



# Domains of Service: *Outline for Conference Series Address*<sup>1</sup>

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Ted Ward

**Thesis:** The Purpose of education that is Christian centers on the equipping of the people of God to be God's servants in a needy world.

We are living in the time of zealous organizing of the ministries of the church. For better or worse, we have more organizations, more copyrights, more patents, and more preoccupation with the machinery of management than ever before in the history of organized religion. Nowadays with the spin-offs of the major Gospel corporations, even the parachurch bodies have paras. Perhaps the church has parachurch bodies, these bodies have parabodies, and these parabodies have parasites. Somehow it all seems to be on the way toward lousy.

Certain fallacious presuppositions seem to abound:

**1. The church is like any other organization, except that its agenda is more important.**

Hardly. Yes, the agenda of the church is far more important; for that reason and for other reasons, it is unlike any other organization. For one thing, the church has no clear bottom line. The qualitative aspects of being salt and light in a dark and dying world are hard to evaluate in dollars-and-cents terms. Lacking a clear bottom line means that many of the models of management and evaluation simply don't fit.

**2. People are what they are.**

As I work with the organizations of Christian ministries, I see an increasing tendency to mishandle human beings. The latest in the long line of offenses to humankind in the name of Jesus Christ is the describe-hire-assess-fire pattern. It works this way: When a job needs to be done, you analyze it very carefully and describe it precisely; then you hire the candidate who comes closest to the description—never mind that the person never quite matches the description. After a while you decide if the person is doing exactly what was described (which rarely is the case), then you fire him or her. An educator's mentality would surely be more Christlike. The degree to which those who lead in the community of Christ are trained to think and act as educators rather than as military commanders often tells the story about the degree of Christian-ness in the encouraging and helping of people. People are not fixed commodities, described once and for all. People are develop-able; they are in process. Redemption is ongoing.

**3. Worth depends on continuing to do exactly the same thing.**

I am distressed by the unwillingness of educators in general, and Christian educators in particular, to become involved in critical examination of their work and their institutions. It's

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as if we really don't believe in the fallenness of the universe after all. What we are in what we serve to maintain is all that it should be—don't bother us with questions and don't expect us to respond to encouragement toward improvement. Improvement suggests change, and change is out of the question.

### **Three Issues**

Whatever is done in the name of Christian education must be concerned with the meeting of needs of the people within the community of Christ in such a manner as to facilitate their meeting needs in the outer communities of society. Three groups of concerns emerge in the process of fulfilling this mandate:

1. The nature of the educating institution
2. The role of the person who has been trained for service to the body of Christ
3. The nature of the educational process itself.

### **Nature of the Educating Institution**

About 25 years ago a book by Ivan Illich, an Austrian missionary priest in Mexico, came on the scene and created a decade of controversy. The first five years or so, the issue was whether or not Padre Illich was right; then came five years of debate about what he had actually said.

Illich's major thesis in *Deschooling Society* was not that schools had to go, but that the effects of schooling had to be countered. He illustrated the many ways in which the institutions and indeed the very lifestyle of western societies are modeled on the school, a social institution of pervasive *conceptual influence*, serving inadvertently, perhaps, as the *source of organizational and relational models* for virtually every sector of society since Hellenistic times.

The school is a powerful paradigm. People think "school" whenever they think about any sort of formal social gathering or organization. The church provides ample illustrations of this axiom—from architecture to the organizing of assemblies to worship or to learn. Everything smacks of school.

There are big people and little people. Those who know and those who need to know. Each of these two sets face in opposite directions—toward each other physically and, too often, away from each other conceptually. The big people have more and different privileges. The little people are expected to be very orderly, quiet, and, if they are allowed to do anything aloud, it is to reassure the big people that the experience is indeed worthwhile and that they are being helped.

Whether or not Ivan Illich was right in his main thesis, it behooves us as Christians in the field of education to examine our institutions and the assumptions we make about them.

### **The Conservative Swings of Educational Institutions**

Among the characteristics of the educational establishment is the tendency to undergo fairly frequent swings, from one side to another of many different issues. Usually these oscillations are accompanied to rather fervent rationalizations which seem to contradict one another, often resulting in the confusing of their constituencies and society in general.

The paradox here has to do with the fact that institutions, in general, come into being to help stabilize a society. It is no coincidence that institutions are usually conservative. The very essence of the idea to conserve is what institutions are all about. Yet we find that the various educational establishments

tend to swing back and forth like a pendulum in reference to methodology, and with reference to some specific issue of purpose.

*The major methodological pendulum has to do with the relationship between theory and practice—more precisely the relative importance of learning from books and learning from experience.*

*The other major pendulum, the pendulum of purpose, has to do with the periodic dominance of two conflicting motifs: education for power versus education for service.*

### **Methodological Swing**

The methodological trends within theological education are among the slowest and least radical in all of the forms of education. Perhaps the fact that theological education is one case of an institution existing in order to serve another institution is part of the explanation—to conserve that which is to conserve—doubly conservative.

Because the educational establishment is controlled by those who have found their rewards and satisfactions in the realm of ideas and abstractions, the tendency, over time, is for the institutions of education to become slowly but surely remote and withdrawn. When this happens within theological education, the schools become monastic and the church becomes resentful; the methods of education become book-centered, never mind the claims that they are person-centered in Jesus Christ, the procedure of instruction becomes highly verbal, and the symbols of success become cerebral.

Corrections, when they come, usually take the form of re-emphasis on the actions and behaviors of competent service in the field. Often the key to the correction is a reawakening of awareness that there are valuable lessons that can be learned best through experience and that the educational institutions can, in fact, play a significant role in bringing together theory and practice.

### **Purpose Swing**

Closely related to methodology, always, is the matter of purpose. (I tend to agree with Marshall MacLuhan in matters of the relationship between medium and message: how you do a thing tends to reflect your real purposes whether or not you have faced up to them.) Surely the purpose of theological education should be constant across time. Yes, more or less, but there are slow shifts and periodic reforms.

As much as anything it is scholarship itself that becomes the competing purpose. The meritocracy and attendant powers of influence and persuasion in the church becomes a kind of political device through which motives more base than the motive to serve become dominant. The tensions boil down to pride versus service in far too many institutions.

The correction or reform of this pattern occurs when the pride of scholarship is humbled before the altar of service. The education that best serves the church is debated and usually the correctives take the form of a new “movement” which continues for a time.

The Bible College movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was one such illustration. The extension seminary of the last twenty years is another. These movements arise largely in response to the claims of irrelevancy of education and they reestablish the primacy of servicenin education; then they succumb to the glories of self-serving scholastic “excellence” and fall away from their commitment to equip the church.

Parenthetically, I have come to fear the use of the word “excellence” in reference to the qualitative judgment of an education institution. Excellence is so often a euphemism for exclusivity and a pretext for justifying irrelevancy in the presumed righteous cause of scholarship.

### **The Role of the Trained Servant**

It is evidently very human to use one’s privileges as a whip to beat down those who are less privileged. Whether it is using one’s superior knowledge of Scripture to belittle and discourage a struggling saint or merely appropriating rank and office in the church as platforms to show off one’s erudition, the temptations to convert education into power are with us early and late. What sort of person should the trained servant be? Whatever else, training should not change the status and role: Educated, but still a servant.

The disciplines of the educated person should be modeled upon the basic teachings of Christ, especially to such matters of authority, hierarchy, prestige, pomp and circumstance as are found in Matthew 23:1-12. Here we find the servant under obligation not to let others treat him as anything other than a servant. The burden of how the servant is to be regarded by others is directly upon the servant. Thus such an alibi as, “But they wanted to elevate me to a place of honor and privilege,” is not acceptable.

### **How is Servanthood Best Demonstrated?**

In a teacher, it is best shown by getting beyond the apprentice’s preoccupation with the worth of the content, and the trained worker’s overconfidence in his or her capacity to “meet the needs of the learners,” and to move into a third stage of relationship and consciousness which is, instead, focused on the companionate relationship of being a fellow-pilgrim, sharing one’s walk in the Way. This imagery seems to have been part of the mind of Christ. One of his last “teaching” interactions with his followers exemplified this so well: it was not just what he said, or even how he met their needs, but it was that their “hearts burned within them” as they walked on the road to Emmaus in the companionship of the risen Christ.

### **Summary**

What is it to be a Christian educator? Can we hope that it is more than being a school-keeper for privileged children?

1. The development of a sound and comprehensively educative professional sector for the service of the church.
2. Effective modeling of a developmental orientation to life and to spiritual maturation.
3. Contributing to an autonomy under Christ, wherein, as did Paul, we continuously search out the richness of the new life as people redeemed from bondage yet voluntarily taking on a glorious servitude. Free, yet servant.

Autonomy under Christ

Self-aware and self-critical

Self-respecting and thus respectful of the creation as our ecology

Engaged in lifelong learning

Adopting the perspective of an educator—toward ourselves and others

*In sum, making a Christian developmental commitment.*