

Critical Thinking in Spiritual Development

Introducing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills are foundational to spiritual formation, development and maturity both personally and corporately within the Bible school or local church setting. The multi-faceted blessings outweigh the minimal threats or setbacks.

To accurately appraise whether one is a critical thinker, and the potential of blessing in spiritual formation, one must first understand what is meant by the expression. A critical thinker is an open-minded, analytical, deep, truth-seeking, reflective, careful, well-informed, thorough, logical, systematic, and inquisitive kind of thinker. Carroll, (2007) states, "Critical thinking is clear, accurate, knowledgeable, reflective, and fair in deciding what to believe or do" (24). As a critical thinker and an instructor I endeavor to (a) challenge assumptions, (b) think deeply about issues, (c) pursue truth, (d) examine fairly the position of others, (e) think at higher levels, (f) make mature decisions, (g) point out that there are various sides to most every issue, (h) determine strengths and weaknesses of viewpoints, (i) improve problem-solving skills, (j) create a strong path to sound reasoning; (k) appreciate the perspective of others without necessarily agreeing with them, (l) openly discuss opinions of others, (m) admit errors and change beliefs when necessary, (n) get to the heart of the matter, (o) create an environment to safely ask questions, (p) go beyond what is stated to build upon an idea, (q) clarify ideas, (r) present ideas and concepts in a concise, clear manner; (s) evaluate sources of information, claims, and arguments; (t) defend beliefs and assumptions through careful study, and (u) gather sufficient, complete, relevant, and accurate evidence.

Personalizing Critical Thinking

I recall, as a new convert, that in a discussion with my pastor, and a group of others he challenged my thinking of his views on the possible post-tribulation rapture of the church. My pastor immediately blurted, "You are a new convert and you are challenging what I believe?" He missed a crucial point in spiritual development. At some point the believer must learn to progress past being a naïve observer,

implementing cognitive maturity, and become truth-seeking on his own. Scripture affirms this as indicated in the table that follows:

TABLE ONE
SCRIPTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SKILLS IN CRITICAL THINKING

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| Analyzing | "...Correctly analyzing and accurately dividing (rightly handling and skillfully teaching) the Word of Truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, <i>AMP</i>) |
| Thinking | "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps" (Proverbs 14:15). |
| Examining | "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5). |
| Testing | "Test everything. Hold on to the good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God..." (1 John 4:1). |
| Proving | "...vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). |
| Reasoning | "Come now, let us reason together..." (Isaiah 1:18). |

Analyzing, testing, examining, reasoning, refuting, and proving are all skills of a reflective thinker and part of the critical thinking process. Each is pivotal to spiritual liberty and knowledge. "Critical thinking is a path to freedom from half-truths and deception. You have the right to question what you see, hear, and read" (Cuesta College Academic Support 2003). It is a journey worth taking. Thinking and learning are inseparably linked. Knowledge is a result of asking questions, making observations, looking at evidence, and reaching conclusions. "I think of critical thinking as a filter through which we examine truth claims. We ask questions of people and writings to find out if they are reliable" (Probe Ministries). Through the years, I have endeavored to develop such a filter.

I unfortunately learned quickly that it is somewhat dangerous to discuss the Bible with many other Christians. Such questions usually result in arguments and dealing with the red-faced retorts of others. One learns to conform and keep quiet. The key is to surround one's self with people where ideas can safely be discussed, who enjoy dynamic, healthy conversations rather than shouting matches. One significant thing I learned, through the years, is to challenge one's own assumptions, not merely those of others. This entails throwing ideas into one's mental crockpot or jotting them down, researching, analyzing, and reaching appropriate logical, systematic conclusions. In this way one learns, this author included, to incorporate critical thinking into reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Critical thinking is similar to lot of experiences with cross-cultural communications. One should ask, "What has been said or written?" "What has not been said or written?" "What is actually meant by what has been said or written?" "What is the attitude, spirit, or worldview behind what has been said or written?" These are skills that have been developed throughout twenty-seven years of missionary

involvement in West Africa. Additionally, an analytical, logical mind has spurred on my critical, reflective thinking.

One should see his role in Bible school education as a guide not knowledge expert. This is a skill I have tried to utilize in the classroom. "Teachers must no longer be viewed as the exclusive providers of knowledge and information, but as experienced guides in the development of student's skills and attitudes required for self-directed inquiring throughout their lives" (Rasi 1987).

Ellen G. White said, "The work of true education is to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts" (Rasi 1987). Schultz (2008) stated, "The basis of the Bible is to educate its readers, to give them thinking ability, to teach them how to listen and learn and prove if what they are taught is correct."

Critical thinking can be a blessing to Bible school students and graduates because it puts them on the same level, or in the same playing field, as counterparts in secular education and disciplines. When lacking or restricting critical thinking, one creates in students the false idea that there is an arena where they are the only players and that there is only one way to play the game.

A friend related it to being like a sport where the team gets together to practice and to play against each other, but when permitted to face outside competition, because of lack of preparation, they will be in for a painful and embarrassing surprise. Critical thinking challenges things that are accepted and may be inconsistent with Scripture. It refuses to accept things at face value. Students need to know how to learn rather than merely regurgitating information that has been given to them. Analysis reveals whether there is enough force of Scripture for one to hold to such things.

Healthy skepticism is one of the chief components of critical thinking. Thomas is often derided for his disbelief. He was merely reacting to what "the other disciples told him" (John 20:25). He responded, "Unless I see...I will not believe it" (John 20:25). He basically adopted an "I'll believe it when I see it" attitude. Obtaining the proverbial "getting it for ourselves" is necessary in the Christian walk. The goal of the translations of God's Word was to place the Bible in the hands of the people, in their language, so that they could make informed decisions for themselves. It is always a sad day when, "My people are ruined because they don't know what's right or true" (Hosea 4:6, *The Message*).

Critical thinking could threaten a Bible school when an atmosphere prevails whereby critical thinking becomes the norm of the day. Everything is relentlessly under the microscope of being dissected, divided, and dismembered. The work of the Spirit becomes sliced, scrutinized, and subjected to constant critical analysis and never-ceasing debate. It is then that the integrity and purpose of Bible school is lost. On one hand one should "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), and "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). He should possess the same noble character as the Bereans, "for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). On the other hand, there needs to be balance; acknowledging that the

“Spirit...bears witness...” (Romans 8:16; 1 John 5:6). It is healthy to evaluate the truth of what is seen and heard. Bible school students have the distinct advantage of being able to lean on the Spirit to “guide...into all truth” (John 16:13).

In spiritual formation and in the life of nearly every Christian there comes a time of struggle and doubt when one may wonder what is to be done with the knowledge acquired. Questions formulate, “Is this really it? Is this truth?” It is at such times that the wise and discerning Bible school instructor should be careful and not deliberately confront the student with material which will cause further questions concerning his faith or weaken it. This could easily happen when critical thinking is taken to the extreme. Our work is spiritual formation and not spiritual destruction. The wise teacher discerns his student’s spiritual development and carefully chooses when to present controversial material which causes questions. When properly timed and presented such material serves not to weaken one’s spiritual development but to solidify it.

Critical thinking, by its very nature, causes one to raise questions. In turn, this can cause others to feel threatened. An insecure, unsure instructor may be threatened with questions about information being taught. Such questions may cause them to feel that the student asking the question does not believe. Creating a learning environment that not only permits but encourages sincere questions allows everyone to find deeper truth instead of being branded as “doubters.” False doctrine is prevalent because people do not ask questions concerning information presented to them. Questions asked in the right spirit, desiring to know and understand truth, can lead to deeper understanding of God’s Word.

It is often in this stage of development where crucial questions concerning core beliefs and long-held values are asked. In Bible College, critical thinking questions are encouraged, but the safety net of godly instructors and positive peer groups are present. (Baughman 2009)

It is a wise teacher that knows when a student is ready. As a general rule critical thinking is best brought into the classroom for Bible school students that have completed introductory level courses that outline and lay the foundation. Students then can critically learn how to evaluate the foundation, remove the scaffolding and build solidly. The Christian life is a continual growth process. As any parent of young children hopefully understands the endless questions of their small children is part of the natural growth process. Asking “how” and “why” is all part of growing up.

But solid food is for full-grown men, for those whose senses and mental faculties are trained by practice to discriminate and distinguish between what is morally good and noble and what is evil and contrary either to divine or human law. (Hebrews 5:14, *AMP*)

Christian educators offer critical thinking and problem-solving skills “So that the man of God may be complete and proficient, well fitted and thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, *AMP*).

David Martz (2004) stated:

The challenge before Christian educators is to help learners grow in Christ and become responsible Christian disciples. This means the ability to think, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and make decisions based on sound exegetical and theological principles becomes essential. Christian educators have the responsibility to help students learn how to learn for themselves. (32)

Every Bible reader is an interpreter; a critical thinker. It is a way of life, or should be. They compare various interpretations of scriptural passages, and explain why one interpretation is superior to others. Some may feel threatened that critical thinking has the potential of destroying faith. Questions may arise like, "Is there any such thing as truth?" "Can I be sure of anything?" Both of these questions "are indeed the very seeds of faith and critical to student development. The leap of faith required by Christianity is actually critical thinking at its best" (Dutton, Hart and Patten 1995, 12).

Critical thinking, in Christian education, should avoid the extreme of allowing critical thinking to promote a secular agenda that attacks biblical authority. Neither should we, or our students, become so engrossed in the ideology of being independent and autonomous thinkers that we fail to have a teachable attitude, or reject spiritual authority (Ephesians 4:11-12), the Holy Spirit's guidance (John 17:17), or the role of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:15-18). Every disciple longs for wisdom, understanding, knowledge (Exodus 31:3; Exodus 35:31; Proverbs 2:6; Isaiah 11:2; Daniel 1:4; Daniel 1:17), and the ability to discern what is right or wrong (1 Kings 3:9; Ezekiel 44:23; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Hebrews 5:14). Solomon was one of the greatest thinkers of all times. He believed a reverence for the Lord was the first step to obtaining wisdom: the ability to think critically (Proverbs 9:10; Psalms 119:130; Psalms 119:99). Well informed decisions, through critical thinking, will enable our students to take a bold stand for truth. Coupled with this students are also taught principles of biblical interpretation and provided the tools to dig into God's Word for themselves.

Charles McKenzie (2003) said:

A confused world waits to hear what Christians have to say.... I turn...to the Christian scholar and say, give yourself to your crucified, risen Lord. Out-live, out-die, and out-think unbelief, and a lost, frightened and bewildered world will listen. (70)

In order to "out-think" the world the Christian should "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Critical thinking skills are capable helpers. Do not use any exclamation marks to show expression.

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