

Faith Pulpit

Rote Memory

In educational circles for the last half century or so, the words “rote memory” have become almost offensive to many. If the object of education is to teach people to think and to feel deeply, it seems either wasteful or damaging to require them at any level to memorize facts and lists. According to this idea, teaching rules of grammar may block the student’s creativity. Making him learn the multiplication table is a waste of his time when he can play store in school or buy a calculator cheaply in the check-out line. Teaching him spelling is not only a waste of his time, but it also forces him to learn something arbitrary and impermanent. In short, this view reviles teaching by rote memory as though it were as outmoded as the cylinder phonograph and the washboard.

Countless students of mine are the products of this current notion that memorizing is unhealthful or somehow dangerous. In the service of Christ, they are now retrieving in adulthood what was snatched away during their childhood, and finding that memorization is harder for them now than it was then. Consider how easy it is for a child to learn a poem or remember baseball statistics, or note how difficult it is for someone past the age of twelve to learn a language well. To serve Christ and minister the Word would seem to require a well-stocked mind; and, Brethren, that means some rote learning.

The Bible

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psalm 119:11). It seems evident that if we are going to convey Scripture to others, we have to know some ourselves. What computer software or what library can prove as useful as the verses we have learned by heart and the passages we are intimately familiar with? We are the richer for every passage, every verse we have memorized—and in the Authorized Version, so that our hearers will not think that we are misquoting the Bible. But how do we learn verses except by rote memory? Memorization involves writing them out, concentrating on them, and repeating them until they are ours.

When it comes to rote memory, we also need to know the books of the Bible in order. Can anyone seriously argue that a thumb-index in his Bible will do just as well and save him the bother of learning them himself? Knowing the order of the books is arguably as useful as knowing the days of the week, the months of the year, and the colors of the palette.

Language

Since God gave His revelation in language, we may accept the idea that language is important to Him. “Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Galatians 3:16 shows the difference between a singular and a plural. While God gave the Old Testament in a beautiful language, He gave the final revelation in Greek, a precise Gentile language.

If we are to communicate the Word, it remains our duty to speak and to write with precision. That is difficult for the person who is ignorant of grammar, spelling, and word meaning. Yet the current “whole language” approach is designed to prevent the student from really learning these important components of language. The student taught by the “look and say” method is usually handicapped for life and dislikes reading. But can he not by reading and hearing simply pick up the principle of grammar? Hardly. Even if the members of his family speak with precision, he will have a systematic understanding of grammar only if he has learned it systematically.

Learning a language as an adult requires memory, indeed, rote memory. The common experience of missionaries is that their little children pick up the local language with precise intonation. That is how each of us learned our mother tongue; but that is not how we learn a language as an adult. We have all heard pastors and students affirm that next year they are going to pick up Greek; and we smiled. You memorize the lists of forms, or else you do not understand the sentences. You memorize the vocabulary words, and only later do you pick up more from reading your Greek New Testament. You memorize the principle of grammar, and most of that is rote memory. You memorize the principal parts of the verbs, or else Greek becomes a guessing game and a discouragement. If you skip the rules of accent, you sense the lack forever after. You do not just tolerate rote learning; you do it with something like zest, knowing that the systematic knowledge of the language opens a new understanding of the Word of God.

Even English requires rote memory to master it. Why learn to spell if your program has a spell-check? You should already have learned about that one. Why learn grammar rather than just imitate others? Because it is so easy to start off a sentence with “her and I.” Why learn the precise usages of words? Because even careful authors say words like “nucular” and “mischeevous,” and many authors confuse synonyms. A cohort is not an associate. You must have noted that the preacher who does not speak the language of the middle class will have difficulty planting a church among those who do.

In addition to language itself, poetry remains to be memorized, and who is to say that you are not richer for having learned by rote? What about memorizing hymns? Is not a Christian vastly richer for having learned even first verses? One year in vacation Bible school we had to learn “Oh Worship the King/All Glorious Above” and Romans 12. Can anyone say that a sand table or hand crafts would have done us as much good?

The Culture’s Basics

In practice there are all manner of things that we learn, or should learn, by rote. Our parents taught us the days of the week, the hours of the day, the months, the colors, and the names of relatives. Since then, we have come to know a wealth of telephone numbers, passwords, addresses, computer procedures, and street names. Few of us would protest that those things hurt our self-esteem or impeded our education. Can we name a profession that does not require the memorizing of great chunks of information, works, lists, procedures, sequences, and formulas? The doctor of medicine or dentistry may live by his laptop computer, but that does not relieve him of needing the wealth of data he must know. The same is true of the attorney, the pharmacist, the mechanic, the engineer, the chemist, and the architect.

For the Christian worker, there is much peripheral knowledge he needs to know—indeed by rote. Clearly there is more to history than dates, kings, and battles; but if he does not know a number of key dates and events, he will have a poor perspective of the past. How can anyone know the Bible without a grasp of Bible geography? And does that not require learning the locations of cities, mountains and rivers, and having a decent awareness of the layout of Jerusalem? How can he understand the news without a fair grasp of oceans, countries, cities, boundaries, and distances? Knowledge is power, and ignorance is expensive. One’s grasp of any discipline is measured by his knowledge of details. Let us not think in slogans, even though they have become a popular substitute for serious reflection. And let us not be afraid of rote memory as at least part of the means to a well-stocked mind.

Conclusion

Clearly there is more to an education than information and data. Proverbs has much to say about the fear of the Lord and about wisdom, and wisdom was once a prime goal of education. The fact that educators rarely speak of wisdom and virtue is not a hopeful sign, because these values seem to have gone the way that memorizing the multiplication table has gone. But for those who minister the Bible, we may well adjust our thinking and do some serious memorizing—writing things out, saying them over, and reviewing them afterward. If sports fans pride themselves on knowing team statistics, may we not in humility learn those things that will equip us, and stock our minds for service?

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A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.