

Beware of Parrots!

There is a very real place for rote learning. It is essential that children should be taught by rote to learn the multiplication tables (number bonds); they need to know, for instance, that $5 \times 9 = 45$, and know it without conscious thought. Likewise, they must learn the alphabet, and be able to recall it on auto-pilot.

Similarly, when we come to spiritual matters, rote learning of the order of the books of the Bible, for instance, is an invaluable asset. Knowing the basic facts of Scripture, dates in church history, and such like, is an excellent thing.

But in the spiritual realm, catechising – though it has undoubted advantages – has an inbuilt risk. I know we are told: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go’, and promised that ‘even when he is old he will not depart from it’ (Prov. 22:6).¹ I also accept that this training includes rote learning. And I acknowledge that catechising has a long and illustrious history. But in spiritual matters, the risk remains.

And when I speak of catechising, I am thinking of adults as well as children.

What risk am I talking about?

In spiritual matters, the risk is that rote learning, catechising or coaching can produce nothing but parrots; that is, children or adults who can repeat facts. Having learned facts, they can regurgitate them. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, except if and when such an ability is taken as a sign of regeneration; that is, when proficient parrots are regarded as true believers.

¹ Although this, quite properly, is taken in the positive sense, the same goes for the negative.

The fact is, truth in the mind, stored in the memory, and repeated in the mouth, while good, is not good enough. A parrot can be taught to repeat facts of Scripture, and repeat them flawlessly. But the most word-perfect parrot will never be regenerated. Hence my chosen title: ‘Beware of Parrots!’; beware of thinking that those who know the facts are regenerate; they may be nothing more than proficient at remembering and repeating facts. They may have learned the language, and that is all.²

We must never forget that regeneration is the one great essential.³ Christ could not have been more explicit:

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: ‘You must be born again’. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

Scripture puts the matter beyond a shadow of a doubt. While the regenerate do know facts, that is far from all that marks them as regenerate. The regenerate have been given a new heart by the Spirit of God, and this leads to far, far more than the knowledge of facts. Ezekiel prophesied of it:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezek. 36:25-27).

As did Jeremiah, quoting God directly:

² See my ‘Preparationism in New England’.

³ George Whitefield, when asked why he preached so often on ‘You must be born again’, replied: ‘Because you must be born again!’

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another: 'Know the LORD', because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jer. 31:33-34).

And this is quoted in Hebrews (Heb. 8:7-13; 10:1-18).

Thus it is clear. The mind learns and knows the facts, those facts are stored in the memory, but in the regenerate they also penetrate the heart leading them to love and obey, from the heart, the truth that has been learnt. As Paul told the Romans:

Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance (Rom. 6:17).

Truth has to enter the mind, be stored in the memory, but until it reaches the heart, it has not done its saving work. Mental assent must lead to heart commitment: 'God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed *from the heart* that form of doctrine to which you were delivered' (Rom. 6:17); that is, said Paul, God be thanked, the truth entered your mind, penetrated your heart and so produced heartfelt obedience. In saving faith, mind, heart and will are involved.⁴

Yes, the sinner has to believe the facts – the record – of the death and resurrection of Christ, but he also has to believe this in his heart; he has to trust Christ. As Paul told the Romans:

If you declare with your mouth: 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

Am I knocking the parental use of a catechism? No! Nevertheless, I think it right to issue this warning.

⁴ For far more on all this, see my *The Secret Stifler: Incipient Sandemanianism and Preaching the Gospel to Sinners*.

But, as I have hinted, I have a far larger pool to fish in at this time. A growing number of churches are setting up courses to attract and instruct unbelievers – whom they increasingly call ‘the unchurched’ – courses to teach them the elements of Christianity. Sometimes they have Bible studies specifically for unbelievers (‘the unchurched’), or so-called ‘seekers’.⁵ And this, coupled with other innovations in evangelistic efforts,⁶ is fraught with danger. In short, I am thinking of the way unbelievers are coached, trained, instructed in the gospel. Many contemporary preachers seem content to inform the mind; that seems to be their aim (if they go so far as to have an aim) – to present facts. This clearly carries the risk of producing parrots. As does the use of training courses for unbelievers, helping them to ‘explore’ the rudiments of Christianity. Coupled with sociological influences, cultural pressures, and the like, coaching methods carry this risk in large measure.

A particularly able parrot might be taught to repeat the Westminster Confession, say, but only a regenerate person knows the power of the gospel in a saving way. An unbeliever can complete an exploration course in the elements of Christianity, gain 100% in the final examination, and yet be unregenerate.

So: ‘Beware of Parrots!’

Let us beware for ourselves. Head knowledge is one thing – it is essential – but regeneration is the *great* essential: As Joseph Hart put it:

*Let us ask th’important question,
(Brethren, be not too secure),
What it is to be a Christian?
How we may our hearts assure!*

⁵ See my *The Seeking Sinner: Fact or Figment?*

⁶ See, for instance, my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly; Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder; Letting Loose A Gadfly; Edward Miall Speaks Today.*

*Vain is all our best devotion,
If on false foundations built:
True religion's⁷ more than notion;
Something must be known and felt.*

Just so! Something must be *known* **and** *felt*. Better, *someone* – Christ – must be known, and our relationship to him must be felt!

Let us beware for others – those who sit under our preaching, and, if we use them, those who attend our Bible studies or exploration courses for unbelievers.

I say again: ‘Beware of Parrots!’

⁷ For the sake of scanning, I let the objectionable word stand. I would prefer ‘True spirituality’s’.