

## A Philosophy of Christian Education

The goal of this paper is to develop a working philosophy of Christian education.

However, before one is able to develop a philosophy of Christian education one must first wrap their mind around what is being spoken about. For many, 'Christian education,' is used specifically to describe the formal academic exercise of learning in a classroom. This is too narrow a view however. Though commended by its specificity, it fails to be broad enough to understand the scope of the word education as it relates to Christianity. Anthony captures a suitably broad definition saying:

Christian education is the process by which those who have experienced a personal spiritual rebirth in their relationship with God partner with the indwelling Holy Spirit to grow in the image of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Once a philosophy of Christian education is understood and developed from this broad definition, it then becomes valuable in its specific application. A formal classroom learning environment will then have a specific place in the bigger picture.

Anthony's definition is helpful in formalizing a familiar concept spoken about regularly in churches outside of the academic world. The concept is called 'discipleship.' No matter how specific one gets in their conception of education, it must fit under the rubric of discipleship. This is the great task we are here for, to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). But to make disciples requires that we must be disciples ourselves, for we are not making disciples of ourselves but disciples of Christ. This is where the great commandment comes in (Matt. 22:36-40). We are recruiting and training people to love God with all their heart soul mind and strength. Dockery, in speaking of the great commandment and its relation to Christian education, has this to say:

---

<sup>1</sup>Anthony, Michael J. (2001-09-01). *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century* (Kindle Locations 403-404). Baker Book Group - A. Kindle Edition.

The first and greatest commandment makes plain that we are to love God with our minds. As T. S. Eliot appropriately expressed: “The purpose of a Christian education would not be merely to make men and women pious Christians: a system which aimed too rigidly at this end alone would become only obscurantist. A Christian education must primarily teach people to be able to think in Christian categories.”<sup>7</sup> Thus we want to love God with our hearts, with our souls, and, indeed, with our minds as well. Learning to think Christianly impacts our homes, our businesses, our health care agencies, our schools, our social structures, our recreation, and, yes, our churches too. To love God with our minds means that we think differently about the way we live and love, the way we worship and serve, the way we work to earn our livelihood, the way we learn and teach.<sup>2</sup>

The discipleship process is then concerned with developing a theocentric worldview that interacts with every idea we come across. It is thinking with god’s point of view, with God’s perspective on every issue. This mind of Christ, is the stewardship and goal of Christian education. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:14-16)

Paul points out that this mindset is our stewardship as ‘spiritual,’ people.

This brings up the initial starting point of any Christian education which is that it concerns Christians. This is opposite to every other religious conception in the world in that education begins with a changed nature. Sanctification proceeds from Justification not the other way around. This is seen in many of Paul’s letters, especially in his letter to the Corinthians. His main point in the letter is to ‘start acting like a saint because YOU ARE A SAINT.’ This radical starting point is essential to the task of Christian education. Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

---

<sup>2</sup>Dockery, David S. (2008-04-15). *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society Through Christian Higher Education*, Revised and Updated (Kindle Locations 366-373). B&H Publishing. Kindle Edition.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). Yount remarks:

Since we are a "new creation" in Christ, and since "the old" is gone, why bother with human conceptions of personality development? Why should Christians be concerned about human growth and development? The answer is found, first, in the thrust of Paul's message. Paul is referring to the spiritual truth that one who has come into vital union with Christ has been radically transformed. Believers see the world differently. Their outlook is changed from "the old" self-centeredness and perversion of the past. Paul does not imply that believers are instantaneously transformed into healthy, whole human personalities. His letters contain explicit testimonies of his concern for Christian growth and maturing as believers take off the "old garments" and put on the "new" (Col 3:8–12) in the social context of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore the first step in Christian education must be that of evangelism for the teacher and that of receiving Christ for the student.

Christian education begins with God but also continues with Him. Paul rebukes the Galatians for forgetting this fact:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-3)

Growth in the Christian life is a spiritual matter requiring a spiritual teacher. This important understanding reminds us that God is ultimately the change agent in spiritual formation. Yount reinforces this fact saying:

Spiritual understanding requires a Spiritual Teacher. No purely biological process can explain spiritual concepts to the satisfaction of the One Who made us to be like Him....When we teach in a church context—sermons, Bible studies, discipleship classes—we may teach for a long time without visible results. Then, without any apparent reason, we see lives transformed, attitudes changed, and behaviors improved. This is the work of the Spirit of the Lord, Who moves, not in the constrained forces of biological processes, but freely like the wind: "The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its

---

<sup>3</sup>Yount, William (2010-08-15). Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher's Introduction to Educational Psychology, Second Edition (p. 77). B&H Publishing. Kindle Edition.

sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Teachers do well to use Piaget's suggestions to provide the rational raw material for spiritual growth. Simply "depending on the Lord" in Christian teaching does not excuse poor methodology.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding God's role necessarily puts weight on God's methodology which is centered in the Scripture. Paul points this out in his letter to Timothy saying:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

The second step in any method of Christian education requires a knowledge of this sufficient Word. For by it, the student is made complete or mature in using the mind of Christ. For the teacher this means teaching the Scripture and for the student it means knowing the Scripture. This seems patently obvious, but in an age of unprecedented biblical illiteracy it seems this fact has been neglected.

If the task was simply to teach the Bible to people it would seem that we could end here but it seems many claim to know the Bible but demonstrate by their lives that they do not let it impact their decision making. This is where the third step of interaction comes in. Yount interacts with secular Swiss psychologist Piaget in underscoring the implications of learning God's Word:

Piaget underscores the fact that teaching must be more than talking at students. Teaching requires more than presenting a lesson to students if we hope to change the structure of thinking of students. A line from the hymn "People to People" expresses the problem Piaget addresses in teaching. The line reads, "How do you tell an orphan child about the Father's love?"<sup>149</sup> The orphan has a scheme called "father," the content of which depends on his particular experiences in being orphaned. Whatever the scheme, it is different from the biblical image of God as Father, which is one of closeness, protection,

---

<sup>4</sup>Yount, William (2010-08-15). Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher's Introduction to Educational Psychology, Second Edition (p. 114-115). B&H Publishing. Kindle Edition.

guidance, strength, and discipline. The one who teaches this orphan about God as "Father" must deal with the child's misconception of the term if the child is ever to understand what the Bible means by the term. Piaget would tell us that teaching to establish biblical understanding is hampered by one-way communication. The better approach is for teacher and learners to enter into interactive conversations in which new material is related in meaningful ways to established ideas. In these interactions, Bible truths collide with learner (mis)perceptions and produce disequilibrium. How learners deal with disequilibrium determines whether the outcome is positive or negative. A positive outcome is (appropriate) accommodation to biblical truth (that is, learners change personal perceptions to correspond to God's Word). We read out of the text—we exegete—God's Truth, and then order our lives by it. A negative outcome is (inappropriate) assimilation of biblical truth (that is, interpreting Scripture so that it fits our own pre-conceived ideas). That is, we read into God's Word—we eisegete—our own truths. This "adding to" or "taking away from" God's Word is heresy (Rev 22:18–19).<sup>5</sup>

This third step in Christian education means creating an interactive learning environment for the student where Biblical truth interacts with current ideas and events. This environment of accommodation and assimilation is where a real Christian worldview is developed. It is here that the more formal university setting is most beneficial. It should be noted that a university that does not have the undergirding of the Bible as a foundation for knowledge will be fractured and disconnected. Dockery agrees, saying:

What happened was a loss of an integrated worldview in the academy. There was a failure to see that every discipline and every specialization could be and should be approached from the vantage point of faith, the foundational building block for a Christian worldview. The separation of faith from learning and teaching was the first step toward creating a confused and disconnected approach to higher education, even in church-related institutions.<sup>6</sup>

In this fractured society, the church can be a big help. By creating rich interactive life groups devoted to fellowship and sharing the Word it can provide a place to rightly relate new ideas to

---

<sup>5</sup>Yount, William (2010-08-15). *Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher's Introduction to Educational Psychology*, Second Edition (pp. 110-111). B&H Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup>Dockery, David S. (2008-04-15). *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society Through Christian Higher Education*, Revised and Updated (Kindle Locations 275-278). B&H Publishing. Kindle Edition.

the truths of Scripture in real life. This is a stage of belonging and operating from certain a-priori assumptions about the world. George Knight is extremely helpful in relating the implications of this worldview to knowledge. Citing seven hallmarks of Christian epistemology, he writes:

1. The biblical perspective is that all truth is God's truth. Therefore, the distinction between sacred and secular truth is a false dichotomy. 2. . The truth of Christian revelation is true to what actually exists in the universe. Therefore, the Christian can pursue truth without the fear of ultimate contradiction. 3. . Forces of evil seek to undermine the Bible, distort human reasoning, and lead individuals to rely on their own inadequate and fallen selves in the pursuit of truth. 4. We have only a relative grasp of the absolute truths in the universe. In other words, while God can know absolutely, Christians can know absolutes in a relative sense. Thus, there is room for Christian humility in the epistemological enterprise. 5. The Bible is not concerned with abstract truth. It always sees truth as related to life. Therefore, knowing in the biblical sense is applying perceived knowledge to one's daily life and experience. 6. The various sources of knowledge available to the Christian—the special revelation of Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ, the general revelation of the natural world, and reason—are complementary and should be used in light of the biblical pattern. 7. . Given the unity of truth, the acceptance of a Christian epistemology cannot be separated from the acceptance of a Christian metaphysics and vice versa. The acceptance of any metaphysical-epistemological configuration is a faith choice, and it necessitates a total commitment to a way of life.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately the goal of Christian education is to teach others to love God with all their heart soul and mind. This could be summed up as Worship. Jesus, answering a Scribe regarding the regarding the greatest commandment, speaks of worship.

Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mk. 12:29-33)

---

<sup>7</sup>Anthony, Michael J. (2001-09-01). *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century* (Kindle Locations 832-846). Baker Book Group - A. Kindle Edition.

Notice the comparison to burnt offerings and sacrifices. Worship is in view. The idea of loving God is the idea of worshipping Him. This is the goal of Christian living. The Apostle Paul in addressing the error of the proto-gnostic teachers to the Colossians reminded them that they were already spiritual people and that their spirituality was to be lived out at the alter of everyday, ordinary life. First he says:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:16-17)

He validates the idea of a new nature and education by Scripture (16) and then shows the goal which is worship or all things done as unto the Lord (17). This is the highest level of maturity which is reflected in everyday life. Paul goes on to show exactly what that looks like in the real world:

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (col. 3:18-4:1)

For the student then, sacrificial service would be the goal. For the teacher this is where equipping the saints for actual ministry or service comes in. This would include equipping to help the homeless, the sick, the less fortunate as well as missions etc.

This would be a great place to end but Scripture does not end with disciples worshipping God. It ends with them making other disciples. The fruit of Christian education is ultimately

Christian educators. The fruit of disciple-making is disciple-making disciples. It is here that the process spirals ever deeper and further when the disciple becomes the disciple-maker.

By

Pastor Matt Smith

Pastormatt@whoisbarabbas.com

Mission:

to make disciple making disciples through the personal investment of our lives

1. Invest in Christ

- a. (student) salvation, baptism
- b. (teacher) evangelism, apologetics

2. Invest in the Bible

- a. (student) sermons, private reading, commentaries, taking classes
- b. (teacher) sermons, structured reading plans, teaching classes

3. Invest in belonging

- a. (students) devoting oneself to fellowship in the church, small groups, university worldview formation
- b. (teacher) creating small groups guided discussion, relating university studies into a Christian worldview

4. Invest in worship

- a. (students) loving God through sacrificial service
- b. (teachers) equipping the saints for the work of the ministry (service) teaching to help the homeless the widows, missions etc.

5. Invest in disciple-making.

- a. The student becomes a teacher investing their life in others