Evangelism and—Christian Education  

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There is an interesting little drama, not often told, hidden within a story in the Gospel of John. It is a story about a boy and a sun-browned fisherman and a Teacher who loved to use the out-of-doors for a classroom.

The fisherman was Andrew, who of all Jesus’ disciples was outstanding as a personal winner of others to Christ. Andrew began his Christian life’s story by going after his big fisherman brother, Simon, later nicknamed The Rock (Peter). Andrew forthrightly gave his witness and won his impetuous brother to Jesus. And what a winning! Peter of the divinely inspired confession—“Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God.” Peter of the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter the flaming spokesman of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But Andrew did not stop at his first big success as a soul winner. Here is the story itself in which the little story is hidden.

Jesus had planned a private little outing alone with His disciples. In a small private boat they had slipped quietly away from the crowds to a country place across the lake. How solitary! How relaxing! How much they all needed just this kind of physical, mental and spiritual re-creation. But no! Without ceremony or warning thousands of people crowded the country paths to crash the private outing. It was enough that this crowd should take up the whole day in demanding the spiritual ministry of the Master. But at dusk they must have food. Food for a population large enough to make a fair-sized little city. And not a bakery or a market within miles! What embarrassment for an apostolic picnic!

But here comes the little story hidden in the large one. Phillip flatly states the problem and its impossibility of solution in a sentence. “The wages of two hundred days is not enough for each to have even a little bread.” Then comes Andrew—Andrew who saw people as individuals—not in the undifferentiated mass. And with him is a boy, perhaps a Junior age boy.

“There is a lad here!”

Andrew brought the lad to Jesus, and Jesus together with the lad and the disciples and the thousands of the multitude organizing
themselves at the Master's command cooperated in a miracle. Five thousand were filled to satisfaction with enough bread left over to supply each apostle for a week.

The point here is not the lad's meager lunch feeding five thousand, interesting as it is. It is rather that Andrew led that lad to Jesus where he was brought into dynamic relationship with the miracle working power of Christ. A boy got the chance of a lifetime to enter into an experience of active fellowship with the Lord of Glory and help Him do a piece of work that has made men wonder for two thousand years. Can we help but suppose that that experience was a learning experience that one lad never forgot? Can we help but infer further that this was a transforming experience that made a difference in a boy's life to the last day he lived? The twilight of that memorable day witnessed a climax that could easily be described as a crisis experience in a human life. At the same time we must recall that the day itself had been a continuous learning experience under the tutelage of the world's greatest Teacher. Christian evangelism and Christian education were so interwoven and interlocked as aspects of one continuous series of events that as far as the Master was concerned they were one stream of spiritual endeavor.

A number of important inferences bearing both on Christian education and evangelism seem to spring out of these incidents. At least we shall attempt to suggest some, even at the risk of pushing analogy into allegory.

1. First, as to evangelism, we may deduce from Andrew's example the inference that introducing people to Jesus one at a time may be the very best way to bring them to a saving knowledge of His grace. Further, we may infer that winning a mere lad ranks for Andrew along with winning an Apostle Peter. And again we would gather that the transforming power of Christ is conveyed to persons in terms of their personal and developmental situation and need. There was no cast iron formula with Jesus. The lad was no less a lad after he met Jesus. He was not put under an unnatural strain to try to imitate Peter's experience or to ape his testimony or digest his adult concepts regarding the meaning of his experience. For the lad there was a joyful personal encounter with One whom he could not but love and trust and yield to. The new relationship was not creedal or theoretical, not technical or ritualistic; it was personal in the realest sense. Finally there is a clear inference
that introductions to Jesus need not be reserved for technically defined evangelistic situations but may effectively be made whenever a sense of need clearly emerges. The Savior is ready any time an open-hearted seeker is brought face to face with Him. In short, effective evangelism is personal, without limitation as to age, is fitted to individual need, and is continuously opportune.

2. Second, as to Christian education we may without strain-ing interpretation make a number of further deductions. It is clear that on the day Andrew introduced the lad to Jesus they were in the midst of a real teaching situation. Jesus was known up and down the land as a teacher. He had been teaching the whole day through. It is further clear that some of Jesus’ most effective teaching came not through the process of verbalization but through dynamic action and experience. Again it need not be argued that Jesus’ teaching was purposeful. He taught, as He preached, for a verdict. Finally it can be seen that both the spirit and the method of Jesus in teaching was admirably fitted to impress children as well as youth and adults. In short, Jesus was a master teacher, his method was concrete and dynamic, it was purposefully evangelistic and it was adapted to childhood as well as to adulthood.

3. It seems obvious that the dualism which many have assumed between evangelism and education is scarcely warranted by the practice and teachings of Jesus. Liberal Christian educationalists have sought to discount evangelism in favor of education. Some conservative evangelicals have retaliated by decrying education and pressing for evangelism. But Jesus seemed to make each complement the other in a balanced program of promoting the kingdom. He wore the robes of the teacher as comfortably as the mantle of the prophet. In the truest sense He was both.

What then is the rôle of evangelism and what is the rôle of education? To those who follow the Wesleyan tradition there should scarcely be serious conflict between the two functions. Wesley was the greatest evangelist of his century. The power of his appeal to repentance shook three continents. But Wesley was a scholar and a school man at the same time. He devised some amazing plans for educating the masses in a day when mass education was little thought of. His writing and publication program, providing inexpensive books for the people, created an intellectual ferment and hunger for learning among the evangelized masses. Wesley saved the Sunday school movement in its crucial beginnings
by suffusing into it new life. He brought Christian education within the circle of the local society or church.

Wesleyans who have taken seriously Wesley's insistence on "the second blessing properly so called" have shown high seriousness in promoting Christian education. Witness the rapid multiplication of holiness colleges during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the present century.

A sense of uneasiness has at times been felt in the ranks of the holiness people, however, lest the glow of evangelism be lost in the glare of culture and education. Some have even come to oppose learning, fearing it as a threat to spiritual power or as a substitute for evangelism. What of these dangers?

There is always peril in ignorance. A program based on emotion rather than on informed intelligence is zeal without knowledge. Equally true is it that intellectual pride and pedantry are the death of genuine spirituality. Knowledge and humility are excellent team mates. Clear and informed thinking as well as warm hearts are the factors in our safety. We need to do some clear thinking about the relative rôles of education and evangelism in kingdom endeavor.

Education may be defined as method or means. Evangelism is certainly related primarily to goal or ends. The goal of the gospel is the transformed person. The character of the method or means is modified by the goal.

There is education and there is Christian education. Christian education is the educational method harnessed and molded by the evangelistic goal. The goal does not destroy the method; it gives it character and direction. Christian education is properly good education in methodology and psychology. But it is Christian in that its ends are Christian ends and its spirit and temper are controlled and colored thereby.

It has been suggested that education operates on the plane of the natural while evangelism deals with the supernatural. To admit this would be to surrender the Christian foundation of Christian education. When Jesus fulfilled the rôle of teacher and taught as one having authority, not as the scribes, He was not limiting himself to the natural. The Spirit of God filled His teaching as well as His preaching. Christian teachers can and should labor under the sense of divine mission, undergirded by the power of the Spirit of God. They should expect spiritual, supernatural results.

At the same time it is necessary to recognize the essential dif-
ference between the function of teaching and that of evangelistic proclamation. Teaching relates to process. Its very substance is time and patience. It labors for growth—growth of ideas, of understanding of attitudes, of abilities and of choices. Evangelistic proclamation relates to crisis. It is a call to turn now! Its very nature is urgency, immediacy, decision. Its message is punctiliar; its tense is aorist. Behold now is the accepted time. Behold today is the day of salvation. Someone has remarked that the ministry of the teacher is like that of the family doctor—a looking after life processes, while the work of the evangelist is like that of the surgeon—a work of emergency.

We need both doctor and surgeon, teacher and evangelist. Let us guard and cultivate the ministries of educators and evangelists by magnifying the distinctive office of each and yet keeping them related in a larger whole. And let us save life by guarding both its crises and its processes. It is evangelism and—Christian education.