

Education as Mission: The Course as Sign of the Kingdom

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The Place of Education

Where do you put a school?

Sooner or later in the life of an educational institution, trustees face the choice of their “college town.” The very character of a school is at stake in that decision. Baylor became a certain kind of school because of its beginnings and trials in Independence, Texas, and then became a different kind of school after its controversial decision to move to Waco in 1886. My own institution, Westmont College, began humbly in fundamentalist Los Angeles in the thirties. We would have moved to Altadena but for residents’ objections. Instead we settled on an estate in ultra-rich Montecito that has marked us ever since.

All educators face these dilemmas, figuratively if not literally. What texts we adopt, how we structure class sessions and assignments, who happens to register, whom we admit, and even whether and how often we have class outside are matters of physical, social, and intellectual location.

Whole traditions of education are culturally located. David Kelsey describes two typical locations of education when he portrays current theological education as perched “between Athens and Berlin.” Athens is education as *paideia*, emphasizing moral training, while Berlin is education according to the agenda of the modern European research university, emphasizing the systematic acquisition and application of information.

Our commitments to these college towns have radically informed our goals and structures of education, and not just in theology. Athens and Berlin (and a few other college towns we can skip for simplicity) characterize western education at every level: primary through graduate;

academic, professional, and vocational; secular and ecclesiastical; formal and informal; reactionary and radical. In all these contexts, education as intellectual progress creates programs for transmitting information gained through expertise, while education as moral development creates regimens for developing personal character and shared citizenship.

Is this the way it should be? Many Christian educators have thought so. For inspiration and guidance we have often looked to the catechetical past or the propositional present. While some have chosen one town over the other, others have tried to inhabit both. Kelsey's own instinct for typologizing locks him into recommending no more than a troubled synthesis of the two approaches: we should research like Germans and train like Greeks – have an east and west campus, so to speak – despite the disjointedness that results (Kelsey 1993).

Disjointedness does certainly result. Insoluble problems are built into curricula and faculties bifurcated between theoretical and practical disciplines. Similar conflicts distinguish schools of different types – liberal arts colleges and professional schools, for example. The complementarities, tensions, and incompatibilities between Athens and Berlin have become ours as well. Partisans take one side or the other, while Kelsey pursues the supposed *via media* of an incoherent synthesis.

Others refuse the whole dialectic. Following Michael Polanyi, Lesslie Newbiggin shows (1995b) that when we place theory over against practice or “integrate” the two in any way that assumes a dichotomy between them, our education tells another gospel – a story other than the good news of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that story is of a supranational academic community, sometimes a western or world culture constructed from “great books,” sometimes a nation-state, sometimes an abstracted humanity, sometimes a realized self, sometimes a tribal or corporate identity. Sometimes it is a story that imagines it is no story at all. All these stories locate

education in the civics of an earthly rather than heavenly *polis*, in a *politeia* other than the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12).

Jerusalem, then, seems the theologically correct choice of college towns. Yet Christ was crucified outside its gates, and we are to follow him there (Heb. 13:12-13). And our final campus is yet to come in a heavenly city for which we still wait (Heb. 13:14). The New Jerusalem is, for now, Utopia, and that is no place for a college.

A better way envisions education – not just formal theological education, but all education – as cross-cultural *mission* on behalf of the eschatological Kingdom of God that has arrived and is still to come in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Against Athens and Berlin, Old Jerusalem and New Jerusalem, I appeal to *Antioch* as our most promising college town (Acts 11:19-26). Long ago a small group of anonymous Jewish refugees from Cyprus and Cyrene traveled there, broke with the educational conventions of their day, and proclaimed their nation's risen and exalted King to Greeks. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number turned in belief to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21). They became the first to be called "Christians," receiving from their opponents a Greek name fitting for such a new people. They also presented the young church with a wrenching cultural dilemma. The unexpected harvest exposed the whole community to a searching critique from the Spirit that shook its catechetical practices onto new and firm foundations. Antioch names not a school of thought, a method, nor a cultural inheritance that must be preserved, but an eschatological location at which the old creation meets the new in unpredictable encounters that leave all parties forever changed.

Exchanging Emissaries

In Antioch the instructor is not so much a premodern pedagogue or modern expert as an eschatological *emissary* who brings an embodiment of the gospel to audiences in the hope of furthering the reconciliation of all things under Christ's lordship. They meet in a forum – the

course – where not the professor but the culture is the *paidagogos* (Gal. 3:24, Gal. 4:2) and the Lord the true *didaskalos* (cf. Rom. 6:17). The course topic and the students’ backgrounds are the guardians and disciplinarians. They have raised the participants in such ways that they might meet and know the Teacher in this appointed event of new creation. The course is a time when the Word is sown onto fallow (or hard) cultural soil and cultivated in the hope that it might bring an ultimate harvest of embodied good news (McClendon 2000, 59-63).

A course brings participants together for a season of exploring any and every academic field – not just Christian theology in its technical sense, but *whatever there is* (cf. McClendon 2000, 416) – in the hospitality of the Kingdom’s holy order of just relationships and mutual edification and in the conviction of Christ’s reconciling reign over all things. The whole project awaits, invites, and ponders manifestations of Christ’s future-present reign. It displays and inculcates the good news in specific practices of exploration. It invites guests to remain in the reign of God as it manifests itself there. It cultivates leaders among those who accept the invitation. It also challenges the emissaries themselves with the radical, unpredictable implications of any new sign of Christ’s unfolding reign throughout the cosmos.

Newbigin’s missiology is as helpful as James McClendon’s theology of culture in showing the eschatological, cross-cultural quality of education. For Newbigin, as for McClendon, mission is not a *tour de force* that makes others look like us either intellectually or ethically. Neither is it just a dialogue that affirms what we all look like already or splits the difference. Both imperialism and relativism are educational strategies that would leave us impervious to unwanted change, and that make humanity the measure of all things (cf. Reno 2002, 37-41). True education is not so violent and not so comfortable. Since mission understands *Christ* as the measure of all things, it submits all other agendas – even the teacher’s, even the students’, even the school’s – to the respect of Christ’s reign. It makes all parties vulnerable to

change as that unfolding universal reign manifests itself. Newbigin looks to the High Priestly Prayer of the Gospel of John “an outline of the way in which we are to understand the witness of the church in relation to all the gifts that God has bestowed upon humankind” (Newbigin 1995a, 179). He says:

I do not suggest that the church go into the world as the body with nothing to receive and everything to give. Quite the contrary: the church has yet much to learn. This passage suggests a Trinitarian model that will guide our thinking as we proceed. The Father is the giver of all things. They all belong rightly to the Son. It will be the work of the Spirit to guide the church through the course of history into the truth as a whole by taking all God’s manifold gifts given to all humankind and declaring their true meaning to the church as that which belongs to the Son. The end to which it all looks is “a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10) (Newbigin 1995a, 179).

Education facilitates this declaration and exchange of gifts. The educational authority is steward of both “the mystery of the gospel,” *i.e.*, the truth that all things belong to God in Jesus Christ, and of prior specific embodiments of that mystery: traditions of learning such as mathematics, history, engineering, music, athletics, theology, and so on. A course entrusts students with these resources – and, equally importantly, entrusts these resources to students. It does so in the hope that Christ’s ownership may be manifest, and that students, resources, and steward may all be transformed in the encounter.

Newbigin’s description of overt Church witness in the context of world religions applies by analogy to any faithful educational endeavor. Our knowledge as teachers is not our own but belongs to the crucified and risen Lord. We have it as treasure in earthen vessels. We proclaim its true value at every opportunity, while acknowledging that it can be known only by trust – an act Christians know as faith. We take on the mission of teaching despite its considerable risks. We risk mistaking ourselves for owners rather than mere stewards, and glorifying ourselves accordingly. We risk losing confidence in the ultimate significance of our trust, and settling for inaccuracy, sloth, and ignorance. We risk letting worries about misunderstanding and distortion

get the better of us, ‘teaching’ petrified orthodoxy by rote rather than letting course content truly live and flourish in unfamiliar settings (Newbigin 1995a, 189).

Ecclesially, these temptations correspond to Catholic, liberal, and conservative Protestant tendencies as Newbigin describes them (Newbigin 1995b, 93ff). All are errors of eschatology and pneumatology. Newbigin’s concluding words apply as much to teachers as to any trustee:

The mystery of the gospel is not entrusted to the church to be buried in the ground. It is entrusted to the church to be risked in the change and interchange of the spiritual commerce of humanity. It belongs not to the church but to the one who is both head of the church and head of the cosmos. It is within his power and grace to bring to its full completion that long-hidden purpose, the secret of which has been entrusted to the church in order that it may become the open manifestation of the truth to all the nations (1995a, 189).

The danger to both the treasure and us is grave. But the gifts and the calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29).

Cross-Transformation

When we announce Christ’s reign in “Antioch” – in the presence of others who embody it less or differently or not at all – what happens is transformation. A course replicates the “three-cornered relationship” Newbigin sees in formal missions “between the traditional culture, the ‘Christianity’ of the missionary, and the Bible.” However alike students and teachers may imagine they are, education is still a mission across cultures. Bringing these three into contact sets the stage for “a complex and unpredictable evolution” in both cultures (Newbigin 1995a, 147). (Indeed, the Bible might evolve as well, as it is a tradition held by the two parties.) Newbigin calls the story of Cornelius’ conversion no less a conversion of the Church (1995a, 59). Likewise, through a fruitful course the teacher culture and what is taught might evolve even more profoundly than the student culture.

It is right that they evolve together. “Mission is not just church extension,” says Newbigin. “It is an action in which the Holy Spirit does new things, brings into being new

obedience. But the new gifts are for the whole body and not just for the new members. Mission involves learning as well as teaching, receiving as well as giving” (Newbigin 1995a, 139). The eschatological character of mission judges teachers who command conformity to their agenda or attempt to replicate themselves in “disciples” who are really only clones. It also judges the ones whose systems of preserving and promoting prior student identity pass for education in pluralist and multiculturalist America. Assimilation and self-realization are not Christian transformation. They amount to imperialism and relativism, not eschatological exchange.

When schools avoid these confusions, they offer treasures both new and old. Europe’s medieval universities offered much more than just assimilation or self-realization. McClendon chronicles their emergence as one of the Church’s gifts to the cultures it was helping create. This gift was one truly received. As a *stadium generale*, the convocation of students and faculty became an institution working alongside the Church and the state and having a life of its own (McClendon 2000, 391). Its ethical practices correlate with originating practices of Christian community: conflict resolution with the reconciling rule of Christ, inclusiveness with the hospitality of new peoplehood, economic leveling (at least in comparison with the wider culture) with eucharistic fellowship that shares what is most precious, acknowledgement of vocation with the interdependent corporate fullness of Christ, and provision for a voice for all with the rule of Paul in which all gifts and givers take their place. Its theological practices correlate as well: community servanthood with McClendon’s theological *loci* of the reign of God alone, honest and courageous inquiry with the knowable and known identity of God and God’s world, and corporate and personal unity with the new humanity of one perichoretic people of all peoples. Finally, its structural commitment to learn from others and spar with them reflects the long missionary conversation that shares and trusts the good news with any who might hear and respond (McClendon 2000, 402-412). Europe’s college towns were new Antiochs.

In some ways, they still are. It is not just Christian educators or even teachers of religion *per se* who embody God's reign and invite others into it. Jesus already reigns in the agnostic's math class, the secularist's history department, and everywhere else. The Kingdom relates to every redeemable form of life, and vice versa. Education as mission applies along the entire frontier between the new creation and the old.

Yet this eschatology is double-edged. In heaven's genealogy yesterday's children can become tomorrow's outcasts, and vice versa (Mark 3:31-34). Having a historical tie to Christian mission, or even a formal one, is not the same as "abiding in him." The light can die. Vital mission demands the very renewal it offers.

So far I have offered generalities. While a thorough treatment of education as mission is beyond the scope of this essay, there is room to detail a few aspects of the metaphor as I flesh it out in my own teaching.

Syllabi That Signify

In a course, teaching and giving come before learning and receiving. These priorities signify the priority of God's operative grace to the nations' cooperative grace, in the logic of election by which God chooses some to bless all (Newbigin 1995a, 66ff; Newbigin 1989, 80ff). The Spirit's work is up to us teachers. So as missionaries we strive to create courses that will be signs of the Kingdom.

As this realization has sunk in over my brief teaching career, I have drawn more and more on ecclesiological, missiological, and cultural categories to develop ways of respecting a course's signification of the Reign of God:

1. I employ a "vision statement" for the course and recall it throughout the semester. Here is an example:

I believe God sees this course as a fellowship. We are a team brought together for a season of growth through mutual training, challenge, equipping, and discipline.

All these serve the ends that every participant attain new and lasting appreciation for the theological beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ, and every participating follower of Jesus gain new and lasting skill in the Church's practices of theological reflection.

Does this surrender to corporate culture? I think not. Vision is an eschatological, prophetic gift, not just a management fad. My vision statements do not present what I wish would happen, but proclaim what I believe God has achieved, in the hope that others might see it too.

2. My syllabi include "rules of the game"

(<http://www.westmont.edu/~work/classes/rules.html>) that inform students of my sometimes unusual expectations and assumptions for our curricular practices. I do this believing that our common academic conventions are overly determined by the early modern hierarchy of expertise, the modern assembly line, and the late modern cult of celebrity. Students as well as faculty are tempted to resort to these conventions rather than the beatific practices of the Kingdom as we all interpret education. (Incidentally, I am regularly astonished by how well my students live up to them. This is particularly true of my upper-division students. I take my upper-division students' superiority as a sign of great hope. It means college is helping them "get it.")

3. For the same reasons, I use metaphors that critically affirm and prophetically correct forms of life common both in academia and in wider western culture. Academics often look down on athletics and military service, but these two forms of contemporary life hold special promise for signifying the Reign of God. It is not coincidental that athletic and military metaphors are also well represented in the New Testament in the writings of Paul, the missionary and catechist to the nations. Both these ways of life are also deeply and increasingly respected in our wider culture, especially among young "Millennials." So my "rules of the game" state that students are a team, that I am a

coach, that they are followers as well as leaders, and that we are at war. Appealing to the virtues and robust disciplines of athletes and soldiers helps students (and teacher!) identify and overcome many of the cultural vices that afflict American higher education: apathy, commodification, cynicism, envy, flippancy, hedonism, indiscipline, individualism, moral rootlessness, oppression, pride, and teleological indifference. Few things please me more than when my students call me “coach.”

4. As the Church is a royal priesthood, so the classroom will necessarily respect the mutual dependence and diversity of spiritual gifts. My courses group students into groups of three to distribute the teaching load and develop them as apprentices in the craft of faithful learning. Students practice mutual service as peer reviewers for each other’s written work and first resources for meeting each other’s ordinary needs. They are as ready as Jesus’ disciples were to be paired off and sent through the towns of Israel – that is, not very ready at all – but in working they discover authority and skill of which they had been unaware.
5. Rather than relying on just a few written assignments to acquire and measure research expertise, I assign many brief “exercises” that work like problem sets in science courses. These focus our reading, writing, and grading skills on a question that forces students to return to the texts they are only beginning to understand. Each assignment sets up new encounters with the embodied reign of God. Together they strengthen habits of regular reading, reasoning, and writing. Thus focused, these habits resemble the spiritual disciplines that keep Christian tradition alive.
6. In upper division courses and even in large general-education courses, I rely on discussions led by students who read through papers in the style of doctoral seminars. Why these work so well mystifies me as much now as it did when I was a graduate

student. My hunch is that they subvert the common assumption that class time is no more than an occasion for disseminating information Berlin-style. Overturning this expectation trains us all to treat education as exchange, to come together as a fellowship that has its own corporate character, to listen and challenge rather than “just take notes,” and to expect and work for transformation. (How well this works depends on the maturity of the students. First-year students plateau earlier in the semester, at which time we shift back toward lectures, while juniors and seniors grow to flourish. Again, I take this disparity as a sign of hope for everyone.)

7. Because mission presupposes the *community* of persons rather than just occasional *aggregation* for the sake of efficiency, I have made office hour visits mandatory. This is not just “assessment” in educator’s jargon! Getting to know each other one-on-one enables all of us to understand each other better, discover ways the tradition addresses us personally rather than just collectively, and identify pedagogical failures and missed opportunities.
8. As I check exercises, participate in discussions, and meet with students, I gain both a sense of what they are learning and an opportunity to learn from them. Making myself vulnerable to their questions and criticisms offers opportunities for the Spirit to bring us both closer to all the truth. So these repeated exchanges lead to revised syllabi, new assignments, different readings, and refined pedagogy. In effect, they empower my guests to influence both their host and the tradition we are coming to indwell together.

There is no need to go on. The specific tactics are less important than their efficacy in signifying the Reign of God over all things. I adopt them to further the goal of truly Christian education to transform all things under the lordship of the Spirit-Anointed Son.

The Gift of Frustration

Surprisingly, these tactics signify even when they fail pedagogically. This is consistent with education's missionary character. I close by illustrating this point with some of the transformative moments that arrive over a typical semester.

At the outset I experience the intimidation of the challenge to structure a course in ways that respect and display the reality of the Kingdom, and often the exhilaration of believing I have met that challenge. I have chosen texts and topics to articulate the marvelous tradition that will be our common focus. I have developed assignments to challenge and form students in potentially fruitful ways. I have introduced students into a community whose camaraderie reflects, however indirectly, that of the fellowship of saints. The first day of class is a wonder, full of potential and proleptic fulfillment.

A greater joy is seeing students catch on. We teachers should admit it: we live for those moments when our students discover what we have hoped and prayed to show them. They make even the grading worthwhile. (Well, almost.)

Yet the sign of greatest promise is actually neither of these. It is the long agony that begins in the early middle of each semester as my excitement crumbles into puzzlement, frustration, shock, and resolve to do better next time. While there is always blame to assign – unprepared, pressured, slothful, and overworked students; my own overambition, indiscipline, incoherence, and pedagogical dullness; texts that are obtuse, shallow, or both – some of my shock always remains unexplained.

Newbigin explains why this might be: What could be happening is an authentic pneumatic exchange across cultures, as students respond to what I have offered them in ways I could not have predicted. Teaching a course confronts me, the so-called expert, with the sovereign agency of the Holy Spirit as his reconciliation of all things in Christ reaches a new and perhaps stubborn frontier. In the mysterious teaching, reproof, rebuke, and training in

righteousness that happen in my courses, God is giving me and my tradition a humiliating new chance to learn rather than just teach, to receive as well as give, to grow qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

Perhaps the greatest temptation that faces teachers is not to take those chances. If we seek to ensure success or inure ourselves to failure by being content with the past, we put ourselves on the wrong side of the eschaton, in the old city rather than outside its gates. But the more we create conditions for the Spirit not just to affirm my students, me, and my own embodied tradition, but also to correct us all, and the more open we all are to discerning and receiving those lessons, the more truly educational our seasons together can be.

Antioch's Challenge

Antioch is not a kind of education but a place where education happens. That means *everywhere* is Antioch – even Athens, Berlin, Jerusalem, Waco, and Santa Barbara. In this realm of every nation and a common king, no one pedagogical culture either dominates or maintains its independence. Yet the world's communities of discipline continue to teach, train, and inform in ways whose relationships with that realm remain hidden – in fact, which often seem more and more cryptic all the time. Some of these traditions have even learned to expect disinterest or hostility from Christ's disciples, rather than the Kingdom's embrace. As far as they are concerned, the Reign of God deserves its retreat into private values, social servanthood, ancient superstitions, voluntarist ethics, religious affection, otherworldliness, outmoded ignorance – or just the unknown and unwanted. So it was in Antioch long ago (Acts 13:50) (and so it remains today). Do we agree? Is Christ our common Lord or not? Are we willing to find out? And if he is, are they *or* we ready to face the consequences?

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