

Reclaiming the Point - Part 4

Bible Study

“Oh, you’re from the Church of Christ. I like you guys, you really read your Bibles,” The stranger said to me one day at the supermarket a few years ago. I smiled and said, “Yeah, I mean, we try our best.” I had heard this praise before. The first time I heard it I was a teenager, and I remember receiving that comment more readily and happily. It made me proud and confirmed the biases I held. I had long suspected, as a young guy who didn’t really know anything, that the people in my church *were* the best Bible readers, and that folks from other churches were either not reading it at all or doing their best to scheme about ways they can misinterpret it every Sunday morning. But hearing that phrase again recently I was a little more reticent and far less complimented because the story of my own intellectual pursuits made me recognize the truth and the falsity of that sentiment.

The Restoration Movement was at its core a movement concerned with Christian unity. The biggest roadblock to unity, the early leaders of this movement supposed, were creeds, confessions, church tradition, and polity that developed over time with minimal reference to biblical precedent. They lambasted high-minded intellectuals who defended these institutions because a) those institutions have no literal biblical precedent, and b) those institutions concretized divisions, divisions that often became antagonistic, that made Christian unity almost impossible. So in an important respect the first and second generation of leaders in the Restoration Movement developed an anti-intellectual rhetorical strategy. They critiqued professors and clerical leadership whose expertise in theology and biblical scholarship produced a denominational system that fractured Christianity. They were convinced that the Bible was simple, straightforward, and easily accessible to those with any mind about them so that the ordinary person could read it and understand it and apply it just as well, if not better due to the simplicity of their common sense, than professors whose advanced degrees have made them lose sight of the forest for the trees—or lose sight of the forest altogether for that matter.

At the same time the alternative was not to be stupid. In fact, the leaders of the Restoration Movement were smart, disciplined, theologically trained and astute writers and speakers. They were devoted to truth, and they were convinced that truth is found primarily through the witness of Scripture. Therefore they emphasized the study of the Bible, making 2 Timothy 2:15 “Study to show thyself approved...” a household idiom.

Growing up in Churches of Christ, even with all the shifts and changes that a hundred and fifty years or so brought, I was still the heir of that kind of intellectual/anti-intellectual heritage. I was still taught to read my Bible thoroughly and regularly. I was taught not to take the preacher’s word for it, but to investigate the Bible on my own to see if I thought he was right. These practices and principles amounted to developing a value for truth in my mind. I found myself formed, as a teenager, with a desire and concern for truth that involved calling everything into question, even my own church and preacher, if it did not match up with biblical truth.

Ironically, it was that very concern for truth, and the insistence that I read the Bible for myself that brought me to a place where I no longer felt that the Churches of Christ had everything right or that everyone else had everything wrong. It made me realize that we each have our own way of reading texts and figuring out how to put our understanding of the Bible in conversation with our experience, our practical reasoning, and our traditions. So when that stranger came to me and told me how he held Churches of Christ in such high esteem on account of their biblical knowledge I could no longer revel in that kind of praise, because I knew it to be true to an extent, but also false in a lot of ways. Biblical literacy has fallen off in a lot of Churches of Christ in the first place, but where it hasn’t we tend to read our Bibles in a very particular kind of way, and not by any stretch the only or even dominant way; perhaps not even the best way.

The point to be reclaimed here is that we were right to empower everyday people to read the Bible and read it well. We were right to insist that people with advanced degrees and complicated vocabularies do not have the final, or even best, say in what the Bible or Christian doctrine does or does not teach. We were right, over all these things, to insist on truth as the primary value of a Christian, and that we can and ought to call all things into question if they seem suspicious.

But we were wrong about a number of things too. We were wrong to suppose that the Bible was so simple and easy

to understand that it required nothing but simple literacy and a working brain to understand. It could be understood simply enough at a surface or literal level, but there's always more to it than that. We were wrong that those who have taken the time and effort to do the necessary study and training to try to understand that "more to it" are always skewed by that very training. They need not think of themselves as the only people who can read the Bible, but they also ought to be given a least the benefit of the doubt and a modicum of authority. And we were wrong about valuing truth only insofar as it supported the way we already thought about things. We loved studying the Bible to affirm how right we are, and became scandalized and often furious when people who point to that same Bible and insist that maybe we didn't have it all figured out.

So let us, once again, reclaim the point of our intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. Let us uphold the thirst and search for truth. Let us neither fall into an intellectual elitism nor an intellectual desert of populism. And let us, more importantly, recognize the truth that we are finite creatures with limited understanding, such that the most important virtue taught to us by Christ was not having a complete and transparent understanding of truth, but rather humility, letting us be the ones who completely and transparently rest in God.

— Brandon Pierce