**Who Should Be a Christian Teacher?**

I have been serving as a teacher in one way or another for more than thirty years. It is my career, as a professor of chemistry and physics, and my avocation as well, as a teacher for churches. I have taught the hard sciences as several universities and colleges, as well as teaching for more than 150 churches in more than 70 countries. One of my passions is to help to raise up teachers who can take on the unending task of helping both the saved and the lost to come to understand the Christian gospel. In my travels and in my efforts to mentor teachers around the world, I have made a number of observations, both positive and negative, of what makes for an academically and spiritually well-qualified teacher which I would like to share. I will make these comments, more or less in order as to relative importance as I see it.

1. Humility.

I cannot count the number of times I have come across young believers who have passion to be Christian teachers but who have flamed out because of pride. I believe humility is the most important quality for anyone who aspires to be a teacher for God’s Church. Generally, those who aspire to teaching in a Christian setting see themselves as smarter than the average person. Hopefully, this is true about the expectant teacher, at least to some extent, as the gift of teaching certainly includes above-average intellectual skills! However, the tragedy which I have seen repeatedly is that those who see themselves as smarter than others allow themselves to be know-it-alls. Confidence becomes pride. They wish that everyone were as smart as they and they cannot understand how the other believers could be so unwise and so uneducated in the basics of Christianity. They cannot wait to enlighten everyone around them with regard to their ignorance. How could anyone not realize that the teaching ministry is the most important aspect of the work of the Church? Because I have such deep knowledge, what can these less-informed Christians teach me about anything? I will hear what they have to say, but pass it through the filter of my superior wisdom.

The amazing thing is that these prideful prospective teachers do not realize that others can see these symptoms of pride from a mile away. One reason I can list these examples of prideful teacher-thinking is that I have been sorely tempted with all of these many times. I confess that one of the comments I have received in my student evaluations as a professor are statements such as, “he is a good teacher but arrogant when I talk to him in my office. He makes me feel stupid.” Ouch! Double Ouch!! I made a decision many years ago that I will go after defeating this kind of pride with unrelenting vigor. I will leave judgment about how successful I have been in this area to those who know me.

This prideful attitude will have two devastating results. First of all, no one likes a know-it-all. Certainly no one wants to be taught by a know-it-all. More importantly, no church leader will give the “stage” to such a person. And they should not. The prideful teacher will cause more damage to the church than any help they can offer. For a teacher, to not have the opportunity to use his or her gift is a great frustration. It is also a sad waste of potential good for the Church. Mark it down; if you have a prideful attitude about your wonderful knowledge, you will never be a respected and fruitful teacher. You are like Nebuchadnezzar, who stood over his beloved Babylon and said to himself, “Is this not the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30) You have forgotten the admonition of Paul in 1 Corithians 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive, and if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you did not?”

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the candidate for teaching who is prideful will inevitably have a hard fall. I have seen this pattern many times. We all know that “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.” (Proverbs 16:18) We tell ourselves that no one appreciates our gift. We are not respected. This church does not deserve me. I am going to find a place where my gift will be appreciated and used. As a result the gift is either used toward non-Christian ends or the person will end up joining a church which does not hold to genuine Christianity.

2. Having the spiritual gift of teaching.

Some are teachers, but do not have the gift of teaching. As a stop-gap measure, in a church without gifted teachers or in a small ministry or new church, this expedient may be a necessity, and that is fine in such a case. However, ideally the evangelist will have the gift of evangelism, the elder will have the gift of shepherding, the church board member will have the gift of dealing wisely with money and the teacher will have the gift of teaching. This principle can be found in 1 Peter 4:10-11, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.

Of course, this raises the question. Do I have the gift of teaching? How would one know? This is a really important question. I do not have “the” answer to this question, but will suggest a few things to look for. First of all, is this what you love to do? Is this your passion (see below)? In your attempts thus far to delve more deeply into the truths of Christianity, do you find yourself making greater strides than many others (not as a point of pride, but simply asking a realistic question)? Is there reason to think that your intellectual gifts are well above average? Do others agree with this assessment?

Certain skills are necessary; otherwise the gift cannot be used effectively. If it cannot be used effectively, then it is probably not a spiritual gift. Intelligence alone is not sufficient. Ideally, a teacher will be a strong public speaker. If you cannot get across what you have learned, what good is it? There are other avenues of expressing this gift. Not having skill as a public speaker is a deficit, but is not necessarily a *sine qua non*. For example, perhaps you are a really good writer or a person who can reason effectively in a one-on-one encounter. Bottom line, in order for a supposed gift of teaching to be genuine, the person holding this gift must have the ability to pass along knowledge in a persuasive way. If not, then this is not your gift.

3. Having passion to teach.

I have taught on spiritual gifts dozens of times, and have published a book on this topic (*Golden Rule Membership*, Illumination Publishers). My first advice on discovering one’s gifts is to ask what you love to do. Your gift is the thing you will do even if no one appreciates it and even if you receive no encouragement for doing it. Passion for teaching is an absolute essential for the one who wants to teach in God’s church. There are at least two reasons this is true. First of all, to become a well-trained and effective teacher will require a LOT of training. I would argue that this role in the Church may require more training than any other. Many hours of reading, studying and preparing, well above the call of duty, are absolutely required. Without passion few will be able to maintain this effort over time. Unlike the first two qualities mentioned above, this quality is relatively easy to “measure.” By our twenties we know what we love to do. You should ask yourself a simple question. Am I truly passionate about teaching the gospel to both believers and non-believers?

4. Having the will and the opportunity to get the training.

We cannot teach what we do not ourselves know. Knowledge does not leap into our brains while we sleep. The Holy Spirit will at times give us the words to speak when we are before rulers (Luke 12:12), but this cannot be counted on in every case. Desire alone is not enough. Jesus did not have any degrees and he was the greatest Christian teacher who ever lived. But we are not Jesus and almost certainly advanced training, very likely including a post-graduate degree, will be required for the effective teacher in the twenty-first century. It is unfortunate, but nevertheless true today that the Christian teacher will need skill in English, because the great majority of useful resources are in English. Knowledge of additional languages is not an absolute requirement, but it is very helpful. Some training in history, philosophy, and the natural sciences is very helpful. Some do not have these skills and will find difficulty acquiring them for various reasons. Perhaps they come into the game at too advanced an age. Perhaps they did not have access to education for cultural or other reasons. If this is the case, then in is not likely that this person will become an effective teacher.

5. Being willing to work in a serving position.

This point takes us back to the first on our list—the requirement of humility. Here is the bottom line. To teach is to serve. Of course, this is true of all Christian ministry, as Jesus told us (Matthew 20:26, John 13:13-17). But this is fundamentally true of teaching in the Church. My experience tells me that teachers often do not see it this way. I teach in a chemistry department. In academia chemistry is known as a service discipline. What this means is that most taking my courses are there, not to be chemists but to be something else, such as a biologist or a pharmacist or a nurse or doctor. I need to accept that nearly all of my students do not share my passion for chemistry. I am there to serve other disciplines.

In Ephesians 4:11-12 we are told that the evangelists, shepherds and teachers are to prepare God’s people for works of service. The way I like to put it, teaching is not the most important thing. It is not the second most important thing in the church. It is not even the third most important thing. However, it certainly is in the top ten and might just possibly be in the top five. If you want to do the “most important thing” then you need to recognize that teaching is not that thing. Your role as a teacher is to provide something to others. Yours is one of the parts in putting together the whole. Teaching actuates other abilities, but it is not that most essential ability and it will not normally be the thing which will be noticed first. The purpose of the Christian life is to know God and to be known by him. The Christian mission is to win as many as possible to Christ. The teaching ministry does not take an up-front role in these things, although it is important to these things. In fact it is essential to these things in the long run, but the teacher’s role is not the most essential one in helping people to have a relationship with God and to conversion of the lost.

Because one of my particular skills is in the area of Christian apologetics, I am blessed to have many experiences which are an exception to the rule I am stating above, but I still need to stress this fact about the teaching ministry. Yours is a service role. You will be tempted to think that it is the top priority, but it is not! A church built out of people, all of whose skill is intellectual will not be an effective church (effectiveness being defined as achieving the purpose and ministry of Christianity). Evangelism and shepherding and taking care of the physical and spiritual needs of the lost and the saved are more essential. They are higher up on the list. If this is not okay with you, then perhaps you should pursue something other than teaching.

6. Able to take the long view and to hold our tongue—not having an agenda or an axe to grind.

The fifth quality I want to mention is a practical aspect of the humility which is the chief quality needed to be a fruit-bearing Christian teacher. This quality can be encapsulated in one word—patience. Anyone who is a teacher will have deeper than average insight into those qualities required for churches and individual members of churches to grow and be effective in their faith. We notice the mistakes our preachers make. We often cringe when we hear outlandish interpretation of the scripture, especially in public forums. We know some church history and notice immediately why a decision is a bad one. What will we do with this knowledge?

Here is the bad news for the teacher. More than ninety percent of the time, we need to hold our tongue and keep our opinion to ourselves. This is true, both because as I already stated, no one likes a know-it-all, and also because teaching is a serving role. I made a decision many years ago and I must remind myself on a regular basis, that I must bide my time. There are convictions I have that I must keep under my hat for a time. When I am invited by a Christian group to teach them, I need to remember that my role is to do what was asked, not to come with a hidden personal agenda. I do not visit churches in order to correct all their errors. My role is to support what the leaders are doing, even when I do not completely agree with what they are doing.

I have seen other teachers forget this basic aspect of the teacher’s role. They tend not to be invited back. Their skill and their passion therefore find a reduced opportunity to be expressed. My personal ministry as a Christian teacher is somewhat unique, as I do so much traveling and have taught for many different churches. It makes this principle even more necessary to the effective use of my gift. Whenever I am invited to teach for a ministry other than my own, I remind myself that I do not want to leave having created more problems than I have solved. In almost every lesson I teach, I find myself asking whether I should make this or that point, no matter how valid. If it will not help what the leaders in the local church are trying to do, whether or not what I am saying might be true, I must hold my tongue. James tells us that the tongue is a fire and a world of evil that corrupts the whole body. In the context, James is speaking this truth about teachers!

One could use the excuse that the Holy Spirit put it on one’s heart to say such and such. Maybe so, but would the Holy Spirit have you creating havoc in the local church or in the ministry to which you are speaking? Perhaps one time in one hundred it is true that the Holy Spirit will influence us to create a big stir. God’s prophets certainly did this at times. There is a role sometimes for a teacher to stir the pot and upset the apple cart, but this is rare and should be done with extreme caution and only after purposeful thought.

One last thought on this point. As teachers, one of the things we love is when others learn through us and grown in Christ. Their life is changed forever. What a thrill. This is a good thing and it is not, by itself, a sign of pride. However, we need to take the long view here. If you will pursue your teaching over time, you will gradually acquire a stronger voice. What you cannot say and what cannot be heard by your audience now because you are a novice, you will be able to say in ten years. I have been teaching for decades. I have gained a significant amount of respect over time. People can hear difficult teaching from me that they may not have received when I was a relatively new Christian. Because I was willing to bide my time many years ago, I am now able to help people understand and learn from my conviction.

The next few qualities on my list are important ones, but perhaps not absolutely essential. These qualities can be acquired over time.

7. Willingness to think broadly and cross-culturally.

One of the growing problems of our world culture is that more and more we tend to live in an ideological bubble. The teacher needs to be able to break out of that bubble. He or she will be teaching singles, marrieds, campus and teens. The teacher will most likely be crossing church cultures and likely even human culture. It is my experience that in order to use their gift, teachers will do some traveling and will eat strange food. A greater than average ability to think outside of the box within which one was raised will be necessary.

8. Broad knowledge combined with one or more areas of specialized knowledge.

As a teacher, I generally must wait to be invited to teach. Why would I be chosen for the task rather than another? My advice to any prospective teacher is that you must acquire two kinds of knowledge. First, you must make yourself the expert in one or two areas. You should choose a topic you are particularly passionate about and dig as deeply into that topic as you can to make it your own. You should nail this topic down so that anyone who needs a lesson on the topic, whether it is a biblical book you have mastered, or a character trait you have studied out or whatever it is, you will be the one they will call on. Maybe you will even write a book on this topic.

The other kind of knowledge you must be prepared with is broad based. You must have one or eventually two or three specialties, but you will also need a little knowledge in a vast array of topics. You must be the Rennaisance man or woman who knows a little about everything. For example, you must know the Book of Colossians backward and forward, but you must have a deeper than average knowledge of all sixty-six books in the Bible. You must know a little history, a little Church history and a little theology. The reason is that you will become the answer person to many and you need to be prepared to give that answer as often as possible. Recently I was asked to do a lesson for a church in Bangladesh on the question of marriage and divorce. I told them that this is not my expertise. They asked me to do it anyway. The fact is that I have studied this topic out quite a bit, actually, and it was a simple matter of taking a few hours to put my material together. It went fairly well. This kind of broad preparation is one thing you must move toward if you want to be a Christian teacher.

I hope that those who have read their way all the way through this essay will find it useful. Presumably, it is because you yourself are interested in teaching. I want to encourage you to pursue this gift. You will find it infinitely rewarding over time as you are able to contribute greatly to the maturing of the saints and to the winning of many more to shine like stars in the universe (Daniel 12:3). If I can be of service to you, do not hesitate to contact me.

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