



To Reform Christian Education: *Six Criteria*¹

Ted Ward

What would happen to Christian education if teachings of Jesus were taken seriously? For one thing, there would be less emphasis on talk and more on action. But changes in leadership style would be even more noticeable.

Much of “Christian education” is patterned on secular institutional and cultural approaches to teaching and learning. From Sunday school to seminary the approaches are adaptations of the ancient Greek academic traditions—traditions that were well established by the time of Christ.

The Greek concepts of knowledge and learning were sharply in contrast with those of the Hebrew scriptures; Jesus deliberately chose not to adopt them. He built no school, put himself in no high status lectureships and raised no funds to perpetuate his teachings through an endowed institution. He could have done so; among the elite of that day, such practices were more acceptable than what he chose to do. He selected a handful of candidates and lived among them as a sort of itinerant community of friends.

Toward the end of his earthly ministry with this close circle of disciples he stated very clearly what he had been demonstrating for three years. The most influential leader the world has ever known went on record squarely against the prevailing secular approach to leadership. What he said has been largely ignored because the secular concept of leadership seems more reasonable than Christ’s propositions.

Leaders must lead. To lead one must have authority. And to lead with authority one must be prestigiously and conspicuously above those who are to be led. Preferably the leader must deserve and merit his position and lead with honor and competence. Leaders have command and ‘presence’ and great leaders exercise authority. Thus it is among the Greeks and Romans.

“It shall not be so among you,” Jesus said (Matthew 20: 25-26). Since Jesus rejects the time-honored secular concept of leadership what does he suggest instead? “Whoever is to be great among you, let him serve you. Whoever wants to be the chief leader shall be your servant” (Matthew 20: 26-27). Is servanthood—the text suggests the lowest servanthood, that of a slave—perhaps a punishment for wanting to be a leader? Or maybe the point here is that one should prove one’s humility through a probationary servanthood. (Americans are especially fond of the idea that true greatness is a dramatic rising from a lowly beginning.) No, the true message of this Scripture is clarified in a hard-to-accept jolt: Jesus refers to *himself* as the example of the servant-leader: “Just as I did not come to be served, but to serve, *and to give my life*. How powerful this contrast becomes in Paul’s review of it: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being

¹ Ted Ward. To Reform Christian Education: Six Criteria. Unpublished document, 1976. Subsequently adapted for publication: Ted Ward. 2012. To Reform Christian Education: Six Criteria. *Common Ground Journal* Vol. 10 (1) Fall 2012, pp. 36-38.

born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2: 5-8). So *this* is what Jesus had in mind as a contrast with the elegant secular view of prestigious leadership! It is hardly an appealing alternative. What would the Church look like if leadership were defined in these terms?

As if his straightforward rejection of the secular (Gentile or Greek) concept of leadership weren’t enough, Jesus brings it up again (Matthew 23:1-12), this time in reference to what had gone wrong in the synagogues and temple: those who sit in Moses seat, taking responsibility for the religious leadership of God’s people, (1) have made a faulty division between word and deed. They talk a good line but they don’t put it into action. (2) They take it upon themselves to tie up neat bundles of tasks for their followers. They see leadership as a matter of deciding what others should do, but they don’t actually get down to the hard part themselves. (3) They make their good works highly visible and take their satisfactions from the praises of men. (4) They perpetuate and expand on the traditions of “pomp and circumstance” so as to make themselves more distinct from the common people. (5) They bask in the honors of their rank, and accept favors and privilege as if they were entitled to it. (6) They like to be called by a distinctive title that represents their authority and prestige: Rabbi!

“Do not be called Rabbi,” said Jesus, as if to summarize his rejection of this whole secular leadership style that had infected the worship of Jehovah. Why not be called Rabbi? “Because you have but one teacher—you are all brothers!” He was talking to his disciples, to the apostles upon whose shoulders rested the vital responsibility of continuing after his departure to carry out the most dynamic leadership task ever assigned to a group of human beings. And not one of these men was to let himself be called “Rabbi”, honored religious teacher and leader. And if this weren’t clear enough (perhaps to close all the loopholes), he goes on to point out that he is talking broadly about *leadership*: “Don’t call anyone ‘Father.’” You can’t create relationships with labels; make relationship-building your approach, not labeling. “And don’t let anyone call you ‘Leader’, because you have only one leader, *Christ!*” He follows this with a deliberate review of what he had said earlier about leadership: “You know your leaders by their servanthood.”

What changes in our concept of the church would result from taking Jesus seriously? The mind boggles. And what about changes in the education of leaders for the church? Leadership for the church is what theological education is all about, lest we forget! The issue that demands more careful attention is *what concept of leadership* is being practiced and taught. What is its source? Christ or culture? The six faults pointed out by Jesus in Matthew 23:1-7 might serve well as evaluative criteria for Christian education. If we assume the logical contrast with the faulty conditions to be the appropriate criteria, here is an example of how the list would look:

1. Emphasis on *knowing* is to be accompanied by emphasis on *doing*. Human development is a holistic matter—you can’t split off one aspect of the person to deal with. Further, enhancement of mental processes such as recall of information is an insufficient goal of education.
2. Learners are to help in determining their own learning needs and should participate in goal-setting. Teaching is a matter of working encouragingly with learners as sharers of experiences. It is not the place of the teacher to determine what the learner needs and to prepackage and prescribe a load of learning tasks.
3. Those who teach are to show, by precept *and* by *example*, the value of avoiding the praises

of others, doing nothing for self-glorification or for the gratification of self-serving rewards. Instead, the beauty and deeper satisfaction of glorifying God and bringing encouragement and honor to others should be sought.

4. Traditions and symbols are to be evaluated against the criterion of servanthood. Whatever would attract attention to the glorification of the merits and efforts of any person other than Christ should be brought under specific scrutiny. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:3)
5. Access to resources, matters of convenience, and other privileges are to be shared as peers. If special treatment is in order, such as circumstances that can be alleviated by temporary granting of preferential treatment, the criterion should be need, not rank, status, age, seniority or gender.
6. The whole learning environment is to reflect the unity of a true community. The Lordship of Christ and the mutual indebtedness of all—teachers and learners alike—to the reality of his presence as sole teacher should not be compromised by titles of distinction and honorific symbols of rank or prestige. The main issue is less the use or non-use of titles but more the seeking after true functional relationships within the family of Christ.

Some of these criteria may need to be compromised or softened to some extent for effective nurturing of children whose motivations and values are still in the self-oriented early stages. But for normal adolescents and adults, Christian education would be more truly *Christian* if these criteria were observed. Why don't we see more of it? The ease with which certain of Jesus' teachings are overlooked by those who claim to be engaged in his work is amazing indeed.