GOT RESPECT?

by Ken Smitherman

I recall, even as I began as a classroom teacher in 1963, the too commonly heard cliché "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Yet in that era, over 40 years ago, popular polls still acknowledged teaching as among the more respected vocations in the United States.

Today the various education media decry not only the loss of respect shown by students for their teachers but also the impact that this loss is making on the effectiveness of classrooms around the world. I have found it particularly refreshing to explore a time in education some 2,000 years ago. My fascination with a particular question caused me to begin to explore. The question was a simple one: Did Jesus go to school? I am convinced that more often than not we quickly come to the conclusion that He already knew everything because He was a man and He was God. But if He stepped from His heavenly realm to live among men as a man, I believe that the acceptance of that notion makes it clear that He would have lived and grown as a person, experiencing the culture and life of that time.

It is generally acknowledged that the people of Galilee were the most religious Jews in the world at the time of Jesus. This notion flies in the face of the perception that Galileans were uneducated peasants from the sticks. As a matter of fact, this region's geographic location on "the way of the sea" (Matthew 4:15, NASB) provided much greater opportunity for interaction with the world than was afforded the Jews of Jerusalem, who lived in some degree of mountainous isolation. It would simply be incorrect to declare that the Galileans were simple, even

though their lifestyle may have reflected that they were. According to the paper "Rabbi and Talmidim" (That the World May Know n.d.), "More famous Jewish teachers come from Galilee than anywhere else in the world. They were known for their great reverence for Scripture and the passionate desire to be faithful to it."

This was the environment that God prepared for His Son to grow as a man in. Jesus lived in an environment abundant with the richness necessary to produce followers who would embrace the kingdom of heaven.

In the book *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell (2005) spends an entire chapter delving into the first-century world of Jesus. Bell explains how the Jews of that time were committed to a deep belief that the Torah, or the first five books of the Old Testament, described the best way to live. He writes that "the central passion of the people of Jesus' world was teaching, living, and obeying the Torah" (p. 125).

He points out that rabbis, the teachers who taught the Torah, were afforded the highest respect of the community. The *talmidim*, the Hebrew word for disciples or students, held their teacher, the rabbi, in the very highest esteem and regard.

Consider, then, what Jesus might have experienced—particularly noting that Jesus came from a family of craftsmen in Nazareth, a town in the province of Galilee. He undoubtedly grew up in a home that reflected a reasonable standard of living. Since education was considered important to Jewish families, there is ample reason to believe that Jesus would have been fully engaged in the cultural and religious education program of His day. Jewish children formally began their education at about age 6. So this was the age that schooling began in the local synagogue—taught by the local rabbi (Bell 2005, 125–26).

This first level of education, lasting until about age 10, was called *Bet Sefer*, meaning House of the Book. Sometimes at *Bet Sefer*, the rabbi would put honey on the children's fingers and have them taste the honey, reminding them that God's words taste like honey on the tongue. The teacher wanted them to associate the words of God with the most delicious, exquisite thing they could possibly imagine. And by the age of 10 they usually had the entire Torah memorized (Bell 2005, 126).

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Following *Bet Sefer*, the best students moved to the next level, *Bet Talmud*: House of Learning. Here they studied until about age 14. During their time in *Bet Talmud*, they would memorize the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. We are talking about Genesis through Malachi—39 books committed to memory (Bell 2005, 127).

Rob Bell writes that "students in this second step of education would also study the art of questions and the oral tradition surrounding the text. For thousands of years, brilliant minds had been discussing the words of God, wrestling with what they meant and what it meant to live them out. This developed into a massive oral tradition. You had a verse, but then you had all the things that had been said about that verse from all of the different people who had discussed it and wrestled with it and commented on it. A mountain of oral tradition. So as a student, you would be learning the text, but you would also be learning who had said what in the name of whom about it" (2005, 127–28).

When the rabbi asked a question, he did not merely

want a predetermined answer spewed back. He wanted to know what the student thought about the issue. The teacher's questions would motivate further questions from the student to take the topic deeper and deeper. Once such practice was instilled in the student, it would be a practice of lifelong learning.

I was fascinated recently by the account of a man who talked about his growing-up years. As a Jewish child attending public school, he would gather with his friends at a particular place after school as they all waited to be escorted home by their mothers. He noted that his friends' mothers always greeted their sons with, "Well, what did you learn today?" His mother, in a traditional Jewish fashion, would greet him with, "And what did you ask your teacher today?"

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Upon completion of this second formal stage of learning, *Bet Talmud*, the students were about 14 or 15 years old. The next level of Jewish schooling was only for the most capable—those at the top of their class. The rest returned to life at home and learned the family trade or business. A number of this elite few who had not been sent home to learn the family trade would pursue a well-known rabbi and apply to become one of his *talmidim* (Bell 2005, 129).

When we know about this education process, we can better understand the context of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:24–25: "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (NIV). It was not the aim of this aspiring disciple to simply learn what he could by following a certain rabbi around for several years; it was his desire to become exactly like the rabbi. He would learn how the rabbi made scriptural application to the issues of life. The essence of a true disciple was to be like his master. This part of the formal education experience was called *Bet Midrash*, meaning House of Study. Eventually students would become rabbis themselves, teachers who in turn would pass on their learning and lifestyle one day to their chosen disciples. It was not easy to be accepted as a disciple. The rabbi wanted to know much about a prospective student (Bell 2005, 129):

- Can this aspiring disciple do what I do?
- Can he really bear what a rabbi must bear?
- Can this developing student become what I am?
- Does he really have what it will take?

Imagine the tremendous level of respect that a student must have had for the rabbi that he had chosen to be his mentor, to be the one that he desired to emulate and to be a reflection of throughout life. Imagine the anxiety and anticipation as the aspiring disciple awaited the formal acceptance of admission to this realm of "higher education," an admission he would receive through the simple words, "Come, follow me." To acquire this invitation was the achievement of a most significant honor and privilege.

Bet Midrash was not like our modern-day 4- or 5-year stint in higher education. Instead, it lasted for many years; and, although it most likely also required the engagement in some sort of work to meet personal needs, it would not become the student's vocation or lifework until about age 30 when the disciple would become a rabbi.

We learn that Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee at age 30, this same age. And we find that Jesus, through what appears to be a different admissions policy, singles out people who had not been the elite of the elite. These were people at work not as rabbis but in various stages of preparation or fully engaged in what they were seemingly destined to spend the rest of their lives doing. And now, an acknowledged teacher, a rabbi—Jesus—invites them: "Come, follow me." Honor of honors! These are truly the elite of the elite, destined to become like their master.

Now I return to my opening concern: the lack of respect for teachers. What if our culture—or, more specifically, our Christian culture—could grasp the notion that "it is enough for the student to be like his teacher"? What would such a notion require on the part of today's Christian school teacher? Is it even possible? Have we in Christian education developed a concept of what a teacher should be like on the basis of a model quite different from anything that God intended?

I am convinced that "it is enough for the student to be like his teacher," but only if the teacher is like what he or she is supposed to be. Perhaps the first step toward achieving such a dynamic might be to grasp the sacredness of that thousands-of-years-old relationship between the rabbi and his disciples: a master and teacher who gave of himself so that his students, his disciples, his *talmidim*, might be like him. More important, though, is the understanding that the teacher must be worthy of emulation.

References

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