

**The Great Commission Imperative of Teaching:  
Why Christian Education Should Be  
On the Cutting Edge of the Church's Mission Today**

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Christianity is a teaching religion. It is rooted in God's revelation. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to persons who could not know Him or find Him without such self-disclosure. Revelation is God teaching us about Himself and about His ways. The Scriptures are the account of that revelation. The writer of Hebrews begins that letter reminding the readers of God's self-disclosure: "God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son (Heb 1:1-2 HCSB). Such a simple but sweeping statement reveals the teacher character of God. Like one of Job's friends, we must also ask, "Who is a teacher like him (Job. 26:22 NASB)?" The Great Commission draws all believers into the teaching process of God and shows us the centrality of teaching in the church's mission.

To find teaching as an element in the Great Commission should come as no surprise. Jesus came teaching and he commanded that we make disciples using baptism (implying evangelism) and teaching as integral, necessary elements of the disciple-making process. Commanding such stood Jesus in the cultural and religious heritage of Judaism. Examining the teaching concept in the Old Testament lays the foundation for understanding this function's imperative in the Great Commission.

### **Old Testament Roots**

In the Old Testament, God invested the teaching function in patriarchs, parents, priests, and prophets, as they instructed others in the Law. But, before discussing those Old Testament roots of Christian teaching, one must remember in the broadest sense the meaning of “teaching.” In the broadest sense of the word, teaching was any effort, verbal or behavioral, aimed at assisting another to understand truth and live by that truth. Speaking, conversation, and observation were and still are teaching, even though such terms do not have the formality of the classroom. While we do not have explicit examples of the patriarchs teaching in the formal sense, imagine the lessons Abraham taught Isaac as Abraham was obedient to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac.

The most obvious injunction to parents about teaching their children is found in Deuteronomy 6. This passage instructs parents to make their lifestyle with offspring a teaching lifestyle, making the most of every teaching opportunity that comes naturally as well as intentionally creating didactic opportunities with their young (Deut. 6:7, 19 NASB). Parental teaching should be diligent (Deut. 6:7 NASB).

Beginning with Moses and following through the prophets of Israel, God instructed them and directed them to teach others. God promised Moses instruction so he would know what to say in Egypt (Ex. 4:12, 15 NASB). God called Moses to the mountain to receive the law which was for the people’s instruction (Ex. 24:12 NASB). The book of Deuteronomy contains Moses’ farewell sermons to the nation, all of which instruct the nation in obedience toward God.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah even described how God would instruct farmers in the raising of their crops (Isa. 28:26 NASB).

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<sup>1</sup>Jack D. Terry, Jr., “God as Teacher,” in *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, ed. Daryl Eldridge (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 6.

In the days of the judges, Manoah sought the Lord and asked for instruction on the raising of a special, promised son, Samson (Jdg. 13:8-14 NASB).

Priests (including scribes and Levites) also instructed the people. Moses charged priests to teach and that the people should be obedient in everything (Deut. 24:8 NASB). The king of Assyria imported a Yahwistic priest to teach the people about fearing the Lord (2 Kgs. 17:27-28 NASB). The Levites were to teach God's people the difference between the holy and the profane (Ezek. 44:23 NASB). Note Ezra's commitment to the teaching ministry: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:10 NASB)."

The wisdom literature provides a wealth of understanding concerning God's role as teacher. Here are only two examples:

Make me know Your ways, O LORD;  
Teach me Your paths. <sup>5</sup> Lead me in Your truth and teach me,  
For You are the God of my salvation;  
For You I wait all the day. Psalms 25:4-5 (NASB)

Blessed are You, O LORD;  
Teach me Your statutes. Psalms 119:12 (NASB)

Israel not only studied the Law and God's revelation, they sang it. Space does not permit the exploration of the richness of Israel's tabernacle, worship, and festivals, all of which were designed to teach the people.

Before leaving the Old Testament, it is important to grasp how the Hebrew system identified an educated, wise person as one who had little or no gap between what a person claimed to know and how that person behaved.<sup>2</sup> Psalm 1 is an excellent example. For the Hebrew, a person could not espouse a truth or principle as personal knowledge and not live by it.

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<sup>2</sup>Lucien E. Coleman, Jr., *Why the Church Must Teach* (Nashville: Broadman, 1984), 81.

Such a person would not truly know that truth because that person was not living that truth. A classic example of this quandary is the precursors of the Great Commission. God's plan for Israel was to teach all nations about Him, but Israel did not know this because Israel did not do this (1 Chron.16:24 NASB; Isa. 49:6 NASB). Jesus Himself asked, "And why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say (Luke 6:46 NASB)?" His question implies that in calling Jesus "Lord," one lies if that one does not yield (i. e, behave) to that lordship. Conceived and operative values must coincide.<sup>3</sup>

In that same sense, all knowledge was experiential in nature. Hebrew parents fed honey cakes to their youngsters as they started training in God's Word so that they associated the experience of God's Word with sweetness. David agreed: "O taste and see that the LORD *is* good (Psalms 34:8 KJV)." Many modern educators will agree that learning is always experience-oriented.<sup>4</sup>

### **New Testament Teaching**

In the New Testament, Jesus modeled teaching and commanded His followers to teach everything He taught. The "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" phrase of Matthew 28:20 partners with the "baptizing" phrase just prior in verse 19 to support that main command, "make disciples." Jesus gave to those disciples and all subsequent believers a "two-handed" task to accomplish the command. Working together like two hands, by baptizing and through teaching we make disciples. The teaching ministry of the church can in no way be separated from the evangelism ministry of the church. They are two sides of the same coin.

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<sup>3</sup>George Knight, *Philosophy and Education* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 26.

<sup>4</sup>Coleman, 73-79.

Closely examine Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-47). Notice several statements through which Peter communicated facts, information, and evidence for them to examine (cognitive). He elicited an emotional response from his hearers (affective). Finally he called for commitment: repent and be baptized (behavioral). The marks of learning are seen all through the final verses (41-47): change occurred in the lives of these believers. What evangelistic segment can we remove from Peter's sermon and retain Peter's teaching intent? What educational segment can we remove and retain Peter's evangelistic appeal? Education and evangelism are so entwined we cannot separate one from another. C.E. Autry said,

Educational evangelism is an organized effort to enlist and train church members. It also provides organizational outreach for evangelism. It would train Christians to witness, and it would bring the unchurched into the Bible study program and confront them with Christ as Savior. It is neither an extensive training program which seeks to educate and culture folk into the family of God, nor an effort to find God by understanding His laws of human growth and development. Nor is it a process of bringing one into oneness with God in Christ. We recognize that every person must have certain knowledge before he can be saved. He must recognize his need for a Saviour, who the Saviour is, and how to receive Him. Men are not saved by the teaching process, but the teaching process prepares men for a saving experience with God. Educational evangelism is not opposed to sudden conversion, but conversion is preceded by some instruction.<sup>5</sup>

A. Boyd Luter has masterfully demonstrated how Paul carried out the Great Commission agenda at Ephesus by shifting from an evangelistic mode when first arriving in Ephesus to an educational-evangelistic mode later, which likely provided the great success Paul had in Ephesus. Luter's contention is that Paul's model demonstrates how "in-depth, heart-inflaming education can ignite widespread, life-transforming evangelism, with a far-reaching cultural

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<sup>5</sup>C. E. Autry, *Basic Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 1959), 92.

impact.”<sup>6</sup> All of this helps us understand the profoundly obvious truth: Christianity is transmitted through the teaching function of the church.

In recent years we have all witnessed the moving medical attempts to separate conjoined twins. Our hearts ache for these children because we see the limitations that being conjoined bring to their lives. Education and evangelism, in a sense, are conjoined twins, but unlike human conjoined twins. Together they are an inseparable, powerful, dynamic team knowing almost no limitations. They strengthen and feed one another. The early church recognized their power in union, but we often make them impotent because we separate them.

Paul and others practiced this function in their teaching, sermons, letters, and other writings. Rick Yount compiled a list of Paul’s view of teaching: Paul was interested in converts and disciplined them. He emphasized “living in Christ.” He taught by personal example and in a variety of situations. Paul established churches as teaching stations and he sent teaching letters to churches and individuals. Paul was a philosopher and thinker and a practical problem-solver. He taught and lived in the work and power the Holy Spirit, prayer, and spiritual growth.<sup>7</sup>

The Hebrew concept concerning who was educated is furthered in the New Testament by the charge to not be only hearers of the Word, but doers also (James 1:22-24 NASB). The test of effectiveness of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 was answered in the changed lives of converts. The test of effectiveness in Paul’s work in Ephesus was answered in changed lives. The test of any teaching-learning situation is still changed lives. LeRoy Ford defined learning as “a lasting change in knowledge, understanding, skill, attitudes, and values, brought about by experience.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>A. Boyd Luter, “Deep and Wide: Education Overflowing as Evangelism from Ephesus,” *Faith and Mission* 19 (Fall 2001): 34.

<sup>7</sup>William R. “Rick” Yount, “The Pastor as Teacher,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 38 (Spring 1996), 15-17.

<sup>8</sup>LeRoy Ford, *Design for Teaching and Training* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 15.

J. M. Price said “A teacher hasn’t taught until someone has learned, . . . and no one has learned until there has been a change.”<sup>9</sup> The question the church must ask of its teaching ministry is “Where is the change in believers today?”

### **New Testament Teaching in These Postmodern Times**

While every generation has needed the teaching function of the church, today’s postmodern culture is in particular need. Today’s generation seems to trudge hopelessly in a slough of despair, oozing with the thick mud and stagnant waters of pluralism and relativism. Popular thought, or perhaps better said as popular non-thought, has eliminated absolute truth. Human existence is meaningless unless one can make his or her own meaning but therefore no ethics exist to guide one to the making of meaning. Yet, religion is still popular. Just among twenty-somethings, eighty percent claim that their faith is important to them and fifty-seven percent claim to have made a commitment to Jesus Christ which is still important to them.<sup>10</sup> While surveys indicate large numbers of the U.S. population considers themselves born-again Christians, researchers are quick to point out the high level of Bible illiteracy present in our culture and how most believers seem to behave in ways no different from their secular and lost counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Postmodern thinkers outside the church have to be taught that people are in deed lost and in need of salvation. While pluralism seems to show respect for persons of different faith groups, pluralism actually says that personal beliefs are insignificant since truth is downgraded.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Quoted by Jerri Herring and Larry Garner in “Five Handles for Getting a Grip on Your Sunday School” (1997), 16.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=149&Reference=A>

<sup>11</sup><http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=103&Reference=B>

<sup>12</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 2000), 83.

In other words, what you believe does not matter. Many postmoderns would argue that words are used to create truth, but those very words are relative (defined by their users), and that truth does not exist. Words only create relative truth. Christians today can agree somewhat with postmodernity's critique; in deed, words can shape reality. But, Christians can point to Jesus who did not state that he would speak truth and discuss about truth, but that He is truth. Truth is not just propositional because Jesus said, "I am truth (John 14:6 NASB)."<sup>13</sup> Without the light of truth held by a society, the lost cannot see that they are lost. The lost must be educated to understand their need for a Savior.

To assume that postmodernism stops at the doors of our churches is a foolish and dangerous assumption. Postmodern thinkers inside the church need to understand the relationship between learning and a change in behavior, knowledge, and understanding. Dallas Willard once asked "Have we done what is necessary to bring the earnest convert into his or her possessions as a child of God, as a brother or sister of Jesus Christ in the new life?" His answer is no. He calls the "teaching" phase of the Great Commission the "Great Omission." If the reader stills needs proof, he suggests that one ask his or her church, "What is our group's plan for teaching our people to do everything Christ commanded?" Most churches do not even have a vague wish or dream, much less a plan.<sup>14</sup> "Spiritual transformation, according to Scripture, is an interplay of time spent alone with God and His Word in contemplation and prayer and the practical day-to-day life of work and play in which the wise life can be exercised and strengthened through

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<sup>13</sup>Julie Gorman, "'There's got to be More!' Transformative Learning," *Christian Education Journal* 5 (Spring 2001): 26-27.

<sup>14</sup>Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub., 1988), 15-16.

action.”<sup>15</sup> What are churches doing to provide an environment conducive to God’s work of transformation? The answer is probably very little.

Both lost persons and saved persons must understand that learning, particularly Christian learning is transformative. Look at any number of New Testament characters: Paul, Peter, blind Bartimaeus, Mary and Martha, Zacharias, Zaccheus, Onesimus, John Mark. All learned; all grew spiritually; all were transformed. The “make disciples” phrase in the Great Commission is about transformation. As conjoined twins, education and evangelism create and work as a greater whole than either can accomplish severed from its sibling.

### **Church Trends in Education in Postmodern Times**

This confluence of postmodern thought merges with important trends in Christian education in the local church. First, pastors seldom see themselves as the lead teacher for their local congregations. While churches maintain a strong emphasis on sermons, many church members assess the effectiveness of sermons by volume, enthusiasm, and rhetoric. Yet, many pastors desperately observe their congregations for any sign of spiritual transformation but seldom find any. They scratch their heads in amazement, but seem unsure why preaching is not developing the saved. “Pastors and teachers’ constitute one office with dual function. The two functions coincide and are combined in one person. As suggested by the terms, a person occupying this office was both to shepherd (which is the idea in the word ‘pastor’) the flock of God and to instruct them in divine truth.”<sup>16</sup> Is it possible that churches and ministers today separate these functions so that pastors are seen as the lead proclaimer of the church and not as

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<sup>15</sup>Judy TenElshof, “Spiritual Formation: How Can Christian Education Be Intentional?” *Christian Education Journal* 4 (Fall 2000): 117.

<sup>16</sup>W. Curtis Vaughn, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1963), 91.

the lead educator of the church? Hopefully, the renewed emphasis in expository preaching will allow pastors to recall their dual scriptural function.

Second, while specialists have been brought along side to lead the church in educational work, often those specialists become administrators and also decline the teaching function. The role of the minister of education has moved from leading the church's educational ministries to being the church's administrator. Even when a minister of education focuses on education, without the pastor's support and his communicating to the people the importance of Christian education, the minister of education can have little effectiveness. Such actions and attitudes generally leave education to untrained persons who may assume their educational efforts are not that important since pastors and staffs show little interest and offer little support in the function as well.

Third, new and elaborate church models are replacing traditional models. New models are needed but, with a de-emphasis in the teaching ministry of the church, these new models may not give Christian education the attention the Great Commission demands. Some seeker-sensitive church models shrink from a strong teaching position for fear of offending. Some purpose-driven church models only assume that Christian education will take place. The gospel is both decisive and divisive. It makes a difference and cuts clean across all human cultures and human desires. Christian teaching helps seekers and believers to understand why the gospel is counter to all human schemes. On the other hand, one cannot assume that Christian teaching will occur at the quality and quantity needed. Yes, the church teaches in everything it does, but much of the time, what it unintentionally teaches shames Christianity to the world and brings reproach on the Kingdom and our Lord. Many times what is unintentionally taught is louder and more profound than what is ineffectively intentionally taught. Is there a solution?

A better church model is one that includes some element that intentionally situates Christian education in every thing it does, since the church teaches in everything it does. “Teaching is an essential function with the Christian community.”<sup>17</sup> Today’s church must rediscover the role of the Holy Spirit in teaching. For the Christian, learning is not merely academic or rational. While academic skills can be useful and while God redeems us totally, body, soul and mind, the Holy Spirit is the transformational agent in the teaching-learning process. The Holy Spirit works through teacher, learner, environment, methods, and content (the Bible). He brings both conversion and maturation (a process) to the disciple of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

One often hears the question, “But can we teach the Bible in-depth at church with unbelievers and believers both present?” First, no one should ever purposefully teach the Bible in a shallow manner. To insist on “in-depth” Bible study seems to postulate that at least some of our Bible study is purposefully shallow. How dare we treat God’s Word as such? Second, when we teach persons the Bible, we must be true to the text. Teach it with all the depth and beauty and wonder the passage contains. Yes, we must recognize certain limitations: our finite understanding and teaching ability, the learning level of the learners, and time, to name only a few. Otherwise seek to appropriately exhaust the passage. To force a passage to be only evangelistic or only discipleship-oriented is to deny the power of God’s Word and the affective working of the Holy Spirit to activate the Word in the lives of believers and unbelievers. To teach only evangelistic or discipleship-oriented passages hobbles God’s Word and ignores the whole counsel of God. The Holy Spirit works the Word through the human teacher to learners producing change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The Holy Spirit’s presence in the

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<sup>17</sup>Coleman, 148.

<sup>18</sup>Daryl Eldridge, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Teaching” in *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, 46-52.

teaching-learning situation is very much an actualization of “and lo, I am with you always” in Matthew 29:20. In our teaching, Word without Spirit, is dry bones.<sup>19</sup> Spirit without Word is emotional fanaticism. Christian teaching is entirely dependent on Word and Spirit.

Roland Kuhl cites, among other ideas about relating God’s reign to Christian education, three ideas relevant to this topic. First, “Christian education must foster purposeful human action manifesting God’s reign.”<sup>20</sup> This associates with the making of disciples. Second, “Christian Education seeks to teach the learning of obedience, kingdomly action, a process of living with God’s reign.”<sup>21</sup> Third, “Christian education must utilize educational processes which involve making decisions for involvement in kingdom-oriented action.”<sup>22</sup> These statements underscore the need for Christian teaching. While some disassociate Christian education from theology, the reality is that education cannot be Christian without theology. As believers, we do not teach to hear ourselves or learn to simply amass information. For the Christian, teaching and learning are theological issues. “Teaching is much more than the passing on of information and filling students’ heads with knowledge. . . . The primary function of the teacher is to relate to the Master Teacher in such a way that he or she becomes God’s agent in the plan of redemption.”<sup>23</sup>

Teaching is the cutting edge of the mission of the church, then, today, and always. Close attention to teaching, from the pulpit to the Sunday School class of our very youngest, will focus the church on a needy, lost world, on a triumphant Redeemer who saves, and on life-changing encounters with Him. That attention is brought about with allegiance to the Great Commission

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<sup>19</sup>William R. Yount, *Created to Learn* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 19.

<sup>20</sup>Roland G. Kuhl, “The Reign of God: Implications for Christian Education,” *Christian Education Journal* 1 (Fall 1997): 81.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

and the Christ Who gave it. “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” is possible with our singular commitment to obey Him in that phrase. Jeremiah saw a day when the fulfillment of the “teaching” phrase of the Great Commission would become reality: “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more (Jer. 31:34 NASB).” With Christ’s power and help, we must make it so.

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<sup>23</sup>Knight, 200.