

Continuing Education: A Pressing Need for the Church Today

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(Modified version of a presentation done for the Bulkley Valley Reformed Officebearers' Conference in 2003 and the Pacific Reformed Ministerial in 2006)

The subject for today is something that I've been thinking about for a good number of years already. Naturally, I include myself in everything I am about to say. As an officebearer and as a Christian, I consider myself a lifetime student who will always need continuing education. Having said that, it has struck me that this idea of being a life-long learner is not universally accepted in the church, either among officebearers or among the regular members. To be sure there are exceptions: the regular member who is right on top of all the issues in the church; the retired dairy farmer whose new passion is translating Bavinck and other theological greats; the officebearer who has just as much formal theological training as his minister and continues to read and learn voraciously; the elder who, despite a busy schedule and lots of pressures, does his best to read what he can to gain more knowledge about the Reformed faith. But let us be honest: there are also officebearers who would soak their shirts if they were asked the five points of Calvinism. There are regular members who have no clue when the minister talks about Arminianism in the sermon. There are adult believers (professing members) in our Reformed churches who do not understand simple theological terms such as sanctification or justification. The problems go even deeper than this into the basic elements of Christian living such as the application of discipline according to the rule of Scripture.

Lack of Knowledge is Destructive

When I was a seminary student, I heard a powerful sermon from one of my professors that convicted me of the great need for continuing education in the church. I became convinced that continuing education cannot be an optional item – it is necessary for the healthy maintenance and growth of Christ's bride. The text for the sermon was Hosea 4:6, *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children."* Those are powerful words. The people of Israel were not being taught: in fact, they actively rejected knowledge. So, they had virtually no knowledge of God and His ways. This Old Testament idea of "knowledge" is more than just having an intellectual, cognitive knowledge of God. In the Old Testament, knowledge of God is living in an intimate relationship with him. In Hosea 4:6, lack of knowledge is paralleled with forgetting the law of God. That means not only forgetting what the law says, but also neglecting to do it, neglecting to live in covenant relationship with the LORD. As a result, the people were destroyed. They were rejected. Their children were forgotten. God turned his back on them. Could that happen to God's people in our congregations today?

It has happened in the past in Reformed churches. During the time of the *Afscheiding* or Secession of 1834, for instance. The Reformed Church in the Netherlands at that time



was rusted out and decrepit. Men would become ministers without ever having had studied, much less read, the Canons of Dort. It is hard to believe, but there were ministers who did not even know who John Calvin was. For lack of knowledge, the Church was destroyed. God rejected the Netherlands Reformed Church and continued his work among others. We must learn our lessons from Church History. Church History teaches us that there is a need for continuing education among all believers. And this lesson from Church History reinforces the teaching of Scripture in such passages as Hosea 4:6.

The Church is a Teaching Institution

The need is also highlighted when we consider that the church is a teaching institution. The last verses of Matthew 28 are well known for their importance when it comes to missions. There is an outward looking aspect here. But these verses also have a lot to say about the church as it looks to be built up on the inside. Here I'm thinking especially of those words in verse 20, "*teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...*" Before I give direct attention to those words, there are a couple of things to notice in the context.

The first is that the Lord Jesus is addressing the apostles. He was addressing the officebearers who would form the first New Testament churches. As a result, we can say that these words are also for our churches today. These words are not something that expired with the death of the apostles – a viewpoint which has been held in the past. The second thing is that the Lord Jesus sends out his apostles with the commission to "make disciples of all the nations." The verb that is used there, *matheteuo*, is the main verb of this whole pericope or section. The main thing here is: "making disciples." The teaching of verse 20 therefore has to be understood in connection with the making of disciples. As we teach in the Church, our goal has to be determined by Christ: making disciples. I'll speak more about that point in a few minutes.

Now, let's take a closer look at verse 20, "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." There are at least three things that we can gather from this. The first is that the Lord Jesus would have the church provide complete and comprehensive teaching for those who are discipled. He says, "all things." The second thing we can gather from these words is that the Lord Jesus would have the church provide effective teaching. We can see that when he says, "teaching them to *observe* or *obey* (*teereo*)." That means the church's teaching cannot be lacklustre or half-hearted – it must be geared towards full-fledged obedience for the disciples of Christ. The final thing I want to note in these words is that the Lord Jesus would have the church provide correct teaching. The church is to teach disciples to observe all things that *Christ has commanded*. The content of the teaching must be the things that Christ has himself taught. The last verses of Matthew 28, then, not only show us that the church is meant to be a teaching institution, but here the Lord Jesus also gives us guidance on how and what to teach, and why we should teach. In short, we could say that Matthew 28:18-20 is not only the Great Commission for missions, it is also the Great Manifesto for church education! Of course, the two are related, but for the sake of brevity, I'll pass that over.

As a teaching institution, the Church must have teachers. The first teachers of the church were naturally the apostles. If you do a word study on the Greek verb most commonly used to describe teaching (*didasko*), many of those references are in the Acts and refer to the teaching and preaching ministry of the apostles. Today, of course, the ministry of the apostles has faded away. In the place of the apostles, we find elders or overseers. These officebearers are also found in the New Testament. I'm confident that we're familiar with the passages that outline the qualifications of New Testament elders. One of the passages is in 1 Timothy 3 and I want to stop and briefly look at this passage, especially at verse 2.

The Elders as Teachers/Disciple-makers

These are the words that have potential to cause fear in many elders: *“An overseer then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach...”* Now it is especially those last words, “able to teach,” which lead to rationalizing and excuse making among some officebearers. Forgive me if I'm preaching to the choir, but I've heard it often enough that I think it needs to be said. Some men read the passage and they conclude: “Well, I'm not able to teach, but I do all of those other things. Not everybody can be equally good at all those things anyway.” But this way of understanding 1 Timothy 3:2 will not cut it. You cannot pick what you want from this passage. Paul says an overseer must be these things. He does not say an overseer must be 16 of these 17 things and you can pick which one you want to fudge on. Brothers, the plain teaching of 1 Timothy 3:2 is that elders must be able to teach. This means Christ would have the teaching ministry of his church led by the elders. Wherever possible, the teaching in the church should be done by the elders (including the minister(s)). This is reinforced and restated by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:24 and Titus 1:9.

Some of our elders may hear this and say, “But I can't teach!” Through his church the Lord gave them this office of elder. That means there is a calling to be a teacher. The teaching may take place in different forms (not necessarily in a classroom), but elders must be teachers. If you feel incapable of doing it, you must do the same as the elder who realizes that he is greedy for money or quarrelsome or given to drunkenness. Either you change to meet the qualifications or you ask to be relieved of your office. The latter may be easier, but there is a huge moral imperative to seriously attempt the former: make your best effort to become a better teacher. And to do that, you have to become a student; you will have to learn about teaching.

Believers as Students/Disciples-in-Training

When we think about it Scripturally, that idea of being a student is something that applies to all believers in the church. Every believer has to think of himself or herself as a student. No Christian can be happy with the status quo when it comes to his or her knowledge of the faith. And again, when I speak of knowledge here, we have to understand knowledge in the Biblical sense: the intimate knowledge of God which includes covenant faith and obedience. The imperative of growing in this knowledge is

taught in a passage such as Hebrews 5:12-6:2. The writer of Hebrews chastises his readers because they have not been making progress. They have stalled in their growth. Rather than moving forward to solid food, they need milk. They need someone to lay the groundwork out for them again and from there they need to move on ever forward towards perfection. The believer today who says that these words do not apply to him needs to look a whole lot closer at himself. If we make an honest appraisal of ourselves, we will realize that we too cannot be satisfied to stay where we are in our spiritual life. There is always room for growth and improvement. Maturity in the Christian faith is not a static *place*; it is a *process* of growth which lasts our whole life long. It is only the believer who holds on to the status quo in his or her life that is an immature Christian. On the flip side, there are really no fully mature Christians on this side of heaven – there are only *maturing* Christians.

The same teaching is found in 2 Peter 3:17-18, “*You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” In this passage, growth in grace and knowledge is what guards believers from falling. Further, this growth in grace and knowledge is called for in all believers. God wants all Christians to be growing in their knowledge. The means by which this growth is brought about is the ministry of the Church. Hence, we can say that Christ would have the teaching ministry of the church addressed to all believers, young and old. And if we relate this back to Matthew 28, our Saviour wants his church to be focused on teaching discipleship to all believers. To be a disciple is to be a student or a follower. The church is mandated by Christ to train disciples. And this mandate extends not only to the youth of the Church, but also to the young adults, to the middle aged, and to the seniors.

If I can summarize briefly up to this point: We have seen why Christ would have us maintain a teaching ministry: for the purposes of discipleship. We have seen where this teaching ministry belongs: in the church of Jesus Christ. We have seen who must lead and wherever possible administer this teaching: the elders of the church. We have seen who must be taught by the teaching ministry of the church: all believers. We have seen what must be taught: everything that Christ has commanded. Now we can move over to the practical side of how this teaching in the church must be done. On this point, there is no explicit command of Scripture. We have to work with wisdom informed by the Scriptures and realize that there are different ways to accomplish what Christ commands.

Evaluation of Current Practices

Let’s first evaluate how things are currently being done in many of our churches. In most of our Reformed churches, official church education ends with the preconfession class. Once our young men and women do profession of faith, the formal learning process is ended. Of course, these same young men and women continue to attend the worship services. They sit under the preaching of the Word in the morning and hear Catechism sermons based on the Bible in the afternoon. We should not disparage the preaching as a means of grace in the lives of believers. Much grace and knowledge can be had from the

sermons. However, a sermon is not given in the same setting as a lesson. On the one hand, the minister is limited in what he can say in the sermon. He is limited by the text on which he is preaching. He cannot take lengthy diversions without doing injustice to his subject. He runs the risk of being accused: “Everything he said was right and good, but it was not in the text!” The minister cannot preach a sermon on the Secession of 1834 or on Bible geography. On the other hand, the sermon listener is limited in what he or she can do with the sermon. The minister says something confusing. The listener cannot raise his hand and ask for a clarification. He might keep it in mind and ask the minister later, but by then he may have forgotten, or the minister is busy with somebody else. Therefore, while it is definitely and authoritatively educational, the sermon cannot be the final word for continuing education. There has to be something more.

Many of our churches have realized this. For this reason, many Reformed churches offer some type of adult education class, sometimes called a “post-confession class.” From what I’ve seen of these classes, the minister teaches on some subject on a weekday evening. Those attending the class tend to be the people who are interested in learning more at any rate. Usually, their number is quite small. Churches of over 500 members sometimes have post-confession classes with 10 or fewer students. The post-confession class is one way to provide for continuing education in the church. Admittedly, it is better than what most of our churches have now, which is virtually nothing apart from the preaching. However, even the post-confession class could be improved upon.

First of all, the class is optional. Those who attend are under no official obligation to be there. This can be seen as a positive thing, but it is also negative in that many believers who really *need* to be there will not come on their own. They often need a bit of a push. On this point, we can compare it to the catechism class. If left to their own devices, some of the youth of the church would undoubtedly come to the catechism class on their own. Many of them would just as soon stay home if given the option. But we oblige our children to attend and this is for their good. Thus, there is also something to be said for an expectation that continuing education be the norm for all age levels in the church. The post-confession class as structured in many present situations does not allow for that expectation and so does not develop its full potential.

A second point about the post-confession class is that typically only the minister is responsible for the teaching of this class. With this situation, the elders are being deprived of a great opportunity for spiritual growth in grace and knowledge. By teaching a class, the elders have the opportunity to learn more themselves – one of the best ways to learn a subject is by teaching it! By teaching a class, the elders also have the opportunity to get to know what their sheep know, what they need to know, what they can handle, and so on. They get a closer relationship to the congregation. Such a close relationship is beneficial for the minister (especially for his preaching), but it is not right to keep the elders from developing the same relationship, particularly since the elders must give supervision over the preaching of the Word. Teaching in the church is a great opportunity for growth and it ought to be shared among the officebearers, with the ministers and the elders both participating.

Now someone might point to 1 Timothy 5:17, “*Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.*” Someone might point to that passage and argue that it shows that it is the ministers who should do the teaching. They are the ones who “*labour in the word and doctrine* (literally: teaching).” However, this passage does not say that ministers are expected to do all the teaching, simply that they are the ones who specialize in this area. We know from the other passages we looked at earlier that all elders are expected to have some competence for teaching. They don’t have to be preachers, but they certainly have to be “apt to teach.”

That was just an aside because I’m pretty sure that was in some of your minds. Back to our current practices. The post-confession class is useful and better than nothing, but could be improved upon. Does the Bible Study Society hold out a better possibility for continuing education in the church? There is certainly an educational aspect to the Bible Study Societies, especially if they are being run properly. However, they are not an official ministry of the church, at least not in many Canadian Reformed Churches. The elders do not normally have any direct supervision or oversight over these study societies. The ministers and the elders are not usually involved in administering or leading these societies. The Study Societies have other limitations as well, but in the interests of time, I will pass over them. So, while the Study Societies have a role in continuing education (and we can be thankful to have them!), they do not really fit under the rubric of what Christ would see us do for a ministry of continuing education in his church.

Two Proposals

What I am going to do now is describe two proposals for the implementation of continuing education. They are merely suggestions and countless variations are possible. The keys are creativity and adaptability to the situation. Moreover, there also has to be a willingness on the part of the officebearers and the congregation to move forward with something like this. Taking the pulse of the congregation, the elders may decide that the attitude of the congregation is not right for implementing a serious continuing education program. The preaching and teaching already done must then endeavour to develop the proper attitude. I realize that these proposals will never fly so long as the will and proper attitude towards learning is not there. You cannot teach if people are not teachable. Those things may take time to develop. But if there is a will among the officebearers, a way forward should be able to be found.

The first proposal is that of John Sittema. He was formerly a CRC pastor in Dallas, Texas, but currently serves a PCA congregation. In his excellent book, “*With A Shepherd’s Heart,*” Sittema describes what was done in his church in Dallas. Because of the geography of the congregation and the fact that members lived far apart, they had two morning worship services. Between the services, Sunday School was offered for all ages. For the adults, there would be 3 courses offered each morning. Each of the courses would follow a different track: Membership Track, Maturing Track, Practical Track. Each course would be 8 weeks in length. Some of the courses offered would be “*Basics of Biblical Doctrine*” (Membership Track), Apologetics (Maturing Track), and “*Financial*

Stewardship” (Practical Track). Further, on Wednesday evenings two courses were offered to adults on alternating weeks. One week would feature a Church History course and the other surveyed the Old Testament using the well known “Promise and Deliverance” as a guide. During the summer, courses would often be offered using video material. The summer would also feature a Sunday afternoon course for the training and development of potential officebearers. In the Dallas CRC, the nominations for officebearers would be made exclusively out of the men who had attended the course.

Now different things can be criticized about the above proposal. Perhaps it is not realistic for your church as it stands. But I think there are some helpful ideas here. With some flexibility and creativity, some of these ideas could be incorporated into something that works for your congregation.

The second proposal comes from the prolific Jay Adams. He has written over 60 books dealing with pastoral topics – often equally controversial and helpful. In at least one of his books, “Shepherding God’s Flock,” Adams describes his idea for the development of a continuing education program. Adams’ program works with the idea that there is only one service in the morning at 11:00. He proposes that there be two 40 minute teaching periods each Sunday starting at 9:30. Having two periods allows everybody the opportunity to sit in on at least one class and be a student. He also maintains that having these two periods allows for more material to be taught and opens up opportunities for more significant things to be done with the children and youth. The two periods give an opportunity for special courses which might otherwise take time during the week – he includes a new members class and teacher training among those special courses. Finally, Jay Adams writes that having two periods allows for a change of teachers and subjects which can be refreshing, especially if some of the teachers are better than others.

Like Sittema, Adams wants to promote the idea of having courses. This flows from Matthew 28 and the comprehensive teaching which the Lord requires there. In order to teach more systematically and thoroughly, Adams argues that a curriculum of various courses to be pursued over a period of time needs to be developed. He proposes that these courses be offered in 10 or 12-week periods for four quarters of the year. The extra days can be used for special programs and the like. He acknowledges that his proposal may have weaknesses in some areas and may not fit all situations. Of course, he is right. You may look at this and think it is unrealistic. Fine. However, couldn’t something *like this* be done in your church? And, when it comes down to it, don’t you agree that there is a pressing need for it?

Addressing Objections

We have already covered some of the objections which might be raised against implementing an official continuing education program. For instance, that preaching, especially Catechism preaching, is already in place. We saw that preaching, while powerful in its own right, is limited in its scope and method. Or the objection that we already have our Bible Study Societies. But we saw that these societies are not official

ministries of the church. We could add that they are not always instructional and the fact also that attendance is often a concern.

If we take those objections out of the way, the one that is usually left is time. Where are we going to find time for something like this? Everybody is already so busy. But if the Lord Jesus would have us do it, should we not be able to find the time? And further, can we afford not to find the time for it, especially in light of Hosea 4:6? Brothers, it is a matter of attitude and will. And, as I acknowledged before, it may take time to develop the right attitude among us towards continuing our growth in grace and knowledge. Patience may be the one thing that we all need to learn the most if we agree that such a continuing education program should be implemented.

Conclusion

I could be wrong about this, but it seems to me that the need for such a program is felt more acutely today than it was 30 or 50 years ago. I was around 30 years ago, but don't remember much of it. Concerning 50 years, I can only go by what I read and hear. And it seems to me that church was much more central to life back then. With those of us who are Canadian Reformed, church life was fresh and new because of the Liberation and maybe also because of immigration. Having had to make hard choices, many people were excited to learn. Furthermore, the culture was less visually oriented. Television was not nearly as popular as it is today. More reading seems to have been done.

Today, it seems that life in general is much busier. There is more to our lives than just the church. With new generations, church life has the tendency to feel stale. My generation has never been challenged to make a hard choice in church life. Having exhausted the capital we borrowed from the previous generation, the danger of a cultural Christianity is great. Other factors are at work here too. I grew up with music videos and lived on the edge between typewriters and computers. Our culture today is very much visually oriented. Why read something if you can watch it on Discovery channel? Many times in high school I wrote book reports based on the movie! Visually oriented people do far less critical and analytical thinking. With all of those things in mind, even apart from the Scriptural data, we are at a great danger of being destroyed for lack of knowledge, especially among the younger generations. A continuing education program can legitimately accommodate the visual culture to a greater extent than the Biblically mandated verbal preaching of the Word. As a result, it can serve to strengthen the power of the preaching! And so, I ask you again, do you not agree that there is today, greater than with previous generations, a pressing need for continuing education in the church? And if you agree, as I hope you will, may I humbly offer the challenge that we do our best to meet that need? If we do so, I am convinced that it will serve the greater glory of God through the Church.

Questions for Further Reflection/Discussion

1. Do you agree that there is a greater need today for continuing education in the church? Why or why not?

2. Are present programs and the preaching sufficient to address this need?
3. If the congregational attitude towards learning and spiritual growth needs work, what are some practical ways in which the consistory can address this problem?
4. Should the elders delegate responsibility for continuing education to others in the congregation, i.e. a committee appointed for this purpose, or should they have direct responsibility?
5. The relationship between missions/evangelism and continuing education was briefly mentioned above. What are some ways in which the outreach of the church might be served by an official program of continuing education?