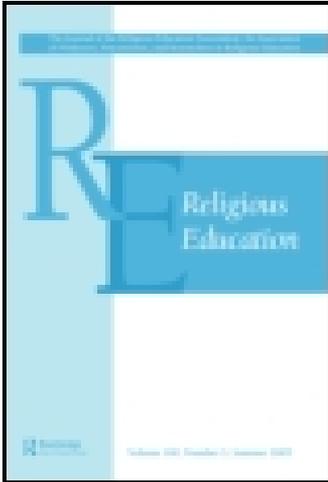


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## Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urea20>

### THE CONCEPT OF DISCIPLESHIP IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Leland Harder (1963) THE CONCEPT OF DISCIPLESHIP IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION, Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association, 58:4, 347-358, DOI: [10.1080/0034408630580404](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408630580404)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408630580404>

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Religious education has been approached in terms of instruction, nurture, and experience. Each of these is limited and needs to be incorporated into a larger scheme of things. Some writers have suggested that we should speak of Gospel-centered education. The following article works out a point of view against this background in terms of . . . . .

## THE CONCEPT OF DISCIPLESHIP IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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FOR ONE WHO slipped into the academic parlor of Christian education through the side door, an aspect of this field as a theological discipline which is most baffling is the diversity of conceptions abroad of the meaning of Christian education itself. One might get initiated into this field through the writings of Randolph Crump Miller of Yale Divinity School; and from the first of his recently completed trilogy of volumes, we learn that the purpose of Christian education is "to impart Christian truth."<sup>1</sup> Although we would like to think that what unites Christians is a common confession of historic Christian tenets — the doctrine of the trinity, for example — the first difficulty with Miller's declaration is the wide variation of meaning which is still designated by the term, "Christian truth." James Smart criticizes Miller at this point when he writes, "At no point does he take account of the actual situation: that the Church's educational program already has, not only beneath it but involved in every detail of it, a number of theologies, and that, because Christian educators have failed to be critical theologians, the Church has lacked a department of theology that would help it, in its educational

activities, to escape from false or confused theologies into a true theology."<sup>2</sup>

Smart's own conception of Christian education begins with a reaffirmation of the biblical distinction between preaching and teaching as separate services required by the "Word of God," with preaching designating the proclamation of this Word to man in his unbelief, and teaching designating the ongoing unfolding of this same Word to man in his belief.<sup>3</sup> Smart's approach has the advantage of beginning with a biblical basis, but its difficulties are the ever precarious differentiation between evangelism and Christian education and the problem of integrating the various legitimate dimensions of the learning process (or processes) in the continuing education of a Christian.

Once we accept Smart's distinction between preaching and teaching as both biblical and valid operationally, we are confronted immediately with the problem of the relationship of these two ministries to their single source in the Christian revelation, on one hand, the form of the human response, on the other hand, and the legitimate processes by which these ministries bring about their desired response. "Man" in Smart's distinction is generic; and to the extent that areas of unbelief remain in the life of each believer, man continues to be a

<sup>1</sup>Randolph C. Miller, *The Clue to Christian Education* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 2. See also: Randolph C. Miller, *Biblical Theology and Christian Education* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), pp. 4-7; Randolph C. Miller, *Christian Nurture and the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 184-186.

<sup>2</sup>James D. Smart, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), pp. 66-67.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

candidate for the preaching ministry. Moreover, a given instance of communicating the Gospel (for example, Jesus' parable of the sower) may be simultaneously preaching and teaching, depending on whether it is proclamation for the response of belief or unfolding for the response of continuing obedience in the lives of the respondents. Thus, these ministries can be divided into the three parts that constitute them: the Christian revelation, the processes by which a person becomes and continues a Christian, and the human response that is required.

By "Christian revelation," I refer to the confession of the Christian church that God has made himself known to us in history, that he has chosen to come to us and to show us what is his will for our existence. As Christians we believe that God has done this uniquely and fully in Jesus Christ. When we speak of God's revelation as "Christian truth," as does Miller, we refer not centrally to propositions in the Bible or in oral tradition or *about* Jesus Christ; we speak of the person of Christ himself.<sup>4</sup> In the Gospel according to John, it is Jesus himself who is the truth (Jn. 14:6). Likewise, when we speak of God's revelation as the "Word of God," as does Smart, we refer not centrally to the Bible, nor to any oral tradition that survives in the church, nor even to the universal experience among Christians of many times and places that Christ abides with us still; we refer to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, himself.<sup>5</sup> Again in the Fourth Gospel it is Jesus himself who is the Word of God, the supreme revelation of God to man. (Jn. 1:1).

CONCERNING THE processes by which a man becomes and continues a Christian, we

have need to try to specify the operational forms which preaching and teaching can legitimately take as these ministries are implemented. Since the major part of this paper deals with a description and analysis of four principal processes in the teaching ministry of the church, the clarification of how these processes relate also to the preaching ministry can best be deferred to the final section of this paper.

This holds also for the distinction between *initial* responses and *continuing* responses to the Word of God, since the legitimacy of this distinction is based wholly on the legitimacy of the distinction between preaching and teaching. The question of a distinction between "conversion" and "growth" in the Christian life has been one of the baffling ambiguities in the literature of Christian education. The use of these particular terms may be part of the problem; but as soon as one accepts as valid a distinction between preaching and teaching, it makes sense to speak of two types of human response that are required, namely, *belief* (i.e., initial responses, such as accepting Christ as Savior) and *obedience* (i.e., continuing responses, such as following Christ as Lord).

In my reading in the field of Christian Education, I have discerned three dominant conceptions of the *process* of Christian education; and the pitfall of many educators is their attempt to denote by any one of these all that must be included in the term, Christian education. These three conceptions may be labeled Christian nurture, Christian instruction, and Christian experience. It is the thesis of this paper that these motifs are valid as processes of Christian education, but become perverted when used

<sup>4</sup>Although Miller stresses the centrality of "Christian truth" in his interpretation of Christian education, it would be misleading to imply by this that he is merely returning to a "transmissive form of education" in the sense in which George Albert Coe used this latter term. In his "trilogy that presents a modern, constructive approach to Christian education," Miller has attempted to work out a new integration of the content of the Christian revelation (what he calls "truth-about-God-in-relation-to-man") and a life-centered educational methodology. The slogan for his approach is "Theology in the background; faith and grace in the foreground."

<sup>5</sup>Smart, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 24-28. It is clear in these two references that Smart identifies the "Word of God," not with the text of Scripture but with the person of Jesus Christ. The gist of his position is found on page 25: "God's revelation of himself is not a communication merely of information about himself or of abstract truths which can be conveyed in words alone or trusted wholly to the pages of a book. It is God himself who is revealed — not just something about God but a truth that is at the same time a life, a personal life. . . ."

as criteria for the truth that is taught. It is for this reason that a fourth conception is needed which can be grounded in the Word of God in a way that the others are not. Such a motif is to be found in the concept of Christian discipleship, which oddly enough is infrequently used as a synonym for Christian education in the literature. In the writer's opinion, this is the one motif that can be used as the criterion for the legitimacy of the others, connoting as it does a vertical relationship between Jesus Christ as living Lord and the contemporary disciple as one who learns from him.

AS AN EXAMPLE of the problem that is being posed, Randolph C. Miller in the third volume of his trilogy has distinguished between "instruction" and "nurture," the former designating "the transmission of factual information and its interpretation," and the latter designating "the involvement of the pupil in the atmosphere and relationships of a community, including knowledge about it as a means of loyalty to it."<sup>6</sup> The importance of this distinction according to Miller is that nurture is the broader term, semantically able to incorporate the meaning of the narrower term, instruction. Christian education is then defined as "the nurture of the total person in all the relationships of life seen from the perspective of membership in the Christian community."<sup>7</sup> For reasons that will be given below, I object to the attempt to compel any one of the current concepts of instruction, nurture, or a third which is usually labeled experience, to carry the total weight of meaning inherent in the inclusive term, Christian education. The interesting thing is that Miller seems to assert the same thing in the next-to-last section of his third volume. In this section entitled, "The Limits of Education," he speaks of the restrictions of education conceived in terms of instruction, problem-solving [experience], and nurture. He goes on to write,

One way of putting this is to say that there

are six steps in the Christian commitment: a person must know, feel, worship, decide, join, and act. He can be nurtured through the first three steps, but in the moment of decision he must take a personal risk, knowing he is surrounded by the members of the total body but that he alone is responsible, and then he becomes fully a member of the body.<sup>8</sup>

In the opinion of the present writer, Miller ends where he should have begun. It is precisely the last three steps as listed with which Christian education ought to have most to do. Because of the way it is grounded in the Gospel, a concept of Christian education as discipleship is not subject to the limitations which Miller correctly attributes to the three processes which he names.

As I will attempt to show in the rest of this paper, discipleship always includes the motifs of nurture, instruction, and experience; but the latter three motifs do not always indicate discipleship.

## I

THE FIRST motif is that of Christian nurture. By Christian nurture I refer to the largely unconscious and informal assimilation of Christian beliefs and attitudes through the constant association with those Christians to whose fosterage one is committed. The context of Christian nurture may be the church; it may conceivably be a so-called Christian community or institution or state; but the chief context for Christian nurture is usually thought to be the smaller circle of the Christian family.

The motif of religious nurture is as old as the institution of the family itself, which according to anthropological data takes us back to the dawn of human history. In his classical study of ancient Semitic religions, W. Robertson Smith tells us that "A man did not choose his religion or frame it himself; it came to him as part of the general scheme of social obligations and ordinances laid upon him, as a matter of course, by his position in the family and in

<sup>6</sup>Miller, *Christian Nurture and the Church*, p. vii.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 194.

the nation."<sup>9</sup> This is rather crassly put, but it is quite apparent that nurture was the predominant form of religious education among the ancient Hebrews, at least until the time of the Exile. "In this long formative period there were no formal schools, and yet this people carried on an effective education in which religion was intertwined with the other affairs of daily life."<sup>10</sup> This form of religious education at its best is spelled out in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."<sup>11</sup>

It was the 19th century theologian, Horace Bushnell, who took this Old Testament image of nurture and crystallized it in a way that has dominated a large segment of the religious education movement in this country to the present time.<sup>12</sup> In his classical work entitled, *Christian Nurture*, Bushnell employed two principal arguments to support his thesis that "the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."<sup>13</sup> The first of these was

<sup>9</sup>W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 28.

<sup>10</sup>Lewis J. Sherrill, "A Historical Study of the Religious Education Movement," *Orientation in Religious Education*, P. H. Lotz, ed. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup>Deuteronomy 6:4-7.

<sup>12</sup>"Nurture" has been by far the most popular term used in the titles of volumes in the field of Christian Education by 20th century writers. I would strongly suspect that this reflects a rather direct influence of Bushnell on main-line Protestant thinking, in which the term has been adopted as a designation for the church's total teaching mandate, and for obvious theological reasons. Certainly, denominations practicing infant baptism would like the term because it fits a doctrine of the church which is continuous with other forms of organic existence, beginning with the family and ending with the total society.

<sup>13</sup>Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. 4.

the so-called organic unity argument: that the values and character of the fostering group is propagated in the children of that group as naturally and by a law as truly organic as when the sap of the trunk flows into a limb. Of course, Bushnell was speaking mainly of the family as the fostering group; and the validity of this application would be accepted in principle by most of us. But according to Bushnell, the family is but the first of three great forms of organic existence which God has appointed for the race, the other two being the church and the state.<sup>14</sup> It would have been as impossible for Bushnell to deny the responsibility of the family and church for the solidarity of a monolithic society as it was for numerous Constantinian synthesizers before him. This for reason of the second argument, that the modern compact between the Christian family, church, and state, is continuous with the ancient covenant that bound Jehovah and the nation of Israel.

IF SOME OF us cannot bring ourselves to conform to this concept of the family and church as institutions of society, those who accept this view should know why. To us it seems important that the new covenant between each person and our Lord, by which a person becomes and continues a Christian, is always the criterion of whether organic connections are truly Christian, and not *vice versa*. The first indication that our Lord intended to found a believers' church was the way he called men out of their homes and institutionalized organic connections to follow him.

Let there be no doubt that Christian nurture possesses a large measure of authenticity as a vital dimension of the education of Christians. It capitalizes on the intricacies of the mental and emotional growth of a child. It stresses the informal relations between parent and child, and between church and child, insisting that the words which are piled upon words in the instruction of our children do not have absolute meanings apart from prior experiences of personal relationships. It emphasizes the

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

importance of living our faith in the primary relationships of one's own home antecedently to any Christian vocation in the wider social context.

The principal criticism of an extreme religious nurture philosophy is what has been called the propagation of bad faith. In his chapter entitled "Jewish Education," Lewis J. Sherrill pointed out that it was the Hebrew family itself that was most vulnerable to the alien influences of surrounding pagan cultures.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in a devastating critique of the religious establishment in America, Peter Berger shows how a typical Christian nurture in America today "provides the individual with the means by which he can hide from himself the true nature of his existence." It "reassures and strengthens him in his social roles, however 'inauthentic' these may be." It "thus tends to be an obstacle in the progress toward 'authenticity' as a Christian person."<sup>16</sup> These things it does because of the dangerous Bushnellian assumption that true Christian faith can be propagated "seminally,"<sup>17</sup> without a break with the institutional forms of a culture-bound Christianity.

## II

THIS LEADS US historically as well as theologically to a consideration of the second motif in Christian education, which is here labeled Christian instruction. By Christian instruction I refer to the formal study of the literary treasures of the Christian life and thought, usually through formal schooling. Presupposed in Christian instruction is

<sup>15</sup>Sherrill, *The Rise of Christian Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), pp. 37-41.

<sup>16</sup>Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 102.

<sup>17</sup>Bushnell, *op. cit.*, p. 173. It is difficult to know when Bushnell is speaking figuratively and when he is speaking literally. Apparently he was entirely serious when in his chapter entitled "The Out-Populating Power of the Christian Stock" he argued that Christians have more virility than non-Christians.

a library of accumulated written materials, with the Holy Scriptures as the paramount resource.

The image of religious instruction is also very old, but in no case can it be dated prior to the development in any society of the art of writing. The historical setting of the 22nd and 23rd chapters of II Kings is a classical instance of this motif. Josiah becomes King of Judah, and during his 31-year reign a great reformation takes place. The altars of the Baals are destroyed and the temples restored. In the process of restoration, a roll of manuscript is discovered; and when Josiah has finished reading it, he is so moved he rends his clothes. He calls for an assembly of all the people to hear the words of the Lord which had been found in the house of the Lord. We read that the people followed Josiah in renewing the covenant with their Lord, to walk in obedience to his commandments which were written in this book.

The publication of this document around the year 621 B.C. was one of the great landmarks in the history of Judah, for her religion began henceforth to be a religion of a book. After the Exile, Ezra regularly assembled the people to instruct them from the Book of the Law, committing them still more deeply to a book as embodying the will of God. Later, when the Prophets and so-called Writings came to be recognized as authoritative as well as the Law, there came the day when it was thought to be necessary to declare once and for all which books were to be included into the canon and which were not — canon meaning literally "final rule of faith and practice."

It was during this same period that formal schools were established to supplement if not to replace the more primitive nurture system; and the curriculum of these schools was predominantly the Hebrew scriptures — Law, Prophets, and Writings. One of the most significant insights in Sherrill's study, *The Rise of Christian Education*, is his interpretation of the failure of Jewish nurture in the home to guarantee survival of a covenantal religion, and the solution

that was sought in the establishment of a formal school system.<sup>18</sup>

How is one to interpret this total development? At the risk of over-simplification, I would suggest three stages in this development. *First*, Josiah rediscovers a Scriptural document, and in it he finds an authoritative norm for his reformation. *Second*, Scriptural documents continue to be produced and collected and used with varying degrees of authority until a time when men feel compelled to declare once and for all which are to be considered orthodox, and which are not. *Third*, if then this canon is the final authority in matters of faith and life, adherents must be thoroughly instructed in the content of this canon, requiring a system of schools with graded curriculum and instruction at many levels.

WE CAN OBSERVE this same process in the history of the Christian church;<sup>19</sup> and I am about to propose that in steps two and three of this scheme, there is a deadly peril which again can turn this second image of Christian education into a perversion. But first, let there be no doubt that Christian instruction is another authentic dimension of the education of Christians, especially when the object of our study is "the strange new world of the Bible." Unless the Bible is rediscovered in the lives of each of us in some similar manner, our faith, too, will become warped, for the Bible is the locus of our own encounter with the revelatory events of our faith; it is the place where we meet the historical Jesus.

The perversion of Christian instruction, like that of nurture, comes at the point where it is compelled to carry the total weight of the meaning of Christian education. It is at this point that Christian edu-

cation degenerates into transmitting pre-certified content as an end in itself without necessarily contributing to the central purpose of the pupil's continuing encounter with the risen Lord. It is at this point that our goals become fixed-end knowledge "outcomes," with the tendency to manipulate the pupil to produce the end desired. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on one's viewpoint), it can never be pre-certified that the Bible has any authority in itself. When we speak of a biblical authority, we are referring to a derived authority, derived from the Word that was made flesh; and by this we mean that the Bible is authoritative for us only when it becomes the locus for our encounter with Jesus Christ. We believe that the Bible is a means by which the living God speaks to living men in the living struggle of every generation; but in our teaching we are always tempted to reduce the Bible to a pre-certified blueprint from which we abstract the celestial specifications for the Christian life. "It follows [then] that this is the standard you try to conform to, a kind of law you obey, the pattern you try to induce or condition in the young."<sup>20</sup> We believe that the Bible is able to speak for itself and that the Word of God is self-authenticating; but because the people find it difficult to understand, "We are . . . under the temptation to take away the very liberty which we profess we are offering. In taking it upon ourselves to proffer the help which people ask, we expose them and ourselves as well to the very risk which we deplore; namely, creating a doctrine about the Bible which will then stand between the people and the Bible so that they no longer hear what it speaks."<sup>21</sup>

### III

THESE PERILS lead us logically to a consideration of the third motif in Christian education, which is designated by the label,

<sup>18</sup>Sherrill, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-5.

<sup>19</sup>For example, Luther agonized over the salvation of his soul, and rediscovered the norm of Scripture in the words of Paul in Romans 1:17, ". . . the righteousness of God is revealed through faith . . ." At the Diet of Worms, he pronounced the formal principle of the Reformation — *sola scriptura*. Finally he translated the Bible into the vernacular and promoted schools at several levels so that the masses could have accessibility to this so-called final authority in matters of faith and life.

<sup>20</sup>J. Donald Butler, *Religious Education: The Foundations and Practice of Nurture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 137.

<sup>21</sup>Lewis J. Sherrill, *The Gift of Power* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 94.

Christian experience. By Christian experience, I refer to learning by first-hand encounter with the problems of existence as distinguished from the institutionalized study of those problems in the environment of classroom or library. More specifically I refer to the acquisition of special skills and abilities through actual personal performance, occasionally with some form of advance tutelage but always with considerable trial-and-error.

The teaching which our Lord gave to his disciples was predominantly in the midst of life situations. To be sure, he gave them explicit instruction about the Kingdom of God; but about his own role in inaugurating the Kingdom he was mysteriously secretive. The explanation of the so-called "Messianic Secret" in the synoptic gospels is to be found in Jesus' own words to his disciples, "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?"<sup>22</sup> It was not until Caesarea Philippi, after months of first-hand encounter, that the identity of Jesus as the Christ was revealed to them and confirmed by our Lord. To be sure, he gave them explicit instruction about the nature of discipleship; but he taught them how to be "fishers of men" by sending them forth into encounter with men. In the missionary training of his disciples, it is preposterous to suppose that our Lord might have established a Jesus of Nazareth Institute of Evangelism, or a Son of Man Biblical Seminary.

Twentieth century Christian educators — such as George Albert Coe, William Clayton Bower, and Harrison Elliott — were right when they asserted that much of what Christians are to learn can only be learned in the crucible of life situations. They were right when they observed that there is in the Gospel itself a certain appeal to experimentation as a way of coming to know that the Gospel is true and vibrant.

THE ERROR of these same men, as with

the other systematizers we have mentioned, is that they took one important dimension of Christian education and tried to force it to carry all of the weight of its inherent meaning. In this case they so exalted the importance of immediate experience as to make it the primary criterion by which the Gospel is known and interpreted. This is the criterion of pragmatism, which asserts that to determine the meaning of any idea, put it into practice in the objective world of actualities and whatever its consequences prove to be, these constitute the meaning of the idea. According to Elliott, it can never be certified that Christian truths are already known by virtue of some external criterion, but that such truths are always discovered in and through the educational process.<sup>23</sup> I quite agree that it is impossible to confine the living experience of Christianity within any so-called authoritative interpretation; but I am troubled by the ease with which Elliott moves from *no authoritative interpretation* of Christianity to *no authority* whatever in Christianity. It is quite evident that the only "authority" which Elliott recognizes as legitimate is that which is inherent in the educational experience itself.<sup>24</sup>

It was H. Shelton Smith's book, *Faith and Nurture*, that laid bare the theological presuppositions of the modern experience-centered religious education movement, showing how these presuppositions have led to an attenuated Christianity, and how their practical application has had the consequences of undercutting their own ends.<sup>25</sup> An example of how these presuppositions can lead one to misinterpret the way in which Jesus is the starting-point of Christian education is Bower's volume, *Christ and Christian Education*. According to Bower, Jesus began not with formulated beliefs but with living persons where they were in their experience of life, seeking to educe within

<sup>22</sup>Mark 8:18. The term "Messianic Secret" refers to the repeated refrain in which Jesus asks those who had discovered his true identity to keep silent about. See Mark 1:44, 3:12, 5:43, 7:36, 8:30, 9:9, etc.

<sup>23</sup>Harrison S. Elliott, *Can Religious Education be Christian?* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), pp. 309-319.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 319-321.

<sup>25</sup>H. Shelton Smith, *Faith and Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948).

them a certain "quality of life" that would permeate the totality of their behavior. "Rather than give them ready-made solutions, Jesus threw people back upon their own resources."<sup>26</sup> Bower believed that the early church obscured the true image of Jesus as a great moral teacher by deifying him; and this, apparently, for two reasons: a sense of mission to declare a message rather than share an experience, and a sense of need to define the beliefs of the new religion as a fixed point of reference for the future.

THE CONTEMPORARY dissent from this interpretation is well grounded both in biblical research and theological critique. Studies by such scholars as C. H. Dodd,<sup>27</sup> John Wick Bowman,<sup>28</sup> and T. W. Manson,<sup>29</sup> have shown clearly that the "sense of mission" which Bower attributed to the early church was not invented by the apostles but given as a mandate by the deliberate intention of Jesus. Certainly it is much less possible for Christian educators today to picture Jesus as merely going about sharing a "quality of life" with people, and to fail to see him as one who was very conscious of a Messianic destiny and who accounted himself and his church as God's chosen agents for the redemption of mankind. C. S. Lewis put it rather dramatically as follows:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic . . . or else he'd be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't let us come with any patronizing nonsense about His be-

ing a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to.<sup>30</sup>

As Christians we confess that Jesus Christ is the central authority for Christian faith and life, and we affirm in reply to Elliott that this is always an authority that is external to our human experience. To be sure, this authority is not arbitrarily imposed, as the crucifixion of our Lord bears witness; but it remains an authority which is outside of ourselves. To all who accept Christ's authority, he gives the power to become children of God; but even those who reject it are not able ultimately to escape it in its eschatological form.

#### IV

THIS LEADS US, finally, to a fourth conception of Christian education, which is that of Christian discipleship. The word disciple means literally *learner*; and by Christian discipleship I refer to a direct personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord in the context of his church through which one learns how to live daily in Christ's eternal Kingdom. Jesus said, ". . . take my yoke upon you, and learn from me" (Mt. 11:29).

The first problem that we face in attempting to visualize the image of Christian discipleship is that within history the Christian life seems invariably to become routinized in the process of settling down to permanency as part of the ongoing natural social order. Perhaps, for this reason, we shall come closest to a true image of discipleship if we listen to the testimony of one who has been a disciple for only four years:

What is it to learn of Jesus Christ? In the beginning of my Christian experience I was convinced I knew all about Him. With a great sweeping gesture of abandon, I "sold all" and flung myself after Him, I thought! Now, I see that I didn't know Him at all. Quite suddenly He had invaded me, but I was still too blinded by my own "light" to see His face. Then, a little later on, when my own light began to die out, I was too dazzled by His light to see His face at all.

When we begin to be puzzled by Jesus

<sup>26</sup>William C. Bower, *Christ and Christian Education*. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), pp. 23-24.

<sup>27</sup>C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).

<sup>28</sup>John Wick Bowman, *The Intention of Jesus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943).

<sup>29</sup>T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1948).

<sup>30</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Case for Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), p. 45.

Christ, I believe that is good. It is doubtful that He would ever turn out to be like our conception of Him. How could we conceive a Lord whose face is "set like a flint" and who stands like "an angel with tears in his eyes" at one and the same time? How could we conceive a Lord who "hath torn and yet will heal us? Who hath smitten, and yet will bind us up"? At these times of utter dismay about Jesus Christ, we feel we are being drowned in darkness. We begin to realize that there is a great distance between Jesus Christ and us. *He is up ahead.* We must run faster. We must pray more. We must spend more time with Him. Somehow, O God, somehow we must get closer to Jesus Christ! He is up ahead. He is up ahead. We cannot reach Him, and yet He said:

"Learn of me!"

"How can I learn of you, Lord? Where will I begin?"

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me."

My Lord's answer: "Deny yourself, take up *your* cross daily, and follow me." Hard? Yes. Without His grace and His strength it is impossible. With Him, "all things are possible." And so wondrous and so greatly to be desired.<sup>31</sup>

There is in this excerpt an image of Christian education which is admittedly rather vague, because there is so much that remains mysterious about Christian discipleship. And yet in the writer's opinion it is the only one which can be safely absolutized, for the reason that what makes education Christian is precisely that which is distinctive about discipleship — the life of faith and obedience in response to the confrontation and call of our Lord. Discipleship alone can incorporate those aspects that are valid in the other motifs. Nurture, instruction, and experience may or may not imply discipleship; but discipleship always incorporates the other three.

Certainly we can say that Christian discipleship includes the dimension of nurture — the nurture of our children, and especially as it relates to our own fostering attachment to Jesus Christ in the context of his church. The image of discipleship *par excellence* is the total picture that we get of

the informal relationship between Jesus and his first entourage of disciples. On one end of this relationship was the person of our Lord, who by all evidence following his wilderness experience had a distinct Messianic self-consciousness. At the other end of this relationship were the disciples, for whom the existence of Jesus was to mean in turn a call to follow him, a response of radical decision, and many subsequent claims for their total allegiance as they were led step by step along the way. The context for Christian nurture in the disciple group was no longer primarily the organic family, for the organic family had now been transcended by the "family" of disciples. "Who are my mother and my brothers?", Jesus asked, when notified that these members of his organic family were asking for him. And pointing to those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mk. 3:33-5).

IMPLICIT IN the foregoing paragraph are two problems for the modern theology of Christian education, the analysis of which would take us beyond the scope of this paper. One is the doctrine of the church as the structured environment in which nurture takes place. Modern theologians have yet to wrestle sufficiently with a charismatic conception of the church in distinction to routinized conceptions.<sup>32</sup> The other prob-

<sup>32</sup>It has been interesting to note that contemporary sociologists are grappling with the kinds of problems that one might expect would be of considerable concern to the theologians. In his attempt to differentiate between the "church," the "denomination," and the "sect," in American organized religion, Joachim Wach observes that "historically seen, the process of the gradual substitution of official for pneumatic (spiritual) charisma which the development of the early church of the first two centuries represents, repeats itself in the history of practically all Christian groups." See his *Church, Denomination, and Sect* (Evanston: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1946), p. 11. A highly significant contribution to the same problem was made by the German sociologist, Max Weber, who gave origin to the concept of "routinization of charisma." See his *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, tr. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1947), pp. 363-391.

<sup>31</sup>Eugenia Price, *Discoveries Made from Living My New Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953), pp. 77-78.

lem is the Christian education of adults as distinct from and in one sense discontinuous with the Christian education of children.<sup>33</sup>

CERTAINLY WE CAN say that Christian discipleship includes also the dimension of instruction. I include here the Christian instruction of our children; but I refer especially to those times when our Lord must teach us through more formal and systematic discourse concerning the meaning of his Gospel. James Smart refers to "the necessity that the disciples should be instructed more fully in the truth of the Gospel, so that they might leave behind their old inadequate understanding of God, of themselves, and of all things in their world." As an example of this, he refers to "the fact that not until after the death of Jesus did the disciples give up their Jewish idea of the Messiah as one who would suddenly, by a demonstration of supernatural powers, inaugurate a universal kingdom in which Jerusalem would become the center of world government."<sup>34</sup> I suspect that, in our own day, we do not grasp much more readily the secrets about the Kingdom of God which are yet "hid with Christ in God." Following our Lord's call of the twelve, he went up on the "mountain" where he gave them some intensive instruction regarding life in the Kingdom. In this manifesto a radical love and nonresistance were declared to be the new basis for a disciple's relations with others. A more scandalous teaching has hardly ever been heard in human history, unless it would be the instruction which Jesus gave these same men on the road to Jerusalem, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (Lk. 14:27-8).

I frankly confess that I don't know the

<sup>33</sup>In this regard John Fry's book, *A Hard Look at Adult Christian Education* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961) must be read with as much seriousness as we read Shelton Smith's book, *Faith and Nurture*, over a decade ago.

<sup>34</sup>Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

full meaning of these teachings of our Lord for Christian existence today. For me, as for the Mennonite Church in which I have been nurtured, they mean Christian pacifism; but I strongly suspect that in the mind of our Lord they mean vastly more than this. I think I see some connection between his Messianic calling as it was clarified in the wilderness, his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, his admonitions on the road to Jerusalem, and his conquest on Calvary. Beyond this all I can say is to echo the words of the Christian convert who was quoted before, "He is up ahead. He is up ahead. We cannot reach him, and yet he said, 'Learn of me!'"

The implication of this for a modern theory of Christian education are several, which again can only be formulated without elaboration. One is a reorientation to the Bible as the locus for our own encounter with the scandalous instruction of our Lord—an instruction which will open unto us as it did for those first disciples a new future of grace, if we have the courage to let it. Another, which is corollary to the first, is that the key to any modern design for curriculum in Christian education is obedience to the instruction of our Lord, which means a curriculum that permits us to study the biblical sources *before* rather than *after* deciding what their relevance to contemporary Christian living is supposed to be.

CERTAINLY WE CAN say further that Christian discipleship includes the dimension of experience. Here again I mean the first-hand experience of our children with the realities of the Christian faith; but I am referring particularly to the cutting edge of the mature Christian's encounter with the world. In 1952 I graduated from seminary and was "prepared" for my first church assignment. A week or two later came the installation as pastor of a small mission church on the south side of Chicago. Although my wife and I entered that work with a strong sense of mission to carry out the preaching and teaching mandates which our Lord gave to his church, it didn't take us long to discover how remote to our situation was so much of what we learned in

seminary. Now desperation itself became our teacher. In our predicament we learned how to pray. In our impasse we discovered resources which are largely inaccessible until they are provided in the existential situation as God's gift through faith and obedience. Those years in Chicago were an internship in the practice of the Christian life which can never be transmitted through the nurture of a Christian home or the instruction of a Christian classroom.

There are not two definitions of discipleship — one for the original twelve and one for us — it is one and the same movement of Christ's church into the battlefronts of the world. Although we sense that evangelism belongs to the essential being of the church, the fact is that most of us are trying to do this work of our Lord by proxy rather than by first-hand involvement. Yet, I doubt whether any of us will ever really understand the meaning of Pentecost until we ourselves become directly involved in the spread of the Gospel in our day. The implication of this comment for a modern theory of Christian education is a curriculum in which the motif of experience emerges anew as an essential concomitant of instruction. What about an adult church school class whose objective is to learn how to carry out the task of evangelism and whose participants come together each Sunday morning to discuss the experiences they had in their assigned house calls of the previous week? Not only is this legitimate Christian curriculum, but it comes closer to being so than the traditional approaches most of us know about in which the "Bible" is purported to be the curriculum.

One of the reasons that discipleship systems in history seem invariably to become routinized as time passes on is that sooner or later the original leader dies. The problem of succession must then be met in a variety of possible ways, all of which lead either to legalized or traditionalized forms of reorganization. In Christian discipleship, however, there is within the revelation that produced the movement a reality that completely destroys the logic of the argument of inevitable routinization. If the

original Master has not in fact disappeared, but as the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep he has been raised from the dead to become the abiding Lord of his church (I Cor. 15:20), then the problem of successor does not arise for there is no predecessor. This does not mean that Christians can now substitute some mystical conception of the Christian life for the structured obedience that characterized discipleship in the Gospel accounts. It does recognize, however, that it is quite possible to develop a time-locked doctrine of discipleship in which the object of the continuing response is the Jesus of the Bible rather than the Christ of the Eternal Present, in which case a living discipleship must still become routinized by replacing it with adherence primarily to a written tradition. The nature of continuing discipleship is such that we can never predict with certainty what Christ's leading will be in each new situation. If this were the case, we would soon end up following our own predilection of next steps in place of the existential leading of our risen Lord.

Christian discipleship, then, means to learn this day in the yoke of the living Christ. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me." If there is any validity to my thesis that discipleship is the only image of Christian education that can carry the total weight of inherent meaning of this theological field of study, it is because Jesus himself becomes our teacher in the context of his church.

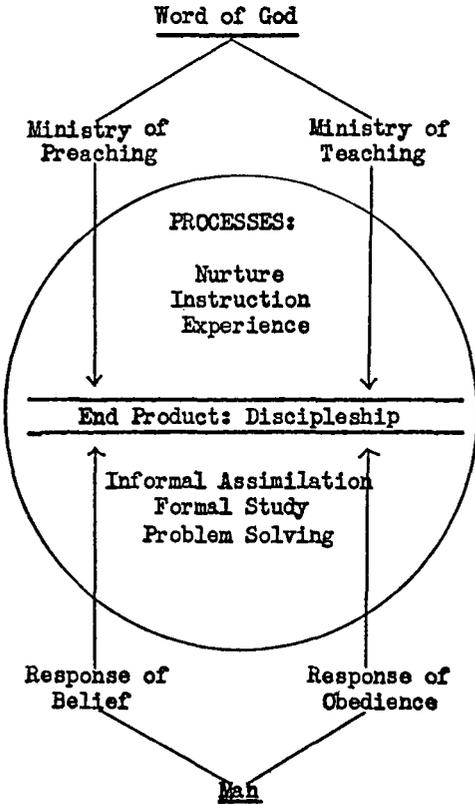
## V

IN THE PRECEDING SECTIONS of this paper, four motifs in Christian education have been discussed — nurture, instruction, experience, and discipleship. We have said that the first three of these motifs are valid as processes of Christian education, but become perverted when used as truth claims. Discipleship is also a process, but it is more than a process. It is grounded in the Word of God in a way that the other three processes are not, since it alone requires a personal relationship to Jesus Christ, who is

the Word of God. Thus, discipleship is both a process of Christian education and a criterion of whether any other educational process is authentic. It is both an aspect of the Gospel and an end-product of the Gospel. It remains, finally, to relate these notions to the distinction between preaching and teaching, on one hand, and the responses of belief and obedience, on the

other. The following diagram may help to indicate how these relationships are being conceptualized.

The circle symbolizes the processes of nurture (informal assimilation of a sponsoring group's values), instruction (formal study), and experience (problem solving), all of which are legitimate dimensions in the communication of the Word of God. This Word is communicated to man through the ministries of preaching and teaching. The fact that this dual communication can be simultaneous is indicated by the way in which the three processes can serve the purpose of evangelism as well as of Christian education. The distinction between preaching and teaching is nevertheless required because certain aspects of the Word of God are more amenable at times to preaching, and other aspects to teaching, depending on whether the desired response is "initial" belief or continuing obedience. The end product of the communication of God's Word (whether by preaching or by teaching) and of the response of man (whether by belief or obedience) is *Christian discipleship* — the unique relationship between the risen Lord and the contemporary believer-follower in the context of the living church. Although authentic discipleship in contemporary times is clothed in considerable mystery, a curriculum for an education that is truly Christian must incorporate this concept in new and creative ways. This is one of the most formidable tasks confronting Christian educators in our generation.



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*(continued from page 346)*

priate these truths without loss to their existential reality. However, the Christian philosophy envisioned by Wild has not yet come into being in the West, he says, but when it does, it will give an understanding of the "life-world" which avoids the errors of partiality, inaccuracy and superficiality. Like Gilson, he holds that authentic Christian philosophizing can produce the better philosophy, but he agrees with Collins that the

purpose is *understanding* rather than salvation, demanding a philosophic order of discovery, while he differs from the Catholic philosophers by holding dogma to be an obstacle to freedom of faith and freedom of thought. Broadly speaking, all three can be called Christian philosophers in the sense that in their philosophic use of reason, these Christians do not deprive themselves of the light of their own Christian faith.