

Week 23

Education

Key Verses

Nehemiah 6:3 "And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

+ Introduction

The knowledge of God is best found in the Bible; therefore, a complete education includes an intentional study of the Bible, God's instruction book. Scan the pages of Scripture, and you encounter numerous occasions when God directed His children to learn, to seek knowledge, and to increase in wisdom and understanding. All of these directives can be achieved through a study of, and appreciation for, the Word of God.

In a sermon preached on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in 1920, George W. Truett – longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and a former President of the Southern Baptist Convention – stated,

"The time has come when, as never before, our beloved denomination should worthily go out to its world task as a teaching denomination."

The commitment to Christian education is an important Baptist distinctive. The responsibility to incorporate Christian education in the church's program is clearly emphasized in the Baptist Faith and Message. At Second, the commitment to Christian education is evident in many ways. We see it in the sermons delivered each weekend, a fully-graded Bible Study program, annual events such as Vacation Bible School for children and Beach Retreats for students, as well as discipleship classes and weekday Bible studies for men and women. Second Baptist School, Second Baptist School-University Model, and Houston Theological Seminary are further reflections of this commitment.

Christian education and personal discipleship are the responsibility of the individual believer and a biblical mandate for parents in the home and for the local church. Let's explore several passages of Scripture that shed light on how Christian education contributes to spiritual growth, providing the capability to distinguish and resist false teaching, the ability to defend our faith, and the ability to participate in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

✦ God's Word Effects Spiritual Growth and Renewal

Today's culture seeks to keep the Bible out of public life. So, it is refreshing to envision the setting of Nehemiah 8, in which a great assembly of God's people gathered in the public square in Jerusalem to hear the Word of God read and interpreted. Nehemiah understood that the reconstruction of the wall around Jerusalem was just the first part of what was needed to protect God's people and restore their sense of identity as the people of God. As Charles Swindoll states in his commentary on Nehemiah, the reconstruction of the wall had to be followed by "the reinstruction of the people."¹ And that is precisely what took place when Ezra, the scribe, began to read God's Word to the assembled crowd.

Chapter 8 of Nehemiah describes three basic responses that are necessary for learning and spiritual growth to occur when God's Word is read. The Word must be understood (v. 1-8), people must receive it with joy (v. 9-12), and this must be followed by a commitment to obey what has been read (v. 13-18). In other words, the whole person is involved: the mind (understanding), the heart (rejoicing), and the will (obedience). Swindoll indicates that all five aspects of authentic Bible exposition are present in Nehemiah 8:

- The Word of God is read.
- The people listen to the Word and respect it as truth.
- The Word is explained so that all who hear can understand.
- Specific teaching is provided so that everyone is "given the sense" of what the Word means.
- And, finally, the truth is applied as those who hear the Word respond to it.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-9 below:

NEHEMIAH 8:1-9 *And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. ² Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴ Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also*

Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. ⁸ They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

⁹ Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

Note these additional insights on this amazing passage, verse by verse:

- **Verse 1:** Most likely, a large portion of the Torah or Pentateuch was read, which would explain why the reading could extend over several hours.
- **Verse 2:** "All who could listen with understanding" participated in the assembly. This would include men, women, and probably young people. J. Vernon McGee states, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that elaborate preparations had been made so that all those gathered would be able to concentrate on what was read. He suggests that they must have provided a nursery for crying babies! ²
- **Verses 3-6:** The respect people had for the reading of the scroll is indicated by their attentiveness, the fact that they stood during the reading of God's Word, and they worshiped God as the reading continued.
- **Verses 7-8:** Several men, including Levites, were dispersed among the crowd to make sure the people understood what they heard. For one thing, many of the returning exiles were unable to understand the Hebrew language, so some translation was necessary. But it is important to note the strong emphasis on "understanding," and this word appears at least six times in the chapter. This reinforces the point that the Word of God must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power.
- **Verse 9:** The people were shocked by the contrast between the law's requirements and their own practices. Their heart-searching is a clear indication of the power of God's Word to bring conviction, an important element in revival, and to generate a response that can result in mobilization of God's people (which is seen in the confession of sin and covenant renewal that occur in chapters 9 and 10).

✦ God's Word Is The Guideline For Truth

The Bible assures us that absolute truth is knowable and that God Himself is the very source of that truth. A healthy Christian life is characterized by a hunger and thirst for truth (Matthew 5:6). In 2 Timothy 1:5, the Apostle Paul rejoices that his protégé Timothy has received a thorough grounding in the truth by his mother and grandmother. This instruction in the truth is to Timothy's advantage as Paul charges him to confront the false teaching that has infiltrated the church in Ephesus.

Several passages in I and II Timothy support the reliability of Scripture as the source of truth and as an instrument by which we are able to discern the truth.

II TIMOTHY 2:15 *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the Word of truth.*

The phrase *“handling rightly the Word of truth”* literally means to “cut evenly” as in a straight line. The figure behind the Word has been held to be that of cutting a furrow, or a mason cutting stones straight, or as derived from Paul’s own tent-making. The *“approved workman”* is one who presents these eternal truths of the Gospel with fidelity.

II TIMOTHY 3:14-17 *You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them,¹⁵ and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

This passage attests to the power of God’s Word to equip men and women for ministry and service. Since every Scripture is *“God-breathed,”* it follows that it is also profitable:

1. for teaching – for instruction in doctrinal truth
2. for reproof – for detecting and exposing all that is false
3. for correction – for setting people back on a right path
4. for instruction in righteousness – for providing needed discipline

One writer states that the word “instruction” is literally “child training.” Every believer, like a child, needs to be “educated, trained and disciplined in righteousness, so that he may prosper in this sphere where righteousness is the norm of life.”³

Repudiating False Teaching

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about his great concern for the church at Ephesus. His passion was the result of spending three years in Ephesus, establishing and building the church there. In Acts 20, Paul says farewell to the leaders in Ephesus and warns them of perils that will befall them if they are not careful. He admonishes them to be on guard against the *“savage wolves”* who will disturb the church and warns that even from their own membership, false teachers will arise who will speak *“perverse things,”* and will *“draw away”* the disciples (see Acts 20:25-31).

As Paul’s warning becomes a reality, he charges Timothy to confront this false teaching, and he throws all his authority behind this young pastor. In I Timothy 1:3-7, Paul describes four things that are true of the false teachers: their doctrinal deviations, their mission, their motives, and their legacy. Their focus on *“myths and endless genealogies”* and their *“idle talk”* has caused them to *“turn aside”* or *“swerve”* from sound doctrine so that what they teach is inconsistent with the truth.

William Barclay ⁴ offers a helpful portrait of the false teacher, as one who:

- desires novelty (whereas the truth does not change),
- exalts the mind at the expense of the heart, focusing on speculation rather than experience,
- deals in argument instead of action; that is, “they fell in love with words and forgot deeds,”
- is motivated by arrogance rather than humility,
- practices dogmatism without knowledge.

Our Responsibility Today

Commenting on the clear warnings about false teaching in Titus 1:13-16, John MacArthur explains that all believers are responsible for being on the alert for false teachers. For what do we watch? MacArthur suggests that we look at their understanding of Scripture and ask if it is biblically sound. We should examine their goals and their motives. And we should pay special attention to the effect of their teaching. Do they define the Gospel properly? MacArthur suggests that those who pass this review should be welcomed as brothers in Christ, but that those who do not “are to be rejected, no matter what experiences they may have had, or what else they may teach.” ⁵ Ensuring that Christian educators are handling the Word of God accurately and with integrity is critical to the spiritual health of a church. MacArthur warns that “constant vigilance is our defense against those who would enslave all of us to a false gospel.”

+ God's Word Requires Enlightenment and Engagement

The Baptist Faith and Message states that Christianity is “the faith of enlightenment and intelligence.” And it follows that a successful program of Christian education will be relevant, appealing, and accessible. Our approach to God’s Word, if it is to result in life-change and maturity, will be characterized by enlightenment and engagement.

Enlightenment

Paul Little, in *Know Why You Believe*, observes

“If we know Jesus lives only because, as the hymn says, he lives within my heart, we’re going to be in trouble the first time we don’t feel he’s there.” ⁶

In our increasingly sophisticated and educated world, Little states that it is no longer enough to know **what** we believe, it is essential that we know **why** we believe it. In other words, becoming a Christian cannot mean that we “kiss our brains goodbye.” There are clear commands in God’s Word to be intelligent in our faith. I Peter 3:15 instructs us to “*always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...*” One result of effective

Christian education is that we will be able to successfully defend our faith in the open marketplace. Our faith is not “blind faith,” but it should reflect a logical, robust, and unwavering confidence in the truth of God’s Word.

Engagement

The writer of Hebrews devotes a fairly extensive passage to the dangers of immaturity and to its resulting lack of spiritual progress. After warning against drifting (Hebrews 2:1-4) and against disbelief (Hebrews 3:7-19), the writer warns of the dangers that come to those who are “*dull of hearing*” (5:11) and “*sluggish*” (6:12) in their study of God’s Word. One of the first symptoms of spiritual regression, or backsliding, is “a dullness toward the Bible.” As in I Corinthians, the comparison is made between those who are content to receive only milk and those who are ready to digest meat. Thomas Constable ⁷ profiles the person who is spiritually immature as exhibiting,

- laziness toward God’s Word,
- an inability to teach the Word to others,
- a diet of only elementary truths,
- a lack of skill in applying the Word.

+ Conclusion: The Goal of Our Instruction

Clearly, Christian education, through the proclamation of God’s Word, through Bible Study, and discipleship, has great value. But it is not meant to be an end in itself. Our mandate to learn should always be geared toward making us better disciples and better servants of God. One writer put it this way: “God gave you knowledge, wisdom, understanding, truth, and insight, not just to fill your heads, but to fill your hearts and thus to fill your hands with the work of furthering the Kingdom of God.” ⁸ Let’s review some goals of Christian education by category.

Ministry and Missions

Christian education is essential to the effective execution of several Baptist distinctives. Evangelism, missions, and ministry – and the application of these to daily life – are dependent on Christian education, as teaching and training provide the skills and knowledge needed for persons to carry these out.

Christian Thinking

I Timothy 1:5 states that “*the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*” William Barclay ⁹ amplifies this to describe the Christian thinker:

- His thinking is based on faith. He begins from the principle that Jesus has given us the full revelation of God.
- His thinking is motivated by love.
- His thinking comes from a pure heart, and from a desire to lead people nearer to God.

- His thinking comes from a good conscience. His thoughts and deeds give him the right to say what he does.
- His thinking is without hypocrisy. He is sincere in his desire to find the truth and to communicate it.

Solid Foundation

James M. Boice, in *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, states that "Jesus says that a man builds a life the way designers build cities, and his point is that the factor that determines what will remain and what will not remain is the foundation."¹⁰ The difference is that some will hear the teachings of Scripture and obey them, and others who hear them will not do them. This is the clear message of Matthew 7:24-27. Those who ignore the teachings of Jesus, whether in their thinking or their behavior, are like houses built on sand, destined to collapse. By contrast, those who live according to the truth, like houses on bedrock, will be able to endure all hardships.

The Next Generation

The book of Deuteronomy is always aimed at the next generation, and it is filled with exhortations for remembering and teaching the great truths of God to future generations. Thomas Constable warned that "when we fail to pass on what we know, we begin to lose what we know."

In his sermon series on *Culture Wars*, Dr. Young preached on "The Battle for Education," using Deuteronomy 6:1-9 as his text. His message contained a clear call for the church to be faithful to this mandate to provide quality Christian education for the next generation:

"The other thing is that the church teaches our children. But the church can't compete. If we have them here for an hour of Bible Study on Sunday, and an hour of Worship, when they have spent 30+ hours each week with media and another 30 hours in school, our task is great. But we are here to teach. And children discover that learning about God can be fun. They learn how to serve. They learn how to pray. They learn basic doctrine – and we seek to do all this in an environment that is exciting and relevant to where they are. The church still stands for the Bible. This church teaches. Give us a chance."

And this commitment to teaching is equally true for moms and dads, single adults, and young people. Our clear command is to teach the truths that have been entrusted to us to this and future generations. This is needed now more than ever. At Second Baptist Church, we intentionally seek to educate our members on the truth of Scripture. We systemically study God's Word each week and learn that it is relevant and applicable to our lives in the 21st Century. We also encourage the study and learning of God's Word beyond the weekend Bible Study hour and into the homes and family units of all ages and stages of life.

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¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990.

² J. Vernon McGee, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991.

- ³ D Edmond Hiebert, *Second Timothy*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1958.
- ⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975.
- ⁵ John MacArthur, *1 & 2 Timothy*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007.
- ⁶ Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.
- ⁷ Thomas Constable, www.planobiblechapel.org/soniclight.
- ⁸ www.lifeway.com/en/articles/foundations-faith-education.
- ⁹ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*.
- ¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986.