

A BRIEF RESPONSE TO JOHN DICKSON'S RESPONSE TO MY RESPONSE.

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What follows is comment on John's recent response (on his website) to my paper of some months back. He responded in eight sections. The bottom line for my own response? In the face of critique John is restating his position. But that continual restatement increasingly means his position is losing the ability to distinguish between an expositional sermon that is a 'teaching' one and a non 'teaching' one (i.e., one a woman can do). As I argue at the end, he has effectively arrived back where many of us started from.

On 1. – Tone

It seems possible to be sensitive to the tone of others but not so sensitive to your own tone.

On 2. – Shifting definition

When John started, he described his case as a 'very straight forward' one. Now he describes it as 'subtle' and 'nuanced'. There's a shift.

John says his definition of 'teach' hasn't changed in many years. It is 'passing on the apostolic deposit'. I agree that this broad bones definition hasn't changed (nor has his reason for pursuing this path).

However, the *content behind* this definition has changed.

John himself says this when he states - "It sounds like you hadn't realized I actually changed my mind between editions 1 and 2." (a Facebook response to a somewhat confused friend).

There's nothing wrong with changing your mind. It is a problem when you say you haven't changed but also say you have.

On 3. Explanation

Is the confusion 'all my fault' – as John asserts?

John needs to own a very great part of any confusion his readers feel. This is because he writes as someone who is trying to eat his cake but also keep it.

Start with the 'eat his cake' part.

John wants it to be possible for women to explain or expound the Bible without those activities being thought of as 'teaching'. The only way you can achieve this is to distance 'teach' from 'expound' or 'explain' – in some fashion – so that

someone can expound or explain the Bible without that being a 'teaching' sermon.

So he says that 'teach' for Paul is "not exposition" (p67), "cannot mean exposition", "refers not to exposition", it "never has the sense of explaining...expounding..." (70). He says this - 20 times? This is very emphatic! 'Teach' isn't 'explain' or 'expound'.

More, he goes a further step by comparing 'teach' to activities that *don't include* explaining or expounding - ie 'paradidômi' ('delivering', 'passing on'). He quotes approvingly Cole who describes 'teach' as an activity of 'rote and repetition'. 'Rote' and 'repetition' are quite obviously activities that *exclude* explanation and exposition. He says 'teach' occurs through "memorizing and rehearsing" - activities that exclude explanation and exposition.

More, when John does talk of the activity of 'explaining the Bible' he *excludes* that from 'teaching'. He says explaining the Bible *isn't* 'teaching'. It is actually close to 'exhorting'.

And, when he concedes that a modern sermon may fulfill the 'teaching' function (a function he defines as "transmitting the traditions") he states that it does this whenever the NT is "*read or quoted*" - activities that exclude explanation or exposition.

He says - "teaching never involved the many and varied things we do in a sermon" (91)

Here is John eating his cake - working through assertion, argument and comparison to effectively *exclude* explanation and exposition from the activity called 'teaching'.

But then he wants to have his cake by insisting that 'teach' *includes* explanation and exposition!

I can see why John now describes his position as subtle and nuanced.

John attempts to clarify this position with a Soccer illustration. Soccer isn't running, he says. But it may include running. As far as this simple point goes, I get it.

But! John's position keeps saying far more than he appears to realize.

His soccer illustration is a useful way of capturing this.

He has said Soccer isn't running. As noted, I get his point. He is saying Soccer isn't *defined as* running. 'Running' doesn't say what Soccer is. Sure.

But then (to keep using his analogy the other way round) it's as if he defines soccer so that it makes no reference to running at all (i.e. 'teach' has no reference to explaining). In effect he is saying that this thing called Soccer is merely transferring the ball *without any reference to running as part of the process of transferring the ball* (which is surely a far too narrow definition of soccer). Then he reinforces this by comparing Soccer to a game where no one runs - a game

where the ball is transferred by people who stand still and who don't run. Then he says *this thing* (the non running game) is a near synonym with Soccer. Further, he then points out that a game that has running in it ceases to be Soccer when the players run. Up until then they were playing soccer (transferring the ball). But the running part? That is better called another game – ('exhorting' - to mix my illustration up).

And then! He says, 'No, I've said all along Soccer includes running'. 'So, stop saying I exclude running from soccer'.

Subtle and nuanced it is! Or perhaps, as I increasingly believe, John's position is at heart incoherent. He wants it both ways. And so we go around in circles.

John concludes that the reason people are finding problems with his position is because they are impatient. This really doesn't help the debate and is of course a double-edged sword. It could equally be the case that the reason John and his supporters find his position so wonderful and don't notice these difficulties is because they are so eager to find a loophole in Paul's culturally awkward command.

On 4. Education

John now insists that 'Teaching is fundamentally an educative activity'. 'How can a word like 'teach' *not* be educative?' he says.

Exactly! But this has been precisely Claire's point! Which he now seems to be accepting – although critiquing at the same time...

This is the deepest point at issue. And John's latest material just muddies the waters again. And suggests he hasn't understood Claire's point – or mine.

At a simple level John has inappropriately narrowed the meaning of 'teach'.

But at a deeper level he has given it a different meaning.

He has made it a near synonym for an activity that *isn't* educative – ***not in the strictest sense and not in essence***. This is a crucially important clarification and one I made sure I used in my paper. Sure, 'traditioning' activities educate in that they have a didactic consequence. Of course. But at this level, every speech act educates. When I pray I educate someone. But that doesn't mean that prayer is, ***in essence*** educative. The same is true of the word 'deliver' – a word John says is an apt alternative for 'teach'. 'Delivering' has a didactic effect, as does every speech act. It will mean that a person who receives the thing passed on is in some sense educated. They now know the words more accurately than they might have before. But the key point is that 'delivering' isn't focused on educating the receiver as a constituent part of what 'delivering' is. It isn't focused on helping a person *understand* the thing being passed on – through explanation and instruction. It is focused on the tradition – that it is kept in tact as it is passed on.

By contrast, instruction *in that deposit* is a different thing. It is, **in essence**, an educative activity. It is focused on the learner rather than the deposit. It is focused on the learner so that they not only get the deposit *in tact* but so that they understand it and learn it. That's why it is only Claire's definition of 'teach' that can be properly said to be educative – in essence.

So for John to now just throw education language around as if his definition of 'teach' is educative in the same way the normal word 'teach' is educative is, at best, confusing categories, but also possibly demonstrates a failure to understand the issues, or at worst is disingenuous.

The very point Claire is making – in a doctoral thesis focused precisely on this issue – is that 'teach' continues to carry with it essentially educational concerns which mean that activities such as explanation and exposition *are a constituent element of 'teach'*. And so when a person explains the deposit they *are* doing the thing Paul calls 'teaching'. They aren't doing something else.

This therefore means that any sermon that explains or expounds a text of Scripture *is* 'teaching'. And so 1 Tim 2:12 directly applies to the thing we do today.

On 5. Verbatim

Happy to leave all of this. We've both said what we want to say.

On 6. Doctrine Commission

John is too quick to assume this report supports his position on a narrow definition for 'teach'. It doesn't.

John uses a word to describe what the DC is doing, but which is not found in the DC itself – the word 'change'.

The "very next sentence" John points to as evidence of this 'change' is anything but evidence of the change he asserts.

The previous sentence states that 'teach' is not only "often an exposition or application of Scripture" it is also often "an explanation and reiteration of apostolic injunctions". This is not only contrary to John's position but importantly, the scriptural evidence noted by the DC for this conviction comes from the Pastorals (2 Tim 2:2 and 3:10). This is to say that the authors of the DC believe that 'teach' can refer to "exposition and application" – ***in the Pastorals***.

Just to make this point again – the authors of the Doctrine Commission don't agree with John on his very narrow definition of 'teach' – that it *isn't* exposition or explanation. Quite the reverse actually.

The sentence John makes much of is simply functioning as an explanation of the previous sentence and says that 'teach' in the Pastorals (which includes exposition and application) is focused on the apostolic deposit.

If there is a change in 'teach' it is with regard to the content the teaching activity focuses on (it is now focused on the apostolic deposit). There is no change in relation to the *way* that teaching happens. It still involves educative activities such as exposition and explanation. This directly undermines John's core point.

Is the DC saying women can preach in church? Only in a very hesitant way and only depending on what you mean by 'church'. The later report (1988) clarifies this when it says – "1 Timothy 2:11-15 applies still to 'family congregations', not all congregations today fall into that category".

Read these reports yourself.

But as you do, bear in mind the point at dispute isn't so much the *content* being transferred from the 'teacher' to the receiver, but the *way* that content is transferred. Is it via the broad activity of teaching, an activity which includes exposition, explanation, as well as repetition - all essentially educational activities? Or is it only really a much narrower kind of activity, such that it is readily possible to distinguish a 'teaching' sermon from a 'non teaching' sermon?

This is exactly the point the DC rejects. It concludes that although it might be possible to distinguish 'teach' from 'exhort' in theory, in practice (quoting them) "It would be impossible, however, to separate altogether the teaching element out of almost any "sermon". Such would be quite artificial."

In its view – establishing non-teaching sermons (the kind a woman could do) is "quite artificial".

On 7. Exegetical points

Scholars disagree over many things. We do our theology from the Bible out, not scholars in. Showing that another scholar agrees with you may only prove that you aren't alone in being wrong.

Work on the text. Don't just throw scholars around. My previous paper presents exegetical evidence and concludes that 'receive' and 'taught' are not apt alternatives. Best to see a response to that exegetical work rather than the names of scholars.

2 Tim 3:16?

John says he is perplexed by my thoughts here. Well, we can share perplexities!

"Profitable" never means 'used for'? I'm *very* perplexed.

Moulton and Milligan say the word means "useful" and make reference to an ancient text where something was said to be "useful to us on the occasion of our absence abroad". Something was "useful to us". Useful things are always useful *for* something. If the thing that is "useful" is a coat, it is "useful" for keeping a person warm – by being *used for* keeping warm.

But according to John this reading isn't possible. The word can't be used like this.

Not only is this odd, but the thing to get hold of here is that there is a lot at stake in John's view of 'useful' being right.

If 'useful' in 2 Tim 3:16 is saying that the written Scriptures themselves were useful because they could be used for 'teaching' then you have clear evidence in the pastorals themselves that John's narrow definition of 'teach' is wrong. The key is the context. And the context makes abundantly clear that the 'usefulness' of Scripture is that it is *used for* all the activities Paul mentions.

John's position rests on this very slim and frail thread – that 'useful' can't ever mean that the thing that is 'useful' is useful because it is *used for* something.

Do we really want to ignore a clear command of God, all the time aware there is a verse in a later Pastoral that indicates that Paul understood 'teach' to refer to the activity of explaining the text of the Bible...

On 8. Written teaching

John says 'teach' in 1 Tim 2:12 refers to 'oral' tradition. Then he says it refers to apostolic traditions where those traditions are written. I didn't make up these two different meanings for the same word. John did. And, I wish it were a merely a 'comical moment' as John says. I'm happy he doesn't want to run with the 'oral tradition' definition. That's good. But it is a shift.

John *did* say that the 'teacher' teaches when "the NT is read or quoted". And he said this in the context of distinguishing 'reading' and 'quoting' from the act of explaining the NT. He said that the 'teacher' wasn't teaching if he shifted from this act of reading or quoting the NT. If he shifted into explanation or exposition he was "exhorting".

In this, I'm just pointing out what he said.

In an attempt to clarify his previous work – two books mind you – he seems *now* to be saying that a sermon is only a 'teaching' sermon if it is a "*focused act of transmitting the apostolic deposit*".

So the best I can now tell, he seems to be saying that explaining or expounding the NT might be included in 'teaching' if it is a *certain kind* of explaining and expounding – the kind that is focused on transmitting the apostolic deposit.

The natural conclusion to this – which is a new idea as far as I can tell in his writing – is that explaining and expounding can be done in ways that sometimes *are* 'teaching' and then sometimes *aren't* teaching. (Odd though when he has also said that "when Paul refers to 'teaching' he never means explaining and applying a Bible passage".)

As I've said, it is no wonder he describes his position as subtle and nuanced.

If I am right in understanding John at this point it begs the question – when and how is it possible to discern this difference between a kind of explaining that *is* 'teaching' and a kind that *isn't*?

What kind of subtlety is this? It is one the DC rejects when it says that “it would be impossible, ... to separate altogether the teaching element out of almost any ‘sermon’. Such would be quite artificial.”

But further of course – Claire’s critical point constrains all this comment. If ‘teach’ still carries fundamentally educative characteristics then any act of explaining or expounding the NT in the mixed public assembly will be the thing Paul prohibits a woman doing – whether or not they are focused on making sure the deposit is kept in tact. But what preacher isn’t interested in their hearers keeping the deposit in tact?

Conclusion

There now seem to be quite a few people who disagree with John. Are they all overzealous – as John insists? Again, his comment is a double-edged sword. It might just as equally be the case that everyone enamored of John’s position is so eager to find loopholes in the culturally awkward command of 1 Tim 2:12 that they are blind to the incoherence of John’s position. The ‘two edgedness’ of these comments shows how unhelpful it is to start down this path. Lets stick to the actual facts.

John’s position began as a simple one. As John has interacted with critics, it is now morphing more and more into a very complex and subtle one that strains the biblical evidence beyond reason and can’t stand up to real life application. And effectively the distinct character of his view is disappearing.

At times he is now talking about ‘teaching’ in ways that correspond largely with the way I have always thought about ‘teaching’!

It seems now that ‘teaching’ is laying down for people the apostolic deposit by whatever means necessary (including explanation? repetition? exposition?) so that people master it. If this is his definition then after two books and a million words and a lot of pain and grief we are largely back where most of us started. Because the fact is, at the heart of every sermon I preach is a determination to instruct people in the word of God so that they receive it, master it and know it (and also love it and live it) - effectively the thing John says he means by ‘teach’. And I want this activity to happen in Church every single week. I want this because Paul insists that we ‘devote ourselves to ...teaching’, at least as much as we devote ourselves to the public reading of Scripture.

It is very strange indeed to say (incorrectly in my opinion) that teaching is “*not* the typical Sunday sermon”—(emphasis his) and then conclude that we can therefore let women do them – instead of concluding that the lack of ‘teaching’ week by week in our churches is a dreadful thing and everyone ought to repent and lift their game.

Offered with much warmth.