

Training for Ministry

2 Kings 4:38–44, Acts 19:8–10

When a little baby is born, it needs more than nutrition and clean diapers. Humans alone, out of thousands and thousands of species, need *education*; that is, they need to learn things that they did not know when they were born.

Ever looked at a spider web? There is a breathtaking beauty and intricacy. Who teaches a spider to spin her web? She uses two types of threads: some are sticky and meant to catch insects; others are non-sticky and are used to walk on. Who teaches the spider how to walk on her own web without getting stuck?

Birds need nests—places of safety to hatch their young. Who teaches a bird to build a nest? Nest-building is cooperative, with males fetching the materials and females doing the bulk of the construction. Who teaches the birds to divide their labor this way?

The leatherback turtle must make its way to the ocean right after hatching. Who teaches a newly-hatched leatherback turtle to head *toward* the ocean, rather than *away* from it? Males spend their entire lives at sea, while females come back to land to build their nests. They choose beaches with soft sand because their softer shells are easily damaged by hard rocks. How do leatherback turtles know to choose beaches with soft sand rather than hard rocks? Who taught them?

The newborn kangaroo is blind, hairless, and only a few centimeters long; its hind legs are mere stumps. It is very vulnerable and needs to climb into its mother's pouch right after it is born. It must make its way through the thick fur on its mother's abdomen into the pouch, which takes three to five minutes. Once it gets in, it fastens onto one of four teats and starts to feed. Who teaches the newborn kangaroo to climb into its mother's pouch right after it is born? That knowledge is critical; if the tiny newborn kangaroo didn't do that successfully, it would die of exposure.

How did the animals learn to do all these things? For the Christian, the answer is easy: it is God—*God* is the one who teaches the animals what they need to know. Scientists speak of “instinct.” Instinct is defined as *an innate, fixed pattern of behavior in animals*. But instinct is not fully explained. Where does instinct reside? In the brain? Who put it there?

Humans are capable of very complex tasks. Humans can learn how to do brain surgery, how to build a skyscraper, how to send a manned vehicle to the moon, how to write a symphony, how to paint a *Mona Lisa*, or how to solve the Rubik's cube. Humans can also learn the truth about God and how to preach the gospel. But none of these things is known innately. Each of these tasks has to be learned. Humans need *education*. Ultimately, this is the work of the Spirit of God: “All thy children shall be *taught* of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children”

(Isa. 54:13). God says his people perish for lack of *knowledge*. How do we get the knowledge that we need? Look with me at our text and consider four points: first, **1. Evangelizing and defending the faith**

“And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (v. 8). Here is a terse yet pregnant account of the substance of Paul’s missionary work in Ephesus, a city for which he had long prayed, and which he had first visited toward the end of his second missionary journey, when he was in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem. He had had a good reception at that time. Luke notes that he had even been asked to stay longer, but though he couldn’t then, he did promise to return. Ephesus was in his heart. It was an important city, called by the Romans “the first and greatest metropolis of Asia.” Like most cities at that time, it had its local deities, the chief of which in Ephesus was the goddess Diana, whose temple was there. Ephesus also had a theater, which was the largest in the world, holding 50,000 spectators.¹ So evangelizing the city of Ephesus was an important part of Paul’s strategy for reaching Asia Minor with the gospel. Now, he’s back in town, and what did he do? He returned to the synagogue to tell the Jews about Christ. The words that are used in Luke’s brief account are pregnant: “spoke boldly,” “reasoning,” “persuading.” These describe a ministry of evangelizing and defending the faith.

The word translated “spoke boldly” (παρρησιάζομαι) means to speak freely, openly, fearlessly. This is a description of preaching. Paul found an initial reception among the Jews of Ephesus. Their synagogue was an enclave of commitment to the Hebrew Scriptures in the midst of rampant paganism, and Paul was deeply desirous to show the Jews that their own Scriptures pointed to Christ. The God of heaven had visited his people in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary! Here was the message that gripped the heart of the apostle Paul, and the Jews at this early stage were interested in hearing it. Paul didn’t just pull a few people aside and whisper quietly; he boldly preached Christ. The message of the gospel is likewise what the people of our world desperately need to hear, and we as a church ought to pray that God would raise up fearless preachers.

The second word Luke uses is “reasoning” (“disputing,” KJV²). This is the word (διαλέγομαι) from which we get our word “dialoguing.” But in this context it does not mean idle chitchat; it refers to speaking with purpose. As the apostle presented Christ to the Jews, he appealed to their reason. The Christian faith is eminently reasonable; an honest preacher wants to answer peoples’ questions. Faith in Christ is not a leap into the dark. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The God of heaven has spoken. He is the embodiment of truth; he cannot lie. He is the one who has given man the gift of

¹ Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

² Word borrowed from the Vulgate

reason. And he doesn't ask us to check our brains at the door when we come to faith. The Christian faith alone is internally consistent. The Christian faith alone makes sense of the world. We know intuitively that there is a God. We know intuitively that there is something wrong in our world, and that something is sin and rebellion. Why is there hatred, distrust, suspicion? Why is there so little civility and brotherly love? Why do we always have to be on our guard, lest we be deceived? The answer is that we were made to have a relationship with God, but that relationship is broken because of sin. Man is in rebellion against the God of heaven. He is estranged from the giver of life. But in Christ we are reconciled to God. Our sins are washed away, and we are given new hearts that love him and long for him. Rebels are changed into worshipers; there is peace, love and harmony. The Christian faith makes sense. Paul reasoned with the Jews, showing them that there is hope in Christ.

The last word is “persuading” (from *πειθω*, *persuade*, *appeal to*): to move by argument or entreaty; to cause someone to accept a point of view or undertake a course of action; to convince, especially after a sustained effort. Paul uses this same word in 2 Corinthians 5:11, where he says, “knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we *persuade* men.” The church is in a life-and-death struggle with falsehood. People try to put out of their minds the uncomfortable fact that there is a God who will one day call us all to judgment. One day we will stand before him and give account for our every word, thought and action—everything that we have ever done. At that time those who fail to measure up to his standard of absolute perfection will be forever excluded from his blessed presence, consigned to eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. Time is short—*today* is the day of salvation; after we draw our last breath it will be too late. Paul wanted to persuade men. He wanted them to make the voluntary choice to leave their life of sin and follow the Savior.

Paul “went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God.” He evangelized and defended the faith—what we call apologetics—but after three months, the climate changed. Our second point is this: Paul and his followers started

2. Enduring insults and abuse

Look at the beginning of verse 9, “But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude ...” Paul preached in the synagogue longer here than in any other city he visited, but after awhile, there was opposition. Opposition is inevitable in a fallen world. As the apostle John puts it, “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Here is the antithesis. Christ is the light of the world, but men love darkness rather than light. It is still the case today. Men are in rebellion against God. Their minds and hearts

are darkened. It is like moving a large rock, and suddenly all the little creatures that live below it scatter and scurry for shelter. They don't want to be in the light; they want to hide. But it is vain to try to hide from God. His knowledge is complete, thorough and comprehensive. He knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. But when some people are confronted with the truth, they become combative. Such was the case in Ephesus. "Some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude." "Some were hardened" is a description of the human condition. All of us are sinners. Our first efforts at sin are tentative. We are ashamed, so we look around to see if anyone is looking. But then we become bolder. We got away with it before; perhaps we can do it again. As we continue to sin, we become hardened. John in his gospel put his finger on the problem, citing Isaiah's words: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them" (John 12:40). When people persist in sin, they become hardened to the gospel. They shut their minds and hearts to it. They do not want even to consider the truth. Their heart, which should be warm and responsive to the things of God, becomes hard and impenetrable. Awhile back I tried to drill a hole in a thin piece of metal. I looked at it and said, "No sweat!" I got out my drill, put in a bit, and started to attack the piece. I drilled and drilled and drilled, but made very little progress. The bit removed a little of the metal—just a little pucker—but there was no way I was going to get a big bolt through that hole. It became clear that that thin piece of metal was actually hardened steel, steel that has been given heat treatment and then quenching followed by tempering. The human heart can become hardened to the gospel. No matter how carefully and patiently the truth is presented, the hardened heart will not receive it. People with hard hearts may feel as though they have triumphed over God, but their victory will be short lived, for in the end, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen! Our text tells us that those who were hardened and did not believe spoke evil of the Way before the multitude. These were public insults and verbal abuse against "the Way"—that is, the Christian faith. Our church likewise has been the object of public insults and abuse—bitter denunciations and attacks upon the character of our officers and members. This can be oblique testimony to the church's effectiveness. When God is at work, the devil rises up to oppose him. Certainly, what Paul preached at the synagogue in Ephesus was the truth. It should have been wholeheartedly received by every person. But those who were hardened in their sin spoke evil of Paul and the kingdom of Christ. It was not pleasant, but Paul was not going to keep quiet. This brings us to point 3,

3. Training the saints for ministry

We read that Paul "departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus" (v. 9b). Paul did not give up; rather, he changed

tactics. He temporarily withdrew from the public sphere and began to hold classes in a rented room. Rather than continue his public ministry he began a period of intensive training with the “disciples” (*disciples* are learners, followers—men and women who voluntarily submit themselves to the *discipline* of Christ). You and I are called to be disciples of Christ. Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and *learn* of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28). Once again we are brought face to face with the fact that we humans are not born with all the knowledge that we so desperately need. Knowledge must be *acquired*, and true knowledge comes from Christ. In Christ alone are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Do you want to acquire this knowledge?

When Paul withdrew from the public square and began to focus on his core group, it might have seemed to be a defeat, but actually he was following the practice of his Lord. During his public ministry Jesus would speak to the crowds, but then he would withdraw and focus on his disciples—men whom he admitted to his close circle. He spoke to the multitudes in parables, but when he was alone with his disciples, he explained their meaning to them. There were women also among Christ’s disciples (though he chose only men to be his apostles). The synoptic gospels speak of women who followed him and “ministered to him” (διακονέω) when he was in Galilee, and who came with him when he went to Jerusalem for the last time (see Mark 15:41). The point is that Christ spent perhaps the major portion of his time investing in the lives of his disciples.

But not only was Paul following the example of Christ, he was also following the practice of the Old Testament prophets. Long before the coming of Christ God’s prophets had invested time and effort into the lives of their followers. There are a number of Old Testament texts that mention “the sons of the prophets” (בְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים). Just as Paul had Timothy, his “son in the faith,” so the Old Testament prophets had their sons in the faith. In times of great apostasy and unbelief, when the priests in Jerusalem were leading the people astray, the faithful flocked to the prophets and followed them around to hear the word of the Lord. Sometimes these groups became quite large. They are popularly known as the “schools” of the prophets. We read in our Old Testament text today that “Elisha returned to Gilgal, and there was a famine in the land. Now the sons of the prophets (בְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים) were sitting before him; and he said to his servant, ‘Put on the *large* pot, and boil stew for the sons of the prophets.’” Later in our text we read that a local farmer brought Elisha a gift of food, and the prophet responded, “What? Shall I set this before one hundred men?” In another place, the sons of the prophets set out to build a bigger building to house their school.

Returning to our New Testament texts, note that here is the only place in the Bible that mentions a “school” (σχολή)—a place for learning. The word is used a

couple times in the Septuagint in the sense of *leisure* but came to be understood as the place or activity of learning—using one’s leisure time to study and learn. Many of the modern translations render it “lecture hall,” because the word *school* has taken on the sense of a large institution with a lot of faculty offering many courses. The lecture hall of Tyrannus was probably a large room and nothing more. Here, Paul and his disciples could gather. He could teach them and answer their questions without fear of interruption. But the point is that Paul was investing his time in the lives of key men and women who were equipped to “teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Men chosen and ordained by the church would preach and lead worship. Women would be equipped to minister among women. And that brings us to point 4,

4. The result: the gospel penetrates society

Verse 10 records that “this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” Amazing! All the people of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Not all accepted it, of course, but all had the opportunity. How different it is today: the biblical Asia Minor is now part of Turkey, a Muslim country where the church has to keep a low profile.

You and I are not born with an innate knowledge of Christ and his gospel. How do we learn it? From a faithful disciple. In Romans 10 the apostle Paul writes that the Lord is rich to all who call upon him, and that “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” This is great news. But then he asks, “How . . . shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?” In other words, the ordinary and regular means that sinners learn the gospel is through a faithful disciple.

Human babies need to learn to feed themselves, to turn over in bed, to walk on their own, to tie their shoes, to avoid danger, and to tell time. None of these things is known at birth. We have a little grandson, and we’re all rooting for him as he’s getting to the stage of walking on his own. One of these days he’ll get it, and a whole new horizon of possibilities will open up for him. But did you know that a baby rhino can stand up on its hooves a few *minutes* after it is born, and a baby zebra can *run* (!) an *hour* after it is born? Why did God make it so hard for humans? One reason is to teach us the importance of education—each of us must learn *good* and profitable things. The church needs teachers of good things. It needs ministers who teach the gospel accurately. It needs godly older women who can teach the younger women to love their husbands and be keepers at home. It needs faithful children who can tell their peers, “I love Jesus.” All the saints must be trained for ministry. Ministry is not just for a select few; it is for all. All of us should endeavor to minister for Christ, whether in our home, school, neighborhood, business, or among our friends. Some, of course, will be called to

ordained ministry. But one man cannot do the work alone. Only as the church takes the message of Christ into the world will the gospel truly penetrate society.

We have looked at (1) evangelizing and defending the faith; (2) enduring insults and abuse; (3) training the saints for ministry, and noted the result: (4) the gospel penetrates society. May we, like Paul, be faithful and experience God's blessing as we seek to reach the world for Christ. Amen.