

Teaching the Faith

Rev. Berton Greenway

“An overseer, then, must be . . . able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

The young Christian lady in my office was lamenting her sins. Aware that she had failed God again, she felt an overwhelming despair. I assured her of God’s love in Christ and how He carried her sins to the cross. I explained to her the meaning of justification and about how, without our works, God declares us righteous before Him. As I did, you could see joyful recognition in her eyes, the blessed awareness that these were familiar words of comfort and life. Yet, suddenly and strangely, with that recognition came more sadness and almost disgust. “Why do I keep forgetting this, Pastor? Why does this not come naturally to me?” Without her knowing, she had suggested a most basic Christian truth. “But that’s just it,” I told her. “It doesn’t come naturally to us. This Gospel has to be learned over and over again.”

It is important to remember that the Christian truths we teach are not as rationally perceptible as to say that two plus two equals four. While not irrational, these truths are by nature incomprehensible to us, that is, we can’t on our own understand them. The words of Paul come to mind: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Nor is it possible for a Christian to retain this confession by his own wisdom and strength. The flesh is far too weak, the temptations of the world are far too great, and the demonic attacks of the evil one are far too powerful. All of this keeps us from remaining in faith on our own. One might as well try to kiss his own elbow than to become and remain a believer in Christ on his own. The words of the catechism spell this out: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him.” If we take that seriously, then the young lady was right: “The message of God’s forgiveness in Christ does not come naturally to us, nor does believing any of the truths of Christ.”

If we continue Luther's thought mentioned above, we find that Luther also knew the solution to this problem of unbelief. Luther continues, "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His Gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." The Gospel is the power that works faith in our hearts. This is why the Gospel must be taught over and over again, and it is why pastors are called to teach the doctrine of Christ. We must teach a Gospel that human beings cannot discover, find, or even believe on their own. This is why Paul told Timothy that one of the characteristics of a qualified overseer (pastor) is that he must be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). The Gospel of Jesus must be taught if it is to be believed, as Paul says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). This need to teach is why our Lord included it in His Great Commission: "Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

Of course, if we are to teach, we must be taught to teach. Even Apollos, though filled with the Spirit of God, was taken aside and taught privately by Pricilla and Aquilla so that he might teach the faith "more accurately" (Acts 18:26). The seminary becomes that very important process in the development of pastors. Taking seriously the confessional requirement that all pastors have a "rightly ordered call" (AC XIV), so that they may be equipped to teach the faith handed down to us, is why our Church insists that those who occupy the Office of the Ministry be first taught so that they can teach others.

This follows the pattern of our Lord. According to Scripture, Jesus taught His disciples for three intense years. It was not an easy process for these humble men. What Jesus taught did not come naturally to them. When they relied on their own reason or feelings to arrive at spiritual conclusions, Jesus, the great Teacher, patiently turned them back to His Word. Day after day, He taught them the message of the Kingdom. In a similar way, one's studies at the seminary are not always an easy process. A seminarian is taught not to rely upon his own reasoning powers, but only on the doctrine of Christ as found in the Word. For all these reasons, time at the seminary will be a challenge both spiritually and academically.

But while the time at the seminary will not always be easy, most pastors will find that their four years of seminary education were some of the best years of their lives. What a delight it is to sit at the feet of learned professors, enveloped in the teachings of Christ and His Word. There is an ongoing realization that you are being taught to teach God's people something more than mere religious facts. Instead, you are learning the eternal, powerful truths of God's saving mercy in Jesus Christ. It is more than extraordinary to know that each day you are being taught the most important truths in this world.

Yes, there is nothing more essential for all human beings than the Gospel that God has called His pastors to teach. They are chosen by Him to instruct others in the most precious of all truths, the truth of Jesus Christ given for us on the cross. They teach of His person, His work, and His victory for all mankind. They instruct God's people in the meaning and use of Baptism, Word, and Supper. They teach them to

pray and do good works and much more. None of this comes naturally to us. And that is why pastors are taught to teach.

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