

## Some Words About...

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### ***Catechein* (to instruct)**

The Greek word *catechein* meant "to instruct" and was used of religious instruction. The English word catechism is derived from it.

#### **New Testament**

Luke's preamble (1:1-4) tells us several things. First, "others" had written about the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection based upon eyewitness accounts. Second, Theophilus had "been instructed" in the Christian faith (1:4) and presumably had read those accounts. Third, Luke is giving Theophilus a complete and orderly account to organize, supplant, and perhaps explain the accounts circulating.

The eighteenth chapter of Acts introduces us to Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew who "had been instructed in the Way of the Lord" (18:25). He was eloquent and well educated and apparently had been a follower of John the Baptist. Priscilla and Aquila further instructed him (18:26), and when he wanted to go to Corinth the Ephesian Christians gave him hearty letters of introduction. There his enthusiasm caused some to attach themselves to him, a situation Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians. Titus 3:13 shows that he was an ambassador at large for the Christian faith and apparently part of Paul's team.

It is obvious that Christian education is not a one-shot deal. Catechetical class is the beginning of careful instruction in Christianity, not the valedictory. Priscilla and Aquila were two early examples of the priesthood of all believers. They served well, as Paul knew they would.

There is a subtle difference between testifying and instructing. This becomes important when Paul says that in Ephesus he "instructed both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21). He was not just witnessing; he was explaining with care what was involved in the evidence he gave. It would affect Jews one way and Greeks another, but it made the same demands upon both and extended the same promises to both.

Later he describes his "ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to instruct in the good news of God's grace"(20:24). He was to tell not merely what the gospel was but how it applied to their lives and to their society, that God being a God of grace affects our whole understanding of reality and the nature of our living.

Teaching is subtly different from instructing, and in Romans 2:17-29 Paul addresses those who have been instructed in the law of Moses and asks them how they teach others not merely in words but by the way they live. He points out that "you know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law" (2:18). But then he addresses their practices (2:19ff.). That is the other side of teaching.

In the second chapter of Romans the contrast from the first verse through the entire chapter is between knowing and doing. Being instructed in the law is just the first step; it shows you what God wants you to do. Following those instructions, actually doing what God wants you to do, is the vital part of godly living. The whole point of instruction is to enable one to do what God wants.

Paul applies this to the Jew who is instructed in the law. A modern parallel might be the contrast between an officer of the law who steals and a civilian who steals. Both are equally guilty. But the officer knows the reason for the law and the consequences of stealing, and he represents respect for the law. His life is saturated with the importance of law. Paul sees the Jew as saturated with the law of Moses. He has been instructed in the law; the Greek has not.

Paul could brag, but he did most of his bragging in response to provocation (see 2 Corinthians 11 and the first verse of chapter 12). In the polyglot congregation at Corinth, with immigrants from all over the Mediterranean, he was provoked by people not speaking the common language, Greek. He wrote to them, "I thank my God that I speak more languages than all of you. But in church I wish to speak five words in order to instruct others intelligibly than ten thousand of a language" (1 Corinthians 14:19). The use of language was important to Paul. It might be used to impress others, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the language of mortals or of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," or to annoy others as in Acts 16:16-18, or to intimidate others as in Acts 19:34, or to accept others as in Acts 9:17. But for Paul language was best used to instruct others in the Way of the Lord.

Having said in Galatians 6:5 that each should make sure his own task is well done, Paul adds, "And as partners, let the one instructed in the Word be instructing for the good of all" (6:6). The emphasis is clearly on instructing in the Word of the Lord. (Translations that say that Paul was in this particular verse urging the sharing of worldly goods miss the point completely.)

### **Today**

During World War II, Dorothy Sayers wrote, "...it is necessary to persuade thinking men and women of the vital and intimate connection between the structure of society and the theological doctrines of Christianity."<sup>1</sup> It is no less necessary today — and no less difficult — than it was half a century ago. Christian education is the essence of Christian influence on the condition of the world and on the vitality of personal response to God. Instruction in the faith determines one's attitudes and habits. These in turn are reflected in social and even political conditions.

### **Endnote**

1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (Sophia Institute Press, [1949] 1999), 33.

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