

## “Last Meditation”

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When President Brown and I first talked about my upcoming retirement he floated the idea of taking my turn at the relatively new tradition at Western of the “last lecture.” I responded by saying in my case it would be a first AND last lecture; I simply have not been a lecturer over the years, but I have given a meditation from time to time. So maybe this will be the best of both worlds for all of us since I will probably say much of what I would have put into a lecture, but in much less time.

We’ll begin with a brief glimpse of the world when I first came to Western Theological Seminary in 1985. The world of 1985 was a primitive one with no iPads, iPods, no iPhones, no tablets, no laptops. The Personal Computer was just beginning to enter the market; what we now know as the Internet was in its infancy as a test project of the US Defense Department. There was no Facebook, no Twitter. When I wanted to communicate with my faculty colleagues I would write out longhand or maybe type a memo and then walk down the hall to put it in their mailbox. In 1985 we had one computer in the library, a big box with a little screen and glowing green letters; this computer was connected directly to a large mainframe computer at a national library database service in Columbus, Ohio.

But already in 1985 the world was on the inexorable path to what has been called the “Information Age”; we now live surrounded by all kinds of electronic devices which miraculously can all speak with each other; through them the world is literally at our fingertips 24/7. Today instead of walking to the library and rummaging through the beautiful card catalog we had back then, you can sit here in Mulder Chapel and use your smartphone to search the library catalog, quite amazing. And these statistics are even more amazing. A study from the University of California, San Diego, shows that the average US citizen on an average day consumes 100,500 words—messages on social networks, email, websites, TV, reading books. The average US citizen spends an average of 12 hours a day consuming information in some form. That’s what happens in a day, here’s what happens in one second – in one second throughout the world there are 168 million emails sent/ 694,000 Google searches / 695,000 Facebook status updates / 98,000 tweets / 1,500 new blog entries ... all in one second.

So how did this happen? How did we get to this world from the quiet, simple world of 1985 so quickly? Our “information age” came about through the brilliant insight toward the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that electronic communication could occur through the creation of a code based on 0s and 1s, the binary code. A new branch of communication quickly developed which studied the structure, the transmission, and reception of data in the binary code—Information Science. With the discovery of the binary code everything—words, music, pictures—is translatable into discrete bits of “information”, the 0s and 1s. And because at the base level it’s all the same code, different electronic devices can be configured to send and receive and display this information. Little chunks of 0s and 1s fly all around us—tablets and smartphones and TVs and laptops and the cloud—surrounding and engulfing us with information.

Let’s step back for a moment and ask a question that is not often asked. We live in what’s called the “Information Age,” immersed in a sea of information—is “information” a biblical concept? My answer is no, it’s not.

According to the concordance to the NRSV the word “information” occurs in the Bible 6 times (4 of them in the Apocrypha). It’s simply not there. In addition to its absence, to me a serious problem in the theoretical understanding of “information” is that information is value neutral. The content, the meaning of what is communicated in binary code is not really important; information theory focuses only on the communication process itself. With this understanding it’s easy to move in the direction of seeing information as a commodity to be consumed. Did you hear that in the UCSD study? —the report labels us as *consumers of information*; in the information age this becomes our identity.

When we turn to the Bible we find another description of our identity and another goal set before us as human beings toward which to aspire, a goal much different than being a consumer of information. If I ask you to finish this sentence from the Psalms I’m sure you can help me—“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of ... wisdom” (Ps 111:10). Looking up wisdom in the NSRV concordance we find 346 occurrences of the word in scripture. The wisdom presented in scripture involves the true knowledge of who we have been created to be by God and how God wants us to live in relationship to God. It is so fundamental a reality that the Old Testament contains a distinct genre of “Wisdom Literature.” In the New Testament in I Corinthians, St. Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with our true source of life in Christ who is the “wisdom of God.” John Calvin begins the Institutes with the famous words, “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”

Today’s passages from the lectionary also point to this fundamental truth of human life. The prophet Jeremiah in chapter 32 speaks of the restoration of God’s people, of God’s desire for a time when God’s people will live in close relationship rooted in a reverential fear of God that is “for their own good and for the good of their children;” this is the awe, respect, devotion to God which leads to wisdom, the wisdom that shapes one’s personal life and the structures of healthy society.

In Luke, when Jesus is told his family is waiting to see him, he responds by saying that even more basic than our ties to our families is our connection with those who hear the word of God and obey it, in other words with those who live according to God’s wisdom.

The challenge of my own professional career during my years here at Western Theological Seminary, the challenge our library staff faces each day, lies in charting a course through the sea of information surrounding us—the databases, websites, books, journals—sorting through it, trying to choose the best of it, organizing it, making it accessible, and interpreting it so that ... the process of working with all this information available to us may ultimately lead to true wisdom. Information seeking is a step along the way; as disciples seeking wisdom it must never become an end in itself. The resources gathered and provided to you by the library for your exegetical papers, for your research into church history, for your wrestling with an issue in Christian ethics is not so you can finish an assignment and earn a high grade, but so that ultimately in the process of working through all this information you may truly hear God’s word speak to you at a deep level ... and do it, and live in a way consistent with what you have learned, living as wise people in faithful relationship to God.

So this is my prayer for you as I exit the stage: that you will resist the values of a society that wants to define you as a consumer of information and live instead rooted in God’s wisdom among those who hear the word of God and do it. Amen.

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