Reforming a Scriptural Imagination:

The Challenges of Forming Christian Intellectuals Today

A Response to Mark Noll

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Dr. Noll is an exquisite historian and a fine storyteller. I always gain much from the fruit of his pen (or keyboard). I am neither a historian, nor the son of a historian, but as a theologian I like to dabble in storytelling. The story of my intellectual life has Calvin College at its center. Calvin freed me from the fear that my faith would be destroyed by knowledge and placed me on a path of discernment always seeking to know and understand. And for that and so much more, I will always sing the praises of my alma mater, “forever faithful to maroon and gold.” If I were to summarize the “Calvin affect” on me it would be that here I was introduced to Christian intellectual life, and to borrow just a little from Immanuel Kant, I also was introduced to the demand to have courage to think as a Christian.

Today the need for courage to think as a Christian is more urgent than ever, but grasping the contours of that thinking requires the full energy of Christian institutions like Calvin. If I may tease out one crucial theme that flows through Mark’s lecture it is that courageous Christian thinking builds from a scriptural imagination. Yet as I begun to learn at Calvin, a scriptural imagination must be reformed as much as it must be formed. We all know that a scriptural imagination flows through the glories and horrors of the American social and political landscape and it could be that the central work of a Christian college is to help people discern the difference between a scriptural imagination that is healthy and one that is diseased. A healthy scriptural imagination builds from that beautiful insight we find in Calvin’s Institutes that the scriptures are the spectacles through which we see God’s world. A scriptural imagination grows out of the deep understand that the bible pulls us into a strange new world in which we are captured by a God who knows us and is transforming us into the image of God’s Son.

That strange new world is our world. It is an upside down world being turned right side up by Israel’s God. We are caught up in God’s overturning of this world, and in God drawing us toward the divine life. A healthy scriptural imagination attunes us to this work of the Holy Spirit. Yet to cultivate such an imagination requires Christian educators who seek to cultivate Christian readers. Christian institutions should cultivate Christian readers, people who read the world as Christians. The goal is not to cultivate a Christian reading of the world, but Christian readers in the world. Why not a Christian reading of the world? Because anytime Christians have claimed to have the Christian reading of the world, we stop seeing the world, especially the world God has never ceased to love. A healthy scriptural imagination creates people who read knowing they are creatures who at every moment stand in need of their creator. These are readers who believe in the Holy Spirit and the resurrected Lord and because they so believe they move through this world in faith, love, and hope.
Faith, love, and hope mark the lives of Christian readers in the world and they can be cultivated by Christian educators committing themselves to three crucial pedagogical tasks.

First, we must help students learn to read only scripture as scripture. So many people read all manner of texts as though they were scripture. The question for Christians is not whether we have a high or low view of scripture, but whether we have a disciplined view of scripture. It is precisely an undisciplined view of scripture that distort lives. The US constitution is not scripture, but so many people treat it as such. The policies and protocols of the financial markets as well as the business plans of corporations are not scripture, but so many have made them unquestioned guides for public life. Only the word of God stands forever and a sound Christian reader spies out the counterfeits, those textual authorities that wish to claim an unexamined permanence in our lives. Christian readers are not antinomians or anarchists, but they do understand the grave dangers of the legalist habit of mind.

That habit of mind lives inside the constant refrain, “It says it here...and we must obey.” It is a habit of mind that quickly esteems official pronouncements and documents of those in power even when they create or increase suffering and destruction. It is also a habit of mind that does not discern the exploitation of biblical language. When laws or amendments are written to sound like scripture without the life giving effect of scripture, then Christian readers must call them out for what they are, signatures of the anti-Christ, not the Christ. To learn to read only scripture as scripture is to learn that all laws, policies, and procedures of every institution must be judged in the redemptive light of Jesus and when necessary challenged and/or changed. Learning to read only scripture as scripture means cultivating that critical eye of faith that will not misplace faith. It is faith always turned toward love. This brings me to the second task for Christian educators.

Second, we must help students learn that they are readers together with other readers. We are readers who follow others who were readers, who have struggled to understand what they read. We are readers alongside other readers, together all of us struggling to understand what we read. We are readers who are being followed by other readers who are watching us in our struggles to understand what we read. Whether we are reading the holy book or the book of nature, we never read alone and the struggles of any reader are the struggles of every reader. It is this shared sense of being readers together that so often goes missing in the obsessions over biblical interpretation in Christian communities. If a shared sense is cultivated, then we might realize that what is most important is not finding consensus on interpretation of texts but sharing in each other’s struggles over reading. The struggles are what join us. Those struggles join all of us to women readers around the world who suffer in societies and cultures that have woven the patriarchic impulses of the bible into patriarchal systems of oppression. We are also joined to readers who have been baptized in a hermeneutics of despair believing that the word of God seems to always to agree with the words of the powerful.

This shared sense brings us to that same dynamic that shaped the ministry of our savior as he stood among the readers of his day and reminded them of what they only barely knew, that they were creatures with creaturely eyes straining to understand a God and a world more mysterious than they could imagine. It is this straining toward knowledge and understanding that marks the journey of life as the good life that God has ordained. Christian readers lock arms with others readers and give witness to a shared project of grasping what it means to be creatures together in the world. This is a grand work of love and it is the calling of Christian educators to help students to imagine themselves as loving readers. We should invite students into the joy of seeking
knowledge together, and not simply gaining knowledge as a commodity. We should equip students to diffuse the wars of biblical and cultural interpretation by pointing them toward a dream of communities of readers who read together in hope. This brings me to my third task for Christian educators.

3. We must help students see things that be not as though they were. Here the words of scripture nicely capture this aspect of a healthy scriptural imagination. Christian readers are disciplined by hope. One of the great lessons that all Christians must constantly deepen in their lives is that hope is never passive. It is always active. The Holy Spirit prods and pushes us to think creatively toward new possibilities. We often succumb to that great temptation to read the world through a hermeneutics of decline, morbidly anticipating what things will fall apart or imagining our social world as nothing more than a series of social and cultural declensions. That way of reading the world is reading turned toward death, not life. But, the life and craft of a Christian educator must be marked by belief that God brings life out of death. Christian educators schooled in the ways of the life giving Spirit are attuned to and anticipate the surprising ways God can bring life out of death and they invite students to see a world that God has pulled and is pulling from death's power. We must draw students to the question - how might my life, my work, my passion, my vocation witness God's victory over death. This pivotal question can only be posed and answered through cultivating readers who can do serious analyses of the forces and agents of death that seek to destroy the creation and inviting those same readers to yield the soil of their lives to the seeds of hope planted by the Holy Spirit. Imagine forming students who can look out onto their worlds and where others see the end, they see beginnings. Imagine students who can look into the nothingness and moved by the Spirit create what had not been imagined but only seen by the eyes of faith.

The world is in great need of such people with a healthy scriptural imagination and I believe Calvin is poised to do an even greater work of cultivating really good readers.