

Teaching moments: Heart of integrity

by [Ellen T. Charry](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

My tradition of origin said, “Find a teacher.” My first teachers, of course, were my parents, especially my father, who taught me to paint a room, saw a board, read poetry during thunderstorms, climb tall logs in the playground and catch fish. When I was in about the fifth grade the rabbi’s wife, who was my Hebrew teacher, invited me to her home and was the first person ever to serve me coffee.

At the sprawling university I attended, two teachers took an interest in me in my freshman year. My philosophy professor, Mr. Wisdom (no kidding), had lunch with me just to talk, and a history professor held Saturday night soirees at her apartment where she served sherry. They made me feel like more than a registration card number.

I backed into graduate school, taking classes for a master’s degree in religion just for fun. After giving a seminar presentation on a section of a book I did not understand, the professor stopped me outside the door of the classroom and asked what I was studying for. When I said a master’s degree, he said, “You have a mind.” “A what?” I asked.

He invited me into his office, which I visited for the next five years, soaking up all the theology he could cram into me and learning to worry over the theological problems that beset Judaism.

Paul van Buren was one of Karl Barth’s last and most able students. In the 1950s he had written his dissertation on Calvin’s Christology. After returning to the states, he became caught up in making Christianity understandable in the secular context and wrote *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, for which Barth disowned him.

Paul then became interested in the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and linguistic analysis. But by the time I met him, late in his career, he had found the most serious theological problem of his life: the Jews. The department he was in was not a theology department but a religion department in which the whole panoply of the world’s religious traditions were taught by their adherents, Judaism among them.

After sitting on search committees to hire Jewish scholars, van Buren had become uneasy with how Barth had dealt with Jews and Judaism.

Barth's approach grew out of the medieval tradition that in turn depended on the Augustinian view that the Jews should not be killed (though perhaps deprived of civic rights) because, in their obtuseness and disobedience, they testify to the divine faithfulness. The Jews fit nicely into Barth's pattern of the one community that is at once rejected and elected. The synagogue and the church together are the people of God, the one bearing God's No, the other his Yes. The imagery is enshrined in stone over the doors of several European cathedrals (in one case the synagogue is represented by a blindfolded woman with head down and a broken staff; the church is represented by a woman with her head held high and crowned, and with a scepter in her hand).

Paul saw that Barth's reading allowed no place for living Jews; they were an ideological construct that filled a necessary spot in his theological structure. Beautiful as that structure is, Paul came to believe that theology abstracted from life, especially from the life of the Jewish people, would not do. He set about to correct Barth.

I met him in the midst of his trilogy of books in which he tried rethink the Jewish no to Christ as obedience to God. At first, we didn't know exactly what we were doing together. I wanted to become a Jewish theologian. He was a Christian theologian who had a tiger by the tail. He encouraged me to find a Jewish teacher, while introducing me to the work of his own mentor, Barth. With Barth's help, I came to see that there were no Jewish teachers who could do what I needed. Paul and I agreed that he would teach me Christian theology and I would translate.

We talked for hours in his office and formed a weekly study group with other graduate students and faculty. He taught me not only what theology is but, more important, what a theological problem is. He was not writing footnotes to Barth, but going to the heart of the Christian tradition of supersessionism: the teaching, which lives deep in the Christian psyche, that Christ has trumped God's commitment to the Jewish people.

Studying with Paul was like watching a consummate surgeon at work. He was utterly high-minded and never engaged in any but the most noble conversation. He taught me that theology is the Christian art of self-criticism, or to put it in medical parlance,

theology is the great physician of the Christian tradition, called upon to correct its errors and stem its pride. If Judaism had theological problems, it was for Jews to identify and solve them. It was for me to tackle Judaism's theological problems.

Paul taught me to plumb the tradition carefully and to work on theological problems that kept the tradition from being its best. He was utterly secure in his identity, and no discovery of Christianity's failings could make him angry or vengeful. I think it was the clarity of his mind and integrity of his heart that eventually enabled me to take Christianity seriously as a way of life. And not only Paul, I must say, but other members of the department who opened Christianity to me. If Jesus Christ could make men of such caliber, it cannot be all bad, I concluded.

Coming from a Jewish orientation which had been primarily a sociological reality, I took a long time to learn to think theologically. Paul taught me to avoid technical theological jargon, even as I began to master it, and to write so that people could understand. Theology is neither a sparring match nor an academic enterprise, I learned. It is the work of clarifying what the tradition is about and analyzing how well it is being itself.

Eventually, Christian theology, especially the theme of reconciliation which is at its heart, had its way with me. And Paul's deadly seriousness about leading an obedient life came to control my own parenting and my own teaching. Paul enabled me to stand in the great tradition. It does not matter that I am not up to the task. I am ennobled just by standing in it.