

APPENDIX E. WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A STUDENT

The word *student* represented an important concept for Jesus. The Greek word μαθητης which is usually translated *disciple* actually means *student*. The word *disciple* as a translation for μαθητης has come to have an anachronistic meaning today. Anachronistic means that it does not correspond to its original meaning. *Disciple* has a religious flavor to it and for many means little more than to be a member or follower of a particular religion. It had a much more substantial meaning at the time of Christ. By the first century μαθητης already had a long history of usage in the Greek speaking world. It was by no means merely a label for religious participation.

The Greek culture was one of the first to be powerfully influenced by a broad understanding of the student-teacher relationship. Beginning over six hundred years before Christ was born, the student-teacher relationship had developed into the classic example of learning and teaching that is still a part of our own understanding of advanced forms of education.

At the time of Christ, it was not at all unusual to observe students interacting with teachers in many parts of the Hellenistic world. For example, when Christ was born, Jerusalem was full of students studying under some of the most famous Jewish Rabbis of all time. Hillel I (70BC - AD 10?) was the most prominent spiritual leader among the Jews of Palestine from 30BC till his death. He founded a school still named for him. Thousands of students came to Jerusalem to study under him. Hillel's chief rival was Shammai, who founded a more conservative Jewish school.

Jerusalem was by no means the first or only city in which this kind of instruction occurred. For both Jews and Greeks it was not considered strange for students to leave home to spend years with one or more teachers. Josephus, an influential Jewish historian in the first century, tells us that he did this several times, first with one group, then with another. In this context the relationship of Jesus and his students was not unusual.

Even in our society, anyone determined to be a student knows that several years of tough work lie ahead. Being a student assumes a commitment to a long-term course of studies, a perspective of perseverance, and a readiness to make sacrifices.

Why? Because that's what it takes to learn the large networks of language code that are necessary for understanding complex subject matters. It's obvious that Christ was also convinced that his teachings were challenging enough to require the effort and the focus of a student.

Jesus never assumed that learning his teachings was just a matter of quickly getting informed. When one considers that Christ, positively the greatest teacher of all time, handpicked a group of men and needed to spend several years to get them to understand his message, then it can be assumed that learning the information requires a significant investment of time and effort.

This is no doubt why Jesus referred to his followers as students, why he expected them to fulfill the requirements of a student, and why he expected his followers to one day make students of others.

A true student is never someone who is casually interested in a matter. A student wants to get to the sources of a subject. This is why all students are language learners. Medical students learn the language of medicine. Mathematics students learn the language of mathematics. Engineering students learn the language of engineering. Computer programmers learn the languages of programming. Gaining access to sources through the languages of the sources is a big part of what makes a student a student.

What are the sources of the teachings of Christ? We have over 5,000 handwritten manuscripts that are the historical artifacts of the words of Christ and his students. These documents are archived in libraries and museums mainly in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East.

The source documents use the language coding typical of Koine Greek literature of the first century. The general culture of the original writers and readers is first century Hellenism with its cosmopolitan blend of peoples, sublanguages, and religions. The immediate history in which the writing of the source documents is embedded includes Greek, Jewish, and Roman developments leading up to the birth and through the life of Christ. Students of Christ should be highly motivated “to get their heads into these worlds.” Anyone who wants the facts about the teachings of Christ has to get them from these sources. The greater the degree to which a student develops reliable networks of code in all these areas, the greater will be the student’s ability to read and understand the scriptures accurately.

Does this sound overly academic? It certainly isn’t in the negative sense of that word. It means that facts are being taken seriously, that irreplaceable information is being recognized, that the study of sources is expected, and that the example of Christ and his own students is given its full due. Accurate and comprehensive information is never optional when it comes to any undertaking of importance. The consequences of inadequate information or inaccurate information can be catastrophic.

Imagine a builder with a flawed blueprint, a game with an incomplete set of rules, sheet music with incorrect notes, or a message missing words. Or consider a doctor with little training, a farmer with no farm experience, a programmer inept at using a computer. Every one of these examples is a disaster ready to happen. The basis for meaningful, reliable work in all areas of life is the study and mastery of reliable information. Christ meant nothing less when he instructed his followers to be students of his words and to make others students of his words.