

THE LAST WORD

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Years ago I invited an older man at our church to join the adult Sunday School class. He wanted to know what the class was studying, and I responded, 'Romans'. He then commented, declining the invitation, 'Oh, Romans, I've studied that before, but maybe next time.' Given the depth of Romans, I knew in a heartbeat he had read it once, but never studied it. Did he know about Augustine, Luther, Wesley? Even the preface to the book changed lives! Plumb the depths of Romans? Never! I remembered this brief conversation recently in talking with two people, a brand-new middle-aged Christian and a University sophomore.

Their comments have created a spectrum for thinking about the dynamic of studying and teaching the Scriptures. Creating one end of the spectrum, the first comment was, 'The more I learn, the more I realise how much I don't know.' This was spoken by a bright-eyed woman in our congregation who had recently recommitted her life to the Lord and joined the Sunday School class I taught. She had never studied the Scripture before and was excited about its newness, challenges, history and salvation story.

The second comment, at the other end of the spectrum, was made by a young student in a NT survey class I teach at the University. 'I've had all this stuff since I was in kindergarten. I know it all and don't really want to take this class.' Although I appreciated the student's candour, I was saddened by his lack of hunger for the Word none of us ever completely 'knows'. But it was this young man's comment that radically challenged my goal for teaching this class.

I had, rather unconsciously, made it my aim to teach students as much as I possibly could so they could walk out of class at the end of the semester saying, 'That was great. I sure learned a lot!' However, this student's comment created a new and more honest challenge for me as a teacher. This naïve declaration of disinterest reflects the attitude of many students raised in the church and immersed in Sunday School and youth groups, especially in the 'Bible Belt' of the American South who attend the University where I teach. My new aim is to teach students in such a way that when they walk out of class at the end of the semester, they realise how much they have *not* learned and *don't* know.

Now, that may sound like a peculiar goal for an educator, but Scripture is no ordinary to-be-learned-and-conquered subject. As I thought about this dynamic, I realised it is this very hunger-to-learn-more attitude that has marked my own discipleship. I am a professor of Biblical studies because it keeps me learning, not because I know it all.

I want this young and already bored student to catch the passion for learning of my middle-aged friend who is digging into Scripture for the first time. And I want both of them to join me in the realisation that, when it comes to the Word of God, everyone is a kindergarten child. That's exciting! Five-year-olds can't wait for school to start. Surely this is a mark of the child in the Kingdom Jesus had in mind.

More than just my classroom aim has been transformed by the juxtaposition of these comments and my prayerful reflection on them. My overwhelming and generally hidden insecurity as a scholar has been challenged. I think most university faculty and students tend to be dishonest about what we don't know. We nod our heads knowingly in a conversation about a book we have never read, an author we have not heard of. We often play academic games that keep us on our toes, in the library and behind our computers. We can dread the classroom question we can't answer and are expert at responding for fifteen minutes as though we do.

My initial irritation with this young student's bravado uncovered a subconscious and very similar attitude harboured in my own heart. In my fear of not knowing enough, there is rooted a pride in what I do know. In embracing what I don't know, fear gives way for the freedom to honestly study, learn and be hungry again for all I want to know. I realised with insight that smacked of revelation that it is not just my student who needs the attitude of my friend – I do, too!

So, as I walk into my classroom day after day, my aim is no longer to teach my students what I know, but to create in them a hunger for all there is to learn. I will be satisfied at the end of the semester if my students walk out saying, 'I thought I knew a lot before this class, but there is so much more to learn!' And that's what I'll be saying, too.

What a privilege to be a Bible scholar, a student of the Word! May we all engage our studies with the understanding that the more we learn, the more we realise how much there is to learn. And that, more assuredly, includes Romans!