

The Cultured Pearl

**Australian Readings in
Cross-Cultural Theology and Mission**

edited by
Jim Houston



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INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A MULTI-FAITH SOCIETY (ITEMS)

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Christian Education as Empowerment for Transformation

Neville Carr

Mature Christians have been described as those "who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14). The ability to choose what is good in a particular culture and society, and to reject what is evil, lies at the heart of the divine purpose for our well-being as humans. Wisdom is a prerequisite for the effective life, but comes to us only as a gift of grace through One whom God has made our wisdom and righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). That many who refuse to acknowledge its rightful source still have some grasp of truth is a clear testimony to the beneficent ordering of things by the Creator. Yet as the Apostle Paul realised, simply to know what is good, right or true in no way guarantees that just decisions, right conduct or true statements will result (Romans 7). For him, the human mind needed re-formation (Romans 12:1f). It had to be taken captive for Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) and exercised constantly with whatever might be true, lovely and noble (Philippians 4:8).

Equipping the Christian mind

The Christian mind, whether individual or collective, is suffering terminally from neglect and abuse in most churches today. The radical demands of the Kingdom for the penetration and transformation of society (e.g. Isa 42:6; 2 Corinthians 5:18f; Colossians 1:16-22) have long since been submerged by more trivial pursuits such as the maintenance of local or denominational structures. If any rigorous learning is to take place in the local church — apart from those rare pulpits where the Bible is taken seriously and interpreted competently — it is largely up to the initiative of highly motivated individuals to discover truth for themselves. If Christians are to be equipped for the work of service by 'pastors and teachers' (Ephesians 4:12), then the

training of equippers needs a thorough overhaul. Whatever is going on from week to week in most Australian churches could not be legitimately described as an equipping process. A more appropriate term might be the 'domestication'¹ or routinisation of faith.

Yet there is an enormous problem when it comes to breaking out of an ineffective system and creating something that actually works. As soon as clergy or theological colleges take their calling seriously and develop a prophetic and critical ministry which aims to equip people for the penetration of society, they are often gagged by the more influential board members, wardens or elders in their institution or congregation. If they wish to keep their jobs and support their families, they learn very quickly to adopt a quiescent rather than a prophetic role. As Marx suggested, institutional religion is the enemy of social transformation because it sacralises the forms and structures of society.²

One of the fundamental weaknesses with theological education is its separation from the local congregation, where actual ministry and mission should occur. At least two things need to happen simultaneously in any theological college:

1. the equipping of the equippers-to-be, a process that should involve both rigorous on-campus study *and* active participation off-campus in a diverse range of pastoral, educational and missiological experiences;
2. the equipping of the equippers (pastors, elders, teachers, etc.) through in-service education on a local parish or regional basis.

Re-thinking Christian education

Effective Christian education — whether it occurs in theological colleges, schools or congregations — has to have certain basic characteristics:

1. It must help believers interpret and respond christianly to the focuses that shape (or dehumanise) them, by reference to the Word of God;
2. It must take cognizance of the learner's own world (cognitive, affective, existential and practical) and of the developmental stages in a person's understanding, morality, faith and spirituality;
3. It must equip believers for the prophetic and critical task of transforming themselves, society and culture into the image and likeness of Christ;
4. It must combine action and reflection (knowing and doing/being and becoming) in a way that promotes justice, peace and love in the world;

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5. It must empower believers of all ages, both individually and collectively, to deepen their knowledge of God and to fulfil their lives as his covenant people responding to the demands of the Kingdom.

The educational task of the church, theological hall, Christian school, missionary or para-church agency is to build a reflective theological bridge between what a person does in the world (home, school, office, etc.) and God's purpose to renew creation and reconcile all things in it to himself (1 Corinthians 15:24ff). At the heart of such a work is the equipping of believers to distinguish good from evil and to pursue the good at all points of cultural and social interaction. For such a process to take place, however, the whole structure of Christian education needs to be radically altered. The old formula of training 'sermonisers' has failed to equip Christians for effective ministry and mission. The trend is still accepted in middle class churches, because the information mode of communication, characteristic of sermons and lectures, is admirably suited to a hierarchical view of reality and to an acceptance of things as they are. Sadly, however, such a pedagogical mode — as opposed to that of dialogue or problem-solving — numbs the brain and thwarts any possibility of critical inquiry or prophetic engagement with evil in the world. One only has to take a few key issues in today's society, to illustrate the need for profound change in all forms of so-called 'Christian' education:

Ethnicity

Australia is a multicultural and multi-faith society. The children of the mass migration of the 50's and 60's are now adults, forming new families and often marrying across cultural lines. In many metropolitan schools, their children now form a majority. What is happening to 'our' Australia? Many people are anxious about the future shape of the community. The Aborigines themselves are talking of boycotting the Bicentenary in 1988 because they still await justice, land rights and respect from society.

What, if anything, does the Gospel have to say to such questions? How should the Australian Church be responding to such social changes, to the fact that other religions are setting up places of worship, or to the reality of neighbours who speak other tongues? What biblical parallels exist in relation to the experience of immigration? What is the Church's mission to refugees and aliens, whose unemployment rates are so much higher than those of 'normal' Australians? Should theological halls teach modern community languages, such as Italian, Greek, Yugoslav and Arabic? How else is the Gospel going to penetrate such language groups? What support do/can white Anglo-Celtic churches or theological colleges give to ethnic evangelists, pastors, social workers, as they seek to reach their own people?

Sexuality

One of, if not the most powerful of forces governing human conduct, is the one barely mentioned in most churches to-day. Left to explore it for ourselves, we develop all sorts of hang-ups or phobias, either by inheritance from parents or through the false consciousness of sexuality in the modern media. Ironically, the Bible is very open about sexuality, sexual love and its abuses. Sadly, theological and parish ministry training — except for an occasional ethics or youth Bible study class — gives the distinct impression that the more 'weighty' problems of Docetism and Montanism deserve priority over 'mere' pastoral matters, such as sexuality, conflict or death.

Sexism in church life is only beginning to be examined. A woman's place in most churches still to-day, is in positions of subordination to ruling male elders, pastors, bishops and theologians. She can decorate the altar with nice flowers or teach Sunday School children or serve tea; but she is strictly forbidden from using known and acknowledged management or educational skills and training in the church. And so each generation of children and adolescents continues to flounder in the school of sexuality via self-discovery or trial and error. What theological colleges need is for a new department (e.g., Marriage and Family Ministries) to be developed that could help future leaders to deal openly and constructively with their own sexuality first, but also to facilitate growth in others in the same area of need. But there needs to be a linkage between theological instruction and the local parish, if the education gap is to be broken down in this area, via extension and field programs — perhaps of a regional nature.

Power

Perhaps the most crucial difference between a Christian and a non-religious person is in the area of power for living. A Christian's energy, wisdom and freedom are gifts from God that enable him or her to pursue justice, beauty and truth in a way that promotes, not self-glorification which is idolatry, but the worship and praise of the only One who deserves such honour — God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and Redeemer of sinful humanity.

Jesus had much to say about secular power (e.g., Mark 10:42ff), arguing for the power(lessness) of servanthood as the only hope for redressing evil and injustice in the world. Paul saw how the death and humiliation of Christ led to his ultimate glorification (Philippians 2:5ff). Christians are empowered as no one else in the world, for works of righteousness, peace and justice (cf. Romans 8:31ff; Colossians 2:9f, etc.). Yet the weapons of their warfare are not human but "divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Corinthians 10:4). Prayerful spirituality lies at the heart of all cultural or political action.

Imperatives of the educational task

If Christians are to have an impact on the structures of society (i.e., school, the media, government and legislature, the corporate sector, etc.), then there is a lot of ground to be made up in the field of Christian learning and training for mission in a complex technological world.

Christian educators need to have an understanding of how groups (small and large) function (i.e., Social Psychology, Sociology of Organisations, Political Science); of how decisions are taken in business and government (local, State and Federal); of how change takes place in society (Communication Theory, Anthropology, Psychology); and of how ideas and social structures act upon each other to shape us and the world in which we live (Philosophy, History of Ideas, Sociology of Knowledge). Truth must never be thought of as contained wholly in the Bible. Evangelism and Christian mission must include the wider process of taking captive for Christ all cultural and social products: science, technology, the arts, politics, welfare and education, business and industry, family life, the media, church life, and so on.

The power to transform culture and humanise society for Christ's sake lies within the reach of the people of God. But until the equippers in theological halls, Bible Colleges and local congregations are trained to facilitate an enlightened and empowered people, there is little chance that Christianity will ever have more than a marginal influence in Australia.

Conclusion

One of the greatest benefits of the Christian religion is its empowerment for effective living. True wisdom involves a recognition of our own mortality, idolatry and incompetence and a humble openness to the divine resources for the good life: wisdom, power and love.

The prophetic educational task for the Christian Church is to be a light in a dark world — that is, to make manifest the knowledge and wisdom that we do possess concerning the nature of goodness, beauty and truth, across the total sphere of human culture. For such a process to take place, all of us — but especially those called teachers — need to develop a radically different understanding of the nature and purpose of the so-called 'higher' gifts. If Christians are to be empowered for mission in the sense given above, then a new strategy needs to be devised for the training and education of the equippers — men and hopefully women who are inquirers after truth, always open to change, committed to serving rather than dominating the body of Christ, and who identify with an incarnational model of ministry.

The power for social (or personal) transformation lies in the sense of the freedom of the Christian, at the individual level (Galatians 5:1), and in the solidarity of the experience of love, at the corporate level. Effective Christian education must somehow hold both principles in tension. There can be no freedom where there is bigotry or indoctrination — which is why sermons and lectures have only limited value, if unaccompanied by dialogue, discussion and then transforming action. Nor is there freedom if one person (or syllabus board) always decides what another person (or group) should learn or know. Ideas, wherever they come from, must be tested by each generation against the creative and redemptive wisdom that is in Christ and in the Word of God. The object of all Christian education is to deepen both the individual and collective experience of the freedom and love of Christ. Only then can the Church become an agent for change in Australian society.

FOOTNOTES

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Penguin, 1972.
2. Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind, A Christian Interpretation of History*, New York, Seabury, 1981. p. 199.