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The Theological Implications of Pupil-Centered Christian Education

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CHRISTIAN theology bears an intimate relation to ecclesiastical practice at every level, whether in the pulpit, class-room or church court. Each influences and reflects the other. It follows that if study and writing are necessary to the development of theology it is also true that the demands of preaching, teaching and even church administration may be the points of departure for new theological insights and are usually their final proving ground. To discuss theology adequately then is to have an ear for sermons, liturgies and lessons; and by the same token, the preacher and Christian educator are obliged to be aware of the theological foundations of their work.

Christian education programs provide an excellent barometer of theological developments. Indeed, their barometric readings are particularly clear, partly because the curricula in Christian education have a semi-permanent character and crystallize the thinking of a period. They take so much time, energy and money to create that any change will prompt a searching debate. Theological weakness is often first felt in the field of Christian education; and yet it is precisely here that the desired changes are last achieved.

It is commonplace to say that from the mid-nineteenth century until sometime between the two World Wars of our century the dominant theological motif of Western Protestantism was what is generally called liberalism. Labels should be used with care, for they may easily misrepresent both persons and positions. Suffice it here to say that the so-called liberal mood (however stated in essence) colored every phase of modern life and thought—political, economic, social and religious. The germinal factor behind the whole movement seems to have been a great upsurge of new life in which *a fresh look at man* yielded a new belief in man, his powers and possibilities. The expositors of the new faith included men like Mill, Darwin, Huxley and Spencer. The story is well known.

In theology the new mood came as a refreshing and invigorating breeze. The new atmosphere was first evident in Biblical studies; but soon every aspect of theology came in for re-interpretation. The final fruits were felt in preaching and religious education.

The pressures of time and the proverbial pendulum have contrived to change the theological climate again. On all sides liberalism is under review, and in some quarters is either quietly forsaken or violently attacked. Social structures are being altered. Economic policies are being revised. Political

methods are changing. So also there is a "new theology". Of this the Christian educator must take serious account. He must ask what may be the gains and losses in liberal forms of Christian education and at the same time weigh the opportunities and dangers of the "new theology" in relation to Christian education. In the present paper an attempt of this sort will be made at one point only: the place of the pupil in Christian nurture.

It is generally agreed that the man who phrased the initial insights of the modern religious education movement was Horace Bushnell whose "Christian Nurture" was contemporaneous with the writings of both Mill and Darwin. In his own way, Bushnell's starting point was man. One hundred years later a powerful exponent of liberal religious education, George Albert Coe, writing in the *International Journal of Religious Education*, claimed that Bushnell "brought to the problems of Christian nurture fresh insight into human nature, the experience of children, the parental relationship, the nature of personality. For the first time in Christian history a true view of religious growth was achieved. . . ."¹ Dr. Coe pointed out however, that Bushnell's more modern successors and admirers departed considerably from his doctrine of man. Bushnell did not deny the fact of human sinfulness but merely modified the doctrines of original sin and total corruption. His real interest was to re-establish the idea of child nurture which to him was implied in the covenant relationship set forth in the Bible—the child being considered not in isolation but always in the setting of the family and the church.

Bushnell was a deeply Christian person who planted seeds some of whose final fruit would have been distasteful to him. His twentieth century descendants in religious education proceeded on these tenets: that human nature is fundamentally "neutral" if not good; that evil and sin reflect failure to come to terms with the physical and social environment; that the object of Christian nurture is to cultivate native powers, "bring out the good" and thus develop character; that this is to be achieved through concrete social settings and in worship experiences. The process which leads to these goals moves by stages which demand that "age-groups" be recognized and "graded materials" prepared.

In all this the primary concern is for the pupil, his needs, interests, capacities and individuality. The pupil is placed in the central and definitive position.

Now we are to ask what elements of truth and practical value tend to be over-looked in this pupil-centered Christian education. There is no need for us to deny its highly commendable features. Indeed, it would be unwise and ungrateful on our part to use the tools of modern religious education and deny their premises *carte blanche*.

The subject may be developed under three headings: (1) Message and Situation, (2) Freedom and Authority, (3) Revelation and Discovery.

1. "Religious Education is in Peril," *International Journal of Religious Education*, January, 1939.

These are chosen for convenience and suggestiveness, rather than with any thought of exact definition of the terms.

(1) MESSAGE AND SITUATION

The first couplet, "message and situation," raises questions about the character of our teaching materials in Christian education. Religious educators have long been familiar with the contrast between "situation-centered" and "content-centered" lesson material. Put in its simplest form the prevailing view has been somewhat as follows: Begin with the situation in which the pupil finds himself. Who is he? What are his physical and social surroundings? What are his needs, interests and problems? What is our point of contact with him? How can we help him to know and serve God? Then and only then is it asked how some point or other of Christian faith has a bearing on the situation. And often enough, it has been felt that a Bible passage has to be taken out of its context or stretched somewhat to be made relevant.

Traditional views have never been entirely lost. There have always been some who have held that Christian education ought to start with the Bible. "People should know the Bible," they say, as though the Bible had some special value on its own. Or one of them may comment more thoughtfully, "The Sunday School teacher should discover the interests of pupils and raise real problems, but the trouble is that he often spends so much time doing this that he never gets to the Bible." Yet another insists doggedly: "Give them the Bible truth. Some day they'll thank you for it."

Observe the contrast between these two groups of Christian educationists. One insists on understanding the pupil's situation and only then will turn to the Bible and the Christian faith for possible guidance in that situation. The other focusses attention on the Bible and assumes there must be some application of its message to the pupil's situation.

The debate between these two proves sterile because both share too artificial a distinction between message and situation. The terms "message" and "situation" ought not to be used as though "message" were purely a Biblical matter and "situation" non-Biblical and concerned with the world apart from that faith. Actually, the Bible sets forth not only message but situation as well.

The Biblical doctrine of man stands for the fact that man cannot know himself as man, except he be aware of his essential relation to God. Only through the revelation of God (in Christ and as recorded in the Bible) does man have a true conception of who he is and of what his situation is in terms of origin, condition and destiny. His condition is two-dimensional, as are the analogies we use for describing that condition. We may take the notion of "lostness" as an example. To be lost may mean that a man does not know where he is; or it may mean that he does not even know where he is going. In the Christian view it is the first work of revelation to show man where he is, as when the Prodigal comes to himself and sees his condition

in comparison with his birthright. The second work of revelation shows man what God really has in store, as when the Prodigal on his return is surprised by the true character of his Father and the new life that awaits him. What man needs to know is his actual situation as an alienated son and his proper situation (though unrealized) as a reconciled son. Thus in the Bible, both situation and message are held together intimately. This is why the Bible must have priority at every level of Christian education. This does not imply that it is easy to bring children and youth into effective contact with Biblical material, nor that it is unimportant to probe the point of pupil interest. The claim is simply that "pupil-centered" Christian education which imagines itself able to understand the pupil's situation apart from the Biblical revelation is simply not equipped to communicate Christian faith. In point of fact, a Biblically oriented curriculum could be "situation-centered" in a far more radical sense than much material which now claims to start with the pupil where he is. There is a tremendous challenge confronting curriculum writers at this point. Those who have produced the new materials of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. have been aware of the challenge. How far they have succeeded remains for study. Other communions in both the United States and Canada are in the midst of reshaping curricula. But the real solution cannot be expected to appear or to be achieved first at the curriculum level. It is more likely to be found by indirection, through a new climate of evangelism and theology in the Church at large and through the class-room attitudes of the teacher who in his own life has felt the situation-revealing power of God in Christ.

(2) FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY

Pupil-centered secular education emphasizes the freedom of the pupil in the teaching situation—a principle rightly shared by Christian education. Freedom provides the basis for that personal encounter so necessary to communication and to the development of personality. This emphasis stands as one of the great achievements of liberal education—a rebuke to doctrinaire and authoritarian attitudes which try to produce faith without freedom and obedience without love.

At the same time, concern for pupil-freedom opened the way for two unfortunate consequences. First, the fear of "indoctrination" led educators in general to avoid clear statements of conviction lest they be too easily accepted. Yet all education must proceed on principles of some sort, some point of view, whether openly acknowledged or not. This fear of forcing the pupil therefore leaves the learner open to indoctrination of a subtler sort, whereby he comes to accept hidden assumptions in place of open claims. Christian educators have been increasingly aware of this problem; but they are not alone, for secular teachers are likewise beginning to re-examine the meaning of pupil-freedom.

From the Christian standpoint it is no solution to abandon Christian indoctrination only to have the pupil subjected to unobtrusive forms of secular

indoctrination. It becomes our task to search for ways of presenting Christian doctrine which will at once exalt God and fulfil the human personality.

A second troublesome element in the idea of pupil-freedom has been the conviction that teachers should maintain an attitude of detachment in regard both to the subject of study and to the pupil's response—as though in fundamentals a number of alternatives were of equal value, or as though in matters of decision it were of little consequence which way a pupil should choose to go. Undoubtedly there are areas of learning where value judgements and personal decisions are not involved; but they are limited in number. The teacher who tries to avoid judgements and decisions can hardly escape some sense of vocational failure, and the student soon suspects that he is being cheated.

Practical solutions to these problems in secular education will be incalculably difficult to discover. Oddly enough, the Church finds itself in a freer and happier position, since Christianity was never meant to be disinterested in regard to life's issues or the personal decisions about them. The Christian educator must forswear authoritarian attitudes in teaching, but this is no warrant for proceeding in an atmosphere of tolerance amounting to non-committal looseness. To do so is to forsake the purpose of Christian faith itself and leave the salvation of persons to progress or to chance.

What then lies before us? Not a reactionary revival of authoritarianism, but rather a recovery of that teaching-with-authority which earns respect if not acceptance. We are not to reassert coercive methods, but to release again the sense of urgency so characteristic of New Testament faith. Let there be no return to doctrinaire intolerance. Rather let us encourage unabashed commitment, tempered always by humility. It is possible to teach with the conviction of a declared faith and yet retain the atmosphere and the actuality of pupil-freedom so necessary to personal choice and growth.

(3) REVELATION AND DISCOVERY

In pupil-centered Christian education as we have known it there is an underlying assumption about the means by which the learner arrives at knowledge of the truth or, in Christian terms, enters into religious experience and comes to know God. The assumption is that through concrete experience in the world and through worship experience, a person *discovers* who God is, comes to know His will and learns to do that will. God is somehow there to be found and served—and the teacher's task is to lead the learner in his search, to help him recognize God's present activity and yield himself to the fellowship and way of God. The pupil (aided by the teacher) is the active agent of discovery.

All this is true as it stands but it is incomplete. The danger lies only in leaving it incomplete, for it leaves out something fundamental to the Biblical conception of God as one who is not only actively present in the world, revealing Himself and calling men into fellowship with Him, but is also the agent whereby men are enabled to acknowledge Him.

The characteristic Biblical view is that God not only speaks and acts in relation to men, but by His Spirit enables them to hear and respond. He opens the eyes and unstops the ears. Thus, it was declared to Peter when he recognized Jesus as the Christ; "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). The Church of the New Testament knew that "no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (II Cor. 12:3). In many different ways succeeding generations have set forth the fundamental doctrine that the Spirit is the organ of Christian knowledge, and a contemporary theologian offers Christian educators a blunt reminder of this truth by entitling a chapter in his book, "God As Educator."²

Beyond even the conception of God as the agent of Christian knowledge, Christian educators concerned with creating the conditions whereby personality development and character education take place need to remember that God is also the agent of growth. St. Paul's well-known phrase about God giving the increase is only one of countless Christian testimonies to the fact that growth in the Church and in the individual is the gift of God.

A soundly conceived Christian education will therefore found itself on a view of Revelation which recognizes the learning process as a divinely initiated response. And none of this denies that the learner's response is truly his own. He has a first-hand faith. God's work is as it were "before and after", enabling response and yielding the fruit of response. At the center is the pupil's decision which, both by God's purpose and by the necessities of the pupil's nature, he must somehow make for himself. Indeed, a divinely initiated response possesses a truly human and personal character precisely because the pupil thereby enters into free and loving relation with God who is the ground of all personal existence.

We have thus considered pupil-centered Christian education in the light of three sub-questions. Certain applications to curricula have been suggested, but a full application of the views set forth would involve other aspects of Christian education as well. For example, all that has been said has a direct bearing on the recruiting and training of Church School teachers. To achieve the class-room approach that is best suited to Christian nurture requires methods that are in keeping with a distinctively Christian understanding of communication. The Christian teacher points not primarily to a body of knowledge nor to himself, nor to the pupil as such, but to God who is Himself the "subject" beyond both teacher and pupil, yet including them both within His grasp. The Christian teacher cannot claim to possess the truth. He can only be possessed by the Source of all truth. He does not say: "I've got it. You take it." He says: "This has got me. You try it." In other words, one might call it the method of witness-teaching. And finally, the Christian teacher knows that God achieves what He wills with His own.

2. Nels Ferre, *Christian Faith and Higher Education* (Harper & Bros., N.Y., 1954).