

# CHRISTIAN EDUCATION – IT'S NOT JUST FOR SUNDAY SCHOOL ANYMORE!

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## Part I

It never ceases to amaze me that anywhere in the world you say “Christian Education” people automatically think Sunday School. Is this the **only** education that the church does? If it is the only education we are engaged in, then we are in big trouble. Let me explain.

I taught the Christian Education (CE) courses at the Bible Institute of South Africa for the last eight years. The first exercise we did was to list every activity a church does, from worship to soup kitchens, from Bible study to foreign missions. I then challenged them to tell me which one of these ministries is *not* in one way or the other CE! I challenge you to do the same, because the way you understand the educational ministry of your church will determine the depth of spirituality existent in your people. You disagree? Then the challenge is for me to prove my point.

Let's look at some of the things that a church does. Let's start with missions (either foreign or local). My contention is that both are a sub-set of CE! What do missionaries or evangelists do? They share the Gospel. What does it mean to **share** the Gospel? It means they **teach** or **explain** the meaning of the Gospel – this is CE! When there is a group of converts a church is started. A church needs trained leaders. **Training** is CE! How about worship? Worship, done properly, is a constancy of **leading** people to understand the importance of what they are doing. It is not only the sermon (which in itself is CE), but it is **instructing** the people to understand what they are singing and why. Too many services have become little more than the stringing along of many songs which no one really knows why they are singing them, nor do we usually (if we are honest) pay very close attention to the words. A well thought through service of worship is led by one who understands what it means to keep the people focused and aware of what they are doing. This too is CE!

Instead of going on and on through all the things a church does, let me instead challenge you to think about every ministry and activity your Church does and see if it isn't in actuality CE.

OK, so what is the point of all this? Well, as in any good education program there must be good planning. This is where many churches all short.

If you had asked your child's teacher the first day what she was going to cover that year, how would you react if the teacher told you that she had no idea yet, and that they will figure that out as they went along? Imagine 12 years of this? Would anyone ever get an education? Then why do we think that we can do this in the church? Let me challenge you further.

Let's look at your Youth Group. What are they being taught? Why? What is the plan? That is, what will they **know**, **be**, and **do** after 3-4 years? Or is your group like most groups, simply going along teaching one topic this week and another the next,

somehow hoping (and maybe praying) that eventually somehow the youth will finally pull it all together by themselves and actually learn something – maybe something that will even affect the way they live their lives not only on Sunday but the rest of the week. Is this really what you want for your young people who will shortly be going on to university where they will be confronted with philosophies that are not only not Christian, but in many cases anti-Christian? Have *you really* prepared them? This approach is like the teacher above with no plan.

Let's look next at your Bible studies. What is being studied? Why are you having them do this study? What are you trying to accomplish in this group and study? What will they be able to **know, be, and do**? Think about this – if you have no objectives then your objective is to accomplish nothing. But you say, "our objective is to study the book of Romans". Great! But what does that mean? If you ask that group at the end what they have learned about the book of Romans you might be shocked to learn that little was learned or remembered. Worse yet, little or nothing has happened to change anyone's life. Should not the goal for any aspect of discipleship be **changed lives**? If our only goal is to cover a book, or to make sure that we know a doctrine better, then true discipleship has not taken place. True discipleship is moving people ever closer (by the work of the Holy Spirit!) to being like Jesus (Rom. 8.29). So I ask you again, in your teaching of the book of Romans, what are your goals for seeing this group become more like Jesus? Will they see Jesus in every verse? Will they grow in their relationship to Jesus as a result of understanding Romans?

Let me go one more step, and on this one I will tread lightly – preaching. How many of you pastors have your sermons thought through for the next year? Why not? What is it you are trying to accomplish? What really "scares" me about well-meaning preachers is when they say to me that they believe they are discipling their people through their sermons, and no more is really needed. That scares me because you have already told me that you do not have a plan for where your sermons are going. You have one 'goal' for this sermon and another for the next. If your people don't know your objective for this sermon, how can you ever expect that they will figure it out when you haven't? This is not discipleship; this is a hit-and-miss approach to simply giving out disconnected information, with no thread being given to help the people tie it all together! This again is like the teacher you would not send your children to.

If I am being harsh, then let me go a bit further before I attempt to offer some solutions.

If we analyze (dare I say) many church programs today, my educated guess would be that you would find a very active church with many enjoyable programs. But what is being accomplished towards true discipleship (another good CE word!). You will find Sunday School and other times children and youth meet. What coordination is there between these groups? Are the youth leaders sitting down with the children's leaders to see what the other is doing? Do they plan in such a way that if a child was to be in those groups for several years they would receive a well rounded, well planned, training enabling them to **know, be, and do** something for the sake of God's Kingdom? Isn't this what we demand from our schools? Then why are we not trying to accomplish something just as complete in our churches? Do we not think that discipleship is as important, or, better, more important that what they learn in the schools?

One more question (and this is especially for the pastors), do you even know what curriculum is being used in your Sunday School – or if there is one? If you don't, then how do you know it is not contradicting what you are teaching from the pulpit? Is your Sunday School using several different curricula? Why? Do you not understand that every curriculum has a different philosophy of what it wants to cover and when it will cover it? The use of multiple curricula means the same material is covered several times instead of a pattern allowing a child to progress from one stage to the next in a logical sequence. Pastors, **PLEASE** know and review what is being taught in your churches! CE/P and GCP can help you with this.

What also concerns me is the trend going on in our colleges and seminaries. One will start a Youth Leaders' program, and another a Children's Leaders' program. These are nice, and they are the popular trend, but there is one ingredient missing. There seems to be no one teaching these leaders that their groups are part of a whole church. Instead we are encouraging programs that will simply be off doing their own thing. This teaches the groups to think individualistically instead of as a like-minded community. Do you want a church where everyone does what is right in his own eyes, or one that is united and striving to serve Christ's Kingdom - together? Who is being trained to pull together all the different ministries in your church to make sure they are all following the overall stated purpose of your church? If every ministry in your church is allowed to continue going in its own direction, then what is being accomplished? Do you really know what is being accomplished? If you don't, then you need to ask if anything is being accomplished to disciple your people and enhance the Kingdom of God? Just because your Church is active does not mean that it is accomplishing anything! Don't confuse busyness with growth.

One last question, how does all this fit with your Church's mission or purpose statement? Does your church have such a statement? This statement tells everyone why your local church exists and what it is trying to accomplish. If you don't have one, then again I must ask, what are you accomplishing, and how do you know? (Did your seminary teach you how to compose a mission statement?)

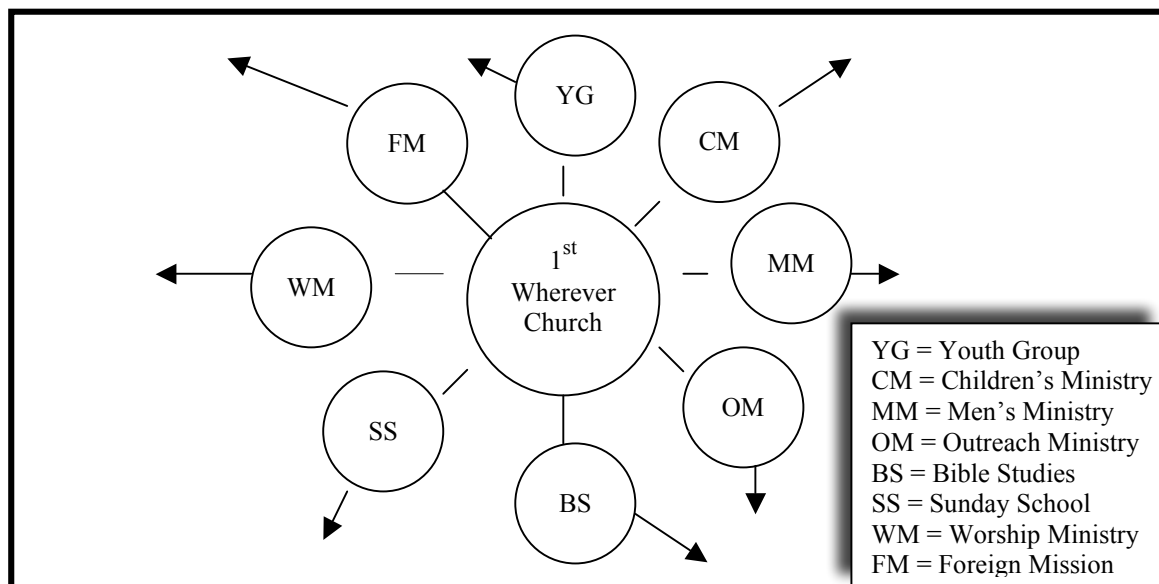
These questions may seem harsh, but they are meant to help raise the questions that need to be asked in every church – often. In the next issue of *Equip* I will try to offer some solutions you can try. Until then I will ask you to take a good look at what you are doing. In all the time you have been in your church, can you really say your people are disciplined (educated/trained)? If you think they are, on what do you base that assessment? Think about it.

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### Part II

In the last issue of *Equip* there were a number of questions raised about how well we assess the work of discipleship (education/training) that the church is doing. The statement was made that most of us have churches that are active but not coordinated. This time we will look at some possible solutions.

Here is a picture of a typically active church. Note that each group is in place, but their ministries are all going in their own directions, and may or may not be connected to the Church's overall purpose and mission.



Add to this all the other ministries in your church. Who is responsible to coordinate them so that they are at least attempting to accomplish the overall purpose of your church?



Here is one way to understand what we need to be doing. This is a 2-3 hour activity that should involve all of your church leaders. Scenario – You have 15 brand new Christians. They know nothing at all about the Bible. Every week for the next 3 years you will have 3 hours to meet with them to disciple them. At the end of that time you must determine what they should **know**, **be**, and **be able to do**? At the end of this exercise you will understand why the church has failed to disciple its people! This exercise will help you understand the need for setting a direction for discipleship.

Secondly, we need to stop thinking that because we teach a class on discipleship that we have disciplined our people! Discipleship is a life-long process moving a person from where he or she is to being like Jesus. Here is a better suggestion.

Draw up a sheet for every individual in your church. Put the person’s name on the top. Then add this chart - or something that better fits your situation.

UNSAVED			INDIVIDUAL		SAVED			INDIVIDUAL		
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Unknown spiritual state	Hostile/disinterested: heretical; false religion; sect member	Friendly/interested: non-religious, but well informed about spiritual things	Has been a church-goer, but is not a true Christian	Being nurtured along and is very interested in spiritual things	New Christian, immature, needing nurturing	Immature believer, inactive, stagnant, not serious about holiness	Actively growing personally, but not involved in ministry	Spiritually mature, but relatively inactive in ministry	Spiritually mature, but needing to be trained as a discipler	Spiritually mature, and is discipling others to disciple others

Then put something like:

<u>DATE</u>	<u>PROGRESS</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____

Your leaders should meet with every individual to determine where he or she is on this progress chart. You then plan for how you will work with the person to move him or her along until he or she is living for the Lord and is discipling someone else.

Are you beginning to see the difference between this approach to discipleship and what you are doing now? With this plan you will multiply your discipler-making capacity. You will also develop a church filled with ministers. Remember: a pastor was never called to **do** the work of the ministry – rather, it was to “*equip the saints for the work of ministry*” (Eph. 4:11-12). And isn’t this what the Great Commission calls us to do – to make disciples?

Typically, we see pastors trying to do everything in the church, and then they burn out. Why? Because we have still not grasped the concept that the role of the pastor is one of equipping (here is that CE word again). The only way we can equip the saints to do the work of the ministry is to disciple them! The only way we can disciple them is by having a plan (better know as a curriculum – another CE term). A curriculum is simply a roadmap that will enable you to move people from where they are to where they can effectively disciple others. What pastor would not want to have a church filled with people *equipped* to do what he would have to do by himself otherwise?

As I said at the beginning, Christian Education is not just for Sunday School anymore - it never was! CE demands that we have a curriculum in place. A curriculum helps us to see where we are headed so we can make plans how we will get there.

Remember the schoolteacher you wouldn't send your children to because of not knowing where she was going? Your church must develop a roadmap if it is ever going to get somewhere and not be like this schoolteacher. What is your plan?

If you need help doing this, this is what we at Christian Education and Publications are here to do. We offer seminars of all kinds to help your church be better disciplemakers. I would also like to mention a few books to help.

### **SUGGESTED READING**

Charles Dunahoo. 2005. *Making Kingdom Disciples*. P&R. I taught this book in my class in South Africa with great results. It is must reading if we are going to have a Reformed and biblical understand of discipleship that is workable in today's world.

Susan Hunt. 1998. *Heirs of the Covenant*. Crossway. This is perhaps the best and most useable book on Christian Education on the market today. I cannot recommend it more highly.

For good books on long term church planning I recommend Aubrey Malphurs.

**STRATEGY 2000:** Churches Making Disciples for the Next Millennium, Kregel, 1996.

**ADVANCED STRATEGIC PLANNING:** A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders, Baker, 1999.

George Barna. 2003. *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*. Regal. Don't let the title put you off. This study changed Barna's whole understanding of the church's priorities.

George Barna. 2000. *Growing True Disciples*. Issachar Resources. The includes the great work of one of our own PCA churches.

If you would like a 4-page bibliography on all aspects of church ministry, email me at [dbennett@pcanet.org](mailto:dbennett@pcanet.org).