

The Task of Teaching our Faith in the Church

(Educational Theory and Theological Inspection)

by Cathy Monkman

At the heart of my understanding of the task of teaching our faith are the words of direction found in the Shema: these words call me as a parent, a church educator, and a Christian to pass on the faith: “**Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.**” (Deut. 6: 6-7) To know the story of our faith, to live our faith in every facet of our lives and to share these words of faith with people of **all ages**—doing so with love—is exactly what Jesus modeled for us. Jesus called his disciples, claimed them as family, traveled with them, taught them, built relationships with them and equipped them with skills and courage to be effective disciples who would carry on his ministry. Jesus gave instruction and modeled new behaviors. Jesus, God Incarnate, **led and directed** them as they **followed and learned** from him. The, Jesus commissioned them, “Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28: 19-20) My **theological and theoretical approach** to teaching our faith in the church is to attempt to follow this model, realizing that teaching in the church is first and foremost *relational*. Teaching the truth to God’s people through a variety of opportunities and by using a variety of methods and processes allows God to lead us and transform us into new ways of thinking, being and living.

Teaching our faith within the context of the church should have the goal to nurture disciples who know, love and follow Jesus Christ in the same way that Jesus nurtured his disciples. God reaches out and claims us to be part of God’s work, just as Jesus chose his disciples to do his work. It is essential to model grace in the same way that Jesus did. Teaching in the church should welcome *all*, regardless of age, gender or situation, believing that the Holy Spirit speaks to each individual to live as Christian disciples. It is the inspired Word of

God in the Bible that inspires and directs our faith teachings and, in turn, guides us in our daily living. Most importantly it is within the task of teaching our faith to share God's promise that God **is always with us and for us**, just as Christ assured his disciples. God, the Creator of all things good, is indeed present and active in the world, wanting the best for all of Creation. Underlying all of these tasks is a vision of transformation with a hope for deeper faith commitment among the people of God, personal and corporate spiritual growth, love of life-long learning and obedient, joyful living.

Karen B. Tye, in her book, The Basics of Christian Education, presents a way to think about teaching in the church that requires careful consideration of several elements. Based upon responses from her students and congregations with whom she has worked, as well as the thinking of other theorists like Jack Seymour, Donald Miller, John Westerhoff, Maria Harris, Thomas Groomes, and Sarah Little, she defines Christian education in four ways: as *religious instruction* (deliberate and intentional instruction), as *socialization* (formation through a faith community), as *personal development* (a process of growth, morally or spiritually) and as *liberation* (critical thinking and transformation).¹ Each of these aligns with the way Jesus modeled his ministry for his disciples. Tye continues to explore the task of Christian Education in the church by asking questions such as **why** is teaching our faith important? **Where can we/ should we be** teaching it? **What** do we need to know? **Whom** do we educate? **How** do we educate, and **how** should we evaluate? And, finally, **what** stands in our way? For Tye, the **purpose of Christian education** is for the community of faith **to be faithful to its past** (continuity) and **open to the present and future** as God calls us forth into new life (change),² and **“to educate and prepare Christians for living and serving in the world.”**³

Tye states that formal classes are not the only place teaching our faith in the church takes place. It happens in worship, in small groups, on mission trips, at Fellowship dinners,

¹ Karen B. Tye, *Basics of Christian Education* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 12.

² Tye, 26-27

³ Ibid, 36.

choir practice, hunger walks and many other ways, even in the hallways. Attitudes, behaviors and surroundings make up the implicit teaching, and the things we leave out (null curriculum) are sometimes the strongest lessons. When the baptismal font and communion table are “center stage” during worship, it teaches that the sacraments are core to our faith. When they are missing, it teaches something very different. Therefore, **teaching our faith in the church needs to attend to the illicit and null curriculum that exists, calling it into question when it needs adjustment or correction.** Also, in the busyness and messiness of life, we need to pay attention to all the ways we might be able to teach, explicitly and simplicity, **looking for every possible avenue or creative context in which learning and transformation can happen.**⁴

Tye also examines the environment, setting and participants and says that learning is enhanced when students (of any age) feel safe enough to express their doubts, their fears, and their hopes, noting they are loved and accepted.⁵ Therefore, **teaching in the church should exhibit acceptance of everyone and be offered with hospitality and openness.** Even in our committee meetings as we make decisions, we **must consider who we may be leaving out.** When a church event is scheduled, do we ask if the families with children are included or left out? Do any of our participants have special needs? How can we include them and nurture them, too?

Knowing “about” Jesus is not enough until we know how to witness to that life and ministry in the world today.⁶ Tye believes that it is indeed important for us to know the story that shapes our Christian identity (the Bible), but, it is also important to share our own life experiences with one another in order to see how scripture has shaped our way of thinking, being and living. Teaching is more than imparting knowledge. **Teaching our faith helps us learn what it means to be disciples of Christ in the world today—allowing us to develop**

⁴ Tye, 30-39

⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁶ Ibid, 56

skills for acting out our faith and for being sensitive to one another as we live together as a covenant community. When we engage in service or mission, the importance of discipleship is reinforced. The experience instills the attitude for faithful living and giving that helps us know how to use what we learn in our individual lives.⁷ Therefore, **teaching within the context of the church should be experiential and offer service opportunities for all ages outside the physical walls of the church building.**

In reflecting on the question of *how* we educate in the church, Tye considers several important factors. Not every person processes their learning in the same way; therefore, by using different approaches (i.e., the Bible, life issues, discipline of theology)⁸ the success of the learner to apply what is learned becomes more probable. The methods we use need to be compatible with the content, context, and the people in the educational setting. If our processes and methods include experience that is multi-sensory in rich and varied ways,⁹ and offer students time to reflect on the application to their lives, then it will lead to better learning and growth. As we plan learning opportunities and prepare teachers for all of these variances, we have an important task and challenge.¹⁰ The task in our explicit teaching is **to use a variety of approaches and methods, including needed time for reflection.** The challenge in our planning is **to consider our participants, their faith development, place in their journey, and different styles of learning.**

Teaching is relational. Tye uses powerful metaphors to illustrate that through relationships, we are invited to be a partner, a companion, a midwife, a sponsor or a guide in the educational process together. We are one body with many parts, each with special gifts and the

⁷ Tye, 57

⁸ Ibid., 53

⁹ Ibid., 94

¹⁰ Ibid., 93-96

desire to work for the good of the whole.¹¹ It is through these relationships that we truly learn who we are and Whose we are.

It is through the voices of these relationships that we must evaluate the process. A variety of assessment tools can be used, such as written evaluations and verbal feedback. The assessment process is not to make us feel guilty, but to help us improve.¹² Thus, the task of teaching our faith must **always** include evaluation and assessment in order to learn from our failures and improve upon our successes.

All of these tasks are helpful in our intentional planning and thinking about how we teach. Yet, Tye reminds us that even if we were able to do everything perfectly, how we teach **can only shape the learning experience of the participants—it cannot ensure what the outcome will be.** Our approach to Christian education, Tye says, is like choreography,¹³ the careful and intricate arrangement of the elements—the why, where, what, whom, and how we educate. This choreography includes a place for improvisation (the teachable moments) and becomes a ***joyful dance with God in the learning.***

The neo-orthodox theologian, **Karl Barth**, arguably one of the most influential reformed theologian in the 20th century, would say that God takes the lead in this dance. That same metaphor of ***dancing with God*** comes through in Barth's writings. Rhythm, itself, is revealed in his own *Church Dogmatics, The three Forms of the Doctrine of Reconciliation*, where Barth illustrates the threefold being and work of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The three forms of grace that come to man in Christ create a rhythmic movement:

¹¹ Tye., 96-100

¹² Ibid, 107

¹³ Ibid., 104

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. IV The Doctrine of Reconciliation Part 1* (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 145-146.

1. In direct answer to the sin of human pride, God descends to graciously hold humanity close, entering into our brokenness, awakening us to the face of God and the gift of grace. This justifying action describes the Priestly office of Christ.
2. In direct answer to the sin of sloth, the Holy spirit lifts humanity up into the glory of God, Christ as King, empowering us to be fully alive and human. This is the Kingly office of Christ and the direction in which sanctification is accomplished.
3. In direct answer to the sin of falsehood, the outward movement is where the calling of humanity takes place. We seek to live into the Kingdom of God. This is our Christian vocation and the Prophetic office of Christ that declares hope for the world.

These three movements help us align our teaching in the church with 1) tradition-centered education, where we are grounded in our Christian identity; 2) person-centered education, where we develop the skills to grow in our faith and know who we are and Whose we are; and 3) mission-centered education, where we live into our calling as Christians in the world.¹⁵ These rhythms also align with Karen Tye's definitions of Christian education. The tradition-centered education is the religious instruction. The person-centered education is personal development and the socialization process. And, the mission-centered education aligns with her description of education as liberation: the "forming over" of the church, of persons and of society...developing a new Christian consciousness...becoming a prophetic activity.¹⁶ These three rhythms are continuous movements and what Barth would call "the heartbeat of God."¹⁷ To think of these movements as guides for teaching in the church lends us the imagery of **dancing with God** in our learning and our living, which, for me, is a way to respond in joyful obedience. With **God as the lead in the dance**, who knows what transformation will take place!

More specifically with regard to teaching in the church, Barth, in his essay, "Gift of Freedom," says the term "theologian" is not restricted to the seminary professor, theological student or to the minister. The task of theology is entrusted to the **entire** Christian

¹⁵ David White, Notes from class on Religious Education, Theory & Practice, Austin Seminary, 2006.

¹⁶ Tye, *Basics of Christian Education*, 12.

¹⁷ White, Notes from class.

congregation, according to each person's talents.¹⁸ The educational assumption drawn from this statement (which agrees with Tye) is that **teaching and learning is to be done in community and with all ages**. It is in community that our behaviors and beliefs are shaped. We cannot do that in isolation. We are continually in a living relationship with others and, with our God-given freedom, we are responsible for each other as members of the people of God.¹⁹ Barth reiterates this responsibility when he says in the midst of the church community that gathers, nurtures and does mission in the world, the teacher "does his research and teaching in and for the community, as one of its members entrusted with this particular task and, hopefully, with the gift to carry it through. Private Christianity is not Christianity at all."²⁰ This leads me to two other assumptions: **Teaching our faith in the church must work towards helping individuals discover their gifts and talents in order to equip and direct them to be effective disciples; and must nurture and offer opportunities for mission in the world.**

Barth would be in favor of asking open-ended questions, I believe, as he called into radical question every human enterprise. In his discussion of "evangelical ethics," he asserts that the question of good and evil is never answered by pointing to the Bible as simply a set of rules.²¹ Most certainly, the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, yet the Holy Spirit works in each of us as we strive to interpret and discern the meaning for us in every new time and place. Barth urges theologians to first recognize the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the directive for reasoning,²² and, then, that it is a privilege to start with the Bible.²³ Thus, **teaching in the church has a responsibility to teach with open minds and hearts, listening for the true Word of God, through scripture as inspired by the Holy Spirit**. In addition, Barth was a firm

¹⁸ Karl Barth. *The Humanity of God: "The Gift of Freedom,"* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 85

²² *Ibid.*, 89

²³ *Ibid.*, 90.

believer in listening to the voices of our past, particularly through our confessions.²⁴ Therefore, **in teaching our faith, we should remember the voices of the saints through our confessions and creeds, because it is they who have shaped our faith.** Barth calls the Christian community “a work which takes place among men in the form of a human activity...it exists only as a definite history takes place.”²⁵

James A Wharton, pastor, scholar, teacher and one of Barth’s students, believes that Barth’s intention in writing his *Church Dogmatics* was not to write so he could say, “I’ve finally got it!” Wharton believed Barth only hoped that his writings might prove useful to others articulating the gospel.²⁶ Confirming this, Barth wrote that his theological method “did not come into being as a result of any desire of [mine] to form a school or to devise a system; it arose simply out of what [I] felt to be the *need and promise of Christian preaching*.”²⁷ I argue, here, that the term *preaching* could be replaced by *teaching*. Barth’s hope was that his writing would be helpful to others in their efforts to articulate the message and pass on the Christian faith. More importantly for Barth, the “message that is entrusted to the church...always has...something original to say that people cannot hear elsewhere...The unique and extraordinary thing about this message is imperishable, and this is what always makes the church free and forms the basis of its right and duty to exist.”²⁸

Both Tye and Barth have influenced me in my approach to teaching our faith, giving me the awesome imagery of a **dance with God**, one that is improvised continuously, but is firmly led by the Master. Barth said that God’s grace is “new to us each day as sinners...a continuous

²⁴ Barth, *The Humanity of God: “The Gift of Freedom”*, 93.

²⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. IV The Doctrine of Reconciliation Part 1 “The Being of Community”*, 650.

²⁶ Donald K. McKim, *How Barth Changed My Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 120.

²⁷ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man tr. by D. Horton* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 100.

²⁸ Rolf Eriker and Reiner Marquard, eds. *A Karl Barth Reader, 1947 ILecture: The Message of God’s Free Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 75.

and perpetual operation in the life of faith...”²⁹ and he even remarked that gratitude follows grace, as thunder follows lightning.³⁰ Rhythm, movement, heartbeat and dance—what joyful obedience and gratitude follows! As we teach our faith in the church, we can find the confidence to “know the truth of the gospel is so inherently simple and transparent that everything that **must** be said **can** be said in terms a child can understand;” and, we can continue to search for ways to choreograph the **dance with the Holy** that are simple enough for a child of God (any age) to follow. In our faithful teaching, we can be confident that God is able “to quicken hearts to faith, minds to truth, and wills to faithful discipleship.”³¹

²⁹ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace — Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 286.

³⁰ McKim, ed., *How Barth Changed My Mind*, “Good News from Karl Barth” by Robert McAfee Brown., 97.

³¹ McKim, ed. *How Barth Changed My Mind*, “Three Confidences” by James A. Wharton, 120.

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