

Principles and Practices of Christian Education

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An Evangelical Perspective

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Wipf and Stock Publishers
EUGENE, OREGON

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Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3
Eugene, Oregon 97401

Principles and Practices of Christian Education
An Evangelical Perspective
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©1992 Pazmiño, Robert W.
ISBN: 1-57910-950-0
Publication date: April, 2002
Previously published by Baker Book House, 1992.

To
women who have taught me about connections:
my mother, Laura Ruth Pazmiño
my wife, Wanda Ruth Pazmiño
my mother-in-law, Aida Melendez
my daughter, Rebekah Joy Pazmiño

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Introduction

This work is a sequel to my earlier text, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education: An Introduction in Evangelical Perspective*, which discussed the biblical, theological, philosophical, historical, sociological, psychological, and curricular foundations of Christian education. A task named in that text, but not addressed in detail, was the formulation of principles and guidelines for the practice of Christian education. *Principles and Practices of Christian Education: An Evangelical Perspective* addresses that important task.

Christian education by its nature is a “preparadigmatic” discipline, in the sense that it lacks one dominant framework that guides all thought and practice.¹ Naming the preparadigmatic nature of Christian education celebrates the place of freedom and creativity in responding to the challenges of teaching and learning in the Christian faith. But working in a preparadigmatic discipline does not exempt Christian educators from the responsibility to develop principles and guidelines for practice that represent a model for or an approach to Christian educa-

1. Robert W. Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education: An Introduction in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 13–14.

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tion.² In fact, each generation must formulate its approaches and models in being faithful to God's call to teach the gospel to current and future generations. Setting forth principles and practices for Christian education serves to outline the necessary forms to complement the freedom and creativity that each generation enjoys. In this work I will suggest a number of forms, principles, and guidelines for practice, but two underlying forms and two complementary principles are prominent in what follows.

The first form is the "educational trinity," which is integrated throughout the work. The educational trinity comprises three elements, content, persons, and context, that need to be balanced throughout the educational process. In fact, education in general can be defined as the process of sharing content with persons in the context of their community and society. Christian education will be further distinguished from education in general within the discussions that follow.

The second form is the five-task model of Christian education. The five tasks—proclamation, community, service, advocacy, and worship—are essential to the life and mission of the Christian church, and they serve to distinguish Christian education from general education. This model guides the planning, practice, and evaluation of Christian education.³

The first principle to guide the practice of evangelical Christian education is the principle of conversion. Conversion involves human reconnection with God, others, and the creation made possible by the grace of God; evangelical theology recognizes—in fact, insists on—the need for both personal and corporate transformation in life. The principle of conversion also implies a second, corresponding principle.

2. Robert A. Drovdaahl raises questions about characterizing Christian education as preparadigmatic. See "Toward a Paradigmatic Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 11 (Spring 1991): 7–16. His pursuit of settledness and a paradigm may limit the place of freedom and creativity, but his pursuit of a framework for Christian education is to be affirmed. The pursuit of a framework and form is the focus of this work.

3. This model is also discussed in *Foundational Issues*, 40–46, as an integrated model that emerges from the study of the biblical foundations of Christian education.

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That second principle, connection, serves as an integrating concept throughout this book. In relation to the educational trinity, this second principle connects the three elements of content, persons, and the context of community/society. In relation to the five-task model, this principle links the five tasks to each other in ten possible combinations. Connection is also implied in the exploration of various educational structures, which themselves form an interlocking web. The emphasis upon both principles, conversion and connection, addresses the fragmentation in the life and faith of the Christian community at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

These forms and complementary principles underlie the organization of chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 present principles from the recent past and those appropriate for challenges in the thought and practice of Christian education. They outline a model that uses the organizing principle of conversion derived from evangelical roots, but expands upon it to include both corporate and personal life. Chapter 3 describes the distinct educational structures that operate in modern industrial society and presents guidelines for the practice of education in some of these structures. The chapter also recognizes the dynamics operative in other structures. Chapters 4 and 5 look at the specific areas of educational content and methods, and respectively highlight the principle of connection and the model of Jesus as the master teacher. Each chapter provides guidelines for practice. The sixth and final chapter discusses basic considerations for the process of educational evaluation, making use of the underlying forms and principles emphasized throughout the work.

This work is offered as one perspective that I trust will encourage reflection, dialogue, and a serious effort by other Christian educators to name their principles and guidelines for the practice of education within and without the evangelical theological orbit. If it encourages reflection and discussion, then this work has accomplished its purpose. The work is intended to be an introductory textbook for courses at college and seminary levels, and it draws extensively upon secondary sources to encourage wider reading.

I am grateful to colleagues, especially Ronald Habermas, Eileen Starr, and Robert Drov Dahl, who offered insightful sug-

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gestions that I incorporated in the text. I am also grateful to Deborah Perkins, who assisted in the preparation of the manuscript. Finally, I wish to thank the members of North American Professors of Christian Education who have supported and encouraged my work.

1

Principles from the Past

In the United States, the dominant culture values the present and the future but frequently ignores principles from the past that merit continuing emphasis. To remedy this situation, Christian educators can affirm educational principles embodied in the Christian faith and identified by educators in the recent past. These principles emerge from theological distinctives that evangelicals have named as they have sought to identify fundamentals, or foundations, of orthodox Christian faith. Orthodoxy refers to right, true, and good beliefs that are consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the apostolic tradition. By considering theology or orthodoxy, evangelical educators affirm the determinative role of theology for the thought and practice of Christian education. As Stanley Hauerwas observed, what we believe, think, and feel makes all the difference in what we do and who we are.¹

The focus upon orthodoxy provides a point of entry for exploring the evangelical heritage and represents the general emphasis in Protestantism upon the teaching of true beliefs and theological doctrines. Such a focus does not negate the importance of orthopraxis (true living or practice) and

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), 227–28, 125.

orthopathos (true passion or commitment).² Donald G. Bloesch, an evangelical theologian, identifies the common elements in evangelicalism while recognizing the diversity of its various streams: Evangelicals have in common a "commitment to the revelation in Scripture over human philosophy, a poignant awareness that we are saved only by divine grace, a belief in the necessity for personal faith for salvation, and fidelity to the great commission to convert the world to the gospel."³ Bloesch sees as the strengths of evangelicalism its Christocentric emphasis (orthodoxy), its fostering of personal piety (orthopathos), and its concern for mission and evangelism (orthopraxis). He also identifies as its weaknesses tendencies toward individualism, biblicism, ghettoism, sectarianism, privatism, and obscurantism.⁴ Recognizing the importance of both orthopraxis and orthopathos, Christian educators can explore basic principles that emerge from the affirmation of theological beliefs or concepts.

Basic Orthodox Principles

The Statement of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals, adopted in 1943 by representatives of some fifty denominations, set forth seven theological concepts.⁵ In relation to each of these concepts, evangelical educators identify educa-

2. The distinctions between orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathos are explored in chapter 5. See Samuel Solivan, "Orthopathos: Interlocutor between Orthodoxy and Praxis," *Andover Newton Review* 1 (Winter 1990):19-25.

3. Donald G. Bloesch, "Evangelicalism," in *Harper's Encyclopedia of Religious Education*, ed. Iris V. Cully and Kendig B. Cully (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 235. Also see Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) and Robert W. Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education: An Introduction in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 49-60.

4. Bloesch, "Evangelicalism," 236. Individualism is "every person wanting to do his or her own thing"; biblicism is treatment of the Bible "apart from both church tradition and historical study"; ghettoism, "a Christ-against-culture stance"; sectarianism, "Christians are encouraged to withdraw from other churches"; privatism, "the spiritual mission of the church often eclipses its social or cultural mandate"; and obscurantism, "a literal interpretation of the Bible brings the faith into conflict with modern science."

5. *Constitution of the National Association of Evangelicals*, 1-2.

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tional principles of continuing significance that build upon this theological foundation.

The Bible as the Inspired and Authoritative Word of God

The Bible provides the essential, though not exclusive or exhaustive, content of Christian education. Sharing biblical content includes careful consideration of a variety of other educational factors. A caricature promoted by Harold William Burgess in *An Invitation to Religious Education* attributes to evangelical educators a “traditional theological approach” that depends exclusively on transmissive methods of teaching; by implication these methods are unresponsive to age-appropriate concepts and experiences.⁶ This caricature, although it has some basis in fact, does not give a complete picture.

An approach that focuses on the Bible, implied by an emphasis on biblical content, does not exclude valuable insights derived from the study of the multifaceted dimensions of God’s creation. Scripture itself validates our study and appreciation of nature (Ps. 19). Paul cites the insights gained through reason and experience in his appeal to conscience and the creation (Rom. 1–2). The creation, God’s creation, includes the complexities of people in their personal and corporate lives. An affirmation of biblical authority enables Christian educators to affirm God’s truth wherever it is revealed in creation. Such an affirmation also provides a standard, a measure for discerning truth in areas of general revelation. Such a standard enables Christians to bring into question all insights relative to a Christian life and world view. A Christian life and world view, if it is to be identified as Christian, must be consistent with the revelation of Christ in the Scriptures. In addition, such a view enables Christians to develop a comprehensive understanding of education.

Both Jesus’ and Paul’s lives exemplified such an approach. Jesus suggests that Christians can and should learn from happenings in the world (Luke 16:8). Paul unashamedly cited pagan poets on Mars Hill when he addressed the Athenians. Through-

6. Harold William Burgess, *An Invitation to Religious Education* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1975), 21–58.

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out church history, Christians have carefully used reason, experience, and tradition in addition to the Scripture to discern truth.

An approach that emphasizes the Scriptures does not exclude careful study and wrestling with the biblical text and context. It does not exclude the tasks of exegesis and hermeneutics, or the responsibility of contextualizing God's truth for contemporary cultures. But this approach does include an appropriate reverence for the sacred text as God's vehicle for disclosing God's person and God's intentions for creation. Christian educators are called upon to share responsibly, not transmit mechanically, God's Word. This sharing requires proclamation and dialogue that enable various age groups to understand God's truth, to grapple with the implications of God's truth for their lives, and to respond in reverence and obedience to discerned truth.⁷

Christian education in the evangelical tradition is distinct from other traditions in its relatively exclusive centering upon biblical authority and content as the guideline for faith and practice. Certainly evangelical Christians, like other Christians, struggle with their selectivity in dealing with the truths of Scripture and with traditions that are not questioned. They also struggle with personal and corporate blindness in dealing with sins, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Yet they have a stated intention to be faithful to the biblical witness and consciously struggle with accountability in terms of biblical revelation. In considering the letter of God's Word, Christian educators hope that the spirit of God's revelation can be discerned for a faithful life of Christian discipleship in the modern world. Given the human situation, the fruits of these efforts for faithful living are mixed. This is also the case for Christian communities with theological distinctives that cannot be identified as evangelical. The danger in any theological tradition is to take a stance of arrogance that rejects the possibility that new truth and light can be discerned from God's Word.

The Oneness of God

The one God affirmed by Christians is revealed in three persons, the Trinity. Christians have often asserted that their

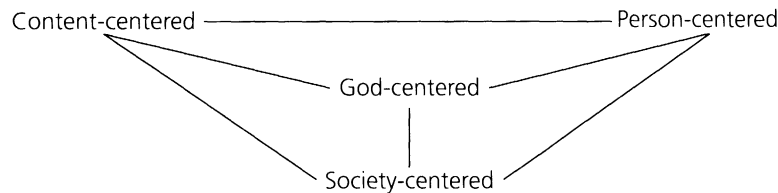
7. Lawrence O. Richards discusses these areas in *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 1970), 51–63.

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efforts in Christian education, as in all areas of life, need to be God-centered. The meaning of such an assertion requires careful consideration, for the orthodox may make assertions and perpetuate shibboleths that they do not affirm in life and practice. When this occurs a dead orthodoxy exists.

A God-centered approach to education can be distinguished from approaches that center upon different foci. Hollis L. Caswell, an educator and curriculum theorist in the 1930s, identified a framework that distinguishes three foci for education (see fig. 1). He described students' interests, social functions, and organized knowledge as elements that are central to different philosophical perspectives in education.⁸ In a relative and comparative sense, educators have emphasized one of the three elements as having priority and therefore as being determinative for effective teaching and learning. But in emphasizing one of the three foci, educators generally argue, the other two foci are in some way also addressed.

Figure 1
The Foci of Education



Educators who emphasize persons' or students' interests advocate a person-centered approach. This approach places priority upon assessing the students' felt needs, interests, and problems. These needs, interests, and problems guide the teacher and the students in the classroom and in activities outside the classroom. Such an approach values the individualization of

8. Hollis L. Caswell and Doak S. Campbell, *Curriculum Development* (New York: American Book Company, 1935), 141-89.

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teaching and learning because of the diversity that exists among students. Psychological ordering of material is given priority over the logical ordering that typifies the content-centered approach. This is the case because of concern for the readiness of individuals to deal with content and sensitivity to "teachable moments" in the life of each student. A person-centered approach emphasizes discovery and self-directed inquiry as central to education, and it tends to see the teacher primarily as a facilitator of learning. Advocates of this approach contend that the content and context of education can be adequately considered only after one first focuses on the persons engaged as students and on "teachable moments" in their educational journeys.

"Teachable moments," a phrase that was popularized by Robert Havighurst, refers to occasions when students are highly motivated and prepared to learn new ideas, skills, or values.⁹ In order to take advantage of these occasions or teachable moments, the teacher needs to focus upon individual students, questioning them and responding to cues indicating interest and need. Examples of such an approach in Christian education are the use of a survey of a youth group's interests to schedule weekly topics and the use of learning centers to encourage discovery learning and the pursuit of individual interests in a Sunday school children's class. As is the case with other approaches, a person-centered approach is subject to extremes. An extreme advocacy of this approach might ignore concerns for social responsibilities and organized knowledge. It might emphasize freedom to explore individual interests to the detriment of necessary structure, form, or discipline. Individuals need to be introduced to the accumulated wisdom of humankind and to their corporate and communal responsibilities beyond personal interests and needs.

Educators who emphasize social functions advocate a society- or community-centered approach. In contemporary discussions this approach emphasizes the need to contextualize. This approach places priority upon the anticipated needs of and expectations for students in relationship to responsibilities and

9. See Robert Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education* (New York: David McKay, 1952).

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roles in the community or society. Students are being prepared for their present or future roles as members of various groups. One example of this approach in Sunday school is training children to actively participate in worship. Children learn the books of the Bible in order to actively follow the reading of Scripture during the worship service and learn how to pray. Among the dangers inherent in an exclusive emphasis upon the society-centered approach is perpetuation of the status quo, even if current patterns of interaction may need to be changed, and a limitation of the creative response and inquiry that is characteristic of the person-centered approach. The society- or community-centered approach generally relies upon the processes of socialization and enculturation to enable students to acquire those values, attitudes, and understandings that facilitate participation in a given group. Unlike the psychological order for teaching and learning that characterizes the person-centered approach, this approach emphasizes the communal, cultural, or sociological order of the content. This order refers to the progressive acquisition of skills and competencies necessary to become an ideal participant in a particular community, contributing to and perpetuating its life.

The preceding description of a community- or society-centered approach emphasizes conformity and perpetuation of the status quo. But it is also possible to identify this approach with an effort to transform or revolutionize a society or to establish a community as an expression of ideals and values that are not embraced by the wider society. Thus education can play a reconstructionist role, providing an alternative to the status quo and a means by which to question prevailing norms for society. Such an alternative community might envision its mission as providing a protected and guarded space that may further the larger task of reform, renewal, or revitalization of society. For example, some Christians stress the need for Christian schools and home schools as an alternative to public schools that do not integrate their teachings with the Christian faith. Advocates of this approach contend that persons and content can be considered only in the light of the larger community and society that affect the educational experience.