

On Being Salt and Light

by Frederick C. Foote

As the homeschoolers of five young children, my wife and I occasionally find ourselves in conversations where salt and light comes up. Homeschooling has some advantages over traditional school settings and people new to the idea often see this quite readily. But we often hear how homeschooling may be deficient in at least one important respect — its failure to position our children where they can function on a daily basis as salt and light to their non-Christian friends. “It’s a tough job,” they seem to say in effect, “but *somebody’s* kids have to look out for the lost souls of the world!”

Our understanding of the Bible on this point suggests that quite the opposite conclusion may be true. If we really want our children to be salt and light in this world, the public school classroom may be the last place they should be.

In exploring this viewpoint, let us first start with some non-dictionary definitions. Salt is a preservative; it is also something that adds savor and enjoyment to our daily food. Light is an expositor of darkness, a symbol of truth; it is also comforting, penetrating, guiding and eminently useful.

The Example of John the Baptist

Now Christians ought to be all of the above. John the Baptist, for instance, was both salt and light. He was, first, a preservative of God’s prophetic truth in an age of spiritual decay. The spirit. The boldness. The message. Everything about John reminded the Israelites that in him, bodily, was something they

were in grave danger of losing something precious, ancient and worthy of preservation. Like Israel’s other great prophets, John’s call to repentance served to “keep the faith” just as sodium chloride serves to “keep the meat” nutritious, fortifying and full of flavor.

In addition to being salt, John the Baptist was also a beacon — no, a laser light show — in the Judean wilderness. For many, this light illuminated new truths. For others, it added candlepower to convictions that were in danger of flickering out. And for those ceremoniously religious or otherwise high-minded folk whose sins needed exposure, John the Baptist was a searchlight piercing into the hidden cellars and glove compartments of Israel’s high and mighty. Ask the Pharisees. Or Herod.

The effect was terrific. People came from miles around, so authentic and attractive was John’s message to those in whose hearts God’s Spirit was stirring.

Like John the Baptist, we should all strive to be as perfectly seasoned and as beautifully lustrous as we can in our testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ. And if, by extension, home schooled children and children in Christian schools are really supposed to be salt and light to their peers in the public schools, then we are certainly at risk of depriving the non-Christian world of some much-needed influence. There is, indeed, a greatness in America’s educational past that deserves preservation. And clearly there are grave errors being taught in many of today’s public schools

that need exposure and illumination. (Evolution, “safe sex,” and the assumed irrelevance of God and His Word come to mind.)

But is sending our youngest children to secular schools a sound application of the New Testament’s teaching about Christians being salt and light?

There are three principal places in the New Testament where we are admonished to be salt and/or light in this world: Matthew 5:1-16, Mark 9:35-50 and Luke 14:25-35. But not one of them has anything to do with our being salt and light merely because we are Christians among unbelievers. For the qualities of being salt and light are not characteristics acquired by our *position* in Christ; rather, they are qualities acquired by our *practice* in Christ. There’s a difference.

Christians who are salt and light, we see from these passages, are quite different from most Christians. Their testimonies are unique and so attractive that they seem to draw people to the Kingdom of God with their blameless lives, their gracious speech, their scriptural insights, and their practical usefulness.

Attractive Qualities of Salt and Light

The *attractive qualities* of salt and light are key and are mentioned in all three of the principal passages cited above. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount (which contains the verses in Matthew 5:1-16), we see how the crowds were attracted to Jesus. Matthew concludes his account with the words, ‘When He was come down

from the mountain, *great multitudes followed Him.*” (Matt. 8:1)

At the end of Jesus’ discourse on being salt in Mark, we see this same attractiveness specifically mentioned: “And Jesus arose from thence, and cometh into the coasts of Judea by the farther side of Jordan and the people *resorted unto Him again.*” (Mark 10:1)

Finally, Luke’s account of Jesus’ discourse on being salt ends with the observation, “Then *drew near unto Him* all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him.” (Luke 15:1)

Thus, we suggest that Christians who are truly functioning as salt and light tend to draw unbelievers to Christ in the wake of their savory and enlightening lives, just as Jesus and John the Baptist did. Unlike notions of being salt and light that result in mere *positioning* among the unsaved, we don’t see that strategy in Jesus or John. Rather, we see them most often going in the opposite direction of the world yet at the same time drawing unbelievers to their message with the qualities of their lives and testimonies.

Jesus ate with drunkards and gluttons, for example, not because He followed them into their dens and taverns, but because they followed Him to where He was going and He, out of compassion, did not turn them away. More than once, thousands of men, women and children followed Jesus into the hot and empty Judean wilderness just to watch and listen. John was capable of this same incredible feat. Few (if any) other figures in history have ever had the attractive qualities of these two men.

A Few Examples From Others

In a similar way, there are certain Christians among us who draw unbelievers to Christ with the attractiveness

of their witness. Like John the Baptist or Jesus, these Christians may not be high-profile or credentialed. They may, in fact, be very quiet, plain or uneducated. It’s their simple, subtle, rock-solid quality that makes unbelievers who observe them say to themselves, “I like what I see. They’re different. What makes them like that?” (And please note, the qualities of salt and light are by no means limited to superstars. A mentally retarded child with a happy spirit and obedient self-control can exhibit this exact same remarkable yet simple, subtle, rock-solid quality in his life that causes heads to turn and onlookers to wonder.)

Merely associating with unbelievers does not make our Christian children salt and light.

When my brother and his wife go out to a restaurant with their home schooled children, they function as salt and light. More often than not, the couple across the room, the hostess, or the waitress comes up to them after the meal and asks, “How do you train your children to behave so well?” Their children are, in a word, respectful. They listen rather than talk. They have good manners. They are cheerful, secure and content. In short, peace reigns at the table, not the children. Yes, something wonderful has illuminated this family and it pierces the darkness of what passes for acceptable behavior in so much of modern America.

A man who is known for his insights and wisdom works in our office. He’s sought out by believers and unbelievers alike who have questions or problems of all sorts. Rarely is his advice what you would have guessed it would be; it often has an unanticipated

twist or emphasis that sets it apart and marks it as coming from wells deeper than those from which most men draw. His Saturday morning Bible study has traversed the Scriptures one or two chapters at a time for over thirty years. But no neon sign, Lucite pulpit, reversed collar or seminary degree provides the attraction — it’s the salt and light in his quiet, humble life that draws people.

It is our impression, then, that all the qualities of salt and light (preservation, illumination, guidance, savor, etc.) seem to manifest themselves in a general attractiveness that points to Christ. This attractiveness has nothing to do with physical appearance and is much deeper and more substantive than popularity. It draws people unto the Lord and, though relatively rare, can be found in men and women of all types and walks of life, although usually in the less-likely among us. (1 Corinthians 1:26)

Easy Answers, Hard Answers

The question now arises, how do certain Christians acquire the attractive qualities of salt and light? Again, we know believers are not automatically deemed salt and light upon their being born again. Jesus always mentions those followers who succeed in being salt and light together with those believers who have lost their savor. The former are lights of the world and cities on a hill; the latter are burnt-out bulbs and dung on a hill. (Luke 14:35)

The answers are easy to spot from the gospel records but are hard to put into practice. In the gospel of Matthew, we read that those who are salt and light acquire those characteristics through their single-minded devotion to Christ. This devotion is referred to as a “hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Such Christians are merciful,

pure, and peaceful. They are also persecuted and reviled yet they see beyond passing afflictions with joy. These people have matured in their Christian faith. That makes them different and it's an attractive, winsome, kind of difference that draws an I-want-to-belike-those-people kind of response.

We learned more about evil from the group than the group learned about righteousness from us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that those who are salt and light are so because they have, similarly, counted the costs of following Jesus and then decided to pay the price in every sphere of their lives:

And there went great multitudes with Jesus and He turned and said unto them, "If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after Me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out." (Luke 14:25-35)

Those who have counted the costs of discipleship and pay the price daily are different. They function as salt and light.

The Example of Jesus

The greatest example of salt and light, of course, is the Lord Jesus. He counted the cost of total obedience to the Father (even death on the cross) and was willing to give no man the slightest mind if it deterred Him in that service. This single-minded purity of purpose was very attractive to many, even His enemies. In Mark, certain of the Pharisees and Herodians admitted an admiration for their unacknowledged King when they said, "Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth." (Mark 12:14)

Being salt and light, then, is nothing more than having an influence upon others due to the inward development of Christ in us. Writing to the Philippians, Paul put it this way, "For to me to live is Christ." (Philippians 1:21)

Salt and Light in the Public Schools

Let us now apply this understanding of salt and light to sending our young children to public schools. As we have stressed, merely associating with unbelievers does not make our Christian children salt and light. In order to be salt and light, they must exhibit in their school classrooms and playgrounds the kind of mature, practical, single-minded devotion to Christ that results in a peculiar attractiveness: a magnetism of qualities that preserves the good, enlightens the darkness, and gives glory to God.

Speaking for ourselves, we know *we* were not salt and light in our elementary schools. We were fools (Solomon's appraisal of children in Proverbs 22:15, and we thoroughly agree). As such, we paid close attention to the other fools

in our class — how they acted, what they said, what they wore, and what they valued. We teased those whom it was safe to tease, rebelled just enough to be considered cool, and tried to be well-liked. By most worldly measures we were successes both academically and socially. But unlike Jesus (who did not regard the opinions of men), we monitored the opinions of our peers *constantly*.

As for influence, we learned more about evil from the group than the group learned about righteousness from us. We didn't preserve anything of godliness in our class. And we didn't shed as much light as was snuffed out by the company of immature friends. They impacted us more than vice versa. Guaranteed.

In short, we spent time with our young and foolish friends, but we were not salt and light. We fit in.

The Young Jesus

Perhaps we should not be so hard on our elementary-aged selves. Consider for a moment at what point in His life Jesus first exhibited a sustained ability to be salt and light to others. Of course, we can't know for certain when that was, but the Scriptures record a certain instance for our benefit when He was in the temple in Jerusalem at the age of *twelve*. He had so matured by then that the leaders there were "astonished at his understanding and answers." (Luke 2:47) The young Jesus probably differed from the religious rulers on various points, but He was knowledgeable in the Scriptures and His speech was surely gracious, seasoned with salt. (Colossians 4:6)

Prior to the age of twelve was Jesus salt and light to the unsaved world around Him? No doubt He often was,

but maybe not on the whole. The Bible itself indicates Jesus “*increased* in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” — a great definition of salt and light, by the way. (Luke 2:52) Becoming salt and light takes time. Maturation takes time. So when we see these qualities blossoming in Jesus when He was twelve, perhaps it should not surprise us when they are not exhibited by our eight year-olds, our ten-year olds, or even our sixteen or twenty-two year-olds.

We have concluded that for our young family, the prospect of Learned (7), Madison (6), Annaliese (5), Freddy (3) or Taylor (1) being salt and light at their ages in the public schools is rather remote — even more so than when we attended elementary school 25 years ago. The textbooks used today are demonstrably anti-Christian. The percentage of Christian students is smaller. And many of the teachers themselves — the very ones we expect our children to honor and obey — are often treacherously subtle as they seek to undermine traditional faith and practices.

In our opinions, the risks are too great and our children too unprepared. In the battle of who is more likely to influence whom, our children (like their parents before them) are more likely to be losers to the larger forces about them than vice versa. And the loss may be greater than we realize. Nothing could be clearer from the

above New Testament passages on salt and light: — “If the salt have lost its savour . . . it is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out, and to be trodden underfoot of men.” (Matthew 5:13; see also Luke 14:34,35)

Christians today have largely lost their savor. They divorce as frequently as non-Christians, they engage in premarital sex as frequently as non-Christians, they hold the same political views as non-Christians, and they watch the same pointless TV shows, read the same lurid best-sellers, and listen to the same godless music as non-Christians. They are, in all manifest respects, indistinguishable from the unsaved world. Such salt is worse than worthless. It belongs in the trash or underfoot in terms of its positive influence for the Kingdom. Perhaps more than any other single factor, this dismal witness may be the result of Christians mistakenly sending their children out into the world to be salt and light before we have sufficiently nurtured in them the Christian qualities that draw men onto God.

Assessing Our Children (And Ourselves!)

When will our children be salt and light, ready to make a difference? The following indicators may help us in that crucial decision:

- ◆ Do our children exhibit maturity in their walk with the

Lord? Do adults with sound judgment comment to us with any regularity regarding our children’s excellent character and behavior?

- ◆ Do they exercise godly priorities in the areas of speech, dress and attitudes when doing so forces them to stand alone from their peers?
- ◆ Can they discuss meaningful issues with adults, know the truth from error with subtlety, and disagree (if asked their opinion) with grace and respect? (See Colossians 4:6.)

These are tough tests (unachieved by most forty-year-olds in the Church much less fourteen year-olds). We pray that our children are being properly trained to pass them as soon as possible. That’s our job. But until they can, we shall seek those *Christian environments* where they are exposed to plenty of salt and light.

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