
A THEOLOGIAN'S RESPONSE TO THE PILGRIM EDUCATOR

I share the author's concern, and I expect most educators do, whether they be content-centered or student-centered. The concern is not new. Paul's prayer for the Colossians linked the knowledge of God's will with fruitfulness and the knowledge of God (Col.1:9-10). Paul's deep concern in the Pastoral Epistles was for sound doctrine (literally, healthy doctrine) to be applied to the life situation problems reflected in those letters. He used that phrase "healthy doctrine" seven times in those three epistles.

Our Lord anticipated the problem, put together the elements for the solution, and suggested the paradigm in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). "Disciples" is the paradigm and the central command of the commission. "Teaching them" centers on the student. "To observe" is the antidote to dead orthodoxy and useless experiences. "All things whatever I have commanded you" requires teaching of content and facts.

Paul's commission to Timothy included and integrated the same elements. Commit things (content) to faithful people (students who applied the Word to their experiences) so they can teach others (which has to be both content and student oriented, 2 Tim. 2:2).

Sound doctrine should issue in fruitful living, and holy living must be based on healthy doctrine.

The stereotypes in Dr. Plueddemann's article seemed overdrawn to me, but perhaps that was a deliberate strategy to get the reader's attention. Content-centered educators are pictured as viewing their students "as containers in which to deposit theological pearls of wisdom," as being satisfied if they have taught outlines of Bible books and Paul's missionary journeys, as teaching "inert biblical facts" to be "regurgitated on the final exam," etc.

On the other hand student-centered educators are depicted as emphasizing "feelings and felt-needs," as trying to get students "in touch with their feelings" so that they can become more self-actualized, as concerned with "techniques in the use of the sandbox and paper dolls," etc.

Frankly I would be hard pressed to name any individual teacher I have known who fits either stereotype. Also one could easily make a case for needing to know the chronology of the missionary journeys of Paul in order to

fit the Prison epistles, for example, into the life situations of both Paul and his readers. And, too, a well-planned meal (an accurate concept) begins with a grocery list (appropriate facts) so grocery lists are not always undesirable.

The pilgrim paradigm serves the author's purpose adequately (though this use of the word is more Bunyan than biblical). But some clear biblical paradigms are "disciple" (though the word fades out of the biblical record in Acts), "maturity," "healthy," "saint" ("saint educational philosophy" is an intriguing paradigm!).

Permit me some observations with regard to the author's suggestions for teaching according to the model proposed.

1. Would that we could accomplish these goals. I think for the most part Christian educators want to do these things but I would like to observe that when we teach the Word of God we cannot be teaching something "inert" (inactive) for it is living and active (Heb. 4:12).

I think we must acknowledge that life is not always evenly paced. There are often periods in which a greater amount of factual input is assimilated and periods during which one wrestles with a disproportionate number of life's problems.

2. Plueddemann's suggestion that seminaries require students to have previous experience working with people is a worthy ideal. But depending on the time of conversion, association with the church may or may not be possible. Some graduate schools do now expect such experience certification from the applicant's local church.

3. Is there no place for a graduate program that is more or less pure research? Does not such research usually find its way eventually into the stream of more accurate Bible teaching and thus more fruitful living?

4. I read not long ago in the publicity of one of the leading Christian colleges in America the boast that about 50% of the faculty were actively involved in local church ministries. The college saw their faculty cup as being half full of ministry, but I saw it as half empty.

5. Majors in Christian education must not only reflect theologically on what they are doing, they must continue to study theology in order to have proper concepts to guide their reflection and integration. Practical internships must always be evaluated by biblical standards. As the author has said, only the Bible is absolute truth. Therefore we must always aim to conform our experiences to the absolute standards of the Bible.

The Christian statesman Charles Malik said it this way: "Far from catering to our changing whims, the relevance of the Bible is precisely its unwavering and disturbing demands on our life. It is relevant by showing us how our life is shamelessly irrelevant to it."

One final thought. Christian teachers, like all believers, are engaged in

spiritual warfare. The best scholarship and finest techniques do not of themselves win the battle for our students' wills. Grade books make good prayer lists. And praying by name and need may do more to ensure a Christlike pilgrimage for our students than all other things put together.

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