



Metaphors of Spiritual Reality: *Biblical Metaphors of Purpose*¹

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This lectureship reflects my belief that any responsible view of education, whether Christian or secular, must deal with four matters. First is *purpose*. What does one assume to be the purpose and outcomes of the educational process or program? Taken in the largest sense, life-purpose itself must be a foundation of responsible educational planning.

The second foundational matter is *development*. What one assumes to be the nature of the development and maturational processes determines to a great extent what is and is not appropriate as education.

The third and perhaps most obvious matter is how one sees *education* itself. All sorts of things are called “education.” It is a commonplace of life. We all learn; we all teach; we all participate in the formal and informal institutions of society that serve to educate us. When we deliberately educate or purposefully choose educational experiences, what criteria do we use to decide what should and should not be done?

The fourth matter is perhaps less commonly associated with education, except among curriculum specialists. It is a professional issue with profound implications for the worth of an educational operation: what do we take the *future* to be? Every planned educational outcome reflects some sort of view of the future. Thus, we cannot talk qualitatively about education without examining assumptions and beliefs about what we cannot yet see.

As a Christian, I take by faith that there is a spiritual reality in human life, and thus there are limits to what can be determined empirically. But I reject a dichotomistic view in which spiritual reality is seen apart from the natural manifestations in which it is incarnate.

Given these presuppositions, it should come as no surprise that I would ask you to examine the ways you think about these matters. Through this series of lectures, I am inviting you to examine carefully the ways you conceptualize education, development, and the purpose of spiritual development. I propose that we do this by examining the metaphors that are lodged in our thought processes, for it is the mental pictures—metaphors, analogies, parables, and images—which the human mind uses to form manageable constructs. Without these, thought would be a vast, disjointed sprawl of bits and pieces, snatches of memory, and competing information—file folders with useless labels.

Considering language and perception is, thus, basic to this consideration of metaphors. Becoming familiar with the way our linguistics reflect and even control our thinking can help to keep us humble.

We evangelicals are a peculiar people. This is evident by the way we talk. We surely have our own lingo. We use terms that other people never hear except when they listen in on us. Consider, for example, some of our big words: “propitiation,” “millennium,” “pneumatology.” And our little words: “grace,” “contrite,” “rapture,” just to name a few. Recently, one of our terms, “born again,” was popularized, and now everybody uses it any way they choose.

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More important are the common-use words that we invest with odd meanings, ignoring the resultant ironies. “Service” is such a word. “Service” is central—as a help to those in need within the fellowship, and as a ministry of compassion to those in the outer society. Our Lord set an example of service. But what has “service” become? We “have services,” or “go to services,” using the word to describe the passive, leader-dominated event that once was called worship. A linguistic researcher in a future century might find that our children first learned to use the word in a whispered sentence such as “When will the service be over?”

A related problem arises from lack of theological discipline in how we use our peculiar words. Consider, for example, “ministry.” Is it something one does to, for, or with someone else? Not long ago, one of my colleagues described the lack of vitality in many “youth ministries” as resulting from the defining of ministry as something you do to someone. He sees his denomination as being in big trouble because people do not seem to comprehend that ministry is for all Christians. Adults persist in seeing youth ministry as ministering to young people instead of developing the ministry of youth. A need today is for “vehicles” through which young people become active in ministry.

How do We Use Words?

That any distinctive group in any society would have a peculiar vocabulary and would share among themselves a unique way to use words is not surprising. That some of these uses would be more defensible than others is to be expected. I intend to go beyond these commonplaces and identify a more basic problem. Words and vocabulary are the codes of our mental processes and the linkages of our social interactions. Certain key words and phrases are the sub-routines of our mental computers. (Note how I say this, illustrating my point by using the computer as a key word to conceptualize the human mind.) Such key words we call metaphors.

To the reader of the New Testament, the “good Samaritan” communicates a Christian value. At the level of literal vocabulary, “good Samaritan” says only a good (rather than bad) person from Samaria (rather than from somewhere else.) But the meaning of the experiences of this particular good person from Samaria speaks volumes. These two words together, “good” “Samaritan,” communicate an idea in a context. They are a metaphor of the Christian’s social responsibilities.

The Bible includes a huge array of metaphors and similes. Even though we may claim to be “literal” in our handling of the Bible, we usually recognize figurative examples when we come across them.

Do our Names Reflect Reality?

Basic to scholarly traditions are category systems—names for things—and taxonomies. Taxonomies classify things in regard to their shared and their unique qualities. The language of scholarship reflects human understanding of the way things are understood and assumed to be. But names and categories often do not adequately represent reality. For example, within academic theology, the distinction between Christology and anthropology is obvious enough—until we take the Incarnation seriously. The line between exegesis and hermeneutics is fine and arbitrary. Between pastoral theology and Christian education, the line is barely logical. We draw such lines in order to manage our tasks. Since Adam, it has been a human responsibility to name the creation. The danger lies in taking our terminology and classification systems too seriously. Taxonomies are always flawed. The doctrine of original sin warns us of that. Many of our arguments as Christians arise over differences in the way we use words and categorize realities. The rigidity of fixed meanings sometimes prevents deeper understanding.

We should not conclude that discriminating judgment is bad. Surely when Adam obeyed God’s command to name the animals, he used the basic skills of discrimination: “Since that last one was a horse, this one surely is a non-horse, so I’ll call it a bullfrog.” Ever since then, dividing the

world into horses and bullfrogs has been popular—too popular. Oversimplified dichotomies result in all sorts of problems. God expects us to discriminate and to use good judgment. For example, “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). But when our discrimination between good and evil becomes an end in itself, we get too busy to pursue peace.

We laugh about the “good guys/bad guys” approach to understanding human experience. We assume an air of superiority in the presence of white-hat and black-hat symbolism. Surely we are too smart to be influenced by such an oversimplified view of life. I wonder. If not kept in submission to the fact that the Gospel is freely offered to all, the tendency to shun the “bad guys” and to avoid every appearance of sin (certain sins, anyway) can reduce us to smug caricatures of what our Lord intends. Never forget that some of his earliest critics accused him of using bad judgment about the company he kept and the places he went.

Are Our Perceptions True to Reality?

Theology students are generally well acquainted with the classical ways of dealing with problems of hermeneutics. Dallas Seminary students, especially, are well-known for their exegetical rigor. Indeed, a commitment to the doctrines of the inspired Word make all Christians more or less concerned about the Biblical text and its meanings and applications. What does the Bible say? What does it mean? How should I apply what it says? Answering these important questions is made more difficult because the Biblical languages are not our vernacular. But the matter of meanings is far more than a linguistic question. Most of the crucial questions of Biblical meaning can be traced to experiential differences. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways” (Isaiah 55:8) is the simplest explanation. The communication of God to man is severely impacted by the limitations and variations of human experience.

Donald Grey Barnhouse was once challenged on this matter. “You have a concept of God in human terms, don’t you?” his critic asked. Dr. Barnhouse replied, “What other concept is there?” Clearly, God is not mystically communicated by the word “God” or even “Yahweh.” Nor is God in our minds apart from what the Scriptures teach and what our minds bring to the words and metaphors of the Scriptures.

When the French read “le chien,” Germans would read “der Hund.” The creature’s bark would sound the same regardless of the language, but only in English would it be written “Bow-wow-wow!” When even a monolingual group of people think about “dog,” the variations are wide-ranging. We would need to specify size, color, breed, temperament, and age to get enough in common to be able to think together about the particular dog. Such observations are the standard stuff of communication theory and communication research.

But we need to go even beyond this problem of semantics to think about the matter of larger ideas, especially the abstractions which are essential to any religious system.

In our commitment to Biblical Christianity, we are vitally concerned with how people think about such matters as God, sin, redemption, and righteousness. We can work all week long on what these words mean. We can reassure ourselves by giving tests that ask for the standard definitions. We can argue that these words mean such and such in the Hebrew and Greek. We can even further investigate what they likely meant to people in Biblical times. These are admirable efforts—efforts defensible in the name of responsible scholarship. But since none of us is a Greek or a Jew of the times of Biblical authorship, our understandings will always be those of outsiders perceiving at a great distance. Further, even when we close that distance through careful scholarship, we find that the Greeks and Hebrews of those times were also human beings—people with wide-ranging differences among their experiences and perceptions.

Once I was a “definitions freak.” I thought that if you could just get together on the meaning of words, all sorts of dissonance and disagreement would disappear. Yes, you have to try to agree on definitions if you are to have any sort of worthy dialogue and literature; but if scholarship in human development has taught me anything, it is to beware of the glib assumption that perception is based in language. It is not. It is based in all the realms of human experience. You can arrive at a sociological or biological definition of “father” and agree that it is a correct or accepted definition, but you will never find another person whose mental associations with “father” are exactly the same as yours. Yet the Holy Spirit chose to use this word as the key metaphor by which humans may grasp something of the character of God: “Our heavenly Father.”

What is the Purpose of the Christian Life?

Reflecting on how we think about such things can be a useful exercise. I often use word-association exercises to help people become more aware of the ways their experiences have shaped their perceptions. In reference to the important matter of purpose, we shall take a brief excursion together.

Ours is a competitive society. We compete as a nation with any and all economic or military aspirants for world domination. We compete through industry (we call it “free enterprise.”) Competition through sports is our largest recreational investment. We even compete within families.

As intensive competitors will, we take a win/lose view of almost everything. Our form of Christianity is, thus, invested with all sorts of notions of winning and losing. For many of us, our sense of purpose is far beyond the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s keynote: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Indeed, our chief end is to win souls, keep count, and present ourselves worthy to the great “Scorekeeper in the sky” at the end of the game—whereupon, in the best tradition of the Greek games, he will place a winner’s crown on our heads. Vernon Grounds identifies pre-occupation with this sort of quantitative success as sinful idolatry.²

The great theme is “opportunities.” God gives us lots of them; we use them well (“take advantage of the opportunity”) or we fail (“lose the opportunity.”) When we fail, often it is because we did not “seize” the opportunity. Thus, we disappoint our Lord and “lose” a round in the great game of life.

At the theological level, there are some problems with all this, of course. Whether we are to be judged or not is a nagging question. Like habitual winners, we want a voice in making the rules. So we really do not want to be judged in any negative sense—just recognized and rewarded. So we say we are not to be judged—but those stars in the crown look mighty appealing. I surely would not want to be seen walking around heaven without a well-loaded crown. Think of the shame and embarrassment of it! (Metaphor: heaven is a place to continue the habit of showing off or feeling guilty.)

Our Americanized system of spiritual free enterprise makes us vulnerable to a sense of guilt. We do not dare disappoint God. But it is hard to measure up to the always-in-high-gear image of the intensive competitor. The race we are running demands some pauses for breath and nourishment, and one’s self-image as a winner gets bent out of shape. Guilt and failure are too much with us. So they must be hidden. Do not let others know—it increases the guilt. It might even cause a brother to “stumble.” The matter of purpose is transcendent. Christians, of all people, need a theologically sound answer to the persistent human questions, “What is life all about?” “Why are we here?”

² Vernon Grounds. Faith for Failure. Commencement Address. *The Gordon*, Gordon College, 22 (1978)

Purpose, especially for Americans, too readily calls up the metaphor of a game or contest. Life is a great game; we are in a contest. Purpose of life tends to be mentally processed in terms of what we do, what we bring to the game, and how well we play it.

So in one era we Americans seek fulfillment of our “Manifest Destiny,” in another we wage “a war to end all wars.” We even evangelize through crusades in bloodless stadiums and on television. Now we are on a mechanistic kick: after faintly baptizing the linear logic of the business world, we set goals, specify objectives, have an endless series of consultations and seminars culminating in a grand review of strategy (in the farthest corners of the earth,) and invite God in to bless our insights. All these metaphors are more cultural than Biblical. Because of compulsive “purposing” in the name of Jesus Christ we could be seen as the first generation of Christians to encourage the Holy Spirit into premature retirement.

Have we come to this? Not yet. Among those of us who have been urging Christian educators to tap more thoroughly the major fields of scholarship and research, there is a growing anxiety that we are using new concepts and procedures badly. It is beyond the scope of this lecture to deal with the whole of that problem, but since I think it starts with this faulty metaphor—purpose as game—I wish to suggest some correctives.

Most of all, we need a larger view, a more complete view of who we are and why we are here. Since we have no meaning apart from the wholeness which we have in Jesus Christ, we must get serious about what it means to be spiritual beings. We are here, in physical existence, as creatures of God’s creative hand. Our every breath exalts the Creator. We are here as spiritual beings, as evidences of God’s redemptive process. As those who are spiritually alive through faith in the redeeming work of Christ, our discipleship includes responsibilities in the physical universe—exploring, naming, understanding, and responsibly using that of which we are part. Ours is a scientific responsibility as well as a compassionate concern for the well-being of the entire groaning creation. As human beings, we are inquirers into the nature of things, from the stars of the night skies to the mysteries of human interaction. Christians, beyond all people, should take these responsibilities seriously. We are all mortal. Error is an inherent accompaniment of human inquiry. Truth is there; we perceive through less than perfect lenses.

Ours is a walk of faith—not just the mouthing of a formula of faith-words. The spread of the Gospel is impeded by a verbal Christianity that puts words ahead of action.

Two specific metaphors of our purpose and function are given by our Lord. “You are the salt of the earth,” he said to his disciples (Matthew 5:13). Salt’s relative commonness, its elemental simplicity, its humble status are balanced over against its persistence, its power to preserve, and its importance in larger compounds. Salt is not particularly noisy, but it cannot be stopped from accomplishing its purpose.

“You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). In this metaphor our Lord included us in a description he made of himself: “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Light does not aim itself. It is not pre-occupied about its consequences. Light is simply light—a marvelous form of energy, capable of replacing darkness, not subduing it, just by the nature of its presence.

So much of the world still awaits a meaningful encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. I thank God for the current vigorous campaign to re-direct mission outreach activities toward “unreached peoples.” At the same time, I fervently pray that this enthusiasm will not become just one more clever movement. The story of missions in the second half of this century includes too many cases where smart managers and visionary promoters figured out really neat schemes to show God how to get on with the job of reaching the world. A far better strategy is to confess that the job is beyond our understanding, to open ourselves to see what God is already doing, and to ask God if he would let us help. In this last matter, we have to be secure enough with God and with ourselves to accept the gentle “no” that may wound our pride and trigger a compulsive dash into the thick of

things, no matter what damage results. (“Pushiness for Jesus” should not be our bumper-sticker.) I do not speak abstractly. The lessons we are learning about what God has done in his own ways through his church in China are sobering. We can see that God has resources other than North American Christians. Now can we trust God enough to seek out prayerfully the Holy Spirit’s activity in the Muslim world?

Evangelism is our joy. But when evangelism becomes our business, our task, our main “job,” its forms become mechanical and its message becomes brassy. Our purpose is to glorify God. We can each glorify God in the thousand-and-one private and public thoughts and acts of our life. Glorifying God has a personal aspect, a corporate aspect, and a public aspect. Jesus Christ is at the center of each of these. The Holy Spirit energizes each. But evangelism is our joy—the privilege and thrill of making the name of Jesus Christ heard clearly in the din and bustle of life. Through this joy we share in the Lord’s redeeming of His lost world.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, whose missiological insights I deeply respect, recently wrote,

In the communication of the Gospel, word and act belong together. The word is essential, because the name of Jesus cannot be replaced by anything else. But the deed is equally essential because the Gospel is the good news of the presence of the reign of God, and because this presence is to be made manifest in a world which has fallen under the usurped domination of the evil one Where the church invites men and women to take refuge in the name of Jesus without challenge to the dominion of evil, then it becomes . . . a sign against the sovereignty of God. An ‘evangelism’ which seeks to evade this challenge and this conflict, which—for example—welcomes brutal tyranny because it allows free entry for missionaries rather than a more humane regime which puts difficulties in their way, becomes a sign against the Gospel.³

The need is not to adopt a “broader view” of evangelism, as John R. Mott recommended in the 1930s, but to grasp the wholeness of evangelism. We do not need a new term, not even “holistic evangelism;” instead, we need to refreshen an old concept: Biblical evangelism, as modeled by Jesus Christ, the Man of compassion. Our Lord wept over humankind’s separation from God, yet he ministered healing to the physical needs of people. And he respected the need for people to reflect and come to their own conclusions. He let perplexed seekers go off into the night to further scratch their heads. He defended his listeners’ capability of reflecting on abstract propositions when he gave them concrete parables.

He knew his purpose so well that he could discern what sort of learning experiences would be consistent and what would be inconsistent. To this basic knowledge, he added a necessary skill: he listened well. And he wrapped the whole process in a warmth and tenderness that even encouraged children to come to him. What a Teacher!

What is the Purpose of Education?

The purpose of education cannot be examined apart from the purpose of life. The stimulating and deepening of human development is a whole-person issue.

The dichotomizing mind tends to split up the person into sectors or “aspects” (metaphor: person as a collection of parts). In such a view, the intellectual function and, to some extent, the physical function are seen as the objects of education (metaphor: Athens and Sparta as the two

³ Lesslie Newbigin. Issues that Affect Relationships between Evangelicals and Ecumenicals in Mission Today, Manuscript (1981) for forthcoming publication. [This article appeared as Lesslie Newbigin. Cross-currents in Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Mission. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. Vol 6 (4) October 1982, pp. 146-151. See www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/1982-04/1982-04-ibmr.pdf]

choices of educational emphasis). When the intellectual aspect is presumed to be a more exalted representation of deity, the choice is made for Athens, and what is chosen as learning activity is intellectual experience, regardless of the costs or benefits in the other “sectors” of the person. This dichotomized view forces unnecessary choices. Current educational philosophy is raising some of the questions that the Greeks tried to clarify, particularly the question of praxis. Is it possible to learn truth apart from practice (applied experience?) As a Christian in education, I welcome the renewed concern for praxis.

During most of its history, the New Testament church has drawn its values and metaphors of education more from Aristotelian Greek thought than from the authentic background of Christian philosophy: Hebrew culture. Praxis forces us back to a Hebrew epistemology and to a biblical valuing of knowledge as that which is acted on. The Hellenistic satisfaction with static contents of the mind is deeply embedded in Christian education. But it is being challenged by a whole-person concern for truth-in-action much closer to Jesus’ own claim that truth was not defined apart from its incarnation. “I am . . . the truth” (John 14:6).

Theological education is being affected by this shift. All over the world, especially where the church is experiencing its most substantial growth, theological education is becoming more praxis-oriented and more concerned that the time-honored memorization of lists be at least balanced by applied and functional learning. At the risk of offending some, I share with you a personal burden. The metaphor of the distillery applies far too aptly to much of theological education: the establishment ferments the good grain in large vats, boils it down, catches the steam in coiled tubes, captures it in branded barrels, ages it, bottles it, and keeps its price just high enough that the common person tends to wonder if there is a cheaper way to meet his or her needs.

Education is Learning Through Action

Would that all theological education was centered on the Incarnation. Not only would it be Christ-honoring, but it would be Christ-imitating. Our Lord was the Word made flesh. Education can be the truth made flesh—not just an “encounter with ideas,” not just the passing of tests of recall, not just the airy-fairy abstractions of intellectual debate, but a hands-on intensive learning through action in the walks of life. Our Lord did not lecture about how to relate to blind people and beggars; he walked and talked. He shared. He lived his way of educating. In the name of what sort of economic advantage, what sort of scarcity, what sort of “better way,” can we take pride in doing less?

“I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.” (John 10:10).

“I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13).

“I have not come of myself, but he who sent me is true . . .” (John 7:28).

“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind” (John 9:39).

“I have come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46).

In the service of the Lord, education must help us serve the needs of people. We are to make disciples of his way. His way is not fulfilled in a neurotic and anxious fussing and bickering about verbal definitions. His way is not properly represented as a proud exclusivism. His way is nothing less than the way of the Cross: a giving, a sharing, and a clear testimony of actions and words that point the observer toward the One who is greater. Our servanthood is not as an apprenticeship to prove our humility while we await promotion, but—as was our Lord’s—a servanthood to death, seeking no glory. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Thus, our purpose is his joy—now, and yet to come; serving his purposes—now, and yet to come; assisting in his processes of redemption—now, and yet to come; proclaiming the good news of his salvation—now, and yet to come.