

O Jesus Christ, Most Holy

Nicolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760); tr. C. G. Clemens (1743–1815)

O Jesus Christ, most holy,
 Head of the church, Thy bride,
 In us each day more fully
 Thy name be magnified;
 Oh, may in each believer
 Thy love its pow'r display;
 May none among us ever
 From Thee, our Shepherd, stray.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Elements in a Philosophy of Ministry: Imitation

Kevin T. Bauder

We learn different things in different ways. Some things we learn by discovering them, like the child who learns through experience that the stove is hot. Some things we learn by being told, whether orally or through print. When it comes to skills that we must master, however, we learn by being shown and then by doing for ourselves.

Christians learn the faith in all three of these ways. Some aspects of Christianity must be experienced before they make sense. For example, Paul opens 2 Corinthians by observing that we come to understand comfort by experiencing it during affliction. Furthermore, our experience of affliction and comfort is what teaches us how to comfort others in their affliction (2 Cor 1:3–4).

Other aspects of the Christian life can be communicated by telling. Paul told the Galatians that people who engaged in certain practices would not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:19–21). He told the Philippians that certain individuals were enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil 3:18–19). He told the Thesalonians that they would suffer affliction (1 Thess 3:4). He also told them about the man of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3–5). It is possible for Christians to know some truths simply because they have been told.

Many aspects of the Christian life, however, must be shown and practiced. That is why elders must be examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3). It is why Paul exhorted believers to be followers of him, just as he was of Christ (1 Cor 11:1). It is why the Hebrews were commanded to follow the faith of their leaders, considering the outcome of their way of living (Heb 13:7). It is why Paul instructed Timothy to set an example for the people to whom he ministered (1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7).

The category of teaching by showing poses a conundrum for evangelical Christians. We are absolutely committed to the sufficiency of Scripture. We are convinced that Holy Writ gives us all that we need to live a life that is pleasing to God (2 Tim 3:16–17). Yet, by its nature as text, the Bible can only tell. It cannot show. How can believers gain the kind of demonstrative, practical knowledge that they need without abandoning their commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture?



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One way is to recognize that the text of Scripture tells us of many examples. It narrates events that are meant as examples for believers today, even when those events occurred during other dispensations (1 Cor 10:11). Reading the Bible is not simply about gaining information. It is also about observing examples of how (and how not) to do the things that God wants His people to do.

Scripture also suggests another way of easing the tension between its sufficiency and the necessity of showing. The apostles made provision within Scripture for ongoing teaching that would continue after the completion of Scripture. Paul tells Timothy to take the teachings that he has received and to transmit them to faithful men. In their turn, these men were to transmit the apostolic teachings to others (2 Tim 2:2). This multi-generational teaching process would necessarily extend beyond the completion of Paul's epistles. It implies that the apostle intended to leave behind a tradition of teaching to be transmitted through the living voice.

Roman Catholic theology makes the mistake of believing that this oral tradition imparts additional doctrinal content. Consequently, Catholicism affirms doctrines that cannot be supported by any Scripture. Protestants hold that the entire apostolic doctrinal tradition is contained in the New Testament. In other words, the New Testament provides believers with all the knowledge that they can gain by telling. Yet Christian teaching also includes elements of explaining, showing, and guided practice that a text cannot provide. Those elements are to be provided by living teachers who receive them from previous living teachers.

We are not simply taught by our teachers. We are taught by our teachers' teachers, and by their teachers before them. These teachers do not become a separate authority alongside the Bible, but they serve as guides in understanding how we must integrate and live out the Bible's requirements. They provide us with models for and critics of our practice.

The Bible taught me that I should be reverent in the presence of God. My father taught me what reverence looked like when he corrected my behavior during worship services. The Bible taught me that I should exhibit *makrothumia* (the kind of patience that results in a slow temper). My pastor taught me how to show *makrothumia* on a fishing trip when his son locked the keys in the trunk of the car. The Bible taught me that I must preach the Word. Certain college and seminary professors taught me how to put together a sermon that would both explain the biblical text and bring it to bear on life. The Bible taught me the importance of singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. My church provided me with a tradition of hymnody that delivered me from having to discover (or worse yet, write) suitable hymnody for myself.

Actually, that last statement is only partly true. The churches in which I was reared sang a hymnody that came partly from the Christian tradition, but also partly from recent attempts to mimic various stages of American popular culture. I later discovered that I would have to critique the hymnic practices of the churches in which I had been reared, separating those hymns that reflected historic Christian sensibilities from those that reflected the worst sensibilities of popular culture.

That situation has worsened in recent years, for three reasons. First, many churches have become more committed to the pursuit of popular culture. Second, they have applied the idioms of popular culture to more and more of the church's ministry. Third, popular culture itself has become more debased. The result is that the great mass of churches in the evangelical world are spiraling away from legitimate expressions of Christian reverence, devotion, and worship. This is a grievous situation.

One of the correctives is to re-emphasize the importance of imitating the saints. Specifically, we should imitate those saints who stand in the line of those who imitate the apostles' imitation of Christ. On the other hand, we should not imitate those saints who have imitated debased influences, whether those influences derived from ancient idolatries or from modern secularism. Not every saint is worthy of imitation.

What is clear is that part of biblical Christianity depends upon imitating our betters. We cannot learn everything we need to know by being told. Some things we must learn by being shown, and the line of those who show us is one that stretches back into the very earliest years of the church. Part of our ministry must include knowing who those saints were, and then appropriating the patrimony that they have secured for us.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
