

THE MASTER TEACHER
(Biblical Perspectives on Instruction)

Charles L. Holman

School of Divinity
Regent University

Biblical learning is *life related*—it is more than cognitive

“Knowledge” in biblical terms means acquiring understanding that affects one’s life. There is little room of knowledge for knowledge sake.

The Hebrew prophet Hosea graphically speaks of Israel being destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hos. 4:6). He does not refer to ignorance expressed in failure to pass a multiple choice test on the Ten Commandments. He means that his people were not living the Ten Commandments. Therefore they did not know the Ten Commandments. There was stealing, murder, adultery (4:2)—they were in effect rejecting their covenant relationship with Yahweh. Hosea thus says: “Let us press on to know Yahweh” (6:3).

The prophet Amos says that of all peoples on the earth, Yahweh has only known Israel (3:1). “Knowledge” speaks of relationships that affect one’s life. Likewise in the N.T. to know God and Jesus Christ is to have eternal life (John 17:3).

But what about knowledge that does not involve personal relationships? Again, we find that “knowledge” as such affects or changes one’s life. E.g. Psa. 119:65-68. Here *biblical* instruction leads one to *keep* God’s commandments. Turning to the N.T., we find in 1 Cor. 8:1-2 that knowledge of how harmless certain foods are (those offered to idols) leads one to partake in an arrogant manner when with less enlightened folk. Here knowledge affects behavior and sadly in this case leads to a sub-Christian attitude. Thus Paul says “love” on the contrary edifies. The point is that knowledge is linked with adoption of a life-style. *Thus knowledge and learning in a biblical sense are life related. They have practical consequences.*

Granted, all of our instruction is not immediately related to life-changing objectives. In my School when a student learns how to parse a Hebrew verb, the results will normally not be life-changing, unless it shows up wrong on the exam sheet too many times! But the goal in such study is ultimately greater than the ability to take apart a Hebrew verb.

If our instruction is leading students to learn in a way that changes their lives, then our instruction is to that extent biblical. This may be a particularly pertinent word in a time when we are witnessing an explosion of information via the internet. What do we do with such learning? How important is the acquisition of a multiplicity of data? To what extent or in what ways is it life related?

Biblical instruction includes critical evaluation of data.

Before it is welcomed as truth, information and ideas ought to be critically examined. No doubt we are all aware that one difference between graduate instruction and that in undergraduate institutions is that one goal of graduate instruction is to lead students to think more for themselves, not merely to indoctrinate them.

My biblical starting point is in relation to what the O.T. and N.T. present as prophetic utterances more than instances of what we call teaching. Thus I am stretching a little here. Nevertheless in Scripture there is an emphasis upon making sure that what we accept as truth is actually that.

In the O.T. false prophets at times were a dime a dozen. Their message had to be critically assessed in light of Yahweh's earlier revelation to His people.

In the N.T. the apostle Paul tells the Corinthian and Thessalonian believers to test what they hear being given as the word of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 14:29). In 1 Thess. 5:19-22 Paul writes: "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil"(NASB). *The Message* (Eugene Peterson): "Don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil." (Note by the way how prophetic instruction is life related.)

There are other instances in the N.T. of falsity being exposed. Such examination presupposes a standard by which to determine what is true. In the N.T. church this was the apostolic tradition. This speaks of a community involved in learning and also critically processing fresh information and teaching. Especially prominent are the opening verses of Luke's Gospel, wherein Luke says he has "investigated everything carefully from the beginning" (1:3). Presumably, this implies that some records of the Jesus tradition, oral or written, he set aside in his own critical assessment of the truth. And we believe that the Holy Spirit led him in this endeavor. All of this encourages us to be open to new truth, but to evaluate its authenticity. *Are we encouraging our students to think for themselves in arriving at truth in relation to a Christian worldview that is grounded in Scripture? Are we doing so in fellowship with the Holy Spirit of truth? Do we read uncritically works with which we basically agree?*

Biblical instruction comes through a variety of media.

Biblical narrative comprises most of Scripture. There is *historical* narrative in both Testaments, whereby past events were recorded and preserved for posterity to hear them read aloud in synagogue or church. Listeners were asked to read historical narrative as examples of how to relate to God themselves (E.g. 1 Cor. 10:1-13). The *parables of Jesus* were another kind of narrative. As his listeners became involved in real life stories, they were brought to face themselves in new ways.

For us this entails hearing the word of the Lord afresh through what happened in earlier times. It means that as we read biblical narrative we identify with the people of God to whom Scripture first came, and we hear the word of the Lord for us in relation to our own plans, activities, and life style. We should not only interpret Scripture, but Scripture should interpret us!

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Festivals and rituals in biblical times were another medium for instruction. By these means salvific events were dramatized and relived by proxy. For example the Passover feast, the feast of Tabernacles, the rituals of water baptism and the Lord's supper were all means to bring home the truth of what God had done for His people. These events were intended to impact the lives of those concerned. Academically I do not know how this applies one for one with us. But for us, immersion in planned interactive events can be another medium of instruction. An internship should serve this purpose. My wife and I spent most of August in mainland China, meeting various groups of Christians. Christian commitment now has a fuller meaning for us. I hope that this will be seen in how we live.

Modeling of their message is vividly seen in Old Testament prophets. They not only thundered forth their disturbing but saving word in places of public assembly, but they modeled their message with unusual behavior. For example Ezekiel was to shave his head and face and take one third of the hair and burn it in the center of the city, all as part of his message to the people (ch. 5).

I have heard of a church service in which a very poorly dressed man appeared in the worship center. As I recall he was not warmly welcomed and was seated far back where he would not be seen by many people. Soon the pastor called him up front and introduced him as the preacher of the service. He was a minister who had dressed this way to see the reaction of the people at church. He delivered his message on how to treat others impartially!

Jesus of course was the great role model for his disciples. His followers were to live as He lived, loving others and even taking up their crosses in following Him.

As teachers we are modeling while teaching, whether or not we are aware of this. Later, students will recall what we were, as well as what we taught after the term is over. Perhaps they will remember even better what we were!

Dialogue, especially with the method of questioning and answering, was obviously integral to Jesus' own didactic method. This kind of exchange leads others to think through issues for themselves. Jesus asked: "Who do people say that I am?" He then followed up the answer from His disciples with "But who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:27-29). Later, according to John's Gospel Jesus asked Peter: "Do you love me?" He could then say: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

Is this not a model for us in our instruction? Is the manner in which we relate to students productive of students giving ready and honest answers in the learning process?

The bottom line is that instruction for living in covenant relationship with God is repeated in varying ways. The master instructor is thus able to offer his/her instruction through many avenues that address the complexity of the human mind and heart which learns in a variety of ways.