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## IN SEARCH OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

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It was Sunday morning—time for Sunday school in the local church. Faithful teachers, who had volunteered their time every Sunday morning for many years, moved toward their classrooms and greeted their students with sincere interest and friendly words. Newcomers were welcomed, and inquiry was made about regular class members who were absent that day. Soon it was time to start the lesson, and the teachers stood before their classes.

In the children's department, the classes began with choruses, games and refreshments. These activities always seemed to take longer than the teachers had planned for. There never seemed to be enough time to really finish the Bible story or practice the memory verse, but the children had come to expect something to eat. In the youth class, the teacher began by asking about the result of last night's basketball game in their community. There was a lot to discuss. Several class members were on the local team, and it had been a close game, with several interesting moments that invited comment. The materials provided for the young people were good, but it was hard to find time to get through them all. Omitting the Scripture reading did allow a little more time to get through the lesson outline.

Across the hall, the young married people began to talk about their upcoming class party. It was difficult to decide where to go and what to do and which evening was best and what time to start. Their

discussion continued. Everyone, including the teacher, had somehow put off lesson preparation until Saturday night, so it was all right to prolong the preliminaries a little bit this time. Downstairs, the teacher of the middle adults started by commenting on the shortcomings of the local restaurant where several in the class had eaten recently. An animated discussion of all the local restaurants was soon in progress. It was agreed that some local eating places were no longer up to par. In the class for senior adults, the teacher began as usual by reminiscing about the good old days when things were done differently and much better. The students spoke in agreement and the commentary continued. In a few minutes, the teacher referred the class to the three-point outline carefully written on the chalkboard, and read the Scripture. But for the rest of the class, the comments did not include any further reference to the Scripture or to the outline before them.

Are we describing here a typical Sunday school? We hope not. It is difficult to be critical of an institution as beneficial as the Sunday school. Our Sunday schools and our Sunday school teachers have contributed immensely to the nurture and growth of Christian believers in our churches. The description of the Sunday school given here is a composite of my personal experiences in Sunday school classes over many years, in visits to many different local churches. I have experienced all of the situations described above, but not in one single church. In many of the Sunday school classes I have visited, God's Word was read, explained and commented on by both teacher and students in a way that encouraged me and provided me with rich spiritual food. But on too many other occasions, I have attended classes that included little or no exposition of the Scriptures. Sometimes helpful comments were made, but God's Word was not opened to us, or at best only a few moments of class time was spent actually looking at biblical content.

As Sunday school teachers and Christian educators, where should we look for the content of the instruction we give to our new converts

and our maturing believers? What is the foundation for our Christian education curriculum? How should we teach in order to teach effectively? A look at current models of teaching (Joyce & Weil, 1996) and the latest innovations in the field of secular education reveals a wide range of possibilities. In the world of education, we find many instructional philosophies (Henderson, 1983), each claiming to be the best prescription for effective learning. Each school of thought has some merit, and each is supported by research data. What about Christian education? What is the best way to educate Christians in order to prepare them for Christian service and enable them to live victorious Christian lives, and most of all, what do we need to teach them? What should be the primary content of our instruction?

There are any number of educational theories in our world today which may lead us to various kinds of educational programs for our churches, different methodologies in our Sunday School classrooms, and numerous ways of approaching the task of Christian education. It is essential to be guided by biblical truth as we face the undertaking at hand. Christian educators in the past have looked to God's Word for guidance in the field of Christian education, and we must continue to do so today. In the letter of Paul to the "holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse," he expresses his desire for those Christians, who are already walking with Christ, to

be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:2, 3 NIV).

In the world of secular education, reality is found for some in the physical world around us. Others believe we construct our own reality in our minds. The understanding that Scripture is a revelation of reality gives direction to Christian education (Richards, 1982), and in Paul's words (Col 2:17), reality is only truly found in Christ. It is in Christ that we have redemption and forgiveness of sins (Col 1:14), and as Pazmiño (1995) suggests in his comments related to this passage of

Scripture, it is in Christ that Christians must center their education, and it is in Christ that integration and wholeness in education can be found. As Pazmiño (1995) says, “It is essential that the Christocentric character of Christian education be recognized and affirmed at its roots. Christ himself is at the center of all of life from a Christian world and life view” (p. 37). Truth about Jesus Christ comes to us by means of God’s revelation in the Bible. Scripture enlightens us and helps us understand more about Christ (Hemphill & Jones, 1989), and the life of Christ in turn helps us to understand more about Scripture.

### **God’s Word: Our Source of Knowledge**

So where do we find our knowledge of reality in Christ, and where do we search for the truth we need as Christian educators? There is a Philippine animal folk tale about a foolish and vain hen that borrowed an expensive ruby necklace from her friend the hawk. The careless hen lost the necklace in the barnyard and when the hawk returned to reclaim it, it was gone. The angry hawk threatened the hen and carried off one of her chicks. The frightened hen gathered the rest of her children under her wings, and they all began searching for the lost necklace in the barnyard. And so to this day you can see the hen and her chicks, their heads to the ground, looking for the lost necklace. Scratch, scratch . . . scratch, scratch . . . day in and day out. They will never stop until they find the lost rubies. They search for treasures in the dirt of the barnyard. They search for rubies, but they only collect bugs and insects, or sticks and stones, in the debris and rubbish of the barnyard.

As Christian educators, are we searching for treasures of wisdom and knowledge in the right place? Where does our lesson content come from? What are the essential elements of our Christian education curriculum? Are we spending our time in worthwhile activities?

We may expend hours in preparation for Sunday school classes and Bible studies, but are we truly offering our students the treasures of God’s Word? And does our teaching methodology contribute to our

students' innate ability for learning? Lesson content and teaching methodology are both important issues to consider. The focus of this paper will be the issue of the source of our lesson content and material, the basis for curriculum in the educational programs of our churches.

If we are to find our treasures in God's Word, then we should begin with a look at biblical history. As the nation of Israel began its existence, Moses encouraged them to teach their families to remember that God had always been active in the lives of their people. Where would they find the content of their instruction? It was to be found, as we see in Deuteronomy 6:1, 2, 4-9, in

the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (NIV).

In Deuteronomy 31:9-13, Moses again emphasizes the source of instruction as we see that he "wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel." At the end of every seven years, the law was to be read to them in solemn assembly. They were to "follow carefully all the words of the law."

As Pazmiño (1988) suggests in his comments on these passages,

God is the author and discloser of all truth, and both teachers and students stand under this truth. God calls teachers and students to understand, grow in, and obey God's revealed Word (p. 19).

God's Law is a trust, a heritage that is to be shared not only with adults but also with children and youth in the community of faith . . . God's Word provides the essential content for teaching . . . (It) is to be passed on from generation to generation with the intent of fostering a response of faithfulness on the part of the hearers (p. 23).

As we move through Jewish history to the time of the monarchy, we find continued exhortation to attend to God's written word. Psalm 78 exhorts God's people to teach their children the statutes and laws which God had given them, so that "the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands" (vs. 6, 7). Wisdom and understanding come from God's revelation to his people through his written word.

For the Jews, neglect of instruction in God's word led first to apostasy and later to their punishment by means of the Babylonian captivity. After the exiles returned to their homeland, Ezra read the Law to the people. Through instruction from God's word, the Israelites came again to a place of obedience to God's will for their nation. So wisdom comes from God, who has revealed it in the written word. Any wisdom inconsistent with God's revelation through his Word cannot be trusted. Christian educators must base all knowledge and instruction on that revelation.

As we move into the time of the New Testament, Jesus' disciples are once again urged to educate the followers of their Lord. In this new setting, the disciples' purpose and focus of instruction must be to move those followers toward obedience of Christ's commands. This will not be easy to accomplish, but we have Jesus' personal assurance

in Matthew 28: 18-20 that his continuing presence and authority will enable us to teach obedience to his spoken word, the word which has been transmitted to us in writing by the authors of the New Testament. Pazmiño (1988) suggests in this context “the New Testament model for Christian teaching . . . centers upon the shared Christian vision, mission, and memory, as the followers of Jesus Christ seek to be faithful to God’s calling in the world” (p. 31).

Luke also provides us with insights into Jesus’ teaching methods, as he relates the story of Jesus’ encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Of particular interest for us here is the fact that the content of Jesus’ teaching on that occasion was based on “what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). The basis for the disciples’ new understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection was to come from the written word of God.

Henderson (1983) points out that Jesus related Scripture to life. He employed existing life situations, posed hypothetical situations, or constructed cases for the working out of scriptural principles. The Word of God in practical application was his basic tool for the development of godly qualities in those he taught. He taught his disciples to be taught by the Holy Spirit. There was no sense of desperation in Jesus’ ministry over the fact that his disciples were not learning quickly enough. He introduced them to a process of life-long learning from God’s word, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He taught them to pray and thereby opened a whole new dimension of learning to them.

Jesus returned to heaven, but his church continued to grow. After Paul’s conversion to Christianity, he began his missionary activities, evangelizing, preaching and teaching, explaining to his listeners both his priorities and the basis for his message, affirming with his companion Barnabas “we had to speak the word of God to you first” (Acts 13:46). It was “the word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (Acts 13:49) that brought growth to the early church. Paul, Barnabas and many others “taught and preached the word of the

Lord” (Acts 15:35) as they traveled from place to place. They entered into the synagogues, reasoned with their listeners from the Scriptures, and encouraged the Jews to examine the Scriptures for themselves to see if Paul’s teachings were true. God’s written word was to form the foundation for instruction in Christianity, as it had in times past for the Jewish faith of the Old Testament. Paul, along with John and Peter, insists that there must be a standard of truth for the gospel they preach. For them, and for the Christian teacher of today, this standard is provided in the Scriptures.

Christian educators will utilize the best that secular education has to offer in the area of learning theories and educational methodology, but as Henderson (1983) reminds us, “unlike education in the secular realm, Christian education begins with repentance. The point of entry into the life of Christian discipleship is a humble and contrite spirit” (p. 863). So from that point of entry, we will begin and move forward with the life-long task of Christian education.

As Zuck & Getz (1970) assert, “the centrality of the Bible is a major plank in the platform of evangelical education.” Christian education should not be “speculative, tentative or exploratory. It is rooted in the truth that God’s Word is authoritative” (p. 23). The Bible is the original source of Christian education (Hayes, 1991), and biblical content must provide the basis for Christian education.

As Pazmiño (1988) suggests, the authority of teachers and educators is derived from biblical authority and must be evaluated in the light of the Bible, the primary source of God’s revelation. As we share biblical content, we should also seek understanding of the implications of the biblical message for our lives, and work together to apply those biblical principles to our daily Christian walk. “Hearing” is not enough. There must also be “doing.” But it all begins with careful attention to God’s Word, and God’s Word must provide us with the foundation for our instruction of believers.

### **God's Word: Our Sure Foundation**

White (1999) relates the story of the English physicist Stephen Hawking who told of an elderly woman who was asked to describe Earth's place in the universe. "The world rests upon the top of a giant turtle," she said. The inquirer smiled and asked, "And what does the turtle stand upon?" "Another turtle," she replied. The patient teacher then asked, "And what does *that* turtle stand upon?" With a satisfied smile the woman replied, "I know where you are going young man, and I've got an answer. It's turtles all the way down!" As one who studied and worked in secular institutions of higher learning where the "scientific" basis for research and learning was fostered, I have often seen "knowledge" based on quotes from authors who based their statements on quotes from previous authors—a method of inquiry and research that left me with the sense that it was "turtles all the way down."

In contrast, Christian educators must stand on the firm foundation of God's written word. As Gangel (1989) suggests, the Christian educator is one who "has committed himself to thinking in a context which defines morality in terms of biblical absolutes and subjects all conclusions to Lord and Word" (p. 78). As White (1999) says, "The world needs truth, not one more shaky opinion. It needs to hear God's Word asserted with a complete confidence rather than in a quivering, self-conscious, half-embarrassed whisper. It is always right to speak the Word of God with boldness, so long as our confidence is in the Word and not in ourselves" (p. 80). In this way, as Hanke (1967) affirms, God's written word "becomes divine intelligence to man as the Holy Spirit bears witness in his heart. Through revelation man lays hold of divine truth which cannot be reached by reason alone, and cannot be reduced to some rational system of man without the direct aid of the Spirit of God" (p. 495).

We also believe the revelation of God to humanity through his written word invites investigation of biblical teachings. We do not shy

away from intellectual inquiry into our faith. Reason should not be an enemy of the Christian faith. Peter said to his listeners that they must “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet 3:15). Christian teachers have tested human experience, ideas and theories in the past by means of biblical precepts and we must be willing to continue to examine them in the light of the Scriptures. The Bible is reliable and trustworthy, and Christian educators and thinkers must be able to “integrate faith with learning in any form” (Gangel, 1989, p. 83).

### **God’s Word: Our Source of Nurture**

A return in our churches to a teaching ministry based on God’s Word will provide spiritual nurture for our believers. As new Christians begin their walk with God, and as mature Christians move forward in their walk with Him, we must provide them with spiritual food that comes from the Bible. Long ago, Moses told the Israelites that God had allowed them to experience physical hunger in the wilderness so that they would come to understand that “man does not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). As Jesus began his ministry here on earth, he quoted this Old Testament passage at the moment when his loyalty to God and to God’s plan for his life and ministry were called into question. Jesus resisted sin and temptation on that occasion, not by doing a miracle or by resorting to his divine power, but by receiving spiritual nurture that gave him strength and victory over temptation through the power of God’s written word.

Many years before the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, Jeremiah said, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; For I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts” (Jer 15:16). Jeremiah assimilated and internalized God’s word (Freedman, 1992). It became a part of his very being, and through it he received nurture, spiritual food that

the Psalmist had declared was “sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Ps 19:10).

Philip P. Bliss spoke in his hymn of the life-giving nurture that we receive through God’s written word:

*Sing them over again to me – wonderful words of life;  
Let me more of their beauty see – wonderful words of life.  
Words of life and beauty, teach me faith and duty:*

*Christ, the blessed one, gives to all wonderful words of life;  
Sinner, list to the loving call – wonderful words of life.  
All so freely given, wooing us to heaven:*

*Sweetly echo the gospel call – wonderful words of life;  
Offer pardon and peace to all – wonderful words of life.  
Jesus, only Savior, sanctify forever:*

*Beautiful words, wonderful words of life.*

In 1960, Glen called for a recovery of the teaching ministry in the life of our churches:

The teaching ministry is the one ministry which when taken seriously assumes the responsibility of communicating the truth at the human level and in human form. It insists that the substance of the Bible and of its faith, including the substance of the great confessions of the church, are essentially intelligible and must be communicated from one generation to another if the church is to be the church and men and women are to hear the word of God. This means that the teaching ministry is the guardian of what may be regarded in the best sense as the tradition of the church (p. 25, 26).

In the words of Sanner and Harper (1978),

The Bible is the Word of God: it is the Foundation and final Authority for the goals and content of Christian education. In it the Christian finds his heritage from the past and his hope for the future. He discovers that he is part of a great teaching tradition. The Hebrews used instruction effectively to perpetuate their faith and their way of life—they taught through the parents, the priests, the wise men, the prophets, the Temple, and the synagogue. Jesus himself was the Master Teacher, his disciples spread the Good News through preaching and teaching.

God honors such teaching with his grace. Biblical principles of education challenge us to perform our teaching tasks with total commitment. We cannot rest content until all men come to know Jesus whom to know is life eternal. To love him, to be like him, to serve him, is the fulfillment of Christian education (p. 49).

When you share God's Word with your class, use the best methodology you can find, so that you can teach in the best way possible. Be familiar with the way your students learn, so that you can use the best of learning theory that is compatible with God's Word. But when you choose lesson content, use the Bible.

For each one of us, teaching is part of our ministry. Whatever our assignment might be in the church, as teachers, Christian educators, pastors or administrators, may we all echo the words of Moses who said: "Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants" (Deut 32:2). Isaiah said, "The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary" (Isa 49:4).

The concepts and thoughts presented here are not new, but as Christian educators, we must remind ourselves constantly of the most

important source for the content of our instruction. From God's Word we will search for treasure, and we will share that treasure with those who need to hear. Upon the sure foundation of God's Word we will base our teaching, and from that word we will be nurtured.

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