

Rethinking Christian Education

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George Patterson recalls that, half a century ago, a seminary professor of his suggested that Christian education at all levels, including the training of pastors, needed to be more relational and tied more effectively to field work in churches. I asked him, "If churches practiced his educational philosophy, would it not replace the average seminary classroom?" He frowned, then smiled and said, "It would. But let's not say that too loudly here!" George never forgot his admission.

Balance. This line of thinking has led George and other missionaries to develop pastoral training in which experienced pastors mentor newer ones. This facilitates training new leaders in a movement of church reproduction in many countries. Galen Currah and George (MentorNet authors) seek balance between the classroom and mentoring. We do both, teaching in Western Seminary classrooms and mentoring students and missionaries outside of the classroom. How could this practical, relational approach to education apply to your church's Christian education? We urge you to decide prayerfully how it could.

Three questions. Here are three basic questions. (1) Would a radical application of the New Testament approach to Christian Education enable your churches and parents do a better job of training children and youth? (2) Would it curb Christian youth dropping out of church and faith during their teen years? (3) Do you agree that the following adjectives describe New Testament education?

- **Responsive** (to current circumstances, ministry opportunities and needs).
- **Relational** (a teacher and disciples listen and respond to each other).
- **Non-professional** (much reliance on the Holy Spirit).
- **Church-based** (non-institutional).
- **Bible-based** (not just Bible content but also Biblical *methodology*).
- **Various methods** (Apostles did it; elders did it; parents did it and prophets did it—in many different ways. They used old and new resources, as Jesus said to do in Matthew. 13:52.)

Training little children. Although we have little experience in leading small children to love and obey Jesus, those who do whom we know agree that parents, especially fathers, must do far more of it. Likewise, the average church should add more activities that include the whole family. Lionel Mota, a pastor in Los Angeles, reported that he reorganized his Sunday School to include teaching in family-oriented small groups meeting in homes, which brought many to Christ, restored family unity, and revitalized the entire church body. Similar examples of brave

Christian educators abound. We would like to hear your report, if you have taken radical steps to implement New Testament guidelines.

Training young people. Have you noticed the strong desire of children and teens for attention from older children and teens? Elementary school children crave attention from Junior High age children but seldom receive it. Junior High children admire older teens, who in turn would love to receive more attention from college age people. When George experimented by giving young people tools to lead and disciple younger people, both grew as a result and it bore good fruit.

Training mixed ages. The common practice of segregating age groups, if carried to an extreme, cripples a young person's social development. Many fail to learn to relate normally to older or younger persons, including their parents. It is normal to seek peers of the same age, and we must provide activities for children and young people of the same ages—but not so *exclusively*! Most children get enough of that in school. The average church must deal more decisively with the growing breakdown of families and the oceans of misery it causes. Simply preaching against family breakdown has not stemmed the evil tide. Sunday Schools desperately need to supplement age-graded classrooms to provide more family activities and opportunities for young people to disciple *younger* people.

Training adults. Many churches could easily improve Christian education as it applies to *adults*. Educational psychologists warn us that abstract lecturing is among the weakest forms of communication. Sermons and Bible teaching that include role-plays, skits, interaction—anything that helps the people avoid being passive "hearers only"—communicate more doctrine and help people more effectively to make edifying plans and commitments. Try it, and you will quickly see the difference.

Smaller groups. Are we willing to add something radically new—and radically New Testament—to our Christian education? Not another structure with recipe-book steps to set it up! It may require for your church to do some reorganizing, to shepherd people in groups small enough to practice the biblical "one-another" commands: *correct one another, share one another's burdens, confess faults to one another, instruct one another, etc.* This may require enlisting teachers' helpers. Conscientious teachers will listen to each person report what they are doing for Christ, their needs and opportunities for ministry. This takes time. If a group or class is too large for this, its teacher should appoint helpers who will do so, in order that every person and family receives real *shepherding*.

Need orientation. A reasonable percentage of the teaching must be done in response to the immediate needs and ministry opportunities that we become aware of by listening. We must listen to those we teach, to visitors and to those we visit in their homes. In relational groups, teaching edifies more people when different members of the group contribute. Some teachers, for example, ask persons ahead of time to relate Bible stories that give background for doctrinal passages. This greatly enhances doctrinal teaching and is a good way to attract people who attend no church to a small group.

Can you hear a child say, "Uncle Ned, will you come watch me help teach the story of the Prodigal Son next Friday night? I'm going to be the rear end of the fatted calf!" Uncle Ned and his family are quite apt to come, especially if you offer his children minor parts.

Training leaders. For training Christian leaders, the Bible requires that pastors apprentice newer leaders. They might delegate the actual training to other shepherds, but it is still their pastoral responsibility to see that it takes place, just as much as preaching or administering the sacraments. Jesus and His apostles modeled this. 2 Timothy 2:2 and Titus 1:5 require it. It does not rule out institutional training, but requires supplementing lectures with mentoring for new leaders. When pastors fulfill this duty in a receptive pioneer field, they can provide enough new leaders to sustain normal, rapid church reproduction.

Relational training. Jesus said, "If you love me, obey my commands" (John 14:15). Relational Christian education requires that we supplement linear curriculum with menu-driven teaching. Again, we must *balance* the two methods. A menu of options lets both teachers and students select what best edifies them, their families and congregations. No two Christians or churches follow identical paths to maturity, or have the same urgent needs. Many needs are common and a linear curriculum serves them well. Other needs are peculiar to individuals, families and small groups and require that a teacher listens and responds to such needs. Two teachers who co-teach can more easily keep this balance. Teachers who name helpers to meet with students can also achieve this balance, and there are other ways. The main thing is to apply New Testament guidelines that require this balance, in whatever ways that fit your people.

Materials that facilitate Christian mentor of new leaders

Pastor's Storybook (English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Hindi). Fast-paced story of a new church led by a novice shepherd who find help from Bible stories. Some versions include an index of Bible stories. Evangelism, 8 units, commands of Jesus, 7 units, New Testament ministries, 14 units. Visit <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>.

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