



Metaphors of Spiritual Reality: *Metaphors of the Church in Troubled Times*¹

Ted Ward

Every educational decision reflects a view of the future. Knowledgeable decisions are those in which the image of the future is taken into account consciously and respectfully.

Educators who participate in curriculum development have a special need for eschatological clarity and a concern for the linkages between the now and the hereafter. A curriculum planner, then, is one who prepares educational experiences today for the tomorrow which seems about to be.

Christian educators, whether employed in secular education or Christian education, are keenly aware of the task of helping people prepare for that future and, at the same time, they take nothing as inevitable except the promises of God. They help people prepare, but they also participate in the processes which change the future. They are not fatalists.

Any education that lacks substantial contact with human reality is not worthy of the name of Jesus. Any education that lacks hope or lacks the vision to affect the future for good is not worthy of the name of Christ. Thus, education in the service of the church needs to be real and to be visionary.

Faith in Relationship to Education

For the Christian, the three abiding evidences of spiritual life and maturing—faith, hope, and love (I Corinthians 13:13)—are not intellectual abstractions. They are matters of one's essential being. They guide thought; they effect perception; they are reflected in action.

Faith makes possible one's commitment to his universe and his creatures—a commitment that motivates a person to be involved in fostering the development of people and society. Faith appreciates the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Christians are not to be esoteric or stingy with that faith. It is shareable; Christians bear testimony in word and deed that true faith is Godward. It is, thus, the basis of spiritual life. Education must nurture this faith in the Lord. But this concern cannot be taken as an argument for a particular institution or some special form of education. The Holy Spirit ministers to the building of believers' faith through all sorts of circumstances, even through persecutions and afflictions (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4).

James' emphasis on the necessary interlock of faith and works is essential for education. If faith without works is dead, then true Biblical education puts faith and action together into practice (James 2:17, 26). James bluntly suggests that having biblical knowledge committed to memory (and belief!) is an attribute shared with demons (James 2:19). Faith alone is dead; and good works alone are useless. Spiritual development and maturity, especially of one's faith, depends on the interaction of faith and works.

A striking parallel emerges between this interaction and a recently re-discovered theme in education: praxis. Partly because of the attention which has been given to oppressed people in various

¹ Ted Ward. Metaphors of Spiritual Reality: Metaphors of the Church in Troubled Times, Part 4. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 140 (557) January-March 1983: 3-10. Used with permission. This is the final article in a series based on the author's W.H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary (February 9-12, 1982)

parts of the world, the work of the Brazilian educator/philosopher, Paulo Freire, has become widely recognized.² Though he makes no claim for originating the term or the concept (it can be traced to Greek philosophy), praxis has become closely associated with Freire.

Praxis holds that learning takes place only when ideas are acted on and action is reflected on. A two-phase cycle is suggested in which the movement back and forth (better to say, round and round?) between doing and reflecting is the practical essence of effective learning. Especially in teaching adults, this proposition is valuable and almost universally applicable. In fact, it is relatively easy to diagnose malfunctioning education in terms of this model. If the educational environment is out of balance toward either the applied or the theoretical, or if the linkages are weak or the cycles too long, it is likely providing ineffectual experiences.

Some see hope as an abstraction too vague to be concerned about, whereas others see it as a basic component of spiritual reality. Psychologists have tried to identify and clarify hope; they see it as a personality attribute. Common sense suggests that hope is demonstrated in optimism, rather than pessimism. Everyday human interaction associates hope with encouragement, lack of hope as discouragement. At the human emotional level, loss of hope is identified as a major cause of suicide; without hope, life does not seem worth living. When hope is tied to things that cannot be counted on, one's emotional condition can go up and down like a yo-yo.

For Christians, hope is an "expectation directed toward that which is good."³ Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Thus, one could argue for an education focused on clean thoughts, righteous acts, and a fixation on loveliness. It has been tried. Indeed, the quest for these evidences of goodness and godliness is reflective of the hopeful orientation of the spiritual person, but the Pauline material, as always, is grounded in the explicit teachings of Jesus Christ. In matters of hope, Christ's words resonate to the heart of spiritual reality: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus taught that sorting the lovely from the unlovely makes sense only in eternal terms. Contact with the unlovely is inevitable; it is also Christian. The education Christians need must deal with the unlovely and the godless things of life as well as with the virtues of gentleness, mercy, and peacemaking (Matthew 5:5-9). Christians are motivated by a heavenly hope with earthly implications. Paul makes one side of this truth explicit in I Corinthians 15:19: "If we have hope in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied." The other side is emphasized by Peter: "always [be] ready . . . to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (I Peter 3:15). The education needed today, then, should help others understand and communicate spiritual reality in meaningful terms to those who are "dead in trespasses and sins." And such communication is to be characterized by "gentleness and reverence," not by strident self-importance and railing ignorance.

Love in Relationship to Education

Love, that second-to-none aspect of spiritual reality ("the greatest of these is love," [I Corinthians 13:13]) is often contradicted by the things Christians do in the name of Jesus Christ. Any act that treats another human being as an object to be acted on by one's own will denies love—and

² Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1970) and Paulo Freire. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1973)

³ Lewis Sperry Chafe. *Systematic Theology*, 8 volumes. (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948) 7:189

denies Christ. Manipulation does not win others to Christ; nor does coercion, aggression, character assassination, or hate-mongering. The ethics of education in the service of the Lord should be disciplined to the spiritual reality of love.

A valuable insight into the simplicity and non-manipulative quality of love in the kingdom is revealed in Matthew 25:31-46, the judgment of the Gentiles. The sheep are accepted and glorified because they met the physical, emotional, and social needs of “these brothers of Mine, even the least of them” (v. 40). Interestingly, the “sheep” responded explicitly that they were not conscious of doing their good deeds for the Lord (v. 39). They were not manipulating events in order to bring attention or glory to themselves. They were simply involved in helping those in need. On the other hand, the “goats” were self-consciously and cleverly awaiting opportunities to do good works. But their motive was to let everyone know they were doing them (v. 44).

Christians are to act in compassion because that is their nature. God has given believers a new nature identified with Christ in love and compassion; thus, they should not deny him by living in contradistinction to their new nature. Education is needed that helps believers discover and act in accordance with the new nature which is theirs in Jesus Christ.

Today’s troubled times and the new anxieties they bring are pushing the Christian community toward a compulsive, neurotic, and defensive style. In several great historic moments, the church has been pushed to the edge. Testing has produced strength. Perhaps the present is the beginning of such a period of testing. What remains unclear is whether spiritual strength will emerge as a dominant characteristic of the Christian community in North America. Perhaps the church in America has had about all the fatness and ease it can stand.

Evangelical Christianity has a tradition of scholarly and emotional emphasis on eschatology. The return of the Lord is both an article of faith and a cause of one’s hope. But the New Testament often links the Lord’s return with active service in the present. If there ever was a time for Christians to be sensitive to the needs of hurting humanity, it is now. If there ever was a time to be concerned about adequate preparation for service in the difficult times ahead, it is now.

In a paper prepared for the Second Evangelical Consultation on the Future (held in Kansas City in 1978), this writer suggested that evangelical Christians may be especially vulnerable to lack of preparation for the future.⁴ Some Christians cannot carry on a discussion about next year without spinning off into a conversation-stopping comment about the possibility of the Lord’s returning before then. Whatever the topic of conversation—political change, economic decline, impending war, nuclear holocaust, or even the need to evaluate the effectiveness of some church program—some believers divert their attention from those immediate needs to the second coming. While believers eagerly anticipate the Lord’s return in the future, they ought not neglect being actively involved in the present.

Metaphors for the “Intermediate” Future

Christians need a clearer sense of the intermediate future—those times between now and the Lord’s return for his own.⁵ Thus, it seems appropriate to distinguish between ultimate future, the culmination of the age with all its momentous events, and the intermediate future, those days between now and then. Four metaphors may be used to express the views people have toward the Church in the intermediate future:

⁴ Ted Ward. The Future of the Church in a Secular Society. In *An Evangelical Agenda, 1984 and Beyond: Addresses, Responses, and Scenarios from the Continuing Consultation on Future Evangelical Concerns* held at Overland Park, Kansas, December 11-14, 1979. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979)

⁵ Ted Ward. The Church: in the Intermediate Future. *Christianity Today* (June 29, 1979), pp. 14-18

The Church as an Unheeded Conscience

Some people see the church as already having done its work; it is now nothing but an unheeded conscience in an era of increasing decadence and evil. Such a view rationalizes inaction. One simply stays apart and stays “pure,” in a strangely unworthy notion that Christian purity derives from not doing this and that. For people who see the Church this way, education is becoming less important. They argue that little more needs to be done or can be done; nothing Christians do will matter now.

The Church as a Ghetto

The second metaphor is similarly passive and defeatist, though popular in various parts of the country. The church as a ghetto suggests a “coming apart,” to be separate in some ultimate way. Christians with this view “pull the wagons into a circle” in the defensive way of the westward pioneers. In some situations, there is even a sort of pride about it. They feel superior to the world from which they separate, even if they do not really want to leave behind the artifacts of that society they condemn. For people who think this way, Christian education is exclusive, apart, and uncontaminated. It has little, if any, concern with the physical, emotional, social, and moral issues of secular society, except to avoid them. Education is seen as benefiting only Christians, except to produce a few “communicators” who can shout over the high walls they have built so they can still claim to be “witnesses” for Christ. The extreme callousness of this position is an affront to all humanity, not just to those it chooses to ignore.

The Church as an Underground Army

The third metaphor is more appealing, even imaginative, drawing as it does on romanticized recollections of Europe during the Nazi occupation. The church as an underground army suggests a sort of can-do attitude, even in the face of overwhelming oppression. Some Christians suppose that their responsibility is to be a persistent annoyance to the occupying enemy. But this sometimes leads to subversion, trickery, and even dishonesty. The problem in thinking of the church as an underground army is that it tends to foster an “anything goes” sort of morality in which any means is allowable so long as the objective is “right.” The end justifies the means.

By contrast, Jesus imposed self-limitations on all His adversarial encounters, and ultimately he did not lift a finger in defense of his own life. He was certainly not the prototype of the underground saboteur. And the “underground army” of his day, the Zealots, despised him for his alleged weakness.

Education, within this metaphor of the church, is essentially schooling for subversion, more concerned with gaining skills and tactics for “zapping” sin than with developing the rounded and balanced persons through whom spiritual gifts can be realized and nurtured.

The Church as a Field Hospital

The fourth metaphor of the church for the intermediate future is the field hospital. This image presumes that the ministry of Christ is not a partisan issue at the human level but, rather, a ministry of compassion, concern, and care for the fallen, no matter what uniform they may wear. The ultimate evil of Satan is his unfaithfulness to his own. This metaphor sees Christians engaged in the ministry of help and relief to those who are broken, blighted, and burdened by the realities of sin in the fallen universe.

The field hospital metaphor holds many urgent implications for education. If the church is seen this way, the need for service-related training is evident. Those who hurt are everywhere—even in churches, Christian schools and organizations. Christians do not have a good reputation for care and restoration of their own. Muslims, for example, have a scoffing saying that Christianity is the only

religion that “kills” its own wounded. More Christians need to practice social and emotional first aid on each other. The Christian community was intended by God to be supportive and co-operative.

This metaphor also suggests that education should emphasize evangelism. But evangelism—verbally explaining God’s plan of salvation from sin—must be accompanied with Christ-honoring conduct. Evangelism is surely not an activity limited to “preachers.” Taking the priesthood of all believers seriously is long overdue. Part of the unfinished work of the Reformation is reducing the contrast and gap between laity and clergy. The metaphor of the “under-shepherd” can be misused by failing to emphasize the “under.” The offices of the church (I Timothy) can be pretexts for grasping power and authority. When this occurs, the church suffers from non-Christian styles of organization and leadership. (Matthew 20:25-26) Leadership education is needed that is truly Christian.

Also education is needed that will help Christians challenge society in the name of Jesus Christ—education that turns them into “doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22). The church needs education that makes Christians sensitive to the needs of the poor and the oppressed; those who are starving, both physically and spiritually.

If the church is to stand as a strong and helpful community in troubled times, it will be less because God raises up great leaders than that the whole people of God give more respect to the structural metaphors of church organization: many sheep, but one Shepherd; many brothers and sisters, but one Elder Brother; many priests, but one High Priest; many kings, but one King of kings; many stones, but one Cornerstone; many soldiers, but one Commander, many children, but one Father; many pilgrims, but One who is the Way. Christians are peers, sharers of Christ, who should be responsive to the singular leadership of Jesus Christ.

In this series, this author has attempted to focus on the spiritual reality that makes human life unique in God’s creation. This series has considered the way Christians think about purpose, human development, and education—and how all this can come together to help God’s people deal with the days ahead. Effective Christian educators—whether teachers, pastors, or parents—are devoted to helping develop the whole people of God. Effective Christian educators seek to find ways to engage others in experiences that balance the intellect and action. All this is designed to help them discover and use their spiritual gifts for the sake of others and for the glory of Christ.