is more difficult, but can be accomplished readily. There are a number of strategies you can use to memorize a text, but the one I recommend comes from Chad A. Woodburn of Master's Flock, a Florida-based discipleship ministry. The technique involves reading the text (or having it read to you while you listen intently) three times. After the first time, look away from the text and explain in your own words as best you can what the text is about. Immediately proceed to the second reading, during which you will visualize the contents of the text, imagining it happening around you. After the second reading, give the entire content of the text in your own words, including as many of the details as you can. Proceed to the third reading, paying close

attention to the language of the passage. After the third reading, quote the words of the passage from memory. Naturally with a long passage, you will want to break it up into smaller chunks and handle each of the chunks separately before putting them together. If you have not done something like this before, start small: begin with one or two verses, not with all of Psalm 119.

There are a number of other techniques people use to remember language. Techniques are like clothes: not every one fits every person equally well. If the technique above does not work for you, look around for one that does. Check your local library for books on memory techniques.

The Practice of Remembering

Regardless of which techniques work best for "loading" a passage into your short-term memory, if you want to remember it over the long haul, you will need to review it frequently for a time. Most people find the best way to do this is to write or print the passage on a note card and carry it around with them during the initial time period.

Theoretically, anything you put in your short-term memory is in your brain forever, but that does not mean you will be able to recall it when you need it—as anyone who has ever turned the house upside down hunting for the car keys can attest. Once the information is "loaded" into your long-term memory, your review need not be as frequent, but you still need to review periodically. There are a number of ways to go about this. One of my Bible college professors kept his note cards in shoeboxes and worked his way through all his shoeboxes during the course of a year. Decidedly low-tech, but quite effective. If you are a frequent computer user, there are programs that can manage your verse memory for you, and flash verses on the screen to review periodically. If you commute to work, you can use the time in the car to review your memory work—the passages you can go over in your head, please, not the ones that require you to read a note card and drive at the same time. If you learn better by hearing, read the passage into a tape recorder and play the tape on the way to work. Just do not forget to say it yourself without the tape as well, otherwise you will end up using the tape as a crutch.

Having partners to work with is not as crucial for remembering as for reading, but it still helps. Getting together with a friend and drilling each other on whatever passages you are currently memorizing helps most people to be more diligent. Like physical workouts, mental workouts are just more fun when you have a partner.

As with reading, you will need to consider what to use as fodder for your memory practice. As with reading, Scripture should be foremost. You will want to start with shorter passages, but your ultimate goal should be to memorize full contexts, not just a verse here and there. For any short passage you memorize word for word, it is a good idea to memorize the flow of the argument before and after it, so that you don't quote the verse out of context.

Feel free to exercise your memory skills on other items you read or hear as well, but keep the emphasis where it belongs: on Scripture. Choose the things you memorize with care. This is not to say that you should never memorize anything not found in Scripture. Certain passages from the pagans, expressing especially well some pagan sentiment or other, can be useful to have at hand: witness Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12. But you should relate what you memorize to Scripture before memorizing it. Know if it is true or false, and why. What you memorize becomes a part of your thinking. Be sure you know what niche in your thinking you want it to occupy before you put it permanently in your mind. Do not memorize promiscuously.

Reflecting

One of the most important features of having a passage memorized is that you can reflect on it at any time, whether you have a Bible handy or not. Indeed, this is what God-fearing people have done with Scripture since the very beginning, whether they were able to read or not.

Definition

Reflecting is focused thinking about a particular subject. Most of us have had the experience of hearing the pastor say something particularly striking, and being so caught up in the thought that we did not hear a word he said for the next ten minutes. That is reflection. When a man sits and thinks, trying to come up with the perfect anniversary gift for his wife, that is reflection. When you consider what a particular passage of Scripture means, or how you might apply it to your life, that is reflection.

In fact, reflection is what Scripture means by *meditation*. Unfortunately, when people hear the word *meditation* today, they think of a particular variety of Eastern meditation: emptying the mind of all thought. While for certain specific purposes this can be a useful practice (e.g., defeating insomnia), it is not what *meditation* means in Scripture. Biblical meditation is thinking about something in particular. Thus, Scripture generally does not simply speak of meditating; it speaks of meditating *on something* (e.g., Psalm 1, Joshua 1:8).

Learning to Reflect

In a culture of two-second images and sound bites, focused thinking does not come easily. Very little in our society prepares us for it. If you have been working on reading and memorizing, you have done some reflecting already, whether you knew it or not. Now it's time to refine the discipline a little.

The best way to begin is by going to a place where you will not be disturbed for at least ten minutes (half an hour is better). Choose a verse or a couple of verses that you want to memorize (or already have). Think through what the text actually says. Ask questions of it: who is speaking? to whom? what are the circumstances? what does the speaker say? Think about its meaning, and consider the connections between different parts of the sentence. Look for words like *and*, *because*, *for*, *while*, and *after*. Consider what those words tell you about the meaning of the verse. When you are satisfied that you understand the meaning of the verse (i.e., what the original speaker meant the original hearer to understand), then consider how it applies to you. What principles or lessons might you draw from the verse? Are your circumstances similar to those of the original hearer? If not, how does that affect the way this verse applies to you? Does this verse address any of the current issues in your spiritual life? (Keep in mind that it may not, but it never hurts to consider the question.)

It may help, starting out, to keep a few sheets of paper handy and jot down key words, phrases and symbols to jog your memory and help you stay focused. However, do not allow this to become a writing exercise. The point is to use your unaided brain to do this, just as illiterate first-century Christians were able to do.

You will probably find your mind wandering often the first few times you do this exercise. DO NOT get angry or berate yourself for allowing your mind to wander. The goal is to focus on your chosen verse; berating yourself for losing focus is just one more distraction. When you realize that your attention has wandered, simply return to thinking about the verse. You will find that with practice your focus will improve, and this will not happen so frequently.

You will probably also find that from time to time urgent thoughts will break your concentration: good ideas, a relative you forgot to call or pray for, old mistakes that you still regret, etc. You may find it helpful to use one sheet of paper to write down important, but extraneous thoughts. Once they are written down, you can be confident that you will not forget to return to them when you are finished with your time of reflection. When not writing on this paper, turn it over so that the list of extraneous thoughts is not visible while you are reflecting.

The Practice of Reflection

As with any skill, you will want to practice reflection frequently at first in order to master the basics. Three or four times a week for ten minutes would be a good minimum. The handy thing about reflection is that once you have mastered the basics, it requires no equipment at all. There are countless points during the average day where time is wasted: waiting for the toaster to pop, in the waiting room at the doctor's office, commuting, in line at the grocery store, eating lunch alone at work, etc. You can use that time to reflect on a passage that you have memorized.

Reflection is an individual exercise by definition, but do not let that stop you from involving other people. Share your reflections with other people, and ask them to share theirs with you. Discuss each other's thoughts critically: check to see if the reasoning is valid, if there are relevant issues your partner has not considered, if there are questions your partner forgot to ask.

As with the other disciplines, you have to choose the content on which you are going to reflect. As with the others, the answer here should be Scripture first. Beyond that, it is best to invest some time reflecting on anything you read.

Integrated Practice of the Forgotten Disciplines

All these disciplines integrate together. Reading provides fodder for remembering and reflecting. Remembering provides fodder for reflecting when reading material is not around or reading would be inappropriate (for example, when driving). Reflecting raises questions that require more reading to answer. The effect of these three disciplines working together is the integration of the printed word (above all, Scripture) into the practitioner's life. However, for a Christian practice of these disciplines, two further key ingredients are required.

The Role of Spiritual Vitality

It is possible for you to practice the lost disciplines of reading, remembering and reflection in a purely academic manner. If you do this, you will end up knowing a lot about the Bible—but not pleasing God with your knowledge. Scripture was not written merely so that you would *know* more; it was written to change the way you relate to God. When you read, you are reading the very words of God, and if you are seeking God, He will reward you. If you are not seeking God as you read, then you are disregarding God's purpose for Scripture. Our jealous

God does not take such a slight lightly, and you can expect no spiritual benefit from it.

Likewise, with remembering and reflection, you must seek to know God better and please Him by your activity. With reflection on Scripture, always reflect not only in order to understand, but in order to obey (Joshua 1:8-9). It does you no good to hear the Word, but fail to do it.

The Role of Community

The teachings of Scripture on fellowship and disciple-making apply to the lost disciplines as well.[13] As noted above, good company will improve your practice of the disciplines. Can you do them by yourself? Of course. And if you have no one to help you, you should do them by yourself. But the quality is likely to be lower, because you have blind spots, just like everyone else. A good practice partner—or better still, a small group of partners—will help you see those blind spots, and you can help them as well.

In addition, the goal is not only to develop these disciplines in yourself, but to pass them on to others (disciple-making). You cannot do this without involving other people. In disciple-making, there are practical benefits to giving the disciple access to a group of individuals skilled in the disciplines. Specific techniques for reading, remembering and reflecting are like clothes: not every one fits every person. Consequently, the likelihood is slim that the same narrow band of techniques that suit you will also suit all those you help to learn. A well-rounded tradition of these disciplines must include a variety of techniques, and that variety survives best in a varied community of practitioners.

Conclusion

In an essay titled "Modern Education and the Classics," T. S. Eliot called for "the revival and expansion of the monastic teaching orders" as a necessary means to provide for a truly Christian education. In his view, society's means of education (public schools, universities, and the like) had gone too far to turn back.[14] Protestants cannot turn to monastic teaching orders as a solution to the problem, but the problem remains, and a solution must be found. Society no longer teaches the basics of

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[13] See Timothy R, Nichols, "Beyond the Pulpit: Two Ways Ordinary Believers Minister to the Church" *CTS Journal* 10 (Fall 2004): 32–42.

[14] In *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 452–460.

relating to the printed word. Effective disciple-making requires that believers fill the gaps in education that society no longer fills.

The proper structure for this is not the monastic order, but the structure of the church itself. Members with equipping gifts (evangelists, pastors, and teachers) equip the saints to do the work of the ministry, including making disciples. Individual members of the body of Christ develop more recent converts, helping them to seek God and passing on their wisdom and knowledge. As the neophytes develop to maturity, they too begin to take part in making disciples. Good churches have always done this. In so doing, they taught believers how to relate to God and each other, how to have biblically sound marriages, and how to minister to each other and the world. In the same way, now they will also teach how to read, remember, and reflect on Scripture.

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