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Theological ignorance an embarrassment that should be remedied

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Almost 20 years ago, in response to what I saw as widespread biblical and theological ignorance among many people in the pews of Christian congregations, I began teaching a series of classes I called "Theology Even the Clergy Can Understand."

It was a layperson's examination of the basics of Reformed tradition (read Presbyterian) theology. I tried to cover such tiny subjects as God, Jesus, the Trinity, the Bible and the church.

I've been thinking about all of that recently because of some educational work I've been asked to consider helping with in my own congregation. In the process, I've reaffirmed my belief that we need to be able to articulate our faith in ways that reflect some effort to understand its complexities.

I'm not suggesting that people in the pews need to know how to compare and contrast the many theories of atonement or be able to discuss in detail the differences among amillennialism, premillennialism or postmillennialism.

But I do think it's important to have read a few theologians or, at minimum, to have heard of them. I once served on a pastor nominating committee on which I was the only one to have even heard of Paul Tillich. It would be like Catholics never having heard of Karl Rahner -- just heard the name, not even be able to describe anything about his theology.

The low level of theological education of church members -- and from my ecumenical experience, I think I can safely include Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox -- is embarrassing.

What subject, after all, is more important than God? And yet we find in our congregations many people whose understanding of God seems stuck at an elementary-school level and whose knowledge of how the Bible came to be and what it means is close to zero.

Talk to them about derivative financial instruments or nanotechnology or which celebrity is dating whom, and they turn out to be experts. But ask them if they know there are two creation stories in Genesis or whether the names attached to all the New Testament books were actually written by those people and they go blank.

Yes, there are exceptions. I know some faithful Christians, Jews, Muslims and others who are more than ready to unpack their Scriptures, to discuss recent trends in theological studies and describe why such knowledge is important for a rich life of faith.

And perhaps there's the problem. Somehow, many people in the pews of Christian congregations seem unconvinced that biblical and theological literacy is vital to a life spent seeking to be a committed disciple of Jesus Christ.

But if we can't articulate a coherent vision of who Jesus was and is, if we can't say something understandable about a God whom the church describes as triune in nature, if we can't talk intelligently about the human condition and God's desire to draw us into God's future, we will live a life of faith stuck in the shallow end of the pool.

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By the time I finished high school, I was fed up with the church. It was full of hypocrites and I wanted no part of it. But I never lost my interest in the eternal questions. Even as a newspaper reporter covering race relations and poverty, I read theology in my spare time and could hardly get enough of theological ideas.

Eventually, I understood that I was one of the hypocrites and that I needed to be in a community that sought to heal such people. So I returned to church.

And even though I have almost no formal theological training, I find it distressing that so many people seem willing to live unexplored lives of faith. If I decide to do what I'm being asked to do in my congregation, I hope to change some of that. And I'd welcome your ideas for how to make theology and the Bible enticing subjects.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for the *Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@gmail.com.]

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