

Crossing Over into Postmodernity: Educational Invitations

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Crossing over is an experience affirmed in biblical accounts. Even the anticipation of crossing over is fraught with a sense of adventure, awe, and apprehension. Nevertheless, the experience of crossing over from one locale or realm to another invites the possibility of transformation. Transformation is central to the journey of faith with our triune God. God is in the business of bringing new life and sustaining life beyond what humans conceive is feasible or desirable. The cultural shifts identified as postmodernity provide an occasion for transformation that God will bring to persons, families, communities, churches, societies, structures and creation itself. The occasion of a cultural shift does not assume faithfulness to Gods' purposes or intentions. Spiritual discernment is required to affirm those changes God intends and oppose those that distort God's will for humanity and all of creation.

In May 2000, I traveled along with eighteen other delegates from Andover Newton Theological school to Mainland China. This was the first occasion I had to cross over the Pacific Ocean to visit Chinese churches and seminaries. I witnessed the spiritual vitality of Christians who suffered much during the Cultural Revolution. My sense of hope was renewed in seeing how God has sustained the faith of persons honoring their prayers and those of other Christians across the globe. The fervent commitment of Chinese Christians to mission in a rapidly changing society encouraged all members of our delegation. Crossing over to China with open hearts and minds provided fertile ground for God's Spirit to work

and foster new vision. This contemporary experience of crossing over parallels what the Bible describes in both the Old and New Testaments.

Old Testament Crossings

The most dramatic accounts of crossing over describe how the nation of Israel was both formed and transformed at critical points in its history. The classic film *The Ten Commandments* portrays the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea in Hollywood fashion. In that crossing from Egypt to Sinai the nation itself in its infancy was delivered by God's mighty hand. A diverse or mixed crowd of people departed from Egypt (Ex. 12:38) and their liberation came at great cost to their oppressors. But every stranger or alien had access to the spiritual blessings of the new covenant forged with God provided they fulfilled its obligations (Ex. 12:48).¹ A second crossing is recorded in the crossing of the Jordan River. The first crossing though dramatic, did not lead to full liberation, but a forty-year wilderness trek. A second crossing was required to enter the Promised Land on the terms God intended. Even Moses, the nation's leader, was ineligible for this second crossing and had to step aside for new leadership to emerge. New crossings may well require the emergence of younger leadership in a time of significant transition within faith communities. This shift can be seen more dramatically in the case of Elijah and Elisha with their personal crossings.

Second Kings 2:1-14 recounts how Elisha crossed over the Jordan River and was empowered to address new challenges of prophetic ministry following

¹ Hywel R. Jones, "Exodus," in *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 127-128.

the earthly crossing of Elijah to God's realm of heaven in a whirlwind. The transference of leadership from Elijah to Elisha was symbolized by Elisha's receiving Elijah's mantle. Elisha persisted in pursuing Elijah across the river and requested to receive the first born's inherited portion of spirit and power. It is noteworthy in both the cases of Moses and Elijah that stand as anchors for Israel's faithful leadership, crossings loom as central to address new challenges nationally and personally.

New Testament Crossings

In the New Testament, the person and ministry of Jesus are pre-eminent. Jesus crosses over from his preincarnate state to his humanity in a profoundly simple and dramatic fashion reversing Elijah's departure. He comes as an infant born in the most humble of settings and under difficult circumstances. Those circumstances included the Roman domination of the nation Israel. In the multicultural setting of Galilee, he crosses over many barriers in his teaching to include Gentiles, women and children. He also crosses over from the multicultural backwater of Galilee to Judea and Jerusalem in proclaiming outrageously the kingdom of God in his person. In addition to Jesus' public crossings, in his own teaching through parables he honors the more personal crossing of the Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The Samaritan crosses over from one side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He crosses to minister to the injured Jewish merchant. This Samaritan was recognized by Jesus for all time and perhaps later by Paul as being a true Jew of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29).

Crossing Over to Postmodernity

Commentators on popular culture and philosophical trends note that we are in the process of crossing over to postmodernity. What invitations might God be making in this crossing especially to those who teach? These invitations include the crossing over of our hearts, minds, spirits, and even our bodies in our actual teaching practices. God delights to use those persons who are willing to cross over. In the crossing, we must ask ourselves does this particular crossing bring us to a wilderness or a Promised Land, or some combination of both? Jesus, the author and finisher of our Christian faith, was willing in his incarnation and earthly ministry to cross. If Jesus serves as the exemplar or model for teaching, can Christian teachers do less?

The realities of postmodernity find expression in the rising influence of Generation X (Gen X) and the call to reevaluate teaching in relation to their participation in Christian education. In my earlier writing on postmodernity in *Foundational Issues in Christian Education*, I stressed the place of truth that is appropriately questioned within postmodernity.² The necessary complement to that discussion is one that considers the place of love or care in Christian education. This follows from the scriptural principle in education of “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) that can include actions as well as words.³ To speak the truth in love in a postmodern context requires giving attention to the deep hunger for genuine or truthful relationships and community voiced by members of

² Robert W. Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education: An Introduction in Evangelical Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 243-51.

³ See my discussion of this principle in Robert W. Pazmiño, *Basics of Teaching for Christians: Preparation, Instruction, and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 67-68, 75-76, 88, 98-99.

Gen X.⁴ Christians claim that the ultimate fulfillment of that hunger can be found in the experience of the love of God and the care of the Christian community. For that to be the case, Christians engaged in education will need to consider the following seven invitations in their educational thought and practice:

1. Return to relational bonds revealed in the Trinity.
2. Revisit the communal commitments that shape our lives.
3. Reaffirm the “common good” in the societal and global context and form a public theology.
4. Reconsider the place of conscience in the search for wisdom.
5. Reinvest in the prophetic calling in pursuing God’s politics in the world.
6. Reappropriate the joy of celebration in corporate worship and public festival.
7. Recognize the continual demand for renewal, reformation and revolution that God intends until the consummation.

The relevance, order, and embrace of these invitations will vary with the particular context of ministry, but the challenge remains if Christians are to minister effectively in postmodern settings.

1

The return to relational bonds revealed in the Trinity requires Christians to clarify their theological grounding.⁵ I affirm that the Trinity can serve as an organizing theological theme for Christian education. This idea is not new, but its

⁴ For a discussion of this hunger see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

⁵ See Robert W. Pazmiño, *God Our Teacher: Theological Basics in Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

application to postmodern realities calls for a return to this Christian distinctive. James Smart in his classic work *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity is the essential starting point for understanding the theological bases of Christian education.⁶ Nels Ferré, a systematic theologian, who worked with D. Campbell Wyckoff, a renowned Christian educator, proposed in his work *A Theology for Christian Education* a trinitarian model with the God the Father as the educator, Jesus Christ the Son as the exemplar, and the Holy Spirit as the tutor.⁷ Christian theological education strives to enable students to explore the mystery and wonder of the Trinity and to taste of the community life modeled for humanity in the life of the Trinity. This monumental task calls for the reflection, commitment, and hard work of Christian educators.

Trinitarian grammar also applies to the general tasks of education suggested by the work of Peter Hodgson in *God's Wisdom*. Hodgson, for example, proposes three basic elements for higher education that include critical thinking, heightened imagination, and liberating practice.⁸ These three relate to my educational trinity in that critical thinking relates to *content*, heightened imagination to *persons'* creativity, and liberating practice to the *context* of the community and society. I define education as the process of sharing *content* with *persons* in the *context* of their community and society. God the Father as Creator is the educator from whom all the *content* of education issues. God's

⁶ James D. Smart, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church: An Examination of the Basic Principles of Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 10.

⁷ Nels F. S. Ferré, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967). See my discussion of this work in Robert W. Pazmiño, *By What Authority Do We Teach?: Sources for Empowering Christian Educators* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 20-29.

⁸ Peter C. Hodgson, *God's Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 8, 114-24.

wisdom is what can distinguish education that results in transformation. Jesus the Son as the exemplar or mentor is the model or master teacher who in his *person* exemplifies all that a teacher should be in his relationships with students, with other *persons*. The hunger for love and care finds fulfillment in the person of Jesus and all who follow him in their teaching ministries. The Holy Spirit as the tutor is the counselor or community consultant who sustains the life of the Christian community and the wider society in ways that fulfill God's purposes for the *context*. The Holy Spirit encounters human spirits to bring life and new life on the personal, communal, societal and global levels. Spiritual renewal applies to the public levels of discourse and life as well as the personal and private domains. In relation to theological education, Hodgson's basic elements can be renamed to include theological reflection, spiritual imagination, and transformative practice that fulfill the triune God's purposes and politics in the world.

2

In the light of the life modeled for humanity by the Trinity, Christians are called to revisit the communal commitments that shape our lives. Postmodernity shatters the myth of the autonomous individual totally divorced from the bonds of tradition, family, and the wider community. Postmodernity also shatters the claim for objective reason divorced from the place of human interests and existential concerns. The use of language itself represents communal practices and nuances. The viewing subject and their history affect the terms and directions of communication. Knowledge itself is recognized as a social construction and the

various inputs from media like the Internet must be questioned for their veracity. Public disclosures are subject to a variety of “spin doctors” who provide a host of interpretations in making connections with the recipients or more often, the viewers of the message. The variety of contacts and inputs in postmodern life require careful discernment to sort out the barrage of information packaged and disseminated. In order to sort out the wisdom from the vast amount of information and knowledge with its claims for immediate attention, Christians must discern the nature and extent of their commitments to various human associations.

Educators have explored the variety of influences by considering the educational configurations or the educational ecology of persons. An educational configuration is a cluster or network of agencies that pass on a culture or educational content to persons. This concept was fully developed in the pioneering work of the educational historian Lawrence Cremin.⁹ From the work of Bernard Bailyn, Cremin identified the four educational agencies or axles in the colonial experience (1607-1783) of the United States to include the home, the church, the community, and the economy.¹⁰ In the national period (1783-1876), the additional educational agencies or institutions that emerged included the schools and a host of voluntary associations like libraries, museums, and child advocacy or support groups like the YMCA and YWCA. During the metropolitan period (1876-2000), the rise of the body politic, and the media is noteworthy. The relationships and interactions of these various agencies or institutions

⁹ Lawrence A. Cremin, *Traditions of American Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

represent an educational configuration. Cremin's shorthand for describing these relationships is that agencies confirm, complement, and/or contradict each other and have varied impacts upon individuals in particular communities dependent upon their distinctive learning styles and histories. Communal commitments can be explored by assessing educational configurations and considering the varying contours over time. Postmodern shifts have resulted in increased contradiction across educational configurations with the resulting sense of fragmentation. In the light of this situation, Christians must clarify their basic commitments as the people of God who are called to incarnate Christian values in the community and society. In relation to the church and its interface with other agencies, the educational agenda calls for a response to preserve, redeem or transform the explicit or implicit curriculum of the corresponding agency. This task requires discernment and often the weighing of tradeoffs.

3

While assessing educational configurations, Christians must reaffirm the “common good” or the public good in the societal and global context. This must be done without the loss of one’s Christian identity. Christians affirm the bonds they share with all God’s creatures and all of creation. The pursuit of the common good itself is major task that requires sustained dialogue and a willingness to demonstrate love in the social arena through the pursuit of justice and peace. The Scriptures describe *shalom* in terms of a fullness of relationship and communion God intends for all of creation. The identification of the

¹⁰ Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 45.

“common good” for Christians results in educational efforts that both affirm Christian identity and openness to the other.¹¹ The affirmation of identity preserves Christian distinctives that includes the recognition that God has created all persons with intrinsic dignity and worth. The affirmation of openness signals the need to afford respect to and care for all others in educational encounters and more generally, in life. The extent of the globe’s ecological crisis demands attention be given to the common fate that Christians share with humanity and all of created life.

The “common good” for humanity necessitates occasions to *mix* with others, with non-Christians, as well as occasions to *huddle* with persons of like faith in wrestling with past, current, and future challenges that our globe confronts.¹² Truth can be discerned in both the particulars of the Christian faith and insights from other religious and non-religious sources.¹³ In drawing from these various sources, Christians in their public discourse affirm the place of politics, which can be defined as the art of making and keeping persons truly human.¹⁴ Christians share with all other persons the care of creation and the possibility of the fullness of life sustained for future generations. This fullness of

¹¹ Constance Tarasar, “The Minority Problem: Educating for Identity and Openness.” In *Religious Pluralism and Religious Education*, ed. Norma Thompson (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1988), 195-210.

¹² I discuss the strategy of “huddle and mix” in Robert W. Pazmiño, “Surviving or Thriving in the Third Millennium?” in *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*, ed. James M. Lee (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 2000), 82-83.

¹³ I discuss this perspective in Robert W. Pazmiño, *By What Authority Do We Teach? Sources for Empowering Christian Educators* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 119-46.

¹⁴ In the tradition of Aristotle, George W. Webber proposes this definition in *The Congregation in Mission* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 49. In this definition, Webber draws upon the work of Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 74-101.

life the Scriptures describe as *shalom* that God intended from creation and will complete at the consummation.

4

With the identification and reappropriation of the “common good” comes the need to reconsider the place of the conscience in the search for wisdom. Barry Harvey draws upon the work of Paul Lehmann in proposing that Christians focus upon conscience as the organizing principle for their shared life and education.

According to Lehmann, it is only as human motivation and human judgment actually converge within conscience that God and humans “have directly and insistently to do with one another (as) the aims and the direction, the motivations and the decisions, the instruments and the structures of human interrelatedness are forged into a pattern of response—a style of life.”¹⁵

The conscience as the seat of the will or intentions requires attention to God’s demands in a Christian understanding. God’s demands include responsible living in the created world. This living is as a social, political, economic, intellectual, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual beings-in-relationship. As relational beings, persons are accountable to God, others, and themselves. The conscience is that dimension of persons where matters of value, virtue, and character take form.

With the increased fragmentation in the human community and educational configurations, the appeal in the public discussions of education is to attend to matters of character formation. With the increase of violence and abuse in communities viewed as safe havens from urban decline and minority intrusion, the concern in the United States intensifies. The expectation that

schooling efforts at the primary, secondary and higher levels can alone bridge the gaps in both public and private morality must be questioned. The formation of conscience and character requires strategies that influence all the agencies and institutions of any educational configuration. In the light of the increased sense of societal and educational crisis, the question of Christian vocation must be posed. With the persistent interest in transformation in education, Christians can share the source of transformation they have in their faith

5

As Christians engage their mission in the educational world, they can reinvest in their prophetic calling. The prophetic calling involves pursuing God's politics in the world. What are God's politics, and in particular how do they relate to education? In one sense, education is slow-fuse politics that seeks for transformation in the human situation. The transformation or change sought is not directly through the legislative, executive, or judicial processes of political and civic bodies. Rather the audacious claim is that education can transform persons and life through study, dialogue, interaction, research, and expression with others in formal, nonformal, and informal arrangements. The sharing of educational content includes cognitive, affective, intentional, and behavioral components and their interface as the whole being of persons takes on new shape.

The prophetic calling involves the posing of questions, the creation of reflective space, and the wrestling with alternatives for current arrangements. A necessary prior task is the identification of the current arrangement and its

¹⁵ Barry Harvey, *Politics of the Theological: Beyond the Piety and Power of a World Come of Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 12-13. Harvey quotes from Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New

precedents. The commonly identified sequence of learning in a prophetic mode is *to see, to judge, and to act*. It must be noted that to act also requires seeing the results of actions. Seeing the results of actions thereby continues the cycle and calls for judgment in evaluation. The sequence presumes certain realities. First, it presumes the prior ability to see which itself may require learning although seeing can imply various modalities. Second, it presumes for judging the understanding of categories for judgment and a basis for comparison. Third, in the case of action, it presumes the empowerment of persons with the voice, choice, and means to act effectively. The hope in prophetic teaching is to equip persons to be all that God intends for them as subjects of God's love and care. God's care implies for Christians caring enough to confront realities that oppress persons and limit the fulfillment of God's *shalom* in all of creation. From a Christian perspective, this is only possible through the person and work of the Holy Spirit working in partnership with persons. The reinvestment in the prophetic calling is often associated with struggle in the recovery of hope. The great North African teacher Augustine commented on hope:

Hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they need not remain as they are.¹⁶

The complement to the anger and courage of hope is the experience of joy that is crucial to teaching and life.

York: Harper & Row, 1963), 288.

¹⁶ As cited in Wilbert J. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, 9th ed. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1994), 384.

Christians engaged in education are called to reappropriate the joy of celebration in public worship and festival. Gabriel Fackre helpfully distinguishes the inreach and the out reach of the church in relation to the task and spiritual gift of *leitourgia* or celebration. The inreach of celebration finds expression through the ministries of corporate worship. The outreach of celebration finds expression in festival.¹⁷ Outreach in public festival serves as an extension of Christian mission in the world. Both worship and festival are vehicles for the sharing of joy as the complement to the expression of anger and courage in the embodiment of hope. Joy is the emotion closest to the heart of God in my evangelical perspective. The Gospel denotes good news that leads to the experience and expression of joy. This joy is experienced even the midst of loss and suffering. Joy finds its fullest expression in the shared human experiences of worship. In a different mode, this joy is also experienced in occasions of public festival where the gift of life and human community is celebrated.

The expression of joy in worship and festival are forms of nonformal and informal education in which life is viewed from the perspective of God's heart. In worship, the conscience is engaged, but much more. Archbishop William Temple described the "more": "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to

¹⁷Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 71.

the purpose of God.”¹⁸ Worship of this kind is formative and transformative. In festival, the very gift of life to humanity and the beauty of creation are celebrated. Opportunities for creative expression in the arts and music can give glory to God as they are shared in public settings. Recounting the history and recognizing the cultures of various communities can glorify the Creator of all culture and history itself. The hunger in postmodernity is for the genuine experience of joy that Christians can share.

7

The seventh invitation of postmodernity is to recognize the continual demand of renewal, reformation, and revolution that God intends until the consummation. Given the nature of created life reflected in the changing seasons of the natural and human life span, openness to transformation is required. New life springs forth in a variety of ways and the rising generations inevitably see the world with different eyes, postmodern eyes. Christian sources describe the need for a continuous process of being reformed, transformed, and renewed by the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit. In relation to education, this implies a reforming, transforming, and liberating approach.¹⁹

In any Christian education effort, evaluation is a crucial element that invites the possibility of change in future efforts.²⁰ Evaluation can also signal the need for openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in recognizing the limits of human efforts. The danger in all education is idolatry that baptizes the content,

¹⁸ William Temple, *The Hope of a New World* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1941), 30.

¹⁹ See my discussion of liberation and transformation in Robert W. Pazmiño, *Latin American Journey: Insights for Christian Education in North America* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1994), 28-75.

²⁰ See my discussion of evaluation in Pazmiño, *Basics of Teaching for Christians*, 75-99.

methods, forms or relationships as divine equivalents. Any of these vehicles can be graciously used by God to accomplish God's purposes. Nevertheless, they all fall short of God's ideals as modeled in the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ. The inevitable gaps serve as an incentive to rely prayerfully on God's resources in the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit and the critical role of the Scriptures. Such reliance welcomes the place of renewal, reformation, and on occasion revolution in Christian education. The Spirit brings new life as Christians spiritually discern alternatives to existing patterns and rely on the Spirit's transformation. The Scriptures present new vistas and read us and our educational efforts from the perspective of perennial and enduring forms and principles grounded in the Triune God. Postmodernity provides such an occasion for reflection and reconsideration of educational theory and practice.

Conclusion

This work has identified seven potential educational invitations of postmodernity for Christian educators. These invitations encourage theological reflection, spiritual imagination and transformative practice in Christian education beyond current efforts. Discernment is required in responding to these along with openness to the one seated on the throne who declares "See, I am making all things new." (Rev. 22:5)