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CHRISTIAN EDUCATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR CHURCHES

LOIS SEMENYE

Evangelism is only the first step in fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. 'Making disciples' includes both evangelism and teaching. The role of evangelism is the focus of two articles in this issue. But churches will remain weak if they neglect the second aspect of 'making disciples' which is teaching. In order for the church in Africa to grow stronger and deeper in the 21st century, she must not only engage in evangelism of the lost, but she must also teach the converts so that they may grow and mature, becoming fruitful and reproductive Christians.

Dr. Lois Semenyé shows the way how churches can make a difference through Christian Education. Theological institutions must train future pastors and church leaders to be mindful of the necessity of effective teaching in the local churches.

Christians have been called to mature in Christ and become holy; 1 Peter 1: 15-16, 'Be holy, because I am holy'. This holy living should be reflected in the believer's life, a life that demonstrates Christ-like character. The Christ-like Christian is called upon to

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impact the society with biblical principles. Matthew 5:13 refers to Christians as the salt and light of the world. In other words, where Christians are, there must be a domino reaction. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

A quick review of church growth studies has shown that the growth of Christianity in the continent of Africa is unprecedented. Unfortunately, despite the number of Christians in Africa, the continent is perpetually experiencing coups, corruption, tribalism and immorality just to mention a few of the vices. In countries where ethnic wars are destroying thousands of people like Burundi, Rwanda, Liberia and Congo, it is not surprising to note that those who cause the misery are also Christians.

The fundamental questions that need to be addressed are: What has gone wrong? Has the Word of God lost its power? Is there something wrong in the way we teach biblical principles? Christians have developed ways of teaching the Word of God throughout the years.

For example, in Africa, formal education was brought to us by the missionaries. Indeed, education was an integral part of the missionary movement. However, this education has been criticised. As early as 1919, Allen (1919) observed that the education given to Christian converts was not proper because it did not meet the needs of the people. Later on, an African Evangelist was quoted saying, 'I am concerned that unless we find ways of discipling and instructing the new Christians we might be in danger. We have a large body of interested people who call themselves Christians, but who have not been taught' (Coon 1983: 24).

Learning biblical truth does not necessarily take part in a given Sunday school class, Bible study group or even in preaching. The lack of proper teaching or discipling Christians has resulted in distorted perception of the Word of God. This calls for reformulating the educational system in our churches. Consequently, this will affect how our theological schools ought to train Christian leaders to disciple believers to Christian maturity.

Different churches have different methods of teaching their believers. Some of these methods include catechetical where one is taught to recite questions and answers. Unfortunately, this method

does not always allow reflective thinking. Another method is simply teaching a Bible story to all age groups who are in the same class and treating them alike and expect them to learn. Worse still, is when a teacher reads long passages of the Bible and expects the students to pay attention and learn without much explanation or defining the difficult terms. Or a preacher expounding on a passage without an objective of what the congregation should take to heart. Still another is when a teacher who is not prepared to teach a lesson comes and keeps the children busy by singing songs that are theologically unsound.

These and other inadequate methods are not only limited to children's classes, but in adult Bible studies also. A Bible study teacher or Sunday School teacher should not preach but instruct the participants. Moreover, in many cases, the 'preaching' is meant to condemn the listeners instead of building them up. Other teachers emphasise on adhering to regulations of do's and don'ts. This type of teaching has resulted in creating superficial Christians, causing a lack of proper knowledge of God. According to Mbiti (1970), the superficial Christians are as a result of improper instruction about the Word of God. This was also emphasized by Joy (1976), who stated that the missionaries, "who traversed land and sea to make one more proselyte succeeded only in making the proselyte doubly sure of hell. The proselyte always comes in by the short cut – he is given 'instant language', he imitates kosher experiences and behaviour, and turns out to have a distorted perception about the more subtle beliefs and values" (Joy 1976:24). This teaching continues even today. There are many street preachers who engage in condemning passers-by instead of building them up. What is solid teaching in many instances is lacking.

These subtle beliefs and values are clearly demonstrated in our many cultures, especially during funerals, political forums, marriage ceremonies and at the time of illness, just to mention a few. During these forums, people turn to 'traditional' ways of life. Some go to seek the witch-doctors and the soothsayers, instead of the Bible. Therefore, the questions that we Christian teachers and theologians need to address are what and how we should teach Christian education that will result in changing of lives.

Christian education must seek to impart relevant Christian truth in order to influence society more positively, and to bring learners into a right relationship with God and with their fellow citizens. To do this, Christian education practitioners need to rediscover how to apply relevant theology which will bridge the gap between content and method, and setting a background which will enhance the propagating of Christian truth by using the best methods and content.

Randolph Crump Miller in Gibbs' book (1992) emphasised that we should not teach in abstracts. He wrote, "we are dealing with real children and real adults, and theology is simply 'a truth-about-God-in-relation-to-man'. As adults, we should have mature beliefs, but we should teach these beliefs in terms of the experiences and capacities of the children and older learners, leading them always from their 'growing edge' to deeper meanings and appreciation of life. The chief source of all our teaching is the Bible, the chief interest of our teaching is the learner and the chief end of our teaching is God and Father of Jesus Christ" (Gibbs 1992:268).

George Albert Coe in Gibbs' book (1992), stated that 'religion changes in the act of teaching it' (Gibbs 1992:248). This implies that the teacher and the learner are crucial components in Christian education. The teacher acts as a representative of the Church or for God and for a cause of a curriculum, while the learner represents nobody else except himself or herself. I suggest we consider these two components briefly.

Teacher

The teacher is a messenger or a transmitter by his or her own conviction and voluntary loyalty. The conviction and loyalty adds impressiveness and authority to the message communicated. It can either be concrete and warm to the pupil listening or it can be the opposite. A Christian teacher should be one who follows the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ and views the learners as people who have the possibility of becoming one with God in their rightful privilege in relating to creation. Hence, the teacher has a commitment to guide each learner in his or her own search for a complete and truly meaningful life. A Christian teacher should

therefore make such big impressions on a learner's life, for example shaping their goals, values and desires to mention a few. In order for this to happen, a Christian teacher must play many roles (Semenye, 1995).

1. A model: Through the verbal and non-verbal communication a teacher communicates Christian principles. Yet a fundamental question for every Christian teacher is, 'Do I walk my talk?' A model for a Christian teacher would include:

- good preparation of lessons.
- enthusiasm in teaching.
- appearance that is acceptable.
- teaching with authority.

2. A motivator: Not every learner is motivated to learn. Consequently, the teacher must cultivate the interest. This can be done by :

- a teacher performing in class instead of sitting and getting bored.
- a teacher having motivation that comes out of conviction.
- a teacher being a good communicator. A good communicator uses gestures well, varies tone and creates a good learning atmosphere.

3. Planner of instruction: A teacher must have concrete answers to some of these questions before teaching:

- Where are my learners? Current understanding.
- Where are we going? Objectives.
- How are we going to get there? Means and methods.
- How do we know we have arrived? Evaluation.

Besides answering these four questions., the teacher must be a strategist. This means the teacher needs to know when the students are ready to learn, know the time required for a particular concept and be a resourceful person.

4. Manager of behaviour: The Christian teacher should know good morals and hence strive to instill them in the lives of the

learners. Moreover, he or she is a counsellor. The teacher should seek ways and means to build up those entrusted to his or her care.

5. *An intercessor:* The Lord Jesus Christ is called the master teacher. One thing we know about him is that he spent a lot of time praying. Teachers too need to intercede for their students.

The role of the teacher in Christian education is very important. Coe in Gibbs' book (1992) stated, "The same curriculum materials may have been taught in 1913, 1918 and 1928, but how different the kinds of Christianity that it represented to the people! All this 'not-in-the-curriculum' meaning is mediated to the pupil by the personal presence of the teacher" (Gibbs 1992:250).

Although this was referring to a Christian teacher, a theologian or a pastor has a lot in common with a Christian teacher. The theologian must know his or her congregation in order to preach what is relevant. Besides, without being a model, a theologian will not have much impact on the people. Non-verbal communications speaks a lot more than we think. A boring message too will not go beyond the interest level of the listeners. Consequently, they will not be motivated to apply what is learnt in their lives if at all any learning will take place. A theologian like the teacher must plan the sermon. It must have some direction to where the congregation is intended to be taken. This must be done in much prayer.

The Pupil

The pupil represents nobody else but himself or herself. A learner is a person with needs. Each learner differs from the other as they all come from different backgrounds. Each learner, including adults, is a product of the environment. The environment we come from plays a great role in influencing us. Consequently, the teacher needs to learn some basic psychology in order to be effective in teaching.

Learners have varied ability of concentration. The teacher needs to know that each age varies in their understanding and consequently differs in activities as well.

A learner has perceived needs, some known to him or her while others are unknown and therefore comes to class expecting that those will be met.

Also, each learner has his or her style of learning. When the style of the learner matches with that of the teacher, then learners will be effective. Moreover each learner comes with experiences that can be shared so that others can learn from them, especially in adult classes. The teacher must be sensitive to some of these factors. Indeed, teaching demands that a teacher must adjust accordingly, varying the use of words, the emphasis and pattern of thought and even attitude toward learning. There is also the readiness of the time of learning a certain concept among students. This of course makes the whole process of teaching and learning complicated. But for effective imparting of the truth and helping the learners to internalise the facts presented, teachers and curriculum must never remain static.

The students in many ways can be likened to a congregational member. A pastor should not take for granted that every one who comes to a church service is dying to learn. Many people attend services for various reasons. Some attend to meet friends or network for businesses or other purposes. Other people come with needs that are expected to be met through preaching.

As we enter the 21st century, Christian educationists and theologians must find new directions for doing Christian education and theology. The new direction will need to develop freedom to read, think, analyse and allow the application of Scriptures to develop mature Christians. This is in contrast to superficial living by adhering to regulations and laws without internalising divine truth in one's life. This new approach should set the stage for spiritual formation.

The educational process that is likely to encourage spiritual formation must spring from the following:

1. Review the current training offered to pastors through TEE and theological training institutions. This should include practical courses that address the African situation. For example, courses should be offered on peace and reconciliation,

Christian ethics, stewardship and leadership. These should be part of the core courses for each student.

2. The training should encompass the 'kingdom of God perspective' and be practical in approach through modeling, apprenticeship, mentorship and practicals.
3. The training should take care of every age group and people with special needs, such as refugees and AIDS victims.
4. The training should encourage the building of bridges between the church and Christian agencies.
5. The training should seek ways and means of being catalysts that will result in bringing desired changes, for example, from worldliness to biblical values.
6. The training should seek to internalise biblical truth.
7. The training should assist in developing Christian literature and films.
8. The training should emphasise discipleship and encourage accountability at all levels.

Finally, the new directions in Christian education and theology in Africa will need cooperation from all sectors: government institutions, NGOs and local churches. For example, the theological teachers need to integrate their teaching with faith to impact their students' lives; the pastors and church leaders need to model Christian values; and churches must provide Christian education programmes for the families. Moreover, our homes need to promote Christian principles and we all must promote Christian schools for all levels. Africa must be reawakened to the need of Christian education and pray for God's wisdom and guidance.

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