



Transcriptions

Biblical Mandate for Education

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Annotation: *BILD Conference: Approaching the Year 2000, Ames, Iowa, February 1990.* See www.bild.org Used with permission. Education is found in every culture; and religions employ the conserving function of education in order to pass on their beliefs and practices. Christianity, likewise, creates forms of education. Ted Ward asserts that it is important for the Christian church to realize that it can't just conserve the past. The world is changing, and education must adapt to these changes.



The church of Jesus Christ places education at the center of a great deal of its activity. We do all sorts of educating in the name of Christ. Individual churches operate Christian education programs. We have Christian higher education. We have Christian elementary and secondary day schools. We have several species, in fact, of higher education, Bible colleges, Christian liberal arts colleges, general universities—increasingly now—and theological seminaries. A lot that we do in Christianity centers in those institutional forms. Sociologically, every religion of the world plays some sort of a conserving holding onto kind of function for the society that it serves.

The church of Jesus Christ is no different in that respect. There are a number of conserving qualities about the church. In general, the conserving institutions of society tend to hold things still to help to guard against whimsical change, and sometimes to guard against even constructive change. In fact, it is that very conservatism about institutions that causes the educational functions within and for the church to be doubly conservative. Because what we have is institutional education serving institutional religion and we get a double dose of the

conservative holding onto yesterday and don't let it change because we must do things the way we've always done them. And if local churches have a problem with this, our institutional educational forms have even more problem with it. But one of the things that we know and that we are particularly called to confront in this decade of the '90s is the reality of change in the world which has brought us to the point of recognition that there are many things that are characteristic of the way we've always done business that need to be re-tooled and made more appropriate to the times.

This workshop this afternoon and our conferences later will dwell on this matter in some detail of what sorts of dynamics are we really responding to and what are the hopes for change that can be seen as healthy constructive change? Indeed, conservatism is not bad. There are things that we do because they are godly. There are truths of God that are unchanging. Unfortunately, it is true, even of those of us who hold to an inerrant view of Scripture, that it's difficult for us to keep separate our view of inerrancy as it relates to Scripture and our view of inerrancy as it relates to our interpretation of Scripture. I hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, but I hold to the fallibility of my interpretation of Scripture. And I hold doubly to my uncomfortableness with social tradition and habit, especially when I know that much of it has not come from biblical Christian roots but has come from secular roots.

Consider, for example, the Sunday school. It's odd that we would call it the Sunday school. Now some people might argue that the word school does appear in the Old Testament and, therefore, a school is inherently biblical because it comes from the Old Testament. Let me assure you that the school of the prophets in the Old Testament had very little in common with the school that our Sunday school is modeled on. Our Sunday school is modeled much more specifically on a Greek invention of about 200 to 400 years before Jesus Christ. The Greeks invented what we, in the Western traditions today, call school and basically school was a place where you put children. And you put children under some kind of authoritative teaching where certain people are classified as teachers because they know things, and other people are classified as learners or students because they don't know things, and the task is to pour that which the learned ones know into the unlearned ones in some kind of a form that they, too, will then have their quantity of this learning. I make a little bit of a sardonic remark about that because I'm not impressed at all with the view of learning that we inherited from the Greeks. As a matter of fact, I think much that is wrong, even within Christian education, can be traced to the bringing into the church of some very, very Hellenistic Greek thinking about what teaching and learning is all about and baptizing it, as it were, in the name of Christ and making it ours, forever and ever, institutional forms without end. And Sunday school is exactly that.

As a matter of fact, Sunday school was invented in the latter part of the Industrial Revolution when some of the folk in urban England began to be very anxious about young people who had been recruited from the countryside to come in and work in the factories six days a week, 12 hours a day. And on Sunday, these little ragamuffins were generally running loose on the streets of London because the good burghers of London knew that it wasn't a good thing to violate the Sabbath and have your factories running on Sundays, so they closed the factories and went to church; and the little children that they were employing during the week were running around on the streets. And some of the stories remind us that these people were also throwing rocks at the church windows which for the good burghers in the church was very offensive both in terms of sound and hazard to the costly windows. And out of this kind of concern for the

social welfare of those children and a preservationist instinct with reference to the quality of the stained glass windows, the Sunday school was invented to get those children off the streets and into a school-like event for Sunday.

Now, as a matter of fact, that early Sunday school was probably less a religious event than most of us imagine. It was a social action concern on the part of these English folk who said isn't it tragic that these children are having no educational opportunity; not even learning how to read and write? And much of the Sunday school's early activities was focused on doing the things that were not possible because these children of the poor had no access to any kind of systematic learning. And, having been uprooted from their families and their home communities, they were living in the cities in desperately poor condition and were in need of education. And, therefore, our tradition for the Sunday school took off and really came a roaring into the 20th century with all the bells and whistles screaming and, by mid-century, all the buses rolling.

Now I have no objection to Sunday school. I have no objection to busing children, as a matter of fact, and I don't speak of this in any critical way; but just simply to put it in a historical perspective that reminds us that this phenomenon that has become more or less the fountain source of our inspiration for how we do educating in the church is really only a couple hundred years old and, in concept, traces back to the Greeks; not to the Hebraic view of teaching and learning. As a matter of fact, the Scriptures take a very different notion, present a very different picture, lead us in a very different direction about what is the responsibility within the family of God for the educating of children?

The biblical mandates for education that we find most clearly in the Scripture begin in the early portions of Scripture with a persistence of the word "remember." Some of you probably thought I was going to take you immediately to Deuteronomy 6 which is the chapter that is most commonly used in the Christian education textbooks of our time. Almost every Christian education textbook gives you at least one chapter on Deuteronomy 6, and then it gives you 15 to 20 other chapters that show you how to violate Deuteronomy chapter 6. More of that later.

Suffice to say, that much that we do in the name of educating is patterned on the notion that school is a good thing. Much that we do in the church presumes that it is a good thing to emulate school. As a matter of fact, we even do that with church architecture and we are doing that in this room right now. This is basically a Greek configuration. There is someone who knows. There are a bunch of people who don't know; and the responsibility is on the one that knows to dump it so that the ones that don't know will each carry home a small bucket and they will feel that they have really put in an educational day. Here, again, there's nothing inherently wrong with that except that it does not go far enough or deep enough.

In Scripture, we find that remembrance and the mandates of Scripture to remember are not simply some kind of mental exercise of the form of memory. They are commemoration memory. They are commemoration event, repeating event, re-constructing event kinds of memory; and, therefore, what they call for is far less a recital that can be memorized than it is an experience to be relived.

The Jewish people, as you as you probably know from looking even in the New Testament, were inclined to take high moments of great transaction between God and his people and make

some kind of a monumental event, space, memorial. Do you remember on the Mount of Transfiguration the reaction of the disciples? What did they suggest? They said, “Let us build here booths or tabernacles.” Places, probably stacks of rocks, is what they had in mind—monuments. What were those monuments for? Those monuments were their Christian education. All the way through the Scripture, the monuments that represent God’s transactions with his people are really the crux of Christian education. Therefore, the calendar of holy days, the calendar of celebrations, the calendar of Passover has a meaning in terms; not just of an event to be remembered—like we think of a holiday, fourth of July—but an event to relived into the consciousness of us today and our children and our generation so that they, too, can become part of that original event. And I submit, in Christian education, we rarely look at it that way. We’re doing good simply to find some kind of a Bible text to use on Flag Day in order to justify doing something with the Christian flag alongside the American flag. We have, in our society, very little sense of the memorial event. Why? Because we have replaced that, along with a lot of other educational devices with schooling-type devices.

Now Jeff already hinted in the introductory remarks today that one of the flaws in schooling is that schooling tends to focus on things that are testable, even in the Sunday school. There aren’t many Sunday schools that would dare to give a test, but the mentality is there all the same. There are memory verses. There are questions and answers. And there are questions usually that have very right answers because one of the characteristics of the schooling approach is the presumption that given a question that is good, it will have an answer that is good. And the issue is getting a good question together with a good answer which tends to be rather limiting in terms of an understanding of the deeper meanings of the ideas behind the question.

We tend to do a lot of things in the name of Christian education that, in fact, tend to limit people’s creative application of truth. We can make jokes sometimes about how Christian education is so concerned about getting Jesus at the center of every question so that Jesus is the answer. And sometimes we even make bumper stickers like that and literally plague the nation with them for a year or two or three, or are you old enough to remember that? “Jesus is the answer.” And that campaign was strong on the bumper stickers of America until a counter campaign came up. “So what is the question?” was the other bumper sticker. So what is the question? If Jesus is the answer, so what is the question? And that one—I was rather amused to discover—the Christian community did not know how to deal with, and so the “Jesus is the answer” bumper sticker simply waned. I think it would have been a remarkable thing and probably would have satisfied my interests much more had we really thought through “So what is the question?” and developed a bumper sticker campaign that deals with the valid questions of our time.

I believe that Christ is the answer, don’t get me wrong. I believe that the Word of God is authoritative and does give us a frame of reference in which to understand God’s truth. It is God’s truth and it allows us to build an understanding of God’s truth. But, if we short-circuit the mental processes and the capabilities of people and simply invest ourselves in making sure that for a certain set number of good questions all of God’s people have the right answers, we are really demeaning the image of God and man. And I cannot believe that that is all so very God-honoring. As a matter of fact, the Scripture is concerned with the kind of remembrance that wants a reliving of God’s transactions with his people.

The Bible is also very concerned about a word that, in our time, is not exactly a good word: the word obedience. Now most people today can spot the word obey or obedience a mile off and not get to the other side of the street—they can actually leave town. Obey, obedience, anything that sounds that authoritarian is not so good for today's person in the Western world. Now this is much more characteristic, by the way, of the Western world—North America and Western Europe—than it is of most of the world. Obedience is not a dirty word for most of the people of this world. We need to understand that we are somewhat unique and, in some respects, somewhat perverted along this line. The Scripture calls for a teaching and learning which is focused on obedience. And that becomes very difficult because if people are rejecting the idea of obedience, we tend not to emphasize the kind of thorough-going disciplines that would be involved in teaching to obedience. You see, people don't want to have to do anything. They want to *want* to do it, but they don't want to *have* to do what someone else, even God, has decided they *have* to do.

As a matter of fact, the frequent use of the word obey and obedience—check it out in the good concordance and you'll be rather startled at the number of times that in Scripture these words occur. The various words rooted in the idea of obey are very frequent and very common, not simply because Christianity is an authoritarian religion. I don't believe Christianity is an authoritarian religion. I think there are far more authoritarian religions than Christianity. In fact, I don't even think authoritarian is a proper descriptor at all. It's not even partly that. I think Christianity is an authoritative religion dealing with the God who has given us truth. The nature of truth and the nature of knowledge is never going to be realized as information alone. That's the point. You will never realize the truth of God as information alone. You must realize it; make it real in your life in terms of things you do in your life. There must be a connection between what you *know* of God and what you *do*. That connection between *knowing* and *doing*, in the view of the old Greek philosophers was one in which *knowing* was controller of *doing*. In other words, the relationship is you've got a an importance of knowing and, if you know; if the mind is thoroughly furnished and well-outfitted with the correct material of informational sort, then the life processes of doing will be controlled by that knowing.

I'm afraid that there are Christians today who still have that image: that if you just know it all, you will then be in a position to do it all. What did the apostle Paul say? He said I know what to do. In fact, I even want to do it but I don't. And there're some other things I know I shouldn't do and I don't want to, but I do. You see, the apostle Paul was educated both in the Hebraic tradition and in the Greek tradition, and what you have in Paul is a marvelous examination back then of what modern Western Christians are up against. We have two kinds of voices in our ears. We have one kind of voice that says, what's really important is that all God's people know all of the material. And so we put a great deal of emphasis on giving people the material on the presumption that if they got this material, they got this truth, it'll control their lives. It doesn't work that way. It doesn't work that way, and God never suggested that it would.

This is the place for the word obedience. The issue is not just teaching people, but teaching people to obey. Now you find that a number of places in Scripture. It's a very clear Old Testament mandate and it occurs even in the New Testament, as we will see in a moment or two. The point here is that the teaching that really counts is a teaching that is concerned with the doing of truth, not just the knowing of truth.

But the Scripture goes even farther than this. The Scripture, especially in the New Testament, puts a tremendous emphasis on the walk of life: If you know these things, walk in them. If these things are true of you by faith, let us see behavior that is appropriate. The epistle of James is loaded with this. In fact, it is so heavily loaded that even Martin Luther was not at all convinced that the epistle of James ought to be in the proper canon of the Scripture because it seemed to be too loaded down with material about works. But, as a matter of fact, God himself is loaded down with material about works; not works as ways to gain merit, but works as the necessity of—New Testament phrase—working out your faith; working out your faith, and the direction here as from what it is that by grace God has given you, to the working out in the walk of life in the behavior that, in fact, is a behavior appropriate to the Christian value system.

Now let us look specifically at the sometimes overused and misused passage in Deuteronomy 6 and we'll see some of these things coming together. In Deuteronomy 6 beginning in the fourth verse, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts." Now listen closely, "Impress them on your children." Now clearly that means inform your children about them, impress them. But not just inform them, as static information, these things are so; but impress them these things are so, and they are important to me. You cannot impress someone else with something that you are not impressed with. So the issue is, right off the bat, not the kind of teaching that focuses on the behavior of the student and takes simply an informational behavioristic approach but, instead, takes an exemplary approach on the part of the one who is teaching. So the one who is teaching here is far more than the informer, he is she is the communicator of an impressive message: impress them on your children. "Talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you get up, tie them as symbols on your hands, bind them on your foreheads, write them on the doorframes of your houses and your gates." You see, right from the interior of the family right on out to the streets of the walk of life, and even in terms of the emblems within the church and the emblems on the external of the church there is something about this teaching that is a memorializing of what God has done. Impress these things that our God has said. These are the laws of our God. These are the truth statements of our God: impress them on your children. I ask you, who was given that mandate? It is quite clear that the whole people of God was given that mandate.

Now to focus that exclusively on parents is to make yet another problem, another mistake. This is a whole community task, but it does seem to center in the behavior of parents because who is it that's going to be there at the lying down and the getting up? Who is going to be there in terms of the marks within the home that represent the truth of God? It is clearly the parent. We need to understand the centrality of the parent in this particular mandate.

And again, as I suggested earlier, when the Christian education textbook asserts this affirming the passage of Scripture in chapter one and then shows us how to build programs in church to remove that responsibility from the parent—[to] make it easier for the parent to discharge this over to the church—we are falling into a pattern which I believe has become almost a plague upon the church of Jesus Christ today and that is the tendency to remove from its rightful place the various mandates and functions of education and decision-making.

For example, and this gets ahead of ourselves in the series of talks this afternoon, but we will sooner or later raise the question about whether or not the church can really hand over to theological seminaries and Bible colleges the responsibility of developing leaders. You see, we're good at it because we are a fairly affluent society. Anything that's just a little bit hard to do we can pay somebody else to do it. And I think that in the final analysis it's a little hard for parents to fulfill all that's suggested here in Deuteronomy 6 so we can pay somebody else to do it. Now the irony of that, of course, is that we pay somebody to coordinate a voluntary program where the people volunteer to do it instead of the parents. That, you know, it seems to me to be a kind of a crooked deal.

Am I against the Sunday school? Not one bit. Do I feel the Sunday school is an adequate response to Deuteronomy 6? Not one minute. You see what I'm saying? It's the Sunday school plus, to use the terms that Larry Richards popularized about twenty years ago. We have to think about a Sunday school that is less patterned after the school of the Greek tradition in the Western world and more in the resource-helping of parents to do their job. And there are certain things that children learn a lot more effectively among other groups of children and can be, in fact, done very, very nicely within the context of what we would call a Sunday school or a youth group or a young people's club or girls this, boys that and the sorts of things that we think of as Christian education.

Christian education is really a strange field. After thirty years in educational research within the university and working as a consultant within various functions and aspects of the church—missions and educational—I find myself now for the last five years within the theological education institution. I'm enjoying it. It's a different kind of a challenge. I can handle it. There are some transitions, but it's fun. And one of the things that I do discover, however, is that the field of Christian education is strangely cut up; sliced in little pieces. We have Christian education that's focused on what you do in the local parish which tends to emphasize what you do for children. Now little by little we're adding ministries for people with special kinds of needs, singles ministries, and so forth, and all of those are Christian education. But funny thing, the academic teaching of the field of Christian education almost never comes to grips with Christian higher education or with pastoral development education. And I keep wondering, whose territory is that? As a matter of fact, there is no other field of professional pursuit—now hear me closely—within the structures of the society in which you and I live that lacks, within its higher education systems, internal research communities studying the processes. Now whether we're talking about medical education research, law education research, architectural education research, or—and you can go right down the list of the professions—virtually every professional field for which there are higher education degrees as part of the credentialing—virtually every one of those fields has a research sector within it studying the processes of doing it effectively. There is virtually nothing in the field of theological education concerned with research on the theological education processes. It's an almost unstudied area. If it were not for the fact that the accrediting association which, by the way, the ATS—Association of Theological Schools, ATS—accredits theological schools, they do research on the higher education processes and some of it is very useful, but it is very meager.

And, furthermore, it is beholden to a strange mix of people who fly under the name of theological education ranging from Catholics to Protestants to Jews and Unitarians. That's our research base. It's virtually an unstudied field and yet I believe that it is a proper domain of concern in the field of higher education. Why do I believe that? Because I believe that one of the

tasks given to us in the church is in 2 Timothy 2:2. Not only do we have the passage in Deuteronomy, but we have a passage in the New Testament that makes very explicit that there is a responsibility that clearly is educational in nature in which the leading persons within the community of faith have a responsibility to inculcate leadership and develop that set of people within the church who are gifted in terms of the gifts of the Spirit to the church in leadership. Let me begin in the beginning of 2nd chapter of 2nd Timothy, “‘You then, my son,’ Paul writes to Timothy, ‘be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.’”

And what you have, then, is a kind of a mandate to create a domino effect: 1 to 1 to 1 to 1 right down the line in terms of leadership development in the church. You cannot give that away. That is a responsibility of leadership in the church. You cannot hire that out. You cannot say oh, but we do that by creating theological schools to serve our denomination. That’s part of our problem. We have made too great the distance between the local church and the educational ministries that create the leadership for the local church. And somehow in the next few years we have got to come to grips with that because I believe that by the year 2000 the nature of the world is going to demand a much different kind of accountability in terms of quality and substance in leadership education.

Now, as a matter of fact, when I am asked to describe the mandate of Christian education, I don’t go to Deuteronomy 6 and I don’t even go to 2 Timothy 2, though I know they’re there. I go, instead, to a passage that I think controls all of us in a much more intimate kind of a way and inspires us in ways that we should be very, very careful to preserve and maintain. I go to the Great Commission. Now if you’re in one of the many traditions that don’t call this the Great Commission, I don’t care what you call it as long as you know where to find it. It’s in Matthew 28 in the 18th through the end. The 18th verse begins, “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’”

And I think that I have sensitized you enough this afternoon to the epistemology of the nature of knowledge, from a Hebraic Christian point of view, that the piece that should be leaping out of this at you is “teaching them to obey.” Again, not the authoritarian-ness even the people resent, but the necessity to teach to a behavior, to an action, to a delivery of the feet onto the walk of life; not simply to create head-trips.

One of the things I learned in Africa about seven years ago is that there is an African language used by a group of Christians in a certain country that will go nameless this afternoon that has a very, very quaint insight within it about the nature of theological education as it as it occurs in this part of Africa. During a workshop, I noticed that whenever my translator was handling the term theological education a very long string of local language came out. And if you’re used to working in sequential translation, you begin to hear those things. And I began to wonder, what exactly is he saying because it seems like he’s using an awful lot of words to say theological education? So finally at a break I said to my translator, “What exactly do you do with the idea ‘theological education’ to get it into your language?” And he says, “Oh, well,” he says,

“we have a funny phrase.” And he says, “It’s a long phrase.” I said, “Yes, can you tell me what it is?” He says, “Well, I can tell you what it is, but we always laugh about it.” I said, “I want to laugh, too.” He says, “We use these words, ‘place where little boys go to get big heads.’” Theological education: place where little boys go to get big heads.

The point being that in most of this world, leadership is assumed to be something that you earn your way into. You’re not given it on the basis of some kind of academic credential. You earn your way into leadership and, in many societies it’s a process of getting some grey hair and a bit of a grey moustache and beard. There’s got to be a certain amount of grey before you’re really a leader. And yet within the educational motivated missionary activity that we planted around the world, we plant schools that primarily cater to the younger people and do exactly what we do in our society. Get them as young as possible, train them fast, and put them into ministry.

I submit that the kind of educational mandate that’s here in the Gospel of [Matthew] is a focus on an inseparable part of the Commission work of the Christians in this world: we are to go and make disciples. In the going, we make disciples. As we go, we make disciples. Inseparable, one idea: going making disciples.

But we do that through two process functions: the process functions that we call evangelism, church planting, and all the rest of that that brings people into a fellowship with one another as members of the body of Christ baptizing them; and the process of educating them, teaching them to be obedient to all things that I have said to you.

Christianity focuses the importance of an informed behavior in life. There are things we must know. The mandate for education is clear. The tasks of education are ours to define and to re-define as we walk down through the years of the human experience. I believe that we’re in a time when it will be necessary for us to do some very serious re-definition; the mandate stays. The forms, the responses to that mandate are, I believe, currently in a very significant and, in many respects, a wholesome transition.