



BEYOND CRAFTS & FLIPCHARTS: DEVELOPING A VIBRANT THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

BY RODGER NISHIOKA, PH.D.

It makes me crazy. It really does. I actually have heard well-meaning, thoughtful, creative educators say stupid things like: “I don’t do theology; I am an educator.” Or, “I leave theology up to the pastors. My job is to put what they say into practice.” Oh, puhhleeze. These kinds of misstatements are the root of my problem. Well, at least one of my problems. As a professor of Christian education, these kinds of statements are damaging because they perpetuate the absurd idea that in the church, there is a separation between those who are theologians and those are educators.

As a result of much of our own doing, Christian education suffers, therefore, from a horrendous lack of theological competence and confidence. We end up perpetuating the idea that we are about process more than content, method more than substance, and technique more than theory. As a consequence, we are all too often disregarded by many as theological lightweights and judged by others as dispensable. After all,

how hard is it really to get someone to hand out the teaching supplies and order the curriculum?

The truth is, we are practical theologians, which is not an oxymoron, by the way. That’s right...we are THEOLOGIANS. As Christian educators, we belong to that wonderful group of persons who are grounded solidly and deeply in a theology that calls us to put into practice what it is that we believe. We share this field of practical theology with preachers, evangelists, pastoral caregivers, missionaries, church growth and development folks, worship leaders, and church administrators, among others.

We do not gather people in a circle simply because it works; we gather people in a circle because Christ himself formed relationships with persons and, like Christ, we seek to build a community of believers who care for, challenge, and support one another.

All of us seek to put into practice what it is we believe—our *theology*—meaning our understanding of how God is at work in the world and what God is calling us to do through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

M.J. Erikson, writing in *Christian Theology*, describes practical theologians as persons who “strive to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life.”¹

A coherent statement of the doctrines

I like this definition because it reminds us that we are supposed to give a “coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith.” This means we are to be clear and thoughtful about our theology. We should be able to state what we believe about God with clarity. Christian educators truly understand this. We understand that speaking to children is different than speaking to young people than speaking to adults. In order to give

¹ M.J. Erikson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 21.



a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, we need to know what our faith traditions say. We need to be familiar with doctrinal beliefs. So what is it that the United Church of Christ states as our primary beliefs? What theological claims are made in our preamble to our constitution? And how do we best invite and interpret these statements for our learners?

Based primarily on Scripture

Erikson's definition goes on to say that our doctrine is based primarily on Scripture. So as practical theologians, we are to be knowledgeable about the Bible. What scripture passages guide your theology of Christian education? If you were asked by a parent or child or colleague, what would you say are the passages that inform how you understand your call to

and perfect." Each time I think I finally have an absolute handle on it, the Holy Spirit shows me a new dimension to this one verse, and I have now come to understand that I may spend the rest of my life trying to understand all that this verse calls me to do and to be. This both thrills and confounds me. And I am amazed at how my study of and love for this one verse connects me to other texts throughout the Bible.

Placed in the context of culture in general

Our theology is not without a setting. We must acknowledge that each of us is shaped by culture. Theology, just like Christian education, does not work in a vacuum. That is why I am so wary of any "one size fits all" model of Christian education. We are called to ministry in specific places with

student who is now a pastor in a small town in Iowa. She told me about her congregation and its various struggles and joys. She told me about riding a tractor in the town parade and living with her husband on their farm and eating pork every once in a while (she used to be a strict vegetarian) as a sign of support for hog farmers in her congregation and community. I loved hearing about her context for ministry, so different from my own, and marveled at the amazing things she is doing there. Surely her theology is shaped by her context, her culture. There are, of course, foundational beliefs we share as followers of Jesus, but her worldview is vastly different from mine, as it should be. I love that.

Worded in a contemporary idiom

Jesus talked about vineyards and vineyard owners and sheep and shepherds and tax collectors and widows for a reason. He used the images with which his hearers were familiar. He used the idioms, the particular speech patterns of his day, to communicate his understanding of God and how he, fully human and fully divine, was sent to save the world. We are to do the same.

I was born and spent my early years in Honolulu.

Indeed, when we Christian educators are at our best, everything we do emerges from our theology and our theology is evident in everything we do.

teach in the church? As a teacher at a seminary, I have been working on Romans 12:2 for years. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable

specific cultures, histories, and traditions. For us to ignore this is perilous and more likely Christian *miseducation* rather than Christian education.

Recently I was in Storm Lake, Iowa speaking at a conference, and I shared a wonderful lunch with a former



Whenever I return to visit family, someone uses the phrase “talk story.” In Hawaii, to “talk story” is to catch up on the latest news. It is an idiom that is powerful. When we talk story, we share with one another the stories of our lives. It is common to be approached by a relative or friend and be told, “Hey, let’s sit down and talk story.” I know what this means, and I know what I am asked to do.

Practical theologians know the language of their people. They know how to communicate the deep and abiding truths of the Gospel in a way that draws their people to them and opens not only their ears but their hearts and minds as well.

Related to issues of life

The final part of Erikson’s definition says that theology must relate to the issues of life. Theology is not some purely academic activity where persons talk about things of little importance and relevance to one’s life. Theology matters

because it relates directly and profoundly to the things that matter—living and dying, joy and sadness, belonging and loneliness—all the deep questions and wonderings of our existence. That is why it is not only what we do, our methods and techniques, but our theology—the reason we do them—that is so important.

Methods and techniques are invaluable, of course, and Christian educators are right to be proud of how we do what we do. But truthfully, everything that we do must represent our theology. We do not gather people in a circle simply because it works; we gather people in a circle because Christ himself formed relationships with persons and, like Christ, we seek to build a community of believers who care for, challenge, and support one another. We move beyond competitive activities and elimination games not because it’s the right thing to do, but because we believe that to be the body of Christ, all are to belong and no one ever gets

“out” and has to sit and watch the others enact the good news. We study the Bible not just to get more knowledge but because we believe God truly is still speaking, and one of the most potent ways God is speaking is through the Bible, God’s word to us today. We use flipcharts and markers not just because it’s our pattern but because we believe that God reveals God’s self to all and that no one person has the corner on truth, and by writing things and/or creating symbols for all to see, we experience God’s revelation together through one another.

Indeed, when we Christian educators are at our best, everything we do emerges from our theology and our theology is evident in everything we do. In this way, we bless not only those whom we are called to serve, we bless the very God of the universe by living a life worthy of the calling. In this way, we live out the best of what it means to be practical theologians!

RODGER NISHIOKA is the Benton Family Associate Professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Dr. Nishioka focuses on equipping pastors to be teachers and leaders in the church’s educational ministry. His particular interest is in building a congregation’s youth and young adult ministries.

