

# Christian Distinctions In Religious Education

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The recent decision of the United States Supreme Court in the McCollum case forces the question as to just what has been lost or gained by the judgment of the Court. We cannot lose what we do not have. If we have not had the teaching of true religion in our schools, wherein does our loss lie? The pressure of naturalism upon true religious education is evidenced in the blurring of vital distinctions, even among conservatives. If the teaching of religion in the schools is not the teaching of the Christian religion, then the decision of the Court is a decision against false cults rather than against the Christian religion. The quotation a "rose by any other name" does not apply when it comes to Christianity.

There is an increasing tendency to confuse the secular and the sacred when it comes to education. Alleen Moone in *The Christian Education of Older Youth* speaks of "the leaders of the liberal movement in religion" as having resisted the division of life into the sacred and the secular. This resistance is resident in their insistence that "God works in and through the orderly processes of nature"; that "he is directly related to individuals through the procedures of human search and reflection".<sup>1</sup> Long before Alleen Moone wrote in defense of the unity of the sacred and the secular George Herbert Betts had said: "There is no use in dodging the issue, it must be met. The literalist and the modern Biblical scholar do not have the same Bible. The God and the Christ of the fundamentalist are not the God and the Christ of the liberalist." He further says:

<sup>1</sup> Moone, Alleen, *The Christian Education of Older Youth*, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943, p. 96.

While many of the points of controversy are wholly incidental in that a belief in either position has no discernible influence on conduct or character, yet the two points of view at issue are at root too far apart to compromise upon them, and compromise but confuses thought and undermines faith. It is impossible, if indeed not desirable, that these differences should fail to show in the curriculum as it develops in the immediate future.<sup>2</sup>

In these times an examination of Christian education in terms of its proper field and function, its aims, the pupil, the curriculum, the methods of teaching and the teaching personality should at least serve to bring to mind the gap which must be bridged to make of the secular or any sort of purported teaching of religion one and the same with Christian education.

## I. THE FIELD OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Education is not the total function of the church. It is one of the basic functions. This fact is being rediscovered by the church. Gerald Kennedy has recently written on "the rediscovery of the central importance of preaching" saying that "preaching is not merely education". Sherrill unequivocally distinguishes between the two functions, saying that Jesus first preached, then taught.<sup>4</sup> The ultimate mission of the church is evangelism in which a number of functions are subsumed. The Great Commission is to go, to preach, to make disciples, to teach.

<sup>2</sup> Betts, George Herbert, *The Curriculum of Religious Education*, New York: The Abingdon Press, 1924, pp. 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, Gerald, *His Word Through Preaching*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Sherrill, Lewis P., *The Rise of Christian Education*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944, pp. 81-83.

Jonah's mission to Ninevah was a preaching, a proclaiming, rather than a teaching, mission. John the Baptist preached repentance. The definition of preaching by the prophet Isaiah was reiterated by Christ Himself as being the preaching of good tidings unto the meek; the binding up of the broken hearted; the proclaiming of liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; the proclaiming of the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; the comforting of all that mourn.<sup>5</sup>

The commission to Isaiah as reiterated by our Lord indicates that the central function of the church is preaching, other subordinate functions being teaching, intercession, worship, fellowship, holy living, providing for worthy causes, and the rendering of service in various ways. The inclusive aim of the church is evangelism. The Great Commission is not only to teach but to make disciples. Becoming a disciple is an involved, even a miraculous, procedure. It is matriculating in the Kingdom of God. It is even more, it is being born into it. Holy living and patient teaching are included in the processes of evangelism. A total program of heralding or proclaiming the Gospel—engaging in a ministry of intercession; instruction or teaching; ministering to the necessity of the saints; comforting the feeble minded and supporting the weak—can scarcely be defined as exclusively a program of education. Christian education, then, is *a* function, not *the* function of the church.

## II. THE AIM IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

What is the purpose or aim of the teaching program of the church? The meaning of the word teach is "to show", "to guide", "to make known", "to show how", hence to train or accustom to some action. Christian teaching, then, concerns itself with showing how to become a Christian and with the inculcation of Christian ideals and the development of Christian habits. It is for the passing on of a body of truth necessary

to salvation and growth in grace. It is the didactic and nurturing aspect of the Great Commission, and involves the central facts of Christianity and the whole body of Christian truth as revealed in the Bible.

The central facts of Christianity involve recognition of the supernatural and the existence of three worlds, whereas the objectives of secular education are bound up with one world, this present world. Hence public education is secular or pertaining to this world and not religious, spiritual or holy. Introducing the ideals of Christian civilization into public education does not make secular education Christian. Christian teaching involves recognition of the need of the New Birth in the hearts of pupils; the New Birth is a miracle which is beyond the limits of anything possible to psychology and education.

## III. THE PUPIL IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Any intelligent consideration of education necessitates consideration of the nature of the pupil and of his needs in relation to his nature. Also, any intelligent consideration of Christian education involves a basic concept of God in relation to man. The importance of the study of the Bible is stressed by the repeated inquiry in the Bible, "What is man?" Basically the answer to the question of the secular and the religious in education is in the answer to that question, and its complement, "That thou art mindful of him".

H. Shelton Smith shows that the growth theory of Horace Bushnell as modified by the evolutionary hypothesis through George Albert Coe on the religious side, and John Dewey on the secular side explains much of the contemporary attitude in religious education.<sup>6</sup> If one has a vague and shadowy view of God as pantheistic and immanent, or a thoroughly atheistic view that he is but natural process, then everything that can be done for the pupil in relation to religion must be upon a naturalistic plane. Since the Christian religion is bound up with spiritual as well as physical reality,

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, H. Shelton, *Faith and Nurture*, New York: Scribners, 1941, pp. 26-32.

it must deal with a true definition of the pupil and a true recognition of his needs.

More than thirty years ago Thorndike published in three volumes his classic in the field of education psychology,<sup>7</sup> and his basic presuppositions are still held to be valid in that field. The title of the first volume is *The Original Nature of Man*. He maintains that learning is based upon and conditioned by man's original nature. Education is a process of modification of behavior by the development of responses to environment. Thorndike does not hold that in religious education man must have his nature subjected to a miracle of supernaturalism which changes it into one which is amenable and responsive to spiritual truth. He was not purporting to be religious. However, the Christian position concerning the nature of man and therefore his basic needs is, like that of Thorndike, that no one can be modified beyond his native capacity for modifiability. He can only be taught in terms of what he is by nature. Since the Word of God plainly teaches that man is by natural generation a sinner in order to be taught as a Christian he must be supernaturally regenerated. This means that Christian teachers have different objectives and a different approach than have secular teachers. The primary need of the child is to be born again, to become a member of a new and different human race. This is what Christ taught. The total accomplishment of this end does not lie within the power of religious education.

True Christian education asks, What is the relation of God to man? If God be pantheistic and man as a result divine by natural birth, then the doctrine of the innate goodness of man and the growth theory in religious education are acceptable. On the purely secular side, if there be no God other than the orderly processes of nature, it is questionable whether the growth theory can be sustained. As Horne puts it, "We have growths as well as growth".<sup>8</sup> Since Dewey objects to goals in

final terms the growth he suggests, being experimental and tentative is as likely to be cancerous or monstrous as it is to be healthy and progressive. Growth normally is toward fulfillment of design.

Christian education is distinguished from naturalism and secularism by the true Biblical concept of the nature of God and the nature of man.

#### IV. THE CURRICULUM OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Inasmuch as the plan of God for the salvation of man is eternal and unchangeable throughout the centuries the curriculum is not basically a tentative matter in Christian education. Christian teaching is by its very nature ultimately authoritative. There are not countless ways of salvation for countless men, there is only one way for all men. All men like sheep have gone astray, they have turned every one to his own way. They must turn to God's way, the way of the Good Shepherd.

The Gospel is sufficiently clear concerning the freedom of the human spirit that there need be no confusion as to the meaning of the terms indoctrination and authoritarianism as employed in the Christian sense. One needs in this connection but to cite again the words of Isaiah and of Christ concerning the opening of prisons and the deliverance of captives. Christ makes men free through the truth, not from the truth.

Of course anarchy and freedom are not the same thing; and one of the first requirements of the free man is that he be a man of disciplined spirit, a man brought under subjection by his own choice to the demands of a society of free men. For those who persistently revolt against all authority there is the prison or the hospital for the mentally ill.

Because the mission of Christianity is to perpetuate a body of liberating truth through the generations teaching will be dependent upon adequate and final sources. Since the only such source is the Bible, the curriculum in Christian education will be Bible centered. It will likewise be pupil centered to an extent not known outside

<sup>7</sup> Thorndike, E. L., *Educational Psychology*, Vol. I, Chapters I, II, III.

<sup>8</sup> Horne, Herman, *The Democratic Philosophy of Education*, New York: Macmillan, 1938, p. 52.

the Christian religion, for a burden of soul is not known to the unsaved. The curriculum of Christian education is bi-polar, as was suggested by Craig at a meeting of the International Council of Religious Education in Grand Rapids in 1947.

True Christian education is so unique in its curriculum that there is no danger of its being confused with secularism. So long as the church is true to its genius, its heritage and its mission in the world, secularism cannot invade it.

#### V. METHODS IN CHRISTIAN TEACHING

The Christian teacher does not underestimate human elements and values in his work. He appreciates the great significance of psychology and philosophy in education but he recognizes the limitations and boundaries of these disciplines imposed by the finiteness of man's mind. He is grateful for acceptable formulations of the laws of learning, habit formation, memorization, *et cetera*, arrived at through patient research. He is concerned with knowledge concerning the instincts, the intuitions and the reactions of human beings to environment. He desires to know more and more concerning organic growth and maturation, and of the levels and stages of human development. He is concerned that he be able to intelligently regard his pupils in terms of their physical, mental and spiritual nature and needs. He recognizes the hazards and limitations of mental life and seeks to be helpful in teaching and counselling.

While method is a matter of common concern in all teaching here again appears the gulf between the natural and the supernatural. Those who believe in indoctrination and the necessary transmission of a body of saving truth, and in the existence of standards and norms of faith and conduct, cannot intelligently become enthusiasts for any methodology built upon the tentative presuppositions of naturalism and pragmatism. First comes Christian experience, then Christian experiences follow. They are not one and the same thing.

In his use of the project method the Christian teacher will not refer to it as

"creative teaching" unless he defines what he means by creative teaching. He will not credit the project method to progressive education but rather will view it in its true light as drawn from vocational education with its definite objectives and norms, or from informal procedures and activities as old as Comenius or Pestalozzi. He will know that Christian education is concerned with vastly more than tentative experiencing. He will seek to know the method of Jesus as central to his purpose rather than to know the implications of Rousseau's *Emile* as a guide to educational thought. The pupil centeredness of the Christian teacher is not a matter of the teacher following the bent to sin of the unregenerated pupil, but is rather a deep and loving concern to lead the pupil to accept deliverance through Christ. His interest in integration will be bound up with supreme devotion to Christ as the means of its achievement. For him education will not merely be a matter of ongoing experience with the human reconstruction of experience determining the meaning of life. Sophistication will not be the goal of education but rather integration of personality on the level of ideals and conduct brought into harmony with the supreme will of God. Project teaching may profitably be employed in an educational framework based upon the idea of authority and indoctrination. When so employed distinctions between the secular and the religious are clearly maintained.

How can the Christian teacher use the discussion method? Long before the tenets of so-called "progressivism" were propounded discussion was commonly employed. Why, then, raise a question as to its value and use as a method in Christian education?

The discussion method in naturalistic circles has come to mean that all truth is relative and such measure of it as can be arrived at is at best but tentative. It was this sophistic view of truth which Plato felt constrained to categorize as opinion in contradistinction to truth. Those who in terms of so-called "creative" teaching speak of the discussion method have in mind discussion as a sort of research tech-

nique for arriving at relative truth. The *consensus gentium* or opinion arrived at by the group is tentatively the truth sought. The idea of a "thus saith the Lord," a finality, is repudiated and scorned. The Bible is not expected to give final answers, although it may be termed a "resource" along with works on psychology and sociology. It may be readily seen that certain questions lend themselves to a proper use of the discussion method in even its present distorted connotations. Such questions as "Which is the better college to attend?", "Which is the best foot-ball game to see?" or "Who is the best doctor to employ?" may be discussed and answers arrived at in terms of the consensus. Such questions however as "What must I do to be saved?" and "Is it ever right to take God's name in vain?" require that there be final authority. In matters basic to faith and conduct it is necessary to find final authority.

The Christian teacher must evaluate the several methods of teaching, not only with respect to their adaptability to subject matter and age levels, the accomplishment of immediate and ultimate aims, and their relationship to the school as a whole, but in relation to the whole Christian system of truth and the ultimate needs of persons. He is bound to be intelligent with respect to the origin of proposed methods. This involves knowledge of how such methods came to be employed in the school room, of the educational philosophy of the person who proposed or introduced the method, of the relation which the method bears to the philosophy, and of the extent to which it is an expression of it.

## VI. THE PERSONALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER

The question of the personality of the Christian teacher is fundamental to the whole question of what distinguishes Christian education from all other educational endeavor, for in the Christian education class room the Holy Spirit is recognized as the teacher. This implies that the Christian teacher must be subject to Him and dependent upon Him. At this point, surely,

there can be no ambiguity as to what constitutes Christian education. While it is highly desirable that the Christian teacher have an attractive and efficient personality, he must have infinitely more than that: for "Without me ye can do nothing".

The preparation of the Christian teacher is a Bible centered preparation. Teacher training should be encouraged. Training courses, correspondence courses, summer training schools, camps, workshops, conferences, all have their place in the training of the Christian teacher. But no mere professionalism can answer the purpose of Christian teaching. The Christian teacher is entitled to adequate human supervision in his work but it must be conducted by one who knows the Holy Spirit's presence in his own life. Seminaries and colleges are to prepare leadership so that intelligent, capable, spiritual supervision may be available to the Christian teacher.

## CONCLUSION

There is little which is new to the Christian mind suggested in this discussion. But one needs to be reminded again and again these days of the infiltrations and encroachments of the secular and the naturalistic.

Christian teachers need not feel ill at ease when at many points their theory and methodology do not seem to be keeping step with naturalism and secularism. While there is much in common between the secular and the sacred in education there are many points at which they do not approach identity in character and aims. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him. Neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned".<sup>9</sup>

Careful consideration of what is Christian should dispel the murk which envelops the area of distinctions between the secular and the religious in education. Since the Word of God clearly distinguishes between the natural and the spiritual man, the carnal mind and the mind of Christ, those who stand on it find distinctions to be clear, final and inescapable.

<sup>9</sup> I Corinthians 2:14.