



EDUCATING THE NEWLY FAITHFUL

BY WILLIAM C. IMES

For some time I have been convinced of the importance of looking at the educational aspects and educational nature of all of our activities in the life of the Church, including worship itself. More recently I have come to believe that we – clergy and laity alike – need to see worship as our primary opportunity for educating our congregations.

The need for education about the basics of Christianity – our story and what it means for today – has never been greater. (I do not want to be too alarmist about this; tests given to World War I soldiers about their religious knowledge revealed appalling levels of ignorance, as well.) But any time a politician advocates for the public display of the Ten Commandments, a wise reporter trips that person up by asking him or her to name them. They invariably fail. As do our theological students. And as do your parishioners.

Yes, I know that the Law does not produce salvation, but try to get someone to tell you what God has done in Christ without using the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. There is a strain of American Christianity that preaches this metaphor as an objective fact instead of the word picture it is. Anselm presented it in a more appealing form, but it often is given in ugly terms – "God is angry and wants blood; aren't we fortunate that Jesus gave Him some?" – which both demean God and exclude all of the other great

metaphors of the atonement: reconciliation, release, and redemption, for starters.

Our faith uses symbolic language because symbols are the language of the spirit. Symbols share with stories an open-ended quality. Every reading produces more truth. We need to address the massive ignorance of persons both within and outside the Church regarding the essence of Christianity, its stories and symbols, both verbal and physical.

Upon examining the current state of education for our adults, I have found literature on generational shifts in America to be most helpful. From that literature and my own observations, I have come to believe that we are witnessing the coming of age of a generation marked with two qualities that will help and challenge congregations. Persons born after 1982 (the generation after Gen X, the Millennials, or the post-Baby Boomer generation) are marked by a friendliness towards authority and institutions. They want to serve their communities and the world. Just note how many high schools require community service for graduation with very little protest from this generation.

At the same time, since their parents dropped out of church, they are profoundly ignorant of the nature of Christianity and discipleship. They simply do not know what Church is about. In American society (both inside and outside of the Church) we have experienced thirty years of

emphasis on spirituality and relationships. It is clear that this youngest generation will place an emphasis on the mind and on learning the things of faith in order to live them out.

As our congregations welcome young and old, long-time members of the Church, this new generation of young adults, and seekers who have never been a part of the faith community, we need to address biblical and theological ignorance by using and speaking of the great symbols of the faith in ways that make them accessible. What God has done in Christ matters. We can study this subject in book clubs and Bible studies. We can take part in work trips that enable us to grow as disciples and to serve all God's people. Yet, to reach the majority of our parishioners, we need to focus on worship as the place where we can introduce the largest number of people to the meaning of the Christian story and its claims on us.

So the question for all congregations today is: Are we prepared to teach?

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