

[Note to reader: I assign this lecture the first week of every course I teach. If you have read it in a previous course you have taken from me, it is not necessary to read it again this time, unless you want to.]

CRITICAL OPENNESS
A SECRET TO SUCCESS IN SEMINARY

R. Erickson

“Be prepared to give an answer...but do this with gentleness and respect.” 1 Peter 3:15-16

Likely all of us at one time or another have snapped at someone because we were struggling with unresolved issues, issues that we unthinkingly projected on that other person. Pity the poor store clerk who accidentally short-changes me the day after I mail off my income tax. Suppressed internal stresses, operating at the subconscious level, can have surprising external effects.

One evening during my second year of seminary, all too many years ago, I was in my apartment reading a book on the so-called second blessing, as part of a course in systematic theology. I remember the author insisted that all *real* Christians spoke in tongues. I also remember, quite vividly, springing up suddenly and flinging the book away from me in a blind rage, not being particularly “charismatic” myself. The impact not only left a serious dent in the wall, but it broke the back of the book as well. My startled young bride made a stinging remark about personal maturity. Of course, I was young and hotheaded (now I’m old and hotheaded), but the event left a serious dent in my psyche, too. Long, long after that outburst, I still wrestled with the question why I had behaved in that silly way.

For years I rationalized that the book’s writer taught a doctrine of the devil. As a dedicated and orthodox theologian, I had every justification for distancing myself from such dangerous heresy. But with old age comes perspective. I gradually began to realize that my problem that night was not that I had stumbled on a devil’s book, but that the message of that book had challenged my safe little theological world in a way I was not able to answer. All the tense and unresolved encounters I’d had with charismatic students during my college years played themselves out once more as I sat reading in that little apartment. Literally decades of meditating on that distressing incident since then have helped me to understand a little of what many seminary students (not to mention church members in general) experience in discussing theological and biblical issues.

For one thing, I see now that in those days I had erected a false dichotomy for myself. I assumed, consciously or not, that if a discussion partner (or an author) did not agree with me, then I simply *had* to demonstrate how that other person was wrong and I was right. If I could *not* demonstrate that, then *I* might be wrong. And if I was wrong on this point, then on how many others was I also wrong? I reasoned irrationally that in such embarrassing situations, I was better off not listening to the unanswerable than I was in letting myself be seriously challenged by it. In fact I came at last to understand that I had enrolled in seminary partly in order to gather the ammunition I needed for defending my pre-adopted positions. But this implied that I saw myself primarily as a warrior rather than as a seeker of God’s wisdom. I assumed that I already knew *what* to believe; I just needed better ways to *fight* for it successfully.

Secondly, I assumed that God's Truth was so simple and lucid that there was neither need nor room for disagreement about it. Entailed within this notion was another: that if the Truth was this obvious, then there was no excuse before God for perverting it. False doctrine could lead a person to perdition. God certainly had no more patience with confused theology than I did. Of course I do believe, even today, that God's Truth is simple and lucid. But I now realize that it is also immeasurably deep, far beyond my comprehension. In addition to that, human culture is immeasurably complex. This is a relevant point precisely because God has always revealed his Truth to humanity in terms of *particular* human cultures; there is a whole parade of them marching across the pages of the Bible, Genesis to Revelation. So even though God's Truth is simple and clear on one level, it takes on enormous complexity as it addresses the convoluted spectrum of human life. The simplicity of God's Truth is no rationale for simplistic theology.

I'm tempted sometimes to laugh at myself for that earlier naïve and optimistic zeal. I'm sure I still retain some of it, in spite of meanwhile having developed a strain of pessimistic cynicism, too. But it's really not a laughing matter. For much of the angst I felt over these things sprang from another assumption lying deep within my subliminal worldview. Like most other human beings, I grew up with a strong desire to earn my father's approval and did not always succeed — or I felt I had not succeeded. I know now that he always loved me; being a father myself has helped me to see that. But it's hard to break deeply engrained habits, especially those we're unaware of. High school was no help at all, since peer approval eluded me more effectively than parental approval did. Actually, when I think back to whose approval I sought in high school, my failure to get it was probably a good thing. At any rate, when I first *really* understood the gospel, during my freshman year of college, I was ready for it. Hearing that God loved me unconditionally for Christ's sake acted like a cooling wash of aloe vera over my scraped and bruised ego. What I didn't realize, however, was that the seeds of theological understanding planted by the gospel in the soil of my heart would require years to root themselves. My subliminal assumptions about seeking and gaining approval remained intact, though now I had another Father to please — and to fail to please — even though at the surface I grasped the message that *this* Father loved me unconditionally.

I brought all this history with me to seminary. Unknowingly I transferred my desire to please from a focus on my dad to a focus on God and my seminary professors, particularly on one professor who reminded me of my dad. I am convinced now that I operated on the belief that unless I got "it" just right (whatever "it" might be), I could not gain full approval from these persons, not even from God. Combined with the other assumptions I've described above, this fatal flaw in my theology drove me to adopt an unassailably narrow perspective, a fragile system that could brook no challenge. It made it very difficult for me to grow in wisdom and understanding, not least of all regarding God's love for me and for all of humanity; that is, to grow in my grasp of the gospel. I could ace an exam, but I could not *think* as a theologian.

Well, well. Yak, yak, yak. What am I trying to tell you in all this? First, I can tell you the Truth: God does in fact love us — *all* of us — unconditionally. It's exactly what Paul tells us in Rom 5:8: "But God proves his love for us in that *while we still were sinners* Christ died for us." This means that there is no evil thing any of us can do, collectively or individually, to make God love us less. We were *already* sinners when Christ Jesus gave himself up for us. It also means that there is no *good* thing any of us can do, collectively or individually, to make God love us more. What more loving thing could he do for us than to die for us? This doesn't mean that he automatically approves of anything and everything we do, good or evil. But it does mean that whether we win or lose, succeed or fail, we retain his regard for us; we remain as valuable in his eyes as anyone ever could be. His love and acceptance of us *never* depends on who we are or

what we do or think, what we read or what we write; it depends solely on what he himself has done for us in the Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

This has profound implications for pursuing a seminary education. It means that we are free to explore, free to be confused, free to be wrong, free to learn. And we are likewise *free to let others explore, to be confused or wrong, and to learn*. Under the vast umbrella of God's grace, we need not worry that he will reject us if we are mistaken on some point, not even if we *admit* we have been mistaken. (I find it odd about myself that in some circumstances I would rather remain in the wrong, knowingly, than to *admit* I am wrong!) The grace of God sets me free from whatever fears make me act that way. Some of those fears involve what I suspect other people will think of me. But if God is for me, who can ever be against me with any *real* effect?

Some of my fears revolve around the damage I may do to other people if I influence them with bad theology. But this is confused thinking at its worst! Rather than to make me resist challenges to my understanding of the Truth, this concern should logically make me more willing than ever to listen carefully to criticisms others may offer me. It also ignores one very potent aspect of the Truth: God cares more about those other people than I ever could. He may give to me, of all people, the opportunity to influence another person for his sake, and I may blow it. But I am not the only pathway by which he can ever reach that person. I am not as important as I might want to think I am. Yet in his eyes I am important enough to die for and to use for his glory. It's just that my blundering will not unravel his eternal plans.

If all of this is true — and I obviously think it is (though I hope I'm willing to be corrected!) — then we can relax in seminary. We can be open to whatever God may want to teach us, whether through books, professors, other students, staff, spouse or children, people in our home churches, unbelieving friends and neighbors, in fact through whomever or whatever he chooses to use. But most especially we can be open to listening to the Word of God. It could well have something to say to us. The human instruments God uses may have mixed motives in dealing with us, but we can always trust the God who speaks through them and through his Word. We are thus faced with the question about what we love more: the Truth of God as it really is, or the Truth of God as we conceive of it. The God of truth sets us free for *openness*. Success in seminary requires just such openness.

But there is another side to this coin. The openness that God sets us free for is not a naïve one, one that blindly embraces whatever comes its way. The alternative to a narrow, unteachable spirit is not a thoughtless, ungrounded one (although there is an ironically close relationship between those two). Openness is essential in seminary, but it needs to be a *critical* openness. I still have a negative emotional reaction to the word *critical*. Even after years of hearing it used, and using it myself, in the sense of "intelligently evaluative," my mind persists in conjuring up images of frowning parents, sneering peers, and disgusted teachers, as in "He's so *CRITICAL!*" It's just something I have to work around. Regardless of my personal baggage, however, that's not what I mean in speaking now of a critical openness. Rather, what I mean by that phrase is a willingness *to listen, to think, and to respond, with intelligence and grace*.

Listening

Listening to other people's points of view is so much easier when we realize that their opinions do not reflect or determine our own personal value. Even their opinions of *us* can't do that. It does not need to be a threat to us if another person has a differing perspective on an issue. We are not required to adopt that differing perspective, or even to deal with it at all if we do not wish

to. We can simply listen to it. If I had understood this better forty-plus years ago, I might have got my entire damage deposit back from my landlord.

The possibility of listening unperturbed to another person's ideas proves a tremendous advantage for participating in what we can call the Grand Theological Conversation. As evangelicals, we insist that in one very important sense the revelation of God is deposited in the words of the Bible. Even though God manifested himself in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, we know about that manifestation to a great extent through what has been preserved for us in Scripture. But it is one thing to read the words of Scripture; it's another to understand them and to interpret them. The complicating factors of language, history, and culture raise such a cloud of interpretive dust, that no one person can ever speak with final authority on the meaning of it all. Many individuals have claimed to do so, of course, sometimes with tragic results, but that only demonstrates the point I'm making. In fact, the task of interpreting the Word of God in subsequent human cultures is entrusted to the Holy Spirit, and he carries out his task in the context and through the voices of the entire church of Jesus Christ. The Grand Theological Conversation has been underway ever since God first spoke to humanity, and it is conducted in all corners of the globe. We as theologians (whether professional or lay) participate together in this magnificent task under the guidance of the Spirit. And we do so first by *listening* to each other — which of course implies *speaking* to each other, otherwise there would be nothing to listen to. We all have a dual role here: to listen and to speak, that is, to *converse*.

Listening in this sense has at least two dimensions. In the first place we must listen to get *what is said*. That is, we must listen in such a way that we make sure we have heard right. We cannot see the inside of another person's head; we cannot infallibly infer the intentions lying behind an ancient author's words. What we have are the words themselves, spoken or written. That's what we must begin with. Listen *carefully*. Before we even think about replying, we must be sure we have an accurate idea of what our conversation partner has expressed.

The second dimension of listening involves being as sure as we can be about what the speaker or author *means* by what he or she says. What is the subtext beneath the surface text? What did my bride mean when she said to me that long-ago evening, "Well, *that* was mature!?" In the Grand Conversation, we need to listen *sympathetically*. We can often "win" a debate by deliberately twisting an opponent's intended meaning through forcing a hyper-literal sense on her words. But those are hollow victories, fooling no one, except perhaps the "winner." The Spirit teaches us to search the hearts of our brothers and sisters, to *understand* them, as he understands us.

Listening carefully and listening sympathetically constitute an essential element of Critical Openness. It's the "openness" element. It's also an element far more do-able in an atmosphere of grace than in an atmosphere of fear.

Thinking

The "critical" side of Critical Openness involves *thinking* about what we have so carefully and sympathetically listened to. This also can be viewed in at least two dimensions. On the one hand, as faithful participants in the Grand Theological Conversation, we assume that insight into God's Truth can just as likely come from another participant as it can come from us. But that doesn't guarantee that it will! We cannot determine in advance where genuine insight will come from, neither where it will *not* come from. God is not bound by our prejudices. Pagan magi showed more understanding of God's plans than Israel's religious hierarchy in Jerusalem (Matthew 2), and a loose Samaritan woman was more perceptive than an earnest "teacher of

Israel” (John 3, 4). Humility becomes us here! Still, the point is that if there are no advance guarantees in this, we need to be not only gentle as listening doves, but also wise as thinking serpents. We must *think* about the adequacy of what we have heard from another theologian. There are several ways to approach this question; the famous classic, *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, provides excellent instruction in doing it. So does the book by Howard Stone and James Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (2nd ed.; Fortress, 2006). One of the purposes of a seminary education is to help students acquire this skill.

Evaluating the adequacy of another theological point of view may convince us that it is right, or that it is wrong, or that it is partly right and partly wrong. And this leads us to the second dimension of *thinking*: we need to think about how to respond. This is not the same thing as *responding* itself (the third element in Critical Openness), but it determines what direction our response will take. If we convince ourselves (by fair and careful thinking) that the other perspective is wrong, we need to show why we think so. But if we are convinced it is in some sense right, we need to consider how it differs from our own perspective and how it ought to influence us to change that perspective.

In other words, in the process of *thinking*, we make a *critical* evaluation, one that makes a *decision*, one that *discerns* among a variety of options. It makes that “discerning decision” based upon some set of *criteria* (a word related to the word *critical*). But the evaluation runs in both directions: we evaluate the other view in terms of certain criteria, and in light of that evaluation, we are compelled to evaluate our own view as well, including those very criteria we just used!

Responding

Once we’ve listened carefully and sympathetically to another position, and once we’ve fairly and “critically” thought through that position — and our own in terms of it — we are ready for the third element of Critical Openness, the *response*. We could almost say that God long ago initiated (and has often re-initiated) the Grand Theological Conversation and that everything we human beings have contributed to it has been either a response to God or a response to one another. Most of the Conversation consists of responses to responses. Your response to a statement made by an author in a book becomes in effect a new statement, to which someone else can respond. This perpetual offering of responses is what keeps the Conversation going. It’s the method, evidently, whereby the Spirit continually unfolds the meaning of God’s revelation for the successive parade of evolving cultures. Unless we talk together and compare notes with one another, we might be forced to think that God wants us all to dress like Abraham or to trade in our cars for donkeys (and maybe he does!). There are some religious traditions that think in this way, even some Christian traditions (and with the crises over producing gasoline, we may end up there in any case!). But subscribers to those traditions seldom converse about these things with those they consider outsiders.

Nevertheless, even though responding is what keeps the Great Conversation going, here or there it can also contribute directly to stalling it — or even killing it. It is important for the success of the Conversation and for success in seminary and ministry that whenever we respond, we do so with grace. We need to give each other the same open freedom to explore and to be wrong as God gives to us. We must treat each other with the same dignity and respect God treats us with. The fact that a person entertains bizarre ideas about creation, redemption, incarnation, resurrection, Gospel composition, or the art of motorcycle repair, is absolutely no reflection on that person’s value as a person, or on her having been herself created in God’s image. Likewise, a person who holds a theology that we would not wish to adopt for our own is not thereby condemned to hell. His eternal destiny is in God’s hands, not ours. Even if he gives

every indication of standing far off from the grace of God, it is God and God alone who knows — who decides — that person's fate. We have no say in the matter.

The implication of this is that part of our role in the Conversation is to treat all conversation partners with the same courtesy and respect we would like to enjoy from them. In fact, as in every other aspect of life, we are called as disciples to treat them just as if each of them were Christ Jesus himself. This can be very difficult at times, especially when these others treat *us* like ignorant, backward pond scum! But it becomes much easier, ultimately do-able in fact, as we remember how wide and protective is the umbrella of God's grace, under which this entire enterprise is carried out. God is not standing by like a sadistic older brother babysitting us his younger siblings, eagerly waiting for a chance to electrocute us for any false step. Instead, he has become one of us; he has redeemed us, called us, and invited us to submit ourselves to be formed into the likeness of his Son, our *real* older brother. As he has treated us with patient grace, he invites us to treat each other that way.

Responding with courtesy and grace, after fair and *thoughtful evaluation*, based on careful and sympathetic *listening* — *this* is what we mean by Critical Openness. In terms of practical day-to-day life in seminary, it often translates in to *reading* well, doing responsible *research*, and *writing* clearly, competently, and professionally. The first and most important thing to do now, at the beginning of any new course, is to remind yourself that God loves you in Christ *unconditionally*. Nothing you do here will make a better impression on him than he already has of you in Christ. Nothing you fail at or mess up in will disgust him or make him laugh at you, for he has determined to regard you just as if you yourself were Christ. You are set free, therefore. Have fun this term. Relax and enjoy the ride with your classmates.