

What Makes Christian Education Distinct

Secular education seeks to make more successful and intelligent people. The Christian educator aspires to nothing less than the transformation of a believer into the image of Christ.

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I am convinced that Christian education, my field of ministry, is one of the highest of all callings. I've also become convinced that Christian educators need to keep reminding themselves of the unique role of Christian education.

All around us we see status given to secular education. Children spend the bulk of their childhood in it. School board elections can become the focus of the entire community. Universities are the center of society's greatest research and most profound discoveries. The media constantly seek the opinions of university professors.

Amid all that, pastors and Christian educators are likely to feel like second-class educators, people who "merely" teach the Christian faith, while "real" educators are out there shaping the world.

Nothing could be further from the truth. So periodically, I like to remind myself and other Christian educators about the difference between secular education and our calling.

A Higher Perspective

In Christian education we deal with the transcendent. Secular education deals only with the human. Christian education discusses the eternal, secular education the here and now. In particular, there are four areas where this is evident.

- **A means of revelation.** Reason, the main staple of secular education, can go a long way, even in a Christian setting. It can assimilate and integrate and see the implications of what God reveals. But in our night drive into understanding, revelation is the headlights and reason the wheels; revelation helps us see the way that reason must follow.

Without revelation the most important things in life are missed: without revelation, you cannot reason your way to the resurrection. Without revelation you cannot reason your way to the Trinity. Without revelation, you cannot reason your way to sacrificial love.

So, the Christian educator, being an instrument of revelation, is privileged to witness some remarkable moments.

As a hobby, I observe operations. Once a surgeon friend invited me to watch a stapedectomy, a microsurgical procedure on the three small bones of the inner ear, enabling a deaf person to hear. Since the surgery is not painful, the patient needs only a local anesthetic.

At one point in the operation, my friend said, "Howie, I'm going to join these bones now. As I do, I'll keep talking, and you watch this guy's face." The moment he connected those tiny bones, the patient's eyes opened wide. Tears of joy started pouring down his cheeks, and I wiped them with gauze.

That's what revelation is like. As I talk, the Holy Spirit joins the bones, imparts the insight. And when it happens, I can see it on my hearers' faces. Their eyes open; their minds are animated. Their lives are changed.

- **Concerned first with God.** Secular education assumes that human observations and interpretations are the basis of reality. Christian education assumes that since God is the Creator and Sovereign of all, he alone is the interpreter of all. All things serve him and are sustained by him. He guides history. Thus the very foundation of knowledge is different for the Christian educator.

The effect is dramatic, as telling as the difference between astronomy studied from a sun-centered versus earth-centered theory of the solar system. God-centered education puts all history into the right perspective; it brings meaning to literature, respect and sanctity to life, standards and authority to decisions about social problems, and direction to philosophy.

- **Concerned with things that last.** Christian education has the authority to speak about more than this visible world, the world that is passing away. Secular education can focus on business and money, matter and molecules, people and issues, but the Christian educator can move beyond to the soul, the human spirit, life after death, the kingdom of God, the return of Christ, the final judgment—things that last.

To put it another way, the difference between secular and Christian education is as stark as the difference between the animal and human world. Animals and humans both have hearts, blood, and brains. They both live and die. They both reproduce sexually. They eat and breathe in remarkably similar ways. In the end, however, the differences infinitely exceed the likenesses. Only humans are created in the image of God. Only humans can make moral decisions. Only humans can perform surgery, rocket to the moon, write *Romeo and Juliet*, paint the Mona Lisa, build the Notre Dame Cathedral. And only humans will be resurrected in the image of Jesus Christ.

- **Superintended by the Holy Spirit.** In Christian education the Holy Spirit is ultimately orchestrating the learning experience, in which I am but a participant. He, not me, oversees the classroom. He is the master teacher, not me. He is the medium of communication, the giver and transmitter of truth, and I am the personality he is animating.

The presence of the Holy Spirit requires the Christian educator to have an attitude of dependence and humility. I can draw back, beginning to depend on myself, my books, my experience, my past learning, my lesson plans, my messages. Or I can be sensitive to him, seek him, acknowledge daily in prayer that I can do nothing on my own, only what he does through me by his grace.

So, no matter what my scholastic degrees or expertise, I know that without total dependence on the Spirit, I cannot bear fruit; I cannot achieve my goal of full discipleship. I can transmit information without the Holy Spirit. I can explain and illustrate and entertain, but I cannot bear fruit without abiding in the vine.

Not Just to Teach But to Transform

Not only the perspective but the objective of Christian teaching transcends secular education. The secularist seeks to make better, more effective, successful, and intelligent people. The Christian educator aspires to nothing less than to transform people into the image of Christ. Secular education and Christian education thus have different postures toward the world. One helps a person fit into the world system; the other helps lift a person above the world. I am teaching not merely to inform the mind but to renew the mind: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

I once took a graduate course at New York University. I knew the professor was brilliant, in complete command of his field. So on the first day of class, I sat in the front row; I didn't want to miss anything.

I soon noticed, however, that the other students crowded the back rows. These being graduate students, motivated learners, I couldn't understand it. But in a matter of minutes, I figured it out. The professor was remote. He had little enthusiasm and simply droned on during the lecture. Later in the course he said to the class, "Look, I get paid whether you learn or not." Then I understood his cold approach to his subject.

As a Christian educator, that attitude will never do. My goal is not to lecture, or even to lecture with excellence. My goal is to teach in such a way that students both learn and employ their knowledge. Christian educators should view themselves as nothing less than disciplers. The knowledge we communicate affects more than the minds of our hearers; it should change lives. In particular, I want to see my students develop five qualities as a result of my teaching.

Deepening Commitment to Christ

Secular education asks what students know, not who they are. Christian education asks not how much students know but how closely they are following Christ.

In Christian education what goes into the head must move to the heart, compelling deeper commitment and greater obedience. Spiritual knowledge is never intended for the head alone, never focused on skills alone, facts alone, principles alone. All knowledge must be dedicated to the glory of God.

While we may be tempted to assume that commitment is the hearer's responsibility alone, we know better. Teachers have a role to play, especially in calling people to obedience concerning what they have heard. I have found that I have a better chance of creating committed students when I challenge them with the implications of what they are learning, spelling out the application in specific terms.

Growing in Christ

I want to see in my students the fruit of the Spirit. Mere knowledge is not my goal, but character.

Several years ago the headlines trumpeted the stories of a serial rapist in a town near Dallas. When the police finally nabbed the criminal, we got the bad news that he was an alumnus, a graduate of the seminary. He had studied, passed the tests, projected the image, gone off to pastor, but he had failed to develop character.

I can instruct in such a way that people are satisfied with listening while not doing. I can make them comfortable with increasing spiritual knowledge while they lack commitment and obedience. I can enable hearers to be puffed up with knowledge rather than humbled by their disobedience to that knowledge. If hearts are not being renewed along with minds, I have failed.

Showing Competence to Live Out Faith

I am dedicated to giving my hearers the skill, knowledge, experience, and character necessary to bear fruit for Christ. In the Gulf War, the military stressed in briefings and interviews the professionalism of the modern American soldier. "The soldiers did their job like professionals," they would say. "We have trained them to be the best in the world." Military professionalism is valued for good reason: commanders know that a soldier's survival, as well as that of his unit, depends on his level of competence.

I feel the same way about equipping believers as a sergeant must feel in boot camp. I know that no Christian can become capable and qualified for the Lord's service without being taught certain skills. I don't want anyone to finish my class and be incapable of accomplishing God's purposes.

I think a Christian must be competent in three areas:

- **Knowledge.** Paul admitted that he lacked rhetorical skills and personal presence to impress the Corinthians, but he stressed that he did have truth, crucial knowledge that was far more important.

A student without a grasp of the Bible is a warrior without weapons. I am a teacher because I'm convinced knowledge makes a difference, especially in how believers live and how well they help others.

Knowledge is more than the accumulation of facts. It includes the intellectual ability to critique contemporary books, song lyrics, and movies. So when discussing a modern book or movie, I regularly ask my students, "What are the values of the piece? What are the presuppositions? What is the scriptural perspective on this? What difference would it make if we acted on this way of looking at the world? How can we counteract the negatives?"

I am committed to training people who can learn for themselves, who do their own decision making, their own problem solving, their own creative thinking, their own biblical interpretation. I want them to learn not only what, not only why, but how.

- **Emotions.** True knowledge prompts feelings. Several years ago I flew to Africa to see Byang Katto, a key leader of the African Evangelical Fellowship. I took in the sights, sounds, and smells of mission life in Nigeria.

My personal knowledge of that missionary's experience improved my prayers for all missionaries. I now feel their challenges and dangers. Feelings aren't everything, but they are a vital part of a full apprehension of the truth.

If we're not careful, we can suck all the blood out of the heart with facts and information. Instead, I want to enlarge my hearers' hearts as much as I do their brains. I want them to know the truth and feel strongly about it.

- **Action.** A competent Christian acts out the faith. Jesus was powerful in word and deed—a man of action. So are his followers.

Some years ago I had a student who had been practicing law in Atlanta when he gave his life to Christ. He had come to the seminary to earn a theological degree, but when he completed his work he returned to the Southeast. Today he teaches and disciples young attorneys, representing Jesus Christ in the bar association. That's action.

I arouse my students to ministry. I inquire personally about their spiritual gifts, whether they are using them and what obstacles they have come up against. Their particular ministry may have little to do with the subject I am teaching, but it directly affects how well they assimilate any knowledge. Ministry plugs knowledge into real people and their 110-volt problems.

Creative in Ministry

I don't want to produce cookie-cutter Christians, patterned after my image. Everyone has a unique personality, gifts, and calling; I want to teach each person to make the most of that uniqueness.

I want people to be resourceful at getting answers from the Word, to learn from their creative God, to find ways to minister to other's needs, to solve their own problems. I want them to find and apply principles, not formulas, in different settings and situations.

Grant, for example, left the seminary classroom to serve in the military chaplaincy. His desire to reach unchurched personnel led him to schedule Sunday evening meetings—at the same time first-run movies from Hollywood were usually shown on the base. Others said no one would come, but he imported films with a Christian message and followed the showings with discussion and a presentation of the gospel, laced with music and testimonies.

In just a few weeks their attendance equaled the secular entertainment, and far exceeded the Sunday morning chapels. Grant was simply adapting his ministry to the setting.

I want people to learn and grow on their own, not to depend on my answers. That's tougher than it sounds, for the more insightful the teacher, the more dependent the hearers become. So I've had to check my impulse to impress people with my insights and instead challenge them to think. I spend a lot of time asking questions, letting students struggle, pointing them to the One who wants to help, letting students get into sink-or-swim situations. Need, I've noticed, is like flint: it sparks creativity.

Effective Communicators

Communication—receiving and giving information and understanding—is at the heart of our faith. We cannot grow in our relationship with God or reach out effectively to others unless we learn some fundamental communication skills. In particular, I want my students to gain proficiency in the two main areas of communication.

- **Listening.** Good communication begins with good listening, and good listening begins with hearing and understanding God's Word. We cannot hope to speak to basic human needs until we understand what they are and how to deal with them from God's perspective.

So, I am committed to training people to read and study the Scriptures for themselves. I do this not by repeatedly exhorting them to read the Word, or just holding them accountable for daily devotional reading, but by whetting their appetite for the Word.

I work hard to make the Bible relevant, alive, exciting. In addition, people will more readily read the Word when they have a frame of reference for understanding it, so I equip hearers with basic principles of interpretation and the big picture of Scripture.

Knowing the Greatest Joy

One day when my daughter was in high school, she said to me, "Daddy, I know you're busy, but you've got to come to our parent/teacher night. You have to meet my biology teacher."

The night of the event, we arrived late and sat in the back row. I heard a scratchy voice from the front, but I couldn't see the teacher. He was sitting down, describing all the experiments his students were doing, one incredible scientific project after another.

I finally stood to see better and discovered that the teacher was in a wheelchair, a polio victim. His presentation impressed me so much, I went up afterward to talk to him. I found out he had two Ph.D.'s and that several area universities had sought him as a professor.

"Why in the world do you keep teaching in high school?" I asked.

"Can you think of anything more exciting," he replied, "than molding young, plastic minds?"

He had the right attitude for teaching, and that was why my daughter and the other students responded so well to him.

The only thing I can imagine more exciting than molding plastic minds is the privilege of molding plastic lives and producing souls for eternity. And that, finally, is the unique role of Christian education.

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