

Equipping the People of God

SERMON · Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life · 9 July 2018 (Theological Education Sunday)

Deuteronomy 6:1-7

Ephesians 4:7-16

Matthew 7:24-29 (quoted)

Matthew 6:10 (quoted)

The Church of South India has designated today as Theological Education Sunday, and the theme for our meditation is ‘Equipping the People of God.’ I see a logical progression in the passages read to us a while ago. The key verses in Deuteronomy 6:1-7, paraphrased, tell us that, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, we are to keep all the precepts, statutes, and commandments of God, and that we are to “love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This passage sets our primary goal for our walk with Jesus. Having said that, it then becomes crucial for us to know our God and understand His will for us. Recall that in the Lord's Prayer we pray, “Thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10).

The key verses in Ephesians 4:7-16 read: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13). On the aside, Paul uses the expression ‘saints’ to mean consecrated to God, holy, sacred, and pious. God has blessed people with various skills and occupations, which they must use to equip others in the knowledge of God. Paul also tells us why it is critical that we should be instructed in the knowledge and precepts of God. In verse 14, he writes: “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” See how relevant this teaching is in our present times.

Having understood what our spiritual goal should be, and why we should instruct ourselves in the Scriptures, we now move to the disastrous outcome if we do not have a strong foundation in our theological learning. Matthew reports Jesus warning us, in chapter 7, verse 27, what befalls a house built on sand: “And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.” In simple terms, it means that we will suffer greatly because of the deficiency in our theology, should calamities and persecution confront us.

This is the backdrop for us to meditate on theology and why we should be instructed in it for our spiritual edification. But the expression ‘theology’ may sound formidable to a lay person. We casually dismiss it as something for the theologians and clergy to grapple with. I would define it as our personal understanding of God and His will for us. In this light, I would say each one of us should have our personal theology, our own perception of God. There exists a divide between full-time and part-time Christian service. It has become more pronounced in these times of a ‘mad rush’ world of round-the-clock working. It is as if saying that those who are not clergy are only part-time in Christ! See how obnoxious such inferences can become. All the faithful, clergy or laity, are levelled equally under our Lord Jesus Christ. I would rather say, ‘God does not call the equipped; He equips the called’ — that is our punch line for today. One fact that strikes us most in the ministry of Jesus is that He picked very ordinary people — fishermen, small-time businessmen, carpenters, stonemasons, tax collectors, and merchants — when He chose His disciples and trained them to become teachers, preachers, and apostles; He did not poach young Jewish trainee priests from the Temple.

Next, we need to look at how not to deal with the Scriptures. We use several popular Bible-reading plans, such as reading from Genesis to Revelation, or choosing books from the Bible and reading them at a suitable pace; reading the Gospel texts in the morning and the Psalms before retiring, or simply opening the Bible and reading verses at random, or subscribing to have a verse pop up on the computer or mobile screen. There are hundreds of ways to read the Bible. I discount most of them, unless one is prepared to ‘study’ the portion read, with or without help from someone who knows the text. There are many who can quote from the Bible, with book, chapter, and verse, and even the page number. Very good — I cannot do that. A time will come when what I call Spiritual Fatigue sets in, and that could be a time when it is too late; some undergo a ‘ghar-vapsi’ (a homecoming, or return to their former ways), while others simply fade away. The reason is that they have not known Jesus and have not experienced the thrill of living in Him.

Instilling biblical teaching, especially the profound teaching of Jesus, must begin at home. Deuteronomy 6:7 says precisely that: “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” More broadly, the responsibility falls squarely on parents and the Church. It becomes something of a ‘catch-22,’ and a complex one at that. The Church is the Body of Christ, comprising His people. It is the same people who are at home, at school, at the workplace, and at church. Who teaches whom, then, is the moot

question. This is where we find the answer to the imaginary divide between the clergy and laity.

The clergy are trained in theology and are ‘ordained’ with the task of equipping the parishioners. They do this in several ways: they teach us to pray; they preach to us, explaining the meaning of selected passages from the Bible; they counsel people; they facilitate many spiritual activities in the church. They also encourage people to participate in the choir, in the reading of Scripture, and in various fellowship groups. All this, and maybe more; but all such activities should have one clear focus: to equip the people of God.

The Church should also equip itself to connect worship to the daily lives of its parishioners. There exists a disconnect between our spirituality and our lives outside church. This is precisely the reason why critics say that the Christian suffers from ‘Dissociative Identity Disorder,’ defined in psychiatry as the presence of dual or multiple personalities. The often-heard statement is, ‘What happens from Monday to Saturday has no relationship to what took place on Sunday’ — and sadly, this is true for many of us. It simply means that we are one kind of person in church, and another once we walk out of its gates, because we have not received the necessary instruction, or have failed to internalise biblical teaching.

Before I conclude, let us recall last Sunday's sermon by a fellow minister. God has entrusted to us a personal theology, an understanding of Himself and His will for us, according to the talents He has given us. Using those gifts and skills, we must take the Gospel to all the corners of the world to equip the uninitiated, which is the Great Commission given by Jesus after His Resurrection. May our Lord Jesus help us equip ourselves and others in fulfilling His will for us. Amen.