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## Defining Literacy Down — Do Your Kids Read Books?

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Every generation worries about the next — and usually with good reason. Here is another reason for worry about today’s adolescents and young adults — they don’t read. That is a generalization, of course. But the generalization seems to be holding true.

Thomas Washington, librarian at a Washington, DC area private school, recently contributed a “[lament](#)” to [The Washington Post](#). The kids are privileged and have no problem of access to books, but they do not read. As he reports:

*I’m a librarian in an independent Washington area school. We’re doing all the right things. Our class sizes are small. Most graduating seniors gain admission to their college of choice. The facilities are first-rate.*

*Yet from my vantage point at the reference desk, something is amiss. The books in the library stacks are gathering dust.*

In the minds of the students ( and of many librarians) the library is now not about books, but about “information literacy,” the Internet, and database searches.

As Mr. Washington explains, many librarians are no longer called librarians, but “media and information specialists.” Further:

*The buzzword in the trade is “information literacy,” a misnomer, because what it is really about is mastering computer skills, not promoting a love of reading and books. These days, librarians measure the quality of returns in data-mining stints. We teach students how to maximize a database search, about successful retrieval rates. What usually gets lost in the scramble is a careful reading of the material.*

Do these students eventually settle down to a love for books? Washington does not think so:

*Conventional wisdom has it that teenagers don’t read because they’re too busy. Only after high school, sometime midway through college, do young adults reconnect with their childhood love of reading and make books their partners for life. I don’t think so anymore. The 2004 Reading at Risk report by the National Endowment for the Arts concluded that literary reading was in serious decline on all fronts, especially among the youngest adults, ages 18 to 24, whose rate of decrease was 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population.*

Other reports indicate similar patterns. Young people are adept at using the Internet and they are avid consumers and users of electronic media in all forms. They will watch a DVD rather than read a book — even the book upon which the film is based.

Those who share Thomas Washington’s lament risk being dismissed as cranks and antiquarians. After all, it is a new age and the kids have figured it out. Who needs books? Who needs to read?

Librarians and secular educators have ample reason for concern, but Christians must look at this reality with an even greater concern.

Reading is an important Christian discipline. Further, growth as a Christian disciple is closely tied to the reading of the Bible, as well as worthy Christian books. This is why the Christian church has championed the cause of literacy. It is why the Reformers fought for the translation of the Scriptures into vernacular languages.

A loss of literacy and respect for the book amounts to grave danger for the Christian church. The transmission of Christian truth has been closely tied to scrolls, codices, and books throughout the history of the Church — a legacy inherited from the Jews, who often protected the sacred scrolls with their lives.

The electronic media have their places and uses, and I am thankful for the accessibility of so much worthy and important information through digital means. Nevertheless, the electronic screen is not the venue for lengthy, thoughtful, serious reading. The vehicle for serious reading is the book, and the Christian should be a serious reader.

Do our own young people read books? Do they know the pleasures of the solitary reading of a life-changing page? Have they ever lost themselves in a story, framed by their own imaginations rather than by digital images? Have they ever marked up a page, urgently engaged in a debate with the author? Can they even think of a book that has changed the way they see the world . . . or the Christian faith? If not, why not?

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