



# Characteristics of Christian Pedagogy

By Doris Kieser and Jim Parsons

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In his seminal work *The Culture of Education* (1996, p. 3), Jerome Bruner notes:

Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message.

In this paper, we accept Bruner's position on pedagogy's intentionality. We believe one's choice of pedagogy teaches as much as one's choice of content. Because we are Christian teachers, we are especially interested in what it means to teach in ways that are consonant with our faith. Thus, in this article, we ask: What are the hallmarks of Christian teaching? We believe this question is fundamental to our work and that if we cannot answer this question sagaciously, both for ourselves and for others, our work as Christians is weaker. In this paper, we explicate what we believe are the characteristics of pedagogy that are truly Christian.

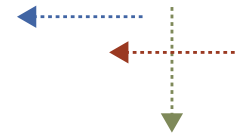
Before we become specific, allow us to be general. Generally, we believe Christian pedagogy has at least

these four hallmarks, which are true across all grade levels and from childhood to adulthood. First, we believe Christian teaching honestly faces life—both the ugly and the beautiful: it assesses life critically so as to suggest change when change is needed. Second, we believe Christian teaching focuses upon social justice: it works to create equitable opportunities for all, especially the most vulnerable and needy. Third, it is synoptic, characterized by a comprehensive view of life that brings together the best of human history as that history relates to God. Fourth, it engages the whole of the educational experience, including the essential features of successful teaching and learning.

Horne's (1998) six essential features of teaching and learning (a teacher, students, a suitable environment, curriculum, educational aims, and methods) imply three questions:

1. Content—what am I teaching?
2. Application—why am I teaching this?
3. Methodology—how will I teach this?

In all cases, teachers must determine what methods AND what content should be used effectively to achieve their goals, as a means of engaging the entire experience of teaching and learning.



We are not alone in working to outline the characteristics of a Christian pedagogy. For example, on its website [<http://www.ovu.edu/site.cfm/christian-pedagogy.cfm>], Ohio Valley University (a Christian liberal arts college located in West Virginia) lists fifteen characteristics of a framework for Christian classroom teaching and suggests that instructors and faculty members integrate faith and learning in as many ways as possible. We have adapted their list into eleven characteristics of Christian teaching.

## A CHRISTIAN CLASSROOM SHOULD:

1. be open to, encourage, and appreciate a variety of opinions
2. engage inviting and approachable pedagogy
3. celebrate students' individual diversity
4. promote corporate and individual responsibility
5. integrate academic work and personal life
6. consider, engage, and assess work fairly
7. promote critical thinking
8. encourage high learning standards for all students and teachers
9. draw information from a wide variety of sources
10. create assignments that help students express themselves as both individuals and community members
11. build relationships both within classrooms and the wider community.

James K. A. Smith's book *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009, p. 25) critically asks whether classrooms fill students with fine ideas and deep thoughts, while secular cultural liturgies shape students' habits, character, and way of life. Smith's calling out the power of cultural liturgies implies how crucial and critical pedagogy can be. We believe Christians should help students see the world honestly and critically, and that a redemptive Christian pedagogy can be part of the critique of and dialogue within society. Trevor Cairney, in *New Perspectives on Anglican Education* (Cairney, Cowling & Jensen, 2011), believes pedagogy ultimately shapes the very nature, climate, and culture of classrooms. He suggests that Christian pedagogy requires teachers to mirror the person of Christ in their daily pedagogical choices.

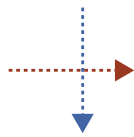
## What Does Christian Pedagogy Look Like?

So, here we ask what Christian pedagogy might look like. Although we believe it would be unwise to suggest a one-size-fits-all Christian pedagogy (Christian pedagogy should differ for different contexts), we do believe that Christian pedagogy would have certain characteristics. These include:

**1. Uniqueness:** Christian pedagogy should recognize each child as uniquely gifted and offer each child dignity that extends from her/his creation in God's image. Such dignity is inalienable. In the course of learning, Christian pedagogy should act upon narrative possibilities that arise from God's unique and diverse creations. No child is without dignity and gift, and Christian pedagogy, as far as possible, educes those gifts in the learning process. As Christian educators, our hope and vocation should be to recognize and encourage children's unique gifts and foster individual flourishing within a supportive learning community.

**2. Relationship:** Christian pedagogy should actively engage children to share their selves with others. When building relationships in learning environments, we recognize that power exists between and among teachers and students that requires the maintenance of healthy boundaries by those in power. However, relationships that are nurtured and mentored within educational communities are key factors in facilitating student flourishing. Such relationships are reciprocal insofar as each of us is affected by and affects the other when we participate openly and appropriately in learning.

**3. Community:** Community building edifies individuals in ways isolated work cannot. Our belief reflects an understanding of interconnectedness as a foundational value informing Christian life. The idea of the Common Good—acting towards the best interests of present and future communities at large—takes seriously a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable among us, and expects that community functions more cohesively than collections of individual interests. Rather, community speaks to the power of shared purpose and care for others—it welcomes everyone to the table of flourishing.

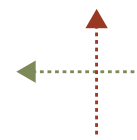


**4. Agency:** Christian pedagogy should teach children that their actions can and will impact the world. Perhaps one of the greatest structural sins we have seen in education is teaching some children to believe that, while some are able to impact the world, most are not. Sadly, these children's classroom experiences of failure become regularized to the point of accepting a system where many have no access to financial and economic resources. Perhaps more sadly, some children learn to believe they are not worthy of opportunities, hope, or efficacious self-definitions. Those of us who teach see these self-definitions and their corresponding behaviors enacted in children. Simply stated, we believe the educational system should help all children come to believe they can impact the world powerfully.

**5. Stewardship:** We understand stewardship as a holistic, responsible relationship with the world—including teaching that humans exist in harmony with God's nature and creation. To be a steward is to care for and respect the moral limits of human agency in the world. To be educational stewards means that all persons engaged in teaching and learning respond with care for those in their midst and with consideration of the possibilities that lay within other people. We agree with theologian Carol Simon (1997) who, in *The Disciplined Heart*, suggests teachers' "narrative imaginations" can help develop potential stories of becoming that energize both teachers and students. Simon outlines how narrative imagination can build relationships and community as it engages learners in both the gravity and grace of life. Stewardship calls us to foster in children the gifts and treasures they bring to learning. Stewardship actively invites diverse, unique aptitudes and skills into the realm of education. Far from stripping participants to their lowest common learning denominator, stewardship aims to create anew from a diversity of gifts and persons.

**6. Service:** Teachers should actively practice Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (NKJV). A Christian understanding of service comes first from

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the call to serve God and do God's will. When a vocation becomes educational service, service entails enacting God's will not only for oneself but also for those one teaches. To pour oneself out in service to others reflects the service undertaken by Christ on the cross—kenosis—pouring out of the self for the wellbeing of others. Educational service

means to give to others for the sake of themselves and the fulfilment of their relationship with God. Such service is not so foreign to teachers. Parsons' research (2013), found that three actions motivate teachers' work: community, agency, and service.

**7. Edification:** Christian pedagogy should undertake the active practice of 1 Corinthians 14:26: "What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (NASB). Here, Paul recognizes that all people—teachers and students alike—bring unique gifts (teachers and parents both know that two children—even siblings—differ in wonderful ways) and calls for a synthesis of human action towards building rather than destroying. This biblical test of edification offers a goal for our collective work. All things should be done for the building of the community. If acts do not build the community, all of us individually and as a church must reconsider our work.

To the question: "What is the chief end of man?" Augustine (1997, 1) answered, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." For Augustine, "To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love." We believe Christian pedagogy should include enjoyment in its focus, while being restorative, hospitable, transformative, and based on edifying classroom relationships and conversations.

Christian pedagogy should disrupt the axiom "if you can't measure it, it's not valuable." Such reductionism, based upon economic rationalism, fuels a xenophobic reaction against threats of disrupting the educational status quo. In fact, considered in light of an explicitly Christian pedagogy, the status quo should be disrupted.

Christian educators must create pedagogy that encourages hospitable, transformative opportunities for student flourishing. Finally, as mentioned earlier, the process of narrative-building could become a foundational approach that cements Christian pedagogy together. The potential and possibilities streaming from narrative-building make it an ideal approach to educational pedagogy. The critical question becomes, “What shape might narrative- and metanarrative-building take when engaged in all spheres of education?”

One possible building block for Christian pedagogy would be a restructured definition of *learning*. Currently, we believe there is too little critique of the learning systems we have created, systems based upon the logic of a consumer/consuming culture that fuels our desires for learning. This logic lives in the mantra “The more I know, the more I can earn. The more I earn, the more I can consume. The more I consume, the more powerful I appear to be. The more power I wield (real or perceived), the more influence I have.” For the most part, as Pope Francis has noted, those caught within this hegemonic cycle are willfully blind to the requirements of justice and charity (in a thick and meaningful sense).

We believe Christian pedagogy must focus on the acts of Christ, in context, as a starting point. Not words or ideas, but acts. These acts must be extrapolated into a contemporary context. Jesus gravitated towards lepers, prostitutes, fishermen, and generally marginalized citizens. As a culture, we have perhaps forgotten that we find redemption and kinship in our kindnesses and hospitality to those most vulnerable among us. If our pedagogy is one that stresses what we call “Sit down and shut up, so I can tell you about the love of God,” we fail to really understand the love of God.

Of course, such redemptive action does not require Christian affiliation. It requires actions and teaching. For

instance, our Christian faith stressed the requirement of service in the practice of faith. Not lip service, people service. Christian pedagogy must include the theory and practice of service as a requirement of learning and faith. In this sense, pedagogy should always be about doing, not just knowing, Christ’s work.

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