

A MATURE CONGREGATION TRAINS

Doug Edwards

Jesus makes the statement: “The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Lk. 16:8). I used to wonder what Jesus meant by this, but now I think I understand. Jesus means that worldly people often pursue worldly activities in a better fashion than Christians do in pursuing spiritual activities. Worldly people sometimes have more zeal and determination in their activities than we do in ours. When a young man or woman joins the military, what is the first thing that happens? He is sent to basic training, more commonly called “boot camp.” Here he learns the fundamentals of being a soldier. He is not sent into battle unprepared and without training.

The Bible teaches that Christians are soldiers involved in a war against sin (1 Tim. 6:12; Eph. 6:10-11). Do we find any basic training for the soldiers in God’s army today? Sometimes we do, but, unfortunately, in many places we do not find any training for Christians. In this article, we will study the great need for training God’s people for service. A mature congregation knows the importance of training. We will notice these three areas of training:

1. Elders, evangelists, and teachers must train the church to serve and edify (Eph. 4:11-12).
2. Experienced teachers must train inexperienced men how to teach (2 Tim. 2:2).
3. Older women must train the younger women (Tit. 2:3-5).

The Lord's Method of Training

To understand how we are to train others and what the most effective training method is, we have to look to Jesus, for He was the master teacher (Jn. 3:2). Concerning His method of preparing the apostles for their daunting task of world evangelism, Mark writes, "And he went up on the mountain and called to Him those He himself wanted. And they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach" (3:13-14). These men had an important work to do. They had to take the gospel to the world and help organize the church. That certainly was a daunting task. Before they could tackle this big job, though, training was necessary.

The order of this training is important: (1) Jesus called them, (2) they stayed with Him, and (3) they went out. He did not call them and then send them immediately on their mission. They stayed with Him. The implication from this passage is that during this time Jesus trained them for their work. How did Jesus train them? I want to suggest that Jesus' training sessions consisted of two steps—instruction and example.

The apostles experienced firsthand this two-fold method of training. Jesus taught them to be a servant (Mk. 10:43-44), and then He illustrated this teaching by washing their feet. He taught them to be forgiving (Mt. 18:23-35), and then He illustrated the principle by exhibiting a forgiving spirit at the cross. He told them to be faithful (Mt. 6:33), and then He displayed faithfulness by regularly attending the synagogue services (Lk. 4:16). Jesus taught them to be merciful (Mt. 5:7), and then He exemplified mercy His entire ministry of service to the sick and hurting. Jesus taught them to stand for the truth (Jn. 8:32), and then He illustrated this point by chasing the moneychangers out of the temple and continually standing up to the Pharisees.

These training methods are the same ones that we need to use as well. They have stood the test of time and continually have been proven successful. We need to teach God's Word, and we need to illustrate it through our own personal examples. It is not enough to attempt to do one without the other. If we tend to teach people what to do and then not do the same things ourselves, people tend to get irritated and wonder why we are not practicing what we preach. If, however, we fail to teach and expect

people to learn only through our examples, they become frustrated and wonder what they are supposed to do.

Leaders are to Train the Church to Serve and Edify

Paul says to the Ephesians, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (4:11-12). Contextually, these words are found in the middle of a text dealing with the miraculous age of the church. These men with miraculous gifts used their miraculous abilities to help the church to mature. Although we do not have these temporary gifts (Eph. 4:13; 1 Cor. 13:10), with the help of God’s inspired Word, we can still do what these men did for the church.

Paul says that we are to train the church in two ways. First, we must equip the saints for the work of ministry. The word “ministry” refers to the act of serving. As we learned in a previous article, we must serve God, our brothers and sisters, and our fellow man. Also notice the word “equipping” in Ephesians 4:12. In classical Greek, the word meant to refit a ship. Before a ship could go on a journey, it had to be fixed if something was wrong with it. It also was equipped with all of the provisions necessary for a trip—food, water, medicines, and other important items. In like manner, the Christian needs to be properly equipped so that he can begin his spiritual journey to heaven. Thus we need training. Who, then, will train us? Paul says that it would be evangelists, elders and teachers. In most of our congregations there are no elders or evangelists, so this awesome responsibility falls upon the shoulders of the local teachers (Jas. 3:1). Teachers, do you feel the burden for equipping the saints? Think carefully about your lessons. Make them timely, relevant, and informative. Do not just get in the pulpit in order to fill your slot. Second, Paul also says that we must equip the saints for edifying. In an earlier article we discovered that edifying meant building up and not tearing down. Saints need to be taught to build up and not tear down one another.

We need to follow the example of Jesus when it comes to equipping the church. Since the Scriptures reveal the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:9-13) and will perfectly equip the man of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17), we must teach from the Scriptures the need for serving God and man and also the need

for edifying. But the congregation needs to see us doing more than merely barking out orders. They also need to see us serving and building up. The congregation needs to see her leaders setting the example during the week and not just on Sundays.

Experienced Teachers Must Train Other Men to Teach

Paul writes to Timothy, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). Paul understands the importance of teaching within a local congregation and the great need to train men to accomplish this wonderful job. Good teaching within a congregation does not automatically happen; previous training must take place.

I am so thankful to see increased efforts made to teach men how to teach. Many brethren over the years have not had the opportunity to learn how to teach. When I first started to "attempt" to give lessons back at my home congregation as a young man, I was put on Wednesday night and given an opportunity to do one of our chapter studies. My lot fell to deliver the study on Romans 4. I was only nineteen or twenty years old, had only given a handful of lessons, and now was trying to explain Romans 4, which I did not understand at all! So I took my trusty B.W. Johnson commentary, which was the only one I had, copied down some of his comments, and then added a few of my own and tried to teach it to the church. I guess that only God knows of the sad results of that tragic night. Unfortunately, this practice is common among many of our churches. We say to those with little experience or little ability, "You have the lesson next week. Be sure and edify us."

It is encouraging, therefore, that more brethren are making efforts to train teachers how to teach. In many of our periodicals, writers are placing more emphasis on how to study and teach. Some of our preachers even deliver special studies to local teachers on how to improve their teaching.

Why is it so important to train teachers how to teach? It is because one can take the pulse of a congregation by listening to its teaching. No church will ever rise above its teachings. Look at the congregations that dwindle down to almost nothing. There may be several reasons for congregations declining, but the common factor is a lack of good teaching.

We have congregations that have no teachers and thus depend on men from other places to come to them and teach. These congregations are on life support. On the other hand, congregations that are alive, growing, and working usually have good teaching.

What do teachers need to be taught? First, they must be taught how to study? One does not study the Bible by reading it like he reads the newspaper. Discipline is needed to study the Bible. Second, teachers need to be taught how to prepare a lesson. We must not merely slap together some ideas for a lesson, but we must learn how to effectively organize our thoughts for the benefits of our listeners. Teachers also need to be taught how to present different types of lessons such as topical lessons and expository lessons. Third, teachers must be taught how to speak. Simply because one has the gift of gab does not automatically mean he will be effective in his teaching. Teachers need to learn the simple principles of public speaking.

Suppose that I invited you over to my house one evening for a meal. When you arrived I brought you into my kitchen to visit while I prepared the meal. There you watched as I pulled some raw chicken out of the refrigerator and put it on a plate, opened a can of green beans and poured it directly on the chicken, then put some lettuce on the plate, and finally covered it with a little bit of butter. Would you eat it? Obviously not, because you would want someone trained in cooking to prepare this meal. Teaching is very similar. The teacher brings spiritual food to a hungry congregation. We need someone that is trained in teaching and who can provide a spiritually nourishing meal. Mature congregations know that young men and inexperienced men have to be trained in teaching.

Older Women are to Train the Younger Women

Paul says to Titus, “Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” (2:3-5). In this chapter Paul discusses the role of four groups within the church: older men, older women, younger women, and younger men. He especially stresses to the older women their need to

train the younger women. How does one know at what age one becomes an “older woman”? I do not think that Paul sets an age limit of forty, fifty, or even sixty. In this context, the older women are the ones who have raised their children.

I am afraid that this practice of older women training younger women is one that we do not see very often. I suppose there are a number of reasons (excuses) as to why this training is not occurring. Some women feel the commandment is for them to train their daughters, and once they have accomplished this, they quit. While training one's daughters is certainly within the scope of this passage, it is not limited to daughters. Paul does not merely say “older women train your daughters,” he says to train younger women. Some older women may feel that they are too old, tired, and run down to train anyone. Do you not think at times Paul might have said the same thing about himself, yet he continued working for the church no matter what. Some older women feel that the lives of the younger women are none of their business. Does not the Bible teach, though, that we are our brother's keeper? Remember, we are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). Sometimes older women do not teach the younger because they feel the younger women will not listen. Just because people will not listen to the gospel does not keep preachers from preaching. Neither should it cause older women from trying to train younger women. Some older women do not teach younger women for fear of being called a woman teacher. We are afraid of any type of teaching at all that involves a woman as being like Sunday School. Certainly the Scriptures do not allow women to teach in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35), in the public (1 Tim. 2:11-12), or in any arrangement similar to Sunday school. The Scriptures prohibit a woman from exercising authority over the man. The Scriptures do, however, allow a woman to teach privately in some instances. They do not prohibit an older woman from privately teaching a younger woman. Some make the argument that older women can only teach through their examples, and they cannot sit down with a younger woman and teach her from the Scriptures. How can one train without teaching? Remember how Jesus taught the disciples—through teaching and example.

Older women are to teach younger women their domestic duties. One of them is “love your husbands.” That commandment has always sound-

ed a little strange to me. Do not women naturally love their husbands? Based on the divorce rate and the number of unhappy marriages, evidently many women do not. Listen to me, dear sister. One of these days you may wake up in your bed and look at your husband sleeping next to you and say, "Where did my Prince Charming go? Why am I sleeping next to Grumpy or Dopey?" There are going to be times when you are mad at him, disgusted with him, do not like him, or maybe are even sick of him. When that day comes, who are you going to turn to for help? Do you think Oprah or Dr. Phil will help? Will your friends at work help? How about turning to an older sister who has already been through the same things you have and can safely navigate you through difficult feelings.

The same thing is true about your children. New babies are so cute, so sweet, so cuddly, and so much work. There are sleepless nights and endless sacrifices to be made for children. Sweet, innocent babies turn into difficult two-year-olds. Children continue to grow into independent-thinking, sometimes rebellious, teenagers. When these days come, who do you turn to for help? Do you want to go down to a local bookstore and find some expert from the world to help you? Why not seek the advice of an older Christian woman who has experienced the ups and downs of raising children? Finally, if an older sister gives you advice about raising your children, do not get mad; instead, be grateful.

Passing the Baton

As we close this article, remember the words of Hebrews 12:1: "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Here the writer compares the Christian life to a race. For the individual Christian, this race is a marathon not a sprint. For the church, however, this race is a relay race, with the older generation passing Christianity to the younger generation. How can we accomplish such a great feat? We pass the baton to future generations of Christians through training. We must practice great caution and not drop the baton, but to do so will require effort and creativity on our part