

The Christian Literacy Project

Pastor Rich Knight
Trinitarian Congregational Church
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II Peter 1:1-11

We're going to read the first part of this chapter, but before we do take a look at verse 16. So often you hear people say that the Bible was written hundreds of years after the fact. When it comes to the New Testament that's simply not true Take a look at **II Peter 1:16-18**

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

He's talking about the Transfiguration. According to the Gospel accounts Jesus took Peter, James and John up on that mountain with him. So these letters have what we call "apostolic authority." They come from the Apostle himself, Peter.

II Peter 1:1-11

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with

godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

Recently I read Stephen Prothero's book, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't. Prothero is the chair of the religion department at Boston University. As I wrote in the newsletter, I found his book interesting, inspiring and depressing at the same time. Prothero begins many of his classes by giving his students a little quiz on the first day of class. You have part of that quiz in your programs this morning.

Religious Literacy Quiz

Adapted from Stephen Prothero's Religious Literacy

- 1. Name the four Gospels. List as many as you can.
(Matthew, Mark, Luke & John)*
- 2. According to the Gospels Jesus was raised in what town?
(Nazareth)*
- 3. In an inaugural address a recent US President mentioned the "Jericho road." What Biblical story was he referring to? (the Good Samaritan)
A commentator on CBS News, Dick Meyer, admitted that he didn't understand the reference: "There were a few phrases in the speech I just didn't get," he said, "One was, 'When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.'"*
- 4. "God helps those who help themselves." Is this in the Bible? (no)
If so, which book?*
- 5. Match the Bible characters with the stories in which they appear.
Some characters may be matched with more than one story or vice versa.*

Adam & Eve

Paul

Moses

Noah

Jesus

Abraham

Serpent

Exodus

Binding of Isaac

Olive Branch

Garden of Eden

Parting of the Red Sea

Road to Damascus

Garden of Gethsemane

6. List as many of the Ten Commandments as you can:

I - IV (Loving God)

No other gods

No idols

Don't misuse my name

Honor the sabbath

V - X (Loving your Neighbor)

Honor your Father & Mother

Don't Murder,

Don't commit Adultery

Don't Steal, don't Lie, don't Covet

Professor Prothero says that most of the students in his classes fail this little quiz. Most could not name the four Gospels. When it came to the Ten Commandments they averaged four (I read once that more Americans know the names of all the Brady Bunch children than they do the Ten Commandments). Prothero cites some other surveys in his book:

- only half of American adults can name even one of the four Gospels.
- most Americans can not name the first book of the Bible
- most do not know that the story of Jonah is in the Bible
- 10% of Americans believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

Thus the need for Christian Literacy.

Literacy refers to the ability to use a language - to know what words means, to be able to converse in that language. (Prothero, p. 11) To read, write and speak is to be literate. We need to be Literate Christians, able to speak about our faith.

In 1987 E.D. Hirsch wrote a best-selling book called, Cultural Literacy. Hirsch argued the modern trend in education away from content-based learning and towards skill-based learning had produced a "disintegration of cultural memory." Education moved away from rote memorization, just piling up facts. But the result is we don't know much. For example, we all know the slogan, "Remember the Alamo," but few people actually know what went on at the Alamo that's worth remembering.

Hirsch called for a return to what he termed, "core knowledge." He said that without this "core knowledge" we can't really have intelligent

conversations and make informed decisions. We're adrift in the ocean, not knowing where we've come from, so we can't possibly know where we're going. The same is true when it comes to religion. We need to have a basic core knowledge of our faith and eventually a basic core knowledge of the great faiths of the world. Religious literacy means having the ability to understand and speak about our faith intelligently. It's the ability to communicate the basic tenants of our religion.

In terms of Christian Literacy it's understanding the meaning of such words as Covenant, Atonement, Incarnation and Trinity. It's knowing that Christ was not his last name but a title. It's knowing the 10 Commandments, being familiar with the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables. It's understanding Paul's doctrine of Grace (that we are saved by grace and not works) and James' doctrine that "faith without works is dead." It's knowing that Jeremiah was a prophet, not a bullfrog, and it's knowing what the job of the prophets was in ancient Israel. Christian Literacy is knowing that St. Paul & St. Luke were not part of the original 12 disciples, but they were instrumental in the spread of early Christianity and prolific writers of books that ended up in the New Testament. There is a basic core knowledge that is essential for us all to have.

Prothero makes the case that when it comes to religion Americans are a paradox - "we as a people are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion at the same time." This is troubling, says Prothero, because one can't understand current events in our nation and world without understanding religion. For Example:

A. Why do Evangelicals think Mormonism might be a cult? - because they put the Book of Mormon, written/translated by Joseph Smith, on par with the Bible.

B. Why is same-sex marriage particularly troubling for practicing Catholics? - because marriage is a sacrament, and one ought not go changing a sacrament. (others point out that marriage has changed through the years - from polygamy and arranged marriages to today)

C. Why is abortion the primary election issue for so many Evangelicals & Fundamentalists? - because of Psalm 139 - "You knit me together in my mother's womb. It was you who formed my inward parts."

D. Why do Sunni & Shiite Muslims not get along?
After the death of Muhammad in 632 the Muslim community split into two.

One group, the Sunnis, believed that Muhammad's successor should be elected. The other group, the Shiites, believed that Muhammad's successor should come from his family. They also have believed through the years that it's ok to kill heretics. So it's ok for them to kill each other. Before we get uppity about that we should remember that we Christians have done our share of killing heretics and witches through the years as well. One more example:

E. You can't understand the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis without understanding the Biblical concept of Covenant, and that the book of Genesis promises the land to Abraham's followers (down through Isaac, Jacob and Moses). They got the land on good authority. Of course, Genesis 12 talks about being "blessed to be a blessing," so perhaps it's meant to be shared!

So, do you see how an informed citizen needs to know something about religion? We need to know something about the religions of the world not only to be truly educated people, but also to be effective, informed citizens.

St. Peter believed that we should seek Christian literacy as well. He wrote about adding knowledge to our faith. II Peter 1:5-7

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

Support your faith . . . with knowledge. Support your faith with study, with growth, with teaching, with learning more about your faith.

Professor Prothero says that over the past 150 years something great happened in the Ecumenical movement and something not so great happened. In the 1800s during the Second Great Awakening Christians banded together to do much good. They protested against slavery, promoted education, fed the poor, spoke up for women's rights and so forth. And Christians did so together, much like the Civil Rights movement. But in doing so, he says, the faith got watered down. People found the common denominator - Loving God & Loving Each Other. In Evangelical circles being a Christian became simply "Loving Jesus." Folks found the common denominator and then they stayed there. They stopped going any further, and so people lost the richness of their faith.

- A. Methodists stopped remembering about John Wesley teaching on sanctification.
- B. Lutherans stopped remembering Martin Luther's teachings on Law and Grace.
- C. Presbyterians stopped remembering about John Calvin's teachings about the sovereignty of God.
- D. Congregationals stopped remembering the rich history of learning the scriptures, so much so, that we used to be called, "People of the Book."

In finding the lowest common denominator we lost the richness of our faiths which is often found in the details, in the distinctiveness of each branch of the faith.

So this year I'm embarking on a "Christian Literacy Project." Through a blog with that title and via sermons I'm going to strive and increase our religious IQ's, to enhance our basic core knowledge of our faith. I hope you'll come along for the journey. I'll send out an email when there's a new entry on the blog and a link to get there. I'll try to keep the entries brief. I'll also strive to make them devotional. Because as St. Peter said, Faith and knowledge go together.

Support your faith with knowledge.

Let's pray:

Loving God, help us to grow in the knowledge of our faith.
Help us to grow in our knowledge of you. Amen.