a Teachable Spirit

The Virtue of Learning from Strangers, Enemies, and Absolutely Anyone

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The illiterate of the twenty-first century
will not be those who cannot read and write,
but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*

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Introduction

Spanish has always been my Achilles' heel.

For five years—spanning three years of high school and two at university—I furiously attempted to learn the mother tongue of many of my hometown friends in Keizer, Oregon. Despite studying Spanish for half a decade, the language has all but abandoned me in adulthood, minus a phrase or two that can be used in a pinch. I've lost most of it. Not all languages are this challenging for me. Biblical Greek, given my day job, is a far more familiar and comfortable language. But that pesky Spanish—five years of study, and all I can do is ask if the joint has a bathroom.

I've often wondered, *Will I* finally *learn Spanish in heaven?*

As silly as it seems, this question is not insignificant. Over a lifetime, every human will accumulate a set of skills that will shape their existence—driving a stick shift, carrying on conversations, doing the finances, putting the green, passing a basketball between the legs, walking and chewing gum at the same time. The list goes on. Be it for survival or a favorite pastime, life offers chance after chance to develop the skills necessary to thrive. So it's not a silly question: Will humans, upon entering the presence of God's glory in heaven, continue to cultivate such skills? Will we learn new things in heaven? And maybe unlearn what we've

done wrong our whole life? In short, will I finally be able to learn Spanish in heaven?

The Bible is quiet on this subject. But not silent. In the divinely inspired words of Revelation that paint the picture of a future new creation—that place Christians call "heaven"—John describes what his eyes passingly behold. The apostle catches sight of throngs of worshipers who are, as he describes them, "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

John notices that the inhabitants of heaven speak different languages. This is noteworthy, if for no other reason than the divine realm John beholds depicts a human community in all its diversity—ethnic, tribal, and even cultural. For John, heaven does not annihilate linguistic diversity. Which could be bad news. If the possibility of learning new languages isn't a reality in heaven, then we're all relegated to an everlasting existence with others with whom we'll never be able to communicate. That doesn't sound like heaven; it sounds like hell.

The other option is that God will give infinite knowledge to humans in heaven. But wouldn't that entail humans becoming something more than human? Only God can have divine, perfect, infinite knowledge. The triune God is the only know-it-all. So just as resurrection doesn't annihilate difference, neither will it fix our finitude. In heaven, human beings continue to be just that—*beings*.

John's vision isn't the only text we can approach to answer our question about learning in heaven. There's Paul's letter to the Ephesians. At the heart of the epistle, the apostle describes the resurrection state of the follower of Jesus: "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in

Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6–7).

Keep in mind that Paul is describing the state of the saint in glory. Notice that God will "show" the resurrected inhabitant's various realities—namely, about the endless bounties of God's grace, kindness, and mercy that went unappreciated on earth. For Paul, God has more to show, reveal, and make manifest to our finite eyes. We will, it seems, *always* have more to learn. Perhaps forever. Heaven, then, is the ongoing education of beholding God's never-ending revelation. Paul's description of the future of a Christian is one in which they have much more to learn—and the Lamb will be their teacher. For those who love to learn, the Christian way should be the best.

There are obstacles to overcome. We may be able to look forward to learning from God forever. In the present, however, we tend to be stubbornly prideful, inflexible, and unteachable. Too often, Christians can fall into a crippling belief that the highest form of learning is in the realms of spiritual and religious knowledge (such as theology, biblical studies, and Christian living). No doubt, these are core components of God's curriculum for our lives. But such a narrow outlook fails to recognize that *everything* in one's life makes up the curriculum of discipleship, from changing the car's oil, loving one's spouse, forgiving a boss, and raising a child to building a treehouse, becoming humble, and even running a business. Following Christ is submitting to the "yoke" of Jesus (Matthew 11:29), not only in the sacred, but equally in the mundane. In other words, a life under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit treats nothing as extracurricular. If life is the curriculum, nothing remains secular.

Christian maturity, in part, comes alongside accepting the

frustrating fact that none of us have arrived at a full understanding of truth. Paul further writes, "Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul's critical teaching here undermines any possibility for religious arrogance or theological pride. Following Jesus entails a recognition that we do not see clearly. This can too often be forgotten. When arrogance colors Christians' discipleship, it paves the way for miles and miles of pain and frustration for everyone around them.

As a professor, I'm all too familiar with the angst students face when they discover that some of their ideas or beliefs don't hold up to Scripture, reality, or truth. The experience can be dizzying. Studying at the university, one of my students soon discovered through reading, coursework, and conversation that some of the finer points of theology he had been handed by his family of origin simply did not align with what is revealed about God throughout Scripture. As he began to rethink his theology, he shared with his parents his discoveries. Their response was cold, dismissive, and combative. Not only did they interpret their son's learning journey as a threat, but they also came to see it as a rejection of the very faith they had instilled in him. Due to an underlying insecurity, they dismissed his learning as apostasy.

How could this be? A disciple is a learner of the way of Jesus. Sadly, for too many, learning is caricatured as a rejection of the faith when it should be appreciated as a pathway toward a deeper faith. What we so often assume is a "crisis of faith" is really a "crisis of understanding."[1] Loving God is not the end of learning. True learning is loving God with one's mind.

Reality, Dallas Willard once wrote, is "what we humans run into when we are wrong."[2] Reality can be painful. Nobody would

disagree that it is difficult to discover that one's present thinking and the truth do not correlate. Still, isn't this a sign that someone is on the right path? Because the Christian is called to relentlessly demolish any high place of theological idolatry—those altars in our minds where we've come to love our thinking about God more than God himself. This demolition project is hard. But it is necessary and liberating. Loving God is not the same as fully understanding him. "Truth is eternal," writes Madeleine L'Engle, "[but] knowledge is changeable. It is disastrous to confuse them."[3] It takes faith to believe in absolute truth. But it takes humility to admit we don't comprehend it absolutely.

Learning includes unlearning. When God calls Jeremiah to his ministry, the prophet is befuddled. How could God call someone so young to be a prophet? "Alas, Sovereign Lord," Jeremiah responds. "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." Then God responds, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you" (Jeremiah 1:6–7).

Commentators point out that God never says Jeremiah is wrong. Indeed, by worldly standards, the prophet was young, likely thirteen or fourteen. God doesn't correct Jeremiah's self-knowledge. Rather, God corrects the fact that Jeremiah bases his identity on it. As Old Testament scholar Christopher J. H. Wright reflects, Jeremiah's comments were "true but irrelevant."[4] Jeremiah had to unlearn his entrenched belief that God couldn't use a young person like himself for prophetic work. Jeremiah would be teachable. As a result, his story is recorded for perpetuity. Our problem isn't that we're ignorant or uninformed. Sometimes our knowledge gets in the way of our Christlikeness. Too often, our greater sin is that we're unteachable.

This book is about one of the most challenging characteristics

to embody—teachability. It is also about why that virtue is so difficult to cultivate in our fallen state. The "pride of life"—as the apostle John calls it in 1 John 2:16—is the lingering consequence of the cosmic fall on one's intellect. Sin always cripples good thinking. Life without God, Paul writes, is an experience marked by the "futility of their thinking" and being "darkened in their understanding"[5] (Ephesians 4:17–18). Sin, then, is a "veil" that keeps us from seeing as we were meant to.[6] And this veil can only be taken away by Christ. When Paul later wrote that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," the statement flowed naturally from his thinking that the way toward a healed mind is through encountering Christ (Colossians 2:3). True and restored thought is possible only by turning toward God. As the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar declared in Daniel, "I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored" (Daniel 4:34). Our minds are fractured by sin. Turning to God begins the restoration.

Christian discipleship should propel us to use our minds more, not less. Thankfully, we have countless luminaries to aid in teaching us how to do so—the most impactful of whom have been shown to be teachable.[7] It's always refreshing to see a renowned theologian passingly comment about their own folly and ignorance.[8] Or to see a hero like Charles Spurgeon confess that the deep thought of a simple cook named Mary King left him transformed:

> I learnt more from her than I should have learned from any six doctors of divinity of the sort we have nowadays. There are some Christian people who taste, and see, and enjoy religion in their souls, and who get at a deeper knowledge of it than books can ever give them, though they should search all their days.[9]

Stories like these embolden our spirits and humble our minds, reminding us that the path toward holy learning will go through whomever God determines. We can, and should, resolve ourselves to learning from whomever God places before us.

What follows are experiments in learning. I will consider seven groups or entities Christians have often struggled to learn from: experts, strangers, the dead, children, secular culture, parents, and enemies. I have written on many subjects—including environmental theology, doubt, deconstruction, theology, sabbath, spiritual formation, liturgy, and desire—but what follows has been born out of the classroom more than any other writing project I've undertaken. Ever watching my students, I've been perplexed, frustrated, and delighted to learn more about them with regard to how they learn, and to discover how when they learn how to learn, the door of faith often swings open for them.

My thesis is simple: Christians should be the most teachable people in the world. They can and should learn from *anyone* and *everyone*. To borrow an obscure line from one of Brighde Mullins's monologues, the Christian should dare say, "Everyone is my teacher."[10]

One

Learning How to Learn

Things had become tight. Our beloved Portland home felt cramped with multiplying roommates, weekend guests, and parish church gatherings. As a result, far too little space remained for the play, exploration, and roughhousing a five-year-old boy like ours required. Our tiny urban lot did not allow us to build out. So my wife, Quinn, quietly planned (I was informed) that we would build *up*. A treehouse!

Our son was ecstatic; I was not.

Building does not come easily to me. Left to myself, I'm inclined toward the life of the mind—books, writing, podcasts, all things intellect. That's my natural environment. "You'd rather *think* about life," a friend once chided me, "than actually live it, wouldn't you?" I blushed in agreement. But there's a historical angle to my disdain for building things. While my own childhood afforded me many skills, learning to work with my hands was not one of them. Mom was a nurse; Dad was a doctor. In my earliest years, they toiled under long work hours as they struggled to keep their marriage intact. These were some of the most painful years of my life. To survive,

I discovered that retreating to the world of reading, thinking, silence, and video games provided a safe haven from my scary world. Dad dragged me outside from time to time, mostly to fish. But learning stereotypical "man things," such as restoring cars, fixing leaky faucets, chopping wood, or building treehouses, wasn't an indigenous part of my childhood landscape.

One of the greatest embarrassments I've faced as I've entered midlife is a lingering shame that I don't know how to do the things I'm "supposed to know how to do" as a man (build things, mostly). The life of the mind has often served as a fig leaf under which I've covered the shame I've had around my masculinity for most of my life. I'm the thinker; my wife is the builder. We've made it work, as long as we agree that I'll be asked to leave my sunless world of thought from time to time to lend muscle holding up a board, find a tool, hammer a nail, or lose a drill bit when needed—the last of which I've all but mastered.

"Can you grab the Phillips screwdriver from the garage?" Quinn asked over her shoulder while hoisting up a four-by-four to the old oak. The first piece of the treehouse was being hung in its place on a bright spring afternoon.

I nodded, heading to the garage just around the corner of our backyard.

Garages terrify me almost as much as building things. They have the feel of a distant land of exotic cultures and unknown tongues. I'm an alien there.

I stood over the toolbox where the screwdrivers were allegedly kept, shuffling about metal items—foreign relics—to locate the requested tool. For two or three minutes, I looked. And looked. And looked. Then, out of nowhere, a surge of emotion welled up within me. And I began to cry.

I have very little to offer by way of explanation. The tears

came from nowhere, deep in some chasm in my soul, a mysterious, unexplored cavern in my story.

I sat down.

Why am I crying?

What is happening to me?

Is this a midlife crisis?

Truth was emerging—one of the most consequential epiphanies of my early adulthood. It dawned on me that I didn't know what a Phillips screwdriver looked like. Not a clue. This was something I was supposed to know. A man should know what different screwdrivers look like. But I didn't. A tsunami of shame overcame me. No one had ever taught me what Phillips screwdrivers look like. I was a thirty-five-year-old man unable to do "man stuff." I couldn't hide my ignorance any longer.

Cold tears drying on my cheeks, I returned to Quinn, empty-handed and ashamed. Vulnerably, I named my inadequacy and ignorance and unfulfilled desires that I had for myself as a man. And my inadequacies as a husband. There, in our backyard, I slowly began removing the fig leaf from my hidden shame.

A new chapter was beginning. God wanted to teach me. But he wouldn't do it in any old, normal way. God rarely does. God would do it his way—through the gentle instruction of my wife. She became my teacher. And in so doing, she has helped teach me to be the man God desires. Along the way, I had exposed before my eyes a whole hidden life of sin—pride, arrogance, and fear. All of these would need to be confronted, along with the fear that I could never become the man God wanted me to be. Becoming teachable has a painful but profound way of exposing our most embarrassing insecurities, fears, and idols.

No wonder we're often afraid to be teachable.

Unteachable

Becoming a teachable person has two prerequisites: There must be a teacher and a person willing to be taught. Increasingly, Western culture has become an environment that celebrates and platforms the brilliant teachers. We need teachers. And plenty of resourceful books on teaching can be found at any local bookstore. More elusive, though, are trusted guides showing us how to *become teachable*. Openness to being taught reveals one's hunger for the truth. But it equally reveals one's willingness to embrace their own ignorance as a path toward learning, or what fifteenth-century German Christian bishop Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) called "learned ignorance" (Latin, *de docta ignorancia*).[1] Nicholas believed the human mind was incapable of understanding everything—to say nothing of everything about God. Christians, he believed, must begin by first acknowledging their own ignorance. The teachable person names their ignorance. Which is why it is such an elusive virtue—in others and in ourselves. Being teachable is vulnerable business.

Still, there remains little that is closer to the Christian journey than one's willingness to be taught. The very language of *disciple* (Greek, *mathetes*) simply means to be a "learner, pupil, or apprentice." Adjacent to this is the concept of *repentance* (Greek, *metanoia*), which means "to change one's mind." The ancient language used to describe the Christian life is inextricably tied to a life of learning. Sadly, however, learning and repentance are not always qualities Christians are known for—especially in modern America.

What was most surprising in researching this book was my inability to locate one single book dealing with the issue of Christian teachability. Nods are given from time to time. More often, though, I discovered that Christians are commonly

perceived in the public square as being the least teachable of our time. True or not, perception is powerful. In 2018, author and historian Timothy Gloege penned a widely circulated article titled "Being Evangelical Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry."[2] Gloege contended that conservative Christians (particularly evangelicals) easily shift blame away from their most embarrassing representatives (particularly in politics) by arguing that they are not truly evangelicals.

Underlying the article is the exposition of the lingering resentment many feel toward evangelicals who appear to many to be unwilling to accept responsibility for their public foibles—along with a further unwillingness to be taught by their failures. Too often, Christians are caricatured as being anti-intellectual,[3] antiscience,[4] and even antiprogress.[5]

If there remains a whiff of merit to these claims, then cultivating teachability will become infinitely important for the church of the twenty-first century. For one, we must be aware that the information age is in its infancy. With the widespread usage of emerging artificial intelligence technologies in the public domain, the quantity of content, information, and knowledge will only proliferate in coming decades. No longer is knowledge scarce or difficult to acquire. This is a gift. But it also presents a new problem. If the primary challenge before the information age was how to acquire knowledge, this new moment will challenge us to discern what knowledge to believe and what to ignore. With information coming at us with such speed as it is, learning how to learn wisely—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—will be one of the unique qualities of the church.

For another, cultivating teachability will pave a pathway through the power-hungry, politicized, tribal times of today. I recently watched a news segment about a young woman's

opening statement in her trial. As a young professional in politics, she had been caught up in a scheme that caused great damage to many. She now faced prison time. As the trial began, she pleaded guilty, publicly confessing that she had failed to listen to the wise people around her. Tears rolled down her face as she named her error before the court. She had been wrong. And she knew it.

I became emotional as I observed a rare cultural moment of humble repentance on national television. That evening, the pundits pounced and mocked the woman for not knowing what *they* had allegedly known all along. They shamed her simply to gain a few political points. Here is the lingering cultural impression one gets from stories like this: The reward for those vulnerable enough to admit their mistakes is to be tarred and feathered—especially if they're on the other side of the political aisle. Rather than celebrate humility, the guilty must be ridiculed for views and clicks. This culture has the graceless habit of demanding repentance while shaming those who risk practicing it.

Teachable people love holding to the truth more than winning an argument. The weaponization of humility I observed that evening has undeniably grotesque consequences for our shared life together—to say nothing of making teachability look like a liability. It has led to a nearly untenable environment where no one is permitted to learn without being publicly mocked. We'd much rather "own the libs" and "own the conservatives" and "own the Christians" and "own the atheists" than behold a beloved creature of God as they are transformed into something a little closer to what God has desired for them. To bolster our own ego, we shame those humble enough to be taught by life's mistakes—all the while hunkering down in increasingly fortified bunkers to guard against being shamed ourselves. Before long, we come to believe that everyone else has some learning to do—except for us.

Barriers to Teachability

At one point or another, we've all humbly submitted ourselves to being taught by someone only to find our own vulnerability weaponized against us. We were demeaned and made to feel inferior, stupid, and worthless for being wrong. Others of us were coerced and manipulated by someone who possessed more knowledge than we did. We were "put in our place." But good teachers don't teach through shame. When we are shaped by shame, we use the same tools on others. Every single semester, I see an aversion in my students to being teachable. For students embarrassed to admit that they came to a Christian university knowing little to nothing about the Bible, they arrive appearing ready to dismiss the whole class. When Christian students from Christian households, who are "supposed" to know Christian things like the Bible, do not know those things, a willingness to learn is perceived as an admission of failure. In their own minds, teachability itself is seen as a defeat.

This is why every single semester, I retell the screwdriver story. And it always hits home. Be it ignorance of screwdrivers or ignorance of the Bible, I often discern in my students a double shame for not knowing something *and* for not knowing something they're "supposed" to know. This twofold assault keeps too many of us from becoming the humble, quiet, and teachable disciples God longs for us to be. Hiding behind the shame of our unformed life, we would rather go on pretending than confess. And in so doing, we are kept from the joy of learning. I must take this into account as a teacher. I have to assume that before I can teach my students the Bible, I must convince them it's okay to be taught—and that I'm a safe person to teach them. They won't be dunked on for their ignorance.

No doubt, teachability exposes the unformed parts of our

lives. For the student, this virtue demands a willingness to submit to someone with more knowledge than they have. And for me—who couldn't identify a Phillips screwdriver—it demanded the humility to learn from a woman what I assumed a man was to know. Teachability is difficult to cultivate, and our lack of teachability reveals the depth of our sin, pride, hard-heartedness, folly, jealousy, and even (in my case) a hidden sexism that presumed that learning from a woman was some kind of problem.

Teachability requires humility before God. And our unteachability exposes our idols. This is why the most teachable people are difficult to identify. They rarely make the news or boast of their brilliance. They don't speak of their accomplishments or broadcast their intellectual prowess. There's no time for public praise. They're too busy quietly, humbly, and gently learning the way of Jesus with hearts hungry to learn. On the other hand, the unteachable can often be the loudest.

I suspect many people fear that being teachable—alongside the intellectual life—will become a slippery slope away from the truth of the gospel. History gives ample reason to fear this. Look at the education system. In 1643, a pamphlet was published that encouraged college students at a major university to a life of robust faith:

> Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed, to consider well, [that] the main end of his life and studies is, *to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life* (John 17:3) and therefore to lay *Christ* at the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.[6]

Which publicly funded university would publish such pious, religious material? Harvard University! Indeed, one of the leading

secular institutions of our time began as an institute to train young people for service in God's kingdom. This same story has played out repeatedly. E. Digby Baltzell once argued that of the two hundred universities operating during the Civil War of the 1860s, nearly two-thirds came from Christian pioneers with similar aims as Harvard University's.[7] Were it not for a Christian love of learning, higher education in America as we know it would not exist. In just a few generations, however, what began as spaces in which to explore learning under God's rule and reign have become institutions most opposed to it. In the biting words of the twentieth-century British novelist Dorothy Sayers, "Modern man has kicked down the ladder by which he rose and told his Christian history to go to hell."[8]

As many have experienced, the slippery slope can be real. How many have seen a child or friend lose their faith in college after one class of biology or because of a roommate's influence? Or a spouse abandon their faith because of a podcast—leaving the marriage destroyed. There's a danger in seeking knowledge simply for knowledge's sake. "Beware you be not swallowed up in books," John Wesley wisely wrote. "An ounce of love is worth a pound of knowledge."[9] In fact, the apostle Paul gives much thought to learning in his letters. At one point, Paul warns against the unchecked pursuit of knowledge as the goal: "Knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). In the last days, he writes, the world will be eerily full of those who are "always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). Indeed, learning and knowledge disconnected from the goal of following Christ can be profoundly destructive. But should we really let a fear of slippery slopes keep us from ever climbing the mountain of truth?

And indeed, nor should we give in to the cultural pressures

we face to look smart. Being informed is not our highest calling. Why is seeking to appear smart so important in our time? Historian Warren Susman has written about the heightened role that performance has played in Western cultures. He calls it a shift from a "culture of character" to a "culture of personality."[10] Who we *are* (in our identity) has become less important than *how* we project ourselves (in our performance) to the world. In line with this shift, individuals are increasingly tempted to replace the call to *be* good with merely *appearing* good. Sociologist Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn pointedly writes, "Performance replaced accomplishment as the path to success. Nebulous qualities such as likeability, uniqueness, and self-confidence edged out duty, right action, and moral courage."[11] Rather than being informed and thoughtful, we would rather *appear* informed and thoughtful.

I experience this temptation to appear well-informed myself. Underneath my discomfort with being taught by another person lies a twisted desire to appear to those in front of me as put together, intellectual, and smart. I don't want to be taught by another person. It demolishes my idol of looking self-taught and self-made. Which is why the information age has become so dangerous for people like me. In a world where I want to appear prodigious and informed as I preach, teach, and speak, I've got a world of digital knowledge from which I can surreptitiously draw. I want the power that comes with knowledge, but not the humility required to receive it. Reading, listening to podcasts, and searching the internet are the ways I can raid from others in quiet so I can project brilliance in public. I'm not always wise. But I have all the tools I need to at least *look* wise.

This temptation to lord one's knowledge over others is nothing new. Jesus teaches his disciples to step away from a similar temptation:

> "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42–45)

Jesus, here, flips the script on what had become normative in his own day. The disciples wanted seats of honor. They wanted to look important and powerful. Anyone who loves God is prone to embodying this kind of pride.[12] They can be tempted to want to be seen and known as right, honorable, and excellent. Like the disciples of Jesus' day, we have a proclivity to be ahead; to lead; to get attention, power, dominance; and to curry importance. And like the disciples, we must be corrected. The disciple is not called to "be right." In fact, this quality is entirely omitted from the fruit of the Spirit passage of Galatians 5. This is no mistake. Our task is not showing that we are leading the way; the task is following the Son of Man. The journey of Jesus is not a power grab or exercise in reputation management. The journey is the journey down—to humble Christlikeness.

Teachability in Scripture

Scripture repeatedly invites us to cultivate a posture of teachability to receive wisdom and understanding. We see this in Solomon, who is described as possessing a wisdom that was "greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East" (1 Kings 4:30). Solomon's wisdom and knowledge were so widely known

that "his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom" (vv. 31–34). While the Old Testament contains only a few of his proverbs, Solomon is said to have written thousands of poems about life—about *all* of life. Wisdom, at least the kind Solomon had, goes outside the lines of even spiritual truth. Wisdom is truth for *all* of life.

In addition, the proverbs repeatedly envision holy living as a humble submission to the teachings of the wise. Many proverbs record the words of a wise father to a maturing son: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 1:8). The "wise" person is even distinguished from the "fool" by their capacity to be taught. Unlike the fool, a wise person is correctable—always ready to learn more. "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge," the author reflects, "but whoever hates correction is stupid" (12:1). Even economic and social flourishing are tied to one's teachability: "Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is honored" (13:18 ESV). Wisdom, in these texts, is less something one has; it is who someone is. "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning" (9:9 ESV).

The crown of the wise is a teachable spirit. As Old Testament professor Daniel Estes writes, these twin virtues of wisdom and teachability are biblically indistinguishable:

> The teachable person learns from past tradition. Rather than demanding the right to learn solely from personal experience, an approach to life fraught with risk, he acquires wise counsel from those who have preceded him. Eschewing total independence of judgment, the wise person learns as well from the accumulated insights of others.[13]

Teachability would stand out as a distinctive of the early Jesus community. We see this in what has been called the Great Commission in the final chapter of Matthew's gospel. Jesus has been teaching his disciples for three years. And now they will go and teach the world. Jesus outlines their marching orders:

> "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19–20)

The ministry of teaching and the making of disciples—in the moral and missional vision of Jesus—are intimately intertwined with one another. To be taught is to be a disciple. And to be a disciple is to teach.[14] Most importantly, the ability to teach rightly first means being taught rightly. The capacity for these individuals to go into the world and teach the way of Jesus *assumes* that they have spent the necessary time being taught the way of Jesus.

This vision shaped the early church. Spirit-formed leaders, Paul later wrote, should be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 2:24). But the biblical writer James warns against becoming teachers too quickly (James 3:1–12). Paul further

commands newer Christians to wait before leading or teaching (1 Timothy 3:6). The early church desperately needed teachers, but the process by which they could do so demanded a lengthy process of submission, humility, and character formation. Before these leaders could teach, they had to show themselves to be teachable.

Writing to Timothy, Paul describes this kind of culture: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (1 Timothy 5:1–2). In Christ, everyone was to see others as their equals or as teachers. No one was to be looked down on. Not every Christian was to teach. But every Christian was to be teachable.

This led to a countercultural community unlike anything the world had seen. Look at the case of Apollos, a "learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). Scripture holds no hesitancy in portraying a man being taught by a married couple—Priscilla (the wife) and Aquila (the husband). Such an arrangement subverted nearly every established norm of social life in the Roman Empire, as would have Paul's command regarding women. "A woman," Paul writes, "should learn in quietness and full submission" (1 Timothy 2:11). For modern readers, this sounds offensive, macho, or downright sexist. But for Paul, this command was delivered in an ancient context where women weren't permitted to learn or afforded formal education. Paul wasn't limiting women; Paul was liberating women. In a culture that stifled the intellectual pursuits of females, Paul *commands* them to embrace a life of learning. No wonder Rome perceived these Christians to be so threatening. They let their women read. And they shamelessly hung their sacred story of a resurrected Lord on the lips of the women on that first Easter morning (John 20).

The learning would not yet be complete. Just as Jesus prepared to ascend to heaven, he told his disciples a soon-coming teacher would continue teaching them, just as Jesus had. This Holy Spirit "will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). Later, Jesus told them this Spirit "will guide you into all the truth" (16:13). The Greek indicative mood (the mood of reality or certainty) in these statements are instructive. The Spirit would lead these disciples into "all things" and "all the truth." Jesus, here, is describing the Spirit as our master teacher—a Spirit dwelling in all who follow Christ. This teacher does not teach merely "Christian" truths. There are no "Christian" truths. Nor are there "secular" truths. There is only truth. And all truth is God's truth.[15] As Augustine later reflected, "Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master."[16] This would be codified later in the church by saints such as Ambrose and Thomas Aquinas, who would say the phrase *omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu Sancto est*: "Every true thing, no matter who says it, is from the Holy Spirit."[17]

Teachability in Christian History

The spirit of teachability is evidenced throughout Christian history. In *Destroyer of the gods*, New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado explores how early Christian communities shared a commitment to the sacred written Scriptures.[18] After the time of the apostles, the need to protect, copy, and disseminate their precious writings became uniquely pressing. The apostles' stories needed a community to guard them and pass them along. With its early adoption of writing and reading as a preferred medium

for divine revelation, the infant church soon became (intentionally or not) a community of writers, readers, and learners.

Given that only about 10 to 15 percent of Roman society could read or write, the earliest Christians emerged as some of the most intellectually savvy people in the Roman world.[19] Paul's command to Timothy to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13) assumes that the church *should* be capable of reading out loud.[20] Becoming a Christian placed a person in the middle of one of the most radical learning communities the world has ever seen. No wonder the Roman ruler Festus declared to Paul, "Your great learning is driving you insane" (Acts 26:24).

This hunger for learning is evident in the writings of early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. When we read their surviving writings, we discover a community of pastors and scholars who opted to lead the Christian community with a simultaneous commitment to Scripture *and* the best learning from the surrounding Roman world. Quoting philosophers, historians, and detractors, these early Christian minds raised their heads high in the intellectual climate of their time. An entire community of thinkers known as the "apologists" set their minds to engaging that climate by defending the truth of Jesus. They possessed a humble knowledge. Many of these writers ended their theological careers publicly acknowledging the things that they had discovered that were wrong in their own thinking. For instance, Augustine's *The Retractations* reflects a spirit of humility and teachability as to what he had been wrong about.[21]

Soon, Celtic monasteries would emerge as places of learning. Known as *muintir*, these "colonies of heaven" served as interlocking communities of respite, prayer, justice, creativity,

and, most notably, education. As Celtic Christianity spread throughout the British Isles, so did its transformative educational system. This was, in the words of Ian Bradley's *The Celtic Way*, "a combination of commune, retreat house, mission station, hotel, hospital, school, university, arts centre and power-house for the local community—a source not only of spiritual energy but also of hospitality, learning and cultural enlightenment."[22] As the gospel of Jesus spread, so did a new and revolutionary form of Christian education where discipleship and intellectual formation were joined at the hip.

In the medieval church, Charlemagne (747–814 CE), the king of the Franks, was inspired by Augustine to see that a nation could be discipled through education. Considered by some to be the patron saint of scholarship, Charlemagne formed a school in which his own children could be educated. He had a library that may have outdone any of his time. In fact, the only surviving literature from his life is that which was written by monks as directed by his hand. Cathedrals and monasteries established schools in which the children of nearby nobles could be educated. Charlemagne was so convinced that the leaders of the church should be teachable that he is said to have sent investigators to find any priest or monk unwilling to learn and have them released from their clerical duties. As one biographer notes, "Education was . . . carefully tended. The partially illiterate [Charlemagne] believed that success in his political and religious reforms depended on learning: 'although doing right is better than knowledge, knowledge comes before doing.'"[23]

The spirit of learning further fueled the Protestant Reformation—at least in part. Before the time of Martin Luther, the writings of the New Testament were only broadly known in the West through Latin translations. But due to the intellectual

renewal brought about by Erasmus, Europe increasingly returned to the study of classic languages. With this came an increased desire to see the Bible translated into everyday tongues. Soon after Luther's encounter with the writings of Paul and the gospel, he set on a path to make the Scriptures available to all and to complete a full copy of the Bible in German. All of this, no doubt, was possible because of Luther's education and insight. As Gene Veith wrote, "Luther was in touch with this new scholarship and was a master of Greek, as well as of his own German language. He also depended upon his colleague Melanchthon, the notable Hebrew scholar and classical educator."[24] The Protestant Reformation, which brought fulfillment to the desire to read the Bible in everyday language, was at the same time a renewal of the way people of faith could and did learn.

Learning led to the Reformation. And learning went wherever the Reformation went. Luther understood that the future of the movement depended on an educated people who could read Scripture rightly. In line with this, he believed schools should be established throughout Germany that would teach the Bible—but not just the Bible. Luther saw a well-rounded education as a part of Christian discipleship. In 1524, he wrote a treatise titled "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools."[25] The document lit a fire of interest in public education. German cities, Luther believed, should be supported by compulsory schools where the young were formed in the ways of Christ as they learned standardized skills of math, science, and languages. His influence led to the formation of a Protestant university in Wittenberg that would become a model for others to come.[26] Luther's renewals retrieved the gospel message—and inalterably changed how people learned.

The mantle would be picked up by John Calvin, who believed

that part of the "yoke" of following Jesus Christ was learning. "Take my yoke upon you," Jesus commands, "and learn from me" (Matthew 11:29). Discipleship and learning, for Calvin, were synonymous. He spoke of the necessity for the Christian to cultivate what he called "a teachable spirit."[27] Without being teachable, we will learn nothing from Christ. In one sermon on Deuteronomy 10, Calvin points out that God commands Moses to chisel out two stone tablets on which to write down the commandments. Calvin then explains that Moses had to bring the tablets *up* the mountain. "Then I came back down the mountain and put the tablets in the ark I had made, as the LORD commanded me, and they are there now" (Deuteronomy 10:5). This little story inspired Calvin's theology of learning. To love God was to bring to God a heart and mind ready to be taught.[28] Human nature may be (in Calvin's words) "obstinate and opinionated," but the gospel frees us to learn and be taught by a God who writes on our hard hearts.[29]

Everywhere Calvinism (the movement inspired by Calvin's teachings) went, learning seemed to follow. These reformations led to the establishment of countless universities and houses of learning.[30] Cornelius Plantinga unpacks why this happened:

> Why such enthusiasm for Christian colleges among Calvinists? No doubt one reason is that John Calvin himself loved the life of learning. Calvin understood that God created human beings to hunt and gather truth, and that, as a matter of fact, the capacity for doing so amounts to one feature of the image of God in them (Col. 3:10). So Calvin fed on knowledge as gladly as a deer on sweet corn.[31]

Because Calvin fused the life of the mind with Christian faithfulness, education became part of the church's mission. As many

historians have pointed out, with the spread of Christianity came the spread of universities. Universities were Christian inventions.[32] And as Christianity spread, so did deep learning and intellectual rigor.

Raising Hands

All of this may surprise some. Not only does the Bible invite us to become people who grow in wisdom and knowledge, but the history of God's people reveals that Christians have often seen learning and discipleship as the same journey. There have been times when this was not the case. But often it is. Following Jesus is the journey to becoming teachable people who have the guiding hand of the Teacher known as the Holy Spirit inside of them.

Consider how John concludes his biography of Jesus. John writes an arresting statement: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). In essence, John is saying, "There's so much more to know!" Christian historian Mark Noll believes this is a model for understanding intellectual life under God's rule and reign:

> What is true for the life and work of Christ . . . is also true for the life of the mind. If the meaning of what Jesus did and is exceeds the capacity of all the books that could be written, so too the meaning of what Jesus did and is, with respect only to the intellectual life, exceeds the capacity of all the books that could ever be written. Christian believers who realize that it is impossible ever to fathom the depths of wisdom and

> knowledge hidden in Jesus Christ nonetheless know that the proper place to begin serious intellectual labor is the same place where we begin all other serious enterprises . . . the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.[33]

If this is true, then following Jesus should be the most enlivening, challenging, vivifying, and fulfilling lifelong continuing education anyone could dream of. There's *always* more to learn. Loving Jesus is the same as loving the truth. To seek the truth, one must seek Christ. Because in Christ, all truth is hidden. There, then, is no more demonstrable way to express our love for God than in a desire to want to know and understand more about him. Loving God and desiring knowledge of God are inseparable. "We cannot love God," writes Alister McGrath, "without wanting to understand more of him."[34]

I have a colleague named Dr. Melisa Ortiz Berry—a luminary expert on ancient and contemporary church history. Students love her. Melisa tells me of a time when she was a child and walked into a church service with her cousin. Having only ever been in a Catholic or Baptist church, she saw something she had never seen before—Christians raising their hands. Turning to her cousin, she asked, "Do they have questions?" As would any child, she saw the world through her experience—the classroom. What looked to her like people with questions was really a community loving God.

Melisa's story stuck with me. Isn't it interesting that the thing someone does to worship God in church is the same thing someone does in a classroom to ask a question? A fitting image, indeed. What if good questions are a sign of true worship?

The treehouse eventually got built. And I can safely say now that I know what a Phillips screwdriver looks like. As I humbled

myself to learn from my wife, I was being formed in myself, and I was allowing her to give me *her* gift. The experience formed both of us. Being teachable shapes us. But it also gives others the gift of sharing out of their own lives. "A teachable life," writes biblical scholar Donald Guthrie, "is a life lived in wholehearted response to God's kind provision *for the sake of others*."[35]

To be teachable, then, is to allow someone else to love you.