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Chapter 1

A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Rick Yount

Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ. From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.

(Eph 4:14–16)

Teaching into the Unknown

I stood at the front of the room and stared into what I can only describe as a deep, dark pit of unknown. As I looked into the eyes of my students, I felt isolated, completely alone. A Kazakh wind blew across the building, rattling the windows, making the sub-zero temperature outside seem all the more cold.

Of the 17 students sitting before me, eight had made a treacherous journey over ice-covered mountains from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. They had driven all night, 300 miles, 10 hours, in order to arrive in time for the class. This class, my class. What were they thinking? What did they expect? What did they already know? Would the
materials I prepared actually help them, their teaching ministries, their churches?

What I needed was a compass to steer me in the right direction until we—these students and I, together—could discover common landmarks that would unite us in a common cause, a common journey. And lead us to a common outcome of growth in the Lord.

Fortunately, I had such a compass. What I lacked at this particular moment was any evidence that my compass was relevant to these Russian Baptists who lived and worked 11 time zones east of Fort Worth. There was only one way, one terrifying way, to find out. I silently voiced a prayer for help and stepped into the darkness. I could only hope my words would find fertile soil.

A Theology

Literally, the word theology, a combination of theos (God) and logos (study, discourse), means “the study of God,” His nature and attributes. A. H. Strong extends this definition to include “the whole range of Christian doctrine . . . of those relations between God and the universe in view of which we speak of Creation, Providence and Redemption.” Klaus Issler echoed this classic sentiment in his contemporary definition: theology is “the study of God—who God is and what he has provided for his creation, both now and forever.”

Theology is both science and philosophy. It is science in that it discovers the facts and relations that exist between God and the finite universe, that in turn are based on God’s works and activities. Just as physical science discovers facts about gravity and aerodynamics and orders those facts into their natural and proper relationship to produce the rational basis for flight, so, in the same way theology discovers facts about God’s creative, sustaining, and fulfilling work in the universe, including mankind, and produces the rational basis for God-ordered life, purpose, and destiny. Theology is philosophy in that it “exhibits these facts in their rational unity, as connected parts

1 A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Valley Forge: Judson, 1907; 32nd printing, 1979), 1.

of a formulated and organic system of truth” that is brought into contact with the human mind through revelation.3

Theology is our beginning point. Here is the foundation of our text: God exists, and in His very nature, He is Teacher. Further, the Church is, at its heart, a teaching institution, drawing the lost to faith and spiritual regeneration, prompting believers to transformation and sanctification, and equipping the saints for works of service in the real world.

Education

The term education has become an increasingly loaded term for the Church, especially in theological circles. A theologian friend of mine recently remarked that my continued use of the term “tainted me.” He could not tell me why, exactly, but the term had taken on a “liberal” connotation. It would be far better, he said, to use words like discipleship or equipping, or even the term popularized by our Catholic brethren: spiritual formation.

Even educational experts differ on both the meaning and methods of education. Dr. Jack Terry introduced me to the debate in 1974 in my first philosophy of education class. He noted that there are two different Latin roots of the English word education. They are educare, which means “to train or to mold,” and educere, meaning “to lead out.”

Forty years later the debate continues. Bass and Goode contrast these two perspectives of education and raise the question whether balance between the two camps can ever be achieved. Educare emphasizes the preservation of knowledge and the shaping of the next generation in the image of their parents. Educere emphasizes the preparation of a new generation for the changes that are to come, equipping them for the solving of problems yet unknown. Educare calls for direct instruction, subject mastery, and becoming good, reliable workers. Educere calls for questioning the givens, thinking “outside the box,” and creating new ways of seeing the world.4

Unfortunately, the recommendations forwarded in the article—

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3 Strong, 2.
balancing old (educare) and new (educere), involving “stakeholders” in decision-making and increasing resources, leave us with little more than rehashed word magic. The system itself is confused, and no one, it seems, is able to speak to the confusion.

Regardless of the endless theoretical and political debates, the result has been high school graduates by the tens of thousands who cannot make change, spell, or speak standard English. Fortunately, the term education in “Christian education” has a very different meaning.

**Christian Education**

Issler reached back to Nevin Harner’s 1939 definition as the basis for his discussion of the theological foundations of Christian education: “Christian education is a reverent attempt to discover the divinely ordained process by which individuals grow in Christ-likeness, and to work with that process.”

There is much here to embrace. It is a reverent attempt, a journey, made in humility, of a truth-seeker. This truth is revealed to, not discovered by, the one who humbles himself under the mighty hand of God. The attempt focuses on the divinely ordained process of growth. Growth is not instantaneous but sequential. Not immediate but progressive. The attempt focuses on the divinely ordained process of growth. Just how does God intend a learner to move from lost rebel to found child? From “babe in Christ” to “well-equipped saint”?

This divinely ordained process of growth moves in a specific direction: Christlikeness. I like this focus on Christ and the goal to grow to be like Him. Strong does not hesitate to place Christ at the center of theology:

> That Christ is the one and only Revealer of God, in nature, in humanity, in history, in science, in Scripture, is in my judgment the key to theology. . . . What think ye of Christ? is still the critical question, and none are entitled to the name of Christian who, in the face of evidence he has furnished us, cannot answer the question aright.

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5 Issler, 33.
7 Strong, vii, ix.
The work of Christian education is to analyze that divinely ordained process of supernatural transformation as it intersects relevant life changes in preschoolers, children, youth, and adults who live in a natural world. This interaction of supernatural and natural processes of change carries the theological issues of conversion, regeneration, sanctification, and transformation into the realm of the social sciences—particularly educational psychology—as we deal honestly with changes in the cognitive (knowledge and understanding), affective (values and preferences), and behavioral (skills and habits) areas of life. The work of Christian education carries us into the Church and out into the world through ministry.

Issler states “the essential question” that Christian education must answer: How do we educate Christians? Dallas Willard goes a step further, detailing what the process looks like: “[Our goal is] transforming disciples inwardly, in such a way that doing the words and deeds of Christ is not the focus but the natural outcome or side effect.” That is, becoming like Christ inwardly so that we naturally behave like Christ outwardly. None of us, of course, will become like Christ since He is God. But in moving toward Him, in “growing up into” Him (Eph 4:15 KJV), we become better than we were and more like what He created us to be.

Dennis Williams goes farther still, summarizing several evangelical definitions for Christian education this way: “Bible-based, theologically sound, Holy Spirit-empowered, the elements of teaching/learning/growth/equipping, change, the church, evangelism, and service. Christian education, then, is more than merely teaching Christians.”

A Theology of Christian Education

Williams’s words carry me back to my fervent, fearful prayers in the early 1970s, as I struggled to find ways to teach deaf college students in my Bible class. “Lord, how should I teach so that these learners will grow up into You?” I struggled with teaching into the

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8 Ibid.
unknown. What did these deaf college students know? What had been their experiences with the Lord, with Church, with Scripture? What did they need to grow toward the Lord, and after conversion, to grow up in the Lord? How should I prepare my “lessons”? What should be the focus of my teaching?

Over the next three years of teaching these college students, the Lord brought experiences into the classroom that answered all these questions. Over five years of masters’ and doctoral studies in Foundations of Education at Southwestern Seminary, the Lord laid strong theological, philosophical, and psychological foundations under my experiences and produced, in the end, a concise theology of Christian education. Those of you familiar with 30 years of the Disciplers’ Handbook, or the first chapter of Created to Learn (1996), or the framework of Called to Reach (2007) will recognize it immediately. I ask for your patient indulgence as I lay it out once again for new readers.

A Theology of Christian Education: The Disciplers’ Model

No single model can encompass the whole of Christian growth. Like Piaget’s table of three cones, the “truth” of the cones remains the same even as their appearance changes as one moves around the table. So the truth of God’s plan for the spiritual formation of disciples—justification (conversion, regeneration), sanctification (discipleship, being equipped), and final glorification—does not change; but we can see His plan from many different perspectives. There are many helpful models, which is why I am using the indefinite article—“a” theology of Christian education.

The Disciplers’ Model is the answer to that simple yet profound question I prayed for during those early years. While it may sound sanctimonious—perhaps a bit self-serving—to claim that this model of mine is “the Lord’s answer,” I know of no other way to say it. I cannot claim any right of creation or discovery. My intent is to honor the Lord who answered my prayers and who gave me the means to teach into the Deaf unknown with confidence and into many unknowns since. The Disciplers’ Model became, and remains, my

11 Picture a table with three cones, a larger one behind, and two smaller ones in front. As one moves around the table, the two-dimensional perception of the cones changes, while the three-dimensional reality remains constant.
teaching compass. And now, after 30 years, I can say that this simple model represents a divinely ordained process that has never failed to move my students or me in the direction of spiritual growth and Christlikeness.\textsuperscript{12}

The surrounding circle of the model represents the Holy Spirit as Teacher, the One who holds all the other elements together in a balanced synergism. In our text we will look closely at “God as Teacher,” with chapters 3, 4, and 5 detailing Father, Son, and Spirit as Teacher. God is, in His very nature, a Teacher. The more we imitate His methods and manners, and the more we allow Him to teach through us, the more effective we will be in facilitating spiritual growth.\textsuperscript{13}

The two foundation stones of the model are the Bible (eternal truth) and needs of learners (present needs). In every teaching encounter of Jesus, we see Him conveying eternal truths to learners in the context of their immediate (though not always well-perceived) needs. Chapter 6, “The Bible as Curriculum,” provides a theological analysis of Scripture as the central focus of Christian teaching, whatever other curricular helps we choose. Chapter 12, “How to Study the Bible,” provides practical helps in “rightly dividing the Word of Truth” in preparation for teaching. Chapter 7, “The Disciple,” focuses on the general needs of all learners and the process of discipling, while chapters 15, 16, 17, and 18 detail specific needs of preschoolers, children, etc.

\textsuperscript{12} Am I, after these 30 years, like Christ? No. Am I more like Christ today than I was 30 years ago? By all means. I still frustrate my wife and embarrass my children. I still anger (or disappoint) my students. My (lack of) warm social skills call for gracious patience on the part of dear colleagues. But I am better today than I was before. Because of Him.

\textsuperscript{13} For those unfamiliar with the Disciplers’ Model, and wanting to learn more, you can find much more extensive discussions in The Disciplers’ Handbook: From Transmitting Lessons to Transforming Lives (1979; 9th ed., 2006), which can be downloaded as PDF files free of charge from the North American Professors of Christian Education Web site (http://www.NAPCE.org).
youth, and adults, as well as suggested methods for helping learners in these age groupings grow spiritually.

Three pillars define the process of spiritual growth. The left pillar focuses on helping learners think. It stands on the left foundation stone, the Bible, and emphasizes the need to understand the meaning of Scripture for daily living. Here we help learners contrast their own personal perceptions of subjective truth with the eternal truth of God. The right pillar focuses on helping learners integrate the values of Scripture into personal priority systems. It stands on the right foundation stone, learner needs, and emphasizes the personal relevance of God’s Word for “my needs.” Here we help learners contrast their own emotional turmoil with emotional maturity that comes from God. Chapter 11, “The Goal of Christian Education: Christlikeness,” analyzes these two processes in detail.

The central pillar focuses on helping learners establish relationships. Churches are communities of faith in which we pray, “Our Father in heaven.” Part of the process of growing spiritually is connecting with other believers in meaningful ways, and this happens best in small, interactive classes and even smaller groupings within classes. We cannot grow alone, no matter how independent or self-reliant we may choose to be. These relational aspects are covered in chapter 8, “The Church’s Role in Teaching,” and Chapter 9, “The Family’s Role in Teaching.”

The capstone of the model is our goal, growth in Christ. We lead learners to think beyond personal perceptions by asking questions and posing problems. More than engaging them in an academic pursuit of truth, we help them consider their perceptions in light of God’s message. We move them beyond a simple acquaintance with Bible stories to actually living biblically. This is rational growth.

We lead learners to remove emotional “smiley face” masks and become more real by sharing ourselves and listening, to move toward emotional maturity by “putting off” negative attitudes in the discipling group, to overcome personal hurts through mutual support in the love of Christ. This is emotional growth.

We lead learners to relate meaningfully with others, receiving from them freely when in need, and giving freely to them when they are in need, to move them into ministry with others in the name of the One
who freed them from self-centeredness and its resulting stagnation. This is relational growth.

Thinking, feeling and valuing, and relating are aspects of spiritual growth in Christ. Chapter 10, “The Pastor as Teacher,” provides guidance as we engage believers and encourage them to become pastor-teachers in their own right. Chapter 11, “The Goal of Christian Education,” provides the capstone for the theological section of the text and defines a means to lead believers to develop toward Christlikeness.

A Theology of Christian Education Organization

For theology to take root in a local congregation, it needs a framework, an anchor. The Disciplers’ Model itself is organized, but to engage a given congregation, there must be organizational connections between theory and practice. Our text is more than a teaching text. It is designed to help leaders and congregations develop a plan for growth. Chapter 2, “A Theology of Organization,” provides the biblical basis for such an organizational structure. Chapter 13, “Planning to Teach,” and Chapter 14, “Creating an Unforgettable Lesson,” provide specific details for organizing learning experiences. Chapter 19, “How to Select Curriculum,” provides practical helps for choosing the right materials from a wide variety of sources. Chapter 20, “Teacher Training,” provides practical guidance in setting up, maintaining, and conducting ongoing teacher training efforts. Chapter 21, “Administrating Educational Programs,” provides specific guidelines for coordinating the many avenues for spiritual growth within the congregation. Chapter 22, “Ministering Alongside Volunteers,” provides guidance in enlisting, organizing, training, and supporting the many volunteers needed for a multifaceted Christian education program. Chapter 23, “Evaluating the Teaching Ministry,” provides practical guidelines for analyzing present strengths and weaknesses in a congregation’s Christian education enterprise.

These administrative guidelines and suggestions provide “the cup,” the container, which delivers Living Water to the thirsty and Living Bread to the hungry. The Disciplers’ Model provides a picture of the process by which Water and Bread are assimilated into the
system, individually and collectively, that we might “grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ” (Eph 4:15).

Teaching into the Unknown—Revisited

I was teaching into the unknown, using my educational compass, but not knowing whether it could guide me in this unknown land. During a session on that first, frigid day in Kazakhstan, I asked a question. A student in the back of the room raised his hand and answered. It was a good answer, and it led me to elaborate. When I paused, the student raised his hand and said, “I wish to apologize to the professor for the inadequacy of my answer. I will endeavor to do better in the future.” Apparently, my additional comment made him think I considered his answer incomplete. “Your answer was fine. You answered the question well. My additional comment was not a criticism of your answer but merely a way to extend the thought. I call that teaching. No apology is needed.” During the next break he moved his things from the back of the room to the front and joined the discussions.

Later in the week I decided to use small groups to integrate my presentation with what they experienced in their own churches. I gave a brief overview of a portion of the material and then divided the students into six groups. I asked them to consider ways they were already using the material in their churches. They looked perplexed. I explained again, and all but one group set about doing their best. The one group called me over and, through my translator, asked what I wanted exactly. I explained the assignment again.

My translator turned to me and said, “They do not understand what you want. They cannot do what you are asking.” It made me a little angry, quite frankly. It reminded me of all the hearing folks I met years ago who claimed that Deaf people could not “discuss Bible passages”—that they needed simple teaching, “on their level.” What I discovered was that it was usually the sign language limitations of the hearing leaders that was at fault, not the mental or social or language limitations of the Deaf. Experiences with groups of Deaf youth and adults demonstrated that they did well with question-and-answer approaches, with discussion, and with problem-solving activities once they were given the opportunity. No, these Russian
Baptist leaders could do exactly what I was asking. They just needed a little prompting.

I turned to the interpreter and said, “They can do what I am asking, and they will do what I am asking, and you will be amazed!” The words surprised me, so I prayed, hoping that the Lord had prompted them! I told her to tell the group to do the best they could. She rolled her eyes and did as I asked. They rolled their eyes and turned to the task.

A few minutes later I asked for reports. No one moved. I asked again, “Who will come and share your group’s conclusions?” One of the members of a group elbowed another and told him to report. He obediently walked to the front and began, timidly, to report. His statements were tentative and rather simple, but they were correct. With each point he made, I responded with some of the affirming words I’d learned in Russian: “good,” “yes,” “I agree,” “correct,” “excellent.” With each affirmation his confidence grew, and he shared more. It took little encouragement to get the second and third and fourth reporters to the front.

We moved to the second section of material, and during the process of their group work, the time for tea break arrived, which Russians take quite seriously. Discussion on the material continued as they walked to the dining hall, and during the 20-minute teatime, and on their way back. Once back in the classroom, they quickly reassembled in their groups. Discussion was more lively now, practical applications deepened, diagrams were created and redrawn to explain points. Students made more discoveries and raised deeper questions about church practices and how they fit into the material. The darkness of the unknown was receding. They were behaving like students the world over.

In the midst of the third session of “rowdy” discussions, my translator looked at me with an amazed expression on her face and said, “I’ve never seen anything like this.” Praise the Lord!

In the last session, while discussing the Holy Spirit as Teacher, one student, an academic vice president from Bishkek, stepped to the marker board and drew what looked like a tongue hanging down from the surrounding circle of the model. He explained that it was a handle, making the circle into a magnifying glass. “The Holy Spirit is
Rick Yount

a magnifying glass. Only He can show us truly”—and at this point, he began pointing to the various parts of the model—“what the Bible says, what our needs are, how we need to think and value, how to teach so our people can grow in Christ.” I was so impressed that I violated the old Soviet code of educational practice [“Teachers must never allow students to know they’ve learned from them”]. I told him I had never thought of that before but that I would certainly use it from now on. This experienced academic dean simply beamed with delight. There were scores of such “moments” during the week. The final exam came, and all the students passed.

As we met for the last time, one of the students, the president of the Russian Baptist Union in Central Asia, stood and spoke for the class. “Thank you for this class. You have not only taught us how to teach, but more importantly you have shown us how to teach. We will never teach our classes the same way again. Please come again.”

The Bishkek contingent made their way to their vans for the long trek back over the mountains. I went to get my bags. I was so thankful to the Lord for the good response. Thirty minutes later, the building secure, I got into the car and noticed that all the students were standing next to their vans. It was well below freezing outside, but there they stood, hats removed, waiting. Waiting for what? As we drove past them, they turned to face the car as we made our way out the drive, waving good-bye. I am not a weeper, but I wept at that sight. As we turned the corner, they tumbled into the vans, and headed home. The Holy Spirit had brought us together, built relational bridges, and shined the Lord’s resurrection light into the darkness of the unknown.

I feel strange sharing the story, as if it is something I should simply treasure in my heart. But the words illustrate the point. The Compass can lead us even as we teach into the unknown. Life and Light had grown in the darkness that week, and it was Christ. The Compass is a theology of Christian education—Bible based, Christ centered, learner oriented—that led me through the early unknowns of that week, that led us all to a level above both our cultures, and that opened the door for further teaching opportunities.

It is this same theology of Christian education that we offer you through the pages of this text. To this end—growth in Christ—we
all have labored over these months. To this end we have prayed and studied and written. May Christ be lifted up, and may the Church be strengthened, as you give yourself first to the Lord and then to the heartfelt words written in these pages. Lord Jesus, make it so!