

Christian Education Theory in the Local Church

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THE total program of the Christian Church is concerned with what we call Christian Education. Therefore it is essential that every minister have a working philosophy of Christian Education which will give stability and proper direction to the program of the church he serves.

DEFINITIONS

Education is that process whereby the personality of an individual is cultivated, modified or developed. Religious education is *that type of education* which relates personalities to God and to other personalities in a "common" life. It trains individuals to meet the precarious factors of their "common" life with hope, confidence and courage. Christian education is a direction given to religious education which finds the genius of its message in the life and teachings of Jesus.

T. G. Soares (Religious Education, p. xiv) defines education as the "directed process of helping growing persons to develop progressively those habits, skills, attitudes, knowledges, appreciations, and ideals which will enable them at each stage of their progress to achieve an ever more integrated personality and to live competent and satisfying lives in their physical environment and as cooperative members of an ongoing and improving human society."

Ligon (Psychology of Christian Personality, p. 10) supports this general theory when he states that "religious education has for its purpose the development of character and personality.

UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL

In order that the educational process may be carried on in the Christian way, it is necessary for us to have an under-

standing of the nature of the individual with whom we expect to work. In its understanding of the individual, Christian education must hold its theories in common with what seem to be the most reliable interpretations of psychological data. This information cannot be based upon a previously accepted theological assumption, but rather must come out of the basic data of experience.

In the light of such data as are available we venture to state the following guiding principles of our thinking concerning human nature:

a. The original nature of man can be neither good nor bad. Soares rightly informs us that this original nature consists in man's biological inheritance and has no qualities which belong to social living.

b. Man as we know him is a composite product of his heredity and environment.

c. Human nature as we know it is educable. That is, it may be modified. Modifications of habit patterns takes place within the group. All personality develops in relationship to other persons.

d. A person may best be described, not in terms of what he is, but in terms of what he may become. Elliott reminds us that there are "resident within that nature possibilities which will never be exhausted in any lifetime . . . and possibilities which are unknown in the animal world." (Can Religious Education Be Christian? p. 197).

e. Man's behavior is basically an effort to discover satisfaction for the urges of his nature. Behavior is basically an effort to discover satisfaction for the urges of his nature. Behavior is modified for the specific purpose of finding satisfaction for one's urges within one's environment. Dr. Karen Horney

describes the individual as possessing two basic types of needs or problems: "ego or individual, and love or relationship." "When both of these needs have a chance for development in organic inter-relationship, when the personality is respected and relationship with others is maintained, there is then an opportunity for the healthy growth of personality in a constructive self-other-inter-relationship." (Quoted from *The Neurotic Personality in Our Time*, by Elliott in *Can Religious Education be Christian?*, p. 188.)

f. Personality may be defined as those habits and habit systems of social importance that are stable and resistant to change. Thus personality is founded on learned adjustment.

g. Character is the word used to describe the ethical or moral aspect of personality, or personality considered from the standpoint of some social or ethical norm. Although some psychologists, notably Filter, may define character in terms of the "force" of activity, rather than its "direction," upon the quality of behavior in terms of strength, persistence, readiness, rapidity, etc., rather than upon its value as right or wrong, good or bad, wise or foolish, this is not the normal use of the term. In actual practice the evaluative aspect is introduced and cannot be distinguished from the traditional definition. (Cf. D. W. MacKinnon, "Structure of Personality," in *Hunt, Personality and Behavior Disorders*, v. 1, p. 7.)

EXPERIENCE IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Our task in Christian education is that of walking with the individual through his experiences in such a way that his personality may develop according to the highest ideals we know. It is to guide the individual throughout life to make a creative adjustment to the world in which he lives, moves and has his being, in terms of the standards of Jesus, as they are interpreted by recognized groups.

Every individual is constantly having experiences. For the purpose of our discussion we shall define "experience" as "conscious human activity." Religious experience may be defined as conscious human activity in which there is an awareness of "Religious values. "Christian values" denote those values which we may associate with the way of life practiced by Jesus or by His followers in our generation.

It is the task of the educator so to organize and arrange situations that the person may be able to develop his experience. Through these experiences of problem-solving, the individual learns to make a progressive adjustment to the larger society or world in which he lives.

If a child is to have religious experiences, therefore, it is necessary for him to share the religious practices of the group and to proceed naturally to the ideas and meanings of life which lie behind these practices. Religious education anticipates such an arrangement of these religious practice situations that the experience of the children may become progressively richer. (Cf. Soares, *Religious Education*, p. 11.)

The conversion experience of Christianity may be defined as that process whereby a conscious sense of direction is given to an individual's life purpose in the direction of God-centered living. Whether the experience is sudden or gradual, it must always have this element in it. It is the task of the Christian educator to prepare, arrange and guide experiences so that this sense of direction may be discovered or experienced by the individual.

The ideal for Christian experiences is to have all life permeated with the consciousness of God's presence and the purposes of Jesus as religiously interpreted. Thus life takes on a quality of meaning in its inter-relationships which it cannot have outside this type of development. A more exact way of stating the definition of religious experience is

that it is "experience infused with a consciousness of God." Christian experience is experience infused with the principles of Jesus' life and teachings as we understand them.

Christian education therefore requires that the learner shall actively participate in Christian value-achieving activity. All instruments used in Christian education must serve to create, cultivate and share Christian experiences of values. It is the response of the person to his environment which makes up the structure of his experience. It is possible for us to set a stage for the development of attitudes, loyalties and goals to which persons will attach significance. The basic problem of all persons is to live out within the educational process the experiences which go to make up a Christian way of living.

THE LEARNING PROCESS

The educational approach is that of beginning with the learner in the experiences he has at a given point in time, and of guiding his responses in order that he may grow. The purpose of Christian education is to enable the individual continuously to make a creative adjustment to the world in which he lives, moves and has his being. The "creative adjustment" suggests that there shall be a reorientation of the individual to increasingly higher levels.

It is necessary to remember that the individual learns in groups. We learn to do the thing which satisfies, and satisfaction is so largely associated with the approval of one's fellows.

The chief qualities of the learning process may be noted as follows:

- a. We note and distinguish things which are pertinent to our interests.
- b. We relate what we note.
- c. We accept in some sense and degree what we have related and act upon it.
- d. What we accept we build into character.

This would indicate that the learning process is one of experiencing under satisfactory conditions things for which

there is readiness and purpose. These experiences are then evaluated and that which is satisfactory is built into character; that which is unsatisfactory is discarded. It becomes clear that more important than what we help children to "know" is what we help them to love and to desire. (Cf. Lewis, *Knowing Children Better*.)

Persons may develop habits by constant repetition, but they learn best when there is enjoyment or purpose in a given activity. Our chief task is that of helping children, youth and adults to build such a life experience that from within that life there constantly wells up ever new life, purpose and meaning. Thus it may be inwardly motivated to grow. Thus it may find its authority within its own experience and not in an external source.

GROWTH AND GUIDANCE

Christian growth takes place when the individual is progressively enabled to make harmonious and creative adjustments to God's world and with his fellow men, in the light of Christian ideals. Christian growth is different from other growth in the goals, content and tones it sets for life.

Christian education recognizes the necessity for growth in every individual. The law of life is: "grow or die, serve or shrivel."

Effective guidance keeps the activities and the reflection carried on by the learner central in its thinking. The learner, not the teacher, is the chief subject of interest. All the techniques of guidance which are to be used in Christian education must take into account the fact that it is experience, actual or imagined, which is central. Guidance may be defined as the process of sharing experiences guided toward certain desired objectives or goals. It is distinguished from "direction" in that teacher and student travel the way of experience together, rather than for the one to "point" the way to the other. Authority is thus to be dis-

covered only in the self-validating experience of the individual. Mutuality of experience brings the quality of reliability to this inwardly felt authority. Experience is thus the only source of authority which will stand or even be heard in the final analysis.

Christian guidance uses knowledge as a resource material for experience. Knowledge may be defined as a collection of data or facts, the cumulative data of experience and its integration in patternful relations. As we share the experiences of the past or present through this collection of data, we are assisted to further knowledge through the understanding of further relationships.

It is essential that we recognize the ways in which knowledge comes to us. One of the common weaknesses in Christian Education is its reliance upon what it calls "revelation" although it recognizes that there can be no revelation apart from the "one who experiences." It is much more realistic to recognize that knowledge is gained in natural ways and by natural methods; this is true in the field of religion as well as in other fields. If religion is to pervade the entire atmosphere of life, it is essential that its theory of knowledge may not be separate from the theory acceptable in other fields. If it is possible to have religious knowledge by revelation, then it ought to be possible to have scientific knowledge or historical knowledge by revelation. However, the term "revelation" is denotative of a process whereby persons are "given" information which process can better be described by the simple word "insight." A person is not "given" information. He experiences. Even if one were to say that revelation is both that which is given and that which is experienced, thus depending upon a personalistic metaphysics, it would be more accurate to describe the event as "communion" in which certain insights were received or achieved by the person. Insight is se-

cured through the discerning of relationships and an interpretation of them. Sometimes these interpretations seem to come as "flashes" and are frequently thought of as "intuitions" or even as "revelations."

A specific example of the wrong emphasis commonly placed upon "revelation" may be found in the statement of educational principles underlying lesson outlines, contained in the "Outlines of Curriculum," October 1946-September, 1947. The first principle stated is to the effect that the Bible is a record of God's revelation of Himself in the life and literature of the Hebrew people, etc. Secondly, it is stated that the Bible is a body of knowledge which has grown out of the experience of believers to aid the pupil to an ever-higher mode of living.

It seems quite certain that the Bible is actually a record of man's developing concepts of God, insights into the religious interpretation of life, and stories of persons who exemplified these ideas. This is far removed from the idea of "revelation" and in practice is recognized by religious educators as a "record of experience." It is only fair that fact, theory and practice should be made as consistent as possible.

THE CURRICULUM OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The curriculum which Christian education uses is best defined as the "full experience of the learner under guidance." This does not mean that there will be no use of formal materials, but rather that the emphasis is placed upon what happens to the individual in the use of those materials. The experience one has in the reading of a book, for example, is far more important than the particular material which may be included in that book.

The task of Christian education is so to plan and guide experiences that the child may continue to grow in Christian insights. Through a series of activities and guided reflection, the learner is led

into an experience and control of life's problems. Thus he increases in his ability to meet hopefully and confidently the various factors of his environment.

It is recognized that the personality of the teacher is of great importance, for this personality helps to determine the type of experience, pleasant or unpleasant, which one has in a given situation. Two chief factors necessary in this teacher are that there shall be a (a) love for persons; and (b) an approach to facts with an open mind.

The task of Christian education is recognized as that of making personal conduct in man's total experience Christlike. The goal is that of developing such strength of character as will enable the individual to live all his life on a high level. However, it is necessary to control certain abuses within society by force in order that the individual may continue to develop.

Christian education needs to recognize that life factors being what they are at present, it is necessary to have not only inward compulsions and inward authorities, but also external pressures. Although it is our goal to enable individuals to rise above the folkways of their groups, many of the things which are done and will continue to be done are done because of group folkways. Within Christian education,

therefore, it is necessary to exercise social and outer checks upon activities in order that the inner authority may be cultivated and developed. Reinhold Niebuhr expresses the situation well in his recent book "Discerning the Signs of the Times," p. 3: "Men are never good enough to wield power over their fellowmen, whatever inner checks of conscience may operate in them, without also being subject to outer and social checks."

We are then confronted with the twofold task of transforming men and of improving institutions in order that "transformed" men may continue to develop in wholesomely creative ways of adjustment to their world, and thus build a "common" life in cooperation with their fellowmen and with a sense of commission from God. In the Christian Church we find the fellowship of those who accept Christian standards forming the best pattern of living and we attempt to develop in accordance with them. It is thus the best prepared of any group to give guidance to other seekers of the "way." Together, under the inspiration of Jesus, we shall seek an understanding of and an experience of God; we shall learn to interpret our experience in the light of values which will stand the test of time; and we shall learn to adjust to the precarious factors of our common life with courage, poise and confidence.