

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

THURSDAY, JUNE 15, 2006

Critical Receptivity, or, How to avoid becoming a theological jerk



Recently a student of mine asked me if my theological studies have spoiled my capacity to enjoy a worship service. "Do you find yourself picking apart the lyrics or the sermon?" He

sensed his own critical awareness rising and wisely wanted to avoid becoming a theological jerk - you know, the guy who sits in the back with arms folded judging the shallowness of church. I shared with him a bit of my own journey on this issue, and yet the question has stuck with me long enough to deserve a fuller response. So here goes.

Note: These reflections can be seen as a follow-up to last week's hunt for [theological parapraxes](#). No matter how attuned we are to the church's slip-ups, we must diligently fight against arrogance. This is my own attempt to mitigate the danger of pride in my intellectual life.

Let me narrate the three stages of development I have experienced myself and witnessed in others on this matter.

Stage One: Critical Spirit. At some point, many of us have been turned on to critical thinking. It is common to happen in college, but I have seen it kick in before, after or without formal education. Critical thinking is that wonderful tool whereby we do not accept what we hear at face value but ask tough questions and think for ourselves. This is a wonderful tool, but it can be used for evil. The place where it becomes particularly dangerous is in times set aside for edification: preaching, worship, bible studies, etc. It's times like these that seem to be "spoiled" by critical thinking, as we put up a wall of questions that block the movement of the spirit within. Yet critical thinking is not a bad thing, and so we rightfully defend ourselves by saying that we are "loving God with our mind" or "testing the spirits." This defense is correct from a certain point of

About Me



Name:
JohnLDrury
Location:
Doylestown,
Pennsylvania, US

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view, and such walls might be necessary for a time to hone our critical skills. But it is dangerous to stay here because we may become cold and isolated.

Stage Two: The On/Off Switch. Early on I discovered that I could not go on with such a critical spirit. I had to open up to edification from others. One option would be to simply reject my critical training. But my critical skills were given to me by godly teachers whom I trusted. So I had to find a way to be both critical and open to edification. So I created an on/off switch: I could turn off my critical tools for moments of edification. I would pray at the beginning of a worship service that God would quiet my mind and open my heart. I would "set aside all my learning" for the moment and seek the transforming power of God. Many of us in college and seminary adopt this kind of language and thinking. This worked for a while, but there were still problems. First, in a desire to prove my openness, I uncritically accepted all kinds of things that I would have questioned even in my pre-critical days. Second, I encountered the problem of a double standard: for which times of edification do I turn the criticism off? On what basis do I make such a decision? Third, I was not yet treating my critical skills as a good gift from God to be used in his service. During the on/off stage, critical thinking has not yet become a spiritual discipline.

Stage Three: Critical Receptivity. This is the stage I am trying to grow into now. My attitude or posture towards a time of edification is to listen critically *in order to* receive the spirit of the message/song/moment. I do not check my brain at the door, but diligently ask tough questions and examine ideas. But I do not stop there. I use these critical tools to adjust and modify inadequate ideas, hopefully refining them in my mind so that I can receive the benefit of the most edifying message. I use the critical skills charitably, searching for the most subtle way of restating the ideas put forth. I find ways to affirm what is right, gently set aside what is wrong, and develop everything in between. The result is that I have become an active and engaged listener. I am not sitting in the back with my arms crossed. But I am also not just removing the filter and letting everything in. Actually, I am in a sense even more receptive to edification than I used to be, because I am not just accepting someone else's ideas. Rather, I am processing their ideas through my critical tools with the result that their ideas become *my* ideas. Therefore, I am truly being changed. This is at least an ideal toward which I aim and a practice which I slowly learning.

Any thoughts?

Have you had similar experiences?

How have you dealt with the threat of intellectual arrogance?

Can we ever be truly receptive and simultaneously critical, or is this wishful thinking?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 12:01 PM

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5 Comments:

At [9:06 AM, June 15, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I think I am an interesting mixture of condescension and low self-estimation. I disdain what I call pop-Christianity largely because I am disdaining myself twenty years ago. I see the whole Dobson Christianity that elects people like Bush as a heap of ignorance and emotional non-think.

But it's not like I think I'm the smartest thing since Einstein. In fact, I am constantly beating myself up for not being able to "play with the big dogs." And part of my disdain for Christian book store Christianity is that as far down in the pack of thinkers as I am, the melting pot of shallow ideas seems so far beneath where I think I am.

But I ultimately see this as a matter of individual ideas rather than people. It is not a question of intelligence really so much as faulty paradigms. And I retain my own stupidity more than I'd like to admit.

So other than doing therapy on your blog, I think criticism needs to be aimed at change to be valid. Stewing over the dinner table doesn't accomplish much of any value other than programming your children to be bitter complainers...

At [10:15 AM, June 15, 2006](#), [Erik](#) said...

Does "turning it off" count if it's not in a service, but in a planning meeting for a service? Man, I've had to turn off my critical switch in order to see past something I don't like, that may edify someone else, and edify myself for that matter if I'd let it.

When you spoke of the critical spirit, I was reminded of back when Lennox and Bud Bence swapped back and forth at College Church in the interim time before Steve Deneff came. Bud spoke of preparing our hearts for worship, before coming to gathering. I must say I have let this go, and felt it was an integral step...I am going to try this again.

Ideally the third stage is the best place to best...where you don't turn off your brain, but also don't let a critical spirit rob you of a chance for the Sprit to move in you.

At [10:04 PM, June 15, 2006](#), [Dan](#) said...

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Good phrase, critical receptivity.

I see lots of people in stage one (oh right there, me being in stage one!). Stage one is hard to stay away from. We Christians love to scandalize (uh, I mean "reform") the body of Christ. What else could be blog about?

Stage two...may have been in this one for half a second but I like my own ideas too much.

Stage three...giving people the benefit of the doubt. This goes back to something you wrote a few weeks back, realizing that your own ideas change over time, (a la Dr. Schenck's experience...though it appears he doesn't think he will change again). Humility, kindness, and love will be present here to get this one down. I do not think this is wishful thinking. If God is real and active in the church, and I believe that he is, he can show us how to properly and gracefully engage in critical receptivity. Not easy, but definitely possible.

I just don't want to see people go the way of some of the emergents and leave the church behind. The "misguided," "fundamentalist" evangelicals deserve grace and truth too. Let's not make the same mistake they made by isolating them. This is stage one silliness.

Okay, off the soapbox.

At [1:31 PM, June 18, 2006](#), [Nate](#) said...

John,

I would respond about my thoughts - but I can't hang with you and Ken Schenck. All I can say is that I have always loved the person you are and am excited the way God is going to use you as a professor or maybe someday a president.

Appreicate you,

Nate

At [9:44 PM, June 24, 2006](#), [brookssayer](#) said...

Very nice post. Critical Receptivity is a very good explanation of where i'd like to try and land, i've kinda just left the critical switch toward "off" in my brain for a while. THanks for the look back on your stages of development, who knows maybe there's a stage four that nobody's told us about yet. :)

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