

The human learning they consider so necessary
extract of Proposition X § xviii xix, xx, xxi, xxii

§ xviii. Although we do not consider human learning necessary, still we are far from excluding true learning, the learning which comes from the inward teachings and instructions of the Spirit. That is how the soul learns the secret ways of the Lord, becomes acquainted with the many inward labors and exercises of the mind, and learns by living experience how to overcome evil and its temptations by following the Lord and walking in his light, and waiting daily for wisdom and knowledge which come directly from his revelation. The soul stores up these heavenly and divine lessons in the good treasure of the heart, as honest Mary stored up the sayings she heard and the things she observed.¹ Out of this treasure the soul, like a good scribe, brings forth things new and old² according to what that same Spirit moves and gives liberty. And when the glory of God requires it, the soul, which is the temple of God, learns to do all things for God's glory.³ This is the good learning which we think necessary for a true minister. By means of this learning a person can instruct, teach, and admonish at the appropriate time, and can testify for God based on definite experience, just as David, Solomon, and the holy

¹ Luke 2:19

² Matthew 13:52

³ The rendition of this sentence follows the Latin: *ut gloria Dei postulat, in cujus gloriam anima, quæ templum Dei est, omnia discit agere*. The original English says "and as need is for the Lord's glory, whose the soul is, and for whom, and with an eye to whose glory, she which is the temple of God, learneth to do all things."

prophets did in ancient times, and the blessed apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, who “testified about what they had seen, heard, felt, and handled concerning the Word of Life” (I John 1:1), administering the gift as they had received it, as good stewards of the multifaceted* grace of God. They did not preach uncertain rumors received by hearsay from other people which they had taken in merely in the intellect, while in themselves they were strangers to the thing in their own experience. They did not teach people how to believe while they themselves were unbelievers, nor how to overcome sin while they themselves were slaves to it like all people who are without grace, nor to believe and hope for an eternal reward which they themselves had not yet arrived at.⁴

§ xix. Let us examine this learning which they consider so necessary for a minister; in the first place, the knowledge of *languages*, at least of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. The reason for this is so that they can read the Scripture, which they say* is their only rule, in the original languages, and so be more able to comment on it and interpret it. The primitive Protestants prized this knowledge even more because of the dark barbarism that overclouded* the world in the centuries immediately preceding the reformation; before that time the knowledge of the languages was almost completely lost and extinct, until it was restored by Erasmus and some others in that era. And this barbarism was even more abominable because the whole worship and prayers of the people were in Latin, and among all those priests and monks scarcely one in a thousand understood the breviary or the mass which he read and repeated every

⁴ Latin: *ad credendum & expectandum sempiternam mercedem, hortantur, dum ipsi hanc non habeant fidem, nec spem*, “exhorting to belief and hope in an eternal reward, while they themselves did not have faith or hope.”

day. The Scripture was a sealed book, even the literal knowledge of it, not only to the people but to most of the clergy. I shall not criticize the zeal of the first reformers against this Babylonish darkness, nor their pious endeavors to translate the holy Scriptures. I believe that they did it honestly according to their knowledge, in order to respond to the reasonable desires of people who wanted to read them, and for other good reasons such as maintaining communication and understanding among different nations by means of these common languages. We think it is necessary and commendable for there to be public schools to teach these languages to young people who are inclined to study them. And although that papal ignorance justly deserved to be abhorred and hated, nevertheless we can see that true reformation does not consist of that knowledge. Since that time the Papists, emulating the Protestants, have applied themselves more to that learning and it now flourishes more than ever before in their universities and cloisters, especially among the Jesuits; but they are still as far as ever from true reformation, and more hardened in their pernicious doctrines.

All this is not a necessary qualification for a minister, and still less is it more necessary than the grace of God and his Spirit, because the Spirit and Grace of God can make up for the absence of this knowledge in the most ignorant and uncultured people. However this knowledge cannot make up for the absence of the Spirit in the most learned and eloquent people. Everything that man can interpret from the Scriptures by his own industry, learning, and knowledge of languages is nothing without the Spirit; he cannot be certain of it and may indeed misunderstand it. But when he hears the Scriptures read, a poor man who doesn't know a single letter can say by the same Spirit that this is true, and by the same Spirit he can understand and interpret it, if needed. Indeed, an uneducated man can discover that his

condition is the same as the condition and experience of the saints of long ago, and he knows and possesses the truths conveyed in the reading because they are sealed and witnessed in his own heart by that same Spirit.

We have plentiful experience of this in the many illiterate men whom God has raised to be ministers in the Church nowadays. Some have even corrected some of the translators' errors by the Spirit, as I said in the third proposition concerning the Scriptures. I myself know a poor shoemaker who cannot read a word who was taken before the city magistrate because he had been preaching to a few people who came to hear him, and was confronted in public with a false citation of Scripture from a professor of theology. I know the shoemaker, and he is still living. Although the professor, who is considered to be a learned man, insisted that what he said was from the Scripture, this man said that the professor was lying, and that the Spirit of God never said any such thing.⁵ He said that, not through any letter-knowledge, but rather from the most certain evidence of the Spirit in himself. When the Bible was brought, it was found that the shoemaker was right.

§ xx. The second part of their learning is logic and philosophy, an art which is so little needed by a true minister that, if someone who has studied it becomes a true minister it is safest for him to lose it and forget it. It is the root and ground of all contention and debate, and it makes things much more obscure instead of making them clearer. Under the pretense of guiding a person's reason with a clear order and rules so that he may find the Truth, it leads instead into a labyrinth of controversy which is far more

⁵ Latin: *affirmare non dubitavit, hallucinari professorem, & Spiritum Dei, quod alter affirmabat, nunquam dixisse*, "he did not hesitate to say that the professor was deluded, and that the Spirit of God never said what the other man claimed."

likely to make someone a sceptic than a Christian, far less a minister of Christ. Indeed it often prevents a man from clearly understanding things that his own reason would show him. Through its numerous rules and various kinds of inventions it often prompts a man who has little natural reason to speak foolishly and at length without purpose. A man who is not very wise may nevertheless be a perfect logician; if you want to make fool out of a man who isn't wise, just teach him logic and philosophy. Where before he might have been fit for something, afterwards he will be good for nothing but speaking nonsense; these notions will swim in his head and make him extremely busy about nothing. The use that wise and solid men make of all this is to see how useless it is. One such man says, "it is an art of contention and darkness, which makes all other kinds of knowledge more obscure and harder to understand." . . . And therefore the apostle Paul, who understood well what was good for Christian ministers and what was harmful, exhorted the Colossians: "Beware lest any man cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit" (Colossians 2:8). And to his beloved disciple Timothy he writes: "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge"(I Timothy 6:20).

§ xxi. The third and main part of their learning is scholastic* theology, a monster⁶ made of a mixture of some Scriptural notions of truth with some heathenish terms and axioms;* it is, so to speak, the heathen philosophy Christianized, or rather the literal external knowledge of

⁶ The concept of "monster" was originally something strange or unnatural, especially a creature which mixed human parts with those of animals; a monstrous birth meant a malformed infant.

Christ heathenized.⁷ It is man in his first, fallen, natural state, with his devilish wisdom, pleasing himself with some notions of truth and decorating them with his own snakelike and worldly wisdom, because he thinks that the simplicity of the Truth is too low and humble for him. He despises that simplicity wherever he finds it, in order to exalt himself, puffed up with this monstrous birth. It is the devil darkening, obscuring, and veiling the knowledge of God with his sensual and carnal wisdom, so that he may better deceive the hearts of the simple and make the Truth despicable and hard to know and understand, multiplying a thousand hard and useless questions and endless controversies and debates. Anyone who perfectly understands all these complications is not a bit less a servant of sin than he was before, but rather he is ten times more because he is exalted and proud of iniquity. He is further from receiving, understanding, or learning the truth in its naked simplicity because he is full, learned, rich and wise in his own conceit. Those who are skilled in this wear out their days and spend their precious time about the infinite and innumerable questions they have invented and falsified concerning the truth. A certain learned man called it "A twofold discipline, like the centaurs, partly proceeding from divine sayings, partly from philosophical reasons." . . . I believe that the simplicity, plainness and brevity of the Scriptures themselves should be a sufficient refutation to this kind of knowledge. The apostles were honest, plain, illiterate men, and may be understood better by that kind of people now than by using all that mass of scholastic stuff, which neither Peter, nor Paul, nor John ever thought of.

⁷ Scholastic theology began in the universities of Europe during the middle ages. It was an attempt to harmonize Christian theology with ancient Greek philosophy, especially that of Aristotle. Its most famous figure is Thomas Aquinas.

§ xxii. This invention of Satan, with which he began the apostasy, has had dangerous consequences. He used it at first to pollute* the simplicity of Truth by continuing the heathenish learning which caused such uncertainty even among those who are called the Fathers, and so many debates that there are few of them who, because of this mixture, not only frequently contradict one another, but also contradict themselves. When the apostasy became predominant* the devil buried the Truth (so to speak) with this veil of darkness, and completely shut people out from the true knowledge. He caused those who were considered learned to busy themselves with idle and useless questions, while neglecting the weighty truths of God, which fell into disuse. Although the Protestants have swept away the worst of these abuses, the evil root still remains. The idea that this kind of knowledge is necessary for a minister is still maintained and is even increasing. Man's fallen, earthly wisdom is upheld, while the pure learning of the Spirit of Truth is despised and neglected and made ineffectual.

And so man works with the Scriptures although he is out of the Life and Spirit in which those who wrote the Scriptures dwelled, the only Spirit by which the Scriptures can be rightly understood and used. A man who is going to be a minister must learn this trade of trafficking in the Scriptures and become what the apostle refused to be, a peddler of the word of God (II Corinthians 2:17).⁸ And so he may learn the trick of taking a verse of Scripture and adding his own barren notions and uncertain conjectures to it, and what he has stolen out of books (and for that reason he must own a good many books) so that each Sabbath day (as they call it) or even more often he can make a sermon an hour long, and this is called the preaching of the word. But

⁸ See also II Peter 2:3 RB

he neglects the Gift, Grace and Spirit of God to teach and instruct and to preach a word at the right time.

In this way human arts and abilities, the knowledge and wisdom which is from below, are set up and established in the temple of God, far above the little seed. This is Antichrist working in the mystery. The devil may be as good and able a minister as the best of them, for he has better skill in languages, and more logic, philosophy and scholastic theology than any of them, and knows the notions about Truth better than them all, and can talk more eloquently than all those sermonizers.* But what's the use of all this? Isn't it just death, like a painted tomb and a dead carcass without the Power, Life, and Spirit of Christianity, which is the marrow and substance of a Christian ministry? The person who has this essence and can speak from it, although he is only a poor shepherd or fisherman, although he is ignorant of all that learning and all those questions and notions — still, speaking from the Spirit, his ministry will be more effective in converting a sinner to God than all of those people who are learned in a carnal way.

Source: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition X § xix, xx, xxi, xxii (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 260-267; and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 196-202.