

So You Want To Be A Teacher...?

A teacher is one who gives instruction on what the scriptures *mean*, not so much what they *say*. The word, διδάσκαλος, is interpreted by Strong's as *master, teacher, doctor*.

Unlike the office of an elder, there doesn't seem to be any clear guidance for those desiring to become teachers of God's word. There are, however, certain admonitions concerning the office:

- Let not many of you become teachers (masters—KJV), my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. (James 3:1) (NAS)

Although many interpret the “stricter judgment” as being against false teachers, the scriptures bear out a more fundamental issue: *teachers who know God's word are without excuse when they practice the opposite of what they preach*.

There are three qualifications for a teacher that may be deduced from scriptural examples. They are sincerity, humility, and patience. One may object to not listing knowledge as a pre-requisite. However, the title implies that teachers are supposed to know what they're talking about. Paul gives us insight into a fundamental problem with the issue of knowledge:

- The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions (1 Tim 1:5-7). (NAS)

Notice that the goal of instruction is

1. Love from a pure heart
2. A good conscience
3. A sincere faith

When you have someone who exalts him or herself to the office, and yet fails to understand the subject they're teaching, those three objectives cannot be met. Paul's indictment is clear: certain men don't have the above-mentioned goals in mind. They waste time on “fruitless discussion”—lessons that don't bear fruit in the listener's life.

If a student is learning the carpentry trade, understanding the electrician's work may be interesting, but it will not bring fruit as far as learning how to saw and hammer wood together. The same goes with the bible: teaching Greek may be interesting, but it won't yield much spiritual fruit. Teaching Mormonism may be interesting, but where's the goal of instruction? The proper working of each individual part, which then causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (Eph 4:16) comes not from studying side issues, but from teaching the truth of God's word.

Qualification #1: A pure heart witnessed by good deeds

In Ephesians 4:11, it says that Christ endowed certain ones with the miraculous *gift* of teaching after His ascension. James, however, implies that teaching can be assumed by anyone. “Let not many become teachers.” Thus, the office could be *allowed* (let) without miraculous intervention by the Holy Spirit.

Although James doesn’t outline any qualifications, the context provides clear evidence that control of one’s speech was a foremost consideration. He says, “Let not many of you become teachers.” Why? The next verse tells us:

- For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (James 3:2)

Thus, sound *speech* is connected to deeds of the body, making a person perfect, or mature. This perfection, or maturity, confirms Christ’s observation of the scribes and Pharisees:

- “All that they tell you, *do and observe*, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.” (Matt 23:3)

The Jewish religious leaders were therefore *able* as teachers but were not able to “bridle their bodies,” as James points out. This is why he mentions the stricter judgment.

God sees *example* as more important than the *skill* in imparting His truths to others. Paul wrote that he buffeted his body, so that, after preaching to others, he wouldn’t be disqualified from receiving eternal life (1 Cor 9:27). Without self-control, all the teaching skills in the world will not impress God.

This crucial aspect of purity of heart and good deeds can be seen in Jesus’ words regarding what made a person truly unclean:

- “Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” (Matt 15:11-12)

The Jewish leaders, who saw themselves as the light of the world (Rom 2:17–24), were offended, not only because Jesus challenged their traditions, but because He also exposed their hypocrisy.

Qualification #2: Humility

It stands to reason that a person who exalts himself above others is not what lines up in light of scripture. Even in today’s so-called Christian culture, some who embrace the pulpit also desire to “lord it over” others. The vestments of pope, priest and preacher all advertise and distinguish a man who stands out above all others. The biblical prophets proclaimed God’s word wearing sackcloth, animal skins (2 Kgs 1:7 – 8; Matt 3:4), and sometimes did so naked (Isa 2:20).

This is a far cry from some of today's preachers, who adorn themselves in costly and sometimes outrageous garb in order to stand out from their followers. Even in humble churches the preacher feels obliged to wear a suit and tie in order to satisfy the paradigm.

A teacher is not unlike a prophet—both proclaim God's word. While the prophet did it through direct correspondence with God, today's teachers do it through devotion to study of that same revelation.

A look at scripture shows that God chose certain individuals *to proclaim His word*. Some, like Moses and Jeremiah, were reluctant to carry out this proclamation (Exod 4; Jer 1). Ezekiel began his mission in great anger over the stubbornness of Israel to accept God's word (Eze 3:14).

From this we can gather that those who spoke God's will did so, not out of ambition, but out of a need to get people focused on obedience. The same should be true—based on scriptural example—for today's teachers. Those who seek to impress, dazzle, or otherwise draw attention to their speaking skills or knowledge are not doing their congregations justice.

A cursory reading of the NT letters show that the early church was rife with problems. Assuming that the infant church had spiritual gifts, inspired teachers still had problems dealing with false doctrines.

A person who is truly humble places himself below others, not seeking attention or gain. The cares and glitter of the world are not vying for his time and attention. The heartfelt objective should be one of guiding others to do God's will.

Qualification #3: Patience

Paul "solemnly charged" Timothy to "preach the word...with great patience and instruction." (2 Tim 4). The reason for such a charge is found in the warnings that people would eventually turn away from the truth and install teachers who would make them feel good. Indeed, a constant theme in the NT is a warning against false teachers. As Israel was self-inflicted with false prophets, so too did the early church begin to absorb and cultivate false teachers.

As urgent as Paul's charge was, he did not tell Timothy to beat people over the head, or threaten them with eternal damnation as a way to keep members faithful. Instead, he urged him to use *great* patience and instruction.

A natural inclination when facing dogmatism, ignorance, or spiritual immaturity is to eventually throw up one's hands in exasperation. It's not our place to discern who is a lost cause and write them off. Although Jesus refused to comply with some of the Jewish leaders' demands for miracles and cooperation with their tradition, He always tried to show them what God truly desired for mankind: repentance and obedience. He never wrote them off as a lost cause.

It took me many years to accept certain doctrines as patently false. Without the patience of an old janitor named Carl, who knew the Word better than most college-educated preachers, I would still be hung up in false doctrine.

Carl didn't do a today-we're-going-to-investigate-doctrine-X, and nit-pick it apart using scripture. Instead, he showed how to change one's *perspective* of scripture. Most of it was done by simply asking questions. Once he painted a person into a corner, where questions could no longer be answered, instruction could then begin. Instead of learning a certain false teaching, I learned the Truth, and false doctrine was then easily detected.

Do we really need teachers today?

Certain scriptures seem to imply that the need for specialized gifts would disappear. In fact, the Hebrews writer says, "They shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest of them" (Heb 8:11).

Looking at early church history, we can see that a dispersion of God's written will would seem to eliminate the need for the *gift* of teaching. Regardless, the responsibility to learn God's will falls not on the teacher, but on the individual. Having a lousy teacher does not excuse a person. This individual responsibility is promoted elsewhere:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food (Heb 5:12).

However, spiritual growth is not so much self-discipline as it is a group effort. The admonishment to teach *one another* is a combined effort. Christians build up *one another*, not one person doing the work and everyone else watching from the pews.

SUMMARY

A quick scan of a concordance shows that the title of "teacher" was used primarily for God in the OT, and especially Jesus in the NT (42 times). Therefore, the qualifications of a teacher can be seen in the life of Christ. It is there that the student of scripture should begin, not with scrutinizing Greek participles, but with how the Master lived. All of Christ's teachings are reflected in how He lived His life. The greater skills are not to be learned in lectureships or workshops, where technique is emphasized, but in how one lives their life. It is there that others can see God's will in practice, and should incite others to imitate that conformity.

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