

12. Christian Education

Erich H. Kiehl, Th. D.

Ours is a highly technological age with heavy stress on mass production, mass marketing, and mass communication. The computer with all its implications is playing an increasingly important role in our society. One may characterize our age as one of "de-personalization."

A further factor which complicates the de-personalization problem is the increasingly great population mobility. Studies such as that done by Dr. Doxiades and his associates for Detroit indicate that by the year A.D. 2000, the population of our nation will be centered in a number of huge megalopoli in various parts of the nation.

In an address made at Concordia Teachers College, Seward, Nebraska, in November of last year, Dr. Andrew Greeley, the well-known Jesuit sociologist at the University of Chicago, said, "It is not God that died in the 1960's; it was rather the great god science."¹

Father Greeley reported the comment of a student. "Look," she said, "science has failed. It hasn't brought us peace, it hasn't brought us racial justice, it hasn't helped us to love one another any better. Our generation doesn't believe in it. We're looking for other systems to explain our life."²

The death of science as a god, the de-personalization of our age and other problems have resulted in various quests. According to Dr. Greeley the first quest is search for meaning in life. This has given rise to interest in the esoteric and the occult. Witness the devil worship cult in San Francisco, also the TV programs which center around the "black arts."

The second quest is for the warm and intimate relationships of the community of yesteryear in our de-personalized, computerized society.

The third quest is to become more oneself, that is, to become free from the fear of someone knowing intimately what we are, and also to be free from the sense of inadequacy with its implications. This quest involves a trusting relationship with others.

The fourth quest is the search for play. Dr. Greeley quotes the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre: "The serious man thinks that his environment is more important than he is, and the playful knows that he is more important than his environment." The point of the playful is that only in the world of make-believe can one "... encounter religion, mysticism, and ecstasy." And all of these involve a special relationship or even a union with some form of the Ultimate.³

Now all these various quests involve attitudes and relationships based on knowledge. Thus in our age we need, through the Spirit's power, to help people to know and to think more clearly on the basis of a better knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures and its meaning for life expressed in changed attitudes, demonstrated in positive relationships. The role of Christian education is to bring about such knowledge and God-pleasing relationships.

Christian Education: Its Meaning and Content

Christian education has always been of vital importance to the Lutheran Church. At its Denver Convention in 1969, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod passed the resolution (7-01):

Resolved, that the Synod in convention assert that Christian education, understood as the communication of God's edifying Word, is essential

to the life of the Church and is the primary process and fundamental activity of the Church in mission and the basis for church renewal.⁴

Note that Christian education is understood as "the communication of God's edifying Word." The content of Christian education is the Word of God. In the opening essay, Dr. Paul Zimmerman stressed the Biblical self-witness that all of the Scripture in all its parts is the inspired and the inerrant Word of God. Our Lutheran Confessions humbly and solemnly recognize this fact. The Bible is and always must be the content of Christian education.

In a world of momentous change and an age of easy relativism, the Word of God is the absolute which is changeless and always relevant to our every age. What Paul said to Timothy long ago is still very true for us today:

You know from whom you learned it
and how since you were a little child you have known the Holy Scriptures,
which can make you wise and save you if you believe in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is inspired by God and helps us to teach,
to show what is wrong,
to improve and train in right living,
so that a man of God is ready and equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:15-17

Christian Education: Its Goal

It is this ageless Word, applicable to the needs of every age, which the Holy Spirit uses to lead men to faith, to nurture and stimulate their growth in faith so that they may through the Spirit's power witness through their life and with their lips to their faith relationship with God.

Christian education involves not only the intellect but also the total person. Writing for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1964, Dr. Bruno Bettelheim of the University of Chicago said,

When the children now entering school will be grown up, the scientific revolution will be largely behind them. Ahead will lie a psychological revolution. What is sorely lacking in our education — and will have to stand at the heart of our efforts in the future — is the education of the emotions, an education which will permit people to live at peace with themselves and others.⁵

Dr. Randolph Crump Miller in *Christian Nurture and the Church* echoes a similar view but from a Christian perspective when he says,

The crucial factor is not information as such, not the capturing of the mind, and not the passing of an examination. The significant factor in Christian education is helping the individual, by God's grace, to become a believing committed member of the community of the Holy Spirit, obedient to Christ as his Lord and Master, and living as a Christian to the best of his ability in all his relationships.⁶

Thus, in Christian education, we strive through the Spirit's power to change attitudes on the basis of a clearer understanding of Scripture and its meaning and message for us. We also strive to motivate the learner to express his attitude in terms of relationships — his relationship with God and with his fellowmen.

Approach to the Word of God: The Problem

Much needs to be done to achieve all this in Christian education and to make of Christian education a lifetime experience for more people. As we know only too well, our involvement in Christian education begins to break down during the High School years and continues all the way through the adult years. Compared to communicant membership figures and making proper allowance for Sunday School staff, statistics for organized Bible study in this very extensive age bracket are very sad indeed.

Part of the problem, I suggest, lies in our approach to the study of the Scriptures. Let me illustrate symptoms of the problem: At Concordia, Ann

Arbor, we have found what you probably already know from your own parish experiences.

First of all, a positive experience: Allowing for the tensions of growing up, we find that by and large our students as they come to us understand that Jesus Christ is their Savior and Lord. We have a very fine group of dedicated youth. To work with them is a great privilege and a most stimulating experience.

But now some negative observations which illustrate the problem:

1. Most of our students have some understanding of the Gospels but one can hardly say a unified understanding;
2. For most the Old Testament is a closed and unfamiliar book, except for some acquaintance with heroes of the Old Testament such as Abraham, David, and Daniel. They also know that in some way the Old Testament speaks of the Christ to come, but have almost no grasp of the way in which it does so;
3. Many have the feeling that the Old Testament especially seems unreal and far removed from their experiences; the events seem to be those of a "never-never land";
4. Many are confused as to what constitutes Law and Gospel. Some think of the Old Testament as Law and the New Testament as Gospel. A probing into what they understand by Gospel too often results in the reaction that Gospel is doing. This may be due in part to the way in which Bible stories are sometimes made to fit some artificial theme and then need to be squeezed to convey a moral of some kind or other. To achieve this the story is at least sometimes taken out of its proper theological context.

Approach to the Word of God: Suggested Solution

And yet the Word of God in its total setting must be the content of Christian education. If we are serious about saying that all the Scriptures are God's Word and that through this infallible Word God speaks to us, we need to listen reverently and carefully to what God has to say in His Word in its original setting.

This means that through a careful study of the theological and historical setting we need to learn *what* God was saying to the people of *that* time before we seek to say what He is saying to us today. This has always been a basic principle of Biblical interpretation.

If we apply this basic principle through a careful study of and a humble listening to the Scripture, we will grow in a deeper understanding of the unity permeating the Scripture and its relationship implications for people of the Bible day and also for us today. This implies that we make use of the valid techniques of historical, archaeological, and linguistic investigation to see the true meaning of words and events in the historical and theological setting of that day. By this I mean techniques which respectfully recognize Scripture as a document of primary history, whose historicity must not be questioned, whose witness must be carefully listened to, and whose message cannot be mutilated.

If we listen to the basic unity of Scripture and apply such valid techniques of investigation, then the relationship implications for us today will often become so apparent that not much of what we term "application" needs to be done. The relationship implications for us today will flow naturally and very honestly from the text.

Covenant, the Unifying Theme

The Scriptures are like a Persian rug with a variegated pattern permeated by a unifying motif. Or, to put it in another way, the 66 books of the Scriptures are like the tesserae of a mosaic which through the Holy Spirit' indwelling inspiration form a beautiful integrated pattern.

Through the Scriptures runs the unifying and integrating pattern of the covenant theme. In the Old Testament the key word is "covenant," in the

Gospels "kingdom of God," and beginning with the Book of Acts the two terms in sequence "believers" and "church."

Please note that the inner core of this unifying covenant theme is the redemptive, sacrificial, and life-giving role of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. This role is carefully foretold and describes in the Old Testament beginning with the *Protevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 and sees its fulfillment in the mission of Jesus Christ and its aggressive proclamation by the apostolic church.

Covenant in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the term "covenant" in its theological meaning is used over 80 times. A simple definition of covenant is God's arrangement of grace in choosing Israel to be His Chosen People.

The foundation for the covenant is God's gracious promise that the Woman's Seed would crush Satan's head. Genesis speaks in detail of God's gracious covenant with Abraham and the patriarchs. At the same time, the inner core of the covenant, the messianic promises, is reflected in Gen. 12:3 "in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" and in Genesis 49:10 "The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the Lawgiver's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be obedience of people."

The climactic event in the history of Israel as Abraham's descendants, was God's mighty act of the Exodus, culminating in the covenant event at Mount Sinai. You may wish to compare Exodus 19:4-6 with 1 Peter 2:9-10 and see the close parallel between the covenant of the Old Testament day and that in which you and I live in our faith relationship with God.

God's covenant with His people involves relationships with God and with people. This becomes quite apparent as one looks at the six characteristics of the covenant relationship: 1. by grace alone; 2. God's providing, guarding presence symbolized concretely at the time of the Exodus by the pillar of cloud; 3. the will of God as the theocratic king to be supreme and lived out in Israel's covenant relationship with Him and expressed in their relationship with their fellowmen; 4. God's desire that His covenant people be a special, select people: "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, my own possession" (Ex. 19:5-6); and 6. God's judgment which like a coin has two sides: salvation and condemnation.

Judaism has a saying, "The *Torah* is the supreme rule of faith; the rest is commentary." Just what does this mean? Judaism would say: The *Torah* or Pentateuch tells about God's making His covenant with His people and spells out its relationship implications for His people. The books from Joshua to Malachi merely comment on what happened to Israel in each age, depending on whether or not they lived in covenant relationship with God.

As the New Israel, you and I would add that the Messianic promise as the inner core of the covenant is repeated again and again in the books from Joshua to Malachi. And, in the process, the repetitions of this promise shed much light on the true nature and role of the Messiah and the implications of His redemptive work.

Intimately tied into this covenant theme is the role of the prophets who as God's spokesmen served as guardians of the covenant relationship. They carried out their role of forth-telling, that is, feeding and leading, guiding and correcting God's covenant people in their covenant relationship as the normal activity of their daily life. As God's spokesmen they also foretold future events.

Crucial in the whole covenant concept is the role of the covenant king in the theocracy. He served as God's representative. Both the kings of Israel and of Judah were judged by God from the viewpoint of the covenant perspective. To them God sent His prophets to lead and guide them so that they would remain faithful to their role as covenant kings. And thus the writer of 1 and 2 Kings says of a king, "He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" or "he did what was right in the sight of the Lord."

The Covenant in the New Testament

Within the all-embracing context of the covenant theme, the Old Testament sets the stage for Jesus the Messiah, as the fulfillment of the inner core of this theme. From the viewpoint of faithfulness to the Scriptures and its theological thought patterns, the content of Christian education must vigorously address itself to questions such as these:

1. What is meant in the Gospels by the term "kingdom of God" and how does it fit into the covenant theme of the Scriptures?
2. What kind of a Messiah did the Jews expect and how did Jesus fit into their expectations?
3. Why did the disciples share the popular view of the Messiah and even ask Jesus just before His ascension, "When will You usher in Your Kingdom?"
4. How is Jesus' mandate "You shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and even to the ends of the world" the dynamic motif in the balance of the New Testament?
5. Why did the apostles stress that Jesus was the crucified, risen, and the ascended Christ? and why did they speak of Him as "Savior and Lord"?
6. Why do the Epistles stress not only the fact of the how of salvation but also always the relationship implications of salvation?

The tightly integrated covenant theme unifies the Scriptures and always forms the theological setting for its message. It is of crucial importance that this be understood by those who prepare curricular materials so that they faithfully and knowledgeably reflect this theme and its relationship implications. All involved in the education process also need to know and understand this unifying theme and its all-embracing implications.

The Total Setting of the Scripture

And now for seeing the Word of God in its total setting: In His great love and mercy God tells us about Himself in human language which we can understand. Under the Spirit's inspiration and guidance the divine Word was written by human writers in human language, human words, human literary styles and forms, and in terms of human life experiences and history. Some of these reflect language and settings which are quite foreign to our experiences in the twentieth century, but were completely familiar at the time of the inspired penman.

It is a basic principle of interpretation that the first sense of Scripture is the literal, that unless the Scripture signals otherwise, we take the words of Scripture in their literal sense. Such a principle implies that we know or will work hard to learn what the words meant to the original writer and reader.

If we are faithful to the implications of the Scripture as the inerrant Word of God in all its parts, then we will welcome the use of all that is valid in contemporary research to get at the meaning of this Word of God at the time when it was spoken or written and then also for us today. It should be self-evident that we do this always in humble submission to the Word of God. We will do this in the attitude of humbly hearing what God has to say to us, and not from the attitude of correcting or suggesting what we in sinful weakness or willfulness may think God should have said.

Let's take for example the much disputed book of Jonah to see how this works out:

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and added "for its wickedness stares Me in the face" (1:2 NEB). The annals of history readily available to us tell us that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and that Assyria was notorious for its wanton, cold-blooded brutality and its incredible pride and arrogance. Although at Jonah's time in the eighth century B.C., Assyria was at low ebb as a world power, it had been and would again in the future be Israel's worst enemy. In fact, God would use her as His instrument of wrath to destroy Israel in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17)

Not wanting to see his nation's worst enemy experience God's forgiveness, Jonah took passage on a ship sailing westward from Joppa to Tarshish in Southern Spain. By the way, in December, 1966, the late Dr. Emmanuel Ben-Dor made an illustrated report on his excavations at ancient Tarshish at the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America.

The reactions of the sailors to the dread storm and their urgent request that Jonah pray to his God reflect the polytheistic milieu of the Old Testament era. Note that in 1:9 Jonah emphasized that the sailors' gods were non-existent, that only his God was the Lord of the universe.

The Hebrew tells us that Jonah was swallowed by a large fish. We should know that there are on record several experiences parallel to that of Jonah. In an instance occurring near the Falkland Islands, a man lived to tell about his experiences in the belly of a large fish.⁷

The description of the once-proud capital city of Nineveh's reaction to Jonah's message reflects what is known about Assyria's history. At this time Assyria could hardly hold its own as a nation, let alone aspire to be a world power. Nineveh had experienced two decimating plagues, killing many of its people. History also records an eclipse of the sun, which for the Assyrians who worshipped heavenly bodies was a most devastating experience. From their polytheistic point of view, all that had and was happening to them told them that the gods were angry with them. Thus they were receptive to Jonah's message of Nineveh's impending doom and, as a result, repented. God had mercy on them and spared them, much to Jonah's chagrin.

The book of Jonah is one of the many cases in which a study of the total setting is crucial. But the same is true of many other events, words, and phrases. Dr. Dahood, for example, has stressed the importance of the Ugaritic, a Canaanite language related to Hebrew, for the understanding of certain Hebrew words and expressions found in the Psalms. In his essay Dr. Zimmerman referred to others in his reference to the work of Professor Kitchen.

Today there are many helpful resources which shed much light on the unifying theme of Scripture as well as on the Word in its total setting. Many of these are highly illustrated and relatively inexpensive. An intimate knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Ugaritic, and the like is not necessary for their use. A selection of such resources should be in the working library of every educator. A larger selection should be in every church library so that these will be readily available to every teacher as well as to individual members of the church.

What Needs to be Done?

What can be done to initiate or intensify such an approach to the study of the Word in its total setting with special reference to its unifying theme? Hopefully the following suggestions will prove helpful.

The role of the clergyman as the shepherd of the flock is very demanding in our complex and challenging age. For some the demands are so great that there seems to be little time for study. But we need to remember that the shepherd has the divine imperative to nourish and to feed, to guide and to lead his flock to a deeper understanding of the Word and its relationship implications.

To do so the shepherd must keep on working hard in studying the Bible. He needs to expound the text of his Sunday or midweek sermon within the framework of the Bible's unifying theme and the total setting of the text. The sermon is an important part of the educational program of the parish. Through it he may nourish and feed more people than through any other agency of Christian education.

The pastor's library needs to continue to grow, not only in the "how to" but especially in the "what" books. His library needs also to reflect a close acquaintance with the critical approach in what is popularly known as "current theology."

What about our Pastoral Conferences? Have we grown in our understanding of the Word through a meaningful study and discussion at our conferences or have we been content to talk about the "how" to the hurt of the "what"?

Is it possible that a survey of the program content of pastoral conferences would expose the urgent need to spend more time in serious Bible study, to trace Biblical themes through the Old and the New Testament to see their intimate relationship to the covenant theme and its relationship implications for us?

The last few years have seen the publication of many helpful books for such study: various volumes of Kittel in English translation, Barclay's New Testament wordbooks, Leon Morris' *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Dr. Bruce's recent *The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes* to mention just a few.

More purposeful Bible Study

The pastor needs to share such tracing through of Biblical themes with his members so that they too may become better acquainted with how the Bible does its own "theologizing." Although he may choose to do so in a series of sermons, he may wish in addition or instead to do so within the more informal setting of a Bible study group or series of such groups. The more members of such a group can enter actively in meaningful study and discussion, the more effective such study will be.

As the church's leader in Christian education, the pastor needs to work through the Scriptures' unifying theme and its sub-themes in their total setting with teachers of the Lutheran Elementary School, the Sunday School, and the Weekday School. The more they understand these and the better they become acquainted with the total setting of the Bible, the more effective they can be in the evangelical communication of the Word to their classes.

Better Use of Teaching Tools

Our teachers need to be trained also in the intelligent and effective use of the multiplicity of visual aids to help in communicating the Biblical message. Check your classrooms and class areas. How many have a chalkboard and a good set of maps, for example? How much and how well are these used by the teachers?

At Concordia we have found the overhead projector to be a simple but invaluable teaching tool in helping to communicate more effectively the great truths of Scripture.

Mechanically all one needs for preparing transparencies for use on this projector is a copying machine using a light or heat process, such as the Thermofax. It is easy to prepare a sketch and transfer it or a picture of a Biblical site or scene to a transparency by running it through a copying machine. Diagrams, charts, simplified maps, and similar teaching aids can easily be prepared for use on the screen. But these and other carefully selected visuals are invaluable aids in more effectively communicating the Word in its setting.

In our day God has given us such an abundance of visual teaching tools for communicating His Word that we evangelical Lutherans should be busy with Spirit-driven zeal, searching for and experimenting with the many tools whereby we can make plain to a questing and confused world that a new, ordered, happy and purposeful life can be found in the certain and eternal Word of the Scriptures.

Conclusion

The evangelical communication of the Word in Christian education demands that we faithfully communicate the Word in its total setting. It means that we must communicate effectively the unifying theme of the Scriptures and its sub-themes. It means that we must always search for the meaning of a given text within the historical and theological framework of the setting of that text before we seek to see its meaning for us today. This requires

toil and labor but it will demonstrate to us and to those whom we teach the eternal relevance of God's Word for each age.

FOOTNOTES

¹Andrew Greeley, "What Should the Future Shape of Christian Education Be?" *Issues in Christian Education*, IV, No. 2 (Spring 1970), p. 4.

²*Ibid.*, p. 5.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

⁴"To Emphasize Christian Education and the Edifying Word—Resolution 7-01," *The Edifying Word—Convention Proceedings, 48th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Denver, Colorado, July 11-18, 1969*, p. 132b.

⁵Bruno Bettelheim, "Stop Pampering Gifted Children (Speaking Out)," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 11, 1964, p. 10.

⁶Randolph Crump Miller, *Christian Nurture and the Church* (New York: Scribner, 1961), p. 4.

⁷Francis Fox, *Sixty-Years of Engineering*, pp. 298-300.