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“A Teacher Like God”

Integrating Faith and Teacher Education

By Horace Alexander

“Who is a teacher like [God]?” Job’s rhetorical question (Job 36:22, NIV)¹ underscores the transcendent love, greatness, and majesty of God as He endeavors to educate humanity in the eternal verities. Consider the teaching credentials of God: He is the Source of knowledge and truth, and in Him “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). In addition, God created the human mind and ordained the laws of learning. He knows how people learn and how they can best be taught. Furthermore, all three members of the Godhead have had teaching experience (Psalm 32:8; John 3:2; Luke 12:12).

A didactic relationship existed between God and Israel:

The Lord reserved to Himself the education and instruction of Israel. His care was not restricted to their religious interests. Whatever affected their mental or physical well-being became also an object of divine solicitude.²

The Bible records similar educational relationships from Adam to the Christian era. It is as authoritative on educational matters as on other areas of human life.

Christian educators have long recognized the authority of God’s Word for establishing general principles of education (“Train up a child in the way he should go...”—Proverbs 22:6) and as a guide for formulating sound educational philosophy. (“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ”—Colossians 2:8). Beyond philosophy and principles, however, the Scriptures afford insights into learning theory and teaching methodology to an extent as yet only poorly appreciated.

Recognizing that all sound educational theory and practice formulated by human beings have their origin in God, significant harmony should exist between pedagogy and Scripture:

The world has had its great teachers.... We can trace the line of the world’s teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them.... As far as their teaching is true... the world’s great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gleam of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world.³

Parallels and congruities should therefore be evident between biblical statements about education and what many modern educators espouse. If Christian educators were to don pedagogical spectacles as they read the Scriptures and, under the Spirit’s guidance, think the thoughts of the

Great Teacher after Him, they would recognize that those parallels and congruencies do exist, as the following sampling of educational perspectives will serve to illustrate.

Objectives

Current emphasis on specific learning outcomes, expressed through the formulation of objectives, finds precedence in Scripture. Sprinkled throughout Jesus' outpouring of His heart to the Father recorded in John 17:13-26 are His objectives for the disciples:

- "That they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves" (verse 13).
- "That they also might be sanctified through the truth" (verse 19).
- "That they may be made perfect in one" (verses 21-23).
- "That the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them" (verse 23).
- That "they may be with me where I am" (verse 24).
- "That they may behold my glory" (verse 24).
- "That the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them" (verse 26).

In the Old Testament the Psalmist suggests worthwhile objectives for the youth: fear God, enjoy life, use discretion, be truthful, do good, and pursue peace.⁴ These objectives are as relevant today as when they were written thousands of years ago.

Domains of Learning

Learning outcomes are usually grouped into three categories or "domains": the cognitive (intellectual development), the psychomotor (performance skills), and the affective (attitudes, values, and emotions). Interestingly, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, His exhortation to humble service addressed all three domains: "If ye know these things [cognitive], happy are ye [affective] if ye do them [psychomotor]" (John 13:17).

Educators have attempted to describe and classify the types of learning occurring in each of these domains. Various committees such as those led by Bloom, Simpson, and Krathwohl have developed classifications (called "taxonomies") of the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains. The following progression of affective growth was suggested by Krathwohl: receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing. Each step includes and adds to the previous step.

The Bible is replete with such classifications. Some are hierarchically integrated such as Peter's taxonomy of the affective domain:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to

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knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-8, NIV).

Grouping

Clear Scriptural evidence exists to indicate the use of grouping methodology by the Master Teacher. Examination of the four Gospel listings of the disciples⁵ indicates that the sequence of the names is nearly identical in each list. For example, Peter is always mentioned first, and Judas Iscariot always comes last, except in Acts, where his name is omitted.

In Acts 1 the disciples are described as meeting to elect a successor to Judas, which also underscores their perception of the need to keep group organization intact. A structural analysis of Acts 1:13 suggests that the disciples (now apostles) were sometimes divided into three groups led by Peter, Philip, and James the son of Alphaeus. With the replacement of Judas with Matthias, the apostles would again form three groups of four.

At times Jesus saw the need for dividing His students into two groups (Mark 6:7). He used a similar configuration when He sent out the Seventy for their field experience (Luke 10:1). Matthew's account of Jesus' sending out the Twelve (Matthew 10:1-4) goes so far as to specify which disciples were paired for their practicums.

Problem-Solving

Problem-solving techniques can also be found in the Scriptures. For example, in the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8, 9), the woman uses convergent thinking in solving her problem. Likewise, in seeking solutions to one's problems today, one could do the following:

"Light a candle"—become acquainted with and review the "light," i.e., the information and counsel available on the problem.

"Sweep the house"—explore the territory likely to offer a solution, eliminating extraneous elements and irrelevant data.

"Seek diligently"—Concentrate intensely on the possible solutions or options, using various angles and perspectives.

"Till she find it"—Converge on the solution, discover the best or only acceptable option.

"[Call] her friends and neighbors together" (NIV)—share findings with others who could benefit from the discovery.

Special Education

With 15 of Christ's 20 recorded miracles of healing being performed for handicapped persons, the Bible is rich in insights for special education. U.S. law P.L. 92-142 stipulates that handicapped children must be provided with a free and appropriate education, and that an individualized education plan (IEP) must be developed for each of these children. It also requires that they be placed in the "least restrictive environment" that will ensure their progress. This involves "mainstreaming" or placing them with nonhandicapped children as far as possible.

One account of Jesus' interactions with a handicapped person recorded in Mark 7:32-37 affirms the validity of these stipulations. Mark notes that the man in question was "deaf, and had an impediment in his speech" (verse 32), two problems that often go together.

Jesus' interaction with this handicapped person is a study in special education. First, the Master Teacher determined that the man had reached the point where "mainstreaming" would no longer be in his best interest. Therefore He "took him aside from the multitude" (verse 33). Then Jesus communicated with him in the only way that met his individual needs: He used visual and tactile rather than aural cues.

Taking the man away from the crowd indicated to him that he had the Master's sole attention. Christ then "put his fingers into his ears." This was not a healing touch, but a means of indicating His awareness of the man's problem. Next "he spit" (the saliva and tears of great persons were alleged to have therapeutic powers) and "touched his tongue" to indicate that He knew about the speech problem and was about to administer healing therapy. Then "looking up to heaven, he sighed" (verse 34). Jesus could have instead bowed His head, closed His eyes, and prayed, but this would not have given a clear visual signal to indicate the Source of healing power.

Thus, Jesus clearly communicated, using sign language, that He knew the man's problems, and was about to heal him using the power He had received from the Father. Only then did Jesus use an aural cue saying "Be opened." This was probably as much for the benefit of the

onlookers as for the man who was healed at that instant.

Teaching Like God

Viewing the Bible as simply illustrating some modern theories and methods of education is, however, not sufficient. Nor do we fully appreciate its educational value when we see it as offering only philosophy and general principles of education. Beyond these, we can let God help us become better teachers if we study the teaching experiences recorded in His Word. This gives a new dimension to a familiar passage: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for *teaching* the truth... and *giving instruction*... so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17, TEV).⁶

Christian educators have the unique privilege of becoming "fully qualified and equipped" through a study of the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They have greater potential for developing expertise in pedagogy than the nonbeliever because "the natural man receiveth not the things... of God" (1 Corinthians 2:14) but "we have received... the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (verse 12).

With God as the teacher's Teacher, Job's question need not be viewed solely as rhetorical. Since "Godliness—godlikeness—is the goal to be reached,"⁷ Christian educators can emulate God in both their personal and professional lives. Each can be "a teacher like God." Under His tutelage we recognize that "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40, NIV). What more could one ask—to be a teacher like God! □

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REFERENCES

¹ From *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

² Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald* (October 30, 1900).

³ _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), pp. 13, 14.

⁴ Psalm 34:11-14.

⁵ Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; and Acts 1:13.

⁶ Bible texts credited to TEV are from the *Good News Bible*—Old Testament: Copyright © American Bible Society 1976; New Testament: Copyright © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976.

⁷ White, *Education*, p. 18.