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Resetting Our Sights in Christian Education

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This is the second of two lectures which Dr. Miller delivered at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Nov. 10 and 11, 1964. His general theme was "Critical Issues in Christian Education." An anonymous grant in honor of the Rev. E. H. Bertermann, who recently retired as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Wausau, Wis., makes possible these annual lectures on some phase of religious education. The first lecture appeared in the February 1965 issue of this journal.

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. He is reborn daily with Christ, and therefore he sees the meaning of life in a new way as he lives in community as a Christian in the world.

I. REDISCOVERY OF THE LAITY

Because I am saved by grace through faith (and not through anything that I do), *therefore* I am to be worthy of my calling to serve God. This is the odd logic of the Gospel. The ethical implications of Christianity are based upon the grace-faith relationship. Faith has fruits, and herein we find the ministry of God's people, the *λαός*.

The living God initiates me into this ministry through Baptism. Whatever else Baptism may mean, it is in part at least a sacrament of initiation, whereby we are grafted into the body of Christ, and because we are members of Christ's body, we have functions to perform. We become the instruments of Christ's ministry of reconciliation in and to the world.

To understand this ministry I need to be equipped for work in His service. I have been given certain gifts that are

unique in me, and I am to use these aptitudes in freedom under God, but I cannot do this except as I understand the how and the why of this ministry.

The job of Christian education turns on this equipping ministry, so that, through discernment, commitment, and training, God's Spirit may use me to build up God's people, the church, for service in the world.

A great deal of Christian educational effort is properly expended in the preparation for such a ministry in terms of discernment and commitment. We minister to the baptized in the hope that they will in due time confirm their baptismal vows and take on the responsibility of ministry. By a proper understanding of dialog and engagement, with the emphasis on the kerygma as prior to propositional understanding, by setting the goals of curriculum in terms of religious issues in the lives of the students, and by aiming at a ministry of mission in the world, we hope that by God's grace His people will be renewed in the Spirit.

But there is a consideration beyond that of nurture in the hope of commitment. There is the guidance of those who are committed. This is the primary emphasis of the resetting of our sights in terms of the ministry of the laity: "to equip God's people for work in His service" in the world.

II. ADULT EDUCATION IN THE CHURCH

We turn, then, to adult education, so that we may reset our sights. Much has been accomplished in terms of method. I conceive of method as any means which

provides a connection between the Christian Gospel and the decisions which have to be made in daily life. We can begin either with the church's heritage or with the decision which provokes a religious issue, and the function of method is to bring these two together in a living reality for those who participate in the process.

The factual information used in such an educational procedure must be both accurate and relevant. Because we are often dealing with deeply held convictions, information from both secular and religious sources needs to be checked carefully. But the greater danger is not inaccuracy but irrelevance.

Because this process involves the participants in life situations and religious issues, it is important that information be related to the questions they are asking or are capable of asking. When the story that the Bible tells or the information coming from the Christian heritage or one's personal witness is obviously relevant, it serves well as a starting point for study; but when the overriding interest lies in the religious issues shared by the students, the starting point is suggested by this fact.

What is important is that there be first some kind of dialog between teacher and students, between the participants, or between the class and the subject matter. As they become engaged in their own interpersonal relations, or involved in a problem, or challenged by the subject matter, they may become ready to hear the key-rygma. Or if they have begun with the proclamation of the Gospel, they may become ready to see how it speaks to their situation. As dialog and engagement increase, the members are free to make their own decisions. The knowledge that

emerges should be taught so that there is a possibility of discernment and commitment. As Ian T. Ramsey writes, "There can be no theological finality. Our whole lives must be spent in the adventure of formulating and teaching ever less inadequate maps of what has been revealed to us in that disclosure in which our Christian existence is grounded."¹

The most popular form of adult education is group discussions. There is no magic in this approach. A group discussion may be only a debating society in which one seeks to score on an opponent. It may be loaded with hidden agenda, so that there is no real freedom to make decisions. A clever manipulator may distort what is being said so that the group may come to conclusions that are against the purpose that God has for them. But when discussion is genuine, the participants are hearing what the others are saying and are responding to what is intended, the dialog occurs. There may or may not be consensus, but at least there is openness to change and therefore the possibility of growth. This kind of engagement with the claims of the Gospel may lead to radically changed behavior as the participants work out the significance of their ministries in the world.

Sources for information and discussion may be found almost anywhere. Lectures have been known to provide a basis for dialog not only with the lecturer but among the audience. Books, motion pictures, stories, role plays, and almost any other kind of presentation will set up the situation in which discussion may prove fruitful.

¹ *Religious Education*, LVII (March-April 1962), 96.

Many varieties of leadership have emerged in adult discussion groups. Leaderless groups seem to develop their own leaders, who operate in terms of sound procedures but without the weight of being experts in the subject. Sometimes such groups make use of the experts as resource persons who are called on when necessary. Other groups operate with a lay leader who may or may not have expert knowledge of the subject matter. Other groups prefer to have as leader a teacher or clergyman who has some mastery of the material being studied and who is also capable of democratic leadership. In a few cases the teacher may be authoritative and dogmatic and still not hurt the participation by members of the group, but this does not often occur. Again, the test is in terms of dialog and engagement rather than in terms of authoritative or dogmatic subject matter dispensed by an authority figure.

The kinds of interest groups are important too. Some groups need one kind of mixture of membership and some another. One church has experimented with groups selected on the basis of occupation. The ministry of the laity has been conceived primarily in terms of one's job. So one group consists of doctors, another of housewives, another of apprentices to skilled jobs, another of secretaries, another of executives, another of shop foremen, another of domestic workers, and so on. In each case the question has been: "How can I exercise my ministry in my occupation?" Only those who share the occupation can enter into fruitful dialog and come up with live options. Other groupings are more common: Bible study, prayer, social problems, neighborhood concern, couples' clubs, and so forth. Almost any mixture will serve a purpose. Special goals for

adults are found in teacher training groups, parents' classes, or church membership groups. When genuine dialog leading to engagement is the goal, it can lead to a examination of what it means to have a Christian "style of life" in today's world and therefore to fulfill the ministry of the laity.²

III. REACHING THE DEPRIVED

Many new insights are emerging concerning the retarded, the handicapped, and the gifted. There is frequently opportunity here for ecumenical cooperation. For example, if about 3 percent of the population is retarded or handicapped sufficiently to be unable to participate in customary Christian education, there are enough potential students to provide a basis for a genuine educational effort, but there may not be enough for a single parish or denomination to be able to marshal its resources to do the job.

Ecumenical cooperation can sometimes begin to provide the basic elements: materials suitable for such students, buildings in which they can operate, and specialist teachers. What kinds of materials are needed for the deaf and the dumb and the blind? What equipment is needed for them? Who will be the teachers? Or ask the same questions about the physically handicapped, who may be able to handle traditional materials but who could not get around the average parish house because they need ramps and elevators. If the proper equipment were available, they might be able to participate in the classes that now exist for the benefit of those who have no such limitations. Or think of the mental limitations of many who are not

² See Francis O. Ayers, *The Ministry of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

hospitalized but who find no place in the community of faithful people. We tend to become impatient with slow learners who are normal, whatever that means, and so have even less place for those who learn much more slowly than their peers.

This whole field needs study and new effort. It may be that one congregation in a neighborhood or town will take on the special responsibility for providing a building which is suitable, and it may be that many congregations will need to cooperate in finding funds, teaching specialists, and materials, relying on larger agencies for resources and guidance. When it comes to the emotionally and mentally ill, we have as yet done practically nothing.

The culturally deprived offer another whole field of endeavor. These include those in the inner city and in isolated rural areas, various ethnic and racial groups, minorities, immigrants, and others who are to a great degree strangers to the ways and teachings of the church. Because the church reflects primarily a middle class American white culture, we lack the resources, the insights, and often the will to work at these problems. Perhaps the greatest single endeavor that is needed is to work at equipping the emerging leadership in such groups with the tools and insights they need. We have discovered that in new fields of Christian missions nothing much happens until an indigenous leadership emerges, trained to serve in the church in their own way and then freed to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in their own culture. But even this training for leadership can be accomplished only by those who identify with those being trained. It is not something that can be accomplished from a distance. What must emerge in-

cludes materials that reflect the religious issues in their own lives, situations in which Christian learning can take place, and leadership that can operate in these terms. How much this can cross various class lines via a "sector" approach, we do not yet know. How much our pluralism can express our basic unity in Christ, we *do* know, but we are not sure we want it this way.

IV. NEW TECHNIQUES

If methods are valuable insofar as they assist in bringing together the Gospel and our world, we need to use this as a test when we examine new techniques. Do they increase the effectiveness of dialog between persons and the resulting engagement with God and God's children in the world?

Perhaps one of the most talked-about developments is called programed learning. This may be a teaching machine, or a special solitary learning book with built-in answers, or some other variation of a process of stimulation and reinforcement in learning by which the student is enabled to succeed in acquiring information. Its value lies in its capacity to provide information. Its appeal is to those who like to learn in solitude. It is geared to success through repetition and reinforcement. It is clearly helpful in language laboratories, and in religious education in acquiring Biblical, doctrinal, and catechetical information.

Christian education, however, is conceived as what happens to a person in community. In programed learning there is no place for personal relationships, no dialog, no engagement, no personal witness. It may provide tools by which one is given resources for dialog and engagement.

So if programed learning is used in Christian education, it cannot replace the relationships upon which nurture depends, but it may provide resources to bring to such relationships.

New techniques coming from group processes are still being evaluated. In many church schools today large classes based on discipline and under the control of a single teacher are still common. Yet if a class is to become a group in which the participants have the opportunity to enter dialog with each other and the teacher within the limits of a 50-minute class period, it is obvious that the size of the class must be severely limited. Recognition of this fact has led the Seabury series, for example, to work with about 12 students in a class led by a teacher and a process observer. Of course, even when the situation is suitable for good communication through interpersonal relations, nothing may occur. This is why the observer is essential to perform a specific function of evaluating the participation of students and teacher. The teacher and observer, evaluating and then planning together, are enabled to provide a climate in which the class may become a group and thus dialog and engagement become possibilities. The religious issues in the lives of the students come to the center of attention, and then they are enabled to think Biblically as they reflect on their decisions in daily living. This involves information, but it means using it creatively.

Some educational situations may call for larger groups, either on account of staff limitations or inadequate facilities or because there is value in moving from large to small groups for special purposes. Team teaching has developed from this approach,

perhaps using group-graded materials, which are then discussed in smaller groups. This approach is more flexible than the small-group approach and may lend itself more readily to visual aids, role play, and other forms of presentation, but it seems less likely to lead to dialog and engagement.

There is such a rush of new curriculum materials that it is impossible to present and evaluate all of them. The materials are becoming more efficient tools in the hands of imaginative teachers. Beginning in 1948 with the Christian Faith and Life series of the United Presbyterians, the approaches to lesson materials have reflected both theological and educational changes. Perhaps the most important breakthrough came with the Seabury series of the Protestant Episcopal Church. In this case a new broom swept everything before it. Based on a dynamic view of revelation that was both empirical and existential, it made use of educational insights drawn from group process and consistent with its dynamic theology. The emphasis was on the religious issues in the lives of the students, on small classes, on parent cooperation, and on worship and the church year as a framework providing structure.

Since 1955, when the Seabury series appeared, the other denominations have considered this point of view as they developed similar materials. The United Church of Christ, the Methodist Church, and the Lutheran Church in America have to some degree approximated the Seabury approach, but with qualifications in the light of less demand on the teachers and more promise of commercial success (Seabury still reaches only 30 percent of Episcopal parishes). In all of these cases increased emphasis on

leadership education has been the key to more effective teaching, with teams of trainers working with teachers as one approach.

V. RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

What are we going to do about the new developments in religious language? There is a difference between teaching factual knowledge and teaching *about* faith. Paul van Buren has set up one basis for an understanding of this process in *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* and in an article on "Christian Education *Post Mortem Dei*,"³ in which he insists that a proper understanding of religious language and its metaphysical implications can lead to the freedom of faith, although God is not a metaphysical entity. The task of Christian education is to tell the story, teaching the story as a story. "Believers have a story to tell, not a photograph to look at."⁴ Teaching "about" faith is similar to teaching "about" love or art, and it evokes a similar response.

In the symposium in response to Van Buren's article, most of the writers took issue with his metaphysical assumption about the existence of God, but they accepted on the whole the educational implications. The specifically Christian stories need to be told, the kerygma precedes any genuine discernment and commitment, and also the formulation of concepts in any systematic form. The stories are not fiction, they said; they are history, myths representing history, imaginative dramas reflecting experience. They provide the central subject matter for evoking a religious response and theological and ethical reflection.

But this brings God's activity into the here and now, something that Van Buren does not make clear or perhaps rejects.⁶ The stories to be told from the Bible need the correctives and the support of Biblical scholarship.⁷ The stories that are told are not primarily to lead to moral behavior, as Braithwaite contends,⁸ but to a personal relationship with God and other men.⁹ The Word God is used "referentially,"¹⁰ which means that the use of the Word can evoke the reality. This makes all the difference in the way we tell our stories, for it moves us from the world of fantasy to the world of reality, in which redemption is a possibility. This leads us into the dialog between God and man in which God is the chief Actor, which is the Biblical priority in all our stories. In this way we may hope that Christian language may come alive and evoke a cosmic disclosure.¹¹

Such a study as this involves us in the problem of communication in terms of the peculiarities of religious language as well as its reference. Canon Drinkwater has

⁵ Gordon D. Kaufman, "Christian Education without Theological Foundations?" *ibid.*, pp. 15 to 19.

⁶ David R. Hunter, "Something to Add," *ibid.*, pp. 19, 20.

⁷ Frederick Ferré, "Van Buren's *A Theology of Christian Education*," *ibid.*, pp. 21—25; see Iris V. Cully, *Imparting the Word* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

⁸ See "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in John Hick, ed., *The Existence of God* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 228—252.

⁹ Bernard Cooke, "Personal Relationships," *Religious Education*, LX (Jan.-Feb. 1965), 26, 27.

¹⁰ See Paul L. Holmer, "Theology and Education," *ibid.*, pp. 28—31.

¹¹ See Ian T. Ramsey, "Discernment, Commitment, and Cosmic Disclosure," *ibid.*, pp. 10 to 14.

³ *Religious Education*, LX (Jan.-Feb. 1965), 4—10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

distinguished various kinds of language: scientific-difficult, scientific-simple, poetic-difficult, and poetic-simple, the latter being "the language of the heart." It is this latter, something as simple and moving as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which evokes a disclosure and a response.¹² The teacher, utilizing these insights, is enabled to tell stories, use poetic forms, and move into the resources of the various arts, as a means of leading the pupils toward the disclosure that may result in commitment.

VI. THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN NURTURE

Education to *bē* the church is the other side of the coin when one speaks of Christian education as what happens to a person in the Christian community. For he is being educated to be a member of the body of which Christ is the Head, being equipped for the service of God in the world. This brings us to a resetting of our sights in terms of the nature of the church, the image of which we find in the New Testament. The church is thought of as "the people of God," with the emphasis on the *λαός*, as "the body of Christ," with the emphasis on the organic unity of its members with their varieties of functions; as the *κοινωνία*, with the emphasis on the fellowship of the Holy Spirit as the members live together in "the household of God." They are followers of "the way," the description being, "Behold how these Christians love one another." They "are not distinguished from the rest of mankind in country or speech or customs. . . . They remain on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. . . . To put it briefly, what the

soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."¹³

The quality of life of the congregation is to be measured by such an image of the church, for this quality of life determines the quality of Christian nurture. Insofar as there is a sharing (*κοινωνία*) of gifts and insights, there will be an openness to dialog, and genuine engagement may occur.

At the center of the church's life is its worship. This is the environment in which Christian nurture occurs, an atmosphere of worship in which the Holy Spirit is uniquely at work. When worship is genuine, when there is a sense of the presence of God, however vaguely conceived, the setting for Christian education has been established; but, more than this, Christian nurture is occurring.

When this point of view is accepted, it changes our sights in terms of the process of education. Worship no longer is something to be got out of the way, like opening exercises, but is seen as part of the process of Christian nurture. Worship may occur in the classroom, by departments, or with the whole church school congregation. One of the most significant developments has been families worshiping together in a service specifically intended for them.¹⁴ It is important to recognize that when children and their parents are together in the church, we use religious language that is common currency to all of them and make

¹³ "The Address to Diognetus," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Harper, 1950), p. 278.

¹⁴ See my *Your Child's Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1962), pp. 102—107, and *Christian Nurture and the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 106 to 110, for descriptions of family worship.

¹² See Gerard S. Sloyan, ed., *Shaping the Christian Message* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1958), pp. 274, 275.

the modifications necessary for their genuine worship.

Worship's primary end is the adoration of God, but it is legitimate and indeed necessary to reflect on the experience one has as he worships. As members of a class, department, or family go to their classes, the worship is a basis for theological reflection, and the wise teacher makes use of this resource.

When a congregation participates in the service of Baptism, many possibilities are opened up. The existential meaning of Baptism in terms of death and resurrection is indicated; the whole idea of forgiveness and acceptance is brought to the fore; the ministry of parents and congregation to the one baptized is clear; and the initiation of the baptized into the ministry of Christ is evident. One is not baptized into a denomination but into the whole of Christ's church, and therefore he enters an ecumenical ministry which is given to him by God. We are Christians before we are Lutherans or Episcopalians or Baptists, and Baptism is the sacrament that gives us this unity.

As we reset our sights in terms of worship, there is much more to be said. We have not yet explored adequately the meaning or the proper age of confirmation, which for many of us is associated with the Lord's Supper.¹⁵ It is possible that our children are ready to participate in the Holy Communion about the age of 12 but are not religiously ready for the intelligent decision that should precede confirmation until about the age of 18. But this ques-

tion needs further examination. We have not applied the study of religious language to worship, and it may be probable that what we have discovered with the use of the New English Bible will lead to translations of our forms of worship into more suitable language. Just as God is not limited to Hebrew, Latin, or Greek, He may not be limited to Elizabethan English.

VII. CONCLUSION

From where I sit I see Christian education moving forward on all fronts. I see a growing concern with the religious issues in our lives, concern for persons in dialog with each other and therefore in engagement with God, facing a world in which God calls for obedience in our secular living. I see increased concern for the retarded and the deprived, for social justice, and for a genuine ministry in the world. I see the beginning of new insights in the area of religious language and with the nature of persons who come to discernment and commitment as a result of God's disclosure of Himself in and through the Christian education process.

But I do not see enough concerned adults, enough devoted and competent teachers, enough morally and spiritually sensitive leaders among clergy or lay people, to make use of the resources which God has placed in our hands. Therefore I see a challenge to us all — to acknowledge Christ as our Savior and to see Christ in our neighbor, so that by God's grace we may become worthy to use our gifts of ministry in the vocation to which He has called us, for we all are witnesses of the faith and ambassadors for Christ as we fulfill our ministry in the world.

New Haven, Conn.

¹⁵ See "The Proper Age for a Declaration of Faith," *Religious Education*, LVIII (Sept.-Oct. 1963), 411—442. [Readers of *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* will also want to read Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) on this subject.]