

A European Philosophy of Congregational Education
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Introduction

In this article I will present a philosophy of congregational education from a western European perspective. The main difference between North America and Europe in regard to Christian education is that the most important avenue for congregational education in North America has traditionally been the Sunday school. In Europe, on the other hand, the avenues for education in the protestant state churches have been catechism (in the reformed tradition) and confirmation (in the Lutheran tradition). In the free churches these forms of education have never been very popular and with the rise of mainline evangelical churches in the twentieth century, new forms of Christian education, among them the Sunday school, were brought to Europe. After a process of indigenization, however, it seems that most free churches have left the Sunday school model behind and embraced other forms of education, most notably the small groups. The state churches, on the other hand, have continued to work with traditional educational models.

This approach does not concentrate on various forms of Christian education but wants to emphasize its importance, because “teaching is not optional in the church” (Downs 1994, 29). I will discuss six elements connected to Christian education, namely educational aim, content, teachers, methodology, students, and environment. Each of these elements functions as a separate yet integrated building block build around my philosophy of congregational education.

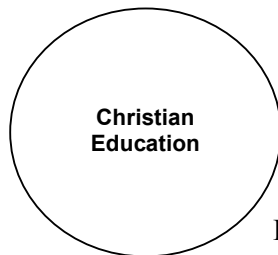


Figure 1. Christian Education

Educational Aim

A philosophy of congregational education must start with the question “Why Christian education?” This question helps us to define the aim of education in the church. For John Wesley this aim could be described as holiness of heart and life (Matthaei 2000, 25-26)¹. Holiness of heart or inward holiness means to love God with our whole being. Holiness of life or outward (social) holiness is the love for our neighbors. Both inward and outward holiness must be part of the educational aim.

This aim of education is based theologically on the New Testament’s claim that “the total process of salvation is seen to be the restoring of mankind to the image of God” (Dunning 1988, 151). Although prevenient grace prevents one from having lost the *imago dei* completely, through sin humanity’s fundamental relationships have been negatively affected. The purpose of Christian education is to contribute to the restoration of the *imago dei* in humanity, which includes the relationships to God, others, the world, and oneself (Dunning 1988, 277-283).

Christian education must stress both the inward and vertical dimension as well as the outward and horizontal dimension of humanity's relationships. This implies that "the goal of Christian education is not only gaining knowledge of the Bible, but includes living the Christian life" (Estep 2003, 15.6). Scripture encourages its readers to be doers of the word (James 1:22) and Christian education must help the people to live out their faith in this world boldly and actively. "Education that is true to its core is measured in mission" (Everist 2002, 259).

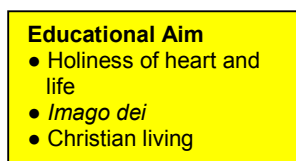


Figure 2. Building Block 1

Content

The aim of Christian education is not to teach propositional truth, but rather to have this truth work toward the larger aim of holiness of heart and life. It must be recognized, however, that "how we think about things does matter" (Downs 1994, 67). Without knowing the content of God's revelation in Scripture this content cannot be lived out in daily life. The transformation of one's life is therefore related to and dependent on the renewal of one's mind.

Because "the Bible is normative for both Christian faith and practice" (Estep 2003, 15.8), the content of congregational education is to a large extent determined by the content of Scripture. Through the study of Scripture we may discover "the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation" (Church of the Nazarene 2001, 27). The overarching themes of God, man, sin, and salvation through Jesus Christ as well as the important stories of the people of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the early church become the "great things" (Palmer 1998, 107) around which students and teachers gather.

In spite of the importance and centrality of Scripture the content of Christian education cannot be limited to Scripture alone. "Because all of Scripture is true, but not all truth is contained in Scripture, Christian educators must study both specific and general revelation" (Estep 2003, 15.7). Ultimately, all truth is from God and may be used to guide the people into a deeper understanding of holiness of heart and life.

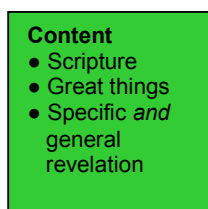


Figure 3. Building Block 2

Teachers

When it comes to congregational education, everybody is both student and teacher.

Too often in the local congregation we separate ourselves into two categories, the teachers and the learners. ... [But] such divisions do not take seriously the reality that each individual needs to be a teacher in order to be a learner, and a learner in order to become and continue to be a teacher. (Everist 2002, 23)

Having noticed this important truth, there are some who are formal teachers in the sense of carrying responsibility for a group of people and their education. Teachers should have a fundamental knowledge of teaching methodology and possess teaching and people skills. To ensure high standards in this area pastors and leaders should help teachers become the best teachers possible. More important than these practical skills, however, are the personal and spiritual qualifications of the teacher, because teachers can only teach who they are (Palmer 1998, 2).²

“Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer 1998, 10). The teacher’s inner life must therefore be cultivated so that one is able to teach from a truly “undivided self” or “an integral state of being” (Palmer 1998, 15).

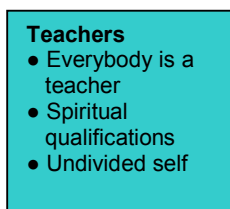


Figure 4. Building Block 3

Methodology

To speak about methodology is not easy since methodologies are many and varied. I will use the division of formal, informal, and non-formal education to offer some methodological suggestions.

1. Formal education is primarily “concerned with teaching theory in a formal education context” (Maddix, week 3: lecture 2). This teaching method is pedagogically based, teacher-centered, content oriented, and often uses the lecture format (Maddix, week 1: lecture 2). Although this teaching method may at times be useful, it is not the preferred option for Christian education.
2. Informal education is teaching that takes place through life experiences, human interaction, and faith communities (Maddix, week 3: lecture 2). This method of teaching may not always seem very intentional, but is highly effective. It recognizes that we learn in community through interaction and that every situation carries educational potential. Seasonal events in the life of the church, for example, provide a clear and strong structure for congregational education (Foster 1994, 45). Also, through worship and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Lord’s Supper, a believer may grow in grace and toward spiritual maturity, making these occasions valuable, also from an educational perspective.
3. Probably the most effective method for congregational education is non-formal education. It stresses deliberate teaching and learning, but, unlike formal education, employs different teaching methodologies with great flexibility, generally focusing on experiential learning (Maddix, week 3: lecture 2). Non-formal education is student and subject centered. Both teachers and students gather around the “great things,” which form the content of Christian education, to be transformed by “the power of the living subject” (Palmer 1998, 103).

It is important to recognize that all three methods of teaching must supplement each other.³

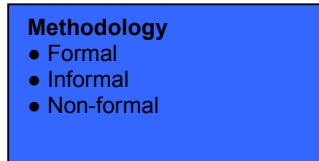


Figure 5. Building Block 6

Students

Although students are as varied as the people in a congregation, they have something important in common, namely that they were created in the image of God and with the ability to respond to God's grace, either positively or negatively. Although sin has distorted the original *imago dei* and students are in need of repentance, they are spiritual beings nevertheless and "it is through the educational process ... that the image of God is being renewed and restored" (Estep 2003, 15.10).

It is important not to stereotype students because each person is unique. In the congregation, everybody is a student (as well as a teacher): from the two year old toddler to the eighty-five year old senior citizen, all have the capacity to learn and to grow. This means, however, that developmental issues must be taken seriously. Since "effective Christian education is concerned not only with what the Bible teaches but also with God's design of people" (Downs 1994, 69), students must be taught at a developmentally appropriate level. All people develop in cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual ways. These patterns of development cannot be significantly altered and it is therefore imperative that educators understand developmental processes.



Figure 6. Building Block 5

Environment

The environment in which Christian education takes place consists of the cultural, congregational, and physical environment. The physical environment (the 'classroom') can be best controlled and should be designed in such a way as to enhance learning in every way possible.

The cultural environment is much more elusive yet very real nevertheless. Over the past few decades, the western cultures have been changing and many have described these changes as postmodernism. Postmodernism is hard to describe, but it is certainly characterized by pluralism and relativism, coupled to an experiential understanding of reality. Because "the influence of postmodernism is all around us" (Kimball 2003, 55), Christian education should be aware of the challenges as well as the possibilities offered to us by the postmodern mindset. "The postmodern world is a world ... hungry for spirituality yet dismissive of systematized religion" (Kimball 2003, 54).

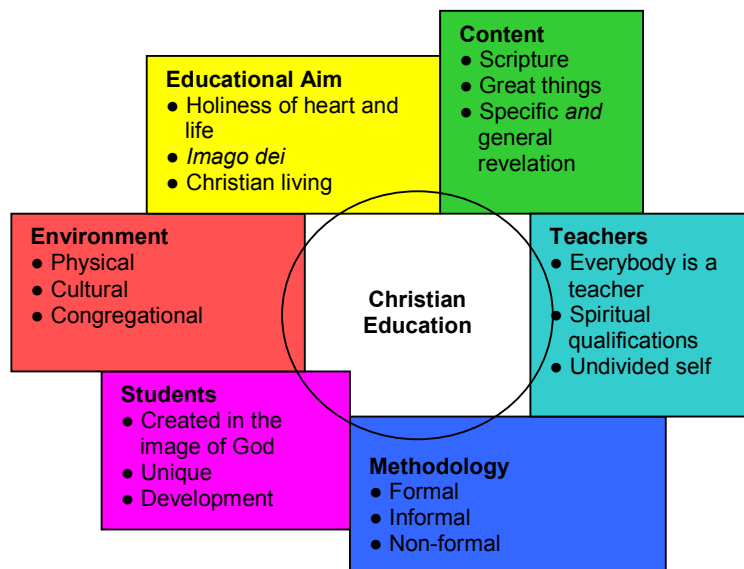
But also the congregation itself is an important learning environment. This is necessarily so, because "reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it" (Palmer 1998, 95). The congregation can be both the context *in which* and the method *by which* one is educated. Because being in community presents many

challenges it is a spiritual discipline. One aim of congregational education is Christian living and mission. This can only be practiced in community.



Figure 7. Building Block 6

A philosophy of Christian education in a sense is always tentative and unfinished. I therefore like the idea of buildings blocks. Once put together they can also be taken apart, only to be put together again in different ways and shapes. Who knows what the future will bring? But for now let us put together the different building blocks, with Christian education taking center place, to give shape to a congregational philosophy of education.



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Notes

¹ See Jesus and his teaching on the 'Great Commandment' in Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34.

² The qualifications for teachers in the Methodist movement as identified by John Wesley still seem to have value for us today. These qualifications were: be totally dedicated to God, represent the Methodist tradition, practice the Christian disciplines, be able to work with a diverse group of people, live an exemplary life, and show evidence of love for God and neighbor (Matthaei 2000, 120).

³ Matthaei suggests that in a Wesleyan ecology of faith formation there are different educational approaches corresponding to the different spiritual stages of the believer. In the first stage, invitation to communion, we should teach the Christian beliefs and practices, which calls for an instructional mode (formal education). The second stage, deepening communion, clarifies the Christian beliefs and practices and emphasizes a dialogical mode (non-formal education). During the final stage, full communion, we extend the Christian beliefs and practices, emphasizing an embodied mode (informal education).