



## Transcriptions

### The Church as a Learning Community

Ted Ward

**Annotation:** *Evangelical Association of New England Congress (EANE), Boston, 1977.* Ted Ward observes that while most of us have benefited from school experiences, we are also survivors of *schooling*. Given that many societies cannot afford schools, how do we develop ways to help people learn without the benefits of schooling? Ward grounds his remarks in a description of the people of God as ordained by God to be mutually dependent individuals who share important values.



The topic for our presentation today is “The Church as a Learning Community.” I think there are several words in that topic that have to be defined: “Church,” “Learning,” and “Community.” This first exercise is primarily focused on the word “Learning,” and I think it will help us deal with what I would regard as a false equation. At the risk of starting on the negatives, I’m going to mention three heavy negatives: (1) a false equation, (2) an inadequate definition, and (3) an overlooked foundation.

But more of that later. Let us examine what we’ve learned now so far in this exercise. If you will please take the little place cards that have the folds in them that have been reading “More Important” and “Less Important,” and without moving them from knee to knee, just turn them around. Now they read, “Schooling” and “Other than Schooling.” The issue is of the things you have in that particular distribution—particular pile on that particular knee—do you have the schooling-learned items in the right place? Do you need to move anything? If you do, go ahead and take a

minute or two and decide what you need to move so that you can decide where it is you learned that.

Now let us reflect on what is going on right now. Without any particular degree of cynicism or baiting or institution knocking, we are together dealing with a very important reality. When you ask people, “What are the really important things they’ve learned in life?” they give you statements like what you have in your lap. And when you ask them, “Where did you learn them?” they generally are momentarily nonplussed; and then they say, “I really can’t identify where I’ve learned it.” But if you get specific and say, “Did you learn it in school?” they say, “Not really.”

Schooling plays an important part in our society and for many of us we have profited from certain kinds of learning experiences. The probability is that most of us here are survivors of the schooling establishment. We’re people that were relatively successful. There are those who are the non-survivors and most of them are not here because many of us who are here have the kind of credential that requires that we be a survivor.

There is a false equation in our society that deeply affects our understanding of learning as it relates to the church. It is the equation that learning equals schooling and that schooling somehow is the essential ingredient in learning, and it ain’t so. One of the areas of work that I’ve been increasingly involved in the last dozen years is the matter of learning out of school. There are many parts of the world that can’t even afford the kind of schooling that we take for granted. And this is becoming an increasingly important issue. How do we work within a society to help them develop ways and means by which people can learn important life skills more effectively without having the benefit of schools and schooling? And there *are* answers. I believe that as we face this question today—the church as a learning community—we must, first of all, disabuse ourselves of the notion that learning is equivalent to schooling. It is not. What we learn in the family, what we learn at home, what we learn in the streets, what we learn outside the established institutions of our land are learnings that are much more complex and, in many ways, much more shaping of who we are and what we are than what we ever learned in the schooling establishment itself.

The schooling establishment plays important roles to deepen, to broaden, to extend, to give us opportunities to put together in new and more creative configurations. But let us not forget that the most complex learning that a human being ever deals with in his whole life—the most complex learning is largely accommodated by the age of six—is the learning of one’s first language and the effective use of language in communication. Now, for sure, the school is concerned with this and adds to, and adds elegance, but very few people really learn their first language in school. And if you don’t think that’s a complex learning, try learning a second language in school. The false equation, then, learning equals schooling.

The inadequate definition that I call to your attention is the definition of church that inadequately sees the church as either place or as facilities. Church, biblically, was never intended to be understood in terms of a place, and it was certainly never intended to be understood as a conglomeration of programs. The church, biblically, is the people of God; the people of God in certain configurations of family for fellowship, for growth, for development.

The overlooked foundation, which is the third of these loaded words, the overlooked foundation of human society is community. The church as a learning community reminds us that we

must no longer overlook the central place in human society ordained by God of the community as a set of individuals, mutually dependent, relating to each other, and sharing certain basic values. I believe that the community is an overlooked foundation particularly in a society such as ours that tends to be highly individualistic. We are primarily a group of dissenters from something and, ultimately, from each other as Americans. But as Christians we are told over and over again in the Word of God that the crucial thing is that we come to recognize our unity, and that we create under the headship of Christ the community that is the family of interdependent parts of the body.

Let me suggest, then, that in summary with reference to our title, “Church as a Learning Community,” we need to understand that the frame of reference of this topic is church in terms of God’s people, assemblies of God’s people in particular places, in particular circumstances, having particular resources, having particular facilities; but the church as God’s people, as a learning community, learning in the sense of development as God intends. There is something created into the human being that is a patterning of development reflecting something of what the Creator intended that it be. And we find, with a developmental eye, that learning and development is not something that you add to from outside the Christian but that you allow to take place organically, functionally, growing. He who has begun a work within you will perform it. And the issue is not me as a teacher or a preacher or some kind of a parent or other to make sure that you get it, and that I get it into you because without my getting it into you, you won’t grow. That kind of an acquisitional view of learning makes us sitting ducks for the likes of Professor Skinner.

We need the Bible’s developmental view of learning that God has created and that within the created human being there are marvelous forces reflecting the handiwork of God. And that God in the creation of the new creature through the miracle of new birth has added to the rest of that, transforming it, and adding to it the Spirit, the lively Spirit of God working creatively from within.

Let me suggest, then, that as we get on with this we need some biblical views of church that involve both development and community. I believe in Matthew 23 we have in a very powerful little passage an illustration of how the Bible relates development and community. The particular context of this particular passage in Matthew 23 is when Jesus was critiquing with his disciples what the Greek cultural influence had come to make the synagogue. I think sometimes as Protestant evangelicals, as Christians, we read this in terms of its being what was wrong with the Jewish religion. I think not. I think it was what had happened to the proper worship of Jehovah because of Greek cultural influences. And when Jesus puts down these Greek cultural influences, we need to recognize that he is also putting it down in terms of the same source of Greek cultural influences as they impinge upon the Protestant evangelical church in North America. And I suggest to you an exercise in reading what, early in Matthew 23, is described in terms of what was wrong in the synagogue at that time.

But let me pick up with verse 8 to illustrate the particular point of this particular hour: “But you are not to be called ‘rabbi,’ ‘honored teacher,’ ‘great leader,’ for you have only one Master; and you are all brothers.” That is the teaching of our Lord. That is the teaching of our Lord to his apostles, to his disciples, to those who would take an apostolic role in the establishment of the work of Christ in this world in building his church. And he said, “As great as you will be,” if you want to see it that way, “don’t let anybody call you ‘rabbi.’” Jesus let himself be called “Rabbi,” but he does not extend that to those who are to be the under-shepherds. “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have but one Father, and he is in heaven,” and, of course, we take that as a good

proof text against the Catholic practice which I think to be patently absurd because the Catholic practice was not very common yet. There, you know, there's historical evidence.

The issue is not what do you call your preacher; the issue is creating relationships by using labels. The church of Jesus Christ is intended to be a set of functional relationships, not created by labeling; but created by experience, by reality, by involvement in a community. This passage, to me, just reeks of community: "You are all brothers, you have but one Teacher. We are colleague-related sharers under one Teacher." And as if somehow we could miss the point, he comes back on it heavy in verse 10, "Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have but one Teacher, the Christ." And I wonder really as we look at Christian education in terms of what it has become today, if anybody bothers to read this and asks, "What does it mean?" Because any of us seem to be quite happy to be called "teacher," and none of us would want to be called "Christ." We know that that is against our principles and premises and understandings, but we're willing to be called "teacher."

The point, to me, is that this context speaks of the relationship that the Christian community has to each other as co-learners under the headship of Christ. I can share with you. I can stand before you only as a sharer of what it is that Christ is teaching me. I do not speak Christ's truth to you. He is capable of doing that. I can share with you this Christian's experience that I am attempting to do today and tomorrow.

The last part of this paragraph says, "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted," and this is the key Christian virtue with reference to structure in that community: we are sharing learners under one Teacher.

In 1<sup>st</sup> John the second chapter, it's put in an even more strong form because it is within the context of dealing with false teaching. In 1<sup>st</sup> John second chapter verse 26, "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you." And, by the way, a developmentalist just loves that kind of language because what is going on in our development, our learning as Christians, is from within. It is from within in terms of the nature of man as God has created man to be a developing being. And it is from within as God has done a work within and has given within the Holy Spirit remaining in—and notice the language, "You do not need anyone to teach you." Now those are strong words and you have to do something with that passage of Scripture or else simply relegate it to an absurdity of some kind of archaic past. I choose not to do that. Notice the explaining sentence at the end, "But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him." I see again and again in Scripture the image of our being sharers in an experience. A community peculiar because of this thing that God is doing within us individually and that from which we have a collective opportunity, a collective dynamic to work and facilitate growth in development; learning within each other and within our body collectively.

I believe, specifically, that it is absolutely wrong within the Christian value system to exalt the expert. I think to exalt the expert is to deprive the expert of one of the most great dimensions of truly being a Christian and a potential leader in the Christian community. I think we have hurt many of our prophets through exalting them, and I think we will be prepared to do it over and over and over again because of secular influence within our community as Christians.

I would rather have us come back, time and time again, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Philippians and read quietly, cautiously, carefully the words of Paul:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is the foundation of a very crucial value in which we need not exalt the expert, but respect the servant. There is a kind of sadness that grows, I believe, in the community of Christ from this tendency of exalting the expert, especially as it relates to matters of learning. I know of no area of life, I know of no part of the American society where it is harder to get people to respect each other. And I speak that as a Christian brother, and I speak that in shame. I know of no sector of the American society where it is harder to get people to respect each other intellectually.

We have put such a premium on knowing and we have deposited that knowing in such a limited number of people that the true servants of Jehovah often are even putting themselves down on the ground that, "I have nothing to share." Sad. Sometimes when I'm encouraging people to engage in small group work—and sharing of experiences in small group work, I'll get somebody who has been exalted as an expert who says, "What do you have those people sharing their ignorance for?" Interestingly, sometimes some of the little people of God sitting in such sharing situations will say the same thing: "I don't think this is worthwhile because all we're doing is sharing our ignorance." I want to scream, "Aunt Millie, that's the one thing in life you can't share; it's yours alone." But what you can share is your experience which is yours uniquely. And God is at work in every one of us and what God is doing in the lives of every one of his children is worth knowing about, is worth sharing, is worth involving each other; and consider the essentialness of sharing.

If we take seriously the notion of bearing one another's burdens which everybody is willing to talk about and preach about and read about, but gets really embarrassed when you start getting into it. How can I possibly share your burdens if I don't know about them? How can I possibly expect you to share my burdens if I'm not willing to tell you about them? And how can any of this happen if nowhere within our church community is an appropriate forum and situation for me in some kind of relatedness with others in that family of God to really lay out my burdens so that I can get help? You say, "Well, take him to the pastor, that's what he's there for. He's there to be the institutional way of fulfilling Jesus' teaching." Baloney. I was impressed with what Paul Benjamin said about this very thing. It seems to me that he was underlining, in one portion of his talk this morning, how important it is to involve all of God's people and not simply to delegate in specialized roles those things that we obviously know to be the ministries of service.

But in addition to that factor of bearing one another's burdens, do you know that if you have no framework in which to share an understanding—if you have no forum in which to say, "This is what it means to me". If you have no situation in which to act out what is happening in your life, you're not going to learn very much. Sharing is an important part of making learning experiences practical. You know the old analogy of the Dead Sea, "Why is the Dead Sea so salty and dead?" The answer, "Because everything's coming in and nothing's going out." That's a homely analogy, but it's

still apt. Jesus Christ does not expect that any Christian be the recipient of all sorts of inputs. He expects us to be involved in a flow-through process. And I maintain that if we are serious about sharing Jesus Christ with a needy world, but do not create situations within the community of Christ where we can share from the abundance of what God is doing in our own lives, that we are asking for an absurdity. I'll say it again in another way: if you're concerned about your people's impact on non-Christians in your community, in your society, in your city, the place to start giving those people freedom to share is within the body of Christ so that they become aware of the abundance of the riches of Christ. And they become facilitated in the ways of talking about this so that what they have, then, to share with the people around them, in the general society, has the experience behind it of verbal experiential sharing within the community of Christ.

There's a one way to look at this that perhaps is a little more academic than most of the rest of the things that I've been saying today, and I'm going to do it. Because this is an illustration that we use within a purely secular framework, and there's nothing about it that even smacks of having been baptized. But I want to talk about three kinds of learning experience and kind of pull this all together. There are three kinds, or three aspects of learning experience and I think, within the church, we need to take all three of these very seriously.

The first one of these is the one that we feel most comfortable with, the most experienced with, the most knowledgeable about, and—most of us having had homiletics courses think we know all about how to do it—and that's how to put it altogether so that we can say something that will affect somebody else's life. Fine and dandy, but that's only part of the action. And, by the way, if you're really serious about effective input, especially verbal input, one of the things you ought to know about that is that one of the crucial needs that people have in dealing with input is to have some opportunity for verbal interaction with that input. It's terribly hard in a group of a thousand people such as this morning, and I suspect it's terribly hard in the pulpit ministry that you have. And I'm not asking necessarily for all pulpit ministries to be highly interactive, but I really do respect the pastors who take a Sunday afternoon or a Sunday evening hour to get together, with whoever wants to, to talk over the sermon of the morning. I think that that's kind of a neat start.

The second aspect of effective learning is growth in self-awareness. This is perhaps, of the three, the one that we are least comfortable with within the church partly because of a pietistic background that says, "It's not okay to talk about me. It's okay to talk about you, but not me because, after all, I am nothing. I am a worm, etc., etc. Never mind that God loved me enough to send his Son for me; I have to keep reminding God that I'm totally unworthy, and that means that I can't talk about me." That's absurd because in several points, especially in the New Testament, we're asked to take a stock of ourselves. And one of the places we're asked to not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, which suggests we ought to at least think of ourselves as highly as we should.

Okay? And, you know, there's a certain amount of, "I'm okay; you're okay; that's okay." Would you buy that? "And if I don't know who I am and where I'm going, how am I going to know what God's doing in my life? I've got to take some looks in there. I've got to become acquainted with the *me* that sits on this side of my eyes. God wants me to."

Consider: if we don't have self-awareness, we don't have a filter network adequate to detect the relevancy of input messages. I have a hypothesis about this; I call it the hypothesis of the L-

shaped Amen. You may have them in your church but, I don't know, in New England you probably don't. An L-shaped Amen is always easy to spot. In the first place, it usually comes from the first five to six rows, or the very last row. I don't know, there's something about the L-shaped Amen that seems to have a location. And it sounds a lot like this, "A-a-a-a-men!" Notice the tone; there's something very, very distinctive about the tone of an L-shaped Amen, "A-a-a-a-men!" It kind of comes out a little on the angry side at the end. Now the L-shaped Amen is almost always associated with some kind of a heavy, heavy pronouncement by a preacher. You know, "You people are really going to blah-blah unless you do blah-blah." "A-a-a-a-men!" Now how do I know that's L-shaped? Because I've preached enough and I've listened and I've looked and I've talked to the people delivering those, and I say, "Brother, what did you get out of this morning's sermon?" And I always ask that when I'm in the back. That's one reason they don't ask me back very often because I, you know, God's children say, "Oh, that was a lovely sermon," and I say, "What'd you hear?" Pretty soon they quit saying, you know, if they got me back for a succession of weeks, they quit saying things like, "That was a lovely sermon." They say, "Good morning," and that works. But I'm not that interested in being exalted so I want to know what they learned—not this, "That it was a pretty sermon."

But I watch these people; I talk to them, and occasionally what I find is, "Oh, preacher, you really gave it to him this morning. It was exactly what Fred Brown needed. A-a-a-a-men, preacher, give it to him; he needs it." That's what I mean in L-shaped. Now L-shaped Amen's are associated with people who aren't really looking into themselves enough to know that what is being said pertains to *them*.

And a lot of the saints shrivel and fail to grow because they're not looking adequately at "self" and they don't see themselves clearly enough. And you know what? As I look at the educational ministries of many churches, I find very little emphasis on helping people to become better acquainted with themselves. We say, "Oh, well, we do a little career stuff for the eighth graders and the ninth graders." I'm talking about for adults. I'm talking about for all the way through life because you've got to continue to grow in self-awareness or you're not going to be able to process input.

Now the third facet is the one again we're a little more familiar with, more at home with, though it took the kids in the '60's to convince us that the word was okay: the word "sharing." We say, "I want to witness; I don't want to share." Good grief. That may be just a semantic problem, but it also may reflect some kind of a psychological hang-up. You know, "I want to witness; I want to have a patterned thing that I tell people. I don't want them to share. I don't want them to get inside what God's doing for me. I want to tell them what God can do for *them*."

You know that this business of telling people what God can do for them is not nearly so convincing as sharing what God has done with *you*? If you're interested in overt public witness of an evangelistic sort, consider that. It's simply propositional to say, "Here's what God wants to do for *you*." People get that all the time in the lobbies of airports. The difference in the Christian message is the person that says, "Here's what Jesus Christ is doing in my life, and because of what Jesus Christ is doing in my life, I love you." There's more to it than that, but there's a good start. Sharing is the process by which we make something our own and it comes out from our abundance.

In summary, as we look at this matter of effective development in learning within the church, the church as a learning community . . .

I've got to add on one more negative. I think sometimes we've been trapped, handicapped, limited by our own Sunday school mentality. Now I haven't got a thing against the Sunday school, but I'm afraid that sometimes we let that be the total of our thinking. I think that the Sunday school mentality can trick the church into copying secular forms of education, partly because it has the word "school" hung in it. I want to ask the question—as a schooling-type educator, as a person concerned with educational analysis, however, even critiquing our own establishments—I want to ask the Christian community these questions; these secular forms of education that involve and are based on the schooling concept:

Are these the only forms we know of to deal with learning and development?

Secondly, are they the best forms?

Third, why did Jesus choose not to use them? Very good question.

Now sometimes we have a historical gap there and we're not aware that the word "curriculum," the word "campus," the concept "textbook," "lecturer," "podium" all sorts of stuff that's very essential in the schoolings thing; these were already well-known by the time of Christ. In fact, that was the "in" way to go at learning problems at the time of Christ, and in the part of the world where Christ was. The Greek influence was having a powerful influence. And Jesus simply chose to pick twelve people and walk and talk and share with them what was going on in his experience and let them share with him what was going on in their experience, and live it together for three years.

And, by the way, if you work out a cost effectiveness model, that turns out to be not much more expensive than the way we do formal education today. It is a real possibility because the ratios that we commonly use in formal education are not very far from one in twelve, but enough back-biting.

The church has three key settings that we've got to facilitate if we're going to be an effective learning community: one is fellowship, where we see each other as being worthy of each other's friendship and confidence, and where we see each other as parts of the learning resource for our compatriots. We need to learn from each other, to put it in simplest words. We need to share with each other; we need to be really companions. What does it mean to be "discipling" people? It means to be sharing with them your own discipleship in Christ; it doesn't mean to be "being Christ" for them, for heaven's sake. We are all brothers. We need to make fellowship far more than parties.

The second, we have family. More of that in the next hour. The whole congregation is an example to families and Christian families are a structural simile of the whole congregation. And somehow these have got to be brought into sync because these are key learning dimensions.

And the third key setting is that lively community that is really doing something together because of their commitment to Christ and to God's involvement in redemption. We need to see that the community of Christ is a dynamic thing in which we learn through doing, and this is a

collective experience not an individualistic experience. God's children need to be growing together in lively community. And sometimes one of the things that we can do is to simulate this on relatively short periods of time. That's one reason I am so gung-ho for church camping is that, sometimes to break the ice and get people aware of this kind of experience of living community, we can get it in short order through collective camping experiences where we really share more of life than simply, "Yes, we all got here to church at 11 o'clock this morning."

Let me leave with you a parting thought. We need particularly to be aware of those who put down nurture. Nurture is at the heart of what the church is doing for the Christian in the Christian community. Beware of those who put down nurture. There is much more in the New Testament about nurture and growth of the sort of the qualitative image of Christ, perfection, etc., etc. You know the passages; much more of that sort of material in the New Testament than there is of the quantitative sort by hundreds to one.

Nurture is the basic task of the church and quantitative growth is the natural and proper outgrowth of nurture within the body of Christ. The church, indeed, is potentially, and in God's plan, a very dynamic learning community.

Thank you.