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A TIME TO TEACH

HOMER A. KENT, JR.

Now is the time to teach. America is shouting this at us in scores of ways. During 1979 Congress increased federal aid to students with the passing of the Middle Income Student Assistance Act which increases government funds for education nearly twofold.¹ In addition, the states and territories spent another \$828 million on student aid in 1978-79.²

Legislation recently passed Congress, and was signed into law by President Carter, to establish a cabinet-level Department of Education, instead of the past arrangement with an Office of Education within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The purpose is to give education a higher visibility and priority in the federal organizational structure, rather than having its interests confused amid the welter of other programs administered by HEW. Many independent institutions are not enthusiastic about this prospect, having learned from experience that increased government attention is not usually a blessing. The fact remains, however, that America is saying, "It is time to teach."

Not only at the federal level is this emphasis seen; the states are also deeply involved. Scholarship programs exist in almost every state to assist young people to obtain higher education. At the same time there is a growing concern that *real teaching* must be accomplished. The movement is growing that competency testing be incorporated, at least at the secondary level, before graduation be granted.

Meanwhile, parents are developing a growing suspicion that in spite of modern and expensive buildings, the latest in equipment, and every conceivable gadget, genuine teaching is not always accomplished. "Back to the basics" is the cry in many circles. One is confronted with the disturbing fact that the 3 R's are rapidly being replaced by the 6 R's: Remedial Reading, Remedial 'Riting, and Remedial 'Rithmetic. Teaching must involve learning; if students are not learning, then we are not really teaching. Parents are telling us, "It is time to teach."

¹A. C. Roark, "States Face Pressure from Mid Income Students," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 17 (Nov 27, 1978) 4-5.

²*Ibid.*

The Christian church must also recognize that it is the time to teach. In this context teaching is defined as that function which instructs people in the Word of God as clearly, accurately, and thoroughly as possible so that learning is achieved. It is assumed that the Word of God is the basic context of instruction and that our responsibility is to teach the whole counsel of God, not just certain favorite sections. It is also assumed that the Bible is the Word of God and without error, and thus its teachings are fully authoritative for man and especially for believers. For at least three reasons, it is absolutely essential that Christians everywhere recognize that now is the time to teach.

TEACHING WAS CENTRAL IN THE COMMISSION OF JESUS

Christ himself was a teacher

1. This was the name by which he was most frequently called. It is common today to find our Lord referred to as the carpenter of Nazareth or to be thought of as an almost mystical figure, but most of the time people called him "Teacher." Only once in the Bible was Jesus called a carpenter (Mark 6:3), although he was elsewhere called a carpenter's son (Matt 13:55).

By far the most common way in which Jesus was addressed was as "Teacher" or "Master." Both of these are translations of the common word for "teacher" (διδάσκαλος). When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to two of his followers, they spoke to him with these words, "Teacher, where dwellest thou?" (John 1:38). When the Pharisees were critical of Jesus' disregard of the traditions of the elders, they said to his disciples, "Why eateth your Teacher with publicans and sinners?" (Matt 9:11). When Nicodemus, that eminent Pharisee of Jerusalem, came to Jesus by night, he said, "we know you are a teacher come from God" (John 3:2). When some terrified disciples wakened Jesus during a storm at sea, their first words were, "Teacher, carest thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38). A rich young ruler one day asked him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18). An agitated father with a demon-possessed child said to Jesus, "Teacher, I beseech thee, look upon my son" (Luke 9:38). The grieving Martha summoned her sister Mary with the words, "The Teacher is come and calleth for thee" (John 11:28). Jesus himself said to the disciples, "Ye call me Teacher and Lord, and ye say well for so I am" (John 13:13). If we may judge by the names people gave him, they did not think of Jesus primarily as a former carpenter, or an evangelist, or an orator, or even as a prophet, although he was all of those things. They saw him as a teacher — one whose primary activity involved instructing his hearers in a message of truth from God.

2. Furthermore, Jesus was continually engaged in teaching. This was undoubtedly why he was given the title. The general pattern of his ministry found him "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23). His teaching was impressive, not only because of its content but because of its authoritative tone — so different from the scribal practice of merely citing the pronouncements of distinguished rabbis from the past. On the contrary, Jesus "taught them as one having rabbinic authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt 7:29).

He did his teaching often when circumstances were adverse. The temple authorities had been hostile to Jesus since the beginning of his ministry when he had driven out the merchants and the money-changers. Yet at the close of his public career, after he had cleansed the temple a second time, he said to those who arrested him in the garden, "I sat daily with you teaching in the temple and ye laid no hold on me" (Matt 26:55).

He taught people wherever he could find them. He did not require a classroom or a pulpit. He taught crowds by the seaside in Galilee (Mark 4:1). The parable of the sower was given in such a setting. He taught great crowds publicly, and sometimes he taught his disciples privately (Mark 9:31). Whether on a mountainside (Matt 5:2), or sitting in a boat (Luke 5:3), or lecturing in a synagogue (Luke 6:6), or merely walking along the road (Luke 13:22), teaching was the outstanding characteristic of Jesus during the days of his ministry.

Jesus told us why he concentrated his ministry on teaching. He had come as the embodiment of the Word of God, to bring the message of God to men. The absolutely crucial nature of that message explains why Jesus concentrated his ministry upon it. He said, "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). He emphasized the unique source of his message: "As my Father hath taught me, I speak these things" (John 8:38). He knew that the message he brought could transform lives even after he was gone. That was why he concentrated on teaching. He did not build any structures during those brief three years. He established no complex organization. He cared not a bit for the trappings which we commonly associate with power and success. Instead He was continually *teaching*.

Thirty years after the Ascension, Christians still remembered Jesus for his deeds and especially for his teaching. When Luke wrote the Book of Acts, he observed to Theophilus that our Lord's brief ministry could be characterized as that which "Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

Christ commanded his followers to teach

Even while his own ministry was going on, Jesus trained his disciples and sent them out to teach others. They went out in pairs, and later reported to him the results of their teaching (Mark 6:7, 30). The content of truth which was being conveyed was so important that it did not matter whether everyone heard it directly from the lips of Jesus. Those whom he had taught and commissioned could also be effective conveyors of his message.

As our Lord prepared the apostles for his departure, he made it clear that they were expected to teach what they had been taught. The Holy Spirit would refresh their memories regarding what they had heard Jesus teach (John 14:26). They must give testimony to what they had learned from Jesus (John 15:27).

This responsibility to teach was brought into clear focus following the resurrection, when Jesus gave the great commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20). The Christian faith was not merely an enlistment program, but a meaningful commitment. It was to be characterized by the clear teaching of God's truth which truly transforms lives and is sufficient for every need because it is the Word of God.

The importance of teaching in the program of Jesus is seen not only in his own practice and in the Commission he gave his disciples, but also in his action subsequent to the Ascension. As the Lord of the Church, he not only bestowed the Holy Spirit upon believers in conjunction with the promise of the Father, but he also gave the key spiritual gifts of leadership which would insure the success of the church. In Eph 4:11-12, it is recorded: "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." These words are inscribed on a bronze plaque by the stairway in the library at Grace Seminary, where they confront the student every time he climbs the stairs to study. In this Scripture passage, the function of teaching is woven inseparably with that of pastoring, suggesting that it is a basic and essential function of the ministry at the local church level. Christ designed it that way, and he insured its performance by the sort of leadership gifts he provided. It will be shown later that these leaders were not the only ones who were to do any teaching. Nevertheless, they were to be the specialists who were particularly gifted and who could train the rest.

There is also another reason why we must recognize that it is "a time to teach" if we would be biblical Christians, looking to the Scripture for our rule of faith and practice.

TEACHING WAS BASIC IN THE PRACTICE OF THE APOSTLES

Christians look to the apostles, not only as the eyewitnesses and personal companions of our Lord in his ministry, but also because they were especially chosen by him and commissioned to be his witnesses in a unique sense. Jesus said to them: "Ye also shall bear witness because ye have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:27). They were Christ's authorized witnesses. The New Testament is the written testimony of the apostles. The apostle Paul wrote of Christian believers as being "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph 2:20). Although many interpret this as meaning "the foundation which the apostles laid — namely, Christ," it is possible that he meant that in some sense the apostles and prophets provided the foundation through their teaching and writing, with Christ being the cornerstone, the key feature in the structure. This would harmonize with Rev 21:14, where the apostles' names are inscribed on twelve foundation stones of the wall of the new Jerusalem. Hence it is crucial if our faith and practice is to be biblical that we know how the apostles understood Jesus, and what they are saying to us.

They did teaching themselves

The Book of Acts emphasizes this again and again, and the teaching involved not only evangelism. The momentous events of Pentecost were followed immediately by a regular program of teaching the converts. "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and prayers" (Acts 2:42).

In Acts 4, the very first persecution against the early church broke out because Peter and John were teaching people in the precincts of the temple (Acts 4:1-2). Even though they were commanded to desist from all further teaching (Acts 4:18), this did not deter them from carrying out what they believed the great commission required of them. Later we find them once again in the temple by a direct order of an angel, and "they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught" (Acts 5:21). They were still there teaching some hours later when soldiers came to arrest them (Acts 5:25), and the high priest eventually accused them of filling Jerusalem with their teaching (Acts 5:28). Harassment, imprisonments, even beatings did not stop them. "Every day in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

This strong emphasis on teaching the Word of God was not only characteristic of the Jerusalem church but of other churches as well. In the church at Antioch, Barnabas and Saul taught the converts for a year (Acts 11:26), and later prophets and teachers were prominent in the ministry there (Acts 13:1). This careful instruction in the Word of God undoubtedly was basic in the development of the spiritual strength of these churches. It was not a mere afterthought, nor a luxury to be provided for a few interested converts who showed unusual promise. Teaching the Word of God was the normal procedure for all converts all the time. An example is the church at Thessalonica. The two Thessalonian epistles were written to that congregation just a few months after the church was founded with new converts. The amount of spiritual understanding which Paul assumes they had as he wrote is obviously considerable as we learn from reflecting upon those letters. Yet Paul had been with them a very short time, perhaps as little as three weeks (Acts 17:7). He must have wasted no time in teaching them immediately upon their conversion.

It was Paul's testimony to the leaders of the church at Ephesus that his teaching pattern was to declare "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). He rode no hobbies, followed no fads, ignored no contexts. He taught God's truth in its total biblical perspective.

Furthermore, Paul seems to have regarded his teaching ministry as the most strenuous of tasks. He wrote to the Colossians that "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom" was his responsibility and goal so that he might bring every man to maturity (Col 1:28). To do this he continually labored to the point of weariness, striving with all the vigor that an athlete must exert if he is to be a serious contender (Col 1:29). He did it because he regarded teaching as crucial in carrying out Christ's commission.

They stressed teaching for the leaders they trained

In the list of qualifications which Paul prepared for the selection of overseers for the church, one of the stipulations was that he be "apt to teach" or "able to teach." The reason is obvious. The basic function of an overseer is to direct the affairs of the church in the light of God's revealed truth, and that involves instructing others in the content of that revelation. Whether he be teaching sinners the way of salvation, nurturing Christians in their spiritual growth, or admonishing straying believers, he is essentially a *teacher* of God's truth.

The importance of teaching was also stressed in the various exhortations that were given to leaders already in office. In Rom 12:7, Paul exhorted those with the gift of teaching to concentrate on their teaching. He urged Timothy amid his heavy duties at Ephesus

to give particular attention to reading, to exhortation, and to teaching (1 Tim 4:13). He reminded the church that even though all elders were expected to be able teachers, those who excelled by their diligence at the task of preaching and teaching should be given double honor (1 Tim 5:17).

Furthermore, as Paul faced the end of his own ministry and contemplated the unfinished task stretching out before the church, his counsel for the future was that present leaders should give special concern to training new ones. He also indicated that the very heart of their ministry would be their ability to teach others. "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2).

They expected every Christian to be involved in teaching

The Epistle to the Hebrews explains that all Christians, after the passing of a reasonable length of time during which spiritual growth should be taking place, should be capable of teaching others. The fact that some were deficient merely called attention to the principle that was being violated by their immaturity. "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" (Heb 5:12).

This does not mean that every Christian is a specially gifted teacher or that all should aspire to be official teachers. James counseled the church, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Paul explained to the Corinthians, "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers." He then went on to say, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?" (1 Cor 12:28-29). The point is clear: not every one has been gifted by God to be a teacher in the formal and official sense. Nevertheless every Christian is responsible to be a learner with sufficient achievement so that he can share God's truth with others. When we bear testimony to God's saving grace to unsaved friends and neighbors, and explain what God has done for us, this is a form of *teaching* and is expected from all of us.

It is clear, therefore, that the apostles understood from Jesus' own practice and from his order to his followers that Christians were responsible to teach. Inasmuch as the apostles were Christ's hand-picked messengers and the New Testament is their authorized and inspired interpretation of Christ and his message, their instruction to us is an additional reason for us to know that it is "time to teach."

There is yet a third reason why it is time to teach.

TEACHING IS DESPERATELY NEEDED TODAY

The frightening rise of cults

In recent years the dramatic rise in religious cults, many of them proclaiming themselves as Christian and preying upon members of Christian churches, points to the need for more thorough teaching of the Word of God.

When a Jim Jones, operating his Peoples' Temple in California under the respectable umbrella of a recognized Protestant denomination, can mesmerize a congregation, build it up to 20,000 members, brag about his sexual prowess with women followers, and then lead 900 people to a plantation in Guyana and eventually to a revolting mass suicide from which the shock waves have not yet settled,³ Christians must surely recognize that it is time to teach. One is reminded of the apostolic warning of those "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power . . . among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 3:5-7).

When Maharishi Mahesh Yogi can introduce his practice of Transcendental Meditation into America with such success that in two decades it can achieve respectability in the highest government and academic circles, it is time for Christians to teach. Maharishi International University, taking over the 100 year-old campus of former Parsons College in Iowa, now has 800 students. It was granted candidate status in 1975 and will apply for full accreditation in 1980. Although its students go to bed early, use no alcohol or drugs at their weekend parties, and attend classes frequently in suits and dresses rather than jeans, some other practices and claims are more disturbing. Everyone on campus meditates 20 minutes each morning and evening. Advanced meditators gather by the hundreds in a fieldhouse, where they are said to levitate and demonstrate other super-normal abilities. Reporters are not allowed to observe it lest the process take on a "circus atmosphere," so say university officials.⁴

When Mormonism publishes a 12-page color insert in *Reader's Digest*,⁵ advertising its viewpoints in a highly appealing fashion, it is time for orthodox Christianity to teach what true Christian faith really is. In that enticing booklet, the emphasis upon home and family, self-reliance, industry, personal responsibility, temperance,

³"Nightmare in Jonestown," *Time* 112 (Dec 4, 1978) 16-30.

⁴L. Middleton, "Meditation a Way of Life at Maharishi University," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 18 (May 14, 1979) 3-5.

⁵*Reader's Digest* 114 (Apr 1979).

service, and faith are all innocent-sounding affirmations of Christian ideals. The poorly taught are being snared by the thousands.

When the "Moonies" with their Unification Church promote themselves as a Christian organization, infiltrating neighborhoods with their propaganda, and staging rallies and demonstrations even on the steps of government, as this writer witnessed recently in Washington, it is a time to teach what God's Word has to say about salvation and prophecy and Christian living. When impressionable young people are subjected to brainwashing by the Moonies and no longer can be reached by their Christian parents, it is time to teach the Word of God.

The growing appeal of sensationalism

The natural human penchant for excitement has not been overlooked by various religious practitioners. Paul spoke of those in his day who were "peddling the word of God" (2 Cor 2:17). So today every part of the country has its religious opportunists vying with one another to build a following, utilizing every claim and gimmick to prey upon the unwary. Sad to say, a large part of their support and following comes from people who originally were from orthodox churches. Because their spiritual growth has been so shallow, they are attracted by sensational claims of supernatural healings or experiences, and like infants whose attention can be diverted by any glittering object, they flock after the big noise, the flashy claims, and the glamorized theatrics.

Now is the time to teach the stupendous truths of the Word of God. When people are impressed with the sensationalism of religious hucksters, we must have been less than impressive with the teachings of God's truth. The fault, however, does not lie with the message, but with the ineffective way it has been taught. Nothing less than a clear, accurate, and convincing instruction will do. God's revelation to man in Scripture with its message of transforming grace will create a sensation when it is clearly taught. Now is the time to teach!

Our people are not as biblically grounded as they should be

From time to time I have heard it said in evangelical circles that our people are well-taught in biblical truth, perhaps even overfed; what is needed now is to put that knowledge into operation. This is usually a well-meant statement, made in an effort to get believers active in Christian witnessing. Such statements, however, imply a false contrast. Knowledge and action are not opposing forces. Christians do not become slothful in their witness because they know too much spiritual truth. On the contrary, their problem is that they have

not been taught enough. They have not learned what our Lord is telling them about their glorious prospects, their present responsibilities, the provisions Christ has made for them by his Spirit, and the joyous experience that can be theirs as they walk in the light of his Word.

If the early church, so effective in its witness to a needy but hostile world, found it necessary to continue regularly in the apostles' teaching, dare we do any less?

Place the blame where you will, but most careful observers today are not noting any trend toward deeper biblical and spiritual knowledge among twentieth-century Christians on the whole. Understanding God's provisions for man in predestination, justification, and sanctification is minimal in many circles. The implications of the present debate over the inerrancy of Scripture are hazy in many minds, even though the tragic consequences of a wrong turn here are amply demonstrated in church history. The biblical teaching on sin, the character of God, the world, God's prophetic plan, and the Spirit-controlled life are only academic matters to some, far removed from the real world. The sort of moral standards we tolerate for ourselves does not always reflect the tenor of biblical teaching. If someone would attempt to discover what Christian standards are supposed to be from an examination of the books we read, the music we enjoy, the TV we watch, the recreation in which we indulge, the way we spend our money, and the way we use our time, would his conclusions match up with biblical teaching? Christians, it is time to teach the whole counsel of God.

The hunger for biblical instruction is still present

Although the superficial attractions of the world often tempt us to compete in kind, whatever short-term gains may occur are usually just that. We must not sell our spiritual birthright for a mess of pottage.

The evidence is clear, not only that the teaching of the Word of God is the only final answer to the needs of mankind but also that a genuine hunger for it still exists. The popularity of home Bible classes testifies to this hunger. One does not always need a formal setting and professional leadership. Godly men and women, mature in their faith and instructed by effective leaders in their churches, are having an extremely helpful influence by opening their homes and ministering to hungry hearts in this day of spiritual confusion.

The amazing growth of the Christian school movement in America is also clear evidence that a genuine desire for biblical instruction is not diminishing today. With God and prayer and the Bible largely excluded from public education, the Christian school is

rising to fill this need. Some estimates indicate that as many as 50% of the children in some areas will be enrolled in Christian schools in the not-too-distant future.

This hunger for biblical instruction is not limited just to Bible study alone. Those who take the Bible seriously understand that God's revelation provides a world-view that affects every area of human knowledge. Consequently a Christian philosophy of education should permeate every discipline of a truly Christian school. At Grace College and Seminary, for example, there is an attempt to make an effective integration of faith and learning in every part of the curriculum. Not only in the Seminary and in the Bible department of the college, but in psychology, literature, history, and every other discipline, the contribution of biblical truth is an integral part of the education. And the hunger is there. Christian colleges and seminaries that forthrightly declare their stand on Scripture and pursue it vigorously are generally healthier today than many of their counterparts who have allowed their Christian philosophy to weaken.

Yes, it is a time to teach. There has never been a better time. The issues are crucial, and the need was never greater. The climate today is more open than ever, and training is available for all who desire it.

But we must *do* it. Christ commanded us to teach. The apostles repeated the exhortation and it is absolutely vital that we teach the Word of God if our faith is to be kept strong and be extended to those in need. The Bible is the objective base which supports our faith and gives it proper direction. We must teach it, therefore, to ourselves, to our families, in our churches, and to hungry hearts everywhere. The admonition of Prov 7:1-3 should find ready acceptance by each of us: "My son, keep my words and store up my commands within you. Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart."