

Qualified to Teach

Mark Heath, 3 Sept 2004

Ezra 7:10 “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.”

Ezra was a scribe. This basically meant that he was an expert in the law of God. He read it, studied it, and taught it. When there were legal queries about how the law should be applied, the scribes would be on hand to explain. They helped people to understand the difficult bits and made it as practical as possible. They were an important part of the community of God’s people.

One reason for their importance is that most people couldn’t read and didn’t have their own personal copies of the Scriptures. They therefore relied on people like Ezra to teach them. They would regularly gather to hear the law read and expounded. In our own time, most Christians can read, and probably have many copies of the Bible (I’ve got at least 20), but the need for teaching has not gone away.

Many Christians find regular Bible reading a difficult discipline, and when they do read it, they can find that there are passages that seem obscure. Of course, the Holy Spirit is able to work in our hearts as we read God’s word and help us to understand and apply it. But the Spirit also gifts certain people as teachers because it is vital that as a community of God’s people, we are living according to his word.

There are a number of contexts in the life of the church where a gift of teaching is used. Most obvious is when someone preaches at a gathering of the whole church. But there should also be teaching in small groups, parents teaching their children, and even friends teaching one another in their homes. Apollos, an excellent speaker with great knowledge of the Scriptures benefited from Priscilla and Aquila privately teaching him more about the gospel (Acts 18:22-24) which enabled him to benefit many others through his public speaking gift.

But what qualifications are needed to be a teacher? Perhaps it is about being a good communicator – a gifted public speaker who can keep the interest of a crowd with stories or jokes. Perhaps it is about being practical and relevant – unlike some preachers who seem to be interested in nothing more than giving Greek language and ancient history lectures. Perhaps it is about being very knowledgeable and culturally aware, able to give an opinion on any and every subject under the sun at a moment’s notice.

Ezra 7:10 gives us Ezra’s qualifications as a teacher. It reveals what his motivation and passion was. We will look at the approach he took to his own vocation as a scribe and see what we can learn from it. Anyone who teaches in the church in any context needs to pay attention to Ezra’s attitude.

Set His Heart

The first thing we are told is that Ezra had “set his heart” on teaching. This was more than just a job, it was his life’s passion. He wanted to do the best job he possibly could. He didn’t just spend the normal working hours, but his whole life was devoted to this end.

James 3:1 warns “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Here we see that James is warning would be teachers that they had better be really sure that they want

to do this task. The role of teacher is not one to take on simply to boost your own ego, or to get an opportunity to tell everyone your favourite opinions. It is about faithfully delivering a message from God.

Those who teach will be judged with a greater strictness, for as we all know, it is expected that they “practise what they preach”. This does not mean that you must be perfect in an area before you can teach on it, but it is not acceptable to tell other people what they ought to do and fail to make any real effort to do it yourself.

Despite this solemn warning, there will still be many who have a passion, like Ezra, to teach. There is nothing wrong with this, and in fact may well be God-given, but the desire to teach is not enough. There are two vital practises that anyone who wants to teach must be willing to embrace. Without them, you are not qualified as a teacher.

To Study

Ezra set his heart on studying the Scriptures. He studied the law of God diligently, memorising it and meditating on it. He wrestled with how it should be applied. It mattered to him that he understood it properly. He knew that his role as teacher was not to give him a platform to air his own opinions, but to announce what God had said.

To be able to study properly, you must be truly humble. There is often the temptation to just use the Bible as a book containing texts that back up your own ideas. We can stick to a few “favourite verses” that say things we like, while ignoring whole themes of Scripture that do not appeal to us. Paul says in Acts 20:27 “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” He believed it was vital to plainly tell people everything that God required of them, without leaving out the difficult bits.

Studying the word of God requires that we make time for reading it. We need to read whole books so that we get the big picture. We need to mediate on smaller passages so that we can understand the flow of argument. We should be willing to make use of reference books to ensure that we have properly grasped the meaning of words. Commentaries are a great resource for making sure we have correctly understood a passage and haven’t made it mean something that the original languages do not permit. They should not, however, be used as a substitute for prayerfully meditating over a passage first.

A good knowledge of the teaching of the whole of the Bible will prevent us from unbalanced and distorted understandings of individual texts. It is all too easy to take a text out of context and make it mean something completely different to what the original writer intended.

The church does not need teachers who do not want to study. Whether a preacher prepares detailed notes or not, if what he says does not flow out from a diligent study of the word of God, then it’s not worth wasting our time to come to hear it. Failure to study the word of God will at best lead to imbalance and at worst heresy.

To Do It

Now there are in fact, many people who are good at studying the Bible. Quite possibly they are “academic” type people who actually enjoy reading books and learning. They may well have earned theological qualifications as a result of their studies. But that alone does not qualify them to teach.

The church does not need teachers who do not make the effort to obey the word of God. The teacher who does not study is in danger of being a heretic, but the teacher who does not obey is certainly a hypocrite. Paul says in 1 Cor 11:1 “Be imitators of me, as I imitate Christ”. He could hold himself up as a role-model because he was striving to follow the example of Jesus in every way.

If we are to be people who obey the word, then this has implications for our study. We need to understand what God’s will for us is in the different circumstances and situations we face. Bible teaching that has no application is pointless.

Ezra then will have spent time thinking about every aspect of his daily life. His work, relationships, thought life, and finances all needed to be brought into obedience to the law of God. Not only that, but as a teacher he needed to understand the daily lives of those who he was teaching. What were the unique pressures and temptations that they felt? How did God’s law apply to their situations?

Those who desire to teach cannot afford to retreat into a world of their own where they just read Christian books, listen to sermons and go to church meetings. They need to bring straightforward application that helps people to live holy lives in whatever work and home situations they find themselves in. This will involve what John Stott calls “double listening” – listening to what our culture is saying, and then listening to what the Word of God has to say about it. If we just listen to our culture and not the Bible, we will be squeezed into its way of thinking, but if we refuse to listen to it at all we are not likely to be able to communicate in a relevant way to the people around us.

There is a danger whenever applying Scripture though. It is the tendency to make legalistic rules. The Pharisees were experts at this. Although they were trying to help people apply the word of God, they ended up just making rules without much regard for the principles behind the laws of God. In Mark 7:10-13 Jesus points out that they had a tradition about gifts devoted to God which actually was used to undermine the commandment to honour your parents.

So a person who wants to teach God’s law must not only know what it says, but do it. They will constantly be evaluating their own lives to ensure that they are fully obeying God. If they are not prepared to be role models to those they teach, and if they are not prepared for a stricter judgement by God, then they are not yet qualified to teach.

To Teach

So Ezra was clearly qualified to teach. He had studied and he was obeying, which meant that he could teach with integrity. People will always respond better to receiving instructions from someone they respect. The character of the teacher is even more important than the communication skills of the teacher. When serious words of warning or even rebuke need to be issued, the hearers must know they flow from an attitude of love rather than superiority.

The early church provides some great examples here. The teaching of the apostles both in Acts and in the Epistles, show that they were people who studied the word of God. They didn’t just expect people to take their word for it all the time, but demonstrated from the Scriptures that they were bringing a message from God.

Not only that, but they were people who were living lives of radical discipleship. They placed a high value on teaching, ensuring that wherever elders were appointed, they

were people who were “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). Hearing the apostle’s teaching was one of the key priorities of the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:42), and the apostles made sure that they delegated any responsibilities that got in the way of their teaching ministry. Acts 6:4 says that they devoted themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the word”. They not only taught, but spent considerable time in prayer making sure that they were prepared and ready to be used to speak whatever the Spirit would have them say.

We are told that Ezra taught the “statutes and rules” to the people. This indicates two things. First, his teaching was *practical*. Ezra had learned to apply the Scriptures to his own life first, which enabled him to help people apply it to theirs also. He doubtless had loads of interesting trivia that he had discovered in his studies, but if it served no practical purpose then he saw no need for people to learn it.

Second, his teaching was *word-based*. He would take a command in Scripture, explain what it meant and then apply it, using examples and illustrations where necessary. By taking Scripture texts and working from them, his hearers could have the confidence that they were hearing what God was saying and not just Ezra’s ideas. Not only that, but Ezra modelled for them how they should approach Scripture. Christians need to learn how to read the Bible for themselves and apply it. Word-based teaching will show them how to do this.

Of course, sometimes a preacher will speak on a topic without specifically working from a text, but they still need to demonstrate that what they say is rooted in Scripture. Doubtless Ezra tried to cover the full scope of the law over a period of time. He was convinced that it was God breathed, and “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16,17)

Conclusion

Ezra sets an example to all who would be teachers of the word of God, in whatever setting. Let us make every effort to understand, apply and obey the word of God in our own lives, so that whether we teach or not, we will bring glory to him in all that we do.