



Ted Ward on Effective Teaching¹

Ted Ward

Much so-called education within the church is not very good education. It's not simply because many of the people teaching in the church are amateurs. That's pretty much the way the Lord set it up. Just like he did with parenthood!

That's not the problem. The problem is sometimes that we simply just do not rise to the occasion. We simply don't become what it is that we can be within a teaching and learning environment; and one of the reasons we don't is because the images we use to think with are images that in many cases are faulty images badly brought into the relationship.

Much that we build as an image of teaching is based, unfortunately, on images of school keeping. I want to show you today in the brief time allotted to me some of the problems that we create for ourselves when we think too much of the teaching ministries and functions within church and family as if we were dealing with teaching in the sense of school-keeping. For example, we don't spend enough time as the people of God, in our teaching, reflecting on what significant results we want. We seem to be quite satisfied to deliver things. Furthermore, we tend to cater to passive people, because heaven knows that's what the church is all about: weekly gatherings of passive people.

We tend to measure our successes in teaching in the same terms that the secular world uses to measure entertainment. We really have two kinds of valuing schemes: One I call the "box office scheme," that is, how many people were there; and the other I call "the ratings scheme," that is, when they were there, did they enjoy it?

If we are concerned about teaching that engages life, we have to be concerned about more than the entertainment themes. But, perhaps most profound of our shortcomings as teachers within the ministries of the church is that we settle for far less than careful thought on the part of learners. In fact, sometimes we are so preoccupied about asking the right questions and getting the right answers that we don't really evaluate the quality of those questions and the involvement of the learners in the questions themselves.

R.C. is right: Life is a series of stories . . . As a matter of fact in the contemporary field of psychology and education, we understand that life itself is a kind of an ongoing first-person story. Each one of us develops a central theme, and much of our life is organized around the events of that central theme. Would that more Christian young people could be brought to an understanding that the world is a story unfolding on them and in them, and that the role of the teacher and the parent is to help them see those elements of life so that they can fit into that story; but when we reduce teaching to a kind of question-and-answer business, we often settle for getting the *right* answer even though we're not engaging people deeply in the right questions.

I propose that this problem may trace in part to our tendency to view educating activities as if we were keeping school. Now please understand. I would be most hypocritical if I said that I don't believe in schools and schooling. One can't have 40 years of a professional career in formal education and come off talking like that! But I do believe that there are severe limitations to what you can do within a schooling-type environment. And I further believe that schooling is only one way to look at education. As a matter of fact, if we reflect on what Jesus did as a teacher, he spent a lot of time showing people how to reason about difficult issues in a parallel-thought kind of way: telling stories

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and considering similarities; all sorts of parables, and similes, and metaphors. By the way, I think it's good for us to get into the habit of doing that as we try to explain ideas.

But there's even more to it than that. Jesus lived with people, he walked with people, he experienced alongside them. He had a tough training job to do with a relatively small group, and he was going to have to accomplish this training task in about three years or less. He really needed an efficient and effective mode.

Well you say that because he dealt with such a very small group, he really didn't have to use a school. Well I submit to you that on other occasions and in many a moment he dealt with thousands of people, but he still didn't build a school. Well you say the people at that time and that place didn't use schools. As a matter of fact there's good reason to believe that schools did exist, even in what we call the "Holy Land." Jesus would not have been unaware of what you can do with a school. But Jesus chose not to use it.

The first "Sunday schools" were not concerned with religious education. Don't mix it up! The history of modern religious education began with the notion of a basement school for street urchins. Why don't we go back to Jesus Christ and organize people in relationship groups? You say, "Well, that takes too much time. Can't get people to invest themselves in each other nowadays." Yeah, I know. And more the pity. So we give up and build schools; and in the process, we tend to use imagery from that schooling that is dominant in the western culture. Western society traces back to Greek civilization, for the most part. Much of the way we reason about how you work with people, how you organize people, what you do when you get people together in situations where something is supposed to collectively happen, actually traces back to imagery from the Greek school.

Unfortunately, the Greeks built into their model the notion that if you have enough information in the head it will affect the life; and if you just pack the head well enough, pretty soon it will control the life. The apostle Paul was our key example of a person who was both trained in Greek Hellenist ways and in Hebraic ways. He knew both cultures. It was the Apostle Paul who stuck his finger in the face of the Hellenistic tradition and said, "Let me tell you. In my own personal experience, there are things I know to do; I want to do them. But I don't do them. And other things that I don't want to do because I know I shouldn't. So my knowledge is in the right place, my will is in the right place, but somehow, in terms of strength, it doesn't come through."

What does it mean to learn?

There are two basically different ways we can go with that question. The typical standard way of understanding learning in so much of our tradition is to store information as one would store data in a filing system. There are two qualities of mind then: One is the quantity of information that it holds; and second, the clarity and precision of its filing system. There's a great deal of fixation on getting enough information in there. I would not suggest that it is not important that knowledge be in the mind. But I submit to you that in terms of what I understand from Scripture to be important in life, what you have as stored information is only a part of the issue. The bigger part of the issue is the second kind of concern, and that is living in the light of the knowledge that you have

Well you say, "That's not learning; that's just application." Well, no, as a matter of fact, if you look closely at Scripture, knowledge itself in the Scriptures always refers to more than the information. It refers to doing the knowledge. For example, when the Lord in Matthew 28 gives the final instruction to the disciples: "All power is given to me in heaven and earth. Go and make disciples . . ." he spells out two process steps: baptizing and teaching them to obey. It isn't just "baptizing and teaching." It is teaching them to obey. The issue of teaching in the New Testament, as was true in the Old Testament, is not a matter of informing; it's a matter of people coming into conformity with truth.

There is a contrast then, between what we see in Scripture, and what we see in the western traditions of knowledge. I would say that much of contemporary, secular society assumes that knowledge is a matter of passive information. Whereas in Christian perspective, knowledge is not knowledge until there is an active intimacy with that knowledge that fulfills itself in the walk of life. If that makes sense, then you cannot be satisfied with those activities that simply inform.

One of the best definitions I know of learning is that learning is reorganizing one's own experience. Reorganizing has to do with the idea of taking all that has come through life, and being able to reorganize, in effect, bring that together and make it focus on something.

Many times people will say, "This experience really helped me see things in a new way." This is one of the best phrases to illustrate what learning is really all about. It's not that you go away saying, "I have learned lots of new data. I have learned lots of new information." With adults, you are dealing with people who have so much experience, so much involvement with life, and so many contradictions in their experience, that more than new information they need a reorganizing of that experience around certain kinds of principles and values that will give it shape, form, and meaning. That is where godliness shines.

We need to help people put what they already know together more clearly so that the pieces fit. Many times people will walk away from an experience and say, "That was really stimulating." But they don't know what it means.

One of the basic misunderstandings is that when we have told somebody something we have taught them something. "I've done my part. Why didn't you do your part?" Just because you have said it, doesn't say very much about what people have learned in the experience.

Yes, telling is part of the process of teaching, and there is a task of telling to be done. Even within evangelism there's a task of telling to be done. But more particularly, people learn from what they are shown, and people learn to respect most those who are teaching them through a sharing process, a walking-alongside sort of an experience. As you move up in age through teenage to adulthood, you will find that telling becomes less effective; showing becomes more effective, and ultimately, if you are really interested in affecting adults, you have to learn how to walk alongside them.

In the adult Bible study what we often find ourselves doing is literally "keeping school." You see, beyond whatever you're doing in illustration of truth, the integration of truth demands that you adopt a relationship alongside people that has something of the very involvement that the Holy Spirit has with us. How in the world do you do that on Sunday morning in one hour's time? The answer: You can't.

You see, our task of effective teaching is not to keep school. Our task of effective teaching is to bring about memorable experiences. Now memorable experiences can be cheap experiences. They may be memorable, but they don't connect with life.

You see, memorability is a lot more like what God does throughout Scripture. If you want an interesting personal study to pursue, take any decent concordance, even a relatively small one, and take a look at the word "remember." There is nothing more central with regard to teaching and learning than this idea of remembrance. Now how do you stimulate remembrance? Every bit of what R. C. has already given us. But there has to be connection, not just information.

I teach Christian education overseas every now and then, and one of my specializations is inter-cultural studies. I know that one can't simply apply American institutionalized educational forms in different cultures around the world. When I teach Christian education overseas I emphasize the following:

I don't emphasize programs at all. Instead I emphasize family, because I believe that responsibility of parents is central in Scripture. In our society we have allowed Sunday school do what parents aren't doing: It's one of the justifications for it. I'm always curious that if the Sunday school

quit trying if parents wouldn't, in sheer desperation, try to do something themselves. But it's a lot easier to think that Sunday school is taking care of it and there's no need to worry. I'm not sure what a better option would be until a community of Christians is willing to create the kind of socialization, the kind of family, the kind of community, the kind of neighborhood that is described in Deuteronomy 6 when the clear instruction was given not to churches and Sunday schools, but to parents and families about what it is to bring their children up into a consciousness of who God is and what God has done for them.

Our task in effective Christian education is also a matter of teaching in such a way that the teaching is touching the lives that people live. It goes beyond Deuteronomy 6 into the sort of things we have in the Great Commission and elsewhere throughout Scripture where the teaching is intended to be toward activity, toward doing, toward obedience, toward living it out.

There are some curious passages in the Epistles where we find several writers saying, "If you really believe these things, do them!" In other words, if you really hold this in your head, put it in your feet! If you really claim it as an intellectual category of belief, let's see it in the way you live it out.

Schooling always has a major limiting parameter: a teacher over against learners. The relationship of teacher and learner is assumed to be a hierarchical relationship in which the teacher inherently must be superior. I'm impressed so often that well-meaning and sometimes very fervently, deep, spiritual people will say when recruited to do educating work in the church, "I don't really know enough to be a teacher." I feel for that person, because I think there might be something very respectable in that response. But you see, if we could understand that in the patterns our Lord taught, our role as disciples is a shared relationship pattern. There is but one Lord. I cannot disciple you; I can share with you as your discipleship of the Lord and my discipleship of our Lord are brought together in relationship. But I cannot build a one-on-one relationship with you. I can only build some kind of a triadic relationship in which our Lord is ministering through you to me and through me to you, and I believe the more reciprocal that can be, the more educative that can be. Those images don't come out of school. Those images come out of Scripture.

Here are some ways to think about alternatives. For many years in analyzing kinds of education, people tended to use two kinds of education and kind of put a continuum between and say, "Well, everyone knows what formal education is. That's the schooling stuff you do in any society. Everybody knows what socialization is. That's what you do when you're not really intending to. Socialization is a very powerful teaching device. Socialization is what happens to you because you are growing up someplace. This kind of socialization, I believe, is what Deuteronomy 6 is talking about, where we ought to be creating the kind of environment in which our children will grow up in knowing God. Nevertheless, there's a fault in this model.

Now formal education is not at the other end of the continuum, but it's another type or function of education, and if we're really going to understand education, we need to get beyond this two-cell model into a three-cell model. Nonformal education is intentional education. By the way, what do you do in school? In school you do formal education. What do you do in church? Strictly speaking, the church and all of its educating is nonformal. It's not part of the credentialing process of our society. You can get a Sunday school pin that you can trip over and they won't even convert it to one year of college! There's no connection between what you do in religious education in the church and what you're doing in college, even in a Christian college. It's two different realms.

Socialization has something in common with schooling, that is, they are both traditional. If we are interested in change and the development beyond a tradition and habit structure, what kind of education would we probably employ? Nonformal education. . . .

Educational alternative models fall into three types of emphases: the classical; second, the technological; and third, the developmental models. Each has a different way of emphasizing knowing, doing, or being. The classical model emphasizes knowing on the presumption that what a person knows affects what that person is: The more they know, the more apt they are to be a certain sort. Doing is more or less unimportant, except that doing somehow comes out of the being.

Technological models put a great deal of emphasis on the doing and argue that if you do things you will come to know them, and quite often these models pay relatively little attention to the quality of the being of the person.

Now most of us as Christians would not be satisfied with any model that put the nature of the person, the development of the integrity of the individual, the competency of the person as a man or woman of God as a kind of secondary consideration. I believe that developmental models are a lot closer to what we ought to be thinking about in Christian religious education; specifically, models that put being at the center of things, and then circulate around it a kind of interaction, sometimes called a praxis, of the doing and the reflecting, the reflecting as a function of knowing, and the doing as a reflection of action, and the cycling of knowledge generated through a doing reflected upon.

Our problem is somehow to get from truth to action. We take truth to be so. We have truth by revelation. Life is to be lived, and we have been left in this world for a purpose. How do we help people learn for themselves to bridge the gap between truth on one hand and action on the other hand?

There must be a knowing of the truth or there can be no acting on the truth. That should be understood. It is important that people know what it is what is said in Scripture, and what it means. But if you only go to that first level, you haven't gone far enough.

The process of redemption involved far more than our intellect: it involves our spirit, our emotional commitment, and our motivations. God is in the business through Jesus Christ of transforming our will so that we can with Christ do the will of the Father.

But the apostle Paul says that he has the knowledge in place, but he still doesn't do it. So I know there is a third element. I don't know what else to call it except strength. The strength, the Spirit-filled power to do that which is in the will of God, and knowledgeably informed by the Word of God.

In our educating, it is not enough to keep school and make sure that people file away facts.