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Is Christian education *really* 'ministry'?

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Christian education is replete with terms and expressions that purportedly describe its character—'Christ-centred education', 'teaching from a Christian perspective', 'Bible-based curriculum', 'redemptive discipline', 'servant ministry', and so on. They are typically spontaneous expressions. To Christian educators, it seems a reasonable and proper way to describe the enterprise in which they are engaged. While each term or expression has particular connotations, the ideas they represent cluster around the notion of what constitutes 'ministry'. It is not uncommon to hear Christian education referred to as 'the ministry of teaching'. But is it just fanciful jargon and cliché? Or is Christian education really 'ministry'?

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This question prompts many others: What do we mean by 'ministry'? How many ministries are there? Are all ministries the same or share anything in common? Are different ministries of equal status? In this paper we are endeavouring to identify and explain the essence of ministry, whether the concept applies to Christian education, and the ramifications for its practice and administration. However, when the discussion is done, a final question is also pertinent. If, indeed, Christian education can be described rightly as 'teaching ministry', then how well does current practice in Christian schools measure up to this ideal?

Primary considerations

It is fundamental to our discussion that we pursue it with a biblically informed consciousness, or what Harry Blamires and others call 'a Christian mind'.[1] This is more than a casual label. It is undeniable that in the West, we live in a secular age and are impacted by its profound effect.[2] The impact is greater than we realise, and we need to be ever vigilant to secularism's subtle inroads and consciously resist following blindly, practices that conflict with biblical principles and values.[3] To think with a Christian mind challenges one of our greatest weaknesses: our tendency to live compartmentalised lives in which we separate the sacred from the secular.[4] At its worst, spiritual sensitivity is diminished as secular modernity prevails. Despite the fact that Christian educators frequently speak of 'a balance between the spiritual, mental, physical, social', the reality is that it is often fragmented and piecemeal. For example, the 'spiritual' activities of a Christian school frequently stand distinct from the formal curriculum in which subjects are taught to criteria dictated by external public authorities.

Can genuine Christian education rightly be described as 'ministry'? The Bible provides us with an orientation and frame of reference to provide answers to this question, and also to all the 'big questions' relating to what is real, how we know, and what is good and of value. The answers to all these questions stem from the historical flow of Scripture. Together they form a powerful metanarrative, described variously as 'The Cosmic Conflict', or the 'Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation' theme. In the face of postmodernity's disparaging attitude to core metanarratives, Christians assert that this metanarrative is the basis of a distinctive, normative worldview that is the centre of their personal faith. The heart of that faith embraces and responds to an understanding of who God is, what He has done, the origin of humanity, humanity's dilemma, God's response to that problem, and humanity's ultimate destiny.

Appreciating what it means to be human

Fundamental to our discussion is a clear under-standing of what it means to be truly human. Unlike widely held assumptions of humans evolving from some primeval state, this discussion endorses the biblical account of humans being uniquely created by God himself.[5] As creatures, humans are seen as primarily dependent on him as the source of life, meaning, understanding and purpose in their capacity to display intelligence, decision-making, creativity, emotion, physicality, individuality, sociality and spirituality. In so doing they are intended to be image bearers, designed to reflect in some small

measure, aspects of what God is like. But personality is more than merely the sum of those parts. These qualities comprise an interrelated whole, the human soul, which 'lives, and moves and has its being' in the Creator.[6]

Recognising humanity's predicament

A fundamental problem confronts every member of the human race. It is recognised that a rebellious choice by humanity's primal parents severed the open relationship they had enjoyed previously with the Creator. As a consequence, they, with the world were plunged into a conflict of cosmic proportions, with the capacity of those who would follow to reflect the image of God well nigh destroyed. Despite this predicament, human nature in its very essence craves and actively seeks to be reconnected with the Creator. Thus Saint Augustine reflected, 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee'.[7]

The context and essence of ministry

The 'Good News' or 'Gospel' proclaimed in the Bible essentially makes people aware of the way God has provided hope and meaning for human existence in the face of the dislocation, brokenness caused by the Fall. Contrary to the popular accusation that God is harsh and vengeful, His compassionate, redemptive nature is highlighted in a theme beginning in Genesis 3 and traced throughout all Scripture.

The oft-quoted declaration of Gospel in John 3:16 is followed by another of profound significance:

> For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:17 NKJV).

Many readers of the Bible tend to be preoccupied with the forensic side of salvation and miss recognising that the word 'save' or *sozo* (Gk.) also has connotations of 'healing', not only of physical ailments, but of comprehensive healing—body, soul and spirit. In His miraculous acts of healing, Jesus bore testimony to this. Physical healing was accompanied by emotional, spiritual healing. Broken relationships were restored and exclusions were dissolved resulting in social acceptance, reconciliation and peace. 'Salvation' is restoration in the most comprehensive sense. Restoration is holistic; that is, it is more than 'the sum of the parts'. It focuses on the development of the 'whole person'—spiritually, intellectually, physically and socially. The term 'whole person' carries with it important implications. Although aspects of personhood can be identified as distinct elements, the notion of 'holistic development' assumes the effective integration or interweaving of each element with the others. To the western mind this poses a conceptual challenge that must be transcended.

The concept of ministry comes to prominence in the writings of Paul the Apostle in addressing the *ekklesia* or 'the church of the New Testament'. Due to its function, it was referred to as the *koinonia*, that is, 'the fellowship' or 'community of faith', and 'the body of Christ'. The goal was always upbuilding, restoration and reconciliation. Paul's words are noteworthy and illuminating:

> It was [Christ] who gave some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors, some to be teachers, to *prepare* God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:11–16).

The word translated 'prepare' has significant connotations. The verb, *katartismon*, implies healing. To the Greek mind, it was akin to the setting of a broken limb, or restoring a dislocated joint. It also has significance in the political sense of bringing together alienated parties to enable harmonious governance to continue.[8] In essence, this process represents a reversal of the alienation resulting from the sin of our first parents. This ministry is focused in Christ. As Paul states so eloquently:

> He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross. (Colossians 1:18–20, The Message).

It must be stressed that this 'ministry of reconciliation' happens in community. Except what we are considering is more than just 'a community' as a sociological phenomenon. William Andersen argues that the New Testament church, or *ekklesia*, fits the community profile, but takes the argument a step further. He argues that the Christian school should be recognised as a ministry of the church at large, reflecting the same elements of community, and sharing the same ultimate goal—restoration of wholeness, or, as often stated, 'the restoration of the image of God in man'.[9]

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Implications of ministry

Clearly, while there are different ministries that are called to serve in specific contexts, including church, health, education, welfare, and counseling, it is argued that their goal is the same—restoration. Thus these ministries are complementary. They are not discrete and independent. Rather they are interdependent. From time to time, assumptions of superior status produce attitudes that reflect a sense of superiority and assumed authority that are obstructive and disruptive. The validity of such assumptions bears questioning. The evangelical church often asserts its roots in the Reformation but forgets Martin Luther and John Calvin's view on the ministerial status of 'theologians, gardeners, janitors and tradespeople'.[10]

Christian schools adopting such a vision and mission truly emulate the redemptive, restorative ministry of Jesus Himself. That ministry of restoration has salvific implications. 'Salvation' is reconciliation in the most comprehensive sense. As Westly explains:

> Salvation in the biblical sense cannot be understood in one-dimensionally, narrow, reductionist, parochial ways. The salvation the Scriptures speak of offers a comprehensive wholeness in this fragmented and alienated life. Salvation in the biblical sense is a newness of life, the unfolding of true humanity in the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9), it is salvation of the soul and the body, of the individual and society, of humankind and the whole of creation (Romans 8:19).[11]

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Such a view represents a significant challenge to the false dichotomy commonly posed between the sacred and the secular. As Harry Blamires argues, the 'Christian mind' is able to see the most 'secular' aspects of life from a Christian perspective because of the individual's orientation to biblical presuppositions and values, that is, their worldview.[12] George Knight argues, Christian education is true ministry and each teacher, an 'agent of salvation'.[13] It is also 'religion' in essence (Latin *religere* = 'to bind together again').

The ultimate goal of Christian education

Christian education can be regarded as one of the complementary ministries envisaged by Paul (Eph. 4: 11–14). The process that underpins Christian education in all phases and aspects is 'formation': the ultimate goal of that process is sometimes expressed as:

> The restoration of the image of God in man through the harmonious development of the mental, social, physical and spiritual faculties.

This goal envisages a process that in all phases and aspects represents holistic renewal. In recent years, the term 'spiritual formation' has gained wide usage and describes such renewal. But in our adoption of the term it needs to be clearly stated that we are not talking about a nebulous spirituality that is commonly encountered in postmodern thinking. Even Rachel Kessler's acclaimed *The soul of education*[14] needs to be contextualised when considered in the context of Christian education. We are speaking of dynamic, formative, biblically-grounded development empowered by the Holy Spirit as part of the shared work of the Triune God. It assumes a disposition that accepts as a given that 'in [God] we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:25). Dallas Willard reminds us that the term can be rightly regarded as 'spiritual re-formation' in recognition of our origin, our fall, and our new potential.[15]

Spiritual formation is nothing short of re-creation in response to our predicament and God's answer through the work of Christ and the conviction and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. As such, it is the work and prerogative of the Holy Spirit. Such formation aligns with the 'Redemption' phase of the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation motif. It constitutes a life-long response to personal acceptance of God's act of grace in Christ at Calvary. It is an essential part of God's plan of restoration, transformation and renewal, seeking to heal human disconnectedness resulting from the Fall, and part of the ministry of the Gospel as commissioned by Jesus in the New Testament. It leads to the reflection of God-likeness, personal integrity and unselfish service rather than the elevation of human greatness, material gain and status. This development is viewed as progressing through stages of maturity and character development relative to age.

Understandably, teachers of Mathematics, Science, Technology, Commerce and the like will query the fit of their subject specialisations in the overall scheme of things. The contribution of Christian teachers in a pastoral role alongside their teaching specialisations is accepted by most. But that role tends to be seen more as a complementary role than an integrated, holistic one: 'value-added' benefit of the Christian school. But there is a fundamental problem in such a dualistic view. A preoccupation with the 'here and now' and preparation for a working career tends to eclipse other perceived roles. But this paper argues that 'this-world' needs are not ignored, but are part of the whole. It advocates a macro view that provides a context in which these specific elements—the subjects of the formal curriculum—

are integrated into that which extends into eternity. Over recent decades, discussion and debate has ebbed and flowed around the term, 'integration of faith and learning'. This paper is (emphatically) not advocating a contrived cobbling of spiritual allusions, object lessons and the like into every lesson—in other words, *pseudointegration*[16] unless those linkages are natural. What is the relationship of the apparently 'secular' subjects of the curriculum to spiritual formation? The short answer is, 'Everything!' Otherwise we are upholding dualism that is inconsistent with Paul's assertion that 'in God we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17:29). A notable example of a disposition that does not separate the sacred from the secular is that of Brother Lawrence, the Carmelite monk, who 'practised the presence of God through the washing of pots and pans and serving his brothers'. It does not apply just to 'religious' life. It is based on a holistic view of life in which the distinction between the sacred and secular is not an issue. In this regard Pettit argues strongly and rightly when he asserts:

> This process should not be divided into the spiritual and physical, private and public, or secular and sacred. It involves the integrated, whole person—one's manner of thinking, habits and behaviors, and the manner of relating with God and others—and it should result in a life of living God and loving others well.[17]

Pettit further explains that by using the term spiritual, we are referring to the dynamic, holistic, maturing relationship between the individual believer and God, and between the individual believer and others (both believers and unbelievers). Thus two principles emerge to prominence—first, formation is personal where a particular individual is being changed (formed) at the core of their being (spirit). This lifelong transformation is set into motion when one places his or her faith in Jesus Christ and seeks to follow Him. Secondly, the change or transformation that occurs in the believer's life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others. But the whole of life is not lived in monastic seclusion. As 'response-able' image-bearers, our worship, study, work, recreation, community service, cultural pursuit and expression and social interaction—in all things, 'whether eating or drinking or whatever is done, it is done to the glory of God' (1 Corinthians 10:31). As such, it encompasses all facets of personhood, and bears testimony to the quality of comprehensive formation.

The implications for teaching as ministry

The formal curriculum

A biblical view of knowledge recognises both a supernatural and a natural order where God is acknowledged as the ultimate, essential source of all wisdom and virtue. Thus true knowledge is more than a body of factual information and marketable skills to be transmitted, learned, reproduced and applied. True knowledge encompasses cognitive, experiential, emotional, relational, intuitive, and spiritual elements functioning as an interrelated whole. Christian education seeks to restore to factual information its true meaning as a way of knowing God and His creation, and acting responsibly as disciples, servants and stewards to one another and the created environment. The commonly viewed distinction between the sacred and secular is artificial and false. All truth is part of God's order, and His presence can be recognised and practised in even the apparently secular and mundane aspects of life. Acquisition of true knowledge leads to understanding that is manifested in wisdom, integrity, appropriate action and worship. True knowledge is active by nature—knowing is 'doing', and knowing comes through 'doing'.

Christian schools respect the place of the traditional disciplines or learning areas in representing particular realms of meaning that are typical of the respective subjects. These are seen as part of the human quest to explore, discover, understand, test, and communicate those understandings. Ronald Nelson argues,

> Each [discipline] develops its own heuristic, that is, its own principles and methods of discovery. Each devises and revises its own special categories, its own conceptual system. Each claims the prerogative of formulating its own criteria for judging the validity of what is put forward by scholars in the field. Each has its own sense, diffuse and debated though it might be, of what the integrity of the discipline requires.[18]

Thus, the disciplines may be regarded either, as 'windows' through which 'to see', or 'windows of opportunity' by which 'to act'. As 'windows', they provide an opportunity to see or perceive and understand something of God and His activity. These are reflected through the created world, the Bible and the Cosmic Conflict and to promote appreciation for Christian heritage. As 'windows of opportunity', they motivate response, application, expression and practice that are conducive to community building, citizenship, social justice, and stewardship of the environment and resources in ways that are consistent with biblical values. These values are sometimes described as 'Kingdom'

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values because of their foundation in the New Testament account of Jesus' life and teachings. Therefore in planning the formal curriculum, a balance is sought between spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, emotional, understanding. While some learning areas fit closely with one category, they often have relevance in other categories, or 'realms of meaning'.[19] They are not discrete one from the other. Because they all find their shared origin in 'God-centred reality', cross-disciplinary linkages are recognised and engaged, particularly in the primary and middle years of study. This can be seen as providing opportunity for 'integration' around relevant themes of study.

The formal curriculum serves as a venue for true learning: opportunities to make connections, see patterns and wholeness, form a 'big picture' and in doing so, portray meaning.[20] Such learning reflects a move from 'surface knowledge' to 'deeper meaning'. In similar vein, research on the function of the brain in learning accounts for ideas and experiences being built into 'neural nets' or 'maps of meaning' that go together to make up a 'big picture' (or gestalt). Such conceptualisations of learning help us to understand what faith is and how it grows. These ideas are not new in essence. Fowler[21], for instance, speaks of the development of personal 'master stories' as part of one's faith. These master stories are at the heart of what Stephen Covey[22] describes as 'paradigms' that inform and drive the development of personal integrity of character, meaning and effectiveness.

> ***Teaching is 'a sharing of realities', or 'weaving connections' between teachers' subjects, themselves and the world until the students make it their own***

The Christian teacher's role

As 'minister-teachers', Christian teachers' role is of central importance. As well as being experts in their teaching fields with the ability to promote and support learning in those areas, the teacher's role in Christian schools is more extensive and holistic. Such teaching is 'a sharing of realities', or 'weaving connections' between their subjects, themselves and the world until the students make it their own. So as 'professional educators' they are expected to be competent in their respective fields of teaching, motivating and maintaining high levels of engagement in learning in a fair, just, non-discriminatory and emotionally supportive manner. They will be sensitive to the spiritual implications and connections inherent in their learning area. They will reflect a disposition that is open to new perspectives, collegial, reflective and self-critically in their quest for excellence to the glory of the Creator. Christian teachers will also be people of faith and integrity who share the vision of the school and its goals and will actively model the culture, ethos and lifestyle of the school system within and beyond their own classrooms. While specialists may take a designated pastoral role, individual teachers will actively nurture and support children in pastoral ministry. They will be conscious continually of the impact they have upon the unplanned learning of their students.

The learning environment

Christian schools seek to provide an enriched, meaningful, spiritually and culturally sensitive learning environment. There is effort to make connections between the student and the subject matter, between the head and the heart, and the development of maps of meaning in the minds of their students. Thus, there is sensitivity to the culture, typical methodology and skills of the different learning areas and where they fit within the larger scheme of learning. Teaching approaches will acknowledge and affirm the diversity of intelligences and gifts shared between the learners, and promote excellence in all facets of development. Teachers will generally function with students as facilitators and mentors in an interactive, emotionally supportive manner, and students will often work in collaborative, cooperative learning and peer-sharing settings in a wide range of activities, both within and beyond the school. Teachers will recognise and follow opportunities to explore new spiritual insights and understandings, both planned and incidental, and encourage personal decisions and commitment in students.

The Christian school: A community of faith

Learning, as we have reflected upon it, is obviously not limited to the classroom. As a community of faith, the Christian school provides a cultural setting or context that enhances the quality of learning, and conversely, the community's ethos is enhanced by the quality of that learning. Just like the New Testament *koinonia*, personal identity and physical, spiritual and psycho-social well-being are nurtured and maintained. Dwayne Huebner[23] describes this dynamic graphically. He adopts the metaphor of 'weaving' to describe how individuals create a 'fabric of life' comprising an interweaving of ideas, abstractions, memories, biblical metaphors, and cultural *mores* derived from the faith community and the relationships within it. He argues that life in the intimacy and context of those relationships affirm a personal and a collective past that in turn, acknowledges, practices, and celebrates the presence of God. And it is dynamic, nourishing, and renewing. Such ideas are consistent with the kind of individuals God created in His image, with the capacity to think and act.

Conclusion

Just calling a school Christian doesn't make it so. Being a teacher in a Christian school doesn't automatically qualify one to be called a 'teacher-minister'. To be so-described is, in verity, an honour. But it is also a responsibility borne by all those who believe they are called to serve in any of the ministries. If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot help but recognise disparities and flaws in what we presently observe in Christian education. Some are just relatively more up-market, selective, academically competitive clones of the public school down the road, but with a veneer of spirituality thrown in. The challenge will always be there to resist the secular tide, subversive threats and the influence of those who would compromise the potential for authentic Christian schools. It will only be in such a context that such vocation and service can truly be called 'ministry'. TEACH

Endnotes

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[2] Taylor, Charles. (2007) *A secular age.* Harvard University Press.

[3] Paul's injunction in Romans 12:2 is worthy of close reflection. Wiilliam Barclay's commentary is highly recommended. See Barclay, William. (1966) *The letter to the Romans: Daily study Bible.* Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, pp. 167–171.

[4] See a companion paper from this journal, Roy, Don C. (2008) 'Christian schools—a world of difference', *TEACH Journal of Christian Education, 2*(1), 38–44.

[5] Genesis 1, 2; Psalm 8.

[6] Acts 17:28

[7] Saint Augustine, *The confessions of St. Augustine*, Book 1.

[8] Barclay, William. (1966) *The letter to the Romans: Daily study Bible*. Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press pp. 176, 177.

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[19] Though assumed by some as somewhat 'dated' the thought of Philip Phenix and Paul Hirst, is seminal and still very pertinent. See Phenix, Philip. (1964) *Realms of meaning*, New York: McGraw-Hill, and Hirst, Paul H. 'The Logic of the Curriculum', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, vol. 1. No. 2, 1969.

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