

Some Words About...

by Terence Y. Mullins

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Hupodeigma (example)

The biblical Greek word *hupodeigma* meant “example” or “prototype.” In the Wisdom of Sirach, Enoch is called “an example of repentance for all generations” (14:16). In 2 Maccabees 6:31, Eleazar is called “an example of nobility and a memorial of virtue.” And in his Wars of the Jews, Josephus says “you have a noble example set before you in Jeconiah the king of the Jews” (6, 103).

New Testament

After Jesus washed the disciples’ feet — an act usually performed by a servant when the guest arrived — he told them, “I have given you an example that you should also do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). And, whatever its faults may be, his church has tried to be a serving church, establishing hospitals, colleges, and universities and reaching out to those in need of food, clothing, and medicine.

The author of Hebrews, discoursing at length (3:1–4:13) on entering the promised rest and pointing to the disobedient ones not entering it, says, “Let us strive to enter that rest so no one falls through their example of disobedience” (4:11).

Later he speaks of priests who make offerings to God as presenting “an example and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary” (8:5). His point is that Jesus Christ is our real high priest (6:20; 7:23), which he finally establishes in 9:11.

He develops extensively the idea of earthly things representing in gross approximation the heavenly realities, writing that “the earthly examples of things in heaven have to be purified” (9:23). He is aware that what happens in heaven is really not in any way comparable to what happens on earth, but he continually tries to give significance to human responses to God by projecting them as imitating heavenly responses. The author obviously is familiar with the Platonic Theory of Forms, with the heavenly priest being the universal and the earthly priest being the particular. Moffatt says, “Like Philo and the author of Wisdom, he interprets the past and the present alike in terms of the old theory [cf. on 8:5–10:1] that the phenomenal is but an imperfect, shadowy transcript of what is eternal and real.”

James 5:10 says, “As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” He may have had in mind Isaiah (37:5–7), Jeremiah (18:18; 20:7–18), Ezekiel (24:15–18), and Daniel (6:6–24). The point, of course, is not merely that the prophets suffered patiently but that they suffered because they preached the word of the Lord and that they endured and persisted in speaking out for God.

In 2 Peter a long series of “ifs” (2:4–8) is followed at verse 9 by “then” as the author says that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was “an example of what is coming to the ungodly.”

Today

We learn by example. Children who see their parents giving thanks at meals soon learn to pray. Teenagers learn to drive by watching adults drive. A woman who sees her neighbor assisting an elderly person climb the stairs to the door offers similar help when she has an opportunity to do the same.

We learn by examples good and bad. Public service announcements on television, which are supposed to discourage people from smoking, show a variety of youth and adults puffing away on cigarettes, and the

example that viewers see before them obliterates the cautious advice given in the background. The intended warning becomes counterproductive.

Augustine knew peer pressure as much as we do today. He tells us in his Confessions that when for one reason or another he had not followed the example of his wildly sinning friends “I would make myself out as worse than I was so that I would not be scorned; and when I had not sinned in some way as the degenerate ones had, I would say that I had done such things even though I hadn’t so that I might not seem a contemptible innocent.”

We learn by example. We learn actions, we learn language, we learn attitudes, we learn habits from what we see and from what we hear and from the examples others set.

It follows that we teach by example. When we show Christian love, when our conversation is uplifting, when we accept our part of the work and share the credit with those who deserve it, when we tell the story of Jesus, we teach by example.

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