

I recently met a well-spoken young man, who is a credit to his generation. He and I had a wonderful conversation about God and faith. In the course of our discussion, he made an insightful observation about how every human is socially conditioned by his/her environment; that is, what we learned from our parents as children dictates, positively or negatively, how we think and act as adults. Had we had the time, I would have liked to explore with him that age-old question of whether or not any of us would be Christian had we not grown up in a Christian home or in a Christian community or in a Christian nation. Since the opportunity didn't present itself, I propose instead to have that conversation with you. Now according to logic, it is entirely possible most of us here today would believe something different about God, the world, and ourselves had we grown up in another time and place. Such a logical deduction is not only intriguing to think about, it is also currently very popular.

We find ourselves living in an age where every historical value is under suspicion. Any attempt to influence the younger generation by appealing to time-honored traditions is now looked upon as a violation of freedom, as a form of manipulation where the older corrupt the younger. Nowhere is this more evident than when we talk about religion. Forcing your children to go to church, for example, has been twisted into an accusation of abuse, just one more example of authoritarian brain-washing. Of course, we usually dismiss this attack as being nothing more than youthful rebellion against the status-quo of society, which we all have been guilty of at some point during our lives. But what if we didn't do that? What if we gave the argument its due? After all, why do we believe what we believe, and why do we do what we do? It is true, if the religion of my home had been harsh, I would probably be exactly where that young man is, in a position of rebellion against all tradition. If I had not had the aid of this helpful teacher or access to that illuminating book when my religious convictions were undergoing development, I might not have made the necessary adjustments, but instead thrown all religious convictions into the wastebasket. But should I feel slighted; as if somehow, I have been robbed of my own independent thought? Am I really supposed to look back on my childhood with scorn just because I happened to grow up in a position where human nature revealed itself in its more lovely characteristics and allowed me to maintain confidence in the integrity of mankind upon which so much of the confidence in God depends? Or should I instead thank God, and follow the words of Paul to Timothy this morning, giving heed to what I learned as a child when I first encountered the Word of God through the very people who looked after me?

Now, I will readily admit that the pressures of environment, influences of heredity, and excellencies and deficiencies of teachers help to determine our life philosophies. Because of this, we ought to hold them with a decent amount of humility and a measure of skepticism. But if we permit ourselves to be tempted into complete skepticism by these facts, we will quickly put an end to civilization itself. For civilization depends upon the vigorous pursuit of the highest values by people who are smart enough to know that their values are qualified by their interests and corrupted by their prejudices. But if this were all there was to Christianity, a set of highbrow principles and ethics, then I would accept the premise that it is wrong to expose younger generations to it for we all have to make our own way in this world. But this is not Christianity. Not even close. Christianity is not defined by European-bourgeoise principles or white-middleclass ideologies. It goes much deeper than that. For there is a hidden element of universal identity found in all cultures and religions, and it is this hidden element we must give attention to if we wish to be thoughtful Christians. What the older generation has learned by experience, it tries to impart to the younger generation in order to spare it from the mistakes it has made. Don't waste your life on the trivialities for there is something more to this universe than just your own ego, there is something more to this life than just meeting your practical needs, there is something more to the self than just brainwaves and cognition. There is this deeper part, the very soul itself, which is untouched by the many changes of life. Part of heightened human awareness is learning how to dialogue about this deeper part, and to do that we need a vocabulary. I can no more blame my family for forcing me to learn the grammar of Christianity than I can blame them for forcing me to learn the grammar of English. Both are essential to my survival as a human being. In the same way world languages help me to understand and be understood, there is this universal language of God, which all hearts are eager to speak. The Christian faith teaches us its grammar, instructs us on how to shape the words and form the sentences so that we might express our deepest yearnings. And we learn this universal language of God second-hand before we are ever able to apply it first-hand. Faith comes by hearing, and we must first understand its sounds and rhythms, hear it and practice it, before we can make the language of faith our own through assimilation. This is why St. Paul tells Timothy to look backwards before looking forwards. Thought precedes expression. Grammar precedes rhetoric. And so, I am thankful to God for all those in my life who never gave up on me, and despite my youthful hubris patiently taught me God's Word. I pray you feel the same. Amen.