

The Christology of Current Religious Education

Charles Russell Gresham

[p.29]

Evangelicals are well aware that the older liberalism of the Schleiermacher-Ritschl-Harnackian tradition has faded from the theological scene. In the vacuum left evangelicalism, realistic theology, Neoorthodoxy and other such schools of thought are waging battle to see which shall succeed that liberalism which was well nigh universal. However, as is often the case of radical movements of thought, liberalism became so entrenched in certain areas of religious life that it has been quite difficult to dislodge it from these positions. One of these areas has been that of religious education.

Why was it that, when such leading theologians as Nels Ferre; the Neibuhrs, Walter M. Horton, and others were forsaking their extreme liberal positions back in the late thirties, leaders in religious education circles as Harrison Elliott, George Coe and W. C. Bower were reaffirming with vigor their faith in liberal tenets? To answer this question we must briefly survey the rise of the religious educational movement.

Religious education, as a vital movement, did not appear on the scene until the first two decades of the present century. But, from that time on, "the idea of a 'teaching church' swept through the country with almost irresistible force. From the standpoint of popular interest religious education eclipsed perhaps every other project of the churches."¹ Undoubtedly the success of this movement was due to many forces. New trends in psychology, sociology and general educational philosophy played important roles in this new movement's success. However, the one single factor which contributed most to the sweep of this educational movement within the churches was what we generally term liberal Christianity. Invariably religious education was wedded to and based upon liberal theology.²

As a result, religious educational philosophy became a wondrous thing to behold. Method and procedure were borrowed from Dewey and the "Progressive education movement," with its exclusive interest in the child-centered approach and the "social project"; and what little content that was deemed necessary was derived from religious liberalism with its emphasis on divine immanence, the inevitability of religious growth, the goodness of man, and the concept of the historical Jesus, who was only an ethical teacher and martyred prophet.³ Within the movement there was an occasional voice raised against this attempted borrowing and synthesizing. Walter Scott Athearn, who directed the great Boston School of Religious Education, warned in 1930 that this modern materialistic age was producing

a naturalism in religion and ethics which provides both soil and atmosphere in which ethical culture programs in

[p.30]

¹ H. Shelton Smith, *Faith and Nurture* (New York: Harper's, 1941), p.1.

² There were, of course, notable exceptions among some of the more conservative groups as the Southern Baptists, the Lutherans, and certain segments of Northern Baptists, Southern Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ.

³ See Smith, *Ibid.*, pp. 5-26.

religious education can thrive. A new morality is seeking to emerge on the wave of this revival of eighteenth-century naturalistic humanism. "Mr. Walter Lippman's *Preface to Morals* may serve as scriptures for the new religion while Professor John Dewey's brilliant Gifford Lectures, *The Quest for Certainty*, may supply its systematic theology—for even an attack on theology needs a theology to back it up."⁴

Dr. Athearn further commented:

It has therefore, come about that, in the field of religious education the *project method is the name for a technique through which naturalistic humanism, in the form of ethical culture, seeks to supplant the Evangelical faith in a personal God, a Divine Christ, the Fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man, with a human fraternity of developing biological organisms seeking changing satisfactions in a material universe of which they are an organic part.*⁵

Dr. Athearn constantly stressed the importance of theological and Biblical content. He argued: "There is a gospel message without which there can be no Christian education."⁶ He argued; he pleaded; he wrote and lectured; but to no avail. In his obituary in *Religious Education*,⁷ in 1935. Dr. W. A. Harper, professor of Religious Education at Vanderbilt, wrote: "His last book, *The Minister and the Teacher*, might well have been subtitled, 'A Protest Against Present Trends in Religious Education.' He protested, but to no purpose. The great leader and far-seeing initiator had lost step with the spirit of the times."

Our interest, however, is in the Christology of the religious education movement. Perhaps the best way to get a picture of the Christology which was current in the thirties (at about the time that Athearn was speaking out for a content consistent with personalistic philosophy, self-psychology, and the Bible) among the leaders of the religious education movement is to survey Paul Vieth's book, *Objectives of Religious Education*, published by Harpers in 1930. Vieth, as research director of the International Council of Religious Education, prepared this, not only as a Ph.D. thesis under Dean Weigle at Yale, but also as a definitive statement of objectives for the ICRE. In doing so, he surveyed the current literature written by the ten leaders in the field of religious education (such men as Athearn, Weigle, Richardson, Artman, Coe, Soares, Cope, Betts, etc.) to see what they had written about the ultimate purposes of religious education. What Vieth has to say about the second objective is quite revealing. This objective is concerning Jesus Christ and is stated in this way:

To develop in growing persons such an understanding and appreciation of the personality, life, and teachings of Jesus as will lead to experience of him as Savior and Lord,

[p.31]

loyalty to him and his cause, and manifest itself in daily life and conduct.⁸

⁴ W. S. Athearn, *The Minister and the Teacher* (New York: The Century Company, 1932), p. 165. The quote in this quotation is from Edgar S. Brightman's lecture entitled "America's Newest Religion."

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 169.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷ W. A. Harper, "The Passing of Two Pioneers," *Religious Education*, July, 1935, p. 8.

⁸ Paul H. Vieth, *Objectives of Religious Education* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), p.

At first glance, this appears quite conservative; but one must bear in mind that the final statement of the objective was by Vieth and, undoubtedly, a partially-conservative constituency unconsciously influenced him in his phrasing. To get at the real nature of the Christology of these men, let me quote several statements from Vieth's book.

Vieth himself suggests:

In our interpretation of Jesus Christ there are various strata of facts and opinions. It is highly important that our teaching make proper distinction between facts and opinions, in order that the pupil may build his interpretation on an adequate foundation. He has a right to know what in the life of Jesus is scientifically established, what is nearly established, and what is not supported by fact.⁹

Again Vieth believes that

We will do well to consider the Christ-objective largely from the standpoint of the meaning of Jesus in present-day life and conduct, rather than from that of dogmatic theories concerning his person. There is practical unanimity of opinion on the moral perfection of Jesus, and on the efficacy of his teaching to meet present-day conditions.

* * * * *

This shift of emphasis from intellectual interpretation of Jesus to one of unity with him in his moral purpose is one of primary significance.¹⁰

As an example of the liberal view of Jesus, the following statement is quoted from W. C. Bower's *The Curriculum of Religious Education*:

The experience of Jesus represents the highest reach of the Spirit in its attainment of ethical, social, and religious values. It may, therefore, be accepted as the norm of religious experience in those who are committed to the Christian way of life. He lived his life on the basis of certain assumptions. These were not only valid for his own experience; they are valid for all who would live as he lived. That historical subject-matter, therefore, is of the highest value that helps the learner to discover the assumptions and convictions upon which he lived his life and did his work, his interpretations of the relations and functions of life, and the motives that impelled him to action.¹¹

These quotations are sufficient to manifest the liberal thinking of religious educational leaders in regard to Christ. The person of Christ, his vicarious atonement, his eschatological and judgment utterances are to be interpreted not as that which is essential but as that which is "not supported by fact". Jesus is God's revelation only in a general and

[p.32]

ethical sense; he is Saviour in the "sense of pointing the way to a new and better life",¹² in a very real sense Jesus is re-interpreted as a modern liberal churchman of the twentieth century!

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹¹ Quoted by Paul H. Vieth, *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

This, then, was the Christology of the religious educational movement generally in the third and fourth decades of our present century. Jesus was an ethical teacher; a noble character; the supreme educator; a man who truly apprehended God; historical but not divine in the technical sense of the word. Their Christology was the Christology of liberal Christianity. Jesus "was the prophet of a new righteousness, based on a new conception of the nature of God and of man's relation to God."¹³

Though such liberalistic faith was firmly entrenched in the Religious Education movement, and remained long after it had waned in theological circles, it has finally been dislodged to a great degree. Religious education is groping around for a new foundation. Both Deweyistic procedure and liberalistic faith have suffered set-backs. Some of the basic insights of both are still being retained but the heart of both procedure and faith are absent.¹⁴ Leading in this move for the re-orientation of religious education have been H. Shelton Smith, whose book, *Faith and Nurture*, was a devastating blow to liberal leaders, and Randolph Crump Miller, who has been addressing himself to the current need of a theological basis to religious education. Others have followed the lead of these two; but most of our attention will be focused upon Smith and Miller.

H. Shelton Smith wrote *Faith and Nurture* in 1941. Since it was more or less exploratory and largely negative and critical, we will not find a plethora of Christological material. Dr. Smith, however, does set forth his belief that there is a doctrinal content to Christian nurture (or religious education). This doctrinal content, among other things, "involves the Faith that God has revealed in history, in Jesus Christ, the ultimate meaning and destiny of human existence."¹⁵ The point of emphasis here, Smith maintains, is that

history was given a religious center in Jesus Christ, in the sense that historical events, both past and future, find their ultimate spiritual significance in and through Christ.... In this sense therefore, Christ is the center of history. Thus for the Christian consciousness Christ is not a way, but The Way; not a truth but The Truth; not a life, but The Life.¹⁶

In contrast "progressive nurture" tends to deny that Christ is ultimate in (1) its emphasis on the importance of present and future with a corresponding lack of emphasis upon the past; (2) its very educational method, which is the method of experimental quest and denies that in the past is the center of values; and (3) its emphasis on the principle of tentativeness for all conclusions and authorities.¹⁷

[p.33]

Smith concludes his critique:

Vital Christian nurture is rooted in a faith that cannot accept unqualifiedly this provisional temper and process of experimentalism. Christian nurture presupposes a faith that goes deeper than mere faith in "growing values." To be sure, the Christian educator

¹³ E. F. Scott, "The Significance of Jesus for Modern Religion in Light of His Eschatological Teaching," *The American Journal of Theology*, XVIII (1914), (Quoted by H. Shelton Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ Interestingly, there is a corresponding trend away from "progressivism" in secular education as well.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 106.

¹⁷ *The Clue to Christian Education* (Charles Scribners' Sons, 1950); *Biblical Theology and Christian Education* (Charles Scribners' Sons, 1956), and *Education for Christian Living* (Prentice Hall, 1956).

will accept truly scientific fact, and he will not blindly assume that there is nothing new to be found in the human quest for truth. But also the Christian must not be blind to the fact that he lives by faith in a Christian revelation. The Christian teacher, therefore, does not share his faith in Christ with the child in a spirit of absolute tentativeness, but in the conviction that in Christ God has spoken an eternally valid word to humanity.

From a positive standpoint, Smith's Christology, though not fully developed, is not satisfactory to Evangelicals. After his masterful critique of the experimentalist's view of Christ as ultimate, he says:

In saying that the Christian educator should present Christ as the ultimate truth about human existence, there is no thought of implying that any particular interpretation of Jesus is itself the absolute truth. For, in the history of the Christian movement, what Jesus Christ has meant to human experience has been expressed in many different forms of thought. This process of changing thought forms may be expected to continue if concepts are to be kept in vital relation to religious experience.

Thus, Christ may be ultimate and surely God's revelation, but the "interpretation" of Him as Deity, Cosmic Lord, Savior, and Intercessor as seen in the New Testament Scriptures are but "thought-form expressions" which will change with changing human experience.

In Randolph Crump Miller we have a real attempt to correct the shallow theology of religious education. In three different books he has emphasized the relevance of theology to Christian education.¹⁸ Miller writes:

Christian education involves a point of view, for it is a particular kind of education. It is not secular education with a halo, although the Christian can ignore secular insights only at his peril. Christian education is concerned with the relevance of revealed Christian truth. Theology, which is the truth-about-God-in-relation-to-man, is the determining factor in the development of a philosophy of education, of techniques to be used, of goals to be attained, and of the nature of the learners to be taught.¹⁹

In regard to curriculum he says:

The center of the curriculum is a two-fold relationship between God and the learner. The curriculum is both God-centered and experience-centered, with theology standing behind the curriculum. The purpose of Christian education is to bring the individual into the right relationship

[p.34]

God and his fellows within the fellowship of the church and within the frame work of the fundamental Christian truth about all of life.²⁰

Thus, Miller maintains that we "have a Gospel and that Christian education begins when we are confronted with it."²¹ The center of such an education is God not man, and the task of the Christian educator is to bring individuals into the right relationship with the God of Jesus

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ R. C. Miller, *Education for Christian Living*, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Christ. This involves decision and involves Christian education intimately with evangelism. "This means that we must confront every learner with Jesus Christ, so that he will put his trust in God through Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit live as Christ's disciple within the dynamic fellowship of a truly Christian church."²²

This emphasis is encouraging; however, the theology that Miller maintains must be "behind the curriculum" and made relevant to lives is more of a Yale version²³ of Neo-Orthodoxy than an evangelical theology that recognizes the integrity and trustworthiness of the inspired Scriptures.

In Dr. Miller's book, *Biblical Theology and Christian Education*, there is given a fairly well-developed outline of Christology. In this we see that Christology which Miller believes is relevant to the current Christian educational task.

To Miller, the Bible contains the "drama of redemption." Act I is Creation; Act II is Covenant; Act III is Christ; Act IV is The Church; and Act V is the Consummation. The first two aspects of the Drama prepare for Act III which is crucial. Here in the Old Testament we are taught that "God is at work in history and that there is an element of salvation within God's historical acts."²⁴ Jesus of Nazareth comes "in the fulness of time." His life, death, and resurrection were acts of God. We need to see that the important point is what God has done in and through Christ.²⁵ This "Christ event" is the total impact of God's redeeming act upon all humankind.

But Christ is more than "event" or "redemption act," he is Savior. By him we are redeemed and reconciled and have experienced, through faith in him, engrafting onto the body of Christ, the Church. In this community of faith we participate in the act of communion in which we become heir to the promises given to Israel, for we are the new Israel.²⁶

This emphasis on Saviorhood presupposes a doctrine of sin. To Miller, sin is rebellion against God, the demonic spirit of disloyalty or disobedience. Sin is something that can take possession of us, and we cannot expel it through our own powers. Man is a slave to sin.

[p.35]

Not just individuals but the whole human race is inextricably caught in the rebellion against God, and this leads to "death," to being "lost," to separation from God.²⁷

Law and the threat of punishment can never deter men from sin; they merely show the futility and wretchedness of men as they come to a recognition of their true condition. God acts in Christ—through death and resurrection—to bring about reconciliation.

In regard to the cross and atonement, Miller writes:

²² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²³ Dr. Miller has been Professor of Christian Education at Yale Divinity School since 1952. Prior to that he was professor at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. He is a member of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

²⁴ *Biblical Theology and Christian Education*, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

As men meditated upon the cross and resurrection, they saw in it the complete uniting of justice and love. The price of their reconciliation was more than man could pay, and God paid it. The atonement meant that they were "atone" with God and their fellows. Various theories arose to explain this atonement, the chief one for many centuries being the idea of a ransom, although Paul also wrote of satisfaction, sacrifice, defeat of sin, and perfect obedience, all of which were metaphors and none of which adequately explained the Mystery. The *act itself* was the significant thing, and it was part of the experience of the early Church. The relationship between God and man had been restored because of the impact of Jesus Christ on history.²⁸

But there is no "Christ-event" without an historical person. There was a genuine incarnation. "God acted in a particular human being, who appeared in history at a given time and about whom we know a good deal."²⁹ Here Miller breaks with neo-orthodoxy and its skepticism in regard to the humanity of Christ. As we survey the sources, Miller says, we discover a "Jesus of history" who is "The Christ of faith."³⁰ As Jesus of history, he is a normal, healthy, fully-human person. He was limited in his knowledge and he was wrong in his prophecy about the end of the age.³¹ But he was different: his birth was different; his temptations were greater; his mission was special; and we say he is without sin because he was consistently obedient to the Father.

Miller's conception of Jesus' deity is quite refreshing in light of the liberal thought which was so prevalent a generation ago. He says:

We do not therefore say, "God is like Christ," or "Christ was like God," but we say that we know and meet God because he has acted in creation and in the covenant, and he has revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ.

The deity of Jesus is God acting in him. The totality of Jesus' impact on man is the full force of the divine forgiveness, the revelation of the God who seeks to redeem mankind through all that he does.³²

[p.36]

In his attempt to relate theology to Christian education, Dr. Miller is to be congratulated on what he has accomplished. The theology set forth is vigorous and based on the Bible. However, in his Christological views, he has failed to present a convincing Christ. In speaking of a "Christ-event," a deity which is God acting in the human Jesus, a human who was wrong, we get a rather conglomerate picture of a figure but not a real personality. Is this any better than the "mystery" of the Christ of Chalcedon and the "two natures," against which liberalism reacted? The real error seems to be in a rather faulty understanding of revelation. If revelation comes only through events and acts and not through proposition or inspired interpretation, then such a figure as presented in Millers' Christology is the result.

The late Lewis J. Sherrill, before his death, made a tremendous impact upon religious education. As Professor and Dean at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and later as Professor

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³¹ *Loc. Cit.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

at Union he helped to influence two generations of students in the field. Although he was not in the forefront of the liberal movement in religious education (he held a viewpoint similar to that of Dr. Walter S. Athearn), it has been only in recent years that Dr. Sherrill has emphasized the importance of theology to religious education. In the preface to his book, *The Gift of Power*, he said: "The Seriousness of Man's plight in the modern world, and the new currents of Biblical and theological thought, are registering their impact on the educational enterprise."³³

He further states:

Two convictions, implicit throughout the book, should be made explicit at the outset. One is that the new philosophy of Christian education must come to the subject of education from within the Jewish-Christian tradition, not from outside it. More specifically, it must draw its inspiration from the peculiar genius of the Christian community and of Christian faith rather than from any form of secular society or secular education. This does not mean that we have nothing to learn from such sources. On the contrary, very much is to be learned, and we shall repeatedly acknowledge the debt. But in the end the unique nature of Christian education derives from the unique nature of the Christian community and Christian faith. This is the principal reason that in the pages that follow, so much attention is given to the subject of revelation.³⁴

In light of this avowed purpose and emphasis in the book, what does Dr. Sherrill say about Christ? How does Christology enter the picture of this *new* philosophy for Christian education?

For Dr. Sherrill, Christ is the Word of God. Above all other media of revelation, "God confronts man in Jesus Christ. In him God's disclosure of himself to man comes to culmination. In him human nature as a medium of revelation and event as a medium of revelation coalesce into one supreme Word of God. It is this which permits Paul to say, 'In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.'"³⁵ Hence, he is the Word of God. This means, says Sherrill, that the "truth which God has

[p.37]

communicated is not an oracle, not a proposition, not a doctrine, but a Person."³⁶

This life (the life of Christ) is the "revelatory event by which all other revelation must be oriented."³⁷ However, there are two foci in his life which present the deepest perception of God's Self-disclosure through Jesus Christ. These are his death and resurrection. Upon these two events the central message, the gospel, rests. Why?

It was because those men perceived what confronted them in these two events. They understood that the death and the resurrection were not merely two real historical events, one tragedy and the other triumph, transpiring in the body of Jesus Christ. These two events were more than that. They were events in which any man in any time or any place might participate and participating know in himself the love of God and the power of

³³ Lewis J. Sherrill, *The Struggle of the Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. x.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁶ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

God in no other way... By faith a man participates both in the death and in the resurrection, not as some remote event, but as a present moment of redemption and a re-creation of his own self.³⁸

The Church has understood from its inception that the death of Christ bore a double meaning; "it was judgment upon man, yet it was sacrifice on behalf of man."³⁹ Through its doctrine of atonement, the Church through the centuries, has attempted to interpret this "scandal." In Sherrill, as in Miller, the emphasis is upon "event," not upon "doctrine" or "interpretation," for both hold that "revelation is not information about God; it is what happens in the encounter between God as Self and man as a self."⁴⁰

What shall we say about contemporary Christology in present-day religious education? (1) It is a marked improvement in light of the shallow Christology in the religious educational movement of a generation ago. (2) It emphasizes the basic truth that Christ is more than man; he is, in a sense, God. He is more than an ethical teacher, he is God's Self-disclosure—the Word of God. (3) However, it fails to satisfy the Evangelical, for it presents a view of Christ that is not in harmony with the total Scriptural picture of our Lord. The viewpoint of Neo-Orthodoxy which has largely influenced current theology is but a partial portrait of the Scriptural Christ. (4) In reading these statements about Christ, written by these three representative leaders,⁴¹ we are conscious of a missing emphasis—Christ's authority, his Lordship. Christ is revelation, yet his teachings, prophecies and words may be erroneous; God is disclosed through the human Jesus, yet some of his actions may well be fallible. Is there not a real difficulty of interpretation here? But of course, Neo-orthodoxy has always loved the paradox!

In conclusion, one might ask why we survey the Christology of current religious education. Why are we so anxious that there be a high Christology underlying educational theory? Only a high Christology and truly Biblical theology can function effectively as the foundation of a successful

[p.38]

program of Christian education. Dr. Jesse Baden, in writing about Billy Graham in Christianity Today, said:

He (Billy Graham) has a high Christology, for without that it would be very difficult, if not impossible to be an evangelist. In all my experience in evangelism, I have never known a minister or an evangelist who was a successful winner of souls to Christ and membership in the Church, who did not have a high Christology. If man is a sinner, he needs a Saviour and a Saviour who "can save to the uttermost."⁴²

So in religious education. Only a Person as the New Testament Christ and Lord can adequately become the goal of Christian nurture; only the Jesus of the Scriptures can provide

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 77.

³⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 78.

⁴¹ Others, as James D. Smart, Joseph Haroutuman, and Elmer Homrighausen are to be found in the Neo-Orthodox camp as well.

⁴² *Christianity Today*, Vol. I, No. 24 (September 16, 1957), p. 24.

Charles Russell Gresham, "The Christology of Current Religious Education," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 1.2 (Spring 1958): 29-37.

the ideals which can control conduct; only the uplifted Savior can bring the regenerative effect into a life in order that "desirable changes" may come about.

© 1958 *Evangelical Theological Society*. Reproduced by permission. Readers are encouraged to visit the Evangelical Theological Society's website (<http://www.etsjets.org/>) where they can take out a subscription to the journal.

Prepared for the Web in February 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
