

# Planning the Curriculum of Christian Education

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As Christians we recognize a central fact. We have a divine Christ, who died and rose again to be the Saviour of the world. When his bodily presence was about to be withdrawn, he promised his disciples power from heaven, and sent them forth to be his witnesses to the farthest parts of the earth. As his followers today, we are his representatives; and our highest duty is to bring his transforming gospel to bear on the lives of men.

But as his ambassadors, we must be skillful. Christ urged his disciples to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. With our eyes open to the complexity of the task, we must do our work in such a way that results will be accomplished. Furthermore, these results are to be sought, not in inert matter which may be fashioned at will, but in human personality, which is the most precious and most unpredictable material with which we could deal. Final decision as to the response which will be made to the Christian gospel lies with the individuals themselves, and not with us. Yet it is our responsibility so to present that gospel, taking into account the circumstances within which people find themselves, that it will be understood, appreciated, and have motive power.

Since the task of spreading the gospel is one of influencing people for their own lasting good, it is in its essential nature educational. This is recognized in the Great Commission as it stands at the close of Matthew: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . . ." This teaching mission is not purely an intellectual one, however,

as is brought out by the revised versions, which read, "make disciples of" instead of "teach," in this clause. The same fact is brought out also by the following verse, which reads: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." The lesson to be imparted is not only a faith; it is a way of life. The mission is not fulfilled until people around the world actually become disciples in their daily walk and in the full scope of the meaning of what Christ taught. No merely casual or indifferent effort may be expected to bring about this result, though we have the promise of the Holy Spirit as the disciples' teacher (John 14:26). The program of Christian teaching must be sustained and thorough.

In an age of high-pressure competition, even for the time and attention of children, we cannot afford to let the sons of this world be wiser than the sons of light. The work of the church must be planned with a clarity of vision born of prayer combined with knowledge, and with a statesman-like willingness to discern the signs of the times. Particularly, a basis must be provided in the church school for the kind of product we would like to see in the church of tomorrow. This brings us to the question of curriculum.

By curriculum is meant what is actually done in a series of learning situations — the educational program as it emerges in the experience of the learners. This curriculum-in-action is

commonly based on plans embodied in printed materials, or at least sketched out in the notebooks or minds of the leaders. In the larger sense, a curriculum involves a comprehensive plan, in which the several parts are combined to accomplish the purpose for which the curriculum is set up. The planning of a curriculum involves several factors, including the establishment of objectives, a consideration of the leaders who are to put the curriculum into effect, the allocation of responsibility to various agencies, the methods of teaching which are to be used, the content of the studies, the adaptation of the materials to use with different individuals and cultural groups, and means of evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum. These factors will now be considered as they apply to the curriculum of Christian education.

### I. OBJECTIVES

Purpose is essential to intelligent action. The end toward which we are moving should be a controlling factor in what is done in an educational program. Without a goal, one may go through the motions of teaching, impelled by the force of habit or a sense of duty; but if life is to be put into the process, the reason for it all should be made clear. A purpose should be in the minds of those who plan the lessons. It should be relayed to and capture the enthusiasm of the teacher, who may, however, make readjustments in the light of local needs. Some part at least of the purpose of the lessons should be seen by the pupils so that they may adopt that purpose as their own. Suggestions from the pupils themselves may contribute to the planning of their studies; but social experience, and more than that, the divine revelation which has been committed to us should be used to guide the persons with whom we are working.

Paul labored to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Colossians

1:28). As educators, we are committed to work with persons. As Christians, we are committed to the fostering of lives which are centered in Christ. We desire to see people become intelligent and loyal followers of Jesus, exhibiting Christlikeness in personal and social living. It is our daily prayer that God's rule may be established in the lives of men.

With the port of destination clearly marked, we may set the sail to reach it in accordance with the position in which we find ourselves. That is to say, there may be a certain amount of flexibility in lesser objectives, so that the main goal may be reached. Yet there are intervening steps to be taken if an inclusive objective is to be reached. We should not become blind to the range and wealth of the Christian heritage in our eagerness to stress the crucial point of saving faith. The objective of completeness in Christ must be broken down into definite areas of emphasis, and these again into more specific objectives. The controlling influence of objectives should extend down to the least point included in a lesson plan. Though day-by-day objectives will have to be chosen locally in part, there is nevertheless a need of determining what will be the main goals in the program of Christian education which is adopted.

Studies that others have made of objectives may at least serve as a check list or guide in the choice of a set of objectives. Of such studies, none is more notable than that made by Vieth, which has been embodied in the eight objectives of the International Council of Religious Education. These are vital and usable by evangelical churches, including as they do an emphasis upon God, Jesus, Christlike character, the Christian ideal in society, participation in the church, the importance of the family, a Christian view of life, and an appropriation of the Bible and other religious experience of the race for present help in living. This set of ob-

jectives does, however, need reinforcement at the points of personal salvation and distinctly evangelical doctrine. Such reinforcement one may supply in his own use of the objectives.

## II. LEADERSHIP

An educational program, even though it has been drawn up in the light of the best possible objectives, depends for its effectiveness on the available leadership. This fact must be taken into consideration when the plans are made. Materials should be prepared, not only to meet the needs of the pupils, but also to fit the abilities of the teachers who are to use them. In turn, the teachers or other leaders have a part to play in selecting and adapting materials to fit the local situation. The more qualified the teacher, the less dependent he will be on ready-made lessons. However, in making selections, he should not lose sight of the need for an over-all plan, of which his immediate task may be a necessary though less dramatic part. Furthermore, it takes a qualified teacher to appreciate fully the values which are offered by good published materials.

Any curriculum worthy of the name must be supported by a program of leadership education. This may be provided for partly by a special phase of the total curriculum and partly by material furnished along with the regular lessons. Teachers' helps are commonly supplied in some form. These in themselves may become a stairway by which the teachers mount to a greater competency, if the steps are made specific enough, with suggestions for possible variation. But beyond the carrying out of activities with the pupils, there must be provision for the teacher's own growth. This requires an understanding of his role and qualifications.

The teacher or other leader is the one who is to make the curriculum "come alive" in the experience of the

pupils. In stimulating learning in them, his own personality will be one of the largest factors. Personal qualifications, then, should rank high in the selection of teachers. Some people are gifted with the possibilities of leadership above others. Latent possibilities, however, may be developed; and this is particularly true of personal characteristics under the mellowing sunshine of God's grace. Therefore, let us place before leaders and prospective leaders suggestions which will inspire them to be the most effective kind of persons they can be. The Christian teacher should be even as his Master was: humble, kindly, patient, yet possessed of conviction and inspiring confidence. He should be the kind of person with whom other people like to co-operate. Secondly, the teacher should be informed, prepared, and diligent in his work, that he may be a workman who does not need to be ashamed. He should study both content and method. He should take a personal interest in his work, not simply for the sake of doing a job well, but more for the sake of the individuals in his group and of the Christ in whose footsteps he seeks to lead them. Thirdly and supremely, the teacher must be spiritual if he is so to lead those under his influence. Devotion to Christ must be central in his life so that the words he speaks will be backed up with the contagion of an experienced reality.

Leadership courses are offered by overhead organizations; but some of the most effective training may be worked out locally in the form of apprenticeships, supervision on the job, and workers' conferences centered around actual problems. This type of activity, however, may be stimulated by suggestions in teaching and promotional materials.

## III. AGENCIES

Leaders generally need some organizational channel through which to work. But the organizational pattern

can become so confused that it is a bar to progress. On the other hand, a well-arranged organization can greatly promote the work of education.

Even more serious than organizational confusion and overlapping is the failure of major agencies to carry the load that is rightfully theirs. All agencies are no doubt guilty, taking the picture as a whole. When one agency fails, other agencies may have to assume an added load. As new agencies with specialized functions arise, burdens once carried may be surrendered to them. This has been true to some extent in the history of the church in regard to general education. The church must remain, however, the central agency and inspiration of Christian education, especially so in a secularized culture. The public schools might well be expected to contribute more definitely to the building of good citizenship and a type of personality that will fit in a community governed by good will. The home, which has children first and longest, should be the greatest force in the spiritual training of children. But homes have their limitations and need the help of the church.

The church itself has a problem on its hands of adjusting its own organizational pattern. Various agencies have grown up, such as the Sunday school, the youth fellowship, the week-day church school, the women's missionary society, and others. Progress has been made toward a correlated program of Christian education in the church; but in actual practice these agencies tend to carry on their own programs with little thought of contributing a special part to a total plan of Christian teaching. An agency may become an end in itself, instead of being primarily a means. In fact, it is far from clear just what the various agencies of the church should be expected to accomplish. Objectives need to be brought down to an organizational level. Only so can a comprehensive

curriculum be planned intelligently.

Interest centers especially in the Sunday school, as the most influential special arm of the church. Should the Sunday morning session be used for evangelism or for instruction? We answer, both. But in so answering, we must guard against a blurring of the function of the Sunday school, so that in the high purpose of doing both, we actually accomplish neither. The problem is one to be worked out in the development of specific programs for use in the Sunday school — programs of education which include in a proper balance the necessary elements of instruction, evangelistic appeal, and cultivation of the spiritual life. But the Sunday school does not stand by itself. Lasting success in the cultivation of Christian personality is conditioned by the level of spiritual fellowship in the church of which the Sunday school is a part, to which fellowship it is our hope to relate the pupils.

#### IV. METHOD

Method is the way in which learning is brought about. It cannot rightly be an afterthought in the preparation of teaching materials. One's conception of method will influence even the selection of content. Teaching techniques are of various types; but in a general way at least, they are written into curriculum plans, by implication if not in specific words. The teacher who uses a quarterly does not do so with an open field as to choice of procedures. Certain limits are set by the material in hand, as long as that material is used as the basis for study. Therefore editors and lesson writers should be constantly aware of how their materials are intended to be used. Subject matter specialists with no understanding of teaching are not competent to prepare manuals for classroom use. However, by observation and study, they might learn. Materials for Christian teaching call for seasoned consideration rather than production under

pressure for time. That consideration should result in materials that are highly usable, even by the lay folk who make up the vast majority of workers in the church.

A variety of teaching techniques is desirable. In fact, the skilled teacher may pass from one technique to another so that in his class many means of learning are brought into play and blended. A story may lead to discussion, discussion to study, and study to plans for action. But the main lines of procedure must be taken into account in the printed materials; otherwise the use of those materials will seem to be futile or even at cross purposes with the activities which the teacher may introduce. For instance, if visual aids are to be used, the lesson must prepare the way and make room for the use of such aids, so that they will be a genuine part of the learning process and not just a special feature. These aids may not be available to all churches using the lessons; but at least, the writers may keep the possibility in mind. If manual activities of some kind are to be engaged in, these activities should be related to the lesson in such a way as to help in the achievement of the desired objectives. If a review in the form of a spelling bee is planned, care must be taken to see that the necessary familiarity with the facts to be covered is provided. There should be a progression toward the realization of the goals of units or series of units. And in all this, there should be, of course, an adaptation to the needs and abilities of the various age groups.

Beyond the question of any particular classroom method is the question of method in the broad sense. Should education seek to pass on, in a systematic way, the accumulated knowledge, attitudes, and customs of the race? Or should the learners be placed in social situations in which they will find it necessary to draw from the past such guidance as they need for present-day living? And if they are placed in such

situations, will they actually draw from the past what is available for meeting their needs? How far should mature guidance go? In fact, how far can it go without stifling real thought and creating an artificial learning situation? These are questions for the theorist. But the practical curriculum planner should be wiser after having considered them, although he may not be quite as sure as before that there is only one way to impart truth. A confidence in the truth itself would lead us to encourage honest investigation on the part of the learners, while we build up a reserve of facts in our own hands to counterbalance any lopsided conclusions. Self-activity is ideal, if it can be kept wisely purposeful. The gain may even be great enough to allow for some floundering around. The practical situation will tend to set limits; and in the average Sunday school, the limits are not such as to permit wide experimentation.

When the time comes for transmissive teaching, we need not be apologetic, especially when the truth we are seeking to impart is drawn from and grounded in the Scriptures, God's Word to man. Though expressed in human language and in various modes, the truth contained there is God's authoritative and final message to us, especially as brought to fulfillment in the teachings and life of Christ, the incarnate Word.

## V. CONTENT

Since we have such a Book, or as some would say, a library of books for our spiritual guidance, a major place will naturally be given to this supreme volume in our program of Christian teaching. We need not feel strictly limited to it, however, especially when it comes to illustrative material, for Jesus drew freely from the life around him to illustrate the truths of the kingdom. The spirit takes precedence over the letter, which if used without insight can have a deadening effect, as Paul recognizes in II Corinth-

ians 3. But when the veil is taken away from our understanding, the truth of Scripture shines forth. Let us, then, teach the spirit of the Bible, even when that spirit is expressed in the lives of missionaries or other heroes who have lived since the sacred pages were finished. But let us teach the Bible. Let us not think that Christian experience is enough without the Bible. Let us believe that the Bible, rightly used, is the best guarantee of a vital Christian life.

How far can we go in teaching the facts of the Bible — the details of the narratives and the geography of the Holy Land? Far enough, surely, to give background for an understanding of the spiritual truths which have their setting in those events long ago. Far enough, also, to promote a love for the Bible itself; for if it is to be our daily study and the Word of life to us, we shall want to know a good deal about it, so that we shall be able to connect up what we read. Some of the learning of the content of the Bible may have to wait until the adult stage in life. There is a great field for work at that level. But the children and youth should receive an introduction to the Bible such as to give them both a general familiarity with its structure and content, and an appreciation of its message for their lives.

The program of Christian education should be planned so as to give a comprehensive and balanced experience of learning, with focus on particular needs, above all on the need of accepting Christ personally as Saviour. Certain emphases, such as temperance, missions, stewardship, and Christian living in the home should be brought in at appropriate points throughout. Graded lessons are recognized as educationally desirable, though there are arguments for uniform lessons, especially in a small church. Elective lessons give the more mature members of the Sunday school an opportunity to study material suited to their needs, material which they might never cover

as thoroughly otherwise.

The largest degree of continuity consistent with other considerations is desirable. At the same time, we must remember that we do not have all the pupils for the whole year, and some of them not for many years. Yet provision should be made so that those who do remain in the Sunday school over a longer span of time will have a sense of progress and will not lose interest. Compromises will have to be made; but the nearest approach to the achievement of the objectives, for all concerned, should be striven for. This leads to a consideration of the need of adaptation of curricula to various peoples, social groups, and individuals at various stages of development.

#### VI. ADAPTATION

The problems involved in planning a curriculum for a typical American church are great enough; but when we move into an area with a different culture, the problems are increased to such a point that it becomes doubtful whether the same materials can well be used. The fact that in many cases materials must be made available in a different language gives an opportunity for a fresh start in curriculum making. The curriculum of Christian education for use on a foreign field includes, not only the broad program of work on that field, but also some definite materials for use in the work of Christian teaching on that field. Such materials may draw upon materials prepared in the sending country, but they should take on the coloration of the area in which they are to be used — in form, but not in essentials. The more specific objectives may vary in accordance with the needs of the field, though, broadly speaking, human needs are the same throughout the world. The traditions, forms of expression, and daily activities of the people should be used in the preparation of curriculum materials, so far as these cultural ways are consistent with the Christian message. By this means,

the gospel may be planted in the native soil of the area, so that it becomes truly indigenous, and does not seem to be a foreign importation. This may apply to distinct cultural groups within our country, as well; for though we look toward the assimilation of diverse peoples into the national life, yet as long as marked differences exist, they must be recognized if we are to do our most effective work. People should feel that we understand them, their ideals and their problems.

Differences coming within the normal range of national life should be taken into account. We may not set up a different Sunday-school curriculum for rural and city churches. Yet some of the educational materials provided may well be different, such as worship suggestions drawing upon and interpreting those aspects of life which are close to the people in the respective types of places. Incidentally, some preparation for transition from one type of community to another could well be included in the teaching program. A group of college students could hardly be expected to use with the greatest profit the same materials as are used by a class in a city mission. However, the same portion of Scripture has possibilities of development into lessons to fit people of diverse types.

There is no easy solution to the problem of pupils in the same department and class of a church school who are so far different in their stages of development in religious understanding and experience that the same approach does not seem to apply. Perhaps the more favored pupils should welcome the opportunity to let their light shine. Such diversity, if it exists, makes the class more nearly a cross section of the community. A spirit of group understanding and sharing in enterprises may be encouraged. But the curriculum makers should not permit the possibilities of group activity to cause them to forget the existence of individual needs. Lesson writers

cannot know the individual pupils throughout the land. But they can know that here and there individuals will be found with certain problems and needs. The skilled writer should find a way to embody ideas in the materials which the teacher may lift out to help Jack or Sue or Mrs. Jones, at the same time preserving the group approach. If that can be well done, it will be a triumph.

#### VII. EVALUATION

Any project carried through as curriculum making is, from committee rooms to editorial desks to writers and through production departments out to the local churches, calls for evaluation. There are two distinct phases of evaluation to be considered in connection with curricula. One is the evaluation of materials that have been produced. The other is a judging of the results obtained in any particular situation through a use of the chosen curriculum.

Materials might well be evaluated by competent persons before being released to the public. In part, this is an editor's job. Ideally, a writer's product should be used experimentally before it is put into final form. Arrangements could be made without too great difficulty to do this more often than is the case, providing schedules are set far enough in advance of the dates of publication. Publishers should take some trouble to see whether the literature they issue is as good as they can make it.

After materials are on the market, evaluation becomes a part of the process of selection carried out by local leaders. Aside from the actual value of the materials, denominational loyalty is a factor in the choice which is heavily urged. Perhaps denominational publishers will learn increasingly to co-operate in the production of materials, to the benefit of all concerned. However, when a selection is to be made from a considerable range of samples, some sort of check list is

needed to make clear what are the points to be noted. Such a check list may be carried in one's mind; but it is well to have it on paper at first, for the sake of definiteness.

The main points to be included in such an instrument of evaluation are somewhat as follows:

1. Doctrinal and other points of view.
2. Range and selection of content.
3. Educationally well planned.
4. Literary quality.
5. Attractive and substantial form.

The usefulness of a numerical score in connection with such an instrument (outlined in more detail) is highly questionable, for weakness at any one of the main points may be an excluding factor. Persons making a selection should have a sense of what is essential and of what may be allowed to pass as usable. After a particular line of materials has been checked for the various points, a conclusion may be stated in the form of a general reaction. After comparisons have been made, an order will bring into the hands of the local workers a printed basis for the actual work of teaching.

The final test of a curriculum is in its effectiveness. What results are accomplished in the minds and lives of the pupils? This is the second main phase of evaluation. Judging the outcomes is a part of the local use of a curriculum. But making provision for evaluation is also a part of the work of curriculum planners.

A place may be provided in a course of study for looking back to see what has been accomplished. This is considered an essential part of units worked out in accordance with the project principle. The pupils size up what has been gained in the pursuit of a purpose which they have voluntarily assumed. For determining the progress that has been made in the learning of factual information, written

tests may be used. Well-prepared tests can be both interesting and profitable, in addition to furnishing an insight into the effectiveness of the program of study. Teachers could make out tests for use in their own classes; but many Sunday-school teachers are either not qualified to do this well or would prefer not to take the time. The inclusion of tests in teachers' manuals might be one way to help restore a genuine educational spirit in the church's program of instruction. The strength and weaknesses of the church school as a whole may be checked with certain standards which are available.

Some results of learning may be evaluated more by performance than by questions and answers, as for instance ability to participate in the musical phases of church life. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of evaluation is that of judging the results of work with people in terms of character and Christian experience. Specially prepared paper and pencil tests may be used, within limits, to determine attitudes and other personal factors. The individual's own testimony is an important source of information, as are also the opinions of his friends. In the last analysis, the judgment must be left to God. Yet a Christian worker who is spiritually sensitive and who finds time to be with the people in whom he is interested can tell in a majority of cases whether they are prospering in their inner lives. Such evaluation is of great importance, whatever the difficulties may be, for spiritual gains must be conserved. Dramatic results are good, but lasting and deepening effects are what count in the end. As weeks and months pass into years, the curriculum maker's prayer will be answered if the young disciples, and older ones as well, are found to be taking their places as mature citizens of the kingdom of God.