

EDUCATION FOR USE

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The Teaching Task

Bible colleges adapt higher education in partial preparation for ministry. On the one hand, they obviously differ from “secular” institutions by presenting courses from a Christian perspective. Unlike seminaries, Bible colleges begin ministry preparation at the undergraduate level. They differ also from Christian liberal arts institutions by including mostly those courses that have the greatest transfer to ministry, by teaching them with a view to ministering, by reducing the emphasis on liberal arts as such, and by including practical courses. On the other hand, Bible colleges do not try to become simply vocational-technical schools. In both practical and conceptual aspects of the curriculum, a governing principle for Bible colleges is “education for use.”

Purpose determines method. If we intend to prepare people for ministry, it affects how we teach them. One thing that can be done is to write up lecture materials in full and put them in the hands of class members. There are serious weaknesses involved in having to depend on student notes taken from lectures and discussions. An instructor can talk twice as fast as most people can write. If the presentation involves a line of reasoning or lots of specific information, the record of that material will not suffice. Notes often lack organization and accuracy as well because of the holes involved. Trying to listen to one idea while writing another proves difficult for most of us. If what we teach will be useful for ministry, the record of our teaching must be correct, organized, and retrievable.

Writing lecture notes makes class time more efficient and beneficial. It allows the presentation to be read ahead of time. Class sessions can then be used to clarify, summarize and apply the information in practical situations. Later, when the matter comes up in a minister, if the issue cannot be recalled clearly, ministers can readily turn to their notes to refresh their mind. Written notes taken during oral lectures are not adequate records of what the professor taught. They cannot help being incomplete, and they will be incomplete in crucial ways. They cannot help being disordered as well, and often they are illegible after the writing gets cold! Besides, it is difficult to find the place where an issue was handled since there is no cross-referencing system or index for the notes. Without a professor’s notes written in full, students are likely not to use the notes they took. As a result, when they run into the issue later in ministry, they will go buy a book on the subject. The class work becomes pointless; they could have bought the book and skipped the college experience.

A second effort can deal with topics in connection with the places where they tend to come up in ministry. For example, instead of discussing a difficult subject like the trinity as a point of doctrine, we can relate it to triune baptism and “Jesus-only” baptism. The belief that God is a single being provides the real impetus for taking a strong stand in favor of baptizing in the name of Jesus only, rather than in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Others take an equally strong position that baptism should be a threefold act because the Godhead is comprised of three eternally distinct persons. Ministers must decide how they will baptize converts. They will be called upon from time to time to help Christians troubled by someone who wants to re-baptize them “correctly.” What might otherwise appear to be a subject for ivory-tower theologians takes on a practical turn.

In Greek classes we can make a similar application to practical usage. After a weekly vocabulary quiz is finished, we could spend the rest of the hour looking at significant passages where Greek has come into the interpretation procedure. Sometimes in translating straight through a book, a student may go for a chapter or more before encountering a verse where the study of the original makes a significant contribution. By dealing with these texts intentionally, maximum benefit derives from the effort expended in the study of the language. We think such a procedure illustrates one more way in which the teaching task is consciously brought in line with Bible college educational philosophy—“education for use.”

The Learning Task

“Education for use” impacts the way professors do their work in the selection of material and the manner of presenting it. It also affects the learning process by supplying appropriate motivation, determining relevant performance, and giving a sense of fulfillment.

As a source of motivation, “education for use” relates the learning experience to what the learning is for. Study takes on the character of realism and relevance. Otherwise, college education becomes a “rite of passage.” Students operate as if they do not see much connection between their studies and their future ministry. Four years of college can become like four years of high school: finish the program to get the diploma to get a job and then sell the books and toss the notes. However, when people learn because they want to serve more effectively, enthusiasm for the task comes more naturally.

As a guide for performance, education for use puts the focus on germane concerns. In adapting the higher education model to ministry preparation, we involve the built-in weaknesses of that model. Students are tempted to perform in accordance with its legal character and extrinsic motivation. They “play the system” to “look good on paper” without necessarily readying themselves for ministry through this system.

When people learn so they can accomplish something, they want permanent understanding; consequently, they are not satisfied with memorizing and rote recall, cramming before tests for short-term storage, cut-and-paste term papers, scanning instead of reading reflectively. There is less tendency toward minimum proficiency because students are not satisfied with just finishing assignments. Performance is more consistent when there is a constant stress on the purpose of education rather than on the somewhat artificial mechanics of formal education.

As a basis for satisfaction, “education for use” brings a continuing sense of fulfillment because the enterprise deals with concerns that matter. Whereas “secular education” often deliberately separates what is studied from personal living preference, Christian education moves personal behavior and social skills right into the process because it has the purpose of changing lives and relationships. For ministry to accomplish that in other people, ministers must demonstrate it in themselves. In study for ministry there is no such thing as academic preparation that does not impact personal behavior. As a result, there is double satisfaction: students learn what matters in serving others for conversion and growth; they also learn what matters for themselves in these respects.

“Education for use” does not mean that only behavioral things are important. It also does not mean that everything has to have a direct bearing on practical activity. Some things have an indirect bearing on behavior and practice: gnostic dualism, views of anthropology, theories of soteriology, ethical theory, eschatology (especially the doctrine of resurrection). Education for use means we study everything in connection with how it affects action. It means we teach in terms of ministry; it is irrelevant whether the student plans to be a vocational minister, because the Christian life itself calls for the priesthood of all believers. “Education for use” does not mean that we study only what we can use—methods and behavior—but that we study everything in connection with use.

Curriculum

Structuring preparation for ministry requires going beyond the common format of higher education in America. Since Bible colleges intend to help people prepare for ministry, the components of that endeavor must include the development of personal life-quality and ministry skills as well as Bible-content courses, theological studies, tool courses for Bible study, and integrating courses in certain liberal arts.

Personal life quality must be involved because that is what ministry endeavors to accomplish in those we serve. Secular education apparently is based on the thought that it can

separate one's "private life" and professional responsibilities—as if employers have no right to consider such matters in their hiring practices.

The "product" we disseminate is itself a quality of life based on a positive relationship to God and fulfilling relationships with other people. Therefore, by its very nature, ministry must occur through the personality of the minister. There is no such thing as learning programs and techniques to have a successful church, and letting it go at that. Success as evaluated by matters germane to Christianity does not occur from programs and techniques. The character and spiritual depth of ministers are the foundation of their ministry.

In the preparation for ministry, higher education must contain curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities in the service of personal development. In addition to periodic life application in many courses, curriculum should maintain a Christian-life segment in a core Christian doctrine course, a procedure not always followed in such classes.

A course in the theology curriculum can intentionally assist in this matter. Additionally, a course in basic Christianity can be organized around the idea of interpersonal relationships: vertical relationship to God, horizontal relationship to other people, and personal development in the interaction of these two dimensions.

Extra-curricular activities can enhance student and faculty life. Chapel also maintains this concern. Growth groups can meet periodically to discuss factors involved in Christian maturing. Students are encouraged to talk with teachers, dorm parents, school counselors so their emotional and social needs can be met more adequately. These concerns are important for every Christian; they are doubly important for people transitioning into adult life during their preparation for lifelong service to Christ.

Practical ministry skills must develop parallel to personal growth and biblical understanding. Understanding provides content; Christian living offers determination; ministry skills convey content through personality into other personalities. Over the years, an increasing proportion of the curriculum has been given over to practical ministries courses in Christian colleges: classes in preaching, counseling, Christian education, church growth, cross-cultural ministry, music ministry. Content without means of conveyance frustrates ministry.

Besides traditional curricular offerings, there need to be opportunities to use what such courses describe. The healthiest development of late in Bible college curricula has been significant growth of the internship program. Between the sophomore and junior years or junior and senior years, for example, students can receive credit for hands-on experience in local church settings. Sometimes internships can run concurrent with classes. Graduates can go for a year's internship as a step into full-time service.

In this way, churches can take part in the educational process beyond sending students, giving funds, and providing prayer support. When internships lead into associate ministry and then senior ministry, they become part of an overall pattern by which ministers gradually enter leadership ministry.

Co-curricular opportunities in Bible colleges include a series of Christian ministry seminars and a Christian action program. The seminars meet regularly for an hour to deal with matters of procedure not incorporated into other ministry courses. Freshmen and sophomores can meet together and juniors and seniors can have their group. They talk about funerals, weddings, practical questions about baptism, structuring different kinds of worship services, office equipment, materials, books. Faculty and outside speakers acquaint seminar members with ministry in the real world. Christian Action requires kingdom service as part of the required program.

A number of extra-curricular experiences give students a chance to gain a sense of reality about ministry, to shape their interests, and to focus their motivation for the work ahead. During spring break, a group can go elsewhere to work with churches. In the summer, others participate in Christian service camps and work in their home congregations.

Efforts such as those outlined above help ensure that the nature of preparation corresponds with the nature of ministry for which students are preparing.