



Metaphors of Spiritual Reality: *Evaluating Metaphors of Education*¹

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What education is and how it can be used properly are matters 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; education is commonplace. Self-appointed experts on education are everywhere. Small wonder, then, that so many ill-advised assaults on the human spirit are passed off as worthy educational ventures.

Three essentially different metaphors of education account for most of the thinking, planning, and operation of formal education. Each of these ways of conceptualizing education should be evaluated in terms of the Christian concern for spiritual development.

Is True Education Merely Intellectual?

Christianity is, in large measure, a rational religion. Spiritual development does not exclude any of the aspects of human personhood. Even the physical is an object of God’s redemption (Romans 8:11, 23, Philippians 3:21). And surely the intellectual is not rejected, for the Word of God in two ways testifies to God’s valuing of human understanding: (a) it is a readable documentation, and (b) it explicitly says, “I would not have you to be ignorant.”

To know God is a matter of experiential fellowship and communion based essentially on his revelation of himself to humankind through the special revelation of the written Word. Even the Lord’s self-identification as “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14), is made known to man by the explicit information of the written Word. These matters are made “knowable” through the mystery of God, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, whose work on humanity’s behalf can be grasped intellectually as textual information, confirmed within by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and acted out in functional life as believers identify themselves with Christ in walk and conversation (Colossians 2:3). Thus, it should be seen that education which is concerned only with intellectual development or in which the acquisition of information as a compulsive priority is less than Christian.

Contemporary secular society, especially in the Western world, is profoundly influenced by rationalism and its roots in Hellenistic philosophy. The highest view of knowledge is that of clarified information.

In contrast, the Hebrew cultural and religious roots of Christianity point toward true knowledge as that which is acted on. The Christian outcome of education, therefore, should not be the Greek-like satisfaction with clarified concepts. Instead, the biblical concern for obedience—acting on truth—should be the central purpose of education and of life. It is not enough to argue that obedience requires knowing. The issue is that knowing, in Christianity, 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 (Romans 6:4, I Corinthians 3, Galatians 5:10-13, Ephesians 2:10, Ephesians 5:2, Philippians 3:12-16, Colossians 2:6, I Thessalonians 2:1-12, I John 1:6-7, 2 John 6, 3 John 4). Their warnings are needed today as surely as in the first-century church.

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What is the Place of Educational Institutions?

It is entirely possible that Christianity in North America and Western Europe may have over-emphasized formal education. Surely if access to Christian higher education were highly correlated with the development of the church of Jesus Christ, the United States would now be the most Christianized nation 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 happens? There must be some slippage somewhere. Could it be that Christian colleges and seminaries are giving academic credit for the wrong things? In the quest for excellence, Christian higher education may have become intoxicated with the intellectual snobberies so glorified in worldly academia. 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 “Christian service assignments” are weekend outings divorced from distinct and relevant dialogue with one’s “academic learnings,” and so long as theological education is seen as preparatory to (rather than simultaneous with) ministry, a weak linkage will continue between education and the development of the church.

In the past decade, we evangelicals have been urged to think of Christianity and its institutions, especially the more conservative ones, as riding a crest of popularity and growth. If this view were altogether accurate, one could expect unprecedented strength and vitality in churches and dramatic influence on society at large. Increased enrollment in theological education is one evidence of the much-touted growth. A close look reveals certain changes of procedure, but not significant differences in the net effects. For example, continuing education is becoming popular. 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? Should not learning be a life-long 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 need not ask why. Could the American obsession with getting, gaining, collecting, and accumulating be the reason evangelicals do not evaluate ways and means more carefully? Whether the question is how many degrees one needs to be considered educated or how large a church enrollment ought to be, it does not follow that more is better.

The American church is on the ragged edge of having too many pastors with doctoral degrees. 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 talents and resources with which God has endowed them. But it is bad news when pastors in the competitive quest for degrees so easily get caught up in proud prestige-seeking and lofty intellectualism that will isolate them from the people they claim to serve. When Jesus’ teaching about leadership and education in Matthew 23:1-12 is ignored, the result is, again, the pomp of the Pharisees and scribes.

Some of the motives for continuing education are less than Christian. Some pastors seek power and privilege through the secular medium of formal education. (Formal education is often highly reflective of non-Christian values and interpersonal relationships even when used in the service of the church, as in a seminary or a Christian college.) The trouble lies in two sources: (a) the difficulty

of keeping the Lord's model of humility and servanthood at the fore and (b) the wrong choice of metaphor of education. The resulting experiences often tend toward alienation rather than the building of Christian communities.

The Metaphor of Filling

The practice of Christian education, with a few exceptions, is ambivalent, inconsistent, and 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 an on-going ministry? Education means several different things, some of which are contradictory; 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.

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 different symbolism. They are both faulty.

One of the key problems in both of these concepts of education is their rooting in a *tabula rasa* view of childhood. Worse yet, this view of the learner as an empty slate to be written on by "those who know" is even applied to the teaching of adults. The result is high-cost "kiddie-schools" with larger chairs and less interesting teachers.

The learner is more acted on than active. The learner, especially in the "filling" metaphor, is essentially a blank page to be written on 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 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, interest, or aspiration. The *content* is the thing. Most learning can be reduced to questions and answers; recall of information is the evidence of becoming educated; tests are good indicators of "success" or "failure;" grading can 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 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," Scheffler points out that "the one choosing the mold is wholly responsible for the result."²

Unfortunately, those who dump and mold rarely see it that way. Dumpers tend to blame the students when the dump-out misses the bucket.

The Metaphor of Manufacturing

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 any learning is 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 in taking to themselves too much responsibility for direction and control. Their strategies and

² Israel Scheffler. *The Language of Education*. (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1960), p. 51

educational devices are often over-powering. Rather than inviting learners into a shared relationship, they expect them 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 firmly fixed. The goals (often stated as “behavioral objectives”) are in the system, not in the learner’s experiences or interaction with the learning system.

This writer, at one period of his career, accepted this metaphor of education. He saw it as substantially preferable to the filling metaphor, and it encouraged learners to decide for themselves the worthiness of the outcomes it promised.

At that time, a dozen or so years ago, Theological Education by Extension (TEE) caught on. As a consulting technologist for TEE, this writer saw two problems emerge. First, in the hands of compulsive people, programmed instruction and allied instructional technologies were used simply as more powerful ways to fulfill the old motives of cognitive dumping. I had pleaded for the integrative seminars as the connecting link 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.³

Second, the historical moment in which TEE emerged was marked by rapid nationalization of the church’s educational institutions in the developing world. TEE promised to be an ideal vehicle to further the 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.⁴ Before 1975, it became clear that these desirable outcomes were being systematically frustrated. North American mission boards were recruiting as TEE missionaries more and more green seminary graduates, using the persuasive “pitch,” “You really don’t need much experience to be able to teach in TEE programs. After all, the materials do it for you.” The result was the largest influx of new missionaries since the post-World War II missionary boom. Thus faded the hopes of moving institutional education into more appropriate forms for the development of the Third World Church.⁵

The Metaphor of a Life-Walk

A preferred metaphor of education is to see it as a life-walk to be shared. Some analysts have called it the “travel” metaphor. Kliebard 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 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 traveler; 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.⁶

³ Ted Ward and Samuel F. Rowen. The Significance of the Extension Seminary. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Vol. 9 (1) Fall 1972: 17-27

⁴ Ted Ward. *Theological Education by Extension: Much More Than a Fad*. *Theological Education*. 10 (Summer 1974) pp. 246-258

⁵ Ted Ward. Types of TEE. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Vol. 13 (2) 1977: 79-85. This writer still believes in Theological Education by Extension, and thanks God that in many places it is fulfilling some of the earlier hopes.

⁶ Herbert M Kliebard. Metaphorical Roots of Curriculum Design. *Teachers College Record*. Vol. 74 (February 1972), p. 404

Kliebard's metaphor of education as travel is based on an earlier and more simple time. (It is not useful to visualize trains, buses, airplanes, and automobiles—or even sailboats or canoes.) What is in mind 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*. This view of teaching and learning suggests a destination, though it implies that the experiences of going there are as important as the arrival.

Thus, Christians have much to embrace in this metaphor of education. Jesus used it extensively. It fulfills the biblical teachings about human relationship, authority, and the inalienable sovereignty of God. All through the Scriptures, God's people are seen 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." (These are awful metaphors of human fulfillment.)

Christians are to learn, to develop, to experience the continuing of God's work begun in them (Philippians 1:6). "Marching to Zion," yes; their mission, however, is along that very line of march. They are not to avoid the needs of fallen humanity to the left and right of the path. Nor should they travel in lock-step. They learn through encountering life's realities as they discover God providing according to their needs, including the need for knowledge and wisdom.

As companions in the way, Christians have each other; some are gifted to teach and to help. They all interrelate; they are an interdependent community. Having one Teacher, one Father, one Leader, they are all brothers (Matthew 23:8-10).

Strangely, people think they understand something simply because they have seen it done so often. Teaching is like that. The study of education is often misunderstood. Many people view professional education as a sort of pretense. After all, anyone can teach; it is argued. And some who have been trained to teach do not seem to do it very well. Thus, 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 the Graduate School of Education at Michigan State University are some educators whose focus is on techniques and technology. A concern for techniques and technology is not wrong, but the over-emphasis on machinery and tactics can and does eclipse the issues of reason and faith which are 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 two problems: reductionism, and over-emphasis on technology.

Within education in the service of the church—from Sunday schools to seminaries—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 or lecturing about one's subject of expertise or dealing with the complexities of a four-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.

Theological Education

The following are some questions on theological education to think about.

1. 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 but lacking 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 (sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation). Some old-guard medical educators had argued then 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 focused more on the people of God. The church and Jesus Christ's building of his church is what ministry is all about. No inherent conflict exists between the centrality of the Scriptures and the need to deal with real people. Education can enhance the one through involvement with the other.

2. 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 realities of their time? Sensitive awareness of the needs and the conditions of people is an essential part of the ministry, as exemplified by the Lord.

3. Are the intellectual roots of present-day theological education 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 co-operation? Is its purpose communicated as winning and getting rewards, or as fulfilling the metaphors of "salt" and "light?" As one pastor has suggested, some seminaries are "turning out intellectual wizards and relational dwarfs."

4. To what extent are seminaries concerned about the persistent evidence that what is learned in an academic context, particularly the so-called "language skills," are often abandoned when the real context of ministry is encountered?

Nothing is more basic to pastoral responsibility than the spiritual development of God's people, the church. Pastors might delegate music-leading tasks or even some of the hand-shaking and the floor-sweeping, but they cannot give away their share of responsibility for the development of God's people. One of the grave ills in theological education is the isolation of the discipline of Christian education compartmentalizing it into a distinct field, conceptually isolated from ministerial service. In many Bible colleges and seminaries, "Christian education" courses are avoided by pre-pastoral students.

The field of Christian education has been preoccupied with children at the expense of adult nurture and especially of parent development. No wonder churches have so many hurting parents whose unpreparedness, anguish, and sense of inadequacy causes them to dump more and more responsibility on the church for the spiritual development of their children. The common pattern of Christian education in many churches falls far short of what God specified in the Scriptures.

The center of biblical Christian education should be in the home, anyway (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). 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 casually knowledgeable dabblers. To be a prepared and developing parent requires a continuously open learning 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 a casual indulgence in matters of teaching and learning.

Arguments for knowledgeable responsibility in Christian education are heard more frequently today. For the most part, they are widely accepted, especially within the Christian education field itself. But what follows from the repentance of past unconcerns and the conversion to a new life as a "real" educator is often equally disturbing. The transformation is too commonly marked by a shift into 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. A true educator is concerned about what and how people learn. In one way or another, every human being is a teacher; all teach each other, directly and 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 what makes for effective 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 gains” 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 larger communities.