

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION?

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In a podcast interview for my most recent book (*Stuck in the Present: How History Frees and Forms Christians*), the host asked if I was finding it easier these days to persuade Christians about the importance of learning. The host thought my need to persuade others might not be as great these days because all the present challenges both in and out of the church are so obvious and alarming. There would surely be a felt need to learn and get better equipped to bear witness as a Christian. So, was I seeing greater eagerness to learn among Christians?

Sadly, I responded that my need to persuade Christians about the importance of learning is as great as ever. Instead of the present challenges making Christians more eager to learn, I am finding that many are content to stay in their safe silos where one can supposedly be protected from the complex challenges of our day. The promise of pseudo safety trumps the embarrassment of being superficial. Fear trumps the risk of learning. And true learning is risky because you will find out how much you don't know.

## *The Need is Great*

When our youngest son taught philosophy before heading to law school, he told me that his number one priority was to convince his students how little they knew. Such exposure is threatening, so it is easier to hunker down in echo chambers where learning is limited.

Even the basics of Christianity are not well known. I have asked different Christian groups whether anyone can give me the biblical texts that describe the proper boundaries of "faith, hope, and love." In other words, what are the Bible verses that describe the difference between biblical faith and presumption, hope and wish-fulfillment, love, and a secular version of therapeutic well-being. Other than my wife, I have found most admit that they can't do it. If the biblical boundaries of "faith, hope, and love" are not clearly understood, you don't need to be a rocket scientist to know how pervasive the ignorance must be on other important Christian teachings.

The late J.I. Packer "mourned the eclipse" of Christian education (he used the word catechesis). Packer believed that its low priority was a main contributor to "the deepest root of immaturity that is so widespread in evangelical circles..." I agree. I believe our

downplaying its importance makes people vulnerable to leaving the Christian faith for usually poor, but understandable reasons.

There are several factors that may lead to deconversion, but there is one that has not sobered enough Christian parents. I've seen it up close in a Christian school context, in parachurch ministry, and in pastoral work. It is a surefire recipe for disheartening your children about the Christian faith. They may still walk with God, but parents can make things more difficult for their children by failing to address an all-too-common problem.

It is not uncommon to find parents who desperately desire their children to be deeply grounded in the Christian faith, but they themselves are apathetic. Years ago, while I was teaching at a Christian school, two high school seniors complained about their parent's lackluster approach in following Jesus. One asked, "Mr. Moore, my father wants me to love Jesus first and foremost, but he is consumed with his brand-new BMW. What should I do?" The other said, "When I come home my mom makes it clear that I need to get studying Latin, but she is reading *Glamour* magazine."

By the grace of God, children may still walk with God despite their parents' hypocrisy. On the other side of things, I know parents who continue to grow in the "grace and knowledge of the Lord" despite having spiritually wayward children. These parents inspire me.

### *Making Discipleship Great Again*

The late Dallas Willard used to say that he had a tough time finding churches who are committed to building disciples or apprentices of Jesus. People of all ages need to be formed in a more serious and comprehensive ministry of Christian education. Most of the Sunday school classes I have observed don't come close to doing the job. Neither do the small groups I have observed.

The research on small groups by the eminent sociologist Robert Wuthnow confirms my own observations. Focused attention must be given to equipping Christians to be lifelong disciples or learners. Church leaders need to provide an atmosphere where this sort of expectation is the *normative path for all Christians*. It must be an environment where everyone has the freedom to pose their most difficult or troubling questions. This assumes, of course, that churches have qualified leaders in both training and temperament.

### *A Common Misunderstanding*

I recently saw a quote being retweeted by those who heartily agreed with it. The quote came from a pastor I hold in high regard. He said, "The vast majority of Christians are educated past their level of obedience. If you would just do what you already knew, your life would change." This pastor (and those who retweeted his quote) believes the answer to the spiritual doldrums is to stop putting such an emphasis on learning. What is needed is to get off one's spiritual duff and do something with what one already "knows."

It's a popular sentiment that I have heard several times before, but it misses some critical truths. For one, most American Christians have a poor understanding of their faith. Again, the polling data shows this and my own varied experience over forty years of teaching confirms it. In addition, the Bible makes clear that *true* knowledge of God leads to love. Finally, we should promote obedience but obedience that honors God is fueled by a maturing knowledge of God. The best love for God (and for human beings) is borne out of a deep understanding of who it is we are loving.

#### *A Forgotten Educator Who Can Help Us*

Consider the rigorous preparation of an NFL football player or of someone in the military who is headed to the front lines of battle. Why should we Christians settle for so much less in our own preparation? We are running for an imperishable crown! (I Cor. 9:24-27)

The largely forgotten, but hugely influential Henrietta Mears was appalled that churches did not offer rigorous education. She was stunned that intelligent college students barely knew the foundational truths of the Christian faith.

For over three decades Mears equipped students at First Presbyterian of Hollywood. Her immeasurable impact was praised by the likes of Bill Bright and Billy Graham. She modeled well that learning deeply about the Christian faith was both thrilling and prepared one to be a dynamic witness for Jesus. It's way past time that we resurrect the spirit and strategic brilliance of Mears.

David George Moore is the author most recently of *Stuck in the Present: How History Frees and Forms Christians*. His YouTube channel is at [www.youtube.com/@MOOREENGAGING](http://www.youtube.com/@MOOREENGAGING)