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The Practice of New Testament Teaching as Pastoral Medicine

ROBERT F. HULL, JR.

After I received this assignment, I was stuck for quite some time. I just did not know where to take hold of it. I finally resorted to the truly desperate expedient of involving some of my students. I “hijacked” a session of my intermediate Greek class and laid my plight before the eight men who had been expecting an introduction to exegesis. I told them about the assignment and asked them what they thought should be the relationship between New Testament studies and ministry, and how they perceived the connection actually occurring in the classroom. Much of what I heard was predictable, but by no means all. Not all of it was pleasant. What follows is a reconstruction of that conversation, edited, amplified, and arranged around a metaphor which came to expression in the course of our discussion.

NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AS PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

The first student to speak said that study of the New Testament at Emmanuel had brought him a long way from the pat answers people sometimes expect when they enter graduate studies. He said you think that if you can just find out what the Greek text actually says, it will clear up all kinds of problems, but the deeper you look, the less clear it is. You soon realize that doing word studies can't clear up long-standing interpretive problems in the text. And you come to understand that some of the issues Christians were wrestling with two thousand years ago are the same ones we wrestle with today. It takes the edge off our need to get everything right. Here he mentioned the textual apparatus, and I think his point was that we often discover a textual variant precisely at the point where the grammar or theology of the text is most challenging to us. What we find puzzling, the ancients often found puzzling as well. He said New Testament study had made him more tolerant of people whose understanding of the text differs from that with which he grew up. And he noted that we have people from a number of different denominations in our student body and therefore do not all represent the same tradition of interpretation.

“Good,” I thought to myself. “This is very positive. I’m glad I thought of this.” Another student made a positive comment about the value of the New Testament Introduction class in making him aware of the vast marketplace of ideas of the first-century world in which Christianity grew up. I took this comment for what it was: a way to get into the conversation without risking anything. It made both the student and me look good.

But now there was a restlessness to my right. A student who looked as though he had been waiting a long time to get some things off his chest said, with a kind of exasperation, “To date, the most significant impact New Testament study has had on my ministry is to cause me almost to despair. It just raises so many problems. The task of getting back to the sources is so daunting. You think if you can just get Hebrew and Greek, you’ll be OK, but then you realize you have to know Philo, and all those Aramaic and Syriac and Latin sources. It just becomes paralyzing. You complete one impossible task, and then you have to do another. And at the end of it all, you have to come back and make the text relevant to your people. What’s even

worse,” he said, “is that some of my best sermons are the ones I spend the least time on exegetically, the ones I ‘cop out’ on.”

Well, this was getting interesting. At this point I found the metaphor I had been looking for as a way to ground my thinking about this assignment. I said that so far, they seemed to be describing New Testament studies as a kind of preventive medicine that you have to swallow to keep you from oversimplifying the task of understanding the Bible. The mere awareness that you can’t master everything is a preventive to a kind of breezy confidence that we have it all nailed down.

I decided to run with the metaphor awhile. I said that the Emmanuel faculty had been through the painful process of having its easy certainties shattered and that this process is one of the functions of critical study of the Bible. Once we have worked through a couple of synoptic parallel passages, on our own, in Greek, we’ll never be at ease with the explanation that the synoptic accounts are something like three eye-witness descriptions of the same accident. There’s something else afoot here. And once we have learned to decipher those funny marks in the Greek text that lead us to the apparatus, the human side of the process of the transmission of scripture will never look the same. “What’s the value of that?” I asked. “At the very least, it keeps you from making some really foolish mistakes in the pulpit. After all, even when you do your very best, you’re going to make some mistakes, but once you know what you know about the text, you can’t ‘unlearn’ it. You have a kind of ‘guilty knowledge’ of some things you might rather not have known. It’s sort of like finding out what your cholesterol level is or hearing the doctor tell you your sugar is too high. You want to know, but at the same time, you’d just as soon not know; it’s a kind of guilty knowledge. Now if you decide to eat the wrong thing, you’ve got no one to blame but yourself.”

NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AS CORRECTIVE MEDICINE

Now the student to my immediate left broke in to say that there is a great tension between New Testament studies and the layman’s doing theology “out of his back pocket.” He said that New Testament studies are a corrective to back-pocket theology. He was mature enough to realize that in the press of a busy ministry, we can easily be swept up by the impulse to do back-pocket theology. He said, “The field of gravity draws us.” Here was an interesting shift of the metaphor. A lot of medicine is corrective, not just preventive. New Testament studies are a kind of corrective medicine as well.

The Pentecostal student on the other side of the table said, “I just have to say something here. Coming to this place has given me a map of the Roman Empire in place of a flannelgraph. Where I grew up, we were introduced to the Bible by a teacher with a flannelgraph. You might learn that something happened in Palestine, but not much more than that. From the teacher you moved to the preacher, who said that what was really important was your personal experience. The Holy Spirit would teach you. Coming to Emmanuel was coming home to finally see a map and to get a handle on where things are located.”

This was going better than I had expected, but then things turned ugly. It was the student on my left again, who had talked about back-pocket theology. He said he had a lingering sense that Emmanuel has always been committed to academics per se, but he saw a great distance between those academic interests and practical issues that have to be dealt with in the churches. Here was a very old charge that I thought had long since been laid to rest. If it was surfacing again, and not in a first-year student, but in someone who had been around for three years—a good student, bright, diligent, and articulate—then maybe we weren’t simply correcting some naive misunderstandings; maybe we were overcorrecting.

A lot of medicine is corrective, not just preventative. New Testament studies are a kind of corrective medicine as well.

So I talked a bit about the long-standing tension in seminary circles about the dominant models for seminary education: Is the seminary mostly a specialized graduate school, such as a school of politics or philosophy, or is it more like a professional school, such as a school of law or medicine? Is its primary identity found in the academy or in the church? Does it have to make a decision between these? Can it serve both the academy and the church at the same time? His response was very disturbing. He said he found in New Testament studies at Emmanuel a great dichotomy between the academy and the church. He said it seemed important at Emmanuel to do critical study not from within the faith but instead from within the academy. This was a grievous wound, indeed, for if there is one thing I am absolutely certain about, it is that in the biblical area we are united in our commitment to do critical studies from a deep faith commitment and as a way of serving the church. It was hard not to become defensive at this point, but sometimes we just have to realize that what we think we are doing is not always what the students think we are doing. And, as the psychologists are always reminding us, a person's perception of reality is that person's reality.

Here one of the great risks of scholarship as corrective medicine became apparent. Some patients need only two aspirin and a glass of water, while others need major surgery. Is our classroom filled with students in need of various kinds and degrees of correction of their inadequacies? Will the students, all listening to the same lecture, hear it so differently that for some it's like a radical amputation, while for others it's like a mild pain-reliever that allows them to sleep? Or is it possible that when I wield my scalpel, I may cut off a perfectly healthy limb or, worst of all, kill the patient? I tried to imagine what had so scarified the student in his classes at Emmanuel. I asked him what would it look like to teach New Testament from a faith perspective. He imagined it would be something like studying the Bible in a Roman Catholic seminary. I said that I wasn't so sure; maybe it depended on the seminary. Another student pointed out that for more than a decade, the major textbooks in New Testament Introduction used at Emmanuel have been written by Roman Catholic scholars, notably Luke Timothy Johnson and Raymond Brown. The fact is, students frequently ask

faculty members here why they have to read so many books by Roman Catholic authors, and we tell them that not only are those authors good scholars, but they also believe something, and they are committed to using their scholarship to serve the church.

I am still not certain what to do with this part of our discussion, except to be more vigilant in my diagnoses of students' needs and more thorough in learning from them their theological medical histories, so to speak.

It was clear that the disjunction this student had seen between the church and the seminary can be

identified in other ways by other students. The student who had first expressed his near despair at having to master so much broke in to say that what he really found frustrating was that we who teach here talk about an ideal of what the church should be and do, but we stand outside the polity of the local church, while our graduates have to serve from within that local church polity. It is difficult to take a risk for change in the church that puts bread on your table.

Here again was a long-standing problem in seminary-church relations. Every church body faces it, because the seminaries have always tried to be change agents within the church, bellwethers for the denomination. And, for some reason, there has always been the perception that a tenured position on a faculty is a lot less vulnerable than a ministry position where you can be given thirty days' notice for violating one of the shibboleths of that congregation.

It is possible to forget what crises of conscience our students sometimes face. There was a Southern

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Baptist minister in the class who said that he and his wife were wrestling with the decision of whether to leave the Southern Baptist Convention. He had found at Emmanuel an openness to studying scripture without a list of predigested conclusions, and he was feeling greatly constrained within a denomination that has been drawing its definition of orthodoxy ever more rigidly. I took this as confession time, and I'm afraid I implicated all my colleagues in what I said, so I hope I did not misrepresent any of them. What I said is this: "All of us who teach here sometimes have the uncomfortable feeling that we may be preparing graduates to serve churches that don't exist"—to which the Pentecostal said, "Thank you for putting into words what I have been feeling."

Another student wondered aloud how it would be if a prospective student, opening our catalog, had as strong an impression of our faculty as people experienced in church ministry as they have of our faculty as scholars. This led to reflections on the importance of hearing faculty talk about what has formed them within the church and how they see themselves as ministers.

NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AS FORMATIVE MEDICINE

Clearly, now the talk was drifting away from New Testament studies as corrective medicine to something like New Testament studies as formative medicine. In fact, I'm probably coining a phrase here. I don't know whether there is such a concept as formative medicine, but I do know that medicine doesn't exist apart from physicians and that a great many physicians are interested in a lot more than preventing and correcting disease. In fact, the greatest of them have been driven by a vast curiosity and wonder about the human person. Anton Chekov, William Carlos Williams, and Walker Percy were all trained as physicians, although we know them as writers. Lewis Thomas, a research pathologist, in a wonderful essay in his book entitled *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*, claims that the shared middle ground between the humanities and the sciences is bewilderment.

What we have been learning in our time is that we really do not understand this place or how it works, and we comprehend our own selves least of all. And the more we learn, the more we are—or ought to be—dumbfounded. (157)

What that suggests to me is that we will never get it all right—never know enough, never master all the disciplines, never shape the perfect curriculum. But we can live as a community of people who believe the gospel and who help form each other for our respective service to the church. One student, who had not contributed to the discussion thus far, said that what he had learned at Emmanuel was that you have to make up your own mind about things. You get the tools here to do your own studying, but you then have to continue to explore the Bible and come to your own conclusions. There was an African American student in the class, a preacher at a black church. He said that within his church culture, preachers are stereotyped as very different from teachers. He said one of his congregation told him, "We don't want teaching; we want preaching." But he said he thought that stereotype needed to be challenged. "Things don't stop here," he said. "This just frees you to keep on learning your whole life." He said that he was a "teaching preacher" now. If I stick to my chosen metaphor, I don't know what else to call this but formative medicine.

Now the Pentecostal wanted back in. He said the reason he appreciated the environment of the seminary was that it is so different from the church. "Could it be any other way?" he asked. "It is a great luxury to study all these things—but it is so important."

We had been talking for over an hour, and now I exercised my prerogative to bring the discussion to a close by pontificating a little bit. Here is part of what I said and more that I wish I had had the time and the presence of mind to say:

"It really is a great luxury to have time to study all the things you get to study in seminary. I would never say that no one could be an effective minister without critical study. Were I to say that, I would be

despising my own heritage. My father had an eighth-grade education. He was a coal miner and a lay preacher. And he was a good preacher. He knew the Bible better than I do. He used whatever helps he could get hold of in his preaching and teaching. He never had the luxury of study, but he always wished that he had. The important thing is to use the opportunities you have to prepare yourself for ministry. Critical studies are not intended to paralyze you by making you aware that you can never master all to which you are exposed. We all tend to measure ourselves against unattainable ideals. When I was a first-year doctoral student, I told an upper-level student that I didn't see how I would ever become a scholar, because I didn't see how I could learn Syriac, and Georgian, and Ethiopic, and Swedish, and Italian, and Afrikaans—I was measuring myself against my Doktorvater, Bruce Metzger. The wiser, older student made me aware that, although some scholars are polymaths, most are not. We really don't expect you to do a full-dress exegesis of every text on which you preach. In fact, one of the things you will learn in this class is how to take exegetical short cuts. There will be times when deaths or other crises in your ministry will take so much of your time, it will be all you can do to pull together something coherent to say on a Sunday morning. We're not trying to turn you into scholars. But we think there's a value even in knowing that you'll never know all you want to—but that you have some tools, and you know where to go for help and how to help yourself.

“And we really want to be a school of the church. But the connection between your study here and your ministry is not always easy to specify. We are convinced that you need to know some things. There is a body of knowledge that is simply indispensable for placing the New Testament within its own environment. It is a considerable body of knowledge, and you'll forget much of what you learn, but you'll always know where to go to recover what you need for the particular tasks of ministry. We don't expect you to be a Philo scholar, but we hope you will appreciate why there are people who give their whole lives to doing so, in the service of the church, and that when you find a reference to Philo in a critical commentary, you won't just blow it off. Sometimes the subject matter in a New Testament class clicks with your ministry in an immediate and pressing way. I'm sure it happens in a Worship Issues in 1 Corinthians seminar or a Life of Paul class. At other times, you don't see the connection at all, but the student across the room is already roughing out a sermon outline.

“We are as interested in helping form you as persons as we are in putting you through your academic paces. Foundational knowledge may not be as important as foundational aptitudes, such as the ability to make your way, with appropriate helps, through a passage in the Greek New Testament and to interpret it for the needs of your congregation. And maybe even more important is that you enlarge some of the foundational capacities you have as a person and a Christian—capacities such as charity and compassion and forgiveness and a deep ardor for God. Paul Ricouer said that most of us come to the Bible with a certain naiveté and that part of the aim of critical study is to help us lose that naiveté, but not so that scripture becomes an alien thing. Rather, the end of the process should be to read the Bible with a second naiveté, disciplined and informed, but every bit as open to our hearing in it the voice of God. This is what it means to integrate your learning and your faith in living out your vocation in the church and the world.”

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