



Transcriptions

Evaluating Metaphors of Education

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Annotation: *Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, 1982. Series: Metaphors of Spiritual Reality.* In this third of four lectures in the series *Metaphors of Spiritual Reality*, Ted Ward advances the thesis that three essentially different metaphors of education account for most of the thinking, planning, and operation within formal education: manufacturing, filling, and travel. The published version of this address can be found in the Document Archives.



The name of our talk today in this series *Metaphors of Spiritual Reality* is *Evaluating Metaphors of Education*. And I'm going to speak somewhat more critically in an evaluative mode with reference to some of the alternative views we have of what education is all about. Because what education is and how it can be used properly are matters far too important to be left vague. Education suffers from over-popularity. Everyone has experienced it in one or many of its forms. Indeed, everyone knows what it is. Sure, education is a common place. Self-appointed experts on education are everywhere. Small wonder, then, that so many ill-advised assaults on the human spirit are passed off as educational ventures. The thesis of this lecture is that three essentially different metaphors of education account for most of the thinking, planning, and operation within formal education. Further, it is suggested that each of these ways of conceptualizing education should be evaluated in terms of the Christian concern for spiritual development.

Christianity is, in large part, a rational religion. Our view of spiritual development does not exclude any of the aspects of human personhood. We do not reject the physical; it, too, is an object

of God's redemption. (Read Romans 6, 8:11, 23; Philippians 3:21, and so forth). We surely do not reject the intellectual. The Word of God in two ways testifies to God's valuing of human understanding: first, by presenting a readable documentation which, then, explicitly says, "I would not have you to be ignorant." To know God is a matter of existential fellowship and communion, but based essentially on his revelation of himself to humankind through the special revelation of the written Word. Even our Lord's self-identification as "the Word made flesh," is made known to us today by the explicit information of the written Word. These matters are made knowable through the mystery of God, Jesus Christ's Redeemer, whose work on our behalf can be grasped intellectually as textual information confirmed within us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and acted out in functional life as we identify ourselves with Christ in walk and conversation (Colossians 2 and 3) thus, it should be seen that education which is concerned only with intellectual development or in which the acquisition of information as a compulsory priority is less than Christian. We must never forget that contemporary secular society, especially in the Western world, is profoundly influenced by rationalism and its roots in Hellenistic philosophy. The highest view of knowledge in that framework is that of clarified information.

In contrast, the Hebrew cultural and religious roots of Christianity point toward true knowledge and that which is acted upon. The Christian outcome of education, therefore, should not be the Greek's satisfaction with clarified concepts. Instead, we should be satisfied with nothing less than the biblical concern for obedience, specifically in the sense of *acting upon truth*. This should be the central purpose of education and life. It is not enough to argue that obedience requires knowing. The issue is that *knowing*, in Christian philosophy, cannot be defined apart from *doing*. Both John and Paul are sensitive to the tendency to divide creed from deed, quite likely entering the early church from Greek philosophy and educational traditions. And if you ever read this in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, you'll find there a string of citations where I suggest some of the places where this enters into their thinking and concern. The warnings of John and Paul are needed today just as surely as they were in 1st century church.

It is entirely possible that Christianity in North America and Western Europe may have overemphasized formal education. Surely, if access to Christian higher education were highly correlated with the development of the church of Jesus Christ, we would now be living in the most Christianized nation and era in history. Evangelical Christianity has available today an unprecedented network of institutions of theological education, pastoral development, intellectual stimulation through literature, vocational training, Bible study, and liberal arts foundational learning. So what happened? There must be some slippage somewhere. Could it be that the Christian colleges and seminaries are giving academic credit for the wrong thing? I'm not smiling. I don't think it's funny. I don't calculate this simply to play to an audience. I am deadly serious. This is my career. This is my commitment as a Christian. I'm not scolding you for chuckling. I chuckle, too. But there's a serious side of it.

In the quest for excellence, Christian higher education may have become intoxicated with the intellectual snobberies so glorified in worldly academia. It seems to me that the more life-changing learning that comes through Christian service experiences is now seriously undervalued. And just as a side note: I examined the history of the Bible college movement which grew up out of a concern that academia in Christian service had gotten away from Christian service, so the Bible college movement came back to re-exalt service as a mode of education. And what has happened to *it*? It has all gone chasing after the same goddess.

Committed as I am to educational evaluation and curriculum development, I see this problem in a particular light. For what it may be worth, please consider: much of today's institutional Christian education is off on a head trip. The service motive is subordinated to intellectual goals; and service, when subordinated to anything, withers and dies. So long as practical experience is stultified by treating it as a poor cousin of intellectual learning; so long as so-called Christian service assignments are weekend outings divorced from distinct and relevant dialogue with one's academic learning, and so long as theological education is seen as preparatory *to* rather than simultaneous *with* ministry, we will have weak linkage between education and the development of the church.

In the past decade, we have been urged to think of evangelical Christianity and its institutions, especially the more conservative ones, as riding a crest of popularity and growth. So where are the great revivals? Is God's prophetic voice being heard in context of humility and contrition throughout our land? Here and there, yes. But, on the whole, there is something wrong. Nevertheless, the educational institutions are charging onward.

The idea of continuing education is becoming popular. And though the preparatory posture still holds at the core of things, the idea of advanced formal education for in-service development, is becoming almost too popular. More and more pastors are getting doctoral degrees, but what is the logic of it all? What does it mean? In what ways is the church affected? Shouldn't learning be a lifelong affair? Does it really require the carrot-and-stick approach to motivate it? Does it really need to be punctuated by one degree after another?

The time has come to raise the question of how much formal education is too much. Many metaphors of the good life carry the notion that more is better. Surely education, especially formal education, is in this category—so goes American thought, getting is its own end. One doesn't need to ask why. Could our obsession with getting, gaining, collecting, and accumulating be the reason we don't evaluate ways and means in education more carefully? Whether the question is how many degrees one needs in order to be considered educated, or how large a church enrollment ought to be, it does not follow that more is better.

The church of Jesus Christ in North America is on the ragged edge of having too many pastors with doctoral degrees. Heresy? You decide. This educator is ready to suggest at this seminary today that the current trend toward more and more theology degrees is good news and bad news. It is good news, of course, whenever people are motivated to develop the talent and the resources with which God has endowed them. But it is bad news that in the competitive quest for degrees people so easily get caught up in prideful prestige-seeking and lofty intellectualism that will surely isolate them from the very folk whom they claim to be serving. And sad news it is, indeed, that our Lord's teaching about leadership and education in Matthew 23 verses 1 to 12 is so thoroughly ignored. I challenge you to consider Jesus' descriptions there of the Pharisees and the scribes as a warning to all of us in formal education. In case you lost your pencil, it's Matthew 23:1-12.

Some of the motives for continuing education are less than Christian. Pastors can be encouraged by theological seminaries and by their own proud congregation to seek power and privilege through the very secular medium of formal education. I observe that formal education is highly reflective of non-Christian values and interpersonal relationships, even when used in the service of the church, as in the theological seminary or so-called Christian college. The trouble lies in two sources: first, the difficulty of keeping our Lord's model of humility and servanthood at the

fore, and second, the wrong choice of a metaphor of education. The resulting experiences tend toward alienation as often as toward the building of Christian communities.

The practice of Christian education, with few exceptions, is ambivalent, inconsistent, even erratic about what education is. Is it competitive or co-operative? Is it for all God's people or for an elite? Is it to prepare for future ministry or to facilitate ongoing ministry? Education means many different things, some of which are contradictory. Our educational efforts often malfunction. There is no question about sincerity and hope. The root of the problem lies more in unexamined and unevaluated metaphors of education with which we think and plan and evaluate.

Consider two of the most common metaphors: education as *filling a container*, and education as a *manufacturing* process. These two are closely related, though they use quite different symbolism. They are both dangerous. One of the key problems in both of these concepts of education is their rooting in a *tabula rasa* view of childhood. Worse yet, such views of learners as empty slates to be written upon by those who know is even applied to the teaching of adults. The result is sometimes high-cost kiddies' schools with larger chairs and less interesting teachers. The learner is more acted upon than active. The learner, especially in the *filling* metaphor, is essentially a bucket to be dumped into by those doing the educating. This orientation demeans the image of God shared in each person, and it encourages a passive receptivity ultimately lacking in creativity and skills of evaluation.

In the *manufacturing* metaphor, the learner is assumed to have characteristics which the machinery must somehow chip off and grind down. Irregularities and peculiarities in the learner (the raw material) are usually regarded as a nuisance. The system could be so much more efficient if everyone were exactly alike, it argues. This metaphor makes a teacher preoccupied with the system and its gadgetry. The learner is an object, something to be shaped and molded.

Teachers who think of education in terms of *filling a container* are rarely concerned with individual differences of background, interests or aspiration. The content is the thing. Most learning can be reduced to questions and answers. Recall of information is evidence of being educated. Tests are good indicators of success or failure; grading can always be objective. The more the teacher knows, the better the teacher is. Learning is essentially painful, but it is such good discipline. Such thinking leads to teaching that is very little more than cognitive dumping. Underlining the severity of dumping information and expectations on the learner—a process for which he prefers the metaphor *molding*—Israel Scheffler points out that the one choosing the mold is wholly responsible for the result. Unfortunately, those who dump and mold rarely see it this way. Dumpers tend to blame the students when the dump-out misses the bucket.

On the other hand, teachers who see education in terms of the *manufacturing* metaphor are usually aware that they have to accept responsibility for whether or not there is any learning taking place. These teachers, or pastors or parents, see themselves as creating the machinery that will turn out the product. Many people with degrees in education operate within this model. Their key mistake is taking to themselves too much responsibility for direction and control. Their strategies and educational devices are often overpowering. Rather than inviting learners into a shared relationship, they expect learners to submit themselves to being processed. The learners often interact and become more active in the whole experience than is possible in the *filling* metaphor, but the goals are usually quite firmly fixed. The goals are often stated as “behavioral objectives,” thus these objectives are in the system, not in the learner's experiences or in the learner's interaction with the learning system.

At one period of my own career, I accepted this metaphor of education especially because I saw it as substantially preferable to the *filling* metaphor. And because at least it encouraged learners to decide for themselves the worthiness of the outcomes that it promised, I decided to give it a try. It was in that period, some dozen years ago, that the Theological Education by Extension idea caught on. My role in what became the TEE or Theological Education by Extension movement was somewhat that of TEE's consulting technologist. My first surge of enthusiasm for TEE lasted long enough for me to see two major problems emerge:

First: I came to see that in the hands of compulsive people programmed instruction and allied instructional technologies were used simply as more powerful ways to fulfill the old motive of *filling the bucket*. I had pleaded for the integrative seminar as the connecting linkage between the cognitive input experiences and the practical service tasks. But the technology of teaching became an end in itself for many in the TEE field.

My second disappointment was less related to the theme of this lecture, but it should be mentioned anyway: the historical moment in which TEE emerged was marked by rapid nationalization of the educational institutions of the church in the developing world. TEE promised to be an ideal vehicle to further that transition. TEE programs could put pastoral development education closer to the real fields of service, get theological education out of its preparatory preoccupation, and more readily employ local pastor/teachers as the delivery agents to help other pastors. But before 1975, it became clear that these desirable outcomes were being systematically frustrated largely because North American mission boards were hiring, as TEE missionaries, more and more green seminary graduates using the persuasive pitch that, quote, "You really don't need much experience to be able to teach in the TEE programs. After all, the materials do it for you." And so was triggered the largest influx of new missionaries since World War II. So much for the hopes of moving institutional education into more appropriate forms for the development of the planted church in the Third World, and so much for my brief experience in education as technology in that factory metaphor.

Now I still believe in Theological Education by Extension and I thank God that in many places it is fulfilling some of our earlier hopes. But, as a matter of fact, I am back to my earlier commitment: education is a life walk to be shared. Perhaps it seems more poetic or even more Christian to me to think of life walk as the metaphor of lifelong learning and development. Some analysts in my field have called it the *travel* metaphor. Herbert Kliebard, University of Wisconsin, says it so well:

The curriculum is a route over which students will travel under the leadership of an experienced guide and companion. Each traveler will be affected differently by the journey since its effect is at least as much a function of the predilections, intelligence, interests, and the intent of the traveler as it is of the contours of the route. This variability is not only inevitable, but wondrous and desirable. Therefore, no effort is made to anticipate the exact nature of the effect on the traveller; but a great effort is made to plot the route so that the journey will be as rich, as fascinating, and as memorable as possible.¹

Kliebard's metaphor of education as *travel* is based on an earlier and simpler time. It is not useful to visualize trains, buses, airplanes, and automobiles in such travel. If your biases are like

¹ Herbert Kliebard. Metaphorical Roots of Curriculum Design. *Teachers College Record*, 74, 1972: 403-404

mine, you can think of sailboats or canoes. But what is in mine really is the walk—purposeful, yet subject to the thousand-and-one revelations that emerge as the trail unfolds to meet the pilgrim’s step. Such a vision of education does not suggest wandering, though it allows for exploring. It does not imply lack of purpose, though it recognizes that *being* is even more important than *going*. It suggests a destination, though it implies that the experiences of getting there are as important as the moment of arrival. Thus, a Christian has much to embrace in this metaphor of education. Our Lord used it extensively. It fulfills the biblical teachings about human relationship, authority, and the inalienable sovereignty of God. All through the Scriptures we see God’s people as strangers and sojourners, walking together with God in the lead. We are pilgrims in a life walk. Ours is not to finish our education and settle down. Awful, awful metaphors.

We learn. We develop. We experience the continuing fulfillment of God’s work begun in us with promise. We are marching to Zion, but our mission is along that very line of march. We do not well to avoid the needs of fallen humanity to the left and the right of our path. We should not travel in lockstep. We learn through encountering life’s realities as we discover our God providing according to our needs. And this most certainly includes the need for knowledge and wisdom as we need it. As companions in the way we have each other, some of us are gifted to teach and to help. We all interrelate. We are an interdependent community and we have but one Teacher, one Father, and one Leader. We are all brothers. Strange, isn’t it? But when we think we understand something simply because we’ve seen it done so often, teaching is like that. Perhaps if we went to doctors five days a week for twelve to twenty years of our lives, medicine would lose all its mystery and much of its respect.

The study of education is often misunderstood. It seems that many people view professional education as a sort of pretense. After all, anyone can teach. Furthermore, some who have been trained to teach don’t seem to do it very well. Thus it follows that those who study education are merely indulging in an exaggerated form of common sense. The reduction of teaching and learning to a set of commonplaces creates a further misunderstanding. Among those who apply to our graduate school of education are a disturbing number of educators who view the study of our field as focused on techniques and technology. Now there’s nothing wrong with a concern for techniques and technology, but the overemphasis on machinery and tactics can and does eclipse the issues of faith and reason which are ever so much more important to the professional study of education.

The field of Christian education, especially so-called church education, can also be criticized for these same two problems: reductionism and overemphasis on technology. Within education in the service of the church ranging from the Sunday school to the seminary, it is common, even popular, to know nothing about education; nothing beyond the immediate doing of one’s own thing. But being an educator is a matter of stewardship. Whether it is listening to others, lecturing about one’s topical expertise, or dealing with the complexities of a 4-year-old’s world and life view; educational issues and concerns, as well as specific knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning, are part of responsible ministry. Some of you are and others of you will be theological educators. You are obligated to deal with practical and theoretical matters of theological education.

Now it is not my business to tell the people of Dallas Theological Seminary how to do theological education. But there are some questions you might want to think about and discuss. Is theological education still being modeled on nineteenth-century medical education? By 1900, medical education had become a very long preparatory education full of lectures and lacking in hands-on experience. A substantial transition toward the clinical context and toward patient-

centered learning was triggered by the 1906 report of Abraham Flexner's study of medical education in the United States sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation. At that time, some old guard medical educators had argued that, if medical education were to become patient-centered, it would lose its emphasis on foundational science. By no means has this happened nor would any theological education need to sacrifice its Bible-centeredness if it became more focused on the people of God.

The church and Jesus Christ's building of his church is what ministry is all about. I see no inherent conflict between the centrality of the Scripture and the burden to deal with real people. Education can enhance the one through the substantial involvement with the other. Is the church of Jesus Christ well served by pastors who are concerned only with the right handling of the Word of God and who lack substantial knowledge of the sociopolitical realities of their time? In my view, sensitive awareness of the needs and the conditions of people is an essential part of the approach of ministry exemplified by our Lord.

Are the intellectual roots of theological education, as we know it today, more Hellenistic or Hebrew? Are the metaphors of education it represents more a matter of cognitive filling, machining a product, or engaging in a life walk? Is its view of development more mechanistic or more organic? Does its use of competition outweigh its advocacy of community and co-operation? Is its purpose communicated as winning and getting rewards or as fulfilling the metaphors of *salt* and *light*? Gordon MacDonald criticizes theological education with a broad stroke which I have to admire, though I would not even want to be caught saying the same words without quotation marks: "We are turning out intellectual wizards and relational dwarfs."

Can more efficient ways be found to help pastors develop those particular skills and biblical languages that will facilitate effective biblical exegesis? Could the tool skills a minister needs, including biblical languages, exegesis, exposition, and homiletics, be taught more effectively within the immediate context of their use? To help people develop spiritually is the central task of ministry. I believe, therefore, that tool skills should be evaluated in reference to their practical use; not just on the assertion that they ought to be useful, and the declaration of vested-interest professors that they intend them to be useful.

To what extent are seminary faculties and administrations concerned about the persisting evidence that what is learned in an academic context, particularly the so-called "tool skills," are, as often as not, abandoned when the real context of ministry is encountered? One might hope that this would not be true for Dallas graduates, but if some thorough evaluative research would show that it is, what would be done? Now I suspect that some of you had been hoping that I would get beyond the theoretical material of these lectures and be specific, concrete, and blunt. Please quit hoping. I have surely quit preaching and gone to meddling.

Many of you are pastors. Educational matters are *your* questions and *your* inescapable concerns. Nothing is more basic to pastoral responsibility than the spiritual development of God's people, the church. You might delegate the music-leading tasks, even some of the handshaking and the floor-sweeping, but you cannot give away your share of the responsibility for the development of the people. As I see it, one of the grave ills in theological education is the isolation of the sub-discipline of Christian education, compartmentalizing it into a distinct field conceptually isolated from ministerial service. In many Bible colleges and seminaries, Christian education is simply a list of courses to be systematically avoided by pre-pastoral students. Not only is it isolated from the pastoral mainstream, Christian education, so-called, has been preoccupied with children at the

expense of adult nurture and especially the crucial issue of parental development. No wonder that we have so many hurting parents, broken homes; and evidence of unpreparedness, anguish, and sense of inadequacy that causes parents to dump more and more responsibility on the church for the spiritual nurturance of their children.

The common pattern of Christian education in many churches falls far short of what God specified in the Scripture. The center of biblical Christian education is to be in the home. In God's plan, parenting is a job for beginners, but God provides help so that such a beginner, each new parent, whose tasks and responsibilities are enormously complex and demanding is able to be prepared and competent. Parenting is no job for the unprepared, the self-taught, or the casually knowledgeable dabbler. To be prepared and developing, a parent requires continuously to open relationship with one's children. How ironic, by contrast, is the professor, teacher, Sunday school teacher, yes, even the pastor whose role as a teacher of others is approached as casual self-satisfied indulgence in matters of teaching and learning.

Arguments for knowledgeable responsibility in Christian education are heard more frequently today. They are fairly widely accepted, especially within the Christian education field itself. But what follows from the repentance of past unconcern and the conversion to a new life as a real educator is equally disturbing. The transformation is too commonly marked by a shift into a preoccupation about methods and materials. Few fields of education have seen such an emphasis on filmstrips, cassettes, programmed instruction, and various forms of video. The awakened Christian educator or pastor is a gullible buyer of all sorts of gimmicky methods and jazzy materials.

A teacher's purpose is to help people learn. An educator is a teacher who is concerned about what and how people learn. In one way or another, every human being is a teacher. We all teach each other directly or indirectly. But to become an educator, one learns through practice and through various deliberate studies a disciplined approach to making and sharing decisions about what should be learned. An educator is deeply concerned and professionally skilled in matters of effectiveness of teaching for human learning. An educator distinguishes between telling and teaching, between hearing and learning. A Christian educator should also distinguish between education that is satisfied with measurable cognitive gain and true education in which the incorporation of principles of God's truth facilitates spiritual development. Such education, at its most practical level, is a life walk to be shared by members of God's family in small groups and in whole communities.

God bless you. Amen.