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Masters in the Making

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How can we go about the task of improving our learning? That is the problem that confronts every educational institution, but especially the church-oriented college or seminary. The problem obviously involves both students and faculty members. The improvement of the learning process on the students' part is dependent on the improvement of the teaching process of the instructor. The teaching process, moreover, calls for a large measure of good counseling on the part of the instructor. The more personal attention a student is given by his instructor, the more stimulated and motivated the student will be to pursue his studies with vigor and enthusiasm.

In the following study we wish to focus attention on this matter of becoming masters in the art of teaching and learning. The accent should be on the word becoming. No matter how many degrees we possess, we do not yet have it made, we have not yet arrived. As our students are still in the making, so we their teachers are still in the making. All of us want to become master teachers, master students. To attain to such mastery is our obligation not only to the church that has called us, to the colleges and seminaries at which we teach, but above all to our Lord Himself as the Master Teacher under whom we serve.

The general theme that we propose to

follow will be: Masters in the Making. The first part will take up the masters' motivation. The second will look at the masters' method. The last portion will consider the masters' message.

I. THE MOTIVE OF THE MASTERS

Our study will be based on the comparatively unfamiliar speeches of Elihu in Job 32—33. There are few figures who have been criticized as severely as this young Elihu. He has been variously called a pedantic apprentice, an inflated babbler, an empty shadow. But a closer look at him indicates that he is more like God's own attorney. He is a real man of the spirit. His speeches have been compared to a gradual that leads over to the theophany in the whirlwind. His words have been described as bringing us to the threshold of the Holy of Holies. If the three friends of Job followed the pattern of Amos and John the Baptist in preaching repentance, Elihu takes his place beside Hosea, Jeremiah, and Jesus in stressing the magnitude of God's grace.

1. *He Is My God*

The name Elihu means "He is my God." That is grace! A psalmist could exclaim, "Know ye that the Lord *He is God*," and then go on to extol the creative omnipotence of the Lord. A prophet could stress that the Lord *He is God* and beside Him there is none other and thus glorify the

exclusiveness and uniqueness of God. The name Elihu, however, suggests a possessiveness that can only be explained in terms of divine grace. He is *my* God. Hosea could look ahead and see such grace bestowed upon his people that they would join in the loving response: "You are my God!" Finally it was our Lord Himself who reminded us of one of the finest summaries of grace in all of Scripture when He quoted the 22d Psalm and exclaimed on the cross: "My God! My God!" That is, God of me! God is mine!

We have referred to Elihu as the Lord's advocate, as God's own spokesman. It is significant that of this divine counselor it is said four times, "Elihu's wrath was kindled." His name means grace, yet he becomes angry four times! What does that mean? Can the wrath of a gracious God be enkindled? Does the gracious God also become angry? The answer is: Yes indeed! In fact, to preach the wrath and the grace of God, or to use the traditional terminology, to preach Law and Gospel, that is the very heart of our program as teachers and students in the church.

We observe that Elihu's wrath was kindled because Job had justified himself rather than God. Job had clung tenaciously to a program of anthropodicy instead of a program of theodicy. Men have always been inclined to do likewise, to justify themselves rather than God, and thus to enkindle a gracious God's ire. As teachers and students we are not exempt. It is such a normal, human thing for us to take credit ourselves for the success of a course, a lecture, a term paper. It is so natural for us to expect that God is going to keep a record of our classroom and study perfor-

mance and then reward us in terms of what we have achieved.

On the other hand, who among us can say that he has not become terribly discouraged at times, so discouraged that he was ready to say with Job: "It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God. How am I better off than if I had sinned?" Thus even the godly are tempted to motivate their performance by the hope of some profit or benefit. And when this happens, the wrath of God is rightfully aroused to bring men to repentance. The gainful motive becomes a type of golden calf which makes God just as angry as the idolatry of the Israelites at Sinai did. And if such man-centered motives persist, then even the final day of joy when our Lord returns must still be a *dies irae* that consumes and destroys.

2. *Spirit, Not Age*

When Elihu introduces himself, he accounts for his previous timidity by stating that he is just a stripling next to Job and his friends. Here is another young counselor like Jeremiah who feels very keenly the fact that he has not arrived at the maturity that he thinks a good counselor should have. But even Elihu anticipates the advice later given to young Timothy, namely, that his youth should not be despised by any man. Why not? Because it is the spirit of God, the breath of the Almighty, rather than age and experience that gives a counselor the understanding that he needs. The old man needs to be inspired, illuminated, motivated just as much as the younger man does. He too needs to say, "Not by age nor by experience, but by God's Spirit" is good teaching and learning achieved. Elihu implies that by God's grace he pos-

sesses a good measure of that spirit despite his youth. Like the psalmist, he has asked God to keep the holy spirit in his heart, so that his own spirit of steadiness, constancy, and perseverance may ever be renewed, so that he may be upheld with a spirit of willingness, geniality and sympathy.

It is the creative aspect of the spirit's activity that Elihu emphasizes. As the spirit moved upon the face of the waters at the creation, as God breathed the breath of life into the first man, so it is the spirit's creative power, it is the breath of the Almighty that also gives true counsel and understanding to men. As the spirit of God came upon the judges, upon David, and other great men of God to equip them for their special tasks in the kingdom, so the good spirit of God still comes to us students and teaches today, young and old, to lead us in paths of wisdom.

3. *Full of Words*

A counselor who is thus spirit-filled will also be full of words when other counselors have failed and look on in silence and perplexity. The advice of Job's three friends was like a bunch of keys none of which really fits into the lock. Their arrows were dull, their lances hollow; they could say no more, their storehouse of knowledge was empty.

But Elihu was full of words, there was so much counsel and advice that it veritably ran over. It could not be otherwise, because it was the spirit within Elihu that constrained him to speak. We note the same prophetic compulsion, the same inner urge to speak that was so characteristic of all of the Hebrew prophets. Elihu says that his insides feel like wine that is with-

out a vent; if there is no immediate outlet, something will have to give, even as wineskins must burst when the new wine ferments and the pressure has no place to go. Thus also a dejected Jeremiah considered briefly the idea of a moratorium on speaking; he thought of giving up his prophetic mission, but then he ran into a fearful thing: his insides felt as though a boiling inferno were raging there. He was sure he could not contain this terrible fire, even his bones became tired from trying to control the force of the flames.

The prophet Amos did not feel the fermenting wine or the raging fire, but he had an equally perplexing experience. Deep inside him the voice of the Lord sounded like a roaring lion who could not be silenced. At the sound of the lion's voice Amos had no choice but to respond, he simply had to go out and speak for God. In the message of Isaiah such prophetic compulsion is expressed in yet another picture: What God has revealed to the prophet becomes a heavy burden that he carries about with him. As long as the content of that burden is not conveyed to his hearers and thus gotten off his chest, the prophet feels heavy-laden, there is no relief for him.

4. *Spirit-filled, Spirit-motivated!*

What is our motive as we strive for mastery as students and teachers? The Lord is our God, we live and work in His grace. Therefore it behooves us to justify and thus glorify Him—anything less will evoke His wrath. Our understanding in the learning process is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God's creative spirit. Therefore our message to men from the spirit is like wine without a vent—it must have an

outlet. Let these be the reasons why we say to our students: Harken unto me!

II. THE METHOD OF THE MASTERS

One thing that is asked in a master teacher is that he be impartial, that he be no respecter of persons, that he refrain from taking sides in a given issue. Elihu would have disqualified himself immediately, if he had sided in with Job on the one hand, or with Job's three friends on the other. In a rather clever word play he alludes to some serious consequences that he would be subject to if he were guilty of playing favorites or using flattery. He affirms, "If I take the part of any man, I may easily have no part with my Maker," or, "I would not respect any man's person, otherwise my Maker might easily have no respect for me."

The Hebrew word for "flatter" means to give a man a name of honor, to give a person what the Arabs call a *Kunya* or what we call a nickname in English. A word of counsel is in place here to teachers: Do we use last names in addressing some students while using first names or even nicknames with others. We might thereby easily expose ourselves to the charge of being partial.

On the other hand, let us not misunderstand this warning about flattery. Flattery is defined in the dictionary as false, insincere, or excessive praise. But this has nothing to do with praise, commendation, and encouragement offered in the good sense. We ought to use every legitimate opportunity to praise the efforts of our students who in gratitude to their Lord do what is required of them. A reassuring pat on the back, a resounding "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," can be a

powerful stimulus to help the pilgrim keep on plodding forward!

1. *Lips Speaking Sincerely*

Another requirement in a teacher is this, that he really mean what he says, that he speak from the heart rather than the mind, that his interest be not simply academic, but highly personal, genuinely pastoral. That is what Elihu stresses in the next small scopus of his address. He appeals to Job to listen because what he has to say has the ring of uprightness and personal concern: "My words declare the uprightness of my heart, and what my lips know they speak sincerely." Here is real honesty and sensitivity! Here is a counselor of sterling qualities: not only forthright and true, but also sensitive to the needs of the other man, gentle and tender over against his shortcomings.

Mark well, these claims to candor, artlessness, and ingenuousness are not boasts on Elihu's part. They flow quite naturally from the fact that he owes all things to the creative spirit of God: "The spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life." The thrust of these powerful words is both backward to what Elihu has just said and also forward to what he is going to say. In retrospect they mean, you may take my claims to truthfulness and sensitivity seriously because I am a spirit-wrought and spirit-controlled creature. In prospect, on the other hand, they mean: The same spirit of God who made you made me, the same breath of the Almighty that gave you life gave it to me. You and I are on the same level. The same spirit of God made both of us. Here is real warmth! Here is sympathy! Elihu will not pontificate! There need be

no condescension. He is made of the same stuff as Job.

2. *Man to Man*

With that Elihu comes to the very heart of good methodology in teaching, namely, wisdom must be imparted as man to man: Not as from a superior to an inferior, not as from a perfect being to an imperfect one, but rather as an equal to an equal. In this the three friends of Job had been seriously lacking. They had failed miserably. They never came down from the raised cathedra that separated them from Job. They remained safely enclosed in a tower of innocence that put them in an entirely different world than Job's. They remained distant, cold, unbending.

Elihu, however, deliberately puts himself on the same level where Job stands. "I am before God exactly as you are." We are equals in His sight. We are both made by the Spirit of God, we are both made of common clay. Elihu admits that he is just as human, just as frail, just as subject to limitations as Job is. He is willing to come down to the level of those whom he is to guide.

And so all of us who would be master teachers must come down to the level of those whom we want to advise and whom we want to train to become masters in the same art. We must endeavor to see in Elihu a sort of forerunner of that Master Counselor who was willing to empty Himself and to assume servant's form and become man so that He might counsel the children of men in their quest for salvation. We need to learn from Him who was touched with a feeling for our infirmities, who was tempted in all things like as we are tempted, so that He might help us to overcome our temptations.

Only when our students see clearly that we are coming to them as man to man, as frail humans holding the same status before God as they, will the barriers of fear, suspicion, and misunderstanding be broken down. Then they will be able to be sure that no fear of us should make them afraid. They will not sense that some high-pressure salesmanship is being used on them, that a kind of squeeze play will be resorted to in order to convince and persuade them.

3. *Once, Twice, Thrice*

One of the greatest handicaps between teachers and students is a breakdown in communication. This frequently takes place when something blocks out the words of the teacher and prevents him from getting through to the student. This is particularly true if the student feels hostility toward the teacher, if he thinks that the teacher along with everybody else is his enemy. Job was in such a frame of mind. He thought that God was his enemy. He thought that God arbitrarily refused to talk with him.

But Elihu, master instructor that he was, was quick to rule out such a possibility. He said, "God is greater than mortal man." How did Elihu mean that? He meant that man may be fickle, moody, and changeable. On a mere whim he may withdraw into a state of uncommunicativeness. But not so God. He is far superior to mortal man, He speaks and acts again and again on man's behalf. Elihu says, "God speaks once, yea twice! Lo, God works all these things, twice, three times with a man!" God tells man what He is going to do, and then He also does what He said He would do. He is concerned that men may turn from their iniquity, that their lives may be kept back

from the pit. And so He speaks to them, sometimes in a dream or a night vision, and opens their ears to His message. He also works on them through pain and suffering, reducing their flesh and bones to such a state that they are on the brink of the grave. God works thus again and again, once, yea twice, yea three times.

Today's teacher too must overcome the feeling among his students that he may be hostile to them. He must break through, keep the channels of communication open. He must offer guidance not merely by what he says but also and above all by what he does to help his students. His oral communication and manual implementation must be ongoing processes. He must go back again and again, once, yea twice, yea three times, so that his disciples may truly be enlightened with the light of life!

III. THE MESSAGE OF THE MASTERS

At this stage the reader may well ask whether the dreams and night visions that strike terror in the hearts of the strong, the pains and sufferings that emaciate the body and destroy the appetite, whether these are in themselves God's salutary message to men? Elihu's response is negative, he indicates that such visions and chastisements are not the real instruments of grace, they are preparatory agents, they are like an anteroom through which God would come to man's help.

But how does God come? Elihu explains this in a sort of program of "theological therapeutics." He sees a remarkable figure intervene on behalf of men. First he calls him an angel or a messenger of God. The term reminds us of many incidents in Old Testament history where an angelic messenger is sent by God to be of assistance to

people. Then Elihu calls this person an interpreter, translator, or explainer! What does he mean by this title? When Joseph's brethren stood before him in Egypt, they did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. It is just that kind of interpreter that Elihu has in mind. We ask, But what was this strange figure to interpret?

1. *The Angel-Interpreter*

According to Elihu, his task was to be twofold: he was to interpret to man what was right for him in the sight of God; and he was to interpret to God how frail and impotent man was. The double interpretation was necessary because man in his alienated condition could not fulfill the will of God, and God in His grace needed to be invoked to come to the help of frail man. Thus the angel was to be an interpreter of sin and grace, of Law and Gospel. Small wonder that in the Targum this Hebrew word *meliz* is rendered by the Aramaic transliteration of *parakletos*, or paraclete, the very word that the fourth gospel uses to refer to the Holy Spirit.

But the angel-interpreter does still more. He appears before God on man's behalf and says, "I have found a ransom for him, a price for his deliverance, a payment that will set him free." The remarkable ransom is not described further. Why not? Is it possible that the interpreter offers himself as a sacrifice of expiation, that he is both the ransom and the ransomer? This becomes the more probable when we look at the last of the four names that are given to this extraordinary figure. He is called: One among a thousand! One among a thousand? What does this mean? The simplest explanation would be: He is one

among the thousand angels whom God uses as His messengers to implement His will on earth.

2. *One in a Thousand*

But is that all? Do we perhaps need to probe much deeper? One among a thousand? Could this mean: One out of a thousand, one set apart from a thousand? One for a thousand, one instead of a thousand, one on behalf of a thousand? The theological concept of one as a ransom for many is alluded to elsewhere in the Old Testament. We need but recall that Moses told the people of Israel twice that the Lord was angry with him on their account, that he was deprived of the right to enter the land of promise because of the sins of the people. Thus the penalty was imposed upon one for many. In the fourth of the servant songs there is a detailed analysis of the one servant suffering for the many: It was he who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, it was he who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. Indeed it was he who bore the sin of many.

The one ransom in a thousand takes man's case before God. There he pleads for him in terms that have a strong Old Testament accent: Deliver him from going down to the pit! Let his flesh be fresher than that of a child! Let him return to the days of his youthful vigor! Thus the angel-interpreter, the one ransomer in a thousand, prays to God on behalf of his frail human client.

3. *Delight in Righteousness*

And the response? God's reaction is twofold. First, He takes delight in man. Even as He once rejoiced in all the works

that He made, so He now takes pleasure in the people who are the works of His hands. Secondly, He renders unto man His righteousness. That men lack such righteousness is axiomatic in the Old Testament. All of their righteousnesses are as filthy rags. They need to recognize that they have righteousness only in their God who promised to become their righteousness. Only thus can they affirm that they hope to live in a city of righteousness, among those who will be covered with the Lord's own robe of righteousness, with those who will be eternally betrothed in righteousness to their God.

4. *Confession and Response*

When God takes delight in man and renders unto him His righteousness, the immediate response is one of worshipful jubilation. Man comes into God's presence with joy. He presents himself in the temple for praise and adoration. He makes a joyful noise unto the Lord and recounts his salvation to his fellowmen. He invites all lands to join him.

But the cultic vision is only preliminary, it is a mere symbol of the greater vision that is yet to come. Ultimately man will be shown the path that leads to life with God, to the divine presence with its fullness of joy, to God's right hand with its pleasures forevermore. One day God will ransom him from the power of Sheol and will receive him. God will take him by his right hand and counsel him and afterward receive him to glory.

5. *Music of the Masters*

Thus to this day masters in the art of teaching and learning may sing before men, making joyful testimony of their

faith in song. Like Deborah and Miriam of old their tongues may sing aloud of God's righteousness and mercy. Like the psalmists they may sing a song that is old and yet ever new: I have sinned! I have broken off communication with God. I have failed to reach the goal He set before me. I have turned right into wrong persistently. And yet the wonder of it is that all of this has not been requited to me. God has not reckoned my sins to my account, He has not repaid me in kind. Rather He has cast all my sins behind His back, He has plunged them into the depths of the sea, He has swept them away like a fog, He has made them vanish like ice before the sun!

A theological therapeutic like Elihu's ought therefore to be a minimal requirement for all of today's educational masters, whether we be teachers or students. As

masters-to-be all of us have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Through the Lamb that was slain and was brought back to life we too have been redeemed from the pit. We are privileged to see the light of God's own life in the ultimate dimension of eternity. In the meantime we need to concern ourselves with both the service dimension of the angel and the truth-seeking dimension of the interpreter. We need to be ready to offer ourselves as a ransom for those who have been entrusted to our care. We need to recognize our identity as some among thousands, as a few chosen to bring the dilemma of the many before God, as a remnant crying out for answers and solutions for all of God's people.

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