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*Teaching as Formation: The Vision of Ephesians 4:11-16
and Pedagogical Implications for Routine Teaching Tasks*

Abstract

This paper seeks to incorporate the vision of teaching in Ephesians 4:11-16 into an understanding of theological education that involves the holistic formation of students. First, a brief exegetical study of Ephesians 4:11-16 is presented in order to accentuate its vision for teaching as formation. Secondly, the task of grading is viewed as a major opportunity for student formation. Thirdly, an emphasis is placed on hearing the voice of the text for today in the task of teaching the text-based exegetical course.

Keywords: Teaching, formation, ministry, grading, contextualization

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Introduction

The topic of formation within the vocation of theological education has come to the forefront of discussion time and time again as for the last several decades theological institutions have sought to understand how the formation of persons occurs. Specifically, Christian institutions often place a spotlight on teaching as a formative activity. This is due to that fact that as Christians we aim towards one paramount goal: to continually be formed into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 4:11-16). As a result, it is my view that every conversation concerning the vocation of theological education and the theme of teaching as formation must ultimately point in this formational direction.

Upon the completion of my Master of Divinity in 2008, Ephesians 4:11-16 not only sparked my passion for teaching, but specifically served as the catalyst for the decision to embark upon a long track of serious preparation to participate in equipping students for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ. This pericope stands as a central part of my personal teaching philosophy and will also be the starting point for the study of teaching as formation here. The purpose of this discussion is to call teachers and students to a biblical understanding of holistic formation as presented in Ephesians 4:11-16. The insights gained from Ephesians 4:11-16 will be applied with a pedagogical focus so that we may explore how certain teaching tasks can be framed in light of this biblical vision for formative teaching. The two specific teaching tasks will be the task of grading and the task of teaching an exegetical course.

Biblical Foundations for Formative Teaching: A Brief Study of Ephesians 4:11-16

1. The *Purpose* of Teaching: Equipping the Saints for Service to the Body of Christ (4:11-12)

In one lengthy Greek sentence Paul names specific gifts including the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. He continues by outlining the expected outcome of their ministry within the church. While persons participating in all of these gifts will work together

towards the ministry which is outlined in this pericope, a specific focus is placed here on how teachers within a theological institution may participate in the ministry outlined in Ephesians 4:11-16.¹ John Stott (Stott 1979:164) observes that the five gifts named here all include in some shape or form an involvement with teaching. He states, “Nothing is more necessary for the building up of God’s church in every age than an ample supply of God-gifted teachers.” This study of Ephesians 4:11-16 particularly seeks to emphasize how teaching involves a holistic view of formation. While much commentary could be made on the nature of each specific phrase of Ephesians 4:11-12, I will focus on giving a brief interpretation of the text in order to be able to comment more specifically how these goals contribute to a holistic view of formation in the latter section.

First, Ephesians 4:11-12 explicates an answer to the why of teaching, which comes in the form of three prepositional phrases. The first two phrases, *πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας* (“for the equipping of the saints for the work of service”), denote the most central purpose of the gifts, namely, for the equipping of the saints for service. The third prepositional phrase *εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ* (“for the building up of the body of Christ”) gives further direction to the goal of equipping the saints. The purpose of equipping is to prepare saints for the work of service that aims to build up the body of Christ. Therefore, teachers in theological institutions have a specific calling to prepare servants for effective ministry in the Church.

2. Growing in Faith, Knowledge, Maturity and Christ-likeness: An Invitation to Holistic Formation for all (4:13)

Further, Ephesians 4:13 specifies three objectives in which teachers also participate. The first of four prepositional phrases, *μέχρι καταντήσωμεν οἱ πάντες* (“Until we all might come to”), introduces the following parallel prepositional phrases that state three specific outcomes. In this verse, Paul begins to realize how teaching is intended to be formational as he defines the content of what goals we are to attain. Before diving into these matters, it is essential to notice that Paul does not exclude himself as one also working towards the attainment of these three stated goals. Rather, he emphasizes that we all (*καταντήσωμεν οἱ πάντες*) as saints, whether in the position of teacher or student, are to be included as participants in coming to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, into a mature person and into the measure of Christ’s fullness.

First, we are to attain “the unity of faith.” Hoehner (Hoehner 2002:553) notes that the “unity of faith” can be interpreted as the “realization that we all have one faith in the one person, Jesus Christ.” Secondly, Paul adds that we should aim to attain “knowledge of the Son of God.” This phrase adds an emphasis specifically upon knowing the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in the “fullest sense.” J. Robinson (Robinson 1903:254) adds that the sense of ἐπίγνωσις includes the ability to perceive, discern, and recognize the object.

Thirdly, we are to grow into a “mature person.” The phrase ἄνδρα τέλειον has caused a number of interpreters to stumble, as especially Western thinkers tend to individualize their description of the “mature” or “perfect” person.³ The phrase ἄνδρα τέλειον is singular and the immediate context helps us to realize that Paul is referring to the body of Christ. However, even though the collective maturity of the body of Christ is at hand, the body is dependent upon the growth of each believer that makes up the whole. Further, the contrast given in v. 16 helps to bring clarity to the definition of maturity. The ἄνδρα τέλειον is contrasted with the νήπιοι (children) who are confused and tossed around by other teachings and are caught by the trickery of men who are involved in the craftiness of error. Therefore, in this context a part of growing in maturity ought to be seen as growing in the ability to discern the nature of various teachings.

Fourthly, we are to attain the goal of coming into the “maturity of the fullness of Christ.” This phrase elaborates upon the nature of the maturity as maturity is measured only by the standard that Christ has set. F.F. Bruce (Bruce 1984:350-351) remarks, “The glorified Christ provides the standard at which his people are to aim . . .” Verses 15-16 develop this concept by further illustrating Christ as the head of the body. Charles Talbert (Talbert 2007: 116) summarizes the significance of Christ as head in light of the common ancient metaphor of the head and body. He states, “When the auditors of Ephesians heard that the church’s goal was to grow up to the full stature of the ideal king, the Messiah, they would have understood it in terms of communities’ aspirations to reflect the character of their ideal kings.” A brief outline will help us to summarize the insights gained before discussing their application in the context of teaching as formation within a theological vocation:

I. The purpose:

- a. For the equipping of the saints for the work of service (12a)
- b. For the building up of the Body of Christ (12b)

II. The goals:

- a. To reach the goal of unity of faith in one person, Jesus Christ (13a)
- b. To reach the goal of having knowledge of the Son of God (13b)
- c. To reach the goal of becoming a mature body of believers (13c)
- d. To reach the goal of coming into “the maturity of the fullness of Christ”(13d)

III. The results:

- a. No longer children tossed about by winds of doctrine (14a), the trickery of men (14b).
- b. By speaking the truth in love we grow up into/ become like Christ, the head of the body (15-16).

Now, we must take a step further to see how this discussion of teaching as informed by Ephesians 4 casts a vision for formative teaching. In the field of education, formation has taken on a number of definitions. In many Christian institutions, “spiritual formation” has become the buzzword that heads most discussions. However, conversations of formation as only “spiritual formation” seemingly cause dissonance between the academic factor and spiritual factor of theological education or what some have also called the integration of faith and learning. A view of formation is needed that from inception avoids this pitfall.

To be concise, the topic of formation inherently asks one major question: into what are we formed? From this study of Ephesians 4:11-16, I conclude, that when considering teaching as formation, the goal ought to be the formation of persons and communities into a body of Christ that reflects the head, namely Christ. With this vision, the whole person is called to formation and into participation with a forming community. The text of Ephesians 4 undergirds this holistic vision as it exhorts the saints to grow in faith, knowledge, and maturity. This integrative approach to formation

involves a vision of teachers who are formative formers who embrace their own process of formation and also invite students to recognize that the formation of individuals must intentionally involve the whole person and also engage the community. In summary, holistic formation involves a whole person and involves the mind, body, and spirit. As a result, formative education must gear itself towards not just informing the mind but also shaping many facets of a person, even including dispositions, actions/behaviors, beliefs, values, and priorities.

So far we have explored Ephesians 4:11-16 and uncovered why teachers are given as a gift from God to the Body of Christ. Now, we will attempt to move from the why of teaching and the what of formation to the how in order to address how certain everyday teaching tasks can be transformed into opportunities to holistically develop students as they embrace their journey of theological education as a calling to grow in knowledge and into the fullness of Christ. While many aspects of teaching could be addressed in the following section, I will specifically focus on two aspects of teaching related to the New Testament discipline that I propose can be seen more overtly as opportunities for formation.

Transforming Routine Educational Tasks into Opportunities for Formation

1. Grading as a Valuable Ministry Tool for Formation

As grading often seems like an endless task, many teachers might have viewed grading, at least at one time or another, as the “necessary evil” of the vocation of teaching. Recently, Richard Ramsey (Ramsey 2012:408) has asked teachers to put on a new set of lenses when sitting down to work through the piles of papers that gather on top of the desk. He states, “While the teacher in Christian higher education understands the necessity of grading, the sheer amount of it . . . may tempt the teacher to respond with the word ‘misery’ rather than ‘ministry.’” But, for Ramsey (2012: 408), grading ought to be seen as “one of the teacher’s most strategic ministries.” This door to this ministry opens only when a vital connection is kept between the academic and spiritual in the learning process. The goal is not to learn truth simply for the sake of knowledge but for appropriation into one’s own life and ministry. Further, the view of grading as ministry does not need to contrast the evaluative purpose of grading. In fact, it must

support William Yount's (Yount 1999:193-220) philosophy of grading as a matter of justice by use of "honest scales" and attempt to build upon it. In other words, grading is not only an appropriate assessment tool but also may be seen as a prospective and intentionally formative activity. This view of grading reinforces the integration of the academic and spiritual and does not fall into the trap of interpreting grading in too humanistic of a way, or what Ramsey (2012:417) refers to as a "soft exercise." In summary, grading as ministry aims to be both evaluative and formative in order to inform the student of their current location in the process of learning and formation and also ways to move forward.

In reference to the forward-looking aspect of grading, Ramsey (2012:414) approaches the task of grading as a "ministry of discernment." He offers three specific ministries of discernment including: 1) discernment of the truth, 2) discernment of the student's maturity, and 3) discernment of God's calling. In this paper, I will specifically focus upon the first two and consider how teachers may participate in this ministry of discernment.

Our study of Ephesians 4:13-14 specifically affirms the concept of grading as a ministry of discernment for the purpose of empowering the student to grow in maturity. Because of the Internet, our students today have a plethora of information available instantaneously. In fact, many students are more adept in navigating through this massive amount of information than their professors. But, many are novices when attempting to sift through the never-ending seashores of information for truths that can accurately be supported by scripture. As a result, this discernment process involves both the evaluation of sources in an academic sense, as well as the ability to establish criteria for spiritual truth. Ramsey (2012:414) accentuates that in the grading process the teacher attempts "to lead one to find a hidden treasure through a dense jungle." Furthermore, as a teacher transparently models the process of discernment by evaluating the student's work, the student gains the opportunity to learn from the process and to grow in his or her own process of evaluating information. More specifically, students have the opportunity to see the teacher's model for discernment when the teacher provides detailed written feedback that expresses how one's grade has been deciphered. The process of grading is also beneficial for the teacher as the teacher is exposed to a diversity of students who offer valuable insights that the teacher may not have the opportunity to learn elsewhere.

As the professor hears and dialogues the student's unique voice, the maturity level of the student also needs to be considered. For many teachers it may be tempting to wax eloquent and fill out the content (knowledge) that a student is missing in the assignment. A formative approach to assessment rather seeks to invite students to the process of learning the information and provide feedback that guides the student into future learning opportunities. In this manner, I propose that formative grading is a conversation between the teacher and student that must occur more than one time throughout the semester in order to measure what progress the student has made. M.A. Defeyter and P.L. McPartlin (Defeyter and McPartlin 2007:23) remind us that students often remain unresponsive to feedback when it is only received near the end of the course. Therefore, feedback must be provided as early on in the course and as often as possible if grading is to be seen as a formational opportunity. This engagement allows students to be invited to active engagement in their process of formation and learning. Defeyter and McParlin (2007:23) support this perspective by stating, "If students are active construers and mediators of meaning rather than passive recipients of information, then they have to engage with feedback in a meaningful way so that it can be used to improve performance in future assignments." This approach to grading does not just invite students to be active in their own learning process, but also active in the process of their own formation. When students understand what is needed for improvement, they are more likely to have the motivation to take the steps to make changes on future assignments.

Relating back to Ramsey's concept of considering each student's maturity level, this type of dialogue between teacher and student allows the teacher to learn the strengths and weaknesses of each student early on in the course. This permits the teacher to continually engage the student with individual feedback on each assignment that reaches the student where they are and encourages them to move forward in their journey of formation. Again, formative grading involves feedback that addresses more than the student's knowledge of the subject matter. For example, a teacher might consider how they can encourage a student to apply what they have learned in order to grow in a lifestyle of holiness and Christian character. Or, how might what has been learned contribute to a student's ability to clarify their call to ministry? Adding one further note, even though space deters from the elaboration upon this matter, peer evaluation must also be considered as a part of this process. By allowing work to be assessed in community,

an invitation is made for additional voices to be heard and relationships to be built along the journey of formation. Also, by inviting other voices the teacher is released from being the only voice invited into the student's process of formation. Further, if one's philosophy of teaching supports the formation of both teachers and students, teachers will also invite feedback concerning their approach to the course and be open to making changes that might enhance the learning environment.

In summary, the task of grading in theological institutions has the potential to serve as more than a retrospective assessment tool. This paper invites theological educators to reframe the task of grading by approaching grading as both a means for assessment and a means for formation. As a result, teachers who are willing to provide detailed feedback on assignments several times throughout each course invite relationship and dialogue, which are two essential elements in the process of formation. In other words, when one sits down to begin the assessment process, more ought to be considered than just the final grade, but how to best form and equip each unique student for their future ministry goals for the building up of the body of Christ. Below, I suggest some ideas for formative grading based upon Bloom's Taxonomy. We often use this taxonomy to write objectives, but it is also helpful in the grading process. When working towards providing formative feedback, we must avoid simplistic comments. For example, it is not enough to inform a student that their work lacks analysis or synthesis. Formative feedback attempts to provide students with encouragement and ways to take the next step forward.

Examples of Types of Feedback Based on Bloom's Taxonomy

Level of Bloom's Taxonomy	Possibilities for Formative Feedback
Evaluation	Encourage students to draw conclusions supported by evidence. Also, encourage students to perform self-evaluations (Ex.- evaluating beliefs, behaviors).
Synthesis	Recommend students form a new hypothesis and build a supported argument.
Analysis	Suggest ways to analyze information/concepts/arguments (ex. Outline the argument and notate strengths and weaknesses).
Application	Encourage students to apply the material in various contexts (How does what is learned apply to one's views about faith, family, society).
Comprehension	Suggest ways to succinctly illustrate/paraphrase one's understanding of the information (chart, graph, drawing)
Knowledge	Suggest sources for further study or other helpful learning tools.

Summary of Results of Grading as Ministry Tool for Formation

Teacher	Student
Teacher models the discernment process by providing detailed feedback that describes the evaluation process.	Student observes and begins to establish criteria for the evaluation of information.
Teacher expands his/her worldview and knowledge by hearing many unique student voices.	Student has the opportunity to be heard and express ideas.
Teacher dialogues with student work by providing detailed feedback that is both evaluative and formative.	Student understands the grade and is invited into further dialogue for future learning opportunities.
Teacher considers the uniqueness of each student and intentionally aims to equip the student for service.	Student is equipped and confirmed in his/her ministry calling.

2. Hearing the Voice of the Biblical Text in the Journey of Formation

Now that we have discussed how grading can contribute to the formation process of both teacher and student as the learning community dialogues with one another, I would like to invite one more voice into this conversation, namely, the voice of our biblical text. By inviting this voice, I suggest that we also invite the voice of the Holy Spirit to inspire and illumine our understanding of this text. Those who teach within the field of biblical studies have a unique opportunity to invite students to hear the voice of the biblical text and understand it as exegesis courses are already centralized upon one's ability to master tools for interpretation, including biblical languages and exegetical methods. However, hearing the voice of the text must involve more than a mastery of content knowledge. The text we study has a voice of its own that aims to guide the process of the formation of persons into Christ's image. The question I wish to consider is how to develop a framework for exegetical courses that takes seriously textual mastery as well as invites the voice of the text into the process of the holistic formation of teachers and students.

To state this goal also requires that we pause to recognize what has been the problem in many academic institutions. Specifically, Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman (Kanarek and Lehman 2013:19) have recognized that most seminary professors are not trained to build an integrative curriculum. They point out that "The goal of a doctoral education is not integration; doctoral students focus on a specific academic area. . . . As such, for an academic who trains clergy in a seminary, the contrast between the two worlds of the academy and the seminary can be sharp." Therefore, part of the solution begins with helping professors to build a teaching philosophy that recognizes that the purpose of textual mastery is not for the formation of the mind alone. The knowledge of the text provides the essential foundation for a person's ability to apply, live out, and teach the message of the text to others. As a result much potential rests in well-trained students, as they are suited with tools to evaluate what might be accurate exegesis and contextualization of the text for unique situations. Ernst Käsemann (Käsemann 1980:viii) is famous for stating, "The impatient, who are concerned only about results or practical application, should leave their hands off of exegesis. They are of no value for it, nor, when rightly done, is exegesis of any value for them." Specifically, even though Käsemann's statement might seem to discourage one from application, Käsemann realistically validates the need for detailed engagement with the text before

attempting to apply its message. As a result, much potential rests in those who are given tools to engage the text for interpretation. They too ought to be invited to contribute to the discussion.

Asbury Seminary students will be familiar with the statement, “A text without a context is just a pretext for what we want it to mean” (Witherington 2009:41) as this idea remains a quintessential element in the process of biblical interpretation. The point here is not to diminish the value of assignments that engage with the historical context or exegetical methods, but to invite one to build on this foundation and engage the current context as well. Joel B. Green helps to define the implications of this approach by stating,

A theological hermeneutics of Christian Scripture concerns the role of Scripture in the faith and formation of persons and ecclesial communities. Theological interpretation emphasizes the potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse and, then, the role of Scripture in the self-understanding of the church and in critical reflection on the church’s practices. This is biblical interpretation that takes the Bible not only as a historical or literary document but as a source of divine revelation and an essential partner in the task of theological education. To push further, theological interpretation is concerned with encountering the God who stands behind and is mediated in Scripture (Green 2011: 4-5).

With these words in mind, Green adds that we ought to be prompted to recall our confession that often follows the reading of the scriptures, “The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.” As a result, it is my view that faith-based study must not be ejected from the academy, but find a central place in the academy as scholars with unique skills are invited to not only engage the text with their mind, but also encounter the living God that inspires the text. As faith-based scholars we must not only question if we are not academic enough, but also wrestle with whether or not we are holistic enough in our approach to integrative theological education. Do we let the text not only form our minds, but also our hearts and our hands? This means that biblical scholars must no longer shift this responsibility of contextualization to the practical theology department, spiritual formation department or the missions department, but must join these voices in discerning how the biblical text speaks to us today.

Therefore, as we invite the voice of the text to speak, it is essential that we not only invite the voice of the text that spoke in past history, but also the voice that speaks into the formational process of each student

today. As a result, it becomes essential to create space in exegetical courses to aid students in moving from knowledge to action or from information to formation. This supports the vision of Ephesians 4 for equipping leaders in the body of Christ, and also reminds us of the call to holiness found within the same chapter. Ephesians 4:22-24 (NRSV) states, “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Further, I would like to offer a few insights concerning how this vision for theological education might find roots within the classroom. Firstly, the sentiment of theological education as formation must be placed as a central value by the theological institution and by each faculty member. Secondly, if value is placed upon this vision, it becomes the role and responsibility of the biblical studies professor to invite students to the process of engaging the text’s voice within its historical context as well as considering what the voice of the text says to the people of God today. Thirdly, intentional opportunities must be provided in the classroom to help students hear the voice of the text and discuss how it may be put into action. Specifically, we might ask what the text means for faith, family, and society. In summary, if one is to have a view of teaching as an invitation to the participation in the process of the formation of the whole person, the application of the text deserves a place within the academic setting and specifically within the text-based exegetical course.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ministry of teaching at times may seem like a demanding one filled with stacks of papers to grade, hours of lectures to prepare, and a litany of problems to solve. But, two major aspects of teaching, including the task of grading viewed as ministry and the task of teaching the text-based course that involves the application of the text, are filled with opportunity to open the door for dialogue that may contribute to the formation of all who are involved. By framing these two aspects of teaching as opportunities for formation, we take a step back from the trees and are able to see again the forest, namely a passion for teaching that aims to equip Christ-like leaders who will in turn participate in hearing the voice of the text for today and proclaim its message loudly to all.

Endnotes

¹ Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 543. As only one article is used to add pastors and teachers to the list (τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους) many have argued whether the reference is to one or two gifted persons. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 284 suggests that the construction indicates that ποιμένας are a subset of διδασκάλους, which allows for a distinction, but not a total distinction. As a result, Wallace concludes, “all pastors are to be teachers, though not all teachers are to be pastors.” Another option is to take the article as an explicative: “and some pastors, namely, teachers.” Space allows only for recognition of the debate here. I only emphasize that both are included in the vision for equipping the Body of Christ, but limit the application of the discussion to the role of teachers within the theological vocation.

² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 552 states that μέχρι functions three times in the NT as a conjunction (Mark 13:30; Gal 4:19; Eph 4:13). Each instance involves the use of the aorist subjunctive absent of ἄν which indicates the indefinite future.

³ Parker Palmer, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2010), 7 recalls the twelfth century European schools which aimed to create the “the good and perfect man” by emphasizing that his parts “were so refined and in harmony with one another that he could make the spiritual journey to God.”

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