

Let Not Many of You Become Teachers

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By This Time You Ought To Be Teachers... (Heb. 5:12).

Let Not Many of You Become Teachers... (Jas. 3:1).

According to the books of Hebrews and James, there appears to be a difference of opinion, or understanding, on the subject of teachers within God's true church. However, upon closer examination of the context in which these statements were made, it will become apparent that no contradiction exists.

In the 5th chapter of Hebrews, the author was explaining that a change had taken place in the priesthood between the First and Second Covenant. This change included a new High Priest, Jesus Christ, who would never die. This new priesthood was after the order, or likeness, of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:9-10; cf. Ps. 110:4). Understanding this transition from the Levitical priesthood, to that of the Melchizedek priesthood, was essential for anyone teaching others about God's plan of salvation. However, based on the following statement, it appears some brethren were struggling to understand this change as well as other basic points of doctrine.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone (else) to teach you again the first oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food (Heb. 5:12; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added; NKJV used throughout unless otherwise noted).

The statement above ties in with a misconception about church leadership.

And I (Paul), brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but (instead) as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it (a more in-depth understanding of God's plan of salvation), and even now you are still not able; ³ for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal? (1Cor. 3:1-4; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

By combining these two scriptural references, it becomes apparent that some brethren were unable to grow in spiritual understanding because they were too concerned about which human leader they should be following. In reality, they were supposed to learn to follow Jesus Christ, their new High Priest, who is the only leader of the New Testament church. Therefore any human being, in position of responsibility in the Body of Christ, is to focus on helping others and discouraging any form of personal aggrandizement.

Not that we (in positions of responsibility) have dominion over your faith, but we are fellow workers for your joy; for by (your own) faith you stand (2Cor. 1:24; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

Paul emphasized that he was a fellow worker, and regarded himself as being equal with all the other brethren. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each church member to work out their own salvation, and not expect a church leader to somehow "get them into the Kingdom of God",

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure (Php. 2:12-13; emphasis added).

Anyone who defers the responsibility, to “work out their own salvation,” is more likely to accept and follow a human leader who does not understand or teach God’s truth correctly. This situation was prophesied and is now coming to fulfillment.

For the time will come when they (brethren in God’s true church) will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears (unstable in their understanding of God’s truth and inclined to wander), they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables (2Tim. 4:3-4; Ed. notes in parentheses).

In this situation, church members will not be able to correctly explain, or teach, God’s truth to those who wish to understand it.

...be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear (1Pet. 3:15b).

In order to assist others in their relationship with Almighty God, each church member needs to apply themselves to the study of God’s word, and not rely on someone else’s interpretation of scripture.

Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of (God’s) truth (2Tim. 2:15; Ed. note in parenthesis; KJV).

Just because someone claims to represent God, it does not mean their message has validity and should be accepted. Instead, those who are listening need to be circumspect about the message, and check to see whether it is contrary to the law and commandments of God in any way (cf. Isa. 8:20). If any aspect is contrary to God’s word, these so-called teachers are to be corrected. If they do not change, their message is to be rejected.

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ These were more fair-minded (noble) than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness (paid close attention to detail), and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so (correct) (Ac. 17:10-11; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

It should be clear at this point, that Almighty God expects His people to teach His word correctly. To do otherwise has serious consequences as Christ explained.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell (Gehenna: garbage dump outside Jerusalem that continually burned) as yourselves (Mt. 23:15; Ed. note in parenthesis).

In summary Hebrews 5:12 confirms that Almighty God expects His people to teach His way of life to others through personal example, as well as by word. However, the subject of “teaching” in James 3:1 needs to be examined in context because it is dealing with a different aspect of this subject. The following commentary explains the context.

The foregoing chapter (i.e. 2nd chapter of James) shows how unprofitable and dead faith is without works. Such a faith is, however, apt to make men conceited in their tempers and their talk. The best (of teachers) need to be cautioned against a dictating, censorious use of their tongues. We are therefore taught.

1. Not to use our tongues so as to lord it over others (Jas. 3:1).

2. We must not affect to speak and act as those who are continually assuming the chair (center stage), or make our own opinions a standard by

which to try all others. Those who thus set up (themselves) as judges and censurers shall receive the greater condemnation. Our judging others will make our own judgment the more strict and severe (Mt. 7:1).

3. Because we are all sinners, we should focus more on our own shortcomings and offenses which should make us more patient and merciful with the mistakes and sins of others (The Matthew Henry Commentary; p 1934; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

Therefore, the context of James 3:1 is dealing with how to teach correctly rather than stating that there should be less people teaching God's way of life. The style in which James 3:1 was written is similar to Christ's statement "if your hand causes you to sin cut it off" (Mt. 5:30). In other words, if people cannot teach correctly it would be better to have fewer teachers. James (more accurately Jacob) was admonishing the brethren not to use their ability to teach God's word as a means to "lord it over others" (Mt. 20:25). Those who fall into this error will find themselves under much stricter judgment. Only Christ has the authority to combine teaching with a warning of the consequences that only he can deliver to those who refuse to be corrected.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.²² But I (Christ) say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you (Mt. 11:21-22; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

Therefore, it should not be the goal of God's people to teach from the premise that they have the authority to pass judgment on the behavior of those who are being taught if they don't "fall in line." Michael the archangel did not make this mistake, even when he was in a very difficult situation.

Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him (Satan) a reviling accusation, but (instead) said, 'The Lord rebuke you!' (Jude 9; Ed. notes in parentheses)

The original King James Version of the Bible would be a more accurate translation of James 3:1 as it says, "let not many of you (desire to) become masters" because this was the context in which this statement was made. The very next verse supports the fact that no human being can teach with the same authority as Jesus Christ because we are all weak and fallible.

For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect (mature) man, able also to bridle the whole body (Jas. 3:2).

Nonetheless, through Jesus Christ, Almighty God commands His people to teach His way of life by word, and example. If this commission relied totally on Christ's original disciples, it would have ceased a long time ago. However, because God expects all his people to be teachers, this message is still going out to the world today.

Therefore, as you walk, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into my name,²⁰ teaching them to keep everything, as much as I commanded you; and behold, I am with you all the days, until the full completion of this age (Mt. 28:19-20; RNT).

So no contradiction exists between Hebrews 5:12 and James 3:1. All God's people are to be teachers in one way or another. However, no one should be aspiring to teach as if they had the same knowledge and authority as Jesus Christ. Christ alone has this responsibility as the next scripture confirms.

But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren (Mt. 23:8; cf. Jn. 5:22, 27, 30; 8:16; emphasis added).

Some may argue that they can't teach effectively under any circumstances, but God refuses to accept this as He did when Moses used a similar line of reasoning (cf. Ex. 4:10-16).

Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. ¹² For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say (Lk. 12:11-12; emphasis added).

Finally, an absolute refusal to teach God's way of life to others, by word or example, is denying one of the responsibilities given to every servant of Almighty God, and Christ said there are serious consequences for anyone who persists in doing this.

But he who denies me (Christ) before men will be denied before the angels of God (Lk. 12:9; Ed. note in parenthesis).

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