

Institute for Christian Studies

FACULTY BULLETIN

Number 4

© November, 1983

COPYRIGHT 1983

by

The Institute for Christian Studies
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
PASSING ON THE TRADITION	
Paul L. Watson	5
THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN THE EARLY CHURCH	
James W. Thompson	12
MYSTERY, MARRIAGE, AND MORALITY	
Michael R. Weed	30
THE CRISIS IN SECULAR EDUCATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY	
Allan McNicol	44
TELEVISION AND THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH Melinda Worley	69
CONTRIBUTORS	78

FOREWORD

Essays in the previous issue of the Faculty Bulletin focused on the Christian moral vision and the identity of the early church as a moral community. It was argued that faithful lives commended Christianity to many in the ancient world.

In T. R. Glover's phrase, however, the early Christians not only "out-lived and out-died" their pagan opponents; they also "out-thought" them. From the outset the church was involved in teaching and interpreting the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Thus the church was not only a moral community; it was also a teaching community--and its teaching anchored its morality.

In the emerging "therapeutic society" it is vital that the church resist the temptation to become "relevant" and "practical" to the neglect of the task of instructing believers in basic Christian beliefs. The following essays reflect upon various aspects of the church as a teaching community.

Once again, appreciation is owed to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her work in preparing the manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

TELEVISION AND THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

By Melinda Worley

Once in a while, a book appears on the secular educational scene which can be related to the church in its teaching. Neil Postman in his book Teaching As A Conserving Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979) offers a significant perspective on how responsible teaching should be carried on in our rapidly changing society. Though much of what he says about our society is not new, his descriptions are illuminating. Certainly the content of the “teaching” with which he is concerned is different from the church’s “teaching”; his carefully outlined argument for making “teaching” a “conserving” activity differs as well from that of the church’s. What is helpful to the church is a particular body of subject matter Postman draws in and the way he defines it as the essential element of “conserving” teaching. We shall begin with reasons for defining teaching as a conserving activity.

The American culture, writes Postman, has overdosed on change. Deeply absorbed in too much change too fast, our culture has experienced the erosion of continuity and tradition. The art of preservation and even the will to preserve has been lost. Postman describes the present situation in ecological terms: there exists an

imbalance in the system. Continuity with the past has been neglected. Balance must be restored if the culture is to remain healthy. He proposes that equilibrium can be restored by conserving tradition through the institution typically in charge of a culture's memory bank, viz., our schools. What he believes should be conserved is not always clear but his reasons for proposing that conservation is clear. At issue is not the value of traditions of the past but the continuity with the present those traditions provide. Postman is concerned that our culture be maintained in its most balanced form.

The church has not been immune to the pressures of rapid change in society. It has struggled, sometimes poorly, to proclaim its ancient message with fresh approaches to new situations. But its teaching is by nature "conserving," its gospel firmly rooted in the past. The believing community confesses that God's revelation, written and collected so long ago, remains true, and therefore must be conserved. What, then, does Postman have to offer us in the nurturing of our young? It is precisely at the point the ancient message intersects with a society in rapid change that Postman's categories and proposals have value. We shall begin with his assertion which has the most significance for the church.

The "Information Environment"

" . . . it is the business of the educator to assess the biases of the information environment with a view toward making them visible and keeping them under control" (p. 31).

Here Postman redefines our task of teaching as having much to do with the “information environment.” Every society has its modes and patterns of communication which are as real to the society as is the terrain. These elements of communication, the “information environment,” define the parameters of thought and learning and determine social attitudes, ideas, and intellectual capacities which will emerge. A society in which the speech of one individual to another is the major element of its “information environment” will maintain a strong bias toward oral literature which, in the absence of the written word, will be its chief medium for passing on its history to its children. When written symbols are introduced, not only will other literary styles develop but gradual changes will take place in the society’s perception of history. If rapid change takes place in the “information environment,” as has happened in American culture in the last few decades, violent changes will also take place in the categories of attitudes, thinking, and learning. The electronic media represent the most obvious and pervasive changes which have taken place in the “information environment” of our culture.

The church has recognized the changes and has understood to some degree the role of the electronic media in these changes. Discussions among teachers, parents, and sometimes church leaders, concerning the influences of media on young people are not uncommon. Such influences are occasionally addressed from pulpits. But the church may not have clearly understood the biases of the “information environment” in which

our children live nor taken its impact seriously enough to subject it and its tools, the media, to more concentrated scrutiny in our various teaching situations. Postman has provided a great service in defining this activity of scrutiny as the major business of conserving teaching. While the community of faith must ensure that its young people begin first with a solid foundation in the message of the Gospel, Postman clarifies for us the necessity of turning our attention next to the “information environment” for its biases exert pressure on the way we and our children think. We shall begin to suggest how the church might thus respond by considering two of Postman’s categories in the “information environment.”

The Image-Centered Medium

The first category Postman describes as “. . . the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States” is television. His two-chapter discussion of this medium is complex, and somewhat grandiose. It is helpful, however, that he focuses attention more on the nature of television and its impact than on the content of its programs and commercials, which is the area to which the church has most attended. We shall confine our remarks to only one aspect of television’s nature and suggest how the church can more directly respond to the impact its biases have on our young people.

Television is image-centered, i.e., its material is presented in a series of pictures in narrative form. It is, thus, non-propositional and instead of inviting abstract critical

analysis, as say a written essay might, television engages the viewer primarily through his/her emotions. There is no dialogue with the material. The viewer has no power to alter what is rapidly appearing on the screen and is therefore poorly motivated to criticize the material according to categories of moral value and judgment. Postman argues convincingly that given this nature of television which discourages calling into question any of its content, children are inclined to absorb the material uncritically whether it conflicts with what they know or believe about the real world. This is an essential bias of television to which he wishes educators to attend.

Of course, an argument might here be raised that whether the medium itself invites criticism is beside the point. The nature of television does not determine how the viewer will respond to its content. If one has the skills of critical thinking and some moral convictions, one will quite naturally subject the medium to whatever analysis and moral evaluation is appropriate. That is precisely what we are here suggesting. If our children are left without these critical skills of analysis and have no clearly defined moral convictions, or if it has never occurred to them to apply these skills and values to what they watch on television, they are more likely to absorb the material without regard to its implications for their behavior and beliefs. The bias of television has remained for them unrecognized and out of their control and we, their teachers, have failed in our task of conserving teaching.

How can the church best respond? If one is to design refined curriculum for studying a medium, one must be accomplished in understanding what the nature of that medium is and how its content affects its viewers. No accomplished understanding can be claimed here. However, there are some points of focus that present themselves as worthy of consideration when a refined curriculum is developed by the church.

Teaching Contexts. Since children do much of their television viewing at home, guidelines for family television viewing might be helpful, not confined only to what kind of programming is appropriate to particular age-groups, but suggesting ways in which parents can discuss the content of programs they watch with their children. Modeling appropriate critical skills is an exceptionally effective teaching method.

The church classroom or young people's group can be an excellent context for teaching critical television viewing, provided each session includes watching selected programming together and that assignments are made which encourage use of the developing skills at home. The goal is to teach critical skills that are eventually applied by the children to their own television viewing.

Suggestions for Discussion. Children should be led to ask how the medium engages them, to discover for themselves which characters in a program they most identify with and why, and how that identification affects their "feelings" concerning

the character's behavior. Discussion is also appropriate concerning how particular behavior or convictions in a program conflict with those of the church and what the consequences of each perspective are.

Young children are not generally ready to participate in very abstract discussions but they are not too young to learn to address critical questions to the television they watch. The context of Saturday morning cartoons might be a fruitful starting point. They can be led to ask how logical consequences of behavior differ in reality from those in a cartoon in which a character throws another off a cliff. Most of them know the difference but teaching them to discuss it clearly is a good beginning.

“Technology as Salvation”

A second category of the “information environment” is the ‘Technical Thesis.’ We shall confine our discussion to an offspring of this thesis which Postman calls “technology as salvation” (p. 98) as seen in the content of television commercials. The subject matter of television commercials is rarely trivial. They typically address basic human needs. The need to share the values of a group, for instance, is often very effectively dealt with in beer commercials, or consider how well the need for status is manipulated by car commercials. The fear of pain, of being sexually unattractive, of being thought to function poorly in the eyes of one's peers are some of the apprehensions dealt with in commercials. What is most significant, however, is that

almost always the solutions offered to these deep psychological needs are products of technology. In a twenty-second parable, one is told, usually with impeccable technique, that whatever one's problems, the solutions to them are immediate and cheap, and it's brought to you by the power and might of technology. This is what Christine Nystrom calls the "metaphysics" of television, the "principle assumptions about what is at the core of human failings and about how we may overcome them" (p. 98). Of course, "technology as salvation" did not originate with television commercials but it is very definitely a bias of television advertising as well as programming. The church must draw the attention of our children to this bias, teach them to recognize it when they see it, and further, to see the essential conflict this bias has with the values of the church.

Suggestions for Discussion. In refining curriculum for these purposes, the church must come to terms with some of the merchandising techniques on which advertising depends. The children should learn to observe, for instance, how the actors/actresses in commercials are dressed, how they act, and what their age, financial status and profession seems to be. Thus, they can perhaps begin to discern at which groups of people the commercial is aimed and what connections the commercial attempts to make between these "types" of people and the product being sold.

Further, children should be encouraged to notice for themselves what is said about the product, what is implied, and what is left unsaid. They need to identify what

problem is presented in the commercial, that the problem often manipulates a deep human need, and that the solution offered by the product may or may not be a realistic one.

Summary. The believing community strives to teach its children what it believes and how these beliefs define what is real and valuable. It struggles to address the human condition in ways that are informed by scripture. But the church must also teach its children to recognize the biases of the secular society in which it finds itself and train them to discern when those biases conflict with that which they have come to believe. We must prepare them to live lives of faith in an age of confusion and change. Neil Postman's book Teaching As A Conserving Activity can help us in that task.

CONTRIBUTORS

With the exception of Paul Watson, who is minister of the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina, the contributors to this issue are all faculty members of the Institute for Christian Studies.

Ash, Anthony Lee, B.S., Florida State University; M.A., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., University of Southern California. Old Testament, Church History.

McNicol, Allan, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Intertestamental Literature.

Thompson, James W., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature.

Watson, Paul, B.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., M.A., M.Ph., Ph.D., Yale University.

Weed, Michael R., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University. Ethics, Theology.

Worley, Melinda, B.S. Ed., Abilene Christian University; M.A.R., Yale Divinity School. Religious Education.