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The Importance of Educated Preaching

By [Howard Merken](#) | December 30th, 2017 | Categories: [Christianity](#), [Culture](#), [Education](#), [Language](#), [Religion](#)

A belief that all that is needed for living or even preaching is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, has so invaded certain segments of modern American Christianity that an educated man might be looked at with suspicion...

J.P.



Moreland's *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* addresses an area in which Christians often have different views: just how much we should use our minds. Dr.



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Moreland takes the high road in thinking and in study, as the title suggests. But this view has been under attack over the last several decades, as we Americans are dumbing ourselves down. While the radical reformers might be blamed in part for this, it has gotten worse in the United States in the last century.

In colonial New England, the preacher was as educated as anyone in the community. Harvard was established September 8, 1636, to train preachers, and the curriculum included Greek, Hebrew, Bible, Chaldee, Syriac, rhetoric, and history. Latin and Greek were prerequisites to admission. Yale, originally named the Collegiate School, was founded in 1701. Its original curriculum was classical studies, and it adhered to Puritanism. Princeton, originally named the College of New Jersey, was founded in 1746 to train ministers.

The educational qualifications of a pastor today depend on the denomination. Some require a Master of Divinity, or an M.Div., a degree following four years of college and sometimes followed by a Doctor of Ministry, or a D.Min. At the other end of the continuum are churches that ordain teenagers. Somewhere in between are the denominations with the Bible institute or Bible school, a post-secondary school that offers diplomas but not always degrees.

Reading abilities in the United States have been going down for at least a century. We know our electronics better, but the basics less. The father of an eighth-grade girl in Oregon complained to her

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public school that she could not spell. The answer was that if he wanted her to be able to spell, he could teach her, for she would be using a spell-checker. This might seem a bit extreme, and of course, an analysis of at least a couple of hundred schools around the country would be required to see how prevalent this attitude is, but it does expose just how far away from the basics we have gotten in our educational goals.

Looking at the About the Author sections of theology books, even more recent theologians, such as those of a century ago, were trained in several languages. Today, a Ph.D. in classical studies at Boston University requires Greek and Latin, plus two modern languages such as French and German. The Bible was written in what to Westerners are foreign languages, and preachers could deal with them, even if they could not speak them. Even schools at one time emphasized classical Latin and classical Greek before college. Or as poet Robert W. Service wrote in *The Low-Down White*:

*Oh, I have guarded my secret well!
And who would dream as I speak
In a tribal tongue like a rogue
unhung,
'mid the ranch-house filth and reek,
I could roll to bed with a Latin
phrase
and rise with a verse of Greek?*



Thunbe
Turns
Left...
and
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The
Suffere
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"The
Hobbit'
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Works
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Mercy



Plato's
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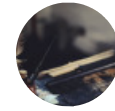
Veterar
Day

The Bible, of course, was written *for* everybody, but its books and letters were written *to* specific groups of people who knew the culture and current events of their day. Knowledge of history is necessary to sort out the different men named Herod in the Bible, and even the two men named Agrippa. Those in the geographical areas covered in the gospels were familiar with the exploits of the Maccabees, which explains why so many people in the New Testament were named Simon (or Simeon) or Judas (Judah). The Maccabean Revolt was about as far behind them as the American Revolution is behind us, so of course they were familiar with it, even as they celebrated Chanukah; but much of this goes over the heads of Protestant Christians who reject the canonicity of the Apocrypha and know little of ancient Jewish culture, practice, and theology.

The Th.D., or Doctor of Theology, has fallen out of favor, in many colleges being replaced by the more prestigious Ph.D., or Doctor of Philosophy. The Ph.D. is an academic degree which has become the most respected doctorate today in the United States, along with the M.D., or Doctor of Medicine. Many people going into the ministry or are already there earn the D.Min., a professional degree with typically less stringent language requirements than the Th.D. For the Th.D., Duke Divinity School, for example, requires reading competence in at least two modern languages besides English, and also ancient Hebrew and Greek for students focusing on Christian Scriptures. For the S.T.D., or Doctor of Sacred Theology, The Catholic University of America requires Latin, Biblical Greek, and one modern



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Holy
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and
"The
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for
Grace:
A
Classic
Playlist
for the
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Wayfar
at
Night:
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Books
That
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"Antigc
and

language as prerequisites, with the first fall semester allowed for their completion for those deficient in them.

We have a particularly strange problem in the United States today, the ignorance of, and outright hostility to, foreign languages. In Western Europe and in many other countries such as Israel, several languages can be encountered in the course of a day. Television programs might be in English with subtitles, depending on the country in which they are shown, although dubbing in voices in the local language is another approach. Our hostility is based on our prejudices and our antipathy toward immigrants whom we often resent, and with whom conversation in English is sometimes impossible. And academically, foreign-language requirements do not always exist in the four-year college program; it depends on the college and the major. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison has different language requirements for the bachelor degree depending on whether the degree is a B.A. or a B.S., and on the major. Besides, we can go from Alaska to Florida and still speak the same language, while in Europe, going from country to country and thus language to language can be like going from state to state here. This makes Americans much less proficient at foreign languages, which in turn makes us a bit more hostile to both immigrants and to the idea of ourselves learning languages.

The hardest subjects in Bible school or seminary are original languages, because, to state the obvious,

the Necessity of Political Prudence



The

conservative is concerned, first of all, with the regeneration of the spirit and character—with the perennial problem of the inner order of the soul, the restoration of the ethical understanding, and the religious sanction upon which any life worth living is founded. This is conservatism at its highest. – Russell Kirk

they are different languages. There is no way to fake their knowledge. They are objective, as their rules come from other cultures, so we cannot simply discuss them as we can discuss how we should apply a certain biblical passage. This helps explain how a translation of the Bible can be sanctified to where somebody talking about the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek could be considered nearly heretical. Remove the necessity of learning to read limited amounts of three foreign languages using different alphabets than our own, and life gets much easier. This also explains why certain denominations often have an undereducated clergy, for the hurdles of learning Hebrew and Greek have been removed to where less academically-inclined people can become preachers.

Photojournalism went from black-and-white to color last century. So did television. A black-and-white photo can show us much without trick photography, but we miss the colors which are really there. The puns, the acrostics, and the meanings of the names found in the Old Testament are lost in translation. Reading about how the twelve sons of Israel were named leaves us a little confused if we do not consider what the names actually mean, and the Hebrew narrative flows so well here, better than in a translation.

But there is more than just language at stake. A few Bible verses which point to the lack of formal rabbinical training of Jesus and some of His apostles are used as proof-texts that formal

education just does not matter. A belief that all that is needed for living or even preaching is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, has so invaded certain segments of modern American Christianity that an educated man might be looked at with suspicion. Liberalism, or higher criticism, really a form of unbelief, is one thing; but education is another. A look at how many times the New Testament writers, especially but not limited to the apostle Paul, quoted sources outside the Old Testament, such as deuterocanonical writings or Greek writings, shows us just how well-read these men were. In fact, few Christians seem to know that these New Testament clauses or sentences are even extra-biblical quotations, as the marginal notes in our New Testament translations typically refer us to the Old Testament but nothing else. And how many preachers bring this out in sermons?

Even preachers today educated in secular matters have learned to think at a level that those without higher education cannot do as easily. And an educated clergy seems to have a better understanding of how to deal with problems in the congregation, and with differences in doctrine and in personality. As the vast majority of preachers are men, some tend to use male aggression, dare I call it testosterone, to enforce their will. Sometimes with large or at least intimidating men at their sides, they can be tempted to run the church like a bully runs the neighborhood. Clergy more educated rely on wisdom more than on intimidation or on teachings about authority.

The world we live in is only a century old. The modes of transportation that most of us take for granted such as the automobile and civil aviation are relatively new in history. Even newer are the cell phone, the internet, the computer revolution, and the digital revolution. Few of us in the United States live on farms now, so we often have trouble understanding the parables of Jesus which revolve around agriculture. What is so good about sheep and bad about goats? It took the comment of an American Indian on a DVD filmed in Israel to fill in the blank for a city slicker like me.

Neither evangelism nor church planting necessarily require much formal education. But once people start coming to church, will they stay? That depends on how they are treated and on how they are fed. That is where the differences between an educated and an uneducated clergy become apparent. Jesus' apostles would have had the three R's, Bible, and job training simply growing up as Jewish males. They knew much more about original languages, first-century cultures in their land, and history before they were even called to the ministry than most of us do today. Of course, we can really take the time to study these things, much of which is found outside the Bible. There is nothing blissful about ignorance, but with study, we can see the Bible in living color. And when we know the Bible better, we can interpret it better, we can preach it better, we can teach it better, and we can answer questions better.

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A Bible school graduate, Dr. Howard Merken also holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in chemistry from the University of

Alaska Fairbanks, and a Ph.D. in chemistry from Texas Tech University. He and his wife Casandra published the third edition of *Beyond Classical: The Next Step in Christian Education*. A former science professor and a veteran of both classical and non-classical Christian school teaching, Dr. Merken is dedicated to teaching people how to use their minds for the glory of God.

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