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# New Thinking in Christian Education

RANDOLPH CRUMP MILLER

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** The following article is one of the E. H. Bertermann lectures which are delivered annually at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, by a recognized authority in the field of religious education. The theme of the lectures this year was "Critical Issues in Christian Education." This lecture was delivered on Nov. 10, 1964.

From where I sit, I see many critical issues in Christian education. For as a professor at Yale, I see all the winds of the future that blow through our hallowed halls. As editor of *Religious Education*, I know what is going to be published in the next six months by Christians and Jews. As a director of Christian education in a local congregation, I am aware of what is actually going on among the faithful. This perspective governs much of what I shall say.

## I. NEW WORDS

Certain key words have been gaining currency in recent developments in theory of Christian education. I shall mention three of them.

"Dialog" has been popularized by Reuel L. Howe. Beginning with the statement of the "language of relationships," which he sees as the basis for the development of the meaning of words, he has gone on to see communication primarily in terms of dialog, which he defines as "that address and response between persons in which there is a flow of meaning between them

in spite of all the obstacles that would normally block the relationship."<sup>1</sup>

Obviously he is building on the philosophy of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship, for only when there is adequate trust can one listen to the other's words. The important element in the achieving of dialog is the overcoming of the obstacles. There needs to be a flow of meaning between the teacher and the student, as well as between the students, for genuine education to take place. The key to this understanding of dialog is not grasping a methodology but achieving a relationship. Almost any method will work when the relationship has been established. People have flocked to hear Martin Buber or Reuel Howe lecture, and dialog has been achieved.

A second key word is "engagement." David Hunter has made use of this word to deepen the usual meaning of "encounter" or "meeting."<sup>2</sup> Two trains may encounter each other on a bridge, and the results are disastrous. Two automobiles meet at an intersection. But "engagement" carries with it the implication of intertwining, involvement, response in which there is a flow of meaning in both directions. It includes what has been called the "logic of self-involvement,"<sup>3</sup> in which there are performance words, expressions

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<sup>1</sup> Reuel L. Howe, *The Meaning of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1962), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Hunter, *Christian Education as Engagement* (New York: Seabury Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM Press, 1963).



of feeling and attitude, and other forms of communication. When we are deeply involved, our feeling-revealing behavior becomes an accurate form of communication. Our engagement with other human beings becomes under the Word of God, in some way unknown and yet known, an encounter with God. This engagement, like Jacob's wrestling with God, may seem like a violent encounter, or like Jeremiah's experience, it may be a call to obedience, or like Pentecost, it may be the opening of the revelation to many others.

The third key word is "kerygma." Beginning with the distinction between kerygma and *didache*, between proclamation and didactic teaching, in the New Testament, the emphasis on kerygma means that we must tell the story before we can listen to propositions. "Kerygmatic catechetics," as used by Roman Catholics, means that the catechism properly belongs in the hands of the teacher and that the story the Bible tells is what is proclaimed to the pupils.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible is understood as a record of God's mighty acts, and it is this story that records the ways in which God has revealed Himself in history. It is important, therefore, that the story be told not only in its parts but in its entirety, and in such a way that it opens up to the pupil the possibility of a response in terms of decision, commitment, and faith.

This emphasis on storytelling has come from a number of directions. Markus Barth stressed it in his use of the Bible in "The Cowboy in the Sunday School," making it clear that the story is to be

<sup>4</sup> See *Modern Catechetics*, ed. Gerard S. Sloyan (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963).

told as the Bible tells it.<sup>5</sup> David Hunter has put the emphasis on the story as a way of revealing the meaning of religious issues and decision making in life.<sup>6</sup> R. B. Braithwaite, in his "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," puts the stress on the value of *any* story, true or false, which has as its purpose the strengthening of moral ends.<sup>7</sup> Paul van Buren, using the insights of linguistic analysis, stresses the use of the story in the presentation of the freedom by which Christ makes us free.<sup>8</sup>

In different ways these are kerygmatic approaches to Christian education: the story comes first and then the interpretation and propositions. The revelation lies in the story, not in the propositions.

When these three key words are taken seriously, they cause Christian educators to rework some of their traditional ideas. For some years the battle in thinking about curriculum has been in terms of content-centered, God-centered, child-centered, and various other substantive approaches. If the curriculum is what happens in the experience of the pupil, the center may shift from one to the other of these alternatives, but what stays at the center is what happens to the student. David Hunter suggests that the real center of the curriculum is the religious issues in the life of the student. In his day-to-day decisions, which may seem as simple as choosing a new suit

<sup>5</sup> See *Religious Education*, LVI, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1962), 39-46, 80; LVI, 2 (March-April 1962), 120-127.

<sup>6</sup> See *Christian Education as Engagement*.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Existence of God*, ed. John Hick (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 228 to 252.

<sup>8</sup> See "Christian Education *Post Mortem Dei*," *Religious Education*, LX, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1965), 4 ff.



or selecting dishes in a cafeteria, religious issues are at stake. *How* he decides carries religious significance. What norms he considers in making a decision, what influences he accedes to, what pressures he rejects or accepts, what personal factors are involved, are elements in the self-understanding that is essential to continuing Christian commitment. The Bible, doctrine, creeds, and other resources become significant as they are relevant to this kind of reflection on the religious issues of life. The curriculum is the student's world, and we learn by exchanging stories about our worlds. Education is what happens to a person in community.

It has become a cliché to say that the "church is mission," but this, too, gains new meaning from our key words. Jesus Christ came to save the world and not only the church. Mission is no longer thought of primarily in terms of supporting someone who works for Christ in a foreign land. The "apostle" is one who is sent forth from the local congregation. Our mission is to the world around us. The major task of the church is "the increase of the love of God and neighbor." And we do not select our neighbor; he is the man next door, he is the one in need, he is friend or enemy. My task is to see the Christ in my neighbor. We are to be in dialog with other people, to enter into an engagement with them in mutual projects, to share in such a way that there is opportunity for the kerygma to be heard and responded to. This kind of relationship depends more on what we are than on what we do, although the two are inter-related.

The "world" has sometimes been used to describe that which is opposed to or

separated from God. But if dialog and engagement exist within the framework of creation, as indeed they do, the meaning of "world" is changed. Bonhoeffer's use of "world" is sophisticated, and yet it points to the facts that God is the Creator of this world and that Jesus Christ came to redeem the world. This is the locale of the church at work. Robert Johnson says bluntly that "the unavoidable primal fact is that the Church is in the world and the world is in the Church."<sup>9</sup> This is where God located His church and where we must be if we are to fulfill our ministries. The religious issues become significant in the work and play of our life in the world.

## II. THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY

This emphasis on the world leads directly to the most significant development in current theology, the rediscovery of the ministry of the laity. The church when interpreted as the "people of God" is the λαός, and therefore all those in the church are laity. One enters this ministry of the laity through Baptism, for he shares in the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world. Even those who are ordained remain members of the "royal priesthood." There is no escaping this ministry, although one may reject its claim on him. There may be varieties of gifts and of ministries, but ultimately it comes down to sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

There are varieties of gifts. No two people are called to exactly the same task. Yet all are called, all are sent, in the light of their gifts. The purpose of the church, then, is "to equip God's people for work

<sup>9</sup> Robert Clyde Johnson, *The Church and the Changing Ministry* (Philadelphia: United Presbyterian Church, 1961).



in His service" (Eph. 4:12 NEB). This is brought out clearly in a quotation from the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Evanston in 1954:

. . . In daily living and work, the laity are not mere fragments of the Church who are scattered about in the world and who come together again for worship, instruction and specifically Christian fellowship on Sundays. They are the Church's representatives, no matter where they are. It is the laity who draw together work and worship; it is they who bridge the gulf between the Church and the world, and it is they who manifest in word and action the Lordship of Christ over the world which claims so much of their time and energy and labor. This, and not some new order or organization, is the ministry of the laity. They are called to it because they belong to the Church, although many do not yet know that they are thus called.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian does not say, "I am a Christian and also a politician," but, "As a Christian, I fulfill my ministry in politics." Francis Ayers states it with simplicity and power: "You have a ministry; therefore fulfill your ministry." This means that one finds his vocation at the centers of power, that the ministry of the laity is crucial in terms of the religious issues in political action, economic decisions, and social concerns. It means that there is a ministry of the laity in work (any kind of work), in leisure, in play, in exercising citizenship, in witnessing against unjust laws, in asserting God's claim on all men, in accepting responsibility for the welfare of one's neighbor.

We sometimes distinguish between the "work of the church" and "church work." There is a witness of the church to the

world, and there is ecclesiastical house-keeping. But this is not quite the proper distinction. It is true that someone must keep accounts and take care of the church's hardware, but within the congregation there is an important ministry of dialog and engagement, chiefly in the work of the Christian teacher who is concerned with the "equipping ministry." The primary responsibility for the teaching ministry lies with the laity, and it is of increasing significance in terms of preparing other laity for their participation in the work of the church in the world.

This emphasis on the laity has led to lay schools of theology. The most significant movement has been the Evangelical Academies, only obliquely connected with the churches, which bring together men and women to consider the responsibilities of their jobs. These academies reach a surprising number of Germans, with backing from management and labor unions, and the results are satisfying from the standpoint of an increase of the sense of ministry. There are five lay schools in Canada, supported by the United Church of Canada, which are having a significant effect. Many other communities operate in their own unique ways to provide a deepening sense of ministry among lay people.

This has led to an increasing interest in adult education in the churches. In the Protestant Episcopal Church the major thrust has been in the direction of parents' classes. Others have worked on the implications for Christians in their jobs. Others have stressed the place of the layman in the church. Concern groups of adults, led by the members, have taken the whole of their own world under consideration, studying theology or the Bible

<sup>10</sup> *Evanston Report*, p. 161.



in the light of the newly developed sense of ministry. They find that there are no easy answers to this ministry of the laity in the 20th century.

Of course, such discoveries are not new, but they are new to an age in which clerical domination in the churches has often been the pattern.

Unless the Lord build the house,  
Its builders toil thereon in vain.  
Unless the Lord keep the city,  
The watchman keeps awake in vain.  
In vain do you rise up early,  
And stay up late,  
And eat hard-earned bread;  
So He gives His loved ones sleep.  
(Ps. 127:1, 2)

### III. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

At the convention of the Religious Education Association in 1963, we discovered that one of the seminars which was poorly attended dealt with "Contemporary American Morality and Nuclear War." When we checked this against articles submitted to *Religious Education*, we found none on this subject. It has been hard to find religious educators or scholars of Christian ethics who have dealt with this subject. Finally, a group of seminarians in West Baden, a Jesuit theological college, conducted a Nuclear War Institute, and we were able to obtain two of the addresses for publication.

This points, it seems to me, to one of the untraveled roads in contemporary Christian thinking. The topic is complex, and simple answers (such as we often find both in Sunday school and among politicians) are dangerous. Christopher Hollis writes that no one can foretell the future but that we know what the consequences of nuclear war might be. There-

fore he presents some of the alternatives that need to be considered, but not with any finality. The only certainty is that "we are in the hands of God."<sup>11</sup>

We are called to responsible Christian citizenship, and this theme must work its way more definitely into our Christian education materials.

Our sense of social responsibility also involves a concern for individuals. One of the frontiers of Christian education thinking involves us in the consideration of automation and what it is doing to our lives. We need to be aware of the value of persons in an automated world, with its technological unemployment, the reduction of persons to statistics or identification numbers, and the Christian answer to this situation. But there is another side to this problem, not often described, which is the challenge that faces the church because of the increased freedom offered by release from certain kinds of labor and from the longer hours formerly required.<sup>12</sup>

Another increasing concern is the new sense of the need for ministry to exceptional people. Beginning with the school dropouts, and continuing to a consideration of the retarded and the handicapped, there are practically no materials for the Christian education of such persons or places where they can be educated. We have succeeded in mass-producing Christian education materials for the great majority of middle class whites and have assumed that such tools are suitable in all situations.

<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Hollis, "War in the Nuclear Age," *Religious Education*, LIX, 3 (May-June 1964), 226-233.

<sup>12</sup> See Mary T. Clark, "Industry's Challenge to Freedom," *Religious Education*, LVIII, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1964), 392-399.



New and creative thinking is needed along these lines.

The culturally deprived, especially in the inner city and isolated rural areas, also lack the proper materials for Christian education. The middle-class values, which are not necessarily values derived from the Christian tradition or from the Bible, are worked into most Christian education materials, and they contain assumptions which are foreign to the culturally deprived. Much work needs to be done at this level.

Slowly the churches have become aware of the Christian interpretation of race relations. Our special issue of *Religious Education* on this subject went out of print almost immediately, in spite of an extra large printing. Negro and white, Jewish and Christian writers contributed to a discussion of race relations and religious education and provided resources for examination of the failures and successes of churches and synagogues in this crucial area of human relations.<sup>13</sup> To some extent, the recognition of this problem is finding its way into Christian education materials and pictures.

Another area of social concern is reflected in the studies of the World Council of Churches on rapid social change. Rapid social change not only has altered Christian thinking about the church's mission but has provided a challenge to a new way of thinking about the world in which we live. When we place rising nations, increased use of technology, and the scientific world view side by side and realize that people are being molded by these influences, we realize that much of what

we teach is out of date by the time it is placed in written form.

#### IV. ECUMENICAL EDUCATION

The danger of a survey such as this is that it hits a number of high spots and leaves the development to others. But this is exactly the purpose. And much of the new thinking in Christian education involves us in an understanding of ecumenical relations.

There is a World Council of Christian Education and Sunday School Association, with a journal, *World Christian Education*. It has members in almost every country of the world. It brings Christians of all nations together for consideration of common interests. Last summer, for example, at FÜRIGEN, Switzerland, representatives from many nations met to discuss problems of curriculum materials.<sup>14</sup> In 1962, a conference was held at Belfast, Northern Ireland, which dealt with the problems of seminary education and with the basic issues in Christian education. Here is ecumenical churchmanship in action.

But those in the churches also need to be educated in ecumenical relations at two levels. (1) They should know what goes on in ecumenical discussions in the World Council of Churches, in the Vatican Council, and in the Lutheran World Federation, for example. It is important to know what the issues are, and in these conferences we can find what separates us from our brothers in Christ. Some of this information is being filtered into our churches through recent books used in adult groups. (2) It is also necessary to develop a grass roots ecumenicity, so that we will understand

<sup>13</sup> *Religious Education*, LIX, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1964).

<sup>14</sup> Colin Alves, "Fürigen, 1964," *Religious Education*, LIX, 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1964)



ourselves and others better. Here is the possibility of genuine dialog across denominational lines that can increase our understanding of the comprehensiveness of Christian faith. More than this, the opportunity to meet and appreciate others may make possible future mergers of churches and will overcome our divisions without compromising the basic faith which we hold.

Religious educators on the professional level have been able to operate on a multi-faith basis through the Religious Education Association for many years. With the more open ecumenical climate of today, it is easier for an editor to establish dialog on the professional level, even to the point of critical debates across faith lines. But chiefly it means that the resources of all faiths are open to everyone.

#### V. FAMILY LIFE

When Horace Bushnell wrote the first chapters of *Christian Nurture* in 1847, he presented insights into the significance of parents for Christian education that are only now being realized. Much of what he wrote was either ignored or forgotten over the years and has been recovered for us by the findings of child psychologists. But the prime importance of parents is offset by their incompetence and lack of understanding of both the Christian faith and the importance of their Christian ministry as parents. They may have a secular understanding of their responsibilities, but they have not related these to a Christian understanding of the family and parenthood.

When new lesson materials appeared which attempted to utilize the ministry of parenthood, they were not used, and finally

a research job indicated that the parents, even when they were active church members, did not know what to do with the materials because they had no understanding of their roles or the role of the church.<sup>15</sup>

Ernest Ligon has demonstrated over the past 30 years that when parents are adequately assisted in understanding their roles, they do a good job of fulfilling them.<sup>16</sup> This has resulted in new developments in the church's approach to the family. There has been an emphasis on the family's worshipping together in a service especially tailored for their needs and capacities. The approach to infant baptism has included conferences with parents dealing with the ministry of parenthood. Parents' classes have been tied in with the education of their children. But the Fairchild and Wynn research report indicates that there is a long way to go before any of these approaches will make a significant difference.

#### VI. THE BIBLICAL BASE

The use of the Bible in Christian education is being governed more today by Biblical theology. No longer is the Bible considered an end in itself; nor is it considered a kind of resource book for problem solving. The problem today is to learn to think Biblically about the religious issue in one's life. We hope that students will go to the Bible with new questions, questions that emerge from their attempt to see the meanings of their lives and to

<sup>15</sup> See Roy Fairchild and John C. Wynn, *Families in the Church* (New York: Association Press, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> See Ernest M. Ligon, *Dimensions of Character* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956).



learn to reflect on these issues from a Biblical point of view.

This means, for example, a change from moralism or even moral guidance based on the Bible's examples, to an ethic of radical obedience. It avoids the ethics of respectability at the cost of taking risks for Christ's sake. It makes clear that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. It takes the ethical decisions that men are faced with and places them within the framework of a view of revelation based on God's acts rather than on propositions. It does not destroy a morality based on God's Law, but it provides a freedom under God's Law that challenges the laws of men.

The Bible is interpreted in terms of the language of relationships, as developed by Reuel L. Howe.<sup>17</sup> It is seen as a story of God's engagement with men, as a record of God's mighty acts, as a drama of redemption. Because the priority is placed on God, with the central act being God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, man shares in the freedom of Christ to be a new creature.

This view of the Bible is beginning to work itself into curriculum materials. The drama of redemption, seen in terms of creation, covenant, Christ, church, and consummation,<sup>18</sup> is related to the student's experiences, and the Bible begins to speak of the wonderful gifts of God.

Our children live even more completely in a universe seen from a scientific viewpoint than do adults, and until the Bible can be interpreted in terms relevant to their world, it will remain an ancient and revered but possibly irrelevant book.

<sup>17</sup> See his *Man's Need and God's Action* (New York: Seabury Press, 1953).

<sup>18</sup> See my *Biblical Theology and Christian Education* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956).

## VII. LOGICAL EMPIRICISM

One of the most important answers to the problem of the communication of the Christian message has come from an unlikely source. Beginning as logical positivism and with no interest in religious concepts, there has developed a study of language which has become significant for the understanding and communication of religious truth. The analysis of language has taken a number of different forms, and one of the most important of these is the thesis of Ian T. Ramsey, who suggests that all religious language must be grounded in what he calls "disclosures," situations in which "the light dawns" or the "ice breaks." These moments of "revelation" can be illustrated in many ways in our common human experience, but chiefly when we discern an individual as a person, when we see what God's claim is in terms of obedience, when a new insight comes and makes sense of the events in our lives. Such disclosures are likely to be followed by renewed or new commitments.

There is, says Ramsey, an odd logic about such disclosures. The language which is suited to such disclosures is odd, and it never guarantees the results. There is no magic here, but there is recognition that the supernatural impinges on the natural. Education may prepare a man to receive such a disclosure, but it can never manipulate the response a man may make.<sup>19</sup>

This means, continues Ramsey, that the primary purpose is to teach insight rather

<sup>19</sup> See Ian T. Ramsey, "Christian Education in the Light of Contemporary Empiricism," *Religious Education*, LVII, 2 (March-April 1962), 95, 96; *Religious Language* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957); *Models and Mystery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). Also, the symposium on this topic in *Religious Education*, LX, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1965).



than information, to evoke disclosures rather than to seek intellectual assent. This involves an understanding of the special nature of religious language, which is more akin to poetry than to prose, more inclined to be odd rather than systematic in its logic, tied in with story and picture language rather than with propositions. Such education, like David Hunter's insistence on the centrality of religious issues, deals with people where they are, enabling them to be equipped for a life of commitment. Vision plus commitment can lead to the new creation in Jesus Christ. Here again we see the significance for Christian education for the emphases on dialog, engagement, and kerygma.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

Such an approach places responsibility on the teacher, for only as ideas and visions

are wrapped up in persons can they be delivered to other persons. Our teacher training is best centered in the nurture of teachers, equipping them for the work of teaching by leading them in the direction of disclosure and commitment.

When we take seriously this approach to Christian education, when we begin to participate in dialog and engagement so that we, too, may respond to the kerygma, we see that Christian education means telling the story of God's mighty acts in such a way that the listener participates in the dialog and comes into an engagement with God in his daily life, and therefore he sees the meaning of his life in a new way and he is reborn daily with Christ as he lives in community as a Christian in the world.

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