OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Esteem for Teaching

David Anguish

Howard Hendricks, late professor of Christian education at Dallas Theological Seminary, told of a woman he met at a Bible school teachers conference. A widow who had always desired to attend such an event, she had only then found one close enough to her home. She purchased a bus ticket and rode all night to be on time for the morning workshops. Hendricks learned that she taught a class of thirteen junior high boys, about one-fourth of the 55 students enrolled in her church's Sunday school. He also confessed he wrongly guessed her age to be about 65. She probably didn't mind; she was 83! (From a 1984 presentation by Hendricks at the College Church in Wheaton, Illinois; in Hughes 1991, 132).

As I read her story, I was impressed by her passion and commitment. I was also reminded of people I had known who demonstrated similar passion well into their retirement years.

I discovered Hendricks's account while preparing for a sermon on the command in James 3.1: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." (The imperative form of γίνομαι [*ginomai*] is expressed more forcefully in the NASB 2020: "Do not become teachers in large numbers, my brothers, since you know that we who are teachers will incur a stricter judgment.") Although he begins his statement with the negative "not many" (μὴ πολλοὶ; *mē polloi*), James's intent was not to discourage

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teaching or restrict the teacher roster. He wanted the church and its teachers to esteem teaching as the noble task it is.

Teaching in the NT Era

In James's world, teachers were well respected. Literally meaning *O revered (or great) One,* "a *rab* or *rabbî* in the Judaism of the time of Christ had the task of expounding the Torah and of giving rulings in matters of the law. He had pupils (*talmudîm*) who studied his exposition and his rulings and were in duty bound to respect and obey their teacher." In the first century AD, "rabbi" had become the exclusive term for an officially appointed teacher of the law (Wegenast 1978, 766–767).

The value placed on teaching by the earliest Christians is indicated by the fact that the article "Teach" and related words in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* is developed around five words, all with multiple variations. Διδάσκαλος (*didaskalos*), used in James 3.1, appears 59 times in the NT; 41 refer to Jesus who embraced the title, *Teacher* (John 13.13). After Pentecost, the disciples were commended for devotion to "the apostles' teaching" (διδαχή, *didachē*) (Acts 2.42). Other texts show that teachers had a notable role in the earliest churches (Acts 13.1; 1 Cor 12.28; Eph 4.11). Paul included *didaskalos* along with "preacher" (κῆρυξ, *kērux*) and "apostle" (ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*) in summary statements of his work (1 Tim 2.7; 2 Tim 1.11).

As Douglas Moo observes, James intended to emphasize that teaching is too important to be thought of only as an honorific title:

> A certain authority and prestige naturally adhered to the teaching ministry. Particularly was this so in a society where few people could read and where people in the lower classes had few opportunities for advancement in status. It is not surprising, then, that Christians were attracted to the teaching ministry. Concern about believers flocking to this ministry for the wrong reasons probably lies behind James' warning: *Let not many of you become teachers* (Moo 1985, 119).

Blomberg and Kamell summarize the effort entailed in giving teaching the respect it deserves:

> Religious teachers in James's world were those who passed on sacred tradition. Their key task was to learn it accurately and transmit it exactly. Only after written texts or oral traditions were correctly memorized were disciples of a rabbi ready to discuss them, lest they misrepresent them unwittingly (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 152).

The Church and Teaching

Mention teaching in the modern church and most think "Sunday school" (or "Bible class program"). But given the relatively recent origin of that method and the manner with which it is

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sometimes undertaken, we should take a step back and evaluate how closely our practice replicates that of the earliest believers.

Long before the Sunday school model became the norm, Christians understood the necessity of consistent, thorough teaching for completing the discipling process and growing the body (cf. Matt 28.20a; Eph 4.11–16). As Philip Slate has noted, this was one of the aims of the NT writings: "It can be argued successfully that all NT documents have for at least one of their purposes that of instructing Christians in their identity and required behavior, facilitating their growth and defense against threats to their faith" (Slate 2011, 1). Think about the citations and allusions to OT texts throughout the epistles that obviously assume the readers' prior knowledge of them. It is apparent they had been taught the content of those texts, no surprise when we remember the disciples' continual devotion to apostolic teaching, efforts to strengthen those who were already disciples, and utilization of teaching centers from which believers took what they learned into surrounding regions (Acts 2.42; 14.22; 19.9–10; Col 1.7; cf. Polhill 2008, 2125).

Think also about the significance of the church's practice in the centuries after the first, beginning with the church fathers whose citations were "so extensive … that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament" (Metzger 1992, 86). While correctly cited in discussions of the reliability of the NT text, we should think about what Metzger's comment suggests about the teaching practices of those men. Churches engaged in intentional catechetical instruction that was designed to prepare people for baptism so they would not be "wet pagans" (Slate 2011, 1). "Catechism" is a biblical concept, the word derived from the NT verb κατηχέω (*katēcheō*), "to cause to ring in the ears, inform, instruct, catechize" (Spicq 1994, 292). It appears eight times in the NT, notably in Galatians 6.6; 1 Corinthians 14.19; and Luke 1.4 (cf. Acts 18.24; 21.21, 24; Rom 2.18). Ancient believers understood the necessity of purposeful and thorough instruction to enable converts to grow stronger and be able to defend their faith in a hostile culture (cf. 1 Pet 3.15; 2 Tim 2.15).

Reflecting on Our Practice

A few months into my first local work after completing my undergraduate program, I had already begun to think about the church's teaching ministry, a process helped along by the influence of the seasoned preacher/elder who mentored me in that work. I met Robert Martin, a missionary we helped support, who visited one Sunday to report on the status of his work. In his presentation during the Bible class hour, he stressed that one of the most important projects they were undertaking in what was then the early stages of their mission was the establishment of a school intended to provide opportunities for extensive training to equip new believers to become mature disciples. He and his overseeing church believed the training was necessary to develop stable, indigenous churches who would be increasingly less dependent on American

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missionaries. After he spoke, I told him how impressed I was with the training school aim and added that I would like to see stateside churches similarly increase our intensity at the congregational level.

In the years since, I've thought often about that conversation, especially when hearing other missionaries describe similar efforts. But in time, I began to wonder if my memory was accurate. Had Robert in fact said the schools were designed for *all* believers or were they intended to be *preacher* training schools? Because we had seen each other at other times when he presented reports to churches I served later, I felt comfortable reaching out for clarification. He assured me that my decades-old memory was correct: the training was for *everyone*. He also shared that just nineteen years after I heard his report, the first training schools became a Bible College, a school that has made a difference in both his original mission destination and in the neighboring regions to which their work has been extended. The school is now nearly 30 years old.

Would a similar plan be fruitful in 21st century U. S. churches? Would other methods work better? That doubtless depends on the church and its commitment to teaching. What we can say in light of James 3.1 is that we will do well to evaluate what we do to determine whether it reaches the standard James had in mind.

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