



Faulty Models of Christian Education: Three Flaws¹

Ted Ward

The first flaw is a conceptual flaw, the conceptual flaw of assuming that Christian education is some other kind of education. It is a unique kind of education, this conceptual flaw would tell us, and it is therefore separate from every other form and species of education. I submit that the use of the word “Christian” as an adjective anywhere gets you into a lot of trouble. You may be aware that the Bible doesn’t ever use the word “Christian” as an adjective. It uses the word “Christian” only as a noun. Therefore what we’re talking about as “Christian education” is something probably that the apostles would have had a little trouble understanding; but perhaps a few years in Bible college would straighten them out.

The concept that Christian education is a thing apart misses the point that the human being, Christian or not, develops in fairly predictable kinds of ways, and that being a Christian doesn’t really alter the patterns of human development, doesn’t really alter the nature of human learning, doesn’t really alter the nature of the human organism. Now it does something to the spirit, and it does something therefore to the whole person, but the educational characteristics of the Christian, the learning characteristics and the learning needs of the Christian are not fundamentally different; and when we fragment Christian education as a matter apart from the mainstream of the discovery about learning, we deprive the field of Christian education from valuable input.

I refer specifically to the problem of isolating Christian education from the research and development world of education at large. Even as it is true in any field of research and discovery, the Christian can look over the fence into the secular research world and be selective about the sorts of things that are brought into the church.

The second flaw is what I will call a practical flaw that grows out of the first conceptual flaw. The practical problem we get into in Christian education for having divided off Christian education as a thing apart is that we keep on dividing and re-dividing it to the point where we actually fragment ourselves within the church. If you don’t believe that, take a look at Christian education within a seminary. Within a seminary, Christian education can be defined as a body of courses that pastors are not required to take. At the practical, functional level, that’s what Christian education is: It’s something that somebody else takes, not pastors. They can, after all, delegate those tasks because these are matters that somehow are outside the pastor’s training and primary interests!

Now having come from a music background, I can understand the problems that would occur if every pastor was a music director. But when it comes to the fundamental function of education or human development within the church, I’m not at all convinced that the pastor ought to be exempted from this particular area of responsibility. I propose that practical problems result from this particular way of doing business, problems such as the pastor not being on top of the human development

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opportunities within the church—where the real development issue is the growth or the maturation of the saints toward the perfection that Paul describes. If the pastor somehow lacks that awareness that this is an educational process, he or she can do all sorts of inappropriate with the preaching ministry and counseling ministry because of ignorance in matters of human development and human learning.

Therefore, if I were remodeling contemporary seminaries and bringing them a little closer to biblical models of the pastor's role, I would draw attention to the fact that exegetically the role of pastor and teacher is an intertwined role that cannot be separated without doing violence to the epistles.

Third, the flaw of buying into Greek models. By the time of Jesus earthly ministry, a fully developed notion of schools and students existed. Jesus chose not to build school. He didn't want to build a dormitory. He didn't pose himself behind a lectern; instead, he chose to work in a model that we call a discipleship model, and yet we don't really try very hard to make it work. He took a relatively small number of people and engaged with them in a highly interactive, continuous basis—not ringing bells, not scheduling things, just living.

Why? If you have the view that the times were so primitive that he had no other way to do it, you have been misinformed. There were other ways and they were well established by that time. Why did he not use them? Well you say, "Because he really didn't want to do anything very important. If he had wanted to do something very important, obviously he would have built a very big academic institution." Most of us would doubt that reasoning.

For the last four years, I have been especially involved in a series of activities in countries outside the US that have become frustrated and disappointed with the use of schooling as an approach to national development. Obviously, schools play an important function; they can do certain things better than almost any other kind of educational enterprise. I'm not saying categorically that schools are bad. However, there are some people who are saying just that. If you want to read some people who are saying categorically that schools are moving in the wrong direction and moving the societies of the world in the wrong direction, let me suggest to you a couple authors. An American by the name of Everett Reimer and a book *School is Dead*, and a book by an Austrian priest who has been in Latin America most of his missionary life; he's a Roman-Catholic who has caught the ear of literally the whole world. Ivan Illich suggests in *Deschooling Society* that we need to restart education in another direction because schooling is counterproductive. There are people in this world who are saying that schools are nothing but a tool of the elitist structure to maintain a class-oriented society.

In the last four years, then, I have been engaged particularly overseas in a study of alternatives to schooling. We have examined complaints against school and schooling. We have discovered, for example, that one of the basic problems is that school was so often thought to be central to the educational process, as if schooling were the ideal educational form. Schooling is one educational form, but it is not exclusively the best.

One of the assumptions that is made within schooling is that all learners are assumed to be similar in terms of needs, interests, and abilities, and that's fatally not true. Yet the whole approach to clustering people in like groups either by age or some other function assumes that once you get done with your clustering then you have people who are alike; and then you can minister to them, or teach them in standard ways.

Another assumption is that conforming behavior is to be preferred over divergent and nonconforming behavior. This is a basic assumption of schools. You just can't run a school if everybody is heading off in different directions. I submit that an educated person is a person who is capable of thinking differently, and not just convergently. Further, learners are increasingly made more competitive at the price of cooperation. It is inherent in schooling that the environment breeds competitive behavior.

Learners are expected to be receptors of learning rather than communicators. Schooling in general sees learners as the end of a communicative process and not as a link in the communicative process. The environment is such that the end of the line is the learner. The learner's part in decision-making is minimal and tends to be steadily reduced. We have a situation in which people are not part of the decision-making process during their training therefore, there is no particular reason to assume that they will become decision-makers independently outside and beyond the learning experience.

One of the things that happened during the revolutionary period in China is that the Chinese set up a situation in which people don't automatically get more schooling. You get a little bit, and then your community decides whether or not you're using what you've got. If you're using what you have for the benefit of the community, then you can get more. And if you're not using what you've got for the benefit of the community, then you don't get any more. Might such a model be of value to the Christian community? I wonder.

The social distance that separates teachers from learners is a problem in schooling. Look at the life of Jesus Christ and his ministry and ask yourself about how many artifacts of social distance did he create in order to separate himself from his learners? He even insisted on taking them along to dinner party engagements! He was working for a close community relationship with those who were learning from him, not a distant relationship. Rather than remoteness or unreality, should not our Christian education be characterized by a high degree of reality, dealing with substantive, substantial, real, contemporary needs and problems of people.

The concern for educational development in the church is not a matter of simple, intellectual gain through any and every approach that seems to work in the secular world. The problem of education in the church is a matter of growing up in the wholeness and unity that is the fulfillment of the Scriptural model that is the picture of the church.