

JESUS: THE UNORTHODOX TEACHER

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Jaroslav Pelikan, when considering Christ's place in general history, wrote, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries."¹ Christ's impact on the world is typically surveyed through His teachings, but as Pelikan later points out, it was Christ's role as a teacher that first and foremost set Him apart. Whether or not one may agree with Pelikan's ranking, it would be unfortunate for anyone studying the life of Christ to overlook Him as a teacher. "However important the message He presented," President Boyd K. Packer wrote, "the manner in which He presented it also has great meaning for us."² This chapter examines Jesus as a teacher. It focuses on what made Him so

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1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries. His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 1.

2. Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 18.

different from other teachers, thus allowing Him to make a mark upon humanity—as a teacher—unlike any other.

RABBI JESUS

Some modern scholars overlook Jesus as a teacher, feeling that this aspect of His life is either inconsequential or irrelevant. To Jesus' contemporaries, however, it is clear that Christ was considered a teacher of considerable consequence. Regardless of position, belief, or association, whether one was a scribe, Pharisee, Sadducee, tax collector, commoner, disciple, or Apostle, the term most often used when addressing Jesus was Master. In fact, even Christ used this term to refer to Himself. In almost every instance, *master* is translated from the Greek *didaskalos*, or "teacher." With the exception of the King James Version, most New Testament translations textually favor "teacher" over "master" when translating *didaskalos*.³ Occasionally, the title "master" is translated from the Greek *rhabbi*, or "rabbi." While the King James Version translates *rhabbi* as "rabbi" (or rabboni) only eight times, *rhabbi* is used sixteen times referring to Christ in the text. The term *rhabbi* did not displace Jesus as a teacher but rather elevated His teaching status. *Rhabbi* was considered an honorary title of respect for an instructor or teacher. "To the disciples," President Packer wrote, "Jesus was their Lord and their Rabbi or Master, or, in other words, their Teacher, and they were His disciples, pupils, or scholars."⁴

Those who wrote about Jesus' life described His primary activity as teaching. According to Weigle, "The word which is most often used in the Gospels to describe what Jesus did is

3. The New International, New Revised Standard, and Living Bible all render *didaskalos* as "teacher." The King James Version translates it as "master."

4. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently*, 18.

some form of the verb [*didascho*] teach."⁵ Mark, for example, said that crowds rushed to Jesus again, and that He taught them as always (Mark 10:1). Thus, we find that both title and task describe Jesus as a teacher. President Packer emphatically agreed. "It would be hard to describe the Lord as an executive," he taught. "Let me repeat that. It would be hard to describe the Lord as an executive. He was a teacher!"⁶

It is important to note, however, that Jesus of Nazareth left His mark upon humanity not simply because He was a teacher. Innumerable teachers lived and worked in mortality and have not made as significant an impact as a teacher as did Jesus. It is clear that Jesus was recognized as a teacher, but with further consideration it becomes more obvious that He must have been an extraordinary teacher as well. While Jesus was called Master in times past, some resonate with President Thomas S. Monson and refer to Him as the "master teacher."⁷ For many, Jesus is considered the superlative teacher. "He was not just a teacher," President Packer taught, "He was the teacher."⁸ Like so many of Jesus' admirers, Edward de Bono also recognized the brilliance of Jesus' teaching, yet he offered an insightful comment regarding Jesus' pedagogy that is worth careful consideration. He wrote, "He was a teacher and a brilliant one, but unorthodox."⁹

Christ's brilliance in the act of teaching is not only plausible to most, it is typically accepted as fact. Volumes have been written about how "the teacher" of Nazareth taught.

5. Luther Allan Weigle, *Jesus and the Educational Method* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1939), 14.

6. Boyd K. Packer, "Principles," *Ensign*, March 1985, 10.

7. Thomas S. Monson, "Thou Art a Teacher Come from God," *Improvement Era*, December 1970, 103.

8. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently*, 19.

9. Edward de Bono, *The Greatest Thinkers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), 44.

Typically, however, these writings focus on the standard practices of Christ's teaching: teaching with and by the Spirit, possessing and demonstrating the capacity to love students, exercising compassion, and remaining devoutly founded upon doctrinal content. Religious pedagogues have outlined His lessons, examined His methods, and even extrapolated upon His analogies in hope of establishing a perfect pedagogy. While these traits are necessary and establish a vital foundation in understanding Christ's teaching methods, it seems that we tend to ignore, or miss, other significant pedagogical aspects of the Master Teacher. Perhaps this is why de Bono's description of Christ's teaching as "unorthodox" is so insightful.

When referring to the unorthodox pedagogy of the Rabbi Jesus, it is important to understand what is meant by unorthodox. To some, applying this term to Christ is nothing short of heresy. How could the Savior, the Son of God, a perfect individual do anything unorthodox? But in this examination, unorthodox is understood as heterodoxy, meaning "another opinion."¹⁰ Thus, it is not surprising that when comparing Jesus with other teachers, we find what James Dillon described as "gross differences in all aspects of milieu, ways of thinking and acting, extent of schooling in society, and place of religion in both school and society."¹¹ Jesus' teachings and methods were not akin to the opinions of His peers. In this light, He was undoubtedly unorthodox. But what is striking about Jesus' unorthodox pedagogy is how people react to it. Ernest Colwell, for example, recognized Jesus as an "unconventional" teacher but also said that He was worthy of

10. The term *heterodox* is derived from the Greek *heterodoxos* < *heteros* "another" + *doxa* "opinion" < *dokein* "seem."

11. James T. Dillon, *Jesus as a Teacher: A Multidisciplinary Case Study* (Bethesda, Md.: International Scholars Publications, 1995), 8; see additional commentary, 7-11.

imitation.¹² President Packer, when referring to Christ as a teacher, described Him as "the ideal, the pattern."¹³ If Jesus' unorthodox methods were heretical, none of these men would ever suggest emulation.

When examining Christ's pedagogy, it is easy to attribute Jesus to "our own ideas and ideals instead of discovering his."¹⁴ We should never underestimate or dismiss traditional Christian teaching techniques (love, spirit, doctrine, charity, etc.) when examining Jesus as a rabbi. But if we focus solely upon what we have come to recognize as the conventional Christian pedagogy when studying the Rabbi Jesus, we might miss discovering a side of Jesus' teaching that would not only deepen our understanding of His masterful pedagogy but would undoubtedly deepen our awe, admiration, and respect for Him. By examining all aspects of the Rabbi Jesus, both the orthodox and unorthodox, we begin to see Him as He is—and we marvel. Since so much has been taught about the generally accepted (orthodox) pedagogy of Christ, we shall now turn our focus to some examples of the unorthodox pedagogy of the Master Teacher.

THE UNORTHODOX TEACHER

At the conclusion of the sermon Jesus taught on the mount, the multitude was astonished by His doctrine. They were also moved by the fact that Jesus didn't teach like their other teachers—specifically the scribes. Matthew emphasized that the multitude was astonished for "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29). This passage can be interpreted in many different ways, but consider two in connection with Jesus the teacher.

12. Ernest Cadman Colwell, *An Approach to the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), 22.

13. Packer, "Principles," 10.

14. Weigle, *Jesus and the Educational Method*, 13.

The Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 7:29 reveals a specific consideration to Christ's unorthodoxy: "For he taught them as one having authority *from God*, and not as *having authority from the Scribes*" (italics added to emphasize the JST changes). This suggests that people were astonished because Jesus was an unauthorized teacher, unlike the scribes. The scribes were trained professionals and regarded as authorized teachers. Even though Jesus was a quality teacher, He did not bear a teacher's credentials of the time or, in other words, the authorization from the scribes.

At the time, a teacher's credentials were awarded by a culture with a healthy respect for learning but governed by a tightfisted system overshadowed by deep tradition. Most everyone in the Jewish culture was considered a teacher—especially parents. It was the obligation of the parents to teach their children in the home. Fathers would teach their sons in both the words of the Torah and ritual practices, while mothers taught their daughters how to fulfill the role of wife and mother in the house according to Jewish tradition and law. But fathers and mothers were not recognized, at least in public, as teachers—especially authorized teachers.

Those recognized and entitled teachers were typically individuals who taught in the formal educational system. Such instructors taught at either the *bet hasefer* (house of the book), *bet talmud* (house of learning), *bet hakiesset* (house of assembly or synagogue), or at *bet midrash* (house of study). It was at the *bet midrash* that exceptional students became teachers and were awarded the rank and title of rabbi. Jesus, as far as we can determine, was never a student nor a teacher at *bet midrash*.¹⁵ It

15. "Established 'schools' had a process by which persons became teachers. They would have to spend years as students or disciples of a famous teacher. An outstanding student would then succeed the master. Others might eventually

is plausible that He, like most of the boys His age, would have attended *bet hasefer*, and probably *bet talmud*. Since *bet hakneset* (synagogue) was designed as a center of continued, lifelong learning, one can assume that Jesus would have participated in its services. Beyond that, however, one can only speculate. Thus, unlike the scribes (and other official teachers), Jesus was not an authorized teacher by the standards of the day. As a matter of fact, His authority was often the subject of question (see Mark 2:15-16; 11:27-28).

What is astonishing is not that Jesus was without proper credentials but that the people even cared. Most teachers without proper training would be dismissed without a second thought. But this uncredentialed teacher astonished the people to the point that they not only recognized Him as an outstanding teacher but they actually addressed Him by the title "teacher." Some even went as far as to call Him a teacher "come from God" (John 3:2).

This unusual entitlement given Jesus may be understood with further consideration of Matthew 7:29. The King James Version emphasizes that Jesus taught in a manner that was not as the scribes. In this light, it appears that Jesus' teaching style was unlike anything the people were used to—especially from their current teachers of the law, the scribes. This is illustrated in John's description of a group of under-officers sent by the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Jesus. According to John, the group of officers, also known as the temple guard or police, listened to Jesus teaching in the temple but did not arrest Him. They returned empty handed, and the Pharisees

form their own group. We have already seen that Jesus did not come out of such a school" (Pheme Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 23). In addition, Dillon felt that "he (Jesus) was known to have had no formal education and to be the pupil of no known teacher; he lacked theological study, ordination, and office" (Dillon, *Jesus as a Teacher*, 6-7).

interrogated the group, asking, "Why have ye not brought him?" The officers answered, "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:45-46). The infuriated Pharisees wondered if the arresting officers were deceived. In a pious, self-righteous manner, the sarcastic Pharisees postulated, "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?" (John 7:48). Perhaps they were confident that their colleagues' present devotion would be unaffected, but the compelling Rabbi of Nazareth would eventually draw from their number as well. John later records that "among the chief rulers also many believed on him . . . but . . . they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue" (John 12:42). Whether one considers His credentials or His manner, it is clear that Jesus was distinctly different from other teachers.

THE AUDIENCE AND SETTING OF TEACHING

Most teachers, whether modern or contemporaries of Jesus, define themselves according to their setting and audience. For example, when asked, "Where do you teach?" the common response is to name a location, a place, where they perform their skill: "University" or "Bet Midrash." "What do you teach?" The teacher typically responds with either a subject or a demographic answer: "Inorganic chemistry," "Talmud," or "Freshmen." There is practicality in such responses, but in an unsettling way such answers reflect a common mind-set regarding teaching. A classroom, laboratory, specific meeting place, or audience defines teachers. As a result, teachers typically don't assume a teacher's stance until they are in the classroom or with an audience.

Rabbi Jesus, in comparison, was not bound by setting. What was Jesus' classroom? Who was His audience? In trying to answer such questions, we find that Rabbi Jesus was unconventional. It's not that He shunned traditional teaching settings that made Him different. It is clear that Jesus taught in

the same settings as many of the other teachers of His time. Matthew records, for example, that "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). But since Jesus was not bound by setting, we also find Him comfortably teaching from the hull of a ship (see Matthew 13:2-3), in the mountains (see Matthew 5:1-2; 15:29-30; John 6:3), at the temple (see Luke 19:47; John 7:14; 8:2), on the seashore (see Mark 2:13), in cornfields (see Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28), or even at a chief Pharisee's house (see Luke 14:1). It's hard to imagine a place where Jesus wouldn't (or didn't) teach. Where did Jesus teach? Anywhere there was someone willing to listen.

Since Jesus was ready and able to teach in any setting, He was not distracted as others might be. This allowed Christ, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks suggested, to "concentrate entirely on those being taught."¹⁶ Since most good teachers focus on their students, one might not consider this an aspect of Christ's unorthodox pedagogy. It is not that Jesus focused on His students that differentiated Him so much from His peers as it was the type of students He taught. Rabbi Jesus was a teacher of unconventional students. Typically, a teacher's students generally consist of a fairly restricted group. For example, Jewish teachers taught only males, and modern teachers teach only those enrolled in their classes. But Rabbi Jesus' students were not restricted by gender, age, intellect, wealth, health, righteousness, station, or even by numbers.¹⁷ Consider, for example, one of Christ's early disciples. A woman, involved in unrighteous acts and from a scorned heritage, found herself the focus of the Master Teacher at a local well (see John

16. Dallin H. Oaks, Conference Report, October 1999, 101.

17. See William E. Phipps, *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1993), 61.

4:4–42). What began with a request for water turned out to be a memorable teaching moment. Using what later would become His trademark, we find the Master Teacher teaching an atypical student in an unconventional setting. Even more amazing was Jesus' flexibility. At one moment, Jesus is teaching a single student by the well, only to find Himself moments later teaching her neighbors. It would be difficult to imagine any other accredited teacher of Jesus' time in similar circumstances. Who did Jesus teach? Those willing to listen.

Another distinctive yet common practice for Rabbi Jesus was how He connected with His students. Most students of His day were associated with teachers by petition. In other words, it was the student who would offer to be a disciple of a teacher. A rabbi would never invite a student to become a disciple.¹⁸ The unorthodox approach of Rabbi Jesus, however, was hinged upon His invitation. Among His first disciples were Andrew and John. These two curious followers of the Baptist once asked Jesus, "Where dwellest thou?" In quick response, Jesus invited them to "come and see" (John 1:39). These future Apostles spent a day with Christ that changed them forever. This invitational pattern is typical of the atypical Christ, for Jesus often invited the children of men, "Follow thou me" (2 Nephi 31:10) and "Come unto me" (Matthew 11:28; see 16:24).

It becomes clear that the Rabbi Jesus was a teacher not because He had students or found Himself in a classroom. Jesus taught at any time and in any setting. Rather than donning the teacher's mantle when arriving to work, Rabbi Jesus was a teacher wherever He was. Thus, He was a teacher both day and night (see John 3). Whoever found themselves in His company, regardless of number, became His students—His

18. See Dillon, *Jesus as a Teacher*, 7.

focus. It seems that for this Rabbi, there was always room in His inn. While this pedagogy may appear unconventional to others, to Him, it was the orthodox approach to teaching.

THE LANGUAGE OF TEACHING

Jesus had an uncanny ability to connect with those in His tutelage through language. This connection was largely due to His ability to use the language of His students effectively. This should not be construed as merely mastering structure, form, syntax, or content of a given language but masterfully using language to teach in a way that connected Him with His students. Pedagogically, Jesus was a master at using the language itself, the tone or presentation of the language, and the form of the language in a way that was distinctively different than His peers.

Jesus skillfully crafted the language itself in such a way that not only the content of His message was powerful and appropriate, but also in a way that the language itself was equally powerful and appropriate. For example, Jesus used repetition of sounds and words, rhythm, rhyme, and language structure as effective pedagogical means in this teaching. Unfortunately, the English translation of Jesus' teachings often obscures this insight. However, by examining Aramaic, the native language of Jesus and the Jews of His time, interesting insights of Jesus' unorthodox use of language are revealed.¹⁹

19. While the four major languages used in Palestine in Jesus' day were Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Aramaic, Jesus conversed and taught in Aramaic. A detailed explanation of this conclusion is addressed by Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902), 1-90; *Jesus-Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 1-37; Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 143-77; and Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 1-7.

Matthew Black cites several dozen examples where Christ uses repetition of sounds and words as an additional impact upon His students.²⁰ Consider, for example, Christ's criticism of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes: "Ye blind guides, who strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel; who make yourselves appear unto me that ye would not commit the least sin, and yet ye yourselves, transgress the whole law" (JST, Matthew 23:21). While the message contains striking imagery and powerfully demonstrates the intended point, Christ's use of language in this pun is even more powerful than many assume. Consider key parts of this saying in Aramaic: "You strain a galma, but swallow a gamla!" Juxtaposing not only the two terms of straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel provides the sensational imagery, but by juxtaposing the sounds Jesus provides an additional impact that would have been even more memorable for the local listener. In similar manner, Jesus masterfully used rhythms, rhymes, and paralleled structure to connect Himself and His teachings with His disciples.²¹

Jesus also showed impressive command of the tone of His language. "It is not surprising," Phipps suggested, "to find that he [Jesus] often spoke with a dry and restrained wit and enjoyed plays on words."²² Not surprising, of course, because dry wit was common to the culture and time. Thus, we find the Rabbi Jesus using witty, compassionate, direct, and even biting tones in delivering His message. But the tone of His

20. See Black, *Aramaic Approach*, 160-85.

21. Jeremias cites four dozen examples of rhythmic patterns in Jesus' language (*New Testament Theology*, 20-27; and C. F. Burney describes the parallel structure used by Jesus (*The Poetry of Our Lord: An Examination of the Formal Elements of Hebrew Poetry in the Discourses of Jesus Christ* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925], 100-46). Jeremias feels that it was Jesus' use of antithetical parallelism that made Jesus distinctive in His language as a teacher. He cites 138 examples of antithetical parallelism in *New Testament Theology*, 14-16.

22. Phipps, *Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus*, 87.

language was nothing more than a necessary means to a designated end. As a teacher, the Rabbi intended to teach. Thus, the tone (means) used to teach (end) was actually a reflection of His students—their disposition, maturity, willingness, and righteousness. Consider the way He taught the children of Israel, for instance. His language was exact, strict, and often considered harsh. He commanded them in all things. But this was necessary because His audience was spiritually immature, obstinate, and heady. In comparison, consider Jesus teaching a people preparing for Zion. Rather than a strict, exacting approach, He teaches that it is not fitting, suitable, or proper that He should command them in all things (see D&C 58:26).

Jesus spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep (see John 10:14). In his powerful sermon to the foundering Nephites in Zarahemla, Alma declared that "the good shepherd doth call after you" (Alma 5:60). Since Jesus knows His audience, He is able to call after them in a way that is truly unique and meaningful. This can be seen in a revelation received by Joseph Smith for his father. Typically known as "the missionary revelation," section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants contains a marvelous example of a shepherd knowing His sheep well enough that He calls in an appropriate and reflective voice. Not having been one overly committed to one sect or form of religion before, Joseph Smith Sr. approached his son to know the will of the Lord. In a masterful tone and manner, Rabbi Jesus taught a fifty-eight-year-old farmer who had spent a lifetime plowing, planting, and swinging a sickle in wheat fields about committing to God's service with heart, might, mind, and strength. In a fashion typical for Jesus but atypical for us, Jesus deepens discipleship because He knows His sheep and speaks their language.

In his study of Jesus as a teacher, Pheme Perkins reaffirms

this important aspect of Jesus' use of language: "Understanding his message did not require special education or even a life that had been marked by holiness in a special way. Ordinary people heard Jesus' words as the word of God addressed to them. Jesus did not use a 'scholarly' or 'technical language' such as we find in philosophical writings of the time or in legal disputes over the meaning of the Law."²³ The important thing to remember is that the tone and words never wedged between the teacher and His students. His language fit His audience in a way that gave His students the best opportunity to become connected with the Master. In this way, Rabbi Jesus was considered a master.²⁴

In addition to Christ's masterful use of tone, He also had a command of the literary forms of His day. Jesus' language in teaching was usually formed as parables, figures of speech, illustrations, dialectic, and discourse.²⁵ The most typical form of teaching used by Jesus was the parable. "All these things," Matthew wrote, "spake Jesus unto the multitudes in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them" (Matthew 13:34). To conclude that Jesus was the inventor of the parable, however, would be faulty. In the Old Testament, for example, the prophet Nathan masterfully used a parable to prick David's conscience regarding his adulterous behavior (see 2 Samuel 12). Noted teachers such as Plato and Aristotle also used parables.²⁶ In fact, the use of parables as a teaching technique was actually commonplace in rabbinical schools of the day. Thus, it was not the use of parables that makes the Rabbi

23. Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 38.

24. See Dillon, *Jesus as a Teacher*, 72.

25. See Dillon, *Jesus as a Teacher*, 86.

26. See Kaari Ward, ed., *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 1987), 152.

Jesus distinctive from others, but it was how He used them that was unorthodox.

Jesus' parables are so unique to Him that Joachim Jeremias concluded, "We find nothing to be compared with the parables of Jesus."²⁷ He described Christ's use of parables as having a nearness to life, filled with simplicity and clarity, composed in masterful brevity yet able to appeal to the conscience.²⁸ At the core of Jesus' parables was familiarity. Although the intended lesson might be new to the students, the way Jesus taught them was very familiar. Thus, Christ "used the familiar to explain the unfamiliar."²⁹

Using the familiar to explain unfamiliar concepts was typical of the other forms of language used by Jesus as well. Figures of speech, illustrations, dialectic, and Christ's discourses were all used to teach, not merely to grab attention or entertain. Jesus used forms of language to embody the content of His teaching rather than, as was customary, to illustrate or to prove some point previously made.³⁰ In short, whatever form of language Jesus used, He used it to teach. In comparison, unwitting or unwise teachers are often tempted to use stories, figures of speech, metaphors, or even humor not as tools of teaching but as a means to illustrate their own humor, punctuate their savvy, or create filler in their lesson plans. Such teaching forms might be considered what Elder Jeffrey R. Holland called "a kind of theological Twinkie—spiritually empty calories" or "'fried froth,' the kind of thing you could eat all day and yet finish feeling totally unsatisfied."³¹

27. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 29.

28. See Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 30.

29. Herman Harrell Horne, *Teaching Techniques of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1964), 12.

30. See Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1971), 27–30.

31. Jeffrey R. Holland, Conference Report, April 1998, 32.

Noncaloric teaching may be entertaining and interesting, but it doesn't illuminate or expand a student's understanding or perspective. Jesus' methods, on the other hand, were varied and pedagogically productive. Every word, tone, and form of His speech was meant to teach.

THE TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING

Besides Jesus' masterful use of language, the Rabbi Jesus was diverse in His approach to teaching. A hasty pedagogue may conclude that it was Jesus' diversity that distinguished Him from other teachers. Such a conclusion, however, would not only be rash, but it would be shallow as well. It wasn't necessarily Christ's pedagogical diversity that set Him apart from others as it was His freedom from commonly accepted pedagogical standards and restraints. It is important to understand that Christ was not a renegade teacher—always rejecting authority or common practices. He didn't sneer at everything prescribed by the teachers of His time. In fact, He often practiced the same teaching techniques as His contemporaries. What was so remarkable about the Rabbi Jesus was that He was not bound to conventional methods, yet at the same time He didn't reject such standards. He chose to teach independently of public opinion, credentialed posture, and textbook formulas and thus framed his pedagogy to bring to pass His desired goals.

Most teachers are bound by traditions, accepted norms, teaching skills, or specified techniques—the rules of teaching. Teachers of Christ's day were just as bound by methods of tradition and regulation as are many of today's teachers. As a result, teaching is reduced to a mechanical mind-set. This formulaic approach is commonly considered orthodox and thus any deviation (unorthodox) may be shunned. Not only is this disposition discriminatory, it is lacking as well. "When we frame our talk about teaching only in terms of technique,"

Parker Palmer writes, "we may make the conversation 'practical' and safe, but we miss the deeper dimensions that could make such talk more real and rewarding."³² Christ never bought into the Procrustean bed mentality of teaching and thus operated in deeper dimensions.

What recognized teaching experts consider either orthodox or unorthodox is irrelevant to Christ. To Him, teaching pedagogy is not relevant because it is endorsed, popular, or acceptable. Pedagogy becomes relevant when it effectively serves its designated purpose. Thus, as Hans Wendt observed: "He [Jesus] avoided pedantic modes of teaching and the petty arts of the scholastic learning. The particular methods He employed by preference were not indeed new, but were rather the customary and natural means of popular discourse; yet He handled them with greater ease and precision, and with higher originality in details, than other teachers."³³ Since the Rabbi Jesus was not bound by pedagogical tradition or technique, He used whatever means were appropriate to accomplish His intended outcome.

TEACHING PRINCIPLE OVER PRACTICE

As one examines Jesus as a teacher, it becomes obvious that good teaching, for Him, was merely a means to a greater end. Since His approach to teaching reflected this perspective, His pedagogy was never defined by a body of critics, some recognized faction of accepted teachers, or the conventional pedagogical practice. In a culture where methods, techniques, tradition, formulas, and prescriptions are highly valued, a teacher who does not adhere to the convention of the day

32. Parker J. Palmer, "Good Talk about Good Teaching," *Change*, November/December 1993, 10.

33. Hans Hinrich Wendt, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893), 1:148.

would obviously be viewed as unorthodox. Christ's unorthodox approach to teaching was not rebellion to prescription; it was, in reality, obeisance to principle. As a result, Jesus' pedagogy was liberating and deeply effective.

This independence of the contemporary pedagogues, however, was not without price. Because of Christ's passion to teach principles rather than pay obeisance to practice, Jesus' critics often dismissed His teaching (and His teachings) as contradictory and irreverent. Those willing to look beyond the teaching of mere practice alone, however, see deeper principles at hand and find Jesus' teaching beyond reproach.

Consider, for example, Jesus' approach to the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. When Christ established the Sabbath law in the Old Testament, it was clear that the Sabbath was of great importance (see Exodus 20:8-11). So important, in fact, that the Lord instructed Moses that those who defiled the day should be put to death (see 31:14). He further instructed that this law should be kept throughout Israel's generations (see 31:16). Yet to those with a limited focus, Christ seemingly broke the very law He established when He and His disciples harvested corn on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:1-8). When challenged by the abiding authority, rather than focusing on the interpreted practice, Jesus emphasized the principle at hand. He taught that "the Sabbath was given unto man for a day of rest; and also that man should glorify God" (JST, Mark 2:26). He then concluded by reminding the practice-bound Pharisees and scribes that the Son of Man made the Sabbath day; therefore, the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath (see JST, Mark 2:26-27).

Whether healing on the Sabbath, forgiving sins, dining with disreputable company, or committing any of the other acts viewed by some to be in conflict with the law, Jesus was defined by principle and not by practice alone. Jesus never

taught His followers to break with Sabbath-day worship; in fact, He commanded compliance. At the same time, however, He never invited His disciples to adhere to the pharisaical interpretations of the Sabbath. The Rabbi Jesus approached His teaching in a way that never obscured the principle at stake or the practice at hand.

When one focuses on the practice rather than principle, one enters into a world of tedious reconciliation. This was the world of Jesus' peers. Obsessed with practice, the guiding principles were forced into the periphery and thus out of view. Because of their limited perspective, Jesus was criticized, ridiculed, and mocked. But this didn't derail the teaching pedagogy of Christ. Allowing doctrine to guide His teaching technique, He was true to the message. In the restorative period, Christ commanded that teachers should "teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom" (D&C 88:77). Teaching the doctrines, or principles of the gospel, requires a teacher to house rules, regulations, and/or applications of practice in the bigger framework of the doctrine of the kingdom.³⁴

THE SECOND SIMPLICITY

Jesus' teachings, according to President Howard W. Hunter, "were as impressive to his listeners then as they are today to those who read his words."³⁵ Since time or people cannot alter absolute truth, it is not surprising that generations have been devoted to the principles Christ taught. What is somewhat surprising, at least from a pedagogical standpoint, is that Jesus could teach truth in such a way that anyone—regardless of his or her experience, intellect, culture, age, or righteousness—could learn something from His teaching.

34. See Oaks, Conference Report, 101.

35. Howard W. Hunter, Conference Report, April 1984, 87.

Some may balk at this notion, feeling that truth—absolute truth—would ascend above the foibles of teaching. Yet most of us have had teachers who can muddy even the clear waters of truth.

Christ's ability to teach principles to a broad audience without diluting depth is unusual. To teach children and adults at the same time and in a way that truth can be discerned by each student, at least at some level of understanding, is not only unconventional, it is astounding. What was Jesus' pedagogical secret? It was simplicity—not simplicity as we know, embrace, or understand it—but simplicity like that described by Cornelius Plantinga when he talks of a "second simplicity." "Second simplicities," Plantinga writes, "lie beyond complexities and incorporate them."³⁶ It was this type of simplicity that Christ used as a pedagogical foundation. "They [Jesus' teachings] are so simple a child can understand," President Hunter explained, "yet profound enough for the sage and philosopher."³⁷

Second simplicity is a product of the teacher's depth of knowledge and practical savvy. "Knowing in depth who and what he was talking about," Phipps wrote about Jesus, "he commanded more attention than the usual Sabbath interpreter."³⁸ Other Sabbath interpreters, like the scribes, were more interested in demonstrating their depth of knowledge than teaching people. They wore tablets on their belts and used technical or legal language in their discourse. Similar to the pompous scribes, some modern intellectuals consider teaching "over the

36. Cornelius Plantinga, "Pray the Lord My Mind to Keep," *Christianity Today*, 10 August 1998, 50, as quoted by Robert L. Millet, "Simplicity, Priority, and Boldness," BYU Annual University Conference, 27 August 1998, 3. I am grateful to Brother Millet for directing me to this idea and train of thought.

37. Hunter, Conference Report, 87.

38. Phipps, *Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus*, 61.

heads" of their students as a trophy of scholarship. Rather than demonstrating scholarship, those who deliberately flaunt for the sake of complexity, expose their ignorance more than their intellect. "Much of the time," Robert Millet suggested, "our inability to teach a principle with simplicity signals a gap in our understanding of the concept."³⁹

Jesus' simple approach allowed anyone to be enlightened. Whether simpleton or sage, anyone could find that entry to Jesus' teachings was readily accessible. The Master Teacher was able to wean the spiritually feeble on theological milk while, at the same table, give seasoned theologians a feast of doctrinal meat. It is interesting that with this teaching approach, those who revel in their newfound discoveries also understand with absolute clarity that there is more, much more, to learn and consider. When taught in such a manner, these learners are not intimidated by the fact that there is more to learn, nor do they regret the realization that there is more to do—instead they welcome it. Simplicity isn't merely tolerated by complexity, nor is complexity feared by simplicity. They are part of the same family. To the Rabbi Jesus, however, simplicity and complexity were not distant relatives, nor were they siblings. His masterful teaching was done in such a way that simplicity and complexity were two inseparable parts of a whole.

A MESSENGER THAT MATCHES THE MESSAGE

Teachers have always been expected to practice what they teach. Yet most teachers usually wink and nod as they share this teaching axiom, taking into account personal weakness and folly. Yet according to Parker J. Palmer, a teacher's personae, disposition, and experience shapes one's teaching:

39. Millet, "Simplicity, Priority, and Boldness," 3.

"Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul."⁴⁰

To this end, Jesus was an extraordinary teacher. There was a power in Christ that extended beyond His teaching and greatly affected the way He taught. Many people have taught Christian virtues and ideals, but none have taught like Jesus taught. Jesus Christ was a magnificent teacher because He was a teacher at the core, always ready to teach whoever would listen. His magnificence was not only because He spoke the language of His listeners but also because he wouldn't pay homage to credentials, techniques, or orthodox practices. In truth, Jesus was a magnificent teacher because He was a magnificent man.

In the case of Rabbi Jesus, one could not separate the message from the messenger. He was the message. "History provides many examples of good men and women," President Hunter taught, "but even the best of mortals are flawed in some way or another. None could serve as a perfect model nor as an infallible pattern to follow, however well-intentioned they might be." President Hunter then concluded, "Only Christ can be our ideal. . . . Only he can say without any reservation: 'Follow me; learn of me; do the things you have seen me do.'"⁴¹

40. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 2.

41. Hunter, Conference Report, 83.

CONCLUSION

It is said that Christ's teachings change men. It should also be said that Christ's teaching style—His pedagogy—changes men. When one reads about how the Rabbi Jesus taught, it is difficult not to be inspired. But when one looks beyond the obvious and considers the unorthodox aspects of the Rabbi Jesus' pedagogy, inspiration is merely the beginning. A deepening awe and a profound respect fill those who recognize the magnificent pedagogy of the Rabbi of Nazareth.

If Christ reviewed His pedagogy carefully, which aspect would He call orthodox or unorthodox? It seems that he probably wouldn't call any of His teachings either orthodox or unorthodox. He would probably just describe His activities as "teaching." Thus, to those who desire to be teachers, Rabbi Jesus extends the invitation to be even as He is. Those who forge an alliance with the world's pedagogical authorities can either continue to look to pedagogical orthodoxy or can follow the Rabbi that overcame the world—having no part of it, yet profoundly affecting the world in incomprehensible ways. Of this unorthodox rabbi, Elder Oaks said, "Our Savior's occupation was that of a teacher. He was the Master Teacher, and He invites each of us to follow Him in that great service."⁴²

42. Oaks, Conference Report, 100.