



What is it to Know?¹

Ted Ward

The issue for Christian educators in our time, I believe, is what kind of knowing are we trying to promote? What is it to learn? What is it to know?

To reckon the work of Christian education simply in terms of erudition and abstract knowledge is not enough; that is indeed more an illusion—to produce information and call it knowledge; to learn that information, and to claim wisdom.

Yet among the people increasingly unwilling to name the realities of our world, we as Christian educators plead for the naming of realities. The people whom we serve are in reality finding their dilemmas too large to confess, their unknowns too gross to label.

There's a tendency that Paulo Freire named yesterday, an emphasis on technical details, the craving for psychological explanations, and behavioral specifications. How many seem caught up either in the fascination of assessing static states, often called attitudes, or in a preoccupation about inducing predicted behaviors; overlooking what Elliott Eisner and others are suggesting is much more important—that is, the imagination of the human being is somehow through processes of development made electric and alive.

I suggest that there are some ethical issues that have not been thoroughly addressed in the field of education, and though we are recognizing today the validity of adult learning, lifelong learning, the importance of teaching and demonstrating an educational mode that does not presume education to be limited to the young, the development of the wholeness of humanity through the lifespan, we have, I believe, yet to address squarely several ethical questions. Specifically, I would raise several questions: Does naming a motive validate that motive? Does self-fulfillment inevitably lead to community? Does the declaiming of injustice lead people to know justice? Does conscientization predictably motivate peace? Where do we stand on truth? Where do we stand on authority? What constitutes our view of valid source?

These questions cannot be answered in this homily, nor will they be answered in my own experiences within the next year. Perhaps they represent a lifetime commitment of inquiry. I'm willing, and I suspect you are as well. I like to remind myself and I would like to share with you the reminder that we dare not trade in one oversimplification for a different oversimplification. We dare not trade in an order of commitment to education as schooling for a commitment to education as self-seeking.

The world in which we live, in the years just ahead, may be a world of great conflict. It has been a preoccupation of many of the sessions of this conference that we live in a time of uncontrolled annihilation, the potential of which seem to be very close to a state of destruction that goes beyond imagination.

The hope I believe is in a praxis-emphasis in our teaching and ministries in religious experience, a reconceptualizing of education and theology, a reexamination of what have been those static terms of justice and mercy into the dynamics of the doings of justice and mercy. I'm thankful to be living in a time when theology is becoming less something to be learned as “learning theology” and more something to be done as “doing theology” where justice and peace are less matters to be understood than they are to be done. In many respects, doing is both product and process. Doing,

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acting, behaving, functioning is means and end. In biblical terms, it is the walk as in the Pauline imperative, “Walk in the Spirit,” in contrast to simply standing still on creedal positions. Walk enlightens the mind. We are still struggling to get free of the Hellenistic presupposition that the end of knowledge is clarification, and to recapture something of the fervency of the Hebrew concept of knowledge as obedience. Perhaps obedience has become something of an unpleasant word today because it smacks of authoritarianism at a time when we’re reconstituting our views on authority.

The issue of doing as the end of knowledge is, I think, the very essence of the Old Testament’s concern for the obedience to the law of God. Much education today, on the other hand, tends to use abstractions and generalizations to turn the reality of experience into that which is somehow beyond experience. The sort of reflection that praxis calls us into must then be disciplined so that it not become a reflection which leads to generalizable ideations alone—though these have validity.

But the reflection that we find in the Scripture should be instead our model, a reflection that leads not to academic paradigms but to parables. There’s a functional, qualitative difference between a paradigm and a parable. A paradigm is the scientist’s abstraction of generalization in which some reality is made, in a way, less real, less a matter of contact experience, in order that it can be made a generalization through which to seek out other experiences. Our Lord in his teaching and in his ministries, and in his behavior with his disciples, rarely developed paradigms, but often developed parables.

We live in a time of profound moral issues; our conference has dwelt on that in many ways. Moral issues cry out for moral choices, but let us not stop with moral choices. Moral choices are useless without moral action. As educators, we need to help each other deal with the academic temptation to take refuge in an abstract gospel. We need to engage ourselves in those communities of fellowship in development and study through which we will engage in a process of exposing ourselves to the work of the gospel, committing ourselves to the fulfillment of the gospel, and engaging ourselves in the actions of the gospel.