

OUTLINE

- I. Literalism seeks one right answer. (Singular vs. plural). But the focus on “right answer” taught me to look for and expect Truth not relativism.
- II. Literalism reads scripture literally. (Literal vs. figurative). But the focus on reading scripture led me liberal arts education which helped me to discover the figurative, sacramental. (Nelson: We live in a vehicle that cannot fully reflect the tenor of God’s world.)
- III. Literalism leads to perfectionism. (The event of Salvation vs. the process of discipleship; Perfection vs. failure). But the focus on perfection pushes me to excellence (when I can crawl out from under the guilt). And the result of this shift is to see the world in its plenitude with humility.

All You Know is not All There Is: Literalism

“Sometimes the only Christian thing to do is be a hypocrite!” said my aunt in frustration. Most likely she was complaining about having to go to a reception honoring someone she did not respect or agree with, but the sentiment stuck with me as an apt description of the dilemma Pentecostals can find themselves in when they get caught in a mental state I call “literalism.”

All You Know is Not All There Is: Literalism

11 Singular and Plural

Literalism takes many forms. One is the tendency to assume that only one right answer exists to any given question or situation. People suffering under this condition tend to look at the world singularly—only one way of living is “correct,” only one interpretation of the text is possible, only those who believe as we do will make it to heaven.

In spite of the limiting and damaging consequences of a literalist worldview, some positive results emerged for me. In an increasingly relativistic and pluralistic culture, the insistence on singularity kept me grounded in the notion that truth exists and can be found. Even if I began to realize that the roads to finding that truth may be more diverse than I had been taught, the destination remained a fixed idea for me.

Elaboration:

The term we use when we say that something “rings true” brought up for me the image that truth is like a pure, strong pillar of metal. When we strike it with the mallet of a new thought, idea, or approach to life, it will either “ring” with the compatibility of purity between itself and the newly encountered idea which is true or it will produce a thud or a splat—a sign of incompatibility with the truth.

The pursuit of the truth, I believe, if undertaken with a whole heart, will ultimately lead to a knowledge of the Truth as taught in Scripture. Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, the Life.” I

don't read this passage literally as some do, who reduce "the Truth" to "only things that Jesus said" or "only what the Bible teaches." I read this passage to mean that all truth, all avenues of knowledge, and wisdom, when pursued with abandonment of personal agendas and secret motivations, will eventually lead a person to the truths taught in Scripture and embodied in the Son of God, if a person sticks with it long enough. Standing at the end of our long journey in the Way, holding open the Door to eternal life, is the one True God/man, Jesus Christ, whose own purity of heart and self-abandonment made possible our pursuit of Life.

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12 Literal and Figurative

Another form of literalism is the tendency to read Scripture literally and take only its surface meanings as the inspired truth. Such an approach ignores the interplay of literal and figurative language in all its forms, and eventually leads Christians into such gnarly debates as the Creation vs. Evolution arguments of the last two centuries. Pentecostals are not the only ones who have been trapped in this squirrel cage, but pockets of the movement have certainly stayed there as long as anyone.

Because of the emphasis on salvation—gaining it and keeping it—the primary advice for spiritual development beyond salvation was captured in a children’s song and delivered in many variations on its theme. The song goes like this (accompanied with motions for toddlers):

Read your Bible, (hands opened as if holding a book)

pray every day, (hands folded in prayer)

pray every day, (hands folded in prayer)

pray every day. (hands folded in prayer)

Read your Bible, (hands opened as if holding a book)

pray every day, (hands folded in prayer)

and you’ll grow, grow, grow! (start in a crouch and stand taller with each word until standing on tippy toes. I always imagined myself blooming like a flower on the last word, “grow!”)

In spite of the failure of my Bible reading and prayer to improve the way I treated my sister, the constant urging to “read your Bible,” even without the benefit of instruction on how to read it, implied the importance of learning about one’s faith through reading. The constant reminder to “read your Bible” instilled a respect for words in general and the Word in particular.

As a little girl, sitting in the opera seats of First Assembly in Wichita, I entertained myself during church by reading my mother's purse Bible or poring over the hymnal. I still remember the shock of surprise I felt when I realized that the "I" speaking in many of the New Testament books was the Apostle Paul and not Jesus himself. I had been taught that God was the author of the Bible, but here was his servant Paul speaking in first person in the Scriptures. And through this discovery, I came to understand something about "narrative voice" in spite of being too young to speak of it in my own voice.

In 1978, the NIV emerged with updated language resembling modern usage. By that time, however, I was in high school and I had already worked out for myself that when Paul says in Philippians 1:27, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;" that the word "conversation" concerned the believer's whole personality and lifestyle and not just the words spoken in conversation to someone else. Reading the "outdated" King James in which meanings were often obscured by my lack of vocabulary or context pushed my interpretive skills and stretched my imagination in ways that few other exercises would have done.

Spending hours in church puzzling over difficult passages—sometimes made clearer by good preaching, sometimes not—developed in me a skill in reading and interpretation that continues to bear fruit for me every day. By the time I reached college and graduate school, the close readings of my childhood, the sorting out of language and digging deeply for meanings just beyond the surface were exactly the skills I needed. But because this skill was learned by reading Scripture, the meanings I discovered really mattered. In Bible study, I couldn't settle for a misunderstanding or a personal reading. I needed truth. If I misread Scripture, I might miss God's word to me.

From there, I took a small step to find deep compatibility between Christian discipleship and the liberal arts. Salvation is about a changed life, and a traditional liberal arts education contributes to that transformation by nurturing a changed mind.

Consider the following description of the salvation experience: *True encounter with the Gospel requires that the believer's whole life be radically changed by it, that what he experiences may affect his action, his tastes, his choices, that no previous attachment be immune to examination and hence re-evaluation. An encounter with Christ puts everything at risk and requires people who are able to risk everything.* Such an all-consuming approach to faith means every idea, every thought, every behavior belongs to Christ as 2 Corinthians 10:5 suggests, and they contribute to a clear understanding of what belief demands of me.

Actually, the above definition does not derive from Christian teaching at all, although as stated it definitely describes the believer's experience. Instead, the passage is my adaptation of one scholar's vision of a liberal arts education. Here is the original:

True liberal education requires that the student's whole life be radically changed by it, that what he learns may affect his action, his tastes, his choices, that no previous attachment be immune to examination and hence re-evaluation. Liberal education puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything.

[Allen Bloom, cited in Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 6.]

Although few university students today are truly confronted by such an education, the demanding, all-consuming potential of a liberal arts education was already familiar to me through the demanding, all-consuming character of my Pentecostal upbringing. When I went to college and studied in a liberal-arts-based environment, the process felt natural and good to me because it provided a deepened version of what I had already been raised to expect about my life.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins observes in "God's Grandeur," "the world is charged" with the presence of God. His Spirit will appear unexpectedly, like lightning or fireworks. It will sneak up on

us like the slow-gathering of oil when olives are crushed. Not matter how long humanity ignores it, God's grandeur lives "deep down" in nature and the created order. And for me, the antidote to ignorance and fear that keep us isolated is to pursue a knowledge of the world and God's presence in it. God is the end, but pursuit of the truth is the means.

The all-pervasiveness of God's presence in human existence and the created order makes every avenue of human knowledge and existence a path for better understanding of God and his intentions toward humanity. 1 Corinthians 2:15 supports this approach to life and learning. It says that the spiritual man appraises and judges all things. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 tells how; it says that we are to "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." I am deeply grateful to my Christian liberal arts educators who were able to help me understand that my goal of transformation into the likeness of Christ could be assisted by means of a holistic education. The route to faith requires the same commitment to truth in all its forms that the goal of faith embodies.

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13 Perfect and Mature

Looking for that one and only way to do or be leads to another consequence of literalism, which I call perfectionism. This affliction bears only a tangential relationship to the psychological condition by the same name. In this case, the very positive goal of the Christian is to “be perfect as I am perfect” (REF), but because of a literalist reading of the English translation, the notion of “perfect” translates as “never failing at anything” or “always getting it right in the one way on which we have all agreed.” The upshot of this thinking is that every mistake, every missed goal, every dropped opportunity feels like moral failure.

If the focus on reading Scripture was the most positive effect on my development, I have to say that perfectionism, as I define it, has probably exerted the most long-term damaging effect on me. But even this emphasis has borne positive fruit. The drive to perfection pushes me to excellence (when I can crawl out from under the guilt).

Elaborations:

A kind of magical connection existed between the daily ritual of reading the Bible and praying and the power to overcome any lurking sin, conflict, or doubt. Many Pentecostals deemed additional instruction unnecessary.

In early Pentecost, I think this simplicity may have been grounded in experience. Certainly my grandfather’s immediate deliverance from alcohol and gambling is testimony to the power of the Spirit to redirect a person’s desires instantaneously, even deeply embedded physical desires. But the emphasis on conversion to the exclusion of discipleship left some converts who suffered from habits and ways of thinking that had not been immediately transformed with the feeling that those behaviors should be covered up. Instant deliverance was the measure of God’s grace toward you or your acceptance of Him. Lingering doubts, habits, and behaviors suggested that your conversion hadn’t really “taken.” Hence my aunt’s discovery that “sometimes the only Christian

thing to do is be a hypocrite!" And for many, covering up those sinful tendencies was the path to social acceptance in the church.

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14 Plenitude and Humility

Often, this kind of thinking emphasizes scarcity over plenitude and eventually arrogance over humility.

And the result of shifting from the negative to the positive side of each focus is to see the world in its plenitude with humility.