

Biblical Foundations for the Teaching Ministry of the Church

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Introduction

While organizations must continually re-invent themselves to stay relevant to changing times, those self-reinventions must not sever an organization from its purpose. Such organizations often drift from their founders' purposes and stagnate in a quagmire of lost identity. Successful organizations are organizations that effectively re-invent themselves while firmly tethered to their historical roots and founding purposes. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the church struggles to make the claims of Jesus Christ meaningful to new generations, just as it has for all generations since the Holy Spirit birthed the church on Pentecost two millennia ago. Particularly, the church in North America is repeatedly tempted to stray from its mission by the sparkle of technology and the oppression of political correctness. Yet, to remain true to the mission, certain functions must permeate the fabric of the church. These functions—worship, discipleship, evangelism, ministry, and fellowship—must mix in a living, symphonic arrangement allowing dynamic expression as the church follows her mission.¹ This paper will explore and review the biblical foundations for one element of the discipleship function, *viz.* teaching.

Old Testament Foundations for the Teaching Ministry of the Church

Even a casual reading of the Old Testament reveals that “the religion of the Bible is a teaching religion, and the God of the Bible is a teaching God.”² Job 36:22 expresses this truth most eloquently and simply: “God is exalted in his power. Who is a teacher like him?”³ While all religions

¹ Gene Mims, *Kingdom Principles for Church Growth* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2001), 33-34.

² Lucien E. Coleman, Jr., “Summary of the Doctrine of Education”, ed. Johnnie Godwin. *The Disciple's Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1988), 1699.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, references and quotations from Scripture are from the New International Version (NIV).

have teaching components, Judaism was a teaching religion from the very beginning.⁴

God as Teacher

In the Bible, the first words of God spoken to persons outside the Trinity were words of instruction. He told Adam and Eve about his plan for humans on planet earth (Gen 1:28). Later he instructed them in practical matters for life in general (Gen 1:29-20) and about eternal life and sin (Gen 2:16-17). After the first man and the first woman chose rebellion against God, he taught them the consequences of their sin and demonstrated his provision for sin by slaying animals from which he made coverings for them (Gen 3:16-21). These examples reveal much about God as teacher, yet they only hint at the richness of this concept. This understanding of God as teacher is so important because “what we think about God indicates what we do about education.”⁵

God's Revelation as Teaching

What would we know about God if he had not chosen to reveal himself to us? We might ascertain that a generally benevolent intelligence created all things, but beyond that we would know nothing about God without his self-revelation. Christianity is indeed two sided: because of a God-shaped void, all persons seek to know the Creator, but because God is so transcendent above us, our search for him is futile. However, God is compassionate and revealed himself to us so that we could know him.⁶ His act of revelation is teaching. As Baptists, we hold that the Bible is God's revelation and as such forms the basis for all of our teaching. Since the Bible provides for us the progression of God's self-revelation, we teach it and believe it in its entirety, not in a piecemeal fashion.

God's Initiated Relationships as Teaching

A perusal of the Old Testament reveals that God initiated relationships with persons. Notable examples include Adam and Eve, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Isaiah, to name only a few. Each of these examples shows God starting and guiding the relationship as a teacher. Adam and Eve learned about life, both earthly and spiritual, from their conversations and daily walks with God. God called Abraham and taught Abraham about himself. Abraham learned about God as a promise-maker

⁴ Jack D. Terry, “History of the Doctrine of Education,” edited by Johnnie Godwin. *The Disciple's Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1988), 1728.

⁵ Robert E. Clark, Lin Johnson, and Allyn K. Sloak, eds. *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1991), 32.

⁶ J. B. Weatherspoon, *The Book We Teach* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1934), 23.

(and later a promise-keeper), a guide, a supplier of rich blessings, the giver of heritages, and a protector, sovereign and mighty (Gen 12:2-3). Joseph saw through God's relationship actions that God was a God who could not only give dreams but actualize them as well (Gen 37-50). Moses, away from the people of God, met God in a burning bush. Though Moses resisted God's call to lead Israel to the promised land by claiming a lack of ability, God said, "I . . . will teach you what to do" (Exod 4:15). Isaiah learned about God's majesty and glory in a way that reshaped his whole life and mission (Isa 6). Even in his corporate relationships with families, tribes, and nations, God taught through his covenant-making, indicating how he used relationships to teach about himself.

Moses as Teacher

Of all Jews, Moses stands out as the greatest. A learned man, God used him to free Israel from Egyptian bondage, provide leadership to a new nation on pilgrimage to their promised land, and give Israel and the world the greatest system of law ever known.⁷ Terry says of Moses,

Moses, chosen by God to deliver his people from the yoke of bondage in Egypt, was called the greatest of schoolmasters. Given the privilege of doing signs and wonders by the hand of God, he taught the Israelites and the Egyptians the omnipotence of God and his judgment on those who opposed him.⁸

God demonstrates through Moses the need and place for teachers among his people. Israel reflects the influence and results that one teacher, obedient to God, can have.

Passover and Other Feasts as Teacher

Interestingly, God did not leave teaching to a few chosen individuals, but dispersed the function widely in the community of faith. One method God directed as such was the observance of the various feasts and festivals of the Jewish calendar. Much of the instruction provided by these events was centered in the home and given to parents as their responsibility.⁹ The prime example of feasts as teacher can be seen in the observance of the Passover. Exodus 12:24-28 points out that even at its

⁷ Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea, eds. *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1975), 1152.

⁸ Jack D. Terry, Jr., "God as Teacher," in *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 6.

⁹ See Deut 6: 7 (NIV) and the use of our English word "impress" as indicative of the parents' teaching responsibility.

inception, the Passover was to be a lasting ordinance among God's people. They were to use it to teach each new generation about God's provision and deliverance. The Sabbath observance, the Passover, Pentecost, The Feast of Trumpets, Year of Jubilee, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles were all given in the Law as observances that taught God's people about God and his rule.¹⁰

Law as Teacher

The Law was more than a codex of civil legislation. It contained God's commandments for everything from religious life to family life to business and agriculture. In Romans, Paul argued that the Law was provided to teach us of our own weaknesses and inability to please God (Rom 3-5). Galatians 3:24-25 likens the Law to a hired schoolmaster under whose tutelage we must submit until the grace of Jesus Christ sets us free. Torah, the description given the first five books of our Old Testament, is derived from words meaning "to throw or shoot (arrows)" and "to point, guide, instruct, [and] teach."¹¹ To the Hebrew mind, there was no difference between law and instruction.

Prophets and Priests as Teachers

Besides giving primary teaching responsibility to parents, God instituted other means to teach his people. Throughout the Old Testament period, God inspired and used prophets and priests to teach his people. Beginning with Samuel and extending to the prophets of the divided kingdom, God spoke his instructions through them. Samuel stated, "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right" (1 Sam 12:23). Even when you consider the acts of the prophets, such as Hosea's marriage to a prostitute whom he buys back from the auction block of slavery, they are instructive of God's relationship with Israel (Hos 1-3). Isaiah preached sermons. Amos illustrated God's word with familiar illustrations of plumb lines and ripening fruit.

Priests also served in teaching roles. When Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, he brought forth Ezra to read the book of the Law of Moses to all the people gathered before the water gate. Then Levites moved among the people, explaining what they had heard. The people responded first with grief over their failure to keep the law, then with joy because they now understood God's laws (Neh 8). When Josiah's reforms brought about the recovery of the book of the Law, Hilkiah the priest, along with Huldah the prophetess, are instrumental in teaching a

¹⁰ Terry, 8-15.

¹¹ Pfeiffer, Vos, and Rea, 1727.

new generation (2 Chr 34).

Teaching in Israel's Worship and Wisdom Literature

Having considered the Law, prophets, and historical writings of the Old Testament for the concept of teaching, the foundations of teaching ministry are also rooted in the worship and wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The entire book of Proverbs is instructional in nature, especially the first nine chapters where instruction from parents is given to their son (Prov 1-9). Even the hymns of Israel as found in the Psalms were in many cases instructive in nature: Psalm 1, 14, 19, 32, 84, and 119, to name only a few. Of another wisdom book, "Ecclesiastes is the English title of this wisdom book derived from the Greek Septuagint's translation of the original Hebrew, 'Qoheleth.' The word *Qoheleth* (1:1; 7:27; 12:8) suggests one who has a function as teacher or preacher in the assembly."¹² Israel noted little distinction between Scripture, wisdom, and instruction.

Synagogue

Sometime during the Exile, after the destruction of Solomon's temple, Jews developed what was probably the most important institution of their religious life, the synagogue. Synagogues were formed wherever ten Jewish males resided. Typical synagogue services consisted of scripture readings and recitations, prayers, sermons, and a benediction.¹³

Although the synagogue was a place of worship for Jews living remotely from the temple, the synagogue became a place of teaching and study of the law.

Strictly speaking, the temple was the place of worship in Judaism, while the synagogue became the educational institution, providing a place to study the law. As the institution for the study and inculcation of the law the synagogue was especially suited to the Pharisaic interest; and from the 2nd cen. B.C. onward, this institution was dominated by the Pharisees. In practice, however, the distinction between worship and instruction disappeared . . .¹⁴

The importance of the synagogue cannot be overemphasized whenever we consider the spread of the gospel during the first century. Paul's custom was to speak about the claims of the gospel first to Jews in the

¹² Trent C. Butler, ed., *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 388.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1312.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1640.

synagogue. The synagogue's reputation was as a place of learning and teaching that provided the platform for much of Paul's missionary work.

New Testament Foundations of the Teaching Ministry of the Church

The church was born at Pentecost as the Holy Spirit spoke the good news of Jesus Christ through the apostles and other disciples gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2). While the teaching ministry of the church sprouted from the soils of the Old Testament, it put down roots, sent up stalks, bloomed and bore fruit in the early days of the church.

New Testament Concepts

At least two major New Testament concepts must be addressed to understand the teaching ministry of the first century church. These terms are *kerygma* and *didache*.

Kerygma

Kerygma refers to "preaching" or "proclamation." While the early church may not have made any distinction between the act and the content of proclamation, today *kerygma* primarily refers to the content of the proclamation. In today's terms we refer to the message of the gospel.¹⁵

The *kerygma* refers to the presentation of the message of Jesus Christ by heralds, who were sent forth ("apostles"), commissioned to declare to an unbelieving world those saving acts by which God through Christ had brought salvation to mankind. It has often been pointed out by modern scholars that this proclamation underlies every writing in the New Testament. It becomes explicit at many points, but even where it is only implicit, it is the ground-message on which all else is founded.¹⁶

One such example of kerygmatic material is found in Peter's defense before the chief priests in Acts 5:30-32 (NASB):

The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.

¹⁵ Michael J. Anthony, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 389.

¹⁶ Ralph G. Turnbull, *Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1967), 414.

Didache

A word closely interrelated to *kerygma* is the noun *didache*. Its verb form means “to teach.” In other variations of the word it may mean “those who have been taught,” those “qualified to teach,” “a teacher” or “master,” “the act of or occupation of teaching,” or “instruction” or the content of a teaching.¹⁷ *Didache* is the part of the gospel that springs from the proclamation of the gospel. It is the working out of the gospel into daily living. While the *kerygma* may precede the *didache*, they cannot be separated, but are intertwined at every point. Excellent examples are Galatians 5, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

The implications of the relation of *kerygma* and *didache* for Christian education have been increasingly studied in recent years. Among the first serious Protestant studies of this type was Iris V. Cully’s *The Dynamics of Christian Education* (The Westminster Press, 1958). She pointed out that the very proclamation of the good news is teaching,” not in the sense of imparting information, but “the dynamic word through which a redemptive experience is mediated. The way in which it is proclaimed as well as the fact of its proclamation gives a ground for interpreting the experience. When the words are appropriated by the person and he is turned around—accepting the forgiveness of God, finding new life in Jesus Christ—then he has the ground for interpreting the experience” (p. 48). The *kerygma* at many levels yields teaching as the church seeks to understand the moral implications of the gospel, as it interprets the redemptive events in the life of the Christian community through fellowship, and as it faces the apologetic task—interpreting its life to the world.¹⁸

Turnbull goes on to note that this dynamic interplay between proclamation and teaching is infiltrating preaching, evangelism, pastoral care and ministry, and counseling as well as education.¹⁹ While his words are about fifty years old, this struggle between proclamation and teaching is still troubling many pastors today. While many seem to divorce the two, a few are recognizing their connectedness and synthesizing new and meaningful efforts in proclamation and teaching in the church.

Other New Testament Terms

In his chapter “Establishing Biblical Foundations” in *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future*, Hayes identifies another set of New Testament terms that closely relate to teaching. *Dida/skw* is the

¹⁷ Friberg, Timothy and Barbara. *The Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 98.

¹⁸ Turnbull, 416.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

most common verb for teaching in the New Testament. As a noun, it is translated as “doctrine” (Acts 2:42; 2 Tim 3:16). Another form, *didaskalos* is our word “teacher.” *Paideuo/w* means “to give guidance and training” and is related to the use of terms meaning “small child” (Eph 6:4; 2 Tim 3:16). Another term, *nouqe/te*, means “to shape the mind” or “admonish.” Four examples of its use (1 Cor 4:14; 10:11; Eph 6:4; Col 3:16) indicate the richness of this strong verb. Our noun “disciple” and the verb meaning “to disciple” come from the *maqhte/w* word group. Many examples of this word’s noun and verb forms are found in the Gospels and Acts. “Building up” or “edifying” through teaching is seen in the word *oikodomew* (1 Cor 3:9; 8:1; 1 Thess 5:11; 1 Pet 2:5). Teaching that allows the learner to compare and contrast is *parati/qhmi*, literally meaning “I set before” or “I place beside” (1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 2:2). Acts 11:4, 18:26, and 28:23 show Peter explaining his vision, Priscilla and Aquila teaching Apollos the rest of the story of salvation, and Paul defending the faith with a chronological recounting of the faith. The word used in these examples is *eokti/qhmi*. Finally, *oqhge/w* is used to show a sense of leading, guiding or demonstrating the way (Acts 1:16; John 16:13; Acts 8:31; Matt 15:14; 23:16, 24; Rev 7:17).²⁰ The use of such powerful and diverse words illustrates the richness of the teaching concept in the New Testament. Interestingly, Paul encourages his protégé, Timothy, with teaching terms: that pastors should be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2) and to disciple others (2 Tim 2:2). The office and function of pastor is oriented toward teaching.

Other New Testament Foundations

Jesus as Teacher

To discuss the roots of the church’s teaching ministry and overlook Jesus’ teaching ministry would be travesty. Yet, to talk about Jesus’ teaching ministry in some light to make it appear that his teaching ministry was some separate and distinct segment of his ministry is also travesty. In the Gospels, nearly every recorded saying and action of Jesus was teaching, usually above and beyond anything else that those sayings and actions might also be. Jesus is associated with the word at least forty-five times. Counting other related terms, the total moves up to more than sixty-six in the King James Version. Yet, he is never referred to as a preacher. He was said to be teaching about forty-five times while he was said to be preaching only eleven times. He referred to himself as a teacher and used educational language to refer to his followers or

²⁰ Edward L. Hayes, “Establishing Biblical Foundations” in *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future*, eds. Clark, Johnson, and Sloak (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1991), 39.

students.²¹

Jesus taught in everything he said and did and set the example for all Christian teachers who follow him to do likewise. He used a variety of methods of instruction. He called for decision and commitment with his lessons. His use of language penetrated the human heart. He was a storyteller without peer. He taught persons of both genders, all ages, various ethnic persons, the wealthy, and the poor. He crossed all religious and political boundaries as he taught. He turned the questions of listeners back on them like arrows that revealed the seekers' intent. He commanded that his followers teach all he had taught. No other teacher like him has ever existed. He is the master Teacher.²²

Paul as Teacher

Paul was a Pharisee and trained at the feet of Gamaliel, one of Judaism's most famous teachers. Paul was trained to be a teacher. While we are likely to think of Paul as a missionary and preacher, teaching is woven into his work. In fact we might view Paul as a teaching evangelist. We do not have many examples of Paul's verbal teaching, but we do have a rich treasury of his written communication. His work is clearly didactic in nature, mixing the *kerygma* and the *didache* in a free manner. Starting with the *kerygma*, he went on to teach about the meaning of being "in Christ" with its moral and ethical principles for the social context of the community of faith. One only has to read Galatians and Ephesians, Romans, and 1 and 2 Timothy to see the breadth of content in Paul's teaching.

In many ways Paul stands as almost a unique figure in the annals of Christian history. He combined the fervency of an evangelist, the compassion of a pastor, the perception of a scholar, and the diplomacy of a statesman. He was able to minister meaningfully with the context of their appreciation to Jews in their synagogues, to Gentiles having some contact with the teachings of Judaism, and to Gentiles entirely devoid of any Jewish preparatory instruction. He was prepared to correct and instruct his converts by beginning at a point of common agreement, and then leading them on to an appreciation of rightful significance in and proper expression of their Christian faith.²³

Conclusion

The roots of the teaching ministry of the church permeate every facet of

²¹ J. M. Price, *Jesus the Teacher* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1946), 13-15.

²² Clark, Johnson, and Sloak, 87-102.

²³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 111.

Holy Scripture. Yet, to conclude with that point says little to the contemporary church struggling with this vital function of the church. Coleman concludes in *Why the Church Must Teach*:

Teaching is an essential function within the Christian community, just as metabolic processes are vital to a living organism. Teaching may take place in worship services, Bible classes, counseling sessions, training events, choir rehearsals, and Christian homes. But it *must* take place.²⁴

He goes on to state that the church must teach to maintain its identity. The church must teach to pass on the Christian tradition. It must teach so it can evangelize. It must teach so to enable church members for worship. Finally, the church must teach so believers develop the character of Christ.²⁵ The church has always taught to these ends and must always teach to these ends. With its roots deeply sustained in Scripture, the church must teach each new generation the ever wonderful, timeless, and glorious gospel.

²⁴ Lucien E. Coleman, Jr., *Why the Church Must Teach* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 148.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148-166.