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Thinking Christianly About Education: A Theological Reflection for Lay Ministry Training

Acknowledgement

1 In preparing this paper, I acknowledge a heavy debt to Brian Hill, Professor of Education at Murdoch University, Western Australia¹.

Introduction

2 Where do we start? Education is a very wide field of activity, and Christian education is almost as wide.. In our diocese, Christian educators are found working with adults (home groups, EFM groups, Alpha, other study groups, catechumenate, preparation for baptism), with teens and with children (youth groups, Sunday School, after-school groups, 'Bible in Schools', church and other schools, voluntary organizations, preparation for admission to communion). Not to mention the educating role of parents with their children.

3 Often in these situations there are three ingredients: learners, teachers² and some learning going on – which might be happening in an intentional and structured way around some material which is being studied. But it might not.

4 As a Christian educator you can be expected to approach your responsibilities with a Christian perspective about your task. Whatever the specific responsibilities or task, you will have in mind the eternal good of the people with whom you are dealing.

Q. What do you see as the goal of a Christian educator?³ How might this goal or goals influence you in your dealings with, say, a family which has only loose connections with the church, but where a parent is seeking baptism for their infant?

A Starting Point

5 The Bible says nothing directly about education or schooling⁴, although there is archaeological evidence that there were schools by the time of the Davidic Empire . But the Bible has a lot to say about teaching and learning.

¹ Hill, Brian. *That They May Learn*. Paternoster. Devon. 1990

² In this paper I use the word 'teacher' to apply to anyone who has some responsibility for advancing the learning of another.

³ The Church is commanded to go to all nations and to make them disciples of the Lord (Mt 28.19f)

⁴ The nearest reference to a school is a 'lecture hall' in Acts 19.9

Deut.4:10b "assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear⁵ me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so."⁶

This verse is a convenient summary of what seems to be the prime Old Testament emphasis on teaching and learning:

- It's not about 'reading, writing, and mathematics'
- It's not about gaining skills for employment
- It's not about a broad general education
- It is about adults hearing the words of God
- It's about adults learning to fear/revere God
- It's about adults transmitting these understandings to their children, so they in turn may hear, fear/revere, and teach.

Although this is quite a static model, underpinning this passage is the idea of intelligent, thoughtful, voluntary personal commitment in a context of community commitment.

Q. How do you respond to the idea of fearing or revering God? Is there something else you would rather this verse said?

Q. Imagine yourself two generations on from the generation which first heard the instruction above. (Your grandparents heard it.) How would you as a young adult know that this instruction had been heard and followed, in your family and in your community?

6 In the New Testament we quickly come across the term 'disciple', to describe followers of Jesus, who often called him 'teacher'. The teacher-disciple relationship seems quite different from the relationship between teacher-student.

Q. How would you describe the difference between being a student, and being a disciple? List several important attributes of a disciple. What are the implications for you of setting out to 'model the discipling of Christians of all ages into the knowledge of Christ and the service of his Kingdom'⁷?

There is much to be learned here, from the concept of 'disciple'.

The Human Learner⁸

7 There is a Biblical anthropology, about the nature of humankind. This can be summarized, that we are neither animal nor angel, but persons - 'inspired bodies'. In life we are 'bodied'. After resurrection we will be 'bodied', as embodied spirits⁹. We misunderstand our faith when we talk of 'souls' as entities

⁵ NIV translates this as 'revere'.

⁶ I use NRSV in my quotes.

⁷ Licensed Lay Ministers' Handbook p7

⁸ The Bible does not mince words. There is an expectation that people teach, and that people learn.

⁹ 1 Cor 15.35-

able to be separated from embodiment. Metaphorically, we are creatures of dust into whom God has breathed the spirit.

Q. *What is your understanding of 'inspired bodies'? What differences might it make to the process of teaching and learning, if we understand humans as 'inspired bodies'? (Bodies are involved in activity. What about Spirit?)*

8 The Biblical picture is of humans as a damaged species, but one which is made in the image of God, and which has been redeemed. Individual members of the species are able to be rescued from their condition.

9 Living in a natural world as we do, humans are strongly influenced by heredity and by environment. But their reasoning powers mean humans have a capacity for self-determination. And there is the capacity for relationships with others; I-Thou¹⁰.

Q. *Of the four notions identified above in para 8 (heredity, environment, self-determination, relationships), which ones do you see as the province of Christian education? Does age and/or education setting make a difference?*

10 There is another component in human learning, uniquely acknowledged by Christians – the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus declared that the Spirit would lead his followers into truth. So at times learners find fresh insights which seem to emerge into the mind, totally unexpectedly.

Q. *Discuss occasions where you have observed in others, or experienced yourself, some learning which in your view could have been Spirit-inspired.*

11 Jesus' summary of the Law gives a cue as to the two prime goals of learning. The first is to become capable of self-determination, to become autonomous - a person who has sufficient freedom, knowledge and self-control to be able to make their own decisions. It is clear that what God wants are people who choose to love him with every fibre of their beings. And so one God-driven aim of education is to develop the potential for self-ruled behaviour - even though this development carries the risk that the person will freely choose not to love God.

12 The second part of the Law (love your neighbour) gives the second strand of development for the learner: to develop the capacity to form self-determined I-Thou relationships with other people.

Q. *From your experience, discuss how the development of self-determination and the development of relationships have both happened, within a group or class of which you have been a part . What seemed to be the ingredients needed for this to happen?*

13 We might wonder about the relative importance of autonomy. It's worth remembering the high respect which Jesus accorded to individuals: eg the

¹⁰ Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*.

Canaanite woman Mt 15.22-28; the rich young man Mk 10.17-31; the sinful woman Lk7.36-50; the cost of discipleship Lk14.25-33.

Q. Choose one of the Bible passages above. In what ways did Jesus respect the autonomy of the people he was dealing with? In what ways did he do more than show respect?

14 You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Although we are autonomous and self-determining, the second strand of Christian learning is to become a person who freely chooses to love God and to love others. To be a child of God, in community with other children of God.

Q. Refer to the passage you looked at in the previous paragraph. How was the challenge to love, not simply to be autonomous, tied into this event?

15 You may have come across the concept of 'stages of faith development' in another course. There are a number of models of faith development eg Fowler, Westerhoff. Each of these models can be helpful in understanding the range of faith positions in which people can be found.

16 I personally find the idea of faith 'stages' can be misleading in possibly suggesting that there is a standard linear process of faith change for an individual. There are adults whose faith is similar to that of many children – quite literalist. On the other hand there are teenagers who are questioning and examining and critiquing, in a way which some adults find impossible to understand. The language of 'stages' can suggest that one 'position' is better or more advanced than another. Not everyone agrees that this is so. Perhaps the essential for anyone involved in Christian education is that most groups of people will have within them persons who have different understanding of faith – their own, and their community's.

The Teacher/Mentor/Educator

17 We live in a 'schooled' society, and it is very hard for us to imagine afresh the role of a teacher, separate from a school, and to think about that role as God-given. But let us try.

Biblical Model - Old Testament Style

18 Parents are teachers. Deut 6.4-9

The priests are teachers. Lev 10.11

There was room for prophets, who might challenge the status quo

Prophets might have understudies/disciples eg Elijah and Elisha

There developed a tradition of wise sages, the gurus of Judaism eg Proverbs and the Wisdom literature, forerunners of the rabbis.

During the time of Ezra and later, scribes emerged, who combined roles of literary assistants to officialdom, with teaching functions in the decentralized synagogue worship system.

By Jesus' time, there was a highly-developed professional caste of 'teachers of the Law'. Outside Jerusalem, the synagogue was the local centre of learning, where scripture was expounded on the Sabbath (and probably at other times during the week also), and boys were able to be taught to read and write.

Biblical Model - New Testament Style

19 The early church provides us with some different actors in the teaching world, in addition to those already mentioned above.

The apostles appear to have been stewards of sound teaching amongst the early churches.

In the New Testament discussions of the gifts of the Spirit, there is specific mention of the gift of teaching as a Spirit-inspired gift for the edification of the Church.

The New Testament recognizes that spiritual learners may learn directly from the Holy Spirit ¹¹, and so anyone may bring a new insight into a group of believers.

20 There's a strong community aspect to learning in the New Testament early Church. '...Christians are encouraged corporately to "go to school" with Christ, to be nourished by teaching and the sacraments, and to grow up into his likeness (Eph 4.11-16). So the Church is a school in which the gift of teaching is acknowledged, but in which all teachers are themselves learners, enjoying mutuality of encouragement and correction. This enables the Church to be a teaching community not simply for its own sake, but for the sake of its mission to the world.' (Virginia Report : Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission para 4.3)

21 Above all else are the word and example of Jesus, revealing love and respect for human learners, and in the glimpses we have of him in action, masterly in his ability to use unforgettable epigram and illustration, metaphor and humour, probing questions and real-life examples, to help his hearers to learn. Especially those who spent time close with him.

Being a Teacher

22 Teaching is very often associated with our own memories of schools. But schooling is only part of teaching. For children in school there is an element of compulsion about being there, even in a private school. It's worth remembering that teaching and learning is going on all around us, informally. Many people act as teachers in the life of a person.

¹¹ Jn 14.26 and 1 Jn 2.27

23 In many out-of-school contexts, both the teacher and the learner are volunteers. The relationship is one of persuasion on the part of the teacher, and voluntary cooperation on the part of the student. When dealing with adults, the relationship verges towards mutual learning, although even here someone has to select material for consideration, and plan what is happening.

24 There is a power relationship between teacher and learner. Even with adult groups, the teacher has power because of the knowledge they are presumed to have. And there is a curious counter-balance. The less overt power the teacher has (through compulsory attendance, say), and the more he/she has to rely on persuasion in the relationship with the learner, the greater the opportunity the teacher has to influence the learner long-term.

Q. Share with others a memory of one person whose voluntary teaching has influenced your life, long-term. What was it about that person which made a difference?

Q. When all the material you learned in a programme has been forgotten, what is it that remains?

What to Teach and How

25 Deciding what to teach can be a simple or complex question depending on your situation. At one end, if you are a school teacher, what you will teach might be determined in detail by the state and by your school. At the other end, you might be totally free - and therefore have the question on your mind 'What do we do next week?' Even if your curriculum has been determined elsewhere (eg school curriculum, Religion in Life, Whole People of God) you will still have to decide exactly what you are going to do, and how.

26 It is a truism that people learn what they learn, which is not the same as what the teacher or leader thought had been taught. Nor do learners come with empty minds. We come with 'knowledge' already, whether that is expressed or not. (Many young children, for instance, have only a hazy distinction between living and non-living things.)

27 As I have noted above in this paper, a Biblical challenge in teaching is to teach in such a way that people 'learn God', and 'learn loving relationships with others'¹². Plainly the first part of this principle is more difficult in a state school environment during normal class time. But it is not impossible.

A common start point can be a respect for knowledge itself, 'a rich storehouse for the glory of the Creator, and the relief of man's estate'¹³.

- knowledge increases our dominion over our environment¹⁴
- knowledge contributes to the relief of human distress
- knowledge is enjoyable in itself
- knowledge increases our wonder at the creativity of God

¹² not the same as learning about ...

¹³ Bacon, Francis. *The Advancement of Learning*.

¹⁴ Gen 1.26-31

The very word 'discovery' when used about knowledge suggests the mystery of discovering something which already exists in the mind of God. Perhaps without realizing the full significance of what he was saying, the Nobel Prize winning scientist Richard Feynman described physics as "like trying to figure out the rules of a chess game between the gods"¹⁵.

28 If we are teaching in a church context, the options are more open. I suggest the following as useful pointers:

- when dealing with children and young people, remember we are in partnership with parents, who are likely to need a lot of help and encouragement to take their role in their children's faith development
- whatever we choose to teach, our prime aims are to develop growing, independent, autonomous, loving relationships with God and with other people.

Conclusion

29 In the diocese, some people are licensed by the Bishop as Educators. An educator is to be 'a person who delights in forming the mind of Christ in Christians of all ages', who 'respects the freedom of those they minister to, and works to build maturity and independence in them', and who 'models the discipling of Christians of all ages into the knowledge of Christ and the service of his Kingdom'.

30 Whether or not you are someone who holds or aims to hold, a diocesan licence as an educator, the key word in being such a person is the word 'disciple', one who wants to be like his teacher. The story of the walk with Jesus to Emmaus is one you might want to meditate upon. I walk myself as a disciple, with Christ. As an educator, I walk alongside others in their walk, always encouraging and directing them to focus their attention not on me - but on Him.

31 Mark 8.22-10.52 is an extended passage with a remarkable variety of events, each described briefly but vividly. There is direct oral teaching, healings, Peter's declaration, the transfiguration, foretelling of death and resurrection, requests from James and John for privileged places, and more. There is action and comment, interaction with the disciples, not simply wise sayings, but drama. What we see in this passage is ministry formation on the move. There's practically nothing in the way of doctrine. Statements of what we are to believe. Jesus' emphasis is on modeling, and encouraging his disciples to imitate, the way we are to be. That too, is our challenge as Christian educators. To both imitate Christ ourselves, and to help others to do the same.

Lyll Perris

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¹⁵ quoted in Johnson, George. *Strange Beauty*. Vintage: London. 2000

Annex

Some References

Old Testament

Deut 6.1-9	focus on the family
Deut 11.19, 20.18	how one's life ought to be lived
Ex 12.26f	the father's role in educating children
Ezra 7.10	the role of the scribes
Prov 8.1-21, 32-36	wisdom (Sophia) mediates revelation
Isa 1.3	the prophet complains that 'Israel does not know'

New Testament

Mt 7.28-29	the authority of Jesus
Mark 6.1, 5.31, 6.30, 6.40	Jesus teaching and commissioning his disciples
Mark 8.22-10.52	range of teaching styles
Jn 16.12-15	role of the Holy Spirit
Mt 28.16-20	the Great Commission
Acts 11.19-24	education in the early church
1 Cor.12.28	importance of teaching
Col 1.28-29	a model of Christian education
Eph 4.11-16	educators equip God's servants
1Tim, 2Tim, Titus 2	instructional leadership
2Pet.1.12-21	true and false teachers

Annex

Seven Laws of Teaching

The Law of the T eacher	If you stop growing today, you stop teaching tomorrow.
The Law of E ducation	The way people learn determines the way you teach.
The Law of A ctivity	Maximum learning is always the result of maximum meaningful involvement.
The Law of C ommunication	To truly impart information requires the building of bridges.
The Law of the H earth	Teaching that impacts is not head to head; it is heart to heart.
The Law of E ncouragement	Teaching tends to be most effective when the learner is properly motivated.
The Law of R eadiness	The teaching-learning process will be most effective when both the teacher and the learner are adequately prepared.

Hendricks, Howard G. *Teaching to Change Lives*. Multonah Press: Oregon. 1987