

A PROPOSAL FOR “RIGHT-HANDED” CHRISTIAN EDUCATION¹

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Introduction: The Problem of Ineffective Christian Education

One of the persistent problems within the field of Christian education in the North American context has been the inconsistency of results seen in various teaching ministry efforts in churches. Too often we find that young adults who have spent much of their lives attending Sunday School and youth groups where Bible instruction is taking place have so little to show for it, either in biblical knowledge or in spiritual growth and maturity.

On the one hand, it is common for Bible and theology faculty in Christian colleges to report that entering classes of freshmen students, even those who have grown up in the church, display great ignorance regarding the content of the Bible. They often do not know where different books of the Bible are found, much less what a particular book is about or who different people in the Bible are and what they did. *Why is it that some students who have spent so many years in educational ministries in churches know so little about the book they have been studying?*

On the other hand, too many times we find that students' lives do not seem to be affected enough by what they have learned. In many cases they exhibit neither a vitality of faith commitment nor consistency of faithfulness in their life decisions. Two examples from my own experience drive this concern home. The first is from my own youth when my church held confirmation classes for those of us in 9th grade. Around a dozen of us who had been involved in the church most of our lives attended these classes and became members of the church. However, a little over a year later at the beginning of 11th grade, only two of us were still coming to church or youth group on any regular basis. Most had dropped out of church all together. The second example is from my ministry as a youth pastor in a local church. One Sunday morning a college student who had been very involved in student leadership in the high school youth group in previous years and had attended Sunday School and youth group all his life, talked with me about how others from the old youth group were now sexually active and encouraging others to be so as well. *Why is it that some students who have spent so many years in educational ministries in churches show so little of the faith and faithfulness they have been learning about and encouraged to make their own?*

In answering this question, we may be tempted to put the responsibility on the students. Certainly, students bear a major responsibility for what they do with what they learn. If they remember so little of the content of what they have been taught, it may be that they have not invested very much in learning. Likewise, students bear the responsibility for living their lives in light of what they learn about what God desires of them. But to put the blame on the students is to miss a larger issue. Students are indeed learning from their experiences in Christian education settings in the church, maybe learning too well. We may also be tempted to blame the teachers for not teaching as they should, but in most cases, teachers are simply following the curriculum they have been given

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and teach as they have been taught to teach. To blame the teachers for carrying out the Christian education program they have been given to do is unfair to them.

Now I do not want to sound overly pessimistic about the results of Christian education efforts in churches today. There are many young adults who have come up through their church and Christian education experiences and now exhibit a vital faith and faithfulness in the way they live their lives. For them, their involvement in the educational ministries of their churches provided the kind of instruction that revolutionized their lives – that challenged them to an intimate walk with God and to be faithful in their life choices. I don't think that all our Christian education efforts are fruitless, I just wonder why there is little fruit in too many cases. *Why, for so many, does their involvement in Christian education have so little effect in their lives? What is it about what we teach or how we teach it that is not as broadly effective as we would desire?*

Inadequate Attempts to Address the Problem

Historically, Christian education efforts seem to have been shaped by three different visions of the learning outcomes that count. These three visions are not mutually exclusive, but our educational ministry efforts have often displayed a dominance of one over the others. These three visions are described below, along with some of the problems encountered as each has been carried out.

Christian Education for Orthodoxy

This vision of Christian education emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to correctly describe and define the Christian faith and/or the biblical story. Educational ministry efforts focus on students learning the content of the Bible and the doctrines of the faith community. This vision is shown in the basic elements of two different educational ministry models: catechism and programs built around Scripture memorization. When these educational ministries are done well, leaders emphasize more than just rote learning of information; they encourage the personal understanding and faithful appropriation of what is learned into daily life. However, in too many instances these educational efforts are not as productive as desired, and in some cases, they degenerate into students simply learning the content of the lesson with little change in their own attitudes or actions because of what they have learned. It is very easy for this approach to produce knowledgeable Pagans, that is, people who know all about the Christian faith and its story in Scripture, but without any personal investment or response of faith to what they have learned.

An example of this from my own experience is when our oldest daughter joined a Scripture memorization team at our church and competed in tournaments. Students were learning passages of Scripture for these events, but when quizzed about how these passages applied to their lives, or what God wanted them to know and do as shown in the message of the book they were learning, there was little evidence that any of it was making a difference in their relationship with God and neighbor. In fact, some of the students who were most competitive showed little humility or grace in their interactions with others.

Christian Education for Orthopraxy

This vision of Christian education emphasizes the development of right behaviors, actions that demonstrate obedience to God and a faithful lifestyle. Students learn from Scripture what they are to do and how to do it and are encouraged to make sure that their lives conform to the pattern shown in the Scripture. This vision is shown in educational models that have teachers and students

work through the biblical material looking for principles for present behavior and then have the students learn and carry out these behaviors. Unfortunately, this kind of “moralistic/behavioristic” teaching, teaching for specific behaviors, can overlook the central message of the biblical passages in their efforts to have something for the students to do in response to the lesson. For example, some curricula in the past have had preschoolers learn from the story of Jesus’ using a small boy’s lunch to feed over 5,000 people that God wants them to share with others. “Share with others?” What about learning from the compassion that Jesus demonstrated toward those in need? What about how this miracle showed Jesus’ disciples that He had power and authority over creation? Using the “personal behavior” filter for teaching can lead to some bad hermeneutical practices. Even when this kind of teaching is fair in its use of the Scripture, it can tend toward a legalistic understanding of the Christian life. This emphasis on right behavior can so easily be taken in and reinterpreted as some kind of “works righteousness.” God loves me when I do the right things and is angry or displeased when I disobey. One of my great fears is when this kind of teaching is very successful, and students become modern-day Pharisees. They may end up with great pride in their righteousness, leaving them little room for receiving God’s grace through Jesus Christ, and little compassion on others who live in disobedience to God’s commands.

Christian Education for Orthopathy

This vision of Christian education is mainly concerned with the fostering of a heart response of love and worship toward God and an intimate relationship with Him. With roots in traditions that emphasize personal piety and Christian mysticism, educational ministry approaches of this type focus on the formation of attitudes and a close personal experiential walk with God. Bible lessons hold up exemplars of people who walked closely with God, and students are encouraged to examine the condition of their own hearts. Personal devotional practices are encouraged, and various spiritual disciplines are promoted to nurture a strong, vital faith experience. The contemporary worship movement in North America is one manifestation of this emphasis, with the worship experience of the congregation being central to the life of the church and a strong experiential emphasis in the worship services. Praise choruses abound with a focus on “my feelings.” Another example is the popularity of study materials like *Experiencing God*, by Henry Blackaby and Claude King (1990). Even youth Sunday School classes have worship bands and take extensive time in corporate worship before turning to the Bible study. The study itself is often limited in scope of Bible content, but strong on personal reflection and examination of the heart. Teaching for heart response *is* important to avoid either a dead orthodoxy or a legalistic orthopraxy, but by itself it can degenerate into feeling good or feeling close to God without a more careful examination of whether one’s life is conforming to God’s will.

Efforts to Combine the Three Visions

Most writers and leaders in the field of Christian education have recognized that one vision alone, excluding the other two visions, is not enough to shape a faithful and fruitful educational ministry. These three visions have been combined in different ways to give direction to the development of the teaching ministries of the church. For example, Les Steele, in his book, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation* (1990), presents faith as having cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects. These three interrelated aspects of faith are to be pursued together in our ministry efforts. From this perspective, teaching ministries that seek to promote growth of faith include teaching for:

- *right belief* (if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved – Romans 10:9)
- *right practice* (If you love me, you will keep my commandments – John 14:15), and
- *right passions* (abhor what is evil; cling to what is good – Romans 12:9).

All three elements are needed to promote transformation of the person toward maturity in faith, toward Christlikeness.

Many Christian education leaders recognize these things, and various educational approaches have been developed to address the “head,” “heart,” and “hands” of those we teach. This understanding has become fairly commonplace, and it is almost an expected truth that good Christian education addresses all three aspects. It is common practice for curriculum for Sunday School and small group Bible studies to have learning objectives in the knowledge, attitude, and behavior domains. Some of my earliest training utilized the “Know, Feel, Do” approach to lesson design, moving from cognitive to affective to behavioral objectives.

However, even with this three-fold vision of what Christian education is to address, our understanding of how to bring these three together in a productive, fruitful way has not always been clear. What is the relationship between these three aspects of spiritual growth: right belief, right passions, and right behavior? Do we always begin with the knowledge objectives, move to the affective objectives, and then the behavioral objectives? It sounds logical, but people do not always act or learn in logical ways. How do we create educational ministries that encourage growth in all areas in an integrated fashion, not disconnected or disjointed? Much of what is done in the “Know, Feel, Do” model is still disjointed, lacking the necessary transitions to move naturally from one type of learning objective to the next. We seem to expect that if people know Biblical truths they will then value them and want to put them into practice. The truth is that in our teaching practice we tend to major on the knowledge objectives, and in too many cases assume the affective objectives will take place on their own, building a bridge to the desire to act. The reality is often far from this. Too many students with heads full of biblical facts but little heart for living them out.

I believe there are two missing elements to this three-fold vision of the Christian education endeavor that, if recognized and addressed, could be critical for genuine life transformation. One is foundational to any genuine spiritual growth at all; the other is a necessary bridge that facilitates the full outward expression of the faith that is being nurtured. Together with the other three components they give us a more complete understanding of the teaching task, and call for a different pedagogical approach.

A Proposal: “Right-Handed” Christian Education

What follows is a proposal, a framework for thinking about sound educational ministry practice that has potential for helping us address the problems of ineffective Christian education in our non-formal and formal settings. It has five elements with a general flow from one element to another, but it is not necessarily a sequential or developmental model. This model reflects my understanding both of how people grow spiritually and how God works in human lives to bring about that growth. It reflects my evangelical understanding of God’s redemptive and sanctifying work in human lives, and some educational processes that contribute to genuine heart and soul transformation.

The “Right Hand” Illustration

Take a look at your right hand, opened, palm up. You see five fingers growing out of one palm, each connected by a common nervous system, common cardiovascular system, and

interconnected bone and muscle tissue. They can be viewed as separate fingers, but in reality, they are all connected. Each contributes its own actions, but most of the time they are used together. In an interesting play on words, the “right-handed” imagery can help us understand these five elements of “right” teaching. Your open right hand is the illustration I will use to explain my proposal for “right-handed” Christian education. The five fingers are:

- Ortho-cognatio², or “right relationship”
- Ortho-doxy, or “right knowledge”
- Ortho-pathy, or “right emotion”
- Ortho-boule, or “right will”
- Ortho-praxy, or “right practice”

These five fingers share a common connection to the palm of the hand, which is where we will begin.³

Palm: The Transforming Work of the Holy Spirit in Our Teaching and Learning

When it comes to the functioning of the hand, all five fingers tie into, and grow out of, the palm of the hand. The coordination of the movement of the fingers is rooted in their being connected together by the palm. They don’t work apart from this connection, for it brings with it live-giving blood, bones for strength, and a nervous system to coordinate movement. So too, in our educational efforts to promote spiritual growth, nothing we do works well apart from being connected to the on-going work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as teachers and learners. It is the life-giving Spirit who animates us, who gives us spiritual life and makes spiritual growth possible. Without this connection, we teach in our own power, trying to persuade others to change and grow spiritually. We may succeed at teaching principles and encouraging moral behavior, but the transformation of the person, the change of the heart toward maturity in Jesus Christ that results in a lifestyle worthy of the gospel; this is beyond our ability.

As teachers in Christian education, we recognize that all we do needs to be animated by the life-giving work of the Spirit. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:28-29:

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.⁴

We labor, we strive, according to the power of God’s Holy Spirit who works within us, and within those we teach. This foundational truth is critical for understanding how our teaching is to be carried out, and how the various elements I am about to describe more fully work together, infused with the power of the Holy Spirit who is in the business of sanctifying us, transforming us as new creatures into the likeness of Christ.

² The original articles used this term. In the new handout you will see “ortho-schésis” in its place.

³ Please note: this use of “right-hand” is simply a rhetorical device, not intended as a contrast to “left-handedness.”

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from: Foundation Publications, Inc. (1995). *New American Standard Bible*. Anaheim, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

Thumb: Right Relationship – Orthocognatio

One of the features of your hand that distinguishes you from most animal life is your thumb. The hinge of your thumb allows it to move in a different range of motion from the other fingers. We call it an “opposable” thumb because it is capable of being moved to touch the ends of our other fingers. This makes it the most critical and versatile digit on your hand. In like fashion, this first “finger” of “right-handed” Christian education is versatile and critical to the functioning of the hand as a whole, and the potential usefulness of the other four fingers.

Foundational to any spiritual growth is beginning with a vital connection with the God who desires our growth. We were separated from God by our sin nature, but through Christ’s atoning work on the cross we are able to receive spiritual life, to be brought into right relationship with God. Jesus said that we must be born again (John 3:3). Paul describes it as being “in Christ.” This new “right relationship” is the catalyst by which all genuine spiritual growth is made possible, through the church’s teaching ministries, worship, times of prayer and fasting, or any other practices. God is at work in the lives of your students and you as the teacher. Our only hope for spiritual growth as a result of our teaching ministries is because when a person is brought into right relationship with God, the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit is now able to work to transform the person as a new creation in Christ. As Paul explained his own relationship with God he said, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless, I live; yet not I but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

It does little good for me to teach people to act like Christians if they are not yet Christians. Any movement forward must come from recognizing that they are not capable of growing spiritually apart from God’s work in their lives. I am not trying to get people to manage their sin, but to have it forgiven, to be cleansed from all unrighteousness, and to enter into a new relationship with God as their Father and Lord. They must see that without God’s power operating within them by the Spirit they cannot change in any lasting, meaningful way.

Am I saying that it is useless to teach those who are not yet believers? No. But we must understand that the beginning place for genuine, long-term spiritual growth comes from this vital connection of being brought into right relationship with God. With those who have not yet placed their faith in Christ, we point them to the one who has the power to transform them. We teach both the gospel message, and the call to walk with God in our lives so that He can transform us. We don’t confuse them by teaching them that if they behave in certain ways God will then be pleased with them. We help them see the necessity of being in right relationship with God through Christ and encourage this faith response. When this happens, and the Holy Spirit indwells them, we can now have hope of encouraging genuine spiritual growth through our teaching ministries as God uses them.

Index Finger: Right Knowledge – Orthodoxy

Both the Old and New Testament are filled with calls for God’s people to know Him and to know His Word. The Psalmist put this passionately in Psalm 119: 1-12,

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.
How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart.
They also do no unrighteousness; they walk in His ways.
Thou hast ordained Thy precepts, that we should keep them diligently.
Oh that my ways may be established to keep Thy statutes!
Then I shall not be ashamed when I look upon all Thy commandments.

I shall give thanks to Thee with uprightness of heart, when I learn Thy righteous judgments.
I shall keep Thy statutes; do not forsake me utterly!
How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy word.
With all my heart I have sought Thee; do not let me wander from Thy commandments.
Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee.
Blessed art Thou, O LORD; teach me Thy statutes.

Again, as Paul explains in Romans 10, having religious zeal is not enough; it must be guided by right knowledge.

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. . . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." . . . How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!" However, they did not all heed the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (vv 1-17)

The knowledge of the gospel message is foundational to any saving faith response. For those who have already placed their faith in Christ, knowledge of God's Word is critical for ongoing spiritual growth. Again, as Paul explained in Romans 12:1-2,

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

The renewal of the mind is the means for our transformation, and this has been a hallmark of evangelical Christian education. We must study the Scripture to come to know both God and ourselves. We see who God is, His character and actions, and we see who we are before God, needing His grace and power. The study of Scripture is foundational to our spiritual growth. We must grow in our knowledge of it if we are to grow in our knowledge of Him and move toward greater maturity in Christ. So, we teach the Word of God, but merely knowing the Word is not enough. The renewal of the mind is more than filling it with information. It involves the other "fingers" as well.

Middle Finger: Right Emotion – Orthopathy

One major theme that stands out in the Psalms is that knowing God has a strong impact on the affective part of our being. The knowledge of God at times produces fear, love, desire, contrition, and hope. Our hearts respond to the God we come to know through His mighty acts and

through His Word. For those of us on this side of the cross, our hearts also respond to the love of God shown through His Living Word, Jesus Christ. We cannot look on this information and remain unmoved, or at least we should not.

Unfortunately, the type of Bible instruction that often happens in our churches is strong on the acquisition of knowledge about God and what He has said and done but does not have much room for fostering the response of the heart to what has been learned. Without the engagement of the heart in the learning process, Bible knowledge remains facts that are affirmed as true, but the power of these truths to transform our lives is cut off.

Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1956) explored the role of the affective domain in effective education and developed a model for educational objectives in this area. From lowest level to highest they are as follows:

- *Receiving (awareness, willingness to hear)*
- *Responding (active participation)*
- *Valuing (seeing the value of what is learned, acceptance or commitment to it)*
- *Organization (prioritizing, comparing, relating, integrating values), and*
- *Characterization (internalizing the values in a way that controls behavior, making it consistent).*

This taxonomy can be helpful for examining our Christian education practices as well. Are we content to have our students simply receive what is taught? Is being an active learner enough? Is valuing the lesson a good stopping point? How do we help students organize the various lessons they have learned and internalize these values in ways that give guidance to their actions?

As I stated before, I believe that much of contemporary Christian education practice ignores the affective domain, being content to have students know the biblical lesson. Those who engage in these kinds of teaching efforts assume that the Holy Spirit will work in the heart, leading to transformation of life. This is seen as the Holy Spirit's work, not ours. Other Christian educators take a different approach and encourage students to receive, respond, and value in some limited fashion the biblical lesson. In these efforts, some engagement of the heart may be promoted, but the lesson is left there, assuming the students will be led by God to live it out in appropriate ways.

Is there an appropriate involvement of the teacher in designing educational experiences to engage the heart and move toward life response, or is this meddling in the domain of the Holy Spirit? As one adult Sunday School teacher in the first church I served once told me, "I just teach them the truths of the Bible, it's up to God to show them what to do with it." I believe this to be a wrong understanding of our roles as teachers. We do not attempt to usurp the Holy Spirit's role in the heart of our students, but we encourage them to be open to the promptings of the Spirit and to follow through in obedience to His leading. The Apostle Paul did not just give God's instruction to those he wrote to, he pleaded with them, exhorted them, urged them, and appealed to their consciences to move them to accept, value, and live out that instruction. Here is one example of Paul's urging:

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15)

God desires to take our growing knowledge of Him, and by the working of the Holy Spirit in the heart, transform us into people who have godly emotions, like sorrow for sin, love for God,

thankfulness for His grace, compassion on others in need, love and esteem for our brothers and sisters in Christ, love for our enemies, and hatred of sin and injustice because of its impact on others. The fruit of the Spirit's work in our lives is described both in terms of internal characteristics, like love, joy, peace, and patience, and external manifestations of the Spirit's transforming work in our interaction with others, like kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit uses those who teach and preach to help learners both to know God's instruction, and then to value it, to be open to God's renovating work in our hearts that will become the basis for actions consistent with who we are becoming, people who love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and who love our neighbors as ourselves. But, stopping our teaching with a change of heart is not enough, we must go on to the involvement of the remaining fingers.

Ring Finger: Right Will – Orthoboule

In *The Screwtape Letters* (1952, pp. 69, 70), C. S. Lewis has Screwtape, a senior demon, offer this bit of advice to Wormwood, a novice tempter, regarding how to keep a man's repentance from turning into genuine spiritual growth:

The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. *No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will.* As one of the humans has said, active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel. *(Emphasis added)*

Lewis describes a disturbing truth. If we have our hearts moved, prompted by God in some way, but we fail to respond and act on this feeling, over time we may develop a hardened heart that loses its ability to be moved, much less move us to action. Our attitudes can become jaded, cynical, and resistant to the renovating work of the Holy Spirit. I believe this is one of the foremost dangers of contemporary Christian education. Even when we take the time to encourage the response of the heart to the biblical lessons we teach, if we do not focus on helping students change in intention and find appropriate ways to put these lessons into action, we may actually be contributing to a deadening of the spiritual senses and the marginalization of faith in life. Our students can become used to hearing biblical truths and feeling some kind of response in the heart, but it then stays there as good intentions that are not realized. What helps us move from the attitude of the heart to the actions of faithfulness? A bridge is needed between feelings of the heart and a person's obedient actions. This bridge is the formation of the will, what Dallas Willard has described as critical to the "renovation of the heart" (Willard, 2002).

If actions flow only from the feelings of the heart, they can waver and fade too easily. We may live faithful lives when we are excited about our walk with God and disobey when we are discouraged or feel distant from God. What is needed is the formation and strengthening of our will to help our actions grow naturally out of our renovated heart. Our actions are not to be disconnected from who we are, but a manifestation of who we are becoming by the grace of God. They need to be more like the skin that grows on us and less like a shirt we put on and off. This kind of organic unity moves from heart to action through the will. The action has not yet been taken, but the will has been set, commitment has been made in a personal way, making the action flow from our being, not imposed from the outside.

An example of this is shown in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, when Paul praised the churches in Macedonia for their sacrificial giving in response to the need of the church in Jerusalem.

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

This attention to the formation of the will is often the missing piece in contemporary Christian education. We tend to move quickly from what the passage says to acting on it, bypassing the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in both the heart and the will of our students. This kind of renovation takes time, encouragement, deliberate attention and self-examination. Time must be spent examining our response to what we are learning, seeking to understand how God desires us to change in attitude and action. We need to build in time for that examination, for identifying appropriate responses, intentionally choosing them, and encouraging follow through and accountability. The formation of the will is tied closely both to the attitude of the heart at one end of the bridge, and to the active response of obedience at the other end. If either is neglected, it will not stand, and it is the only way across the chasm between them.

Little Finger: Right Behavior – Orthopraxy – and a “Coaching” Pedagogy

When the previous four elements have gone well, we have set the stage for “right behavior.” This is not a mechanistic kind of obedience, but actions that flow out of a renewed mind and heart, out of a character that is being transformed by God. It is more like the skin that we are surrounded by and less like a shirt we put on and off at a whim.

It is very easy to get students to do different actions, like giving money for missions or assisting with a service project, but actions alone are not the goal of our instruction. We are after the transformation of students into people who live out faithful actions because of the work of God within them. It is far easier to produce legalistic Pharisees than to teach for genuine sanctification. Doing the right things is easier than being the right kind of people.

Acknowledging this, it is still true that obedience, the putting into action of what has been learned, is still one critical feedback for Christian education. In a combination of the actions taken and the heart attitude shown in doing them we can see the degree to which learning has taken place, learning that produces spiritual growth. But this is where contemporary Christian education practice often falls down. If our teaching always stops short of active response, or if we never revisit our actions to examine them in light of what our Scripture lesson pointed us to, we will never be able to assess our learning and growth. Too much teaching points toward action, but never gets to it. Or, if students identify responses to a lesson, we don’t take time in future class sessions to share what happened when they attempted them. We lose a critical opportunity to troubleshoot problems, affirm and encourage faithfulness in difficult situations, clarify misunderstandings, and pray for God’s ongoing help through His Holy Spirit as we strive to live in obedience to His Word.

Paul took time to review, to revisit lessons learned by those he taught, and to correct or affirm and encourage them in ongoing faithfulness. One example of this is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12,

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

Paul's example points to a "coaching" approach to teaching, one that provides feedback on the full learning process. A "coaching" pedagogy involves *instruction* (we're good at this), *demonstration and modeling* (by the teacher or another mature Christian), *practice, feedback, and reinforcement* (time to try it out and share the results), and *repetition and overlearning* (habit formation) (Leyda & Lawson, 2000). People who are learning truths that point to new life responses need someone to "coach" them through the process of learning new habits, of practicing and developing new ways of living. They need a coach to help them review how they have lived out what they have learned, offer counsel, consider options, affirm effort, and maintain a vision of the goal of Christlikeness. When this happens, people are better able to persevere in the challenging effort of changing old habits and establishing new ones. Without it, lessons are too easily forgotten, and we get into a pattern of ignoring the connection between what we are learning and what we are doing. James warns us of the dangers of believing but not doing when he said,

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (James 2: 14-18)

Much of our educational efforts in churches do not help with this process of living out what we are learning. We are too busy going on to the next lesson each week to take time to review past lessons and examine our lives in light of them. We settle for communicating information and affirming understanding. Do we really expect changes in behavior to result from our teaching? Are we afraid to look at what people really do with what they learn? Is our teaching to partner with God in the sanctification of His people, or do we unintentionally maintain the status quo? Our actual teaching practices speak loudly about our expectations. I am afraid we have too often settled for too little. A more appropriate model for instruction that builds upon growth in knowledge, a stirred heart, and the setting of the will to act, would be this coaching model.

The Relationship Between the Five Fingers and the Palm

In considering the functioning of the five elements of the educational model described above, it must be remembered that they are an organic unity, drawing life and strength only as they are connected to the palm, allowing the Holy Spirit to work within each element and use them for His sanctifying purposes. Though there is a general flow from one finger to the next, it is not a lock-stop process. Lessons don't have to start with a study of the Scripture. They can begin with actions, stirring up a motivation to learn more from God's Word. Or they can begin with an examination of the heart in comparison with the message of Scripture, showing the need for a change of will and actions. What is critical is that the five fingers function together. To leave one out totally is to miss the opportunity for transformational teaching.

- Without a right relationship with God, Christian education becomes moral education without genuine spiritual transformation of the person.
- Without right knowledge from God's Word, we lack guidance to know and do God's will.
- Without right passion, lessons become facts to file away, inviting a false sense of religious pride.
- Without a right will, our best of desires will not see the light of day in our actions.
- Without right behavior, we can deceive ourselves that we are growing spiritually when we are actually stagnant at heart.

When all five elements are incorporated into our teaching ministries, they will become more fruitful, more usable by the Holy Spirit to contribute to His sanctifying work in people's lives. This "right-handed" Christian education model draws life and power from the Holy Spirit who indwells us, who has given us God's Word and illumines our lives as we read it, who is able to transform us from the inside out, including our attitudes and will, and strengthen us to live according to what we learn. Lessons become more memorable, more influential, forming our understanding, attitudes, will, and actions.

In the Old Testament, when something is associated with God's right hand, it implies a source of power. As the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 63: 7-8,

When I remember Thee on my bed, I meditate on Thee in the night watches, for Thou hast been my help, and in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to Thee; Thy right hand upholds me.

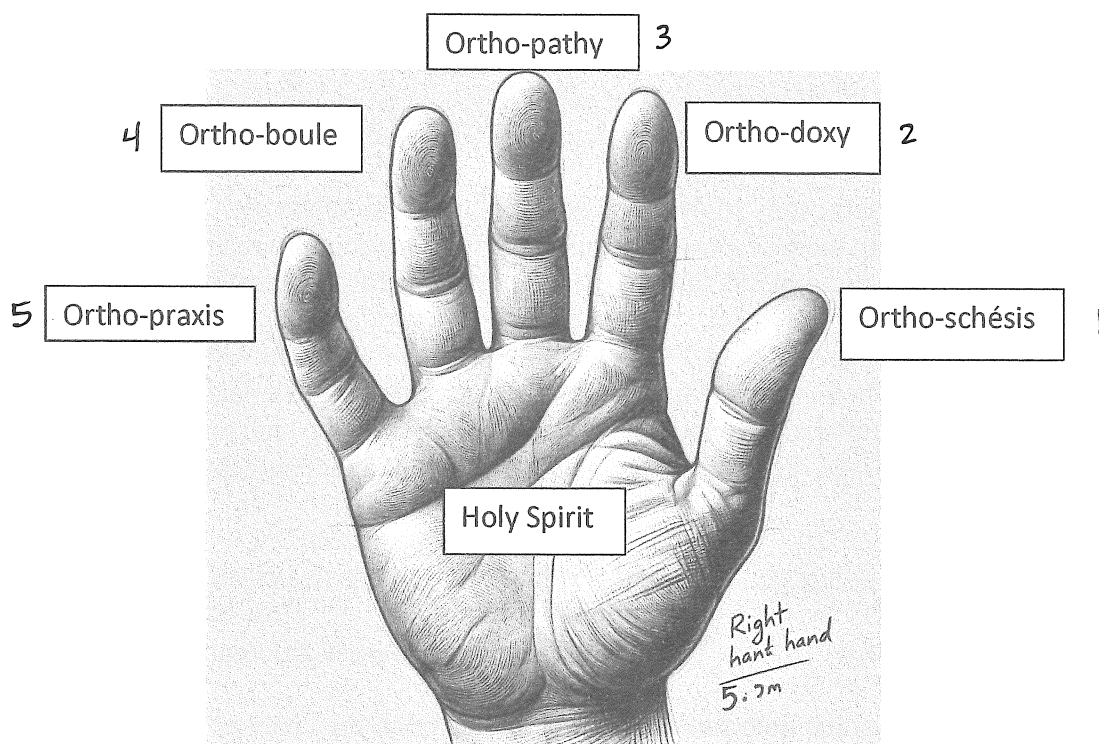
When our educational ministry efforts draw on the power of God's Spirit in each of the five elements described earlier, we will find greater transforming power. May God help us to develop our teaching to reflect these critical areas. When this happens, we may see the realization of Paul's own goal for his teaching: *The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.* (1 Timothy 1:5)

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“Right-Handed” Teaching for Transformation

Dr. Kevin E. Lawson
SPCM Conference, October, 2024



Inadequate/Incomplete Approaches to Teaching:

- Teaching for right knowledge or belief (Ortho-doxy)
- Teaching for right behavior (Ortho-praxy)
- Teaching for right affection (Ortho-pathy)

Common Models Combining the Three Key Elements:

- Know/Believe, Cognitive, Head: (If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved – Romans 10:9) (Be transformed by the renewal of your minds – Romans 12:1-2)
- Feel, Affective, Heart: (abhor what is evil; cling to what is good – Romans 12:9)
- Do, Behavioral, Hands: (If you love me, you will keep my commandments – John 14:15)

Three Critical Elements to Strengthen Transformational Learning:

- “Ortho-schésis” – “Right relationship” with God, being “In Christ,” and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (important “opposable thumb” function) (Issue of “prevenient grace”)
- “Ortho-boule” – “Right will” as an important bridge between the affect and behavior
- The Holy Spirit as the animating force that brings about growth and transformation

Why All Five “Orthos/Rights” are Needed

- Without a right relationship with God, Christian education degenerates to moral education without genuine spiritual transformation of the person.
- Without right knowledge from God’s Word, we lack guidance to know and do God’s will.
- Without right passion, lessons become facts to file away, inviting religious pride.
- Without a right will, our best desires will not see the light of day in our actions.
- Without right behavior, we can deceive ourselves that we are growing spiritually.

A Proposed Pedagogy to Strengthen the Opportunity for Transformative Learning:

A BIBLE TEACHING CYCLE FOR DEEPER IMPACT

Testimony **REVIEW:** Before tackling a new study, or a new passage of Scripture, take a few minutes to review what we've been learning and invite people to share where God has given them an opportunity to put into practice what the group studied in recent weeks.

H **REFOCUS:** Introduce the new study with something they can relate to. Asking a question may help – one that will help them see how relevant what they are about to read is to their own walk with God. Where possible, link the last study to the new one for this session.

B **READ:** Study the passage together. Don't just summarize or tell them what it means. Use some inductive questions to help them see for themselves what the Scripture says. You may be able to provide some information/background that helps them better understand and appreciate the significance of the passage. Your own study is important but help them learn from the passage as much as you can.

L **REFLECT:** As your group's understanding of the passage becomes clear, begin to explore a range of ways it impacts their lives. What makes it hard to do this? How has God helped them do this? Where do they need this now? Why is it so important? What difference does it make?

T **RESPOND:** Reserve some time for sharing where they think they may need God's help in responding and pray for one another. Pray that God would help them be attentive this week to opportunities to live out what we've been talking about and pray for His help to do so.

REINFORCE: During the week – 1-2 times check in, review what the group has learned, reinforce the goal of attending to God for ways to live this out, pray for your group members, share your own experiences.

This leads us back to . . . “REVIEW”

NOTE: Patience and perseverance needed in changing the expectations and patterns of a group study. They will need to “taste and see” that this leads to recognizing God's transformative work in them.

Kevin E. Lawson, 9/4/2024