



Incarnation and the role of the teacher: a reflection

Alternative inspiration

Being a teacher (in church or school) is not easy. The professional culture of teaching today is incredibly pressurised, overwhelmed by red tape, over-regulated and too prescriptive for words.

If you teach in church, then it'll probably be because you were once the last to say 'no' (the one who wasn't looking at their shoes when the buck stopped!). Typically, then, you find yourself in sole charge for ever afterwards and when you get to heaven, an angel will sidle up to you and say, 'I understand you have some experience with young people. We do have needs in that area!'. The often thankless task of leading children and young people in their learning in church means there is no church anywhere that ever seems to have 'enough' people to lead all its kids groups and youth ministries.

But teaching as a Christian is a Christ-like thing to do, whether professionally or voluntarily. God is a teacher, and God esteems those who teach. This, of course, contains a challenge to teach as Jesus taught. Can we find some examples of 'how to teach' from scripture? Can we relate that to our own settings in school or church? I think so, and it's the theme of incarnation that is theologically fruitful here.

For any Christian who teaches, in church or school, the teaching method of God in Jesus represents an alternative inspiration to that offered by the secular structures of schooling.

Teaching styles

When God was on earth in the person of Jesus, it was as a teacher, and Jesus was brilliant at it. The fact that Ofsted might not have liked his lesson plans only tells me that Ofsted have got it wrong!

Whether you use National Curriculum, GCSE syllabuses or a teaching programme for children such as Rooted, the Feast, Salt or whatever, going by the book is a great help – but we all know the best learning happens spontaneously, when the



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learners get excited, ask their own questions, relate especially well to you as their leader. Learning happens in dozens of ways, and Jesus was, as the Gospels hint, a light touch specialist at all of them. He used all the learning styles you can imagine:

- Visual learners saw Him take a child and put him in their midst.
- Kinaesthetic learners were sent two by two into the villages of Galilee to heal the sick and build the kingdom of God.
- Inter-personal learners (like Nicodemus and the woman of Samaria) got a 'one to one', and it changed their lives.
- Intra-personal learning happened when Jesus asked His perceptive questions: 'Do you want to be healed?' 'Who do you say that I am?' Reflective skills were evident as they articulated their insights.
- Linguistic learners took eight beatitudes learned by heart and used them for years to come to turn the world upside down.
- Logical learners struggled with Him to find the true meaning of God's law and God's love: 'This is the greatest commandment ...' and they did ranking and prioritising activities.

God as learner, God as teacher

Jesus cared about learning. In fact, I would like to go so far as suggesting that the incarnation is actually God coming to earth to learn. It's not a role play, or a field trip, but it is God coming among us as a learner. If you think God can't learn, then look carefully at what the Bible says about why God was born in Jesus, and imagine the boy Jesus in the temple, discussing and asking, answering and enlarging His vision of God. And Jesus seemed to care about the learning of every individual who crossed His path. I re-read the Gospels thinking about Jesus as a teacher: like teachers today He was never off duty, sometimes up early and sometimes up late in the cause of teaching and learning. He had brilliant ideas, and

made lessons out of the everyday stuff of relationships. He never ducked a controversial topic, communicated wonderfully, was easy to talk to and never gave you the feeling you were stupid. He followed up, could have a laugh, really cared, ate lunch with the learners (not in the staffroom), hung around in the yard so that whoever wanted to could come and talk to him, made time for people, cared more about deep learning than hitting targets or filling in forms. Most of all, uniquely, He did what He taught; lived as He spoke; closed the gap between theory and practice; was not a hypocrite.

So for me, the incarnation provides a rather unsettling point of reflection. If God was in Jesus the Rabbi, the teacher, then a Christian who teaches – like me for instance – should reflect on the example He left. All those of us in the Christian community today who teach, and who care about the learning of children and young people, try to walk in His footsteps. For the Christian believer who teaches, we can get our direction from government, governors, teacher training or the GCSE. But we also have a source for our direction and the way we function as teachers in Jesus, in God. It's possible that our inspiration can be renewed, our work refreshed by considering that Jesus was a teacher – they all called him Rabbi, before they called him Christ. Perhaps we could all

do with a bit more Jesus-shaped inspiration for our teaching work, alongside all the government stuff.

Global learning

Just to flesh this out with one example, it seems to me that one challenge that the Christian teacher must not shirk is the challenge to go global. Jesus was no narrow nationalist – I guess he would like an international curriculum a whole lot more than a national curriculum. He had Samaritans and Syro-phonicians among His learners and had been an asylum seeker in Egypt himself before the age of two. Whether you teach RE or Geography, Science or Maths, global learning might be Godly learning. It's also interesting to note that God's learning styles are often 'through experience', learning by doing, feeling, engaging and responding for ourselves, not just being instructed. This is why I've been inspired by Christian Aid's brilliant global learning activity based materials – the Chocolate Game, the World Feast Game, the Trading Game. They are great education, in an incarnational and Jesus-copying style.

So when the job's pressure is great, and overloaded curriculum change comes after you again, then maybe the coming of God in Jesus as a teacher can provide another way of looking at the working life. You teach? That's Christlike. Now, make the Word become flesh in your own classroom.

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