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Book Review: Heart Deep Teaching

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Book Review: Heart Deep Teaching

Abstract

Teaching has been and continues to be “the most universal and appreciated role of the Christian ministry through the ages” (Nouwen, 1971, p. 10). However, the teaching in churches has not made a positive impact on the young. According to Ham and Hillard (2009, p. 31), over 60% of children who grow up in the church will leave it as young adults. Christian churches need to understand the Gospel’s call to develop human potential to the fullest through what Newton terms *heart-deep teaching*.

How should Christians in vocations respond to this situation? As the author of this review and as a teacher by vocation and a pastor by calling, how should I revitalize the church’s education policies? *Heart-deep Teaching: Engaging Students for Transformed Lives* provides a unique way to revitalize Christian education by focusing on key theoretical and practical methods to stimulate deeper student learning in church settings.

Book Review: Heart Deep Teaching

Newton, G. (2012). *Heart-deep teaching: Engaging students for transformed lives*. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group. ISBN: 978-0-8054-4776-7, 212 pages.

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Introduction

Teaching has been and continues to be “the most universal and appreciated role of the Christian ministry through the ages” (Nouwen, 1971, p. 10). However, the teaching in churches has not made a positive impact on the young. According to Ham and Hillard (2009, p. 31), over 60% of children who grow up in the church will leave it as young adults. Christian churches need to understand the Gospel’s call to develop human potential to the fullest through what Newton terms *heart-deep teaching*.

How should Christians in vocations respond to this situation? As the author of this review and as a teacher by vocation and a pastor by calling, how should I revitalize the church’s education policies? *Heart-deep Teaching: Engaging Students for Transformed Lives* provides a unique way to revitalize Christian education by focusing on key theoretical and practical methods to stimulate deeper student learning in church settings.

Characteristics of Heart-deep Teaching

There are three critical components of effective teaching (Price & Nelson, 2007): (1) planning what to teach (content); (2) planning how to teach (method); and (3) organizing the context under which the material will be taught and hopefully learned. As a Christian teacher, I believe that the Bible is the main source of what to teach. I also know how to organize the teaching and learning context by relating the exegetically significant ideas to the audience’s physical, emotional, and spiritual developmental (or environmental) stage. The most critical component of my Christian education is planning how to teach by clarifying the procedures and strategies of teaching and this book deals with this issue. Newton emphasizes these concerns with a critical term called heart-deep teaching.

Heart-deep teaching contrasts with the prevailing modes of educational practices usually called

“banking education” (Freire, 1972), “transmissive approach” (Wilhoit, 1986), or “violent teaching model” (Nouwen, 1971). Those approaches put high value on the retention of factual information by reciting facts to prepare for standardized tests. These approaches are based on six faulty principles which the author identifies as: (1) all fun activity equals good; (2) all interaction equals good learning; (3) keeping students busy is more important than accurately teaching facts and principles; (4) simple points are more important than depth; (5) since most people learn through their experience, experience must be the basis of truth; and (6) accomplishing measurable behavioral objectives is more important than changing students’ character (Newton, 2012, pp. 8-13).

Christian education focuses on the heart, where all human capacities are involved including the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of a person. The heart is the place where the deepest learning begins and the fundamental changes are made. Hence, heart-deep teaching is a form of spiritual formation which is guided by the Holy Spirit, who ministers in five elements: the teacher, the learner, the Word, the participants, and the environment. It also provides a holistic approach embracing all learning domains such as the cognitive, affective, volitional, and behavioral domains. This approach always encourages the students to apply these lessons to their own lives.

Therefore, the heart-deep teaching process involves four stages (Newton, 2012, pp. 149-189): (1) priming students’ hearts toward the lesson by asking questions and educational dilemmas that cause the students to be oriented enthusiastically in the upcoming learning activities; (2) engaging students in discovering and wrestling with the truth from the Word in a variety of ways so that they can integrate these principles into their lives concretely; (3) stimulating students into deeper processing

skills using all their learning domains holistically, and (4) asking students to apply their learning into their life settings.

Benefits and Concerns of This Book

Christian education in the church and also the schoolroom is a means to lead the spiritual formation of all learners. This is the way of teaching used by Jesus. While Jewish religious leaders taught by primarily focusing on repetition so their learners would remember their teachings verbatim, Jesus' teaching style was mainly focused on a learners' ability to search out a principle or find relationships that were hidden under the surface level of the question.

Christian education in the church has been at risk. The problem is not the irrelevance of the Bible but the irrelevance of the ways we use to teach from the Bible (Foster, 2007, p. 25). I fully agree with the author when he diagnoses the problem of Christian education, namely, "not teaching the biblical truth as practical principles to use in everyday life" (Newton, 2012, p. 57). Newton clarifies the goal of Christian education is not only to teach the Bible, but also to train and educate students to be like Christ (p. 107).

This book outlines an effective Biblical teaching method while also providing many useful tips and strategies to apply to a local Church education. Various examples of lesson plans allow readers to follow the heart-deep teaching approach easily and efficiently. Not only does this book cover the implementation of heart-deep teaching procedures, the author also recommends teachers to experience the beneficial aspect of heart-deep teaching. "Heart-deep teaching must begin with heart-deep learning on the part of the teacher" (Newton, 2012, p. 56). Newton continues by admirably reminding readers that "understanding the essence of truth must be the first concern for the teacher before speculating about how to engage the learner" (Newton, 2012, p. 56).

However, Newton's overemphasis on the lesson planning does raise some concerns. If the goal of Christian education should be spiritual formation, couldn't focusing mainly on well-planned lessons potentially detract from this focus? How can spiritual formation be narrowed down to classroom teachings with lesson plans? Furthermore, the lesson plan is mainly focused on the cognitive

domain (Bloom's taxonomy), even though the author stresses the holistic development of human domains which also include social, moral, and spiritual capacities. In addition, the author locates wisdom as the highest level of the cognitive domain, defining it as the pinnacle of heart-deep learning or where biblical principles are integrated with the fabric of every aspect of a person (Newton, 2012, p. 50). But the author does not explain how wisdom differs from other cognitive categories such as application or evaluation.

Even though Newton shows a lesson plan with four categories of goals (cognitive, affective, volitional, and behavioral), in many cases, evaluation and transfer strategies are not clearly mentioned and the reader does not know whether these goals are met at the end of the class or how these goals might be applied and transferred into the teachers' and students' lives.

Concluding Remarks

Jesus' teaching focused on the transformation of the hearts in the audience. While the Jewish leaders emphasized propagating the laws by reciting them, Jesus' teaching always focused on changing and transforming human hearts which is the center of all human capacities. Followed by His model, Christian education must be transformed to focus on the heart so that every aspect of the person becomes progressively more Christlike. Educators need to stimulate deeper student learning by providing engaging teaching processes and programs which lead to students' character and behavioral changes. In order to do so, teachers need to create and organize a lesson carefully based on students' contexts and environment, while asking students to apply the learning to their life situations. This book provides a set of practical examples and various cases to improve all Christian teachers' strategies and instructional tactics.

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