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Why Not Say "A"?

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WHY NOT SAY "A"?

You have had a busy year; so have I. My wife came with me this time, because often the schedule is such as to bring the comment: "Night before last, you came home yesterday; last night you came home today; Dear, if tonight you come home tomorrow, I'm going home to my mother."

Strange title - Why Not Say "A"? Four-year-old Susie's parents were trying to teach Susie the alphabet. But Susie wouldn't say "A".

Susie saw the point, but are we quite as clear about life and the world today?

How confused we are is reflected by the lady who came briskly into the bookstore and asked, "Have you got that book 'A Piece of My Mind' by Norman Vincent Sheen?" Or by the high school boy who spoke on a forum dealing with manners, habits and trends where the specific subject was the use of tobacco. He said, "After the report on cigarettes and lung cancer was released, I asked a junior classmate, as he lighted up a cigarette, 'What? Are you still smoking? Aren't you afraid for your health?'--to which the junior replied, 'Look, buddy, anybody can quit smoking; it takes a real man to face cancer.'" Or by the even more significant statement taken from the April 8, 1966, issue of TIME, the issue with the IS GOD DEAD question in big red letters on the cover, in which the religion section begins as follows: "Is God dead? It is a question that tantalizes both believers, who perhaps secretly fear that He is, and atheists, who possibly suspect that the answer is no."

Sometimes it seems that this confusion tends to drive us even more madly toward self-destruction. Someone prophesied many years ago that Germany would destroy itself by overmilitarization, Britain would destroy itself by overexpansion, and America would destroy itself by overspending. It almost seems that we Americans have come into an era of compulsive spending in material things at the expense of making ourselves expendable in the interests of spiritual and eternal values. One reason for our confusion is a sort of natural resistance to careful study and clear thinking.

I passed a busy city street corner recently and heard (well, I didn't really hear because of the garbled verbiage) something like this: "What d'yaread, what d'yaread, what d'yaread? Get the Chicago Tribune."--or whatever paper it was that he was hawking. Perhaps the newsboy was suggesting something more significant than the few cents which represent the value of the paper he was selling. I ask myself, and you, the questions: What do you read? How do you read? How well do you read? How fast do you read? How much do you read? How comprehensively do you read? I read the following quotation to our own students recently: "Many students who ride around in big automobiles are apt to become little-read riding hoods." This is much too true, and so, to a great extent, education stops at Commencement. How far this is from the meaning of living and from the original intent of formal education is suggested by the very name of this finishing convocation--it is Commencement. I am sometimes shocked at how poorly even our teachers read, and I was reminded of this recently when I listened to a speech by a high school teacher in which he included

the following statement: "Mark Twain said a school is a log with a pupil at one end and Mark Hopkins at the other." Granted, the reference made a significant point in his talk, but the fact is that the comment was not made by Mark Twain. Actually, the high school teacher notwithstanding, it is from an address by James Abram Garfield to Williams College Alumni in December of 1871 that we read the following: "I am not willing that this discussion should close without mention of the value of a true teacher. Give me a log hut, with only a simple bench, Mark Hopkins on one end and I on the other, and you may have all the buildings, apparatus and libraries without him." Then in Arthur Guiterman's "Education" at a later date, we find "For education is making men; so it is now, so was it when Mark Hopkins sat on one end of a log and James Garfield sat on the other."

This may not be the most important thing in the world and it may not be worth the time and research involved in this particular instance. The point is, however, let us not be shallow, superficial and mediocre in our approach to, and use of, those things that are not our own, especially if we are passing them out to others for their consumption. Let us be sure of our ground, thorough in our research, accurate in our communication, because even our best is inadequate enough for the world in our time which lacks and seeks for certainty, waddles through tasks with shoddy performance, and misunderstands and gets more and more confused about values and meaning in life.

In our time of exploding knowledge, fast pace, short time and vast space, there is so much to see, hear and read that we find ourselves overwhelmed and don't

read much at all or don't read well when we attempt it. We don't have the time, and we will never have it unless we find it or make it with conscious effort. I remember when my professors told me I would never have the time to read more books per year than I was able to find time to read (besides textbooks) while I was a college student. How right they were! I am now looking forward to retirement for time to read the books I couldn't find time for in college.

It would be better to read and learn some things well than to be overwhelmed and defeated by the volume of available materials. Recently I heard the new president of a university in his inauguration address comment as follows: "In 1870 I.S.U. opened with twenty-one students and a library consisting of a Bible and a dictionary. I would almost settle for that today", he said, "if more of our students would use them both."

How Clearly Do You Think?

Clear thinking is hard work, especially when you go out into the world where the dust of commerce and confusion never settles. It is important, though not easy, to see clearly what are the issues and to determine courses of action relative to them. A minister counseled a group of young people in the common stilted phraseology, "You must play the game of life honestly and courageously." One of the boys shot back, "But we don't know where the goalposts are." Our communication is not always clear between the generations, and I fear that the values and the traditions and what we consider to be the axioms and postulates of our Christian heritage and history are not

getting through to them with any more meaning or clarity. And we are not teaching if they are not learning!

You have come through the first phase of a liberal education, a liberating education. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and sometimes the meaningful and profitable use of knowledge is fearfully difficult. Careful, logical and critical thinking is just plain hard work. If you are lazy, you should have told the dean long ago so that he could have ejected you and saved you time and trouble. Good education is hard work--and good use of it is more hard work. I used to advise the faculty members--when I was dean and therefore had a right to advise--that it is better to plant apple seeds than to pass out applesauce. One of the weaknesses of American colleges is that students have too much done for them. I heard of a dean who, in the registration line, said, "My boy, what particular branch o'learnin' would you like to have studied for you by our competent perfessors?" Perhaps instead we should say with one wise voice, "If heads that think must ache, perforce, then I choose headaches."

Yes, clear thinking is hard work, but something that helps a lot is careful observation. One bit of advice I had when I was a college student was "Go anywhere, with nothing but a notebook, and study out anything alone". And then a professor told me the story of Agassiz and the fish. Professor Agassiz was a matter-teacher of an earlier day. His student wanted to learn biology, and one day the

lesson was on the fish. Agassiz said nothing. A fish was lying on the laboratory table. After a long time of mutual silence, while the student waited to be taught, he began to look at the fish. He noted the shape, the size, the changing colors, the fins, the scales--and he began to make notes of what he saw. Still Agassiz said nothing. The student touched the fish. He turned it over and looked at it from another point of view. He continued to make notes. The hour ended and Agassiz hadn't said a word--except to make an assignment for the next lesson--which was to continue observation and investigation and note-making. By now you have the point. Agassiz was a great teacher, and the student did a lot of research on the fish.

Note an even simpler lesson in observation, put negatively, and pardon the personal reference. As a student at Taylor back in 19-blank, I enrolled in General Psychology. One day, just after the students had entered the classroom in the old Administration Building the teacher said, "Take a sheet of paper and sketch roughly the front facade of this building, showing the number and relative locations of the windows in the four stories of the building. Every day for many days you have been coming into this building, and you should find this an easy assignment." But, you know, almost nobody did. And when we went outside, everybody turned, most for the first time, to observe the general outlines of that side of the building.

And, then, in the pursuit of truth, don't settle for a little, and don't quit now at Commencement. At best, there is so much more than you can ever get.

Select and organize and integrate. I have never forgotten the warning, expressed to a class by another master-teacher, "If a man's knowledge is not organized meaningfully, the more he has, the greater will be his confusion."

How Firmly Do You Believe?

I think I have learned that faith, "if it does not lead to action, is in itself a dead thing." This is the real problem of our time. It is not God that's dead; it is that faith has become, for so many people, a dead thing. This is especially true of the theologians, the professed believers. And for those whose faith is dead, there is of course no living God. It is my conviction that faith is where the action is, and that nothing is more active than faith, hope and love.

To believe is not just to give assent to propositional statements and traditional creeds. To believe in Christ is to have convictions that issue in a way of life. Faith is freedom and faith is service.

St. Peter says, "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." Service is not the same as servitude. Service is a way of life and a standard of living. Many people are slaves to the things they think are essential to happiness--the fashions and fads of the moment, the dollars and cents of the budget, the opinions and comments of the neighbors, the stocks and bonds of the market--and so on and on through a miserable life of bondage. These people have not been liberated to live as free men, as servants of God. They do not really believe.

Your Christian education should have liberated not only the mind but also the spirit. It should have released the hands to be helpful, the feet to walk in paths of need, and the heart to embrace the needy.

True faith is a disciplined liberty. St. Paul said, "So then, my brothers, we are not sons of slavery under the law, but sons of freedom under grace. Plant your feet firmly therefore within the freedom that Christ has won for us, and do not let yourselves be caught again in the shackles of slavery." It is this standing fast in liberty, this planting of the feet firmly in freedom that is the essence of self-discipline. Liberation comes at a price, and it is costly to maintain. Freedom is not an uncharted course; liberty is not something that just happens. There are fixed points in the pattern of the free life, and these must be consciously found and carefully safeguarded.

Plant your feet firmly on the ground of reality, and your spirit can soar above the clouds. The greatest freedom is found in the regulated life, and the greatest spiritual liberty comes with the greatest care about courtesy, cooperation, and consideration of the rights, needs and feelings of others. When you grasp the meaning of this disciplined liberty and you become this liberated person, you can live, generally speaking, on the top side of circumstances. You may not like the lowering clouds, the flashes of lightning, and the crashes of thunder--from down here. But have you ever thrilled to the beauty of a thunderstorm from the top side? As you sail smoothly along above the clouds, you do not hear the thunder, and the lightning is beautiful

bonfires set in billowing grayish-white which moves quietly under your feet. Or, to change the figure slightly, like the airborne meteorologists who fly into the calm center of the hurricane and ride the storm for the purpose of sending out radio warnings to people who are endangered by it, you can ride the calm centers of the storms of life and even help others from within the midst of them.

But we must go on from the reading and the thinking and the believing to the action. One man confessed, "I spend so much time justifying what I am doing that I have little time to do what I am justifying."

How Positively Do You Act?

Every generation hears the challenge that it is living in an era of crisis, in a period of transition. And this is true! It is in the very nature of things that this is so. The only time in history when this was not so is what we now call the dark ages. In this case the very absence of crisis became the crisis--and the tragedy! The world lives in crisis and dies in its absence.

But crisis must, in every generation, become the first stage in a cycle that can come full-circle to redemption. We are often detracted and diverted from the real issues by focusing on certain individuals or events as if they were the crucial factors. They are not--they are symptoms. An earlier generation focused on Hitler and blamed him for all that was wrong. Then we focused on World War II and said that it was what made us different, spoiled our point of view and corrupted our values.

This generation looks accusingly at Moscow or Peking or blames all of the world's ills on Communism. But these men, events, places and movements are only the symptoms, not the disease.

What is the real sickness of our society, and what can we do about it? First we must see the condition of the world, the crisis, as the result of our sin and the consequent judgment of God. If sin, at the national and international levels as well as in the individual, is not dealt with by God's means and through His provisions, our judgment might still come to us through wicked nations in spite of our supposedly superior military defenses. God's instruments of judgment are wielded by the hands of men--but so are His instruments of mercy and grace.

The Christian world order is cooperation and not selfish competition. No amount of competitive armament will ever secure the peace of the world. A test ban treaty is nothing more than a suspicious truce because it is keyed to an inadequate and erroneous program for world peace. Why does the government of a Christian nation not know this? Because national political leadership is not trained in this awareness. Federal service and international services are among the most neglected areas in Christian higher education.

Christian principles must be applied to our practice in all of our relationships with all people. For example, equality of opportunity for everyone is more than a sociological theory; it is a Christian responsibility. We cannot get by with hypocrisy. I traveled in Africa and preached the Christian answer to apartheid

and the color bar, and the people said to me, "What about Little Rock and Ole Miss and Selma?" Granted, we are not all equal, but equality of opportunity is a Christian birthright and may not be denied any man by any other men. If we are to be Christian we must be willing to hitch our religion to the social and political issues of our time and make it work in real life.

Christians must be willing to stand up and be counted. It is so easy to be chameleons, to take on the colorings of our environment so that we do not stand out by contrast. This is why the church has become more of an echo of the world than an evangel to the world. What an opportunity we have to apply Christian principles through the offices and services of the church!

And your action must be positive rather than negative. Anyone can find faults and criticize people for them. It does not take much intelligence or education to be negative, and if one wishes to be only destructively critical, any old subject for criticism will do. Remember the epitaph that was written over the grave of an army mule: Here lies Mabel, the mule. In her lifetime she kicked three colonels, twelve lieutenants, twenty sergeants, 112 privates, and one bomb.

Positive, thoughtful and dedicated living in Christ's way is the answer for our time. To be sure, this is different from the thinking of the secular world, but it appeals to, and challenges, the best blood and brains. It is now yours to apply what you have learned and to continue the education that was started here--in more and better reading, clearer and nobler thinking, firm and intelligent believing, and positive, dedicated action. God will bless and guide you in this application of your training.