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Abstract

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I remember quite well my earliest exemplar in Christian education, Dr. John Blanchard, commenting that the primary challenge facing the Christian teacher was to help our students develop critical thinking without creating a corrosively cynical or skeptical mindset. “All truth is God’s truth,” he would say, quoting Frank Gaebelein, so that we could be boldly confident in our teaching, while still remaining faithful shepherds of our students and of the Lord’s word. But how does one go about doing this? What is the educational framework for fusing faith and reason within the bounds of Christ’s love and authority? Can we develop a coherent evangelical approach to both the theory and the practice of Christian education, one that is inclusive, faithful, and vigorous?

Book Review: Robert W. Pazmiño. Foundational Issues in Christian Education

Reviewed by Dr. David W. Robinson, Adjunct Professor, D.Mg. program, George Fox University

Robert W. Pazmiño. *Foundational Issues in Christian Education: An Introduction in Evangelical Perspective*, Third Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 296 pp. \$26.99 (paperback). ISBN-10: 0801035937; ISBN-13: 978-0801035937.

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Robert Pazmiño thinks that we can. In opening his work on issues in Christian education, Pazmiño makes his ambitious mission clear. “This book in its third edition explores the disciplines used to form a holistic and integrated conception of Christian education from which guiding principles and guidelines for practice can be drawn.” (Pazmiño, 9) Pazmiño’s guiding principles are clearly evangelical, though not narrowly drawn or focused. Instead, he brings a different perspective to the task, and is quite open about his background and beliefs. “This work is written from a bicultural North American Hispanic perspective. The author is also an ecumenical evangelical Christian in theological

persuasion.” (Pazmiño, 15) Pazmiño goes on to state that while this might strike many readers as unusual – Hispanic evangelical Protestants who are both of the reformed tradition and ecumenical are not commonplace – it is his vantage point, and one that he is comfortable in espousing. Postmodernists likely will applaud his explicit statement of his belief structure, and all readers will benefit from the author’s candid disclosure. Readers should also note that the author has a definite target audience in mind. “This work is intended to be an introductory textbook for upper-level college and seminary courses.” He is mainly interested in evangelical students, but “it is also intended to engage the wider ecumenical community of religious educators.” (Pazmiño, 15)

Pazmiño structures his book in a systematic way. After his introduction, Pazmiño’s evangelical and reformed worldview is immediately revealed in his first two chapters. First he gives an overview of the biblical grounds for education, scanning highlights in both the Old and New Testaments. This is not intended to be an exhaustive development; the reader may think of other moments in the scriptures that might have been considered. Nevertheless, Pazmiño does generate a useful point of departure for further study. He culminates the chapter with a proposed four-way “integrated model” for Christian education, schematizing education for proclamation (kerygma), education for community (koinonia), education for service (diakonia), and education for advocacy (propheteia). (pp. 46-53) It is a potentially useful schema for further discourse among Christian educators.

In the second chapter, Pazmiño goes on to outline more formally theological foundations. He notes that evangelicals are more propositional in their approach to theology proper, and thus generally not well connected to other outlooks that term

themselves “Christian.” The social sciences and “religious education” being one-degree-or-another of anathema to evangelicals (I don’t believe that I exaggerate there), other movements that the author lists as “process, liberation, existential, neo-orthodox, natural, or other theologies” are avoided, and little dialog exists. Whether one thinks that this is a good thing, or deplorable, Pazmiño is correct in noting the divide. He then proceeds to state an evangelical and reformed doctrine, which is de rigueur in evangelical exposition. His discourse is a bit different, however, in its willingness to look at models/schemas from neo-orthodox thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr, with his “Christ and Culture” taxonomy. He then spends some time outlining and mildly dialoging with other more liberal traditions within nominal Christianity: liberation theology, for example, and the thought of Paulo Freire. It’s certainly a more eclectic blend than one generally sees in evangelical theological discourse. The coverage is neither deep nor wide, but it is indicative, and of use to students of the subject.

After laying the foundations, Pazmiño shifts his focus to the philosophical foundations of Christian education. In this he is clearly building on the biblical/theological base with an evangelical taxonomy of disciplines. “A philosophy of education,” he notes, “attempts to articulate a systematic and life-giving scheme of thought that can guide practice.... The challenge for the Christian educator is to make that philosophy of education explicit and consistent with a Christian worldview while recognizing the place of paradox.” (In passing, I take paradox to be a fruit of futility in a fallen world [cf. Ecclesiastes], which point I would like to have seen Pazmiño pursue.) In true Athenian fashion, Pazmiño then goes on to definitions: philosophy and its branches, education and its sub-categories, Christian education. Several summary taxonomies are presented, like that on page 97, attempting to map the relationships between philosophy and educational praxis. Value structures are briefly sketched, and then Pazmiño turns to cataloging various modern philosophies of education, ranging from perennialism to postmodernism. He then proposes an extension of Tertullian’s archetypical two cities, Jerusalem (spirituality) and Athens (philosophical inquiry), to also include other representative types: Nazareth (multiculturalism), Prague (artistic creativity), and

Rome (political and institutional life). It’s an intriguing thought and a fine point of departure, but would require more organization to stand as a useful schema for Christian education.

Beyond this point, Pazmiño then moves into history and the social sciences in his taxonomy of foundations. He rightly notes the flux that the study of history is engaged with. “In investigating historical foundations, educators are forced to consider aspects of education that are more subject to change and various contingencies in different times and places.” (Pazmiño, 129) Or, as Paul Valery put it, “History is the science of what never happens twice.” Our current generation suffers from a fairly virulent ignorance of the past, a condition that Christians in general – and Christian educators in particular – must avoid. Pazmiño states that “...history provides an awareness of both the possibilities and the complexities of education.” (Pazmiño, 131) The author then goes on to give a brief – and on balance, likely too brief – survey of education from the Old Testament to contemporary American society. Twenty eight pages are hardly sufficient for such a task, though I am highly sympathetic to the attempt.

After considering history, Pazmiño turns to the social sciences. He observes correctly that evangelicals may make use of the insights of the “social sciences” (a term that I confess to being less than enamored with) without necessarily accepting their presuppositions or worldview, which are all too often hostile to the Christian faith. Herein, “all truth is God’s truth” is once more in view. The connection between sociology, anthropology, cultural anthropology, and education is to be found in the construction and transmission of knowledge, and the organization of same in society and culture. (Pazmiño, 167-68) Christian educators must be aware of the cultural framework in which they and their students operate, if they are to develop methodologies that are as effective as they can be for the cause of Christ. Pazmiño then goes on to discuss culture and cultural context, and then the sociology of knowledge. The survey in the sociology of knowledge section is worth the chapter all by itself, for Pazmiño summarizes some important questions, and relates them to the larger practice of teaching, ethics and faith. “The exploration of insights from the sociology of

knowledge brings Christians to a fuller appreciation and understanding of the various dimensions of knowledge.... Grappling with the sociology of knowledge can enable Christian educators to identify the distinctive elements of their teaching that build on faith perspectives.” (Pazmiño, 183) And this sociology of knowledge rests within the larger framework of the sociology of education, which deals with all of the institutions in a society that educates: home, school, church, work, the media, political groups, various agencies, and so on. As the Christian educator develops a larger perspective, he or she will “...discern what aspects of culture can be preserved, redeemed, or transformed. Such identification and analysis, with the subsequent development of strategies for action, must be included in Christian education if persons are to adequately represent Christ in the various cultures and subcultures in which they have been called to live, work, and minister.” (Pazmiño, 192) The possibility of the prophetic recognition of social and structural evil, and the application of effective reforms based upon the redemptive power of Christ, is all too often overlooked among many evangelicals. Being “in the world, but not of the world” would mean that we would have more Wilberforces within the body of Christ, and within our classrooms, and less pietism.

Turning his attention from the broad generalities of sociology, Pazmiño then addresses the realm of psychology. Quite obviously, Christian educators ought to be highly focused on their students as individuals, each one created in the image and likeness of God, and each one precious in His sight. Psychology is a discipline which may contribute valuable insights into the lives of our students – at least, in theory. As is the case with sociology and anthropology, however, psychology is a discipline with many schools that are quite anti-Christian in their worldview and postulates. Pazmiño doesn’t duck this problem, and quickly profiles the various major schools. The problem, he says, is to find the particular blend of insights from those schools that may be used on a foundation of Christian truth. This approach is not syncretistic, as Pazmiño works it out; instead, it is broadly synthetic, following once again the dictate that “all truth is God’s truth.” His thoughts here are worth quoting at length:

...Christians are confronted with the need to think faithfully about psychology in general and/or develop a Christian psychology on which to build their educational thought and practice. Christianity embodies a perspective on human beings that has definite implications for their education. For example, if persons are viewed as basically good as created by God, then perhaps greater emphasis should be placed on freedom, discovery, and creativity in the learning process. In contrast, if persons are viewed as basically evil, as fallen in sin, then perhaps greater emphasis should be placed on structure, discipline, and responsibility in the learning process. An additional possibility is to view person as being both good and evil in varying degrees, which necessitates some rhythm or combination of emphasis on freedom and form, on discovery and discipline, on ardor and order, or on creativity and responsibility. (Pazmiño, 195-96)

Christians have the ability to apply the mind of Christ continually, and so discern where God’s truth may be in things psychological. To encourage this, Pazmiño goes on to summarize briefly and critique some notable developmental psychologists: Gerald R. Levin, Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler, and several others. He then proposes an integrated model, one which takes the real truths of the various schools and places it into a biblical worldview. In so doing, he points out that we are all much more complex, constantly unfolding, and ultimately mysterious creatures. (Pazmiño, 224-28)

The final foundation that Pazmiño considers is that of curriculum. Here we have the tire meeting the pavement of educational practice, the place where all models and theories must be structured for effective educational design and deployment. Once again, Pazmiño starts with definitions. After surveying five alternatives, he comes to define curriculum as “...that content made available to students and their actual learning experiences guided by a teacher.” It is in this creative blending of content and experience that the challenge lays. Paraphrasing Lois LeBar, Pazmiño notes that “...Christian content without experience is empty and that experience without content is blind. (Pazmiño, 232) (The connection here between this statement and that of the apostle James in James 2:17 [NIV] in unmistakable, I think: “In the same

way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”)

Pazmiño goes on to list a set of questions that Christian educators ought to consider when putting their educational vision into action. These range from “What specifically should be taught?” to “Who is being taught, and who is teaching?” and “What organizing principle holds it all together?” (Pazmiño, 234-35) He goes on to discuss curricular metaphors, including production (B. F. Skinner, et al.), growth (John Dewey, Carl Rogers, and company), and pilgrimage (James Fowler, Richard Peace; I suspect that we would find Parker Palmer in this neighborhood, as well). Which metaphor is best? It depends on the context says Pazmiño: “Sensitivity is required in relation to purposes, content, student/teacher needs, and styles.” (Pazmiño, 242) Values are also vitally important, and should not be disregarded as we create our curriculum. Pazmiño also usefully points out that curriculum exists at three levels: the explicit (what I would call the constructed and spoken curriculum), the hidden (the unconstructed and unspoken curriculum), and the null (the left-out content and everything excluded). It is imperative that Christian educators be aware of all three levels during the creative act of curriculum writing, and not just the first.

Pazmiño concludes his work with two appendices that are overtures and invitations to the postmodern world. He points out that Christians should take up the challenge of postmodernism, and should see both the truths (postmodernism has some valuable insights on language, knowledge and power, for example) and the essential loneliness residing there. By living out the life of the Triune God in our time and place, Christians – and Christian educators – can demonstrate the redemptive power of God both within and outside of the classroom.

Overall, I assess *Foundational Issues in Christian Education* to be a helpful book for precisely the group of people that Pazmiño was writing for: upper-level college and seminary students. It is not the sort of work that I would use with higher level courses, but it would certainly be appropriate for 300 – 400 level course work in an education course, or as an adjunct enrichment text for Christian education coursework at the B.A. or M.Ed./M.A.T.

level. There are some valuable schemas and quick summaries/critiques to be found throughout Pazmiño’s text that would be especially helpful as an introductory textbook. (There are also some overly complex models – see, for example, the rather Byzantine diagram on page 97, which is guilty of Baroque excess – and which are not likely to be of much practical help to anyone, I think. Good teachers will politely stroll past it.) Despite the occasional gaps and unevenness of continuity, I found the book to be well worth the time I spent with it.

Pazmiño’s open and discerning approach embodies precisely the sort of stance that “all truth is God’s truth” requires in a Christian teacher; he has done splendidly in this. Anyone interested in seeing what an evangelical heart and mind can do as they approach the foundations of education without prejudice or fear will appreciate Robert Pazmiño’s work.