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# EDUCATING THE HEART: CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION

*Dittmar Muendel*

We must learn to educate the heart, not just the mind or emotions. The trust of the heart determines whether we are related to God or to an idol. The attachment of our heart — our most basic concern — guides how we use our knowledge and reason. Our basic concern in life also shapes our emotional responses to situations. It determines what we fear most and what we look forward to. The aim of Christian education is to help others put their trust in God and serve their neighbours. To accomplish this aim we must therefore learn to affect the heart in its search for an object of trust.

In its search for something on which to rely, the heart feeds on images, symbols, ritual actions, and concepts which express an “ultimate environment” for our lives.<sup>1</sup> The “ultimate environment” is that which is most real or most important according to a particular view of life. For the hedonist, pleasure is the highest reality and pain the biggest fear. For the relativist, nothing is real and nothing can claim our life-long allegiance. For adherents to the consumer culture — at least according to the analysis of John Berger,<sup>2</sup> glam-

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1. See James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 28-29.

2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1971), chap. 7.

our or being envied by others is the highest value and losing consumer power is the biggest fear.

Trust in God and His grace as the ultimate environment of our lives also comes to us by images, symbols, and ritual actions (e.g. sacraments) — in short, by means of “words”. The question becomes: Which “words” will we listen to? — the words of our secular culture or the words that express God’s Word to us? Christian education is embroiled in a conflict of interpretations. *Christian educators are called to be assistant interpreters.* They assist the learners to reinterpret the experiences of their lives according to the perspective opened up by God’s grace rather than by the various hedonistic, relativistic or consumeristic perspectives of our society. Those who are called to teach must therefore be trained in engaging in a *dialogue of perspectives* with the learners. In all our endeavours in preaching, teaching, and counseling we seek to bring about a conversion of the heart from idol to God; to support the faithful in what Luther calls “daily conversions”. On the level of Christian instruction, conversion occurs when the learners’ perspectives on life are reversed.

Before looking explicitly at the dynamics of instruction that flow from a dialogue of perspectives, we must briefly look at the relationship between Christian nurture and Christian instruction.

## NURTURE AND INSTRUCTION

In my last article I focussed primarily on Christian nurture in the home, because only in the home can there be ongoing nurture. However, the congregation as a part of its educational ministry must also be involved in nurture — and not only for those who fail to receive it at home. Liturgy, life-style, and biographical stories were important elements of a nurturing home. These same elements are crucial for congregational nurture.

Nurture in its various forms feeds the heart with life-giving images as they are presented in hymns, biblical stories, prayers, sacraments, celebrations, the lives of members of the congregation, the experience of Christian community, etc. Nurture provides the building blocks which the individual uses to build her or his faith perspective, wherever and whenever it pleases God. Our society with its smorgasbord of views of life provides its own nurture by such powerful means as the mass media, peer pressure, and the hidden agendas of public education. The conflict between the aims of the various types of nurture is felt by the parents and teachers. It often does not become explicit for the child until he or she is ready to compare values and life-styles.

Once a child is ready to begin critically comparing values and perspectives — somewhere between ages 10 and 13 —, then explicit Christian instruction must complement the uncritical nurture. There are two main reasons for instruction. The first is our need to understand our faith and to think through the consequences of looking at life from a faith perspective. The second is that even with the best nurture, we are constantly tempted to use the dominant symbols and views of life that surround us in our society to guide our decisions and actions. Our conscious thoughts and beliefs may still be Christian, but our heart vacillates in its allegiance. Christian instruction seeks to surface our false

allegiances by bringing them into dialogue with the perspective of faith.

If we are willing to acknowledge that nurture and instruction are two distinct dimensions of Christian education, then our approach to the educational ministries of the congregation will change. For example, Sunday School for the younger ages (5 to 9) should be more children's *Church* than *School*. Worship, songs, prayers — and an experience of the beauty of holiness — would become central, rather than adjuncts of the schooling time. "The Word" would not come as dogmatic concepts or moral lessons abstracted from biblical stories. Rather the leaders would be good storytellers who realize that God speaks through images, the details, and plot of the stories. Nurture predominates. For ages 10 to 13, nurture by means of a Christian community experience, songs, prayers, group worship would continue. But now the "story-time" can become a bit more critical and dialogical. The children can begin to compare biblical stories with TV stories. They can start to sense the different actions, values and perspectives entailed in the two. In the older ages, youth groups and special worship services can provide a part of the nurture. Instruction time can develop to a full dialogue of perspectives, which we will describe below.

Another example of how we must make sure that both nurture and instruction occur for a complete Christian education can be confirmation ministry. I have found that several week-long retreats or a series of weekend retreats were much more effective than a weekly hour in a classroom. In our retreats we experienced Christian community. We were nurtured by songs, prayers, stories and the Lord's Supper. We practiced being concerned for one another. Explicit instruction occurred within a context which already provided building blocks for faith.

## THE MEANS FOR REVERSING PERSPECTIVES

So much Christian instruction in our congregations and educational institutions has been powerless to change the learners' outlook on life, because it has ignored the need for genuine dialogue. Most teachers ask some questions of their students. Most often, however, these questions are looking for a particular answer. Questions and answers stayed on the level of transmitting and verifying the reception of religious information. Some teachers asked their students what they *thought* about a given topic (and in the 1970's they asked what the students *felt*). However, as we showed in the previous article, neither our thoughts nor our feelings necessarily reflect the opinions of our hearts. The so-called dialogue became an exchange of ideas or of feelings without generally bringing about any genuine reversal of the opinions of the heart.

The dialogue we need is one that can bring about spiritual and moral transformations: changes of heart and action. The means of a dialogue that can engage the heart are created reality and God's word of promise.

What Luther calls the theological use of the law is basically the activity of *holding up the mirror of reality*. As teachers we cannot directly see or show a person the false attachments of his or her heart. However, we can help others discover their false objects of trust on their own. More precisely, our activity of presenting created reality to others can become a means by which God can let



a person experience the deceptiveness of the idols and their promises. Only God can bring about a conviction of sin when and where He wills.

Created reality is not an arbitrary means for engaging the loyalties of the heart. Because God's will is present in nature and preeminently in social reality our mirroring can break through the various narrow perspectives on life. God's call to serve others is present to each person in one's interpersonal, economic, and political relationships. Helping others to face any one of these — or all of these — relationships thus has the promise that God's voice may be heard in the needs of concrete people. Once persons start to hear the call — even if they do not know that it is God's voice —, they will feel the inadequacy of their present loyalties and way of life. They will be ready to hear about the better allegiance which God's word of promise offers.

There are many ways by which we can expose students to God's call to serve their neighbours which is present in social reality. Field trips and study tours can be very effective in raising their social awareness and in pricking their consciences. Newspapers, literature, and visual resources that mirror aspects of reality to them but which they tend to screen out are important resources to help students let go of the narrow perspectives which loyalty to idols create. Many biblical stories hold up mirrors in which they can discover their pre-occupation with themselves. They also discover the broad range of God's call to serve.

*The Word of promise* is the second major means of engaging students in a dialogue that can bring about changes of the heart and of daily action. The Word of promise offers God's grace as the context for a new view of life. Without this Word, we can only become defensive at the sight of the broad responsibilities thrust upon us when we face up to social reality. The promise of grace frees us from having to prove ourselves, so we can acknowledge our false loyalties and self-preoccupation. The Word offers us a better loyalty — allegiance to a gracious God, rather than to the idols of our age. Without this Word a conversion of the heart to a new loyalty would not be possible.

The Word of promise can be made present to the students by all the various forms of Christian nurture. It should be present in the nurture-dimension of the learning group. It should also be made explicitly present in the telling of the central Christian story. The parables of Jesus and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as God's parable to us communicate God's grace to those who are wrestling with responsibility and who sense the inadequacy of their present loyalties.

The major means for developing a dialogue which can assist spiritual and moral transformations to occur are created reality and the Word of promise, i.e., Law and Gospel. Yet how do we use Law and Gospel in instruction? How do we use these means in our sessions so that we can engage our students at deeper levels than just the intellectual or emotional? How do we challenge the dominant symbols of our society to the extent that they have shaped our students' views? We must learn to engage the students in a dialogue of

perspectives. In this dialogue we can help them to reinterpret their own experiences in the light of the biblical perspective.

## THE METHOD OF DIALOGUE

There are three basic phases to a genuine dialogue of perspectives. First, the students have to be helped to discover their own present view. This view could be their approach to a particular issue or toward life and its meaning in general. Secondly, the students have to bring their views into dialogue with a Christian perspective. Thirdly, the students must be encouraged to create a broader perspective and express them in action. These three phases include various substages as we shall see below. The three basic phases of dialogue can be present in an individual session, a unit, a whole course, or a retreat. Sometimes it will take several sessions just to help the students discover that they do have a certain perspective shaped by the home, peers, the media, and the church. Sometimes the presentation of the Christian perspective and dialogue with it will take up two-thirds of the course. Regardless of the time frame, the various phases must be gone through, if any genuine dialogue and any potential change is to occur.

### 1. *Helping the students discover their own present perspective.*

a) *Present action as a first clue.* If we begin our session, unit, or course by asking our students, "What do you *think* about . . .?" we will get many opinions (if we're lucky). These opinions often merely reflect what parents, peers or other significant figures are thinking. They do not necessarily reflect the individual student's actual way of approaching an issue. Thomas Groome in *Christian Religious Education. Sharing Our Story and Vision* demonstrates convincingly that students' actions or usual activities toward the topic at hand are much better clues to their real interests and attachments of the heart.<sup>3</sup> His opening questions come in the following form: "What have you done concerning . . .?" "What do you usually do, when . . .?" There is quite a difference between asking what students think about prayer and what they do with prayer; what they think about peace and justice, and what they do about them. The second set of questions surface the students' present ways of dealing with these topics.

Each of the questions holds up a mirror and helps the students to see how they respond to life's various dimensions. A judicious teacher or Board of Education will try to assure that the whole range of human interactions with their world will at some time be explored. If we believe with Luther that God addresses us through our vocations, roles and relationships in life, then we will

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3. See Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 208-211. See all of chapter 10 for a description of the five movements of dialogue which he discerns.

explore also economic and political relationships and not only interpersonal ones.

If the students have no initial awareness and therefore no usual way of acting with respect to a certain issue, the teacher must bring about some initial exposure to it. For example, middle class students may not be aware of poverty in Canada. A field trip or audio-visual presentation may be necessary to bring about an initial awareness of the problem. Beyond that the teacher will have to work at helping the students discover how they are in fact connected with the problem. The teacher will help them to find that their actions do have an impact (positively or negatively) on poverty.

b) *Reflecting on present action.* Once the students' present ways of dealing with the topic at hand have been articulated, they are encouraged to critically reflect on them, according to Groome.<sup>4</sup> The students are asked to see how the influences of home, school, peers, mass culture, or church have shaped their present actions. This exploration can help them to discover how dominant symbols or key images of "a good life" are shaping their perspectives and their actions. Another important element of reflection, to which Groome alerts us, is to ask the students what they hope to be the outcome of their present way of acting. The teacher asks why-questions. Why do you (do you not) pray? Why do you vote (not vote)? Why do you want a house, car and spouse? By means of these questions, the students are helped to become aware of their vision for life. They begin to see what they hope will give their lives a purpose or fulfillment. They begin to notice the attachments of their hearts.

## 2. *Exposing the students to the distinctiveness of the Christian perspective.*

The first phase of dialogue deals with the students' perspectives. The second phase brings these perspectives into dialogue with the Christian perspective on life. Once the students have expressed and examined how they deal with prayer, to continue but one example, they are open to hearing the biblical and confessional teachings or stories on prayer as an invitation to dialogue. The teacher's task will be to present the biblical or confessional view. He or she can use assignments, lecture, or any host of resources to help the students see the topic at hand in the unique light which Christian teaching throws on it. The only thing the teacher must watch out for is that he or she does not give the impression that he or she has now given them "the final answer". This impression closes off dialogue. It prevents a change from occurring in the students, since conversions to a broader view can only happen freely and willingly. The presentation must be an invitation to explore a new possibility. It must be an invitation to faith, rather than a reprimand for having "the wrong views".

After the biblical or confessional perspective clearly illumines the topic at hand, the teachers must assist the students to bring their initial views into

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4. Groome, pp. 211-214.



dialogue with the presentation. Where does the presentation of the Christian view affirm, call into question, or seek to broaden their own initial views? What details of the situation can they now see, which they tended to screen out in their initial view? What basic loyalties underly the actions of the biblical characters that may be different from the students' basic loyalties?

In helping the students discover the differences between the perspectives, the teachers will seek to point out the distinctively Christian context or frame for looking at any issue, whether in the area of human work or prayer. The frame is always God's unmerited grace — as the parables of Jesus so clearly demonstrate. God's grace is the strange logic that brings about the unexpected twists in how people act in the parables.<sup>5</sup> The teachers are not primarily called upon to teach the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. They must, rather, be able to help students discover how the logic of grace revolutionizes all areas of life and therefore sheds a new light on any topic. The reality of grace is the power which will allow some of the students to let go of their loyalty to the idols of the age or of their mixed loyalties to God on Sunday, Mammon during the week, and hedonism on weekends.

The questioning should not only be one way — students examining their views and actions in the light of Christian teaching. The students should also question the teaching. The students' experiences of life and their life in the present century should be used to broaden their understanding of the Christian faith. Every teacher's presentation is limited. Every Christian story and teaching of the past is also limited by the particular time and place in which they arose. So the students must be encouraged to question and probe. Only in that way can they come up against the eternal.

### 3. *Developing new perspectives and ways of acting.*

Dialogue is not complete unless the students are encouraged to articulate a new, broader view on the issue or topic at hand and express this new understanding in action. "How is your understanding of . . . different now?" is the line of questioning. This questioning allows the students to discover for themselves that their views have broadened. My experience in teaching indicates that the views of almost all students change somewhat. However, they do not necessarily shift their basic trust of the heart simply on the basis of one course. A further experience shows me that real changes often occur one or several years after the instruction. ("We sow in hope.")

The students must also be invited to find a different way of dealing with the issue or topic. One cannot construct new perspectives in one's mind alone. A new way of seeing a challenge of life always entails a new way of responding to it. I may express my new understanding on prayer by saying: Prayer is for the

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5. See Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 70-71.



human spirit what breath is for the body. But if I do not alter my prayer-life to reflect that it is essential for the life of my spirit, I have not really changed my perspective. I have not really come to be more concerned about my spiritual health than about all my other concerns. Concrete new actions help us to actually shift our basic concerns. New loyalties need external forms of expression.

The teacher can help the students come to concrete new decisions and actions by asking: "What will you now do differently about . . . (or, with . . .)?" Each student is invited to find his or her own personal response to the issue. Beyond this individual invitation to act, the teacher can also help the whole group of students to move into some concrete action. For example, I regularly had confirmands participate in a six-week practicum. During the practicum, they had to visit shut-ins, do chores for the elderly, or work with the handicapped. Many of the confirmands continued their service after the six weeks of the practicum were over. Again, an adult bible study group became the congregation's evangelism team (without that label) — long before the L.C.A.'s "Word and Witness" program was developed. So even actions proposed by the leader or by the group can be helpful in letting the participants find concrete ways of expressing the new perspective they are developing.

Our description of Christian instruction as a dialogue of perspectives was necessarily brief and sketchy. However, even this brief sketch can help us teachers and educators to examine our own practice of teaching. We may notice quickly how often we limit our instruction to the phase of presenting biblical or confessional teachings. We may also notice that many of our students either resent this or become apathetic. If we truly want to engage them and open up possible changes for them, we must work on the other phases. The Gospel must again become a light which illumines their own world. Then it will also be able to shine into their hearts.