

## RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION BY THE CHURCHES

P J Hartin  
University of the Witwatersrand

---

### Abstract

*This article wishes to delineate the different approach and purpose in religious instruction offered by the churches as distinct from religious instruction which is offered in state schools. The very basis of all Christian education is that of the Scriptures, which is directed towards the intellectual, moral and relational dimensions of life. While the aim of the church is to help its own members to grow intellectually, morally and relationally within the biblical heritage of that particular church tradition, the aim of the school is judged to be different. It is argued that the aim of the school is to hand on the values of its own society. As such it cannot endorse one particular religious tradition or denomination. Its task is to teach a respect for the wealth of religious traditions present in our South African society.*

### 1. Introduction

In the early Christian church the proclamation of the word of salvation was seen to comprise two elements: the *kerygma* and the *didache*. The *kerygma* included the initial proclamation of the Gospel to those who had not heard it before, such as occurred in the initial speeches of the Apostles in the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Once more and more people came to accept the Christian message, there was a need for a much deeper instruction into this way of life and its beliefs: hence the *didache* arose.

The letters of Paul betray much the same state of development. He founded numerous Christian centres throughout Asia Minor and Europe through an initial proclamation of the Gospel message (*kerygma*). However, many of these churches needed further instruction, either arising from questions that they posed to Paul, or from problems that emanated from within the communities themselves which demanded a detailed response. Against this background emerged the letters of Paul, aimed at a deeper explanation of the Christian message (*didache*).

Most Christians today come into the fold of Christianity by being baptised at an early age. They grow up in a Christian home and regularly attend church services in which they gradually absorb the fundamentals of their Christian faith. But, a much deeper instruction in their Christian faith is needed. For this reason all churches

institute programmes, particularly for the young, so that they can obtain a fuller appreciation of their Christian faith and life.

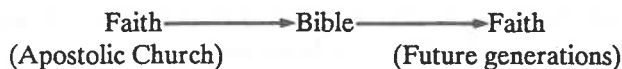
These programmes obviously vary according to the different Christian denominations. Where they would be similar is in the emphasis that each places upon the Bible as the source and basis of their faith. Where they would differ is in the various different emphases that each group places upon its own traditions which delineate it from other Christian denominations.

It is my intention to consider above all the importance and role that the Bible should play in all religious instruction in churches. Obviously it is difficult to speak for all churches in general. What I can do is to speak from within the Christian tradition to which I belong, the Roman Catholic Church, but I am sure that much of what I say is applicable to most Christian denominations.

## 2. The Bible as the Magna Carta of Christianity

'Christianity is a religion of the Book.' Although this may not be an all-inclusive definition of Christianity (Schillebeeckx 1974:20), it does have a value. As a definition, it does help to distinguish Christianity from many of the other world religions. At the same time it points to what is the foundation-stone of Christianity: the Bible. Without the Bible Christianity just simply could not continue to function or exist, for it is the authoritative document expressing the very nature of the Christian faith. The biblical books of the Old and New Testaments are attempts, under the guidance of God's Spirit, to record for future generations the understanding of faith which the Apostolic church possessed. 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have faith in his name' (Jn 20:31).

Schillebeeckx (1967:15) expresses very well the nature of the Scriptures as enduring for all time with the task of bringing future generations to absorb that same faith that the Apostolic church confessed: 'Scripture is the "covering letter" accompanying the mystery of the redemption brought about by God in the man Jesus, and it is clear that God intended it to be the lasting document accompanying this definitive saving event.' The Bible, then, is an expression of the faith of the first generation of the early church. It is this faith which becomes normative for all subsequent generations. The relationship of the Bible to faith is best expressed by means of a diagram:



In some ways one can say that the Bible is the *Magna Carta* (Schillebeeckx 1967:15) for the faith of Christianity. Every age must turn anew to the Bible and re-examine itself in the light of its teachings. This does not mean that the Bible has to be

repeated verbally, and its images and world-vision taken over immediately from the first century and transposed into the twentieth century. Not at all. What has to be done is to take the faith that is expressed in the biblical writings and re-express it in terms of our twentieth century world-vision. In this way the Bible continues to influence the present age, helping to revitalise the faith of the present, as well as acting as a safeguard to ensure the continuation of that same faith that was professed. As 2 Timothy 3:16 expresses it: 'All Scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correcting, and for training in righteousness.'

### **3. The Scriptures as the essential part of Christian education**

Seen in this light, Christian education has to derive its guiding source from the Scriptures. While it is ultimately the parents who bear the responsibility for educating and training their children in the ways of faith, it is the Christian community which assists them and supports them in this task, giving them the help where often they feel inadequate.

At the turn of the century George Herbert Mead, a social psychologist, devoted his attention to the interaction between the development of the individual with regard to the wider community. Peter Berger (1963:99) expressed Mead's theory in this way:

All this learning occurs, and can only occur, in interaction with other human beings, be it the parents or whoever else raises the child. The child first takes on roles vis-à-vis what Mead calls his 'significant others,' that is, those persons who deal with him intimately and whose attitudes are decisive for the formation of his conception of himself. Later, the child learns that the roles he plays are not only relevant to his intimate circle, but relate to the expectations directed towards him by society at large.

Consequently, in the context of the child's interaction with the community or society of the church, his 'significant others,' it must be borne in mind that the child is being educated as a whole person. Consequently, Christian education in this framework is directed towards three main aspects: the intellectual life, the moral life, and finally the relational life.

#### **3.1 The intellectual life**

When one speaks about Christian education one tends to speak above all about moral activity and tends to forget the other important aspects as well, chief of which is the intellectual dimension. Moral life is based upon one's intellectual convictions: 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another' (1 Jn 4:11). Our love for one another, the command to love, is founded on the fact that God has first loved us. Consequently, the imperative is derived from the indicative.

The aim is to acquire an understanding of the essential message of the Scriptures. To do this the Bible must be studied scientifically with all the means available, so as to arrive at an objective interpretation. Then, this message must be made

understandable in today's thought-categories and vision. What I discover from the Bible must be harmonised with the modern world-view and concepts. There is only one truth. I feel that a great failing today is that people tend to live with the view that there are two truths: one for religion and one for the world in which we live. The religious truths and values operate on Sundays, while the secular truth operates during the rest of the week! Nothing could be more fallacious. It is that essential task of Christian formation to help the person to see that there is only one truth which can only be attained through harmonisation of the teaching of the Bible in the modern world.

Obviously, the age of the child must be taken into consideration, and the methods adopted must be different according to the psychological development of the child. The great failing very often is to approach the biblical accounts in exactly the same way, irrespective of the intellectual development of the child. Just as it would be wrong to teach an historical-critical method of reading the Bible to children of seven years old, so too it would be wrong to ignore an historical-critical reading of the Bible with children of sixteen years of age. As Benfield (1970:44) says:

The task ... is, therefore, gradually to ease the children into a position where they can begin to understand the deep significance of scripture to those in whose lives 'God-talk' and 'God-knowledge' are vitally important and to do this in such a way that it will relate to their own searching in the area of 'God-experience.' It must be part of their God-exploring and self-exploring.

### 3.2 Moral activity

A Christian receives new life as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ, and this new life first achieved by Christ is realised in the Christian through the work of the Spirit. The indicative thus means the fact that the Christian now exists as a new creation sharing in the salvific work of Christ. But this new life, this faith that the Christian possesses, carries with it an imperative, a categorical demand. The Christian must, therefore, actualise his faith in his various concrete life-possibilities. His life and the way in which he acts is a demonstration and actualisation of his faith (Ridderbos 1973:284).

All Paul's paraenesises are theocentrically orientated. His teaching always begins with a reference to God and what he has done for the Christian:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rm 12:1-2).

The basic concept for Paul of this new relationship with God is that of justification (Ridderbos 1973: 287). This includes the making known of the will of God to His people and also includes the moral character of this relationship between God and those to whom He has revealed Himself.

Another important aspect of the theocentric character of this new life is expressed by the concept of sanctification, which indicates the moral situation. This is used to refer to the moral perfection which takes place through the activity of the Spirit. Christ is the one who has sanctified his people so that 'he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph 5:27). This concept of sanctification is an all-embracing term for the Pauline imperative: the new life must demonstrate itself in holiness and purity according to the will of God in the form of a holy offering of oneself (Ridderbos 1973:292).

One must illustrate that what one accepts intellectually has implications for one's moral life. The standards derived from the Bible should be seen as direction-pointers, indicating to the person the way he/she should be acting, the direction he/she should be taking. They come as the light of a flashlight illuminating our world and showing how we are to act as Christians in our world. Instead of being a noose placed around one's neck, or shackles on one's feet, the Christian standards of the Bible are liberating principles setting forth a blueprint of how one is to lead one's life in order to attain happiness and fulfilment. Once again, it is the essence of the scriptural message which must be applied to the present day.

### 3.3 Relational dimension

Christian education aims at helping the individual lead his/her life in society in harmony with others. Christian education shows how this is to be done through the witness of the Scriptures. It shows as well that the relational dimension is not simply a horizontal one (person to person) but also a vertical one (God to human being). Both aspects are essential for a full realisation and fulfilment of the Christian person. This, surely, is where all Christian education leads: to bring the individual into a harmonious relationship with both God and fellow human beings. It is the point on which the whole of Christ's teaching hangs: love for God and one's neighbour.

## 4. The differing aims and responsibilities of biblical instruction at school and in the church

Parents are the ones who ultimately bear the responsibility for the education of their children. Because of many inadequacies, be it time or even knowledge or experience, parents are most often unable to fulfil these roles themselves. Hence, they delegate this responsibility to the wider community of the church, and even the wider community of society and the state. But this delegation of responsibility must not be interpreted as an abrogation of all responsibility. Parents must continue to oversee and influence what their children are receiving from the wider communities.

It is, above all, the community of the church that assists the parents in the religious education and formation of their child. For this reason it is to the community which

bears the same faith and traditions of the parents that they seek to entrust the religious education and formation of their child.

It is to the wider community of the state that the parents entrust the academic education of the child, to enable the child to become a worthy member of the society in which they live. It is, however, especially in the field of religious education that the church and state-school tend to overlap. In this overlapping, however, the role and aims of the church and school are seen to be very different.

The aim of the church, as has been shown, is to help its own members to grow intellectually, morally and relationally within the biblical heritage of that particular church tradition. It helps its adherents to absorb its own traditions and to preserve the rich heritage of that particular religious denomination. Consequently, the aim is for the members of the church to absorb and be at home with the very special and well-treasured inheritance of that particular religious denomination.

In the wider community of society, and in particular of the state-school, there are many different religious traditions and denominations. Consequently, the aim of the school can in no way be the same as that of the church. It cannot endorse one particular religious tradition or denomination. To do so would be a betrayal of the trust placed in it by parents. It would amount to religious proselytism and indoctrination.

A school is a mirror of society itself and its task is to help preserve and hand on the values of that society. As our present South African society is part and parcel of the religious inheritance of Judaeo-Christianity, it is right that scholars should receive instruction in that religious inheritance, but it must occur in an impartial way in that Judaeo-Christianity is no monolithic entity, but is made up of many divergent traditions. Of this the scholars must be made aware and they must, above all, absorb a respect, tolerance and appreciation for those whose religious understanding of Christianity may differ from theirs. Again, it is the parent who must see that this task of the school is carried out. In no way is the school to undermine the work of the parent in the religious upbringing of the child. Instead, the task of the school is to uphold and support the role by teaching a respect for the wealth of religious traditions that there are in our South African society.

## 5. Conclusion

Christian formation can only be such if it remains rooted in its foundations in the Scriptures. To try to achieve a Christian formation apart from the Scriptures, is as impossible as trying to cook without any source of heat. It is the Scriptures which will forever provide the source, power and inspiration for every effective Christian formation. It is, however, important to realise as well as respect that the aims and intentions of religious education in the churches and at schools differ. These differences must be maintained and strengthened if the religious pluralism of our society is to be respected.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Benfield, G 1970. The Bible in the classroom: Junior stage, in Walton, R, (ed), *A source book of the Bible for teachers*. London: SCM, 44-53.
- Berger, P 1963. *Invitation to sociology*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hartin, P 1986. Scripture and Christian formation. *Khulisa*, vol 1, 14-15.
- Kress, R 1985. *The Church: Communion, sacrament, communication*. New York: Paulist.
- Ridderbos, H 1973. Paulus: Ontwerp van zijn theologie. Kampen: J H Kok.
- Schillebeeckx, E 1967. *Revelation and theology*. London: Sheed & Ward.
1974. *The understanding of faith: Interpretation and criticism*. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Walton, R (ed), 1970. *A source book of the Bible for teachers*. London: SCM.