

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Epworth Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_epworth-review-01.php

School for Sinners*

FRANCES YOUNG

ONE of factors leading to the demise of women preachers in Primitive Methodism, according to Dorothy Graham's Birmingham Ph.D thesis, was the founding of Theological Colleges and the expectation that ministers would receive theological education. Hartley College is a case in point: created originally in Sunderland 1868, it then moved to Manchester in 1881 where Hartley's patronage enabled a college building. Colleges were conceived of in somewhat monastic terms, and Victorian stuffiness could not envisage gender mix. Probably also there were reservations about women being educated!

Be that as it may, this occasion seems an appropriate one to share a research journey which has increasingly focused on the early church as inherently educational in its nature and purpose, as a 'comprehensive school'. A recent review of my book on *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* asked the question, 'When did we last think of the church as a learning community?' I think John Wesley did, but more of that later!

The beginning of my journey is not altogether easy to pinpoint, but the first major stage was a study of patristic exegesis and the nature of 'commentary'. In an article for the *Festschrift* for Henry Chadwick, I was following up a hint from Edwin Hatch 100 years before, and asking what was going on in Greco-Roman schools? All ancient education was based on literature: how was it read? How did exegesis proceed? I was then mainly concerned with the debate in the Fourth Century about allegory, but the article ended with the hunch that

from a very early date the homily was the bishop's lecture on the literature that really mattered, namely the scriptures. Everyone studied week by week with the Christian *grammaticus*.

There have been two subsequent parallel but converging paths: further study of patristic exegesis especially in the second and third centuries, and also the work on the Pastoral Letters which led into recent sociological studies of early church. Each of these areas will provide material for the thesis I present here.

I

The thing about research is that new directions illuminate things already known by throwing a kind of back-light on them. Let me begin here, not with specialist points about patristic exegesis, but a general point about the third century Church as defended by Origen of Alexandria (*Contra Celsum* Book VI.1-2; ET Henry Chadwick):

We say that it is the task of those who teach the true doctrines to help as many people as they can, and as far as it is in their power to win everyone over to the truth by their love of mankind – not only the intelligent, but also the stupid, and again not just the Greeks without including the barbarians as well. It is an excellent thing if someone is able to convert even *the most stupid and uneducated yokels*.

*Hartley Victoria College Commemoration Lecture, 1994.

Origen is here responding to criticisms of Celsus: 'these ideas have been better expressed among the Greeks.' Celsus is objecting to the crudeness of scripture compared with Plato and the writers of the Greek classics. Origen goes on:

If I may venture to say so, the beautiful and refined style of Plato and those who write similarly benefits but a few, if indeed it benefits anybody; whereas that of teachers and writers with a meaner style which was practical and exactly suited to the multitude has benefited many . . .

Origen goes on to quote I Cor. 2.4-5: 'not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in power of God'. Only by God's gift is the spoken word persuasive, he suggests.

Supposing it is granted that in some respects the Greeks and those who believe their doctrines hold the same views, yet they have not the same power to win over souls and to confirm them in these teachings. For this reason the disciples of Jesus, who were uneducated as far as Greek philosophy is concerned, travelled through many nations of the world, influencing each of their hearers according to his merits as the Logos willed; and their converts became far better (men) in proportion to the inclination of their freewill to accept a good life.

Now the full impact of this passage cannot be grasped unless you realise that Origen shares Celsus' ideas and values. The very word 'doctrines' (Greek: *dogmata*) means 'teachings' and has its origins in the activities of philosophical schools. 'Disciples' are 'learners' or 'pupils'. 'Conversion' means a change in mind-set. The purpose of philosophy is to make people good. Origen does not read I Cor. 1-3 in terms of a 'simple Gospel' opposed to intellectuals. What Origen is saying is that the Gospel is better than philosophy because it can educate everybody into living a virtuous life. Furthermore, whatever their social and educational starting-point,

After conversion and entrance into the Church each individual according to his capacity can ascend to the hidden truths in the words which seem to have a mean style.

Origen essentially believes that God is the great educator – indeed, salvation is education, God in his providence creating the world as a kind of school for fallen spirits, accommodating the divine self to human limitations in the incarnation, providing for each one to progress at their own pace.

At the heart of this educational enterprise was scripture. At the heart of every ancient educational enterprise was literature – hence the debate about style with Celsus. To return to the passage in Book VI, Origen goes on:

Our wise men, Moses who was the most ancient and the prophets who succeeded him, were the first to understand that *'the highest good cannot at all be expressed in words'*.

Origen parallels Plato and scriptural texts, and insists that Moses and the prophets are earlier than Plato, in fact earlier than Homer (VI.7). They didn't misunderstand Plato, as Celsus claims; they had priority. In fact, scripture encourages the study of dialectics, just like Plato!

In fact what we might call the battle of the literatures was already under way in the second century. Why was it so important? To answer that question we need to go back to that research on exegesis, and what that uncovered. The fact is that all education in the ancient world was based on literature. After learning basic reading skills, the ancient classics formed the material for learning about grammar, language, style, morals and everything else. Ultimately pupils were learning to 'imitate' the great classics. The art of rhetoric was to persuade an audience and so achieve success and acclaim, and the techniques of persuasion would be the principal focus of what we might call secondary education. Philosophers purported to teach pupils deeper truths, often lampooning the teachers of rhetoric for teaching people to tell lies attractively. Rhetorical teachers responded by insisting that only the truth is really persuasive, and that they taught morals through literature: moral criticism was part of literary criticism, finding exemplary heroes to imitate, deducing morals from unsuitable stories by allegory. But that is the main point: literature was revered because it was ancient, and the whole educational programme depended on classic texts.

In the Hellenistic world, Jews found their identity through the confluence of two traditions. Psalm 119 is one of the best clues to the importance for Jews of their ancestral literature, and they had long had their scribal experts, engaged not only in copying the texts but developing techniques of interpretation. All this was systematised under Greek influence, and the synagogue was virtually a Torah school (see further below). John 7:14ff lifts the curtain a little on the situation in Roman Palestine: you had to be learned to be a teacher. Some Rabbis encouraged Greek education, but alongside this there was parallel Jewish education in Jewish literature and lifestyle.

Celsus, against whom Origen was writing, lived a generation or more earlier than Origen, being contemporary with the second century Christian apologists. These writers were doing no less than substituting one set of classics for another – adopting an alien literature, the literature of the Jews, claiming it was more ancient than the Greek classics, and that it contained the truth. If some have justifiably become worried lately about Christianity's supercessionary claims with respect to Judaism, perhaps we should note that in contemporary terms the far greater scandal was their claim to supersede the whole of Greek culture. This barbarian set of texts in crude translationese was supposed to educate! What about style? What about anthropomorphisms? Celsus thought he had an easy target, but a generation later Origen turns the tables. He uses all the techniques developed in the Hellenistic schools to defend and exegete the scriptures of the Jews and lampoon the classics of high culture. And not the least of his audacious claims, as we have seen, was his affirmation of the value of the church as a non-elitist, potentially universal school.

II

What about the New Testament?

Sociological approaches are all the rage at present! The principal ancient parallel with the church discussed in scholarly literature is the household. In my work on the Pastoral Epistles, I noted how a 'household code' was becoming an ecclesiastical canon. Two important emphases emerged as I proceeded: (i) the notion of the household as a learning community (Kenneth Grayston, in the *Methodist Recorder* review, recommended starting with the section on education in the ancient world); (ii) the need to re-emphasise the synagogue model.

(i) The ancient household was not a nuclear family with 2.5 children but, it has been reckoned, a community of approximately 50 persons, including servants, slaves, ex-slaves, tenants, clients and hangers-on. Ancient society was not made up of horizontal classes but competing vertical communities. The head of a household was conventionally likened to a king or emperor in ethical literature: he was responsible for the welfare of all, exercising what we might see as a benevolent dictatorship! The ideal of the philosopher-king was a model to be reflected at the household level.

It is against that background that E. A. Judge suggested that philosophical ideas did not circulate widely through the formal tradition of the great classical schools, or through street preachers, but through the talk that took place in household communities. The household would in any case be the place where most education and training took place. The children of the family would be sent to school, along with some slave children who were to be trained in what we might call secretarial or management skills, but most people would have been 'apprenticed' to members of the household to learn the skills necessary to perform their tasks. The *ethos* of the household was the responsibility of the household head. A standard *topos* in popular moral philosophy concerned household management, the duties and obligations built into the relationship of husband and wife, father and child, master and slave. The head might welcome a philosopher-chaplain into the household to assist in setting the right moral tone.

Judge argued that Paul would have been recognised as just such a teacher or 'sophist'. He reckoned Paul was sponsored by some 40 patrons. The church, he suggested, was a kind of philosophical school based in a household. What Paul founded were 'scholastic communities' with 'doctrines', i.e. teachings, especially about the true way of life (*logos and gnōsis*). Early Christianity was not a religion in ancient terms at all. Building on Judge's foundation, Abraham Malherbe has taken this line much further, and his important papers have been collected and published in a volume called *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*. Here he explores the Cynic background of Paul's language of apology and attack – it was typical of rival teachers. *Parrhēsia* (tactless effrontery), *philanthrōpia* (love of humanity) and being 'gentle as a nurse' in reproof, these were the marks of a Cynic teacher bringing moral medicine. Malherbe was able to adduce many parallels with Paul's language. It was a commonplace in the ancient world that learning was by example and imitation: compare Paul's charges to imitate him as he imitates Christ.

'Doctrine' focuses in the later NT writings (e.g. the Pastorals) on way of life, on loyalty and fidelity (= faith). Truths about God, the universe, providence, Christ, etc., provide warrant for the inculcation of a certain lifestyle. *Paraenesis*, exhortation to live according to certain ethical patterns, dominates first and second century Christian material, using scriptural proverbs and other biblical allusions to build up collages presenting the way of life revealed in Christ.

The church, I submit, began as a learning community.

(ii) The synagogue already had many of these characteristics and, I would argue, had an important, indeed increasing, effect on the developing structures of the church.

Religion in the ancient world was not a matter of belief; it was a matter of fulfilling the duties and obligations of belonging to your own ethnic community,

ensuring that the ancestral gods were honoured by the performance of ancient traditional rites and practices. Jews had their own traditional religious practices, their own ethnic identity markers, their own *ethos*. But in the Diaspora, they could not practise sacrificial rituals, they had no temple. What they had was a study-and-prayer-house (*proseuchē*): here Jews were educated in their own duties and obligations through their own ancient literature. The ‘gathering’ (= *synagōgē*) could be in a household, or a converted house (as archaeology has shown), though large prosperous communities could build their own purpose-built building.

I quote from the new ‘Schurer’: ‘the main object of these Sabbath meetings was not religious worship in the narrower sense, but religious teaching, i.e. instruction in the Torah’; so Philo is ‘not far wrong when he calls synagogues schools (*didaskaleia*)’, describing them as places ‘where “the ancestral philosophy” was cultivated and every kind of virtue taught’. Aristotle admired the Jews, thinking that their monotheism and their ethical emphasis made them a nation of philosophers. It seems that Gentile ‘God-fearers’ felt the same as Aristotle and were attracted to the ‘synagogues’ to learn the Jewish philosophy.

As I was completing my own work, Burchaell’s study, *From Synagogue to Church. Public services and offices in the earliest Christian communities*, appeared, and confirmed my sense that in sociological studies of the NT inadequate attention has been paid to the synagogue model. He distinguishes the worship gatherings of the community and the ‘school’ (*beth ha-keneset* from the *beth ha-midrash*) suggesting that the latter involved the specialised study of the original Hebrew, whereas the vernacular was used in the ‘assemblies’. But that does not detract from the central purpose of the *synagōgē* – to hear the reading of the scriptures and their exposition.

Burchaell suggests that in the Hellenistic world two significant features appear: (i) There developed a ‘catechetical tradition’, by which normative belief was formulated across a network of synagogues, though clearly in this period there were differences among Jews in culture and emphasis from ‘party’ to ‘party’. He suggests that where ethnic identity held people together, such differences could be contained, especially when lining up against ‘others’ (non-Jews), whereas early Christianity’s multi-ethnic composition meant that normative beliefs and teachings became contentious and vital for identity.

(ii) Attendance was open to Gentiles, so synagogue teaching tended to emphasise the ethical features of the tradition which ‘would have direct appeal to the hellenistic mind’ (p.221). This reinforces my earlier point about the hellenistic attitude to Judaism as a philosophy, taught in Sabbath schools, on the basis of literature. One important feature of a synagogue was its collection of scrolls, its library deposit.

Of course, many synagogue functions related to ‘community’ issues, whether legal matters like contracts, etc., or social security, like the support of widows and orphans. Not all synagogue functions can be paralleled in early Christian groups, but it is highly plausible that, as Christian groups were excluded from synagogues, whether because of their controversial beliefs or because of the increasingly Gentile composition of these groups without appropriate assimilation, Christians would model their organisation and their practices on the synagogue. Clearly they met to study Jewish literature – that the study of scripture was at the heart of the operation is evident in the NT. Particularly in the wake of rejection of the ‘ethnic marks of a Jew’

(circumcision, Halakah), the character of the teaching became focused on the way of life (*paraenesis*) set out in scripture. Second century Christian literature demonstrates the importance of *paraenesis* and the right way of life, based on scripture. It is this which replaces Halakah, the legal interpretation of Torah. As the Christians appropriated Jewish literature, *paraenesis* was at least as important as the prophetic, Christological interpretation.

III

My title was 'school for sinners', and perhaps we had better focus on the second key word for a moment or two. I hope you have noted how often I have indicated that the teaching offered was about the right way of life, ethics, etc.

In antiquity, the accepted idea was that virtue could be taught. 'Virtue' meant excellence in anything. When the sophists claimed to teach virtue, they meant that they taught the means to success, the way to get *doxa* (good opinion, reputation, glory) and that this involved morals in terms of lifestyle. Ancient society was an 'honour/shame' culture, and to do wrong in any way brought shame. The Platonic tradition looked for abstract principles behind practical actions, but still held to the underlying belief that sin is ignorance: if you know what is right, you will do it. The Stoics' great motto was: Live according to nature. By this they did not mean what we might assume – following every bestial urge – rather they meant in harmony with the way things are, a rather more 'ecological' understanding, we might say! *Religio* or *pietas* meant observing one's obligations to others – whether parents, gods, or even 'underlings'. There were social constraints on individual greed, exploitation, etc. Sin was the offence caused by failure to fulfil the obligations one had to the divine society which related to the human social world.

In Jewish tradition, the study of Torah was believed to produce righteousness. In early Christianity, the Gospel was the revelation of the right way of life, according to God's plan, taught by God's Son. Loyalty to the one true God meant fulfilling one's obligations (debts). In Jewish tradition, it was recognised that there was an 'evil inclination' in the human heart, that temptation was a reality. In early Christian texts we find teaching about Two Ways, the way of darkness and the way of light. Choice and freewill were key concepts in early Christianity, defended against the fatalism of the ancient world. In the fourth century, humanity was depicted as being offered the choice between living like beasts, according to the flesh, or living like angels, according to the spirit.

Yet the Western tradition of Christianity became increasingly pessimistic – the Fall became the more dreadful so that Redemption might be the more amazing:

*One who is all unfit to count as scholar in thy school
Thou of thy love hast named a friend – O kindness wonderful!*

Sin was turned into the 'corruption' of human nature. Virtue was not teachable, but a gift of grace. Moralists have never been entirely happy with this, from Pelagius on. The notion that Christianity teaches the right way of life and that this is the way of salvation has lasted.

The Pastoral Letters suggest that loyalty to God (faithfulness, faith) is mirrored in loyalties to superiors, masters, etc. They present us with a

hierarchical, patriarchal and authoritarian picture. There is a worrying connection between monotheism and monarchy! Teaching is understood as telling what to do, passing on the unquestionable truth. But, as we have seen, in the ancient church we also find the notion of spiritual journey, of progressive conversion of the soul from sin to knowledge of God. A moral and intellectual quest was involved, and this ensured a real tension between the educational process of *paideia* and the dogmaticism which came to dominate and against which the modern world has reacted. I guess all this provokes some reflections, and we should turn to assess where this research journey has taken us.

IV

Has democracy and our modern sense of 'rights' destroyed our sense of sin, and with it our sense of 'grace' – for surely there is no 'grace and favour' if there is no sovereign to offer it? Has our modern approach to education ensured the impossibility of taking over the ancient idea of the church as a learning community?

The educational process we have been observing appears to be top-down, paternalistic, dogmatic, authoritative, traditional. It involves obedience to obligations and loyalty to superiors, both human and divine, though there is mutual responsibility, for the higher ranks are bound to the lower ranks, and expected to set an example. By contrast, modern educational ideals stress the experiential, the creative and critical; novelty is prized; attitudes are anti-elitist, etc. The contrast is real, yet it is easily exaggerated: it is a struggle to get students to abandon the security of authoritative rote-learned notes after A level!

Still, I suggest, there is an unfortunate bifurcation in the church. Those who care about 'teaching' turn it into a caricature of the dogmatic model; 'liberals' in reaction over-emphasise the experiential. Either way theology is marginalised in our culture: as a leisure activity, essentially private, and either entertainment or 'sect'-like brainwashing.

So we have suffered a loss of the sense of being teachers and learners together, of humility before a 'wisdom' passed down to us from the past. We have failed to notice the narrowness of 'experience' and the limitations of empiricism. 'Learning' has been devalued – so often it is dismissed as 'academic' and irrelevant. Indeed, education in our society is both overvalued and undervalued. We have burgeoning 'courses' and qualifications, but often with a deeply anti-academic flavour. And churches are not exempt. As a result we have perhaps lost a significant understanding of the core purpose of churches – 'teaching' the Christian understanding of the way the world is, why the Christian account is different from others, especially secular accounts, what distinctive lifestyle is implied by Christian commitment. Maybe churches need to undertake again a major catechetical enterprise, not only to be engaged in before baptism or confirmation but week by week in the church's gatherings to read the scriptures together.

V

Let me end by returning to our Methodist tradition.

The evangelical Gospel emphasises that we are sinners, and that God has done something about it. To receive that grace is to be humbled, and to accept that we need to be teachable. It would take another lecture to focus properly on

sin, but I guess this aspect of our tradition needs to confront the self-affirmation and self-righteousness of modernity, based on rights not obligations. To confess that human beings are not the measure of all things, but that we need to be shown the proper way of life and empowered to pursue it would be a proper reaction to the *hybris* of our culture. Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection was not arrogance, but an important holding together of the need for redemption and the possibility of advance. John Wesley was influenced by early Eastern ideas – he translated the Macarian Homilies, behind which lies the work of Origen, with whom we began.

Related to this is the need to rediscover the church's function as a learning community for all people, where excellence is pursued by everybody. People have different gifts, and the educational process needs to be comprehensive. But that does not mean directing everything to the lowest common denominator, but rather stimulating people to want to progress further in their understanding. Wesley thought his lay assistants should read for five hours a day, and should read very widely, recommending the standard curriculum of classical literature used in eighteenth century schools as well as early Christian Fathers like Ephraim Syrus, the writers of European Pietism, etc. If they were not prepared to read they should give up preaching and return to their trade. Those who only read the Bible were accused of 'rank enthusiasm'.

Wesley was the educator of his people, most of whom came from classes with no educational privileges in the eighteenth century. Pamphlet after pamphlet was issued, and he made a lot of money with his publishing, most of which was given away! He produced the Christian Library: over seven years he selected and published a wide range of Christian literature from many different periods and traditions, some translated into English for the first time – some not retranslated till very recently, for example, (pseudo)-Macarius. Wesley recognised the difficulty for the average person of deciding what best to read, and wanted to give his people the height and depth of Christianity through the medium of theological writings which agreed with scripture and which were intelligible without being superficial. He therefore selected and abridged, tampering with texts so as to highlight their essential matter. The disadvantaged deserved the chance to improve themselves, not to be patronised by being talked down to: one may contrast the attitudes of white middleclass students on the educational treadmill and mature students, especially women, given a chance later in life, or black people given the opportunity to pursue theological courses.

Primitive Methodism gradually realised it had to educate its common people as ministers so that they could educate their congregations. Hence Hartley College. Hence the remarkable career of A. S. Peake. If women were a casualty for a while, they would soon be bouncing back: the foundation of Hartley was contemporary with the foundation of the first University colleges for women. Isn't it time we reclaimed their priorities? Origen thought the learning process was for all and for the whole of life. So should we.

Bibliography and References

The following are referred to, explicitly or implicitly, in the text:

Burtchaell, James Tunstead *From Synagogue to Church. Public services and offices in the earliest Christian communities*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Chadwick, Henry (trans.) *Origen, Contra Celsum*, Cambridge University Press, 1965.

Hatch, Edwin *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, Hibbert Lectures 1888, reprinted by Harper Torchbooks, New York 1957.

Judge, E. A. 'The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community', *Journal of Religious History*, 1 (1960-1), pp. 1-8, 124-37; and 'St Paul and Classical Society', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 15 (1972), pp.19-26.

Malherbe, Abraham J. *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd enlarged edit., Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1983; and *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1989.

The new 'Schürer': *The history of the Jewish People in the time of Jesus Christ*, vol.II, revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Matthew Black, Edinburgh 1979.

Verner, David C *The Household of God. The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles*, SBL Dissertation Series 71, Scholars Press, Chico, California, 1983.

The author's previous publications with fuller treatment of the material in this lecture include:

Focus on God, with Kenneth Wilson, Epworth Press, 1986.

'The Rhetorical Schools and their influence on Patristic Exegesis', in Rowan Williams, *The Making of Orthodoxy*, Essays in honour of Henry Chadwick, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp.182-199.

'*Paideia* and the Myth of Static Dogma', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, Essays in honour of Maurice Wiles, ed. Sarah Coakley and David Pailin, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1993, pp.265-283.

The Theology of the Pastoral Letters, Cambridge University Press 1994.