

Faith Pulpit

Teaching and Teachers Two Essential Components in a New Testament Church

A troubling trend is developing in churches today. This trend is not something we see in the “other” kinds of churches (i.e., the mainline, liberal churches) but in what we usually call “our” kind of churches—solid, Bible-preaching churches. The trend is a diminishing emphasis on Bible teachers and Bible teaching. This trend shows up in children’s and youth ministries, but nowhere is it more prevalent than in adult ministries, especially adult Sunday School classes.^{[1](#)} In this article we examine the New Testament emphasis on teachers and teaching and then suggest some action steps churches can take to reestablish their adult Sunday School classes.

THE GOSPELS

The focus on Bible teaching in the gospels is on Christ’s teaching ministry. We see His emphasis on teaching in three areas: He was called a teacher, He had an extensive teaching ministry, and He included teaching in His last command to us.

HE WAS CALLED A TEACHER

The three most common titles of address for Christ, and predictably so, were “Jesus” (615 times), “Lord” (191 times), and “Son of Man” (80 times).^{[2](#)} The next most common title, however, was “Teacher,” which was used 70 times. While people used five different Greek words to address Jesus as “Teacher,” the most common word was didaskalos, which was used 45 times (e.g., Mark 4:38 and Luke 21:7).^{[3](#)} This word conveys the normal and common meaning of teacher, which is one who instructs someone else. Likewise, its verb form, didasko, carries the normal concept of a teacher instructing one or more students. “How remarkable,” Zuck comments “that Jesus is spoken of this many times as a Teacher! Certainly teaching was a major component of his ministry on earth.”^{[4](#)} Eavey

adds that “teaching was His chief business. He was often a healer, sometimes a worker of miracles, frequently a preacher, but always a teacher.”[5](#)

HE HAD AN EXTENSIVE TEACHING MINISTRY

Not only was Jesus frequently called a teacher, but He also spent a lot of time teaching. Forty-seven times in the Gospels we read of Jesus teaching people. Two examples show this teaching emphasis. (In all the texts below we have added the emphasis on the word “teach” or a form of it.)[6](#)

“Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and **taught** them, saying: . . . And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his **teaching**, for he was **teaching** them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 5:1, 2; 7:28, 29).

“And he was **teaching** daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words” (Luke 19:47, 48.)[7](#)

Jesus taught in the synagogues (Matthew 4:23), in the temple courts (Matthew 21:23), in houses (Luke 5:17, 18), in towns and villages (Matthew 11:1), on a mountainside (Matthew 5:1, 2), by a lakeshore in a boat (Luke 5:3), and in the streets (Luke 13:26). Zuck concludes that “teaching was one of Jesus’ most prominent activities. Clearly He was recognized as an eminent Teacher.”[8](#)

HE INCLUDED TEACHING IN HIS LAST COMMAND

Seeing the emphasis Jesus put on teaching in His ministry, we are not surprised that He included teaching in His final command to us recorded in Matthew 28:19 and 20.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In this passage of Scripture, commonly called the Great Commission, Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples (“make disciples of all nations”), and He then instructed them how to do so.

- “Go therefore.” Better translated as “having gone” or “as you go,” we, His followers, are to be about the business of making disciples wherever we go.
- “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Once people receive Christ as Savior, they are to be baptized as an outward indication they have accepted Him. Baptism, then, is an essential part of discipleship.

- “**Teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Receiving Christ and being baptized are one-time occurrences. The ongoing part of discipleship, however, is teaching people. The inclusion of teaching as part of the Lord’s command to make disciples demonstrates the strong connection between teaching and discipleship.[9](#)

ACTS

The book of Acts records the beginning of the church and its early expansion. Christ had modeled the importance of Bible teaching and included teaching in His final command. So what did the early church do regarding Bible teaching? How important was it to them? The Scriptures below answer that question clearly.

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ **teaching** and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

“And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were **teaching** the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:1, 2).

“And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to **teach**” (Acts 5:21).

“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease **teaching** and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (Acts 5:42).

“And when he [Barnabas] had found him [Paul], he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and **taught** a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26).

“But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, **teaching** and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also” (Acts 15:35).

“And he [Paul] stayed a year and six months, **teaching** the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11).

“He [Apollos] had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and **taught** accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25).

“How I [Paul] did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and **teaching** you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20, 21).

“He [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and **teaching** about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and

without hindrance” (Acts 28:30, 31).

The record in the book of Acts leaves no doubt that the early church took Christ’s command seriously and engaged extensively in a Bible teaching ministry. Edward Hayes concluded that “teaching was no peripheral function in primitive Christianity. . . . The life and work of the early church, as revealed in Scripture, revolved in large measure around teaching.”[10](#)

THE EPISTLES

The New Testament epistles fill out our understanding of the nature and importance of Bible teaching.

THE GIFT OF TEACHING

One of the continuing spiritual gifts given to believers is the gift of teaching. The gift of teaching can be described as the supernatural ability God gives to some believers to excel in helping people understand the meaning of Scripture and how to apply it to their lives.[11](#) The clearest reference to this gift is found in Romans 12:6–8.

“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; **the one who teaches, in his teaching**; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”[12](#)

Another probable reference to the gift of teaching is 1 Peter 4:10 and 11.

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: **whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God**; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

While this text uses the word “speaks” rather than “teaches,” it almost certainly includes teaching based on what the person is to speak—the oracles of God. That’s part of teaching.

The fact God that has given the gift of teaching shows its importance in churches today. If teaching were not important, He would not have given such a gift. Its existence shows its importance.

THE OFFICE OF TEACHER

In the New Testament we find several references to people who were called teachers, leading us to believe that the office of teacher was a part of the church. No doubt the people who occupied the office of teacher possessed the gift of teaching.

“Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and **teachers**, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul” (Acts 13:1).

“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third **teachers**, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:28).[13](#)

“For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a **teacher** of the Gentiles in faith and truth” (1 Timothy 2:7).

“I was appointed a preacher and apostle and **teacher**” (2 Timothy 1:11).

The presence of the office of teacher emphasizes the importance of teaching in the early church.[14](#)

THE TEACHING ROLE OF THE PASTOR

In many Scripture passages the apostle Paul emphasized the teaching role of the pastor.

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors and teachers**” (Ephesians 4:11).[15](#)

“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, **able to teach**” (1 Timothy 3:2).

“Command and **teach** these things. . . . Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to **teaching**” (1 Timothy 4:11, 13).

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and **teaching**” (1 Timothy 5:17).

“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to **teach** others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, **able to teach**, patiently enduring evil” (2 Timothy 2:24).

“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and **teaching**” (2 Timothy 4:2).

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as **taught**, so that he may be able to **give instruction** in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

“But as for you, **teach** what accords with sound doctrine. . . . Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your **teaching** show integrity, dignity” (Titus 2:1, 7).

The fact that the pastor is to be a skilled teacher further emphasizes the importance of Bible teaching in the New Testament.

OTHER REFERENCES TO TEACHING

The New Testament contains several other references to a Bible teaching ministry. These references assume that a church will teach its people and primarily give further explanation about teaching.

1 Corinthians 4:17—“That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I **teach** them everywhere in every church.” Teaching was Paul’s regular practice in his ministry.

Galatians 6:6—“Let the one who is **taught** the word share all good things with the one who **teaches**.” In the early church the recipients of Bible teaching were to help support those who taught the Bible. We do not have the same situation today, but this passage shows the respect that should be given to Bible teachers because of their important role.

Colossians 1:28—“Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and **teaching** everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” Here Paul expressed again the importance he placed in his ministry on teaching people. Note the strong connection between teaching people and discipleship (“that we may present everyone mature in Christ”).

Colossians 2:7—“Rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were **taught**, abounding in thanksgiving.” This verse shows that teaching was an assumed part of the New Testament church.

Colossians 3:16—“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, **teaching** and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” In addition to further emphasizing teaching, this passage tells us that people who teach the Word are to be filled with the Word.

2 Timothy 3:16, 17—“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for **teaching**, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” In our churches today we must keep the inspired Scripture as the focus of our teaching.

Titus 2:3—“Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to **teach** what is good.” Teaching is not just for a small number of people in the church. Older women are also to teach.

Hebrews 5:12—“For though by this time you ought to be **teachers**, you need someone to **teach** you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food.” Apparently, Christians should progress to the point where they can teach others and not need to keep being taught. Some

among the Hebrew Christians had been believers long enough that they should have been teachers, but they were not mature enough yet to teach. This concept shows the Scripture's expectation that many in the church should teach.

James 3:1—"Not many of you should become **teachers**, my brothers, for you know that we who **teach** will be judged with greater strictness." Evidently, some believers in the early church desired to be teachers but perhaps for the wrong reason. They may have done so because they liked the prestige and respect accorded teachers. James warned these individuals not to be too quick to become teachers for teachers have a higher accountability before God since they become partly responsible for people's lives and spiritual growth.

The cumulative effect of these Scripture passages is to show again the centrality of Bible teaching in the early church.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from the New Testament shows that teaching and teachers were an integral part of the church and central to its purpose and mission. Christ modeled this teaching emphasis and commanded us to do the same. The book of Acts demonstrates that the early church took Christ's command seriously and put a strong emphasis on teaching. The epistles reflect the same importance in their frequent references to teaching. At its core, then, the church is an educational institution. Howard Hendricks summed up the importance of Bible teaching (here called Christian education) with these words:

- Christian education is not an option, it is an order;
- It is not a luxury, it is a life.
- It is not something nice to have, it is something necessary to have.
- It is not a part of the work of the church, it is the work of the church.
- It is not extraneous, it is essential.
- It is our obligation, not merely an option.[16](#)

The next article builds on this premise to propose some ways churches today can implement this same emphasis in adult Sunday School classes.

Works Cited

1. This trend shows up in several ways in our churches: putting little emphasis on or even dropping adult Sunday School, poor organization of classes, difficulty in getting teachers, substituting video series for Bible lessons, and the rise of small groups.
2. Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 24.
3. The other Greek words are *rabbi* (John 3:2), *rabboni* (John 20:16), *epistates* (Luke 5:5), and *kathegetes* (Matthew 23:10). See the complete list of the occurrences of these words at Zuck 25–27 and 34–35.
4. Zuck, 24. Eighteen times the Gospels record that Jesus preached (e.g., Matthew 4:23), but interestingly He was never called a preacher nor addressed as Preacher. This fact does not minimize preaching and preachers today, but rather it shows the emphasis Christ put on teaching.
5. C. B. Eavey, *History of Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 78.
6. All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
7. See Zuck 29–33 for the complete list of references to Jesus teaching. Zuck added that Jesus “taught on many occasions, though the word *didasko* is not used” (33).
8. Zuck, 29.
9. Many times people think that small groups are an essential part of discipleship. Based on this text, discipleship comes from teaching people (*didasko*), and Sunday School is our strongest Bible teaching ministry. That is why I think Sunday School is the best discipleship ministry we have in our churches today.
10. Edward L. Hayes, “Establishing Biblical Foundations” in *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 37, 38.
11. See “The Gift of Teaching and the Local Church” in the September 2000 edition of the *Faith Pulpit* (<https://www.faith.edu/2000/09/the-gift-of-teaching-and-local-church-ministry/>).
12. The thought of this elliptical reference to the gift of teaching is, “the one who has the gift of teaching, let him use it in his teaching.”
13. Paul’s use of ordinal numbers and an apparent ranking is interesting here. David Lowery comments that, “the fact that Paul assigned ordinal numbers . . . to the first three gifts suggests that these may have been relegated to a lesser role by the Corinthians. . . . Those three kinds of gifted members . . . probably were rated lower than those who had the more spectacular gift of tongues. But the first three gifts may have been greater (v. 31) because of their extensive value to the whole body of Christ” (“1 Corinthians” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds. [Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2000], 534). A side note here is that since we believe apostles and prophets have ceased to exist, that leaves teachers as the only one remaining of these three more valuable gifts.
14. While we do not have in our churches today an official office called “teacher,” we do have the office of *pastorteacher*, and we have many Bible teachers in our different ministries. I believe such teachers fulfill the office of teacher.
15. I have used the New King James translation here for clarity. Many commentators believe that the two words “pastor” and “teacher” should be linked together to convey the idea of “pastor-teacher.” Homer Kent Jr. commented that “pastors and teachers are named as one grammatical unit (by use of just one article in the Gk text). Inasmuch as the teaching of God’s truth is basic to all pastoral care, the two items form a natural combination. It should be noted that in the New Testament both of these functions are exercised by the elder (i.e., bishop): ‘Elders . . . feed the flock’ (1 Peter 5:1–2); ‘A bishop . . . must be . . . apt to teach’ (1 Timothy 3:2)” (*Ephesians: The Glory of the Church in the Everyman’s Bible Commentary series* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1971], 72.) This combination of the two roles shows the important teaching responsibility of the pastor.
16. Robert E. Clark, et al (eds). *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 11.

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[Other Articles](#)

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