

Iconic Christian Teachers

Their Expertise, Platforms, and Styles

By Steve Staten

Books and films hold up eminent teachers for their contributions to public education and academia. These individuals capture the imagination of students, as they simplify complex issues, change the ways we relate to the world, impart life skills, and solve all sorts of problems. The same is true for teachers of religion and spirituality. Through many mediums and styles, and by virtue of their individual specialties, outstanding Christian teachers have captivated students, readers, and a variety of audiences, making a lasting difference in their lives.

Whether it is ministering to the mind and soul, unraveling difficult concepts, arguing persuasively for core doctrines, or helping revolutions turn the tide with the right message for the right time, teachers are much more than dispensers of information. Beginning nearly two thousand years ago, Christian teachers, equipped with different proficiencies, began using a broad range of approaches to ground believers in the knowledge of God and prepare them for what lay ahead.

We will look at three characteristics of iconic teachers throughout the ages, from a biblical perspective: the teachers' fields of expertise, their platforms, and their styles.

Fields of Expertise

Every Christian teacher is familiar with Ezra, the ideal teacher of old, who was described as "well versed in the law of Moses" and "a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the Lord" (Ezra 7:6, 11). At a crucial moment in Jerusalem's history, this expert was the leading presenter of the Law, an instructor in its use for a community that had long since lost touch with the source (Nehemiah 8).

Jesus, the most eminent teacher of all time, and whose writings are more widely read than any others, described the potential value of a teacher, who is "like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52). This reminder that the hallmark of good teaching involves showcasing older and less noticed revelation alongside new (gospel) revelation was a vital one, because many heretics placed the old and new at odds. Early on, recognized teachers in the church tended to be generalist scholars of the Scriptures who played an important role in the new era (Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28). False teachers were proliferating, and becoming

problematic because of their incompetence, lack of character, and self-serving motives (1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Timothy 2:17-18; 2 Peter 2:1ff).

The apostle Paul, a formally trained rabbi, was the most distinguished teacher in the apostolic church (2 Timothy 1:11; Acts 17:22-34). It can be argued that the two most influential teachers in the early post-apostolic period were Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.

Justin was born in Samaria around 100 and likely baptized in Ephesus, but spent most of his life in Rome. He is called Justin Martyr because this man of conviction was executed for his faith, around 165 AD. In one dialogue he described his initial response to the Christian message, following a seaside conversation with an old man, around 130 AD: "A fire was kindled in my soul. I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable. That is how and why I became a philosopher. And I wish that everyone felt the same way that I do."¹ In his *First Apology*, Justin wrote with grace and eloquence to emperor Antoninus Pius and his adopted sons and future emperors. Not only was Justin an iconic apologist who presented the faith to outsiders; he also battled the heretics Valentinus and Marcion. Justin's original words do not survive today, but we know of them through subsequent teachers – like Irenaeus – who heavily depended on them.

Irenaeus of Lyon is a distinguished theologian among the Church Fathers, men who clarified orthodoxy, presented sound hermeneutical principles, and provided the earliest list of books that became our New Testament. He also researched, exposed, and renounced heresy, in addition to organizing churches around the "rule of faith" (an early form of the Apostles' Creed). He was first and foremost a teacher, and his gift proved invaluable when he became an overseer, counseling Christians in Rome and other cities. Irenaeus promoted a vision of Christian unity that still inspires us today.

For the Church Fathers, apologetics (the defense of the Christian faith) and theology were only two fields of importance. Other early Christians, such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria, Melito of Sardis, Tertullian of Carthage, and Marcus Minucius Felix (hereafter, Mark Felix) of Rome expanded the role of teacher by creating compelling narratives and discourses, scriptural expositions, and high-impact catechetical manuals.

The succeeding centuries saw the development of disciplines of devotional literature such as spiritual biography, and allegory, as well as works of Christian philosophy, homiletics, and textual scholarship. During most of Christian history, it took astonishing energy to write, especially if one sought to influence the masses. Writings had to be copied by hand, and traveling was slow and often involved great risk. There were few

¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 8:1, 2.

options open for women, which explains the forlorn fact of widespread patriarchy—hence the Church *Fathers*.

We are indebted to the medieval monks for copying and preserving Scripture, Western classics, the writings of Christians, and even writings hostile to the church. Even though we might not like or even agree with some of these influential Christian writings, we can still note their influence and appreciate their value. Often some of the greatest teachers' contributions contained both orthodox and heterodox elements, from the early post-apostolic through the centuries leading to the present. That's why the expression "Eat the fish and spit out the bones" is often used in reference to preaching and teaching—shorthand for the apostle Paul's words, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

The concise list below includes some of the most influential contributions from these teachers, many of whom were prolific writers. I have purposely not included their more academic contributions, even if they were important. Moreover, I end the list at books released before this century.

Justin Martyr	<i>First Apology</i> (~156)
Clement of Alexandria	<i>Instructor or Tutor</i> (198)
Irenaeus	<i>Against Heresies</i> (~175–185)
Tertullian	<i>Defense</i> (197) and <i>On Baptism</i> (~198–203)
Origen	<i>Song of Solomon</i> (~244) and <i>Against Celsus</i> (~248)
Athanasius	<i>On the Incarnation</i> (~319)
Eusebius	<i>History of the Church</i> (313, final edition ~323)
Basil the Great	<i>On the Holy Spirit</i> (~364)
Gregory of Nyssa	<i>Catechetical Discourse</i> (386)
Augustine	<i>Confessions</i> (~398) and <i>City of God</i> (413–426)
Benedict	<i>Rule</i> (~ 540s)
Anselm of Canterbury	<i>Why God Became Man</i> (~ 1097), <i>Proslogium</i> (~1077)
Thomas Aquinas	<i>Summa Theologiae</i> (1265–1274)
Dante Alighieri	<i>The Divine Comedy</i> (c. 1308–1320)
Julian of Norwich	<i>Revelations of Divine Love</i> (1373)
Thomas à Kempis	<i>The Imitation of Christ</i> (c. 1418–1427)
Desiderius Erasmus	<i>New Testament in Greek</i> (1516, final edition 1535)
Martin Luther	<i>Lectures on Romans</i> (c. 1515–1516), <i>95 Theses</i> (1517)
John Calvin	<i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> (1536)
St. John of the Cross	<i>Dark Night</i> , a.k.a. <i>Dark Night of the Soul</i> (1577–1579)
John Milton	<i>Paradise Lost</i> (1667)
John Bunyan	<i>Pilgrim's Progress</i> (1678)
Jonathan Edwards	<i>Religious Affections</i> (1746)
John Wesley	<i>A Plain Account of Christian Perfection</i> (1777)
G. K. Chesterton	<i>Orthodoxy</i> (1908)
Dietrich Bonhoeffer	<i>The Cost of Discipleship</i> (1937)

C. S. Lewis	<i>Mere Christianity</i> (1943) and his <i>Narnia</i> series
Elisabeth Elliot	<i>Through the Gates of Splendor</i> (1957)
Corrie ten Boom	<i>The Hiding Place</i> (1971)
J. I. Packer	<i>Knowing God</i> (1973)
Ron Sider	<i>Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger</i> (1977)
Richard J. Foster	<i>The Celebration of Discipline</i> (1978)
Francis Schaeffer	<i>A Christian Manifesto</i> (1981)
Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart	<i>How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth</i> (1981)
Henri Nouwen	<i>Return of the Prodigal Son</i> (1992)
Joni Erickson Tada	<i>Heaven: Your Real Home</i> (1994)
Dallas Willard	<i>The Divine Conspiracy</i> (1998)

Those writings make it onto many “most influential,” “most important,” and “most read” lists, and I admit that I have only read about half of them. I’m surprised that Melito’s *Passover Homily* (160–170) and *Octavius* (150–250) by Mark Felix don’t make it into most popular lists. These two works are very creative and theologically rich writings and are the earliest surviving works in their genres. Melito, an overseer in Sardis, showed himself a gifted preacher and teacher in his skillful mastery of polished cadence, weaving together Israel’s story arc, paschal imagery, and vibrant descriptions of momentous events of Christ’s triumph in Jerusalem. He accomplished this by means of antitheses, shuddering dilemmas, especially in the final showdown between Jesus and death itself. Mark Felix closes his reportedly true story of a seaside conversation with sophistication and punch, but in a debate that could readily be performed as a three-person play.

While I am discussing the use of creativity in teaching, I’d like to highlight the astonishingly long influence of the more innovative teachers. Learning sometimes requires imaginative ways of envisioning our present reality before addressing it biblically.

Julian of Norwich was a mystic whose subject matter was God’s love. She was born around 1343 and spent much of her life in an enclosed room, devoting herself to prayer. In 1373 Julian suffered a grave illness, accompanied by visions. After her recovery she wrote *Revelations of Divine Love*—becoming the first woman to write a book in English. Her subject and conclusions are extravagantly optimistic: God is good and merciful, we are made in his image, and all will turn out well in the end. The title of the recent and widely acclaimed biography by Matthew Fox tells of her relevance: *Julian of Norwich: Wisdom in a Time of Pandemic – And Beyond*.

Julian’s contribution is part of a distinctive category worth mentioning, one largely overlooked by Protestants, Evangelicals, and the Stone-Campbell movement. Over the last thousand years, a notable number of Catholic nuns and other women committed to a life of celibacy became fervent students of Scripture. The most famous among them

faced a combination of plague, loss of loved ones, and their own illness. They transformed their grief and suffering through study, prayer, serving the poor, and writing. Non-Catholics facing trials can find enlightenment from their stories and writings. Among the most notable are Clare of Assisi (13th century follower of Francis; wrote *Rule of Life*), Catherine of Siena (14th century writer, *The Dialogue*), Teresa of Avila (16th century reformer, author, theologian, *The Way of Perfection*), and Thérèse of Lisieux (19th century author, *Story of a Soul*).

Two centuries after Julian, due to the advent of the printing press, Desiderius Erasmus published an instant bestseller, *The Praise of Folly* (1511). Douglas Jacoby read this book in 1980, and foolishly praised it, before being put to rights by Steve Staten. Erasmus, the most famous teacher of his day, used an artistic literary device. He personified the sin of folly, offering a social commentary affording modern readers a peek into the world of the early sixteenth century. Erasmus exposed and attacked superstition and abusive and corrupt practices in the Catholic Church. In 1513, a year after the death of Pope Julius II, Erasmus authored *Julius Excluded from Heaven* – although he did not admit authorship. This risky allegory portrays a drunken, narcissistic pope trying to enter the gates of heaven. The writer also attacks the sale of indulgences and other papal corruptions. These are bold, creative commentaries challenging the establishment, coming from within the ranks. Both books, as well as his more scholarly accomplishments, were widely read by clergy, helping to prepare the way for Martin Luther and other reformers.

Later that century a poem was published by Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, called *Dark Night* (1577-1579). Posthumously retitled *Dark Night of the Soul*, the poem and the author's commentaries explore the uncomfortable process of spiritual cleansing, which John of the Cross likens to an arid desert, where the soul finds itself without comfort. The sufferer may feel abandoned by all and forsaken by God himself. Yet it is in these times, John says, that God is most near. "O spiritual soul, when you see that your desires are darkened, your inclinations dried up, and your faculties incapacitated, do not be disturbed. Consider it grace. God is freeing you from yourself."² The journey through the dark night is made possible in Christ, whose death and resurrection transform the dark night of judgment into a dawn, enabling sufferers to participate in his resurrection. *Dark Night* continues to be the book of choice for many during times of personal crisis, spiritual inventory, meditation, and recalibration.

Creative works can be transformative, but personal and collective renewal and profound insight come through numerous sources: compelling apologetics, sound exegesis of Scripture, investigation into connections between biblical texts, the sound demonstration

² Starr, Mirabai, *Dark Night of the Soul: St. John of the Cross* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2003), 148.

of theological concepts, doctrinal instruction, meditation on scriptural truths, and biography.

As I was exploring this subject, I was reminded by a friend of another category of instruction—biblically based societal justice. In the 1930s Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Harry Emerson Fosdick, in their own ways, used the Scriptures to confront the evils of their (so-called) Christian nations. Bonhoeffer challenged Nazism and antisemitism in Germany, while Fosdick opposed racism in the United States. The downside in Fosdick's case is that his material was weak in exegesis and theology; the upside is that his material was relevant, unambiguous, and often on point with the gospel. Martin Luther King, Jr. borrowed Fosdick's material without blushing. King penned these words to Fosdick: "If I were called upon to select the greatest preacher of this century, I would choose your name. If I were called upon to select the foremost prophets of our generation, I would choose you to head the list."³

Other theologians, like Howard Thurman, an often-overlooked figure, author of *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), anticipated King in using Scripture in this manner. In the period leading up to the Montgomery bus boycott, King drew inspiration from Thurman. But King gained his own acclaim with *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958) and *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963), using on-point biblical themes.

Thurman, King, and others thus grounded America's Civil Rights Movement in a Judeo-Christian framework to mount a more effective battle against injustice. Later writers followed their approach in addressing great social issues of the day. Examples include Cain Hope Felder's *Troubling Biblical Waters* (1989) and James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011). However, in these post-Christian times, gospel themes may motivate believers, but not society at large. A new framework has emerged: prominent influencers are no longer anchored in the charters set by Moses and Jesus. We are clearly in a new world, and we require competent teachers—men and women capable of engaging a world in a state of flux.

Some fields of serious study are often best investigated alongside other disciplines. For instance, I am deeply interested in the writings of Christians who have successfully faced their own spiritual crises. An ancient story of a transformed spiritual crisis is best discerned through various fields of study, such as biblical/theological studies, spiritual memoirs, church history, and Christian spirituality. Believers through the ages have embraced their agonizing challenges head-on: persecution, plague, illness, institutional injustice, and conflicts with God and others. In the process they were transformed, and a

³ Martin Luther King Jr., Inscription to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 1958. Source: *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958* (University of California Press, 2000), 536.

notable number were able to narrate their spiritual awakening, transforming grief, theological enlightenment, survival, or achievement. Some of them we have noted earlier.

Studying courageous perseverance in this way has led me to extend grace more generously. In crisis stories, occasionally we observe that otherwise theologically focused individuals lose their spiritual or doctrinal footing under intense circumstances – even veering into mental unsoundness. Yet they often reach greater clarity by the end of their ordeal. The biblical story of Job is the archetype for later noble characters who passed through dark places. During his multi-faceted crisis, Job dealt with envious friends, became a byword in his community, ruminated excessively, and gave way to bitter verbal self-flagellation. Yet his awakening eventually came after the “Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1).

Each field of study has much to contribute, but perspectives and conclusions from a well-told, lived experience, an apologist’s compelling arguments, or a scholar’s greatest works are not to be embraced thoughtlessly. Like anyone else, teachers can get it wrong. I remind my hearers and readers to look to God’s Word and his handiwork in creation (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:20) for our most foundational and authoritative beliefs.

Platforms of Influence

During the mid to late High Renaissance of the 1500s, there were new forums for teaching the gospel, including “unteaching” commonly held beliefs. By the time Luther’s 95 theses reached wide circulation in late 1517, thanks to two thousand printing presses across hundreds of cities, the populace had become increasingly motivated to read. Public discourse was more popular as the Reformation got underway.

Let’s examine teaching platforms that have arisen since that time. The intended audiences vary from devoted church members to inquisitive seekers to the general public. I am using the word “platform” in the broadest sense of the word, to indicate any medium where there is a communicator, a listener / reader, and a way to communicate biblical truths or, at the minimum, to pique appetite for learning these truths more effectively. All are not equally effective, yet some platforms of influence open the door to fresh pathways of learning.

Formal Pedagogy. The common place to locate Christian teachers is in formal universities and colleges. Here the broad discipline of study is related to education and teaching methods, or pedagogy. This term is derived from the Greek *paidagogia* – “leading a child.” The term *paidagogos* occurs in 1 Corinthians 4:15 and Galatians 3:24-25, and is variously translated as “guardian,” “guide,” or “tutor.”

The methods of teaching are broad and multifaceted: music (Deuteronomy 31:19), information saturation (Deuteronomy 11:19), and telling parables at opportune gatherings (Mark 3:23; 4:2, 33-34). The most common form of pedagogy in church occurs through *catechesis*, the Greek term for oral teaching or instruction (Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25; Romans 2:18).

Formal Christian teaching can be traced back to the catechetical schools established by Clement and Origen, both early Christian leaders in Alexandria (Egypt). Formal university education in the early Middle Ages was conducted by monastic schools. By the High Middle Ages (soon after 1000 AD) cathedral schools were venues of education for clergy, administrators, and diplomats. The University of Oxford, the University of Paris, and the University of Cambridge were founded by the Church in 1096, 1150, and 1209, respectively. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) studied at the University of Paris. Oxford-trained scholars include John Wycliffe, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and N. T. Wright. William Tyndale and Isaac Newton were both educated at Cambridge. For centuries most universities had a theological department. Even Harvard, established to train clergy (1636), is named after a Puritan teaching elder and philanthropist.

Let's not underestimate the value of the most accessible forms of formal learning. Bible classes, ministry staff training, and online degree programs are all forms of pedagogy through which humble learners (Matt 18:3) participate in their own advancement.

Organized Receptions. In the early years of the Reformation a new vehicle was available to some of the greatest influencers. A novel development, called the *salon* (a gathering), began in France at the instigation of prominent women like the exceptional French scholar Marguerite de Navarre, who hosted the most renowned invitation-only salon, the "New Parnassus." Parnassus is a mythical name associated with poetry, literature and, by extension, learning. Marguerite, sister to the king of France, Francois, hosted and corresponded with some of the most notable thinkers of her day, including Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus, and John Calvin.

Along with her cousin Renata di Francia, another fierce supporter of the reformers, she provided such thinkers with funding, a secluded place to write, and organized receptions for the discussion of their ideas. Though they were Catholics, the women created opportunities for the reformers. Marguerite herself also wrote boldly on gender, marriage, and spiritual struggles. Salons helped incentivize the public to become both literate and informed on the on timely topics of interest. Both Marguerite de Navarre and Renata di Francia branded the earliest practice of the salon, which continued to evolve, and is today seeing a resurgence throughout Europe. Perhaps the salon can once again be a place for introducing meaningful spiritual and theological topics to the public.

Books, Articles & Blogs. Writing has not lost its capacity to inform, uplift, and effect individual and institutional change. Every Christian discipline is blessed by its expert writers and others who utilize one or more modes to share their teaching – books, articles, and blogs. Thanks to electronic advanced, in many cases we can obtain their printed books in a day, or even download it in an instant.

I counted over thirty categories of Christian writing. Based on sales and “must read” lists, the more iconic teachers /writers of the last few decades are John Piper, Timothy Keller, Philip Yancey, J. I. Packer, Francis Chan, David Platt, Andy Stanley, Jen Wilkin, Beth Moore, Dallas Willard, Rachel Held Evans, N. T. Wright, Richard Rohr, and Henri Nouwen. Not all are scholars, and in my opinion are not all in the same league, but they are iconic and influential for all Christians.

Some of the best-selling Christian books of the last two decades came from well-known pastors, like *Radical* by David Platt, and *Crazy Love* and *Forgotten God* by Francis Chan. Rachel Held Evans (1981–2019), a journalist and best-selling author of *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, was technically not a teacher, but she demonstrated the attractiveness of books, articles, and blogs. She gained a huge following.

Now, a word about discernment. Even Christian fiction writers like Francine Rivers and Frank Peretti have influenced how believers view Bible times, the time of the early church, and spiritual conflict. Some of their contributions have been imaginative and helpful, but readers should distinguish between sincere speculation in fiction, novelized nonfiction, and knowable truths.

Additionally, some famous teacher-authors either lost their faith or were involved in serious scandal. Bart Ehrman is an eminent New Testament scholar who renounced his biblical faith. The late Ravi Zacharias, an effective apologist and prolific author, was long involved in “sexting, unwanted touching, spiritual abuse, and rape,”⁴ according to a report that came out in February 2021.

We should not lose sight of the thing that makes writings most compelling: the life of the author. On that note, *Life Together*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, available in three German-to-English translations, is a little treasure, with a compelling backstory during the rise of Hitler’s Nazi Germany.

Journals. In the faith-based world, formal periodical journals have served adherents of various religious traditions and schools of thought associated with a university. Journals are not usually financially profitable, so they are often subsidized. Good journals require excellent boards, editors, and advisors because they require painstaking peer review. Examples of such journals are *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*; *Pro Ecclesia: A*

⁴ <https://www.rzim.org/read/rzim-updates/board-statement>

Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology; *Windhover: A Journal of Christian Literature*; and *Teleios: A Journal to Promote Holistic Christian Spirituality*. *Spiritus* explores the relationship between spirituality and culture through multiple disciplines. *Pro Ecclesia* is an ecumenical periodical. *Windhover* highlights poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and creative nonfiction from a Christian and spiritual perspective. And *Teleios* is a new venture featuring original articles, reviews, and poetry, established to serve the International Churches of Christ and the broader Stone-Campbell movement. (Full disclosure: I consult for the organization that launched *Teleios*, serving as an advisor.) One of the main benefits of a journal is bringing a consortium of specialists to topics that matter to target readerships.

Guest Lectures. The educational word's go-to method, the uninterrupted oral address, has fallen on hard times. The lecture has yielded considerable ground to more interactive forms of communication. However, this is probably because of overuse. Nonetheless, the guest lecture is a "sage on the stage" for drawing crowds, especially when the presenter is a renowned expert and the topic is meaningful for a wide audience. Universities sometimes use the guest lecture in a debate format, where two experts on opposite sides of a subject present their case before a live audience.

I have asked people in a variety of roles, ages, and locations the question, "Who would you drive three hours to listen to with the hope of asking the lecturer your own questions?" The most common answer among well-versed readers in my circle is N. T. Wright, the professor who has an enormous and dedicated following among Christians in the United States and Europe. He has taught for over thirty years combined at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities, and is author of over seventy books, both academic and popular. Other common answers to my question are Douglas Jacoby and Marty Solomon.

Theater. Poetry readings, the spoken word, large stage plays, and one-person plays can reach people intellectually and emotionally—in addition to being entertaining. This genre opens doors to spiritual discussions for all kinds of people. The play *Screwtape*, which my wife and I enjoyed, is based on apologist C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. The play, like the popular book, follows the schemes of the apprentice devil Wormwood to damn the soul of a young architect. In many ways Wormwood is the reverse of Clarence, the guardian angel of a famous Frank Capra film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Plays like *Screwtape* are conversation starters, even among secular folks.

Though I'm not iconic in any sense, I have some experience with this medium. In 1994 a play that I wrote, *The Cross and the Gavel*, was performed in Chicago before an audience of about 3000. In the next three years it was translated into Russian, Tagalog, and other languages, and performed before an audience of 7000 in Russia and 9000 in Manila. The

value of this play was that it brought people into the world of church through a medium that easily prompted spiritual questions about the last judgment. As a result, many guests studied the Bible and were baptized. Yet theater has its limitation. It is not strong in its inability to handle doctrine, demonstrate truthfulness, or confirm whether the attendees are in fact learning anything.

TED-Style Talks. Since 1990 TED Conferences LLC (Technology, Entertainment, Design) has been presenting a wide range of topics related to the research and practice of science and culture. These presentations usually involve an expert making use of note-free storytelling to stimulate the imagination and deliver salient content, through a less-is-more use of slides. TED talks usually last about 18 minutes and are composed of 2300 words. For comparison, if we read the 2247 words of Matthew 5 to 7 (the Sermon on the Mount) out loud, it would take about 15 minutes. The TED-Style approach has been used at Christian conferences and workshops, and is ideal for eliciting Aha! insights, though not so much for theological depth or audience interactivity.

Podcasts, YouTube, and Vimeo Channels. Podcasting, including video podcasting, sometimes called videocasting, is one of the most accessible forms of teaching and learning. Due to the combined innovations of the internet and the smartphone, access to learning has been democratized, allowing individuals to listen to whatever they want while taking a bath, riding a bus, or strolling through the park. This medium cannot be ignored.

One caveat is in order. Unlike most other mechanisms, it is possible to run a successful podcast and gain a large following with an overly ideological, agenda-driven message, without adequate understanding or valid credentials. Nevertheless, an effective teacher can create an authentic and high-quality podcast, easily accessed. The best Christian podcasts feature credentialed subject matter experts as presenters, hosts, or interviewees.

Christians are very particular about their podcast preferences, with generation, timing, and relevance emerging as key acceptance factors. According to the Apple podcast app in January 2021, the most-listened-to podcast in this genre was “The Bible in a Year,” a daily Scripture reading by Catholic priest Mike Schmitz. Professor Esau McCaulley’s podcast “The Disrupters” is growing rapidly because he interviews authors and Christian leaders who disrupt the status quo, resonating with major national unrest in the United States. But the staple Christian teaching podcasts that draw listeners tend to involve teachers known for their expertise through their writings, research, or ministry.

Hackathons. Collaborative brainstorming across disciplines has been around for almost a century. It has been used mostly during wartime or in the arenas of technology and aerospace. One of the main benefits of hackathons is the way they serve as accelerants in

the learning process. In the early 2000s computer specialists would gather to participate in “marathons” and share “hacks” in collaborative software coding. The newly coined “hackathon” soon evolved into a collaboration practice in engineering and large corporations. The nonprofit sector has also appreciated hackathon-style events that bring together many skilled individuals who donate their time and skills to build something awesome.

Hackathons are still not common in faith-based circles, but I believe this will soon change. I cosponsored a hackathon in 2019 with the help of Robert Carrillo, former CEO of HOPE *worldwide*. To illustrate their value, imagine a major problem a church faces, then bring into the room specialists from the fields related to the issue. The problem is broken down into separate components and groups form around these subtopics. Then the groups come back together for an integrative solution. Even hypothetical dilemmas are valuable. Imagine what 2020 would have been like if theologians across multiple disciplines, as well as ministers and shepherds—including men and women of various ages and ethnicities— had discussed the response to the pandemic, or social unrest, generational dynamics, or gender issues, in a continuous hackathon approach beginning in 2019.

Virtual Sessions. The pandemic powered the San Jose-based company Zoom into a worldwide mainstay. It’s not only a strong virtual platform; its advantages have been demonstrated tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of times in virtual teaching sessions. While lacking the social intimacy of actual presence, Zoom still facilitates nearly every other benefit of pedagogy, such as interaction with the presenter and breaking into groups and classrooms. Furthermore, this approach easily allows for recording without additional equipment.

Churches and universities have exhausted this platform ad nauseam. At this time in global history, many people long to move back into traditional venues for teaching and learning, in proportion to safety levels related to the global health. One thing we will all miss, though, is the ability to hit “mute.”

Engaging Styles

Until the mid to late twentieth century, we didn’t have the benefit of audio or video recordings illustrating the styles utilized by teachers when they were with students, fellow ministers, or larger crowds. They left strong impressions on historians, witnesses, and biographers, but our perceptions and preferences related to styles come from our personal experience.

Styles are closely connected to the expectations around the platform. A lecture in an auditorium or classroom is delivered in an *authoritative* style. A *facilitator* style involves asking questions of the listeners. Jesus sometimes answered questions with piercing

questions of his own (Mark 2:1-11; 4:10-13). A *delegator* style involves sending students away to do some work, usually in collaboration with other students, and report back. Jesus used this technique when he sent out the seventy-two (Luke 10:1-24). And there are other styles, of course.

Styles are very personal things. We know what we prefer, what we like very much, and what we dislike. We might love quintessential secular teachers in the realm of films, books, and the classroom because they resemble what we teachers aspire for in the Christian sphere. Our minds and souls have different needs at different times. Let's consider some examples from the secular sphere.

I was moved watching Hilary Swank play Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*. The real-life story involves a teacher of "unteachable, at-risk" children. Gruwell used outside stories to inform the children's own narrative. She did this by asking the students to write about troubles of their past, present, and future, and having them read books like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and other accounts written by troubled youth. Gruwell's style was collaborative, and the results were transformative. This led to a book coauthored by 150 students, the *Freedom Writers Diary*.

Who hasn't seen Pat Morita's memorable Kesuke Miyagi teaching Daniel LaRusso in *The Karate Kid*? Although it may seem strange to use Miyagi as an example, hear me out. One aspect of his style was the use of nonintuitive techniques demonstrating how constantly work on specially selected, though mundane, chores was an integral part of the training. This technique was evident in the famous "wax on, wax off" scene, and it is called *kata*. Just as choreographed sets of movements are important in physical training—the skills acquired will be important in other, more serious contexts, academic rigor is useful in research. Anyone who has studied under a rigorous professor gets the application. Some of the greatest learning comes from mundane disciplines that students rehearse in a dusty library.

John Keating, played by Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*, is one of the most extraordinary teachers on film. On one occasion he quotes a poem by Walt Whitman that uses poetry as a metaphor for life—a performance in which each student has a role. He tells them, "The powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse." Keating looks at each student and asks, "What will your verse be?" He was an unconventional and animated professor. If only there were more Christian teachers who could harness the power of the Word and sound Christian literature to help young students "seize the day" (*carpe diem*).

One of my Wheaton College professors, the late Robert Webber, was much like Robin Williams in animation, humor, and surprise as the lecturer in my historical theology course. I'll never forget how he immortalized the classical conflict between rivals

Athanasius and Arius over a single word that would end up in the Nicene Creed.⁵ He once stood on his desk, playing the part of Athanasius, looking down on and eviscerating Arius, acting out the renowned high-stakes debate with a strong sense of hyperbole. Most encouragingly, he spent two weeks discussing baptism and communion, blasting the evangelical approach to salvation – in Wheaton, Illinois, the Mecca of evangelicalism. He took a stand, saying “Baptism should take the place that the sinner’s prayer does today.” The class was both shocked and highly engaged. Dr. Webber was known for his flair for drama and edgy manners, which nearly got him kicked out of school in 1968, his first year of teaching.

Style is personal, cultural, and situational. It’s personal because of our various tastes. It’s cultural because what may be acceptable in one location isn’t so in another. It’s situational because what performs well in a large audience on a stage, or in streaming video, may not work in a classroom. Yet clearly Jesus teaches us that style matters – whether it is in his constant use of parables (Mark 4:2), easily available visuals, like a fig tree (21:18-22), the mix of teaching with demonstration, as when he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:3-17), figurative speech (John 16:25), or hyperbole (Mark 10:25-28). As G. K. Chesterton put it, Jesus possessed “a literary style of his own; the diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque – it is full of camels leaping through needles and mountains hurled into the sea.”⁶

Conclusion

The most significant shapers of Christian thought and practice for the first 1700 years were devout, well-studied theologians – as church teachers, professors, elder-teachers, pastor-teachers, preacher-teachers, missionaries, and men and women who had taken rigorous vows.

A shift occurred by late eighteenth-century, when emotionalism and instant conversions made American preachers like Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Billy Sunday celebrities. This paved the way for culture in televangelism and the megachurch phenomenon, dumbing down Christianity, and reducing faith to subjective experiences and trite formulas. How we need more biblically and theologically sound teachers influencing our view of God and helping to shape our spiritual lives!

⁵ Athanasius argued that the Son was of the “same” substance/essence (*homoousios*) as the Father, while Arius argued that their substance was “similar” (*homoiousios*). The great debate hung upon a single iota, representing the difference between Jesus being God incarnate and Jesus being a created being.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), 146.

I'll conclude this paper by sharing an anecdote illustrating why I believe that church leaders should give their ear to spiritual, proven, and biblically trained teachers.

In April 2000 I assumed a shepherding role in the large congregation where I served. Shortly thereafter, I assembled a team for each region comprising mature couples who would host Friday evening meetings for those who were discouraged or spiritually weak, including former members, inviting them into their homes for meals, open discussion, and fellowship.

We conducted a survey of participants and found that one fifth of those who came to these events did so because of frustration with how their leaders had treated them. The other four fifths were dealing with difficulties unrelated to church. The ministry staff was not equipped to help them through life's challenges, to answer their theological questions, or to adequately explain the biblical concept of grace. We saw the fruit of a church culture produced by overly didactic preaching: "You need to ____" (be at everything, give to the church financially, obey your leaders, bring visitors...). The theology of our church was shallow, and a fair share of the ministers themselves were feeling many of the same frustrations. Within a few years there was a crisis, followed by ceaseless appeals for biblically sound and inspirational teaching.

Over the years I have partnered with others who not only shared similar experiences and perspectives and were willing to invest themselves in the teaching ministry, financially and in other ways. For nearly two decades I have been in continual discussions with Alex Hunter, Kevin Grady, Dave Pocta, Douglas Jacoby, Jeff Jones, some of our wives, and others who strongly believe in the vital need for qualified teachers and comprehensive biblical education. Some of us banded together, and others joined us later, in creating the Disciples Center for Education. Our vision: we need all kinds of competent and formally educated teachers throughout the world. And we have been officially working in this endeavor for about two years, beginning with a discussion at a farmstead outside Atlanta in October 2019.

It is our hope to see men and women throughout the churches develop expertise in Scripture, exegesis, hermeneutics, biblical languages, theology, archaeology, spirituality, church history, Christian philosophy, Christian literature, and other related fields.

Our goal is to help teachers find their best location and/or platform, and to observe them as they hone their expertise and styles in accordance with their God-given gifts.

We hope to partner with more congregations, mission societies, and individual patrons who appreciate the need for platforms for teachers, in order that we may all build up the church.