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Study the Brain Without Losing Your Soul

Can brain science teach us about discipleship?

Drew Dyck | posted July 1, 2014



A mechanism for cooling the blood—that's what the philosopher Aristotle believed the brain was. Others in the ancient world were even further off the mark. The Egyptians saw the heart as the seat of intelligence. The brain, they believed, was mere "cranial stuffing."

Well, we're not in ancient Athens or Egypt anymore. The brain is still the least understood organ in the human body, but we know a lot more than our ancient counterparts. And we're about to learn a lot more. Neuroscience is in its infancy (imaging devices like fMRIs are barely two decades old) but our knowledge of the brain is increasing exponentially. What Copernicus's heliocentric model did for our understanding of the universe, neuroscience promises to do for our view of the self.

And, some say, our experience of God.

How should Christian leaders respond? Is this new knowledge of our most vital organ friend or foe?

First, some cautions.

Beware the hype. Hardly a day goes by without breathless proclamations of what the latest brain study means. You've seen the headlines. Scientists announce the discovery of a "God gene." Spirituality is reduced to serotonin receptors in the brain. A neuroscientist invents a "God Helmet," a machine allegedly capable of producing mystical experiences.

Perhaps in our day we should be holding the Bible in one hand and the latest brain study in the other.

But often these claims turn out to be overstated or flatly false. A recent article on Salon.com stated that though "brain imaging is being used to explain law, politics, even theology. It's often hokey."

The thrill of discovery has a way of spurring overstatement. Just because an area of the brain "lights up" when you pray, doesn't mean religious experience has been explained away. And just because our brains are "hardwired" for belief, it doesn't follow that God is an illusion.

Complicating matters is the fact that many of those trumpeting the latest findings hold materialist worldviews. There is no spirit or soul, they believe. The brain and mind are one. Everything about us is reducible to the

synaptic firings between our ears. Of course we must reject this crude reductionism and be careful to distinguish between what the science is actually saying and what agenda is being advanced in science's name.

So that's one mistake: to take everything scientists are saying about the brain as gospel truth. But there's an opposite and equally dangerous error: to ignore it.

Neuroscience has shed light on mental illness, addictions, and habit formation. Do we really believe it has nothing to say about discipleship? Brain studies have yielded tremendous insights into how we listen and learn. Do they have nothing to say about preaching and teaching?

I believe wise leaders use all the tools at their disposal to more effectively pursue their callings—and brain science is a powerful tool. At *Leadership Journal*, we believe it's so powerful that we've dedicated an entire issue to educating readers on crucial takeaways from the burgeoning field. The theologian Karl Barth is quoted as saying preachers should prepare sermons holding a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Perhaps in our day we should be holding the Bible in one hand and the latest brain study in the other.

Such knowledge might seem beyond the purview of Christian leaders. But as Augustine said, "All truth is God's truth." And as we discover more about the brain, we learn how to minister more effectively to those under our care. There's another benefit, too. The human brain is perhaps God's greatest creation. As we learn more and more about it, our awe of God will only grow.

Drew Dyck
Managing Editor

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