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Do We Teach the Bible or do We Teach Students?

by James Plueddemann

Both the clear teaching of Scripture and its application to the needs of the person, church and society are necessary. But neither content nor application is sufficient by itself, and one without the other is dangerous. Yet much Bible teaching in the local church and in the seminary is either subject-matter centered or student centered. We must re-examine the necessary interdependence between knowledge and practice.

A False Dichotomy

The tasks of biblical scholarship and biblical teaching are related yet different. The novice Bible professor may be a competent scholar who has mastered ancient languages, developed skills of research and become an expert in a specific technical area of knowledge. But in the classroom the teacher is appalled to discover that

students don't know if the book of Hebrews is in the Old or New Testament. Many have never heard of Calvinism or eschatology. The teacher is dismayed by the biblical and theological illiteracy of students and blames local churches for a lack of solid biblical teaching.

Content-centered educators suspect that biblical illiteracy is the result of "watered-down" student-centered education in the local church and argue for rigorous teaching of solid biblical content. They wage passionate battles against student-centered education which emphasizes feelings and felt-needs over the teaching of pure Bible content.

Personal-relevance educators, on the other hand, feel that the mere transmission of Bible content is not enough. They say that students soon forget Bible facts if they don't see their relevance, thus becoming illiterate. From their viewpoint, the blame for biblical illiteracy is the personal

irrelevance of content transmission teaching models.

A Synthesis

Teaching the Bible is not like running a factory with empty-headed students as containers in which to deposit theological pearls of wisdom. But neither is Bible teaching simply a therapeutic exercise. Theology is not merely a tool to help students get in touch with their feelings so that they can become more self-actualized. Bible teaching that is divorced from life leads to dead orthodoxy, while teaching solutions to the problems of life without an understanding of Scripture leads to heresy and dead churches.

Subject-matter educators assume that learning biblical concepts will mysteriously develop spiritual maturity in learners. They assume that if students learn the outline of the book of Romans, the missionary journeys of Paul, the locations of the twelve tribes of Israel, and can refute the JEDP theory, the teaching task of the Bible professor is accomplished. From there it's the job of the Holy Spirit or the job of another academic department to help students put theological facts into practice and promote spiritual growth.

But mere personal-relevance philosophies of education may be even more dangerous than mere

subject-matter philosophies. They rightly react against dead orthodoxy and the teaching of inert biblical facts, but their teaching may become a gimmick for simply helping one feel good about oneself. The original meaning of Scripture is ignored while "what it means to me" is overemphasized.

This, then, is the dilemma between content-centered and student centered philosophies. Do we teach the Bible or do we teach people? Is the aim of education best accomplished through transmission of absolute truth or through facilitating personal growth in students?

The Secular Debate

The debate is not unique to teaching the Bible. Traditional secular educators argue that schools should go "back to the basics" of teaching the academic disciplines and the great ideas of the classics, while progressive educators are committed to the task of helping students prepare for jobs, be good citizens, and become self-actualized human beings.

John Dewey (1902) argues against the dichotomy between the child and the curriculum, between the logical and the psychological, between freedom and discipline.

Whitehead argues against the teaching of "inert ideas" or ideas which

are not connected with other ideas and with life.

Culture is an activity of thought, and the receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. (Whitehead, 1929, p. 1)

The Danger

The dichotomy between teaching the Bible and teaching students is dangerous. Teaching the Bible for its own sake is idolatry. We study the Bible so we may know God. But we worship God, not the academic discipline of the study of God. On the other hand, teaching students for their own self-actualization makes an idol out of persons, ignores the power of sin, and ignores the absolute standard of God's revealed Truth.

Educators may attempt to solve the dilemma by balancing curriculum requirements between subject-matter courses and personal-relevance courses. Bible departments may try to overcome the tension by having two tracks. The bright students study "hard" theology with Greek and Hebrew, while the more ordinary students follow a "soft" track of applied theology. But such strategies for curriculum balance only promote the worst of both worlds. These

attempts at curriculum balance lead either to ivory tower thinkers or unthinking practitioners. Balancing two curriculum extremes seldom leads to real integration.

Another Paradigm Is Needed

Rather than argue between teaching content versus teaching students, and rather than attempting to balance curriculum between the two, another paradigm is needed. This paradigm places subject matter and the experiences of learners in continual interdependent tension. The interdependence between faith and life is not a new idea. Interdependent tension between the Word of God and life experience began with Adam and Eve. Old Testament patriarchs, judges, prophets and poets cried out for Israel to carefully follow all the commands the Lord had given. Each verse of Psalm 119 is an example of the interdependence between the Word and personal experience. Jesus' teaching does the same.

Jesus never taught subject matter which was divorced from life, nor did he teach solutions to practical problems without teaching the Word. Jesus' teaching of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is one of the best examples of the interdependence between content and experience. Jesus began by asking questions about the present experience

of the disciples. He began with their felt-needs, their problem situation. Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself. His teaching was not an isolated lecture -- it grew out of the sadness of two people with downcast faces and out of a comprehensive understanding of Scripture. There was tension between the experience of the two disciples and the Scriptures. Jesus helped them to integrate personal tension with the Scriptures. He didn't teach an irrelevant theological concept (by threatening it would be on the final exam). Nor did he have them sit in a circle to learn a meditational therapy for handling grief and for improving their feelings of self-worth. Jesus compelled them to reflect on the tension between the content of the Word and their present need.

Each of Paul's letters demonstrates the interdependence of truth and life. Even Paul's most systematic writings in Romans 1-11 grow out of specific life-related needs of people in the church at Rome.

Barth was impressed with the way in which Calvin related truth to life.

How energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, til the

walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible. (Barth, 1933, p. 7)

To say the Bible is practical or pragmatic does not mean that there is a one-to-one correlation between each verse of the Scripture and present felt needs. The Bible is practical because it helps us to know God, and knowing God is infinitely practical. But knowing the Bible is not the same as knowing God. We progressively grow in our relationship to God as we explore the tension between our actual experience and the expectations of the Bible -- between the challenge of Scripture and our obedient response.

This does not mean that absolute truth is generated by experience. To say that the Bible is pragmatic does not negate the fact that it is at the same time absolute truth. God tells us that all Scripture is useful. God alone is the author of truth. But until we see him face to face, our understanding of truth is not absolute, and our understanding

of truth is significantly influenced by experience.

The effective teacher is like a person who takes a strong rope, ties one end around the big ideas of Scripture, ties the other end around the major themes of life, and then through the power of the Spirit struggles to pull the two together. The subject-matter educator is busy tying the rope to the Word, while the personal-relevance educator is tying a rope to the felt needs of students. Even if by chance both are using opposite ends of the same rope, there is urgent need for Spirit-filled rope pullers.

Educational Analysis

In order to better understand the paradigm of interdependent tension, the two sides of the dilemma will be analyzed by seeing how each would answer these three questions:

1. What are the assumptions about the nature of the learner?
2. What educational aims should we seek?
3. Which are the best educational methods?

The Content-Centered Educator

The Content-Centered Educator assumes the learner to be ignorant, with limited understanding and knowledge.

Educational aims come from the deficiency between what the learner knows and what the educator thinks the learner should know. The Bible is taught from the perspective of its original meaning and its historical-grammatical interpretation.

Techniques of higher criticism are taught along with book outlines. Preferred educational methods stress means for efficiently imparting knowledge and truth. Creative teaching methods for subject-matter educators may include the use of technology for transmitting information, such as videos, programmed instruction, computers, and overhead projectors. The subject-matter educators may include the use of technology for transmitting information, such as videos, programmed instruction, computers, and overhead projectors. The subject-matter educator assumes that the learner is like raw material for the theological assembly line of knowledge.

Transmission of information through clearly presented lectures and the appropriate use of technology is good and maybe even necessary, but mere transmission of knowledge is not sufficient.

The Student-Centered Educator

The Student-Centered Educator tends to idealize the current state of the learner. The learner is seen not as deficient or immature, but as a person with rich experiences, deep feelings, great dignity and worth. Aims for teaching the Bible emphasize building relationships with God and with others. Goals include emotional health, becoming aware of one's feelings, and self-actualization. Piety, worship, and the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and meditation are included in the curriculum. The Bible is taught not so much from the standpoint of what it said to the Hebrews and Greeks, but what it says to the modern hearer.

Educational methods provide opportunities for social interaction, building interpersonal relationships, stimulating personal reflection, and encouraging a caring community. Group sharing of experiences, journaling of feelings and prayer for the needs of others in the class might be specific methods. The personal-relevance educator assumes the learner is like a wild flower, ready to bloom under the right conditions. But personal relevance without a deep understanding of absolute truth revealed by God is meaningless. The search for

relevance without an understanding of Truth is ultimately irrelevant.

The Pilgrim Educator

The Pilgrim Educator sees the learner neither as an assembly line product nor as a flower, but as a pilgrim. The learner is in process, but the process is only a part of the aim. The personal process has an external goal. The present state of the pilgrim is not seen as a deficit, but neither is it idealized.

The educational goal is to equip the pilgrim with understanding of the Map God has given and in the power of the Spirit to help him or her benefit from the experiences of previous pilgrims, so that the pilgrim may reach the Heavenly City. A related goal is the development of the pilgrim. God is not only interested in the temporal position of the pilgrim, but in his or her character as well. Biblical subject matter is a necessary tool for guiding and developing the pilgrim.

Pilgrim educational methodology seeks to compel critical reflection between personal experience and the Bible. The Bible is taught clearly, but the teaching of content is not the end -- it is a means. The teacher must challenge the student to explore the tension between God's standard and life experiences, and then help the student to pull the two together. This can be done in many ways -- through a

stimulating lecture, through the use of educational technology or through a dialectic discussion method. Many methods and combinations of methods are appropriate. The effective Bible teacher is a good teacher of the subject matter, but also constantly challenges students to wrestle with biblical implications for ethical dilemmas, problems in the church, and personal lifestyle. The effective teacher will constantly hold absolute Scripture in tension with modern world-and-life views.

Dewey (1902) uses the metaphor of maps to teach the mutual interdependence between the logical and the psychological. Maps are useful tools for pilgrims.

Content-centered educators might teach courses in the history of maps, the original languages of maps, theories of interpreting maps, and the higher criticism of maps. But the study of maps must not take the place of the use of maps for an actual journey.

Student-centered educators on the other hand, might encourage each student to design his or her own map from personal experiences. Experiences and maps of previous explorers are usually ignored. Students are encouraged to wander around in the woods of life. The educator isn't overly concerned if students wander into the swamps as long as they build

meaningful relationships with others and better understand their own feelings as a result of the experience. There is little sense of history or sense of direction.

Dewey argued that the experience of the learner leads to better understanding of maps: but maps also help the learner to have a richer journey. Maps and experience on the journey are dependent on each other. It is unwise to divorce the study of maps from the experiences of the traveler. And it is useless for a pilgrim to begin a journey with no sense of direction or purpose. Without the Map of God's revelation, we have no knowledge of who we really are, where we are going, or how we get there.

Suggestions for Teaching

Most Bible teachers agree that more can be done to effectively compel critical reflection on the tension between biblical truth and the needs of the person, the church and society.

The Holy Spirit is a powerful supernatural force in helping to tie together absolute standards of the Word with our sinful condition. Yet the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God, through spiritually gifted teachers, and through spiritually sensitive learners. To depend on the Holy Spirit means that spiritually gifted teachers must continue to "fan to flame" of the gifts God has given. Because we are involved

in a supernatural struggle between the forces of good and evil, there can be no specific guaranteed outcomes, no matter how sophisticated our educational paradigms or methodologies. But spiritually gifted teachers must do more to intentionally challenge students to wrestle with truth in light of the problems of life.

No teacher should be satisfied with merely depositing "inert ideas" into the heads of students to be regurgitated on the final exam. We must teach to higher levels of learning. Students must be challenged to think, analyze, and synthesize ideas with issues in life. Examinations should go beyond informational recall and include questions which force students to interpret and use information to demonstrate insight into current issues. Assigned papers and class room lectures should compel students to struggle with major biblical concepts. We must also compel students to use these concepts in grappling with problems in the modern church and society. For example, students can be given assignments to investigate the "folk-theology" of the average lay person and compare that theology with the teachings of historical trends in theology.

Entrance requirements into seminary or graduate school should require students to have previous experience

working with people. How are students to integrate theology and life if the only life they have ever known is school, and the only theology they know comes from books? Seminaries worry about low student enrollments and they feel forced to recruit students with only a "raw B.A." Students would not need lengthy experience but should have enough experience to know people and their problems. They could be required to spend a summer as a camp counselor or to be a lay youth worker in a church. A high grade-point average is not a predictor of the ability to integrate theology and life.

Graduation requirements must include more than Bible credits. Every Bible major should take at least one course in education, human development or communication. All master's or doctoral theses should have at least one chapter pointing out the implications of the particular topic for the needs of the church or society today. Academic programs which teach mere theological "maps" with no concern for the "journey" are sub-biblical.

Bible professors must have more than academic credentials -- they must have experience in ministry and demonstrate personal concern for the contemporary theological needs in the church.

Majors in Christian education must be challenged to constantly reflect

theologically on what they are doing. Too often a course in methods of evangelism does not relate to soteriology, and church management courses ignore insights from ecclesiology courses. Too often practical internships in ministry are not debriefed in light of theological understanding.

Conclusion

Radical educators call for a "de-schooling" of theological education, but the proposed pilgrim paradigm is not radical. Biblical knowledge is necessary for pilgrims and must be taught. Most teaching methods will not need to change. Current structures of theological education do not need to be demolished. Some Bible professors are already teaching in such a way as to promote the intentional interdependence of Bible content with the problems of life.

But the paradigm shift could have a dramatic effect. Bible courses too often have a reputation for being exercises in memorizing grocery lists. Students complain that Bible classes are boring, and boredom becomes the powerful hidden but real curriculum. Christian education courses too often have a reputation for being exercises in the techniques of sandbox and flannelgraph use. Education in the church faces the same problems. There is an urgent need

to a quiet revolution -- for a pilgrim paradigm of Bible teaching.

May we communicate the Map of the Word through the power of the Spirit in such a way that students will be challenged and the church will be strengthened in the pilgrimage of eternal significance.

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