

Dear Co-Laborer,

For these next three issues of this letter I ask for you to indulge me in an endeavor to communicate a few of my phobias. Lord willing, I shall return to the subject of an eternal hope in September. We have no new prayer requests but covet your continuing prayer for the ones included with the last issue.

DRIFTING TOWARDS DUMBNESS

Part One

Access to technology precludes the need to develop thinking. The attitude among many of today's youth is, "Why take the time and effort to memorize when I have immediate access to the answer? You do not memorize the answer to 96 times 84, so why should I memorize nine times nine? I have machines that give me the immediate answer to both questions. I can easily 'Google' any question I want answered."

People do not wish to think deeply about subjects; they do not perceive they have the time to do it, and society creates the impression that it is not necessary. In talking with the headmaster of a private school, he said that the faculty has difficulty motivating the students to concentrate on a subject for the fifty minutes of class. Education has been replaced with entertainment. The "gadgets" available to them easily distract students, and evidently they cannot discipline their minds to focus on a subject for even fifty minutes.

The New York Times recently reported, "As more people do their reading on e-readers and smartphones, some publishers are specializing in works that are longer than a typical magazine article, but shorter than the usual novel."

As entertainment replaces reading, children develop virtual relationships via texting. Email is being replaced by texting, while writing letters is a thing of the past. Constant interaction via texting has replaced relationships, and the result is young people have lost the art of interpersonal communication and relationships. The lack of attention span also affects their ability to develop relationships with one another.

I hear people say, "I am a visual learner in the sense that I have to see images rather than words in order to learn. If I can see it happening, then I can focus and give it my attention." If we assume this to be the case, then what difference exists between learning and being entertained? Exacerbating this problem is the fact that people do not see reality clearly. This is why four people can observe an auto accident and each of the four give a different report on what happened.

If you read a page from a book, you can set the book aside, think about what you have read, and then read it again. Words have meanings, and the meanings communicate concepts. People who insist on substituting visual learning for reading have limited ability to reflect on what is learned. Add to this that such people do not perceive that they have the time (and often the ability) to watch the visual image over and over again; their confidence in being able to comprehend a visual image upon one viewing only multiplies their limitations.

This tension between the visual image and the written word is not a recent phenomenon; scholars wrestled with the relationship between the two at least as far back as the Protestant Reformation. It is true that people can learn about God by studying the world He created. "...for the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity."¹ However, observing creation cannot teach doctrine, such as the Incarnation, Justification, and Propitiation. Theology requires careful thought.

Today, however, the velocity of life aggravates this tension. Velocity tends to be destructive – for at least four reasons:

- 1) **It destroys your margin for error.** If you fall off your bike riding at three miles per hour, you have one kind of problem. If you fall off the bike going downhill at thirty miles per hour, you have an entirely different kind of problem.
- 2) **It creates a false sense of accomplishment.** Go, go, go, does not mean grow, grow, grow. Most of the time the opposite is true. Still, I have a sense of being more productive if I am climbing on an airplane than when sitting behind my desk.
- 3) **It destroys your perception of reality.** I was riding with a young friend in his pick-up to the airport as he was travelling 80 mph on the interstate highway with one arm on the back of the seat while he looked back and forth between me and the road. I thought, "This man has no idea what is happening. He has lost the sense of the danger we are in."
- 4) **It is addicting.** The faster people go in life, the more intoxicating speed becomes. People do not wish to sit and think. They want to be active, doing something.

My wife and I have a modest DVD library and one evening we were watching an episode of "CSI Miami." The editing and speed in which the scenes took place made the sequence nearly impossible to watch. I asked my daughter why they do this, and she said so that people will not get bored. People do not want to sit through long, thought-provoking dialogue. The

¹ Romans 1:20

day of families sitting around the dinner table talking for a protracted period of time is a thing of the past.

The problem is not new; in Phaedrus by Plato (born c. 428 BC, died c. 348 BC), Socrates saw this and warned of the dangers to be found in cultural complacency, of the difficulty parents have in motivating their children when culture is distracting and robbing the young of their passion for learning:

And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.²

As Socrates notes, people do not want to think deeply; they enjoy reminiscing on past experiences. They love reliving their time at Disneyworld, the cruise they took, or the wonderful time skiing. They do not like to reflect on their purpose for living and where they are going with their lives.

An awareness and development of the soul is why we are here. Yet we have created a culture that denigrates the soul in the pursuit of passion. Happiness is meeting my expectations; holiness is my meeting God's expectations. Since happiness is the goal of life, we are destined never to be holy. Information becomes knowledge when you apply it; knowledge becomes wisdom when it becomes part of your soul. "Where is the wisdom we lost in knowledge; where is the knowledge we lost in information," T.S. Eliot noted in his poem "The Rock".

In the world there are lesser and greater goods. The temporal is a good, but a lesser good. The eternal is the greater good. Christ is the greatest good. Christ motivates me to seek the greater good, and thus the greatest good. The profit motive in Scripture is not because God is obligated to reward us for doing what He wants, but rather because He knows He created us to be motivated by profit and, by His grace, gives us the promise of rewards in eternity. This is the only true way men learn to love Christ. None are noble enough to learn it any other way.

Christ converted my wretched soul at age 19. Prior to my conversion I failed to see any purpose for existence, and thus did not apply myself to my studies. A few years later, while in graduate school, I awoke one morning reflecting on the fact that no one can think without a vocabulary. This obvious truth had never before occurred to me, and when it did, I wept and

² Plato, Selections, "Phaedrus," Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1927, pp. 147-233

begged God to forgive me for my stupid neglect. I realized then that I would never fully recover from what I had done.

Some mistakes in life are irrevocable. You will take their consequences with you into eternity. So I ask myself, "How do I get my grandchildren to see this? How do we motivate them to take the time to think and grapple with the issues of life? How do we get them to pay the price so they have the tools necessary to think?" We have to make a conscious effort not to allow technology and velocity to crowd out the most important things in life. Most of what a person becomes is caught rather than taught. It is for this reason I am terrified over the future.

Thirty to forty years ago men were willing to spend protracted time studying Scripture. Coveys of men across the U.S. were willing to memorize a chapter of the Bible and spend twenty hours seeking to master the material, and then meet once a month for four hours with the other men to discuss what they had learned. Rarely do I find men willing to do this today. They do not see the need and they do not have the time. I cannot tell them that God requires this kind of discipline; the Bible does not command it. Nevertheless, their failure to do so tends to impoverish the soul.

In contrast to Scripture, culture is heading towards self-gratification and temporal good, a path that is now encouraged by the emergent church. People no longer go to church to learn about God; they go to experience God. Psalm 103:7 notes, "He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the children of Israel." Israel witnessed the deeds of God, while Moses was able to understand His ways. Most Christians want to see the deeds of God, while few wish to understand His ways.

Happiness is good, but holiness is our reason for living on earth. Therefore, happiness should be the byproduct of our pursuit of holiness. Can the people of God be motivated to pursue holiness instead of happiness? I believe they can. However, if a person does not see the need, if he does not want to take the time and effort to think carefully about the ways of God revealed in Scripture, I am dubious that others can help him.

In Revelation 2-3, after calling attention to the sins of the church, our Lord Jesus makes some promises to the "overcomer." I pray that our children, our grandchildren, and we will finish the race of life as overcomers.

Walt