

Competency

Some time ago, I disputed the charges on a utility bill I had received. Because the issue was not resolved immediately, I had to make a number of phone calls, and each of those phone calls went to the same level of support staff. None of the support staff I talked to had the capability to address my claims. As I dealt with them, I came to realize that they were reading from a manual, and because what I was asking was not in the manual, they were not able to give the information that I needed nor could they make corrections to the charges. It became evident that as they referred the problem to another level of support staff, they did not communicate my concerns appropriately, and I continued to receive inadequate answers to my questions.

The longer I spoke to the support staff, the more I became convinced that their competency was based on their ability to read a manual. Sadly, they did not have the level of competency I needed to deal with my dispute of the charges. They had stock answers, but those stock answers were not based on real experience. I do not fault them for their lack of competency, but, rather, the fault lies with the ones who had trained them. To become truly competent, they would have had to have a deeper understanding of the billing process, and it was clear that they did not. In other words, experience would have helped their competency. Understanding a manual gets one only so far.

Competency is important in many areas of life, and that also includes our faith. A colleague, one who works with a Muslim community in a large Canadian citizen, is often asked to speak at a church. When asked to do so, he requests that he bring along a Muslim imam (equivalent of pastor in Islam). On the appointed day, the imam arrives and apologizes and says that the pastor is running late but that he would like to engage those in attendance in conversation because he has some questions about Christianity. With permission given, he begins to ask those in attendance what they believe and why. His questions do not require answers that demand a deep understanding of theology, but they do require a basic understanding of Christianity. It becomes quickly apparent that many Christian believers do not really know how to give answers to his questions. They prove to be somewhat incompetent. My colleague is concerned that many Christians are not fully aware of what the manual (the Bible) teaches.

About half an hour into the presentation, the imam begins to remove his Muslim garb, and it becomes evident that it is not an imam who is speaking to them but the pastor himself. In taking the role of a Muslim cleric, he is able to reveal to those gathered that they do need to know what they believe if they are going to talk about their faith with unbelievers, especially those who have questions. He emphasizes how we not only need to be ready to give an answer to those who question us on the hope that we have, but we also need to know what the answers are. In other words, we do need to exhibit more than a competency we gain from a child's Bible story book. This pastor is convinced that most people have heard the answers at one time or another but that was during the catechism class they took as a teenager or heard in a second service in which the Heidelberg Catechism was being preached. What concerns him is that many have not used those answers in everyday life. In other words, the book learning that we once

had faded into obscurity because we have not made it part of our experience, at least not intentionally so.

In a way, those learning situations, while important, are rather like learning the vocabulary of a second language. We can learn the vocabulary and even the grammar of another language but until we put it into practice, we won't ever be fluent. In the same way, unless we speak of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, we might have learned the words, the facts, but we won't have the answers. Competency comes with experience, real life experience. It comes from more than just learning how to read and quote a manual. If we are going to be competent Christians, then, we need to be living and speaking our faith. We must apply the gospel in every situation, thus making what we learned from a manual a part of our experience. We will then become competent.

But, thankfully, we are not alone. When I was a student at Reformed Bible College (now Kuyper College), one of the required courses was an evangelism course. We had to learn a method of presenting the gospel, and then we were required to partner with an evangelism committee from a church which was involved in door-to-door calling. It wasn't a great experience for me, and I dreaded those Tuesday evenings. But one day, my partner and I were invited into the house, and my partner asked that I give the presentation of the gospel. I fumbled around, looking for the words and trying to remember the Bible verses. When I came to the part where I asked him if he wanted to accept Jesus as his Lord and Saviour, he said, "Yes, I do." I was quite astounded, sure that he didn't really understand what I was asking, so miserable had been my presentation of the gospel. But he was adamant: he understood, and he wanted to put his trust in Jesus, and he wanted to follow his Lord. After trying to convince him otherwise (I actually tried to dissuade him!), we prayed together, and he gave his life to Jesus.

Clearly the Holy Spirit was present that day. Thankfully he was, for I certainly did not do a competent job in talking about Jesus had done. But the Spirit was competent where I was not.

The present of the Holy Spirit ensures that even when we are weak (or maybe especially when we are weak) he is strong, and he can accomplish what we cannot do. This story I just told reminds me of how weak I am. This does not excuse us, of course, of learning and growing in our competency. To give answer to the hope that we have, we need to speak the language, and to speak the language, we have to actually live it. But we can be confident that even if we do not speak the language of the gospel clearly or proficiently, the Spirit can take what we say and make it good. For that we can be thankful. I'm guessing, however, that the Holy Spirit, though fully able to use incompetent people, would prefer that we make ourselves competent. It works a little better that way.

Pastor Gary