

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Watson, Paul (2012) "Making Christians: An Interview with John Westerhoff," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss3/6>

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MAKING CHRISTIANS

An Interview with John Westerhoff

Dr. John Westerhoff is an acknowledged expert and prolific writer in the field of the church and its children. He is currently the Director of the Institute for Pastoral Studies at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Paul Watson, on behalf of Leaven, spoke to Dr. Westerhoff concerning some of the ways the church can minister to its children.

Dr. Westerhoff, what kind of job are we doing in our churches today with regard to Christian education? Are we doing it better than we used to, worse than we used to? Where do we need to improve?

I think that it's not what we do that's wrong, it's what we don't do. In education we talk about the overt curriculum, the covert curriculum, and the null curriculum—the things that we are doing, the things that we're doing but don't realize, and the things that we ought to be doing but are neglecting. And I think the issue is not so much whether we are making a mistake in the overt—what we do; the mistakes are in what we don't realize that we're doing and in what we should be doing but are not doing at all.

The main question is also a very old one: How do we make Christians? Tertullian said, "Christians are made, not born." Judaism, out of which Christianity came, believed that its religious community was perpetuated by having babies. The Church said, "No, we will continue to be a force in the world by the conversion of adults—not simply by having children." The church has forgotten that. Many denominations appear to be losing members, but they actually are not. It is just that people are getting married later, choosing singleness, or having fewer children. We ceased thinking about going

out to convert adults. We thought we simply were going to have babies and that would perpetuate the church. So, that's the first issue. If we really care about children, what we ought to worry about is adults.

Let's go back to Tertullian's question, How do we make Christians? The church originally said there was a process for doing it. They called it "catechesis," from which we get the word "catechism." Catechesis, which was the process of preparing people for baptism, literally means "to echo"; in this case, "to echo the Word." But over history, it became echoing words, that is, memorizing the catechism. In other words, along the way we distorted the understanding of how to make Christians. We thought it would happen naturally. But very little happens naturally without some intentionality. We forgot that the Word we were supposed to echo, in catechesis, was a person—Jesus. What we are supposed to be doing is making or fashioning Christ-like people. That is the whole end of what we are about. Now, unfortunately, somewhere along the way we ended up confusing "catechesis" with "catechism." We then called it "Christian education," associating it primarily with only one piece of what catechesis is: instruction, the teaching of knowledge and skill.

Then what should "catechesis," or Christian education, include?

There are, in fact, three aspects of that intentional, lifelong process that is catechesis. One of the three, but only one of them, is instruction—what we traditionally do in catechism classes. By itself, however, instruction is not adequate. You could end up with a magna cum laude atheist who knows all about Christianity but does

not intend to embrace it. Of course, many churches traditionally have not even done instruction very well, because we thought instruction applied only to children. Children actually benefit the least from instruction. The test of a healthy church is whether it is doing instruction with adults. The ability to think cognitively is an adult activity. That means not only knowing scripture, but being able to interpret scripture; not only knowing doctrine, but being able to think theologically. You cannot learn that as a child. So, instruction is terribly important for adults.

The other two pieces of catechesis are formation and education. Instruction, formation, and education are the three intentional, related, lifelong aspects of catechesis, which is the process by which you reproduce Christ-like persons. Now, the most important of these, the one that finally does “make Christians,” is formation. Education is what you do to accomplish faithful formation. Formation, while it is an intentional activity, is also a natural activity. In anthropology we call it inculturation. It is a natural process. It goes on all the time. We are always being shaped, formed, influenced, fashioned by certain forces—all sorts of forces. And when the church is not intentional about this, the forces of culture take over.

In other words, our goal is to fashion self-critical people who will look at their lives in the light of the Gospel, always critically; we need to fashion people who will resist the influences of society. But, you see, you cannot “teach” people that. They have to be “formed,” through both “instruction” and “education,” into persons who make Christianity a way of life. Furthermore, I would argue, this formation cannot take place in the church alone. It has to happen in the home also, which is another reason the church must continue the catechesis of adults as Christian parents. And, I would argue, in our day, unless we have parochial schools, we cannot do the job. So, it has to be home, school, and congregation together.

You are advocating parochial schools?

I see no other choice for Christians in our day and time. But they should not be like previous parochial schools. They should not be just good schools that teach religion or have prayers in the morning. These schools should dedicate themselves—faculty and students alike—to living the Christian life. (Incidentally, Professor Hauerwas and I have a new book coming out, *Schooling Christians*, which deals with just that issue.) The reason I say this is because the school now occupies the major proportion of children’s time—even more

than the home and even more than the television. If you want to take the single most important influence in terms of inculturation in our society today, it is the school. So, unless we have truly Christian schools, the chances of our being able to accomplish formation of Christian lives are diminished. Formation in the home must be consistent with that in the school, which must be consistent with that in the congregation.

Isn’t your emphasis on formation in keeping with some of the recent discussions of theology and ethics?

Yes, very much so. There has been a huge shift in the theological world. The shift has been from worrying about doctrine and belief as our central educational concern to a concern for faith—faith understood as perception, how we perceive life. The move has been from making moral decisions to character—the character of the person making decisions, his or her identity as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church. This is a move from experience to consciousness or awareness, especially being aware of the presence of God in one’s life. So we have moved away from doctrine, which can be taught by instruction, and from making moral decisions, which can be taught by instruction and reflected experience (education). We have moved toward faith, character, and consciousness; and formation is the only way we can achieve these.

Insofar as we have not taken formation seriously, and since it goes on naturally, we have actually been miseducating our children. Not that we were intentionally doing it. It was a sin of omission, not a sin of commission. We just did not know what we were doing, and that was not because we were bad people. We just paid no attention to it.

Can you say more about the education that would be valid and would facilitate or lead to transformation?

There are eight areas I would ask a congregation or a family or a school to look at. First, consider ritual participation—ritual worship. It is the primary force by which we form people’s worldview and value systems. In secular society, the formative ritual is spectator sports. In other words, if I were to have a Christian school, there would be no competitive spectator sports—no football teams, no basketball teams, no baseball teams. These would be eliminated.

Are you suggesting that the worship period is as educative, in the sense of being formative, as the Bible school hour?

Oh, yes. More so, in fact. I would say that the one place children belong is at the worship service, not in the Sunday school.

Every child I know is highly ritualistic . . .
Ritual provides security for them.

Not in Children's Church?

Definitely not in Children's Church—not if you want them around tomorrow. If you have children's sermons or special church for children, you do not form them to be adult Christians. What happens is, during adolescence they drift away from the church, and they never return. If you bring them up within the adult church, they will rebel; but they will return. They rebel in different ways. Some go away and rebel. Some stay and rebel. They have to push against the church to find themselves. It is healthy to rebel, although we might prefer that they rebel one way rather than another—but that is a different issue. At least when they rebel, there is a pretty good chance that they will return. When they drift away, they never return. When we started having children's sermons and children's church, we actually worked against ourselves.

Children learn by observing the way adults do things. When you put them off in their own groups, they stop learning. Ironically, we make them immature. I am sure you have enough readers who remember living in small towns. If there were only eighteen kids, everybody—boys and girls—from grades one to twelve had to play, or we would not have enough for a ball team. In those days, children matured much more rapidly than now. Today we put them into age groups, which slows their maturation because they have no one older to look up to or learn from. Children are learning from their peer group, and the peer group is keeping them immature. With television, they become highly sophisticated, but they remain very immature—a recipe for moral prob-

lems and immoral behavior. That is what our society has produced: highly sophisticated, immature adolescents. And we participate in that in the church by dividing church schools and classes by age groups.

In the United States, we have a mixed feeling about children. We love them, and we hate them. We want them, but we do not want them around. Until we decide that we really love our children enough to have them with us and put up with whatever that means, then we probably ought not to have them.

What does that mean in the context of the worship service? Do we address them directly in any way? Does the entire congregation sing the simpler children's songs?

No. There is no reason why the children and adolescents cannot sing the other songs. There is no reason why they cannot learn Bach chorales or learn to sing the Psalms. They do not understand all the words, but they learn lots of things in which they do not understand all the words. You see, although we think we are helping them by providing children's worship, we really not helping them at all.

The main thing is that they feel a part—which means taking part. There is no reason why children cannot usher. Why do you have to be a man to usher? There is no reason why children cannot read the Bible in church, provided they can read. Some read better than some adults I know. There is no reason why they cannot say prayers in church, if they have the gift to do this. There is no reason why children cannot take the offering together with their families.

A lot of our ritual in church has become so intellectual and "heady" that it really ceases to be good ritual. It may be good instruction done in the context of worship, but it is still instruction. And so, the children tune it out. They don't know what we are talking about. If it is truly worship and ritual, the children will be happy there. Every child I know is highly ritualistic. Try to get out early on Friday night to go someplace and cut the bedtime story short—you can't do it. And they want to hear the same story over and over again. Ritual provides security for them. It provides all the things they need to function in what is basically an alien world; and when we eliminate those rituals from church, we undermine their security.

As I said before, in our society, the formative ritual is spectator sports. In the early church, you could not become a Christian and go to a public athletic event

because the early church knew it could not compete. By the way, the other place in our culture where ritual is done is television advertising. It is a ritual: repetitive, symbolic actions to manifest a particular worldview and value system intended to shape your life. You put media advertising and public athletics together and you have a double whammy. The question is not, Does ritual go on? It goes on all the time. The questions are, Is the church conscious about how it is doing its own rituals? and, Is it including children in those rituals so they can be formed by them? By the way, families also need rituals, not just the church. And the church school needs its rituals as well. The tests in each case are: Are they faithful rituals? Are they Christian? Are they tested by the Gospel?

You indicated earlier there are eight areas of education a church should be aware of—one being ritual worship. What about the other seven?

A second area to look to is the environment. We shape environments, and then they shape us. I am fascinated that in Japan all the furniture is in the middle of the room, and they have a sense of community. We put our furniture around the room, and we do not have a sense of community. Most of our churches would not produce a sense of community because of the way they are built—with elongated pews. If we turned them on their side and sat more in a horseshoe, people would experience community. As our pew arrangements are now, we shape individualism.

The third area is the ordering of time. How a community orders its time—its calendar—shapes its life. The church has a calendar that tells a story, which the church tries to live out over its year. It is the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus and of our preparing for Christ's return. Some churches try to live it out in their worship services; some do not even do it there. Yet most churches, even if they do it in their worship services, do not do it in their everyday lives. From the average church's life during Advent, you would never know there was a contemplative season of waiting patiently and watching expectantly, of examining one's life on the grounds that Christ might return this year. There are other calendars. The Hallmark card calendar tries to influence us. It has almost a day a month that it wants us to celebrate. And sometimes, institutional churches have a special calendar (stewardship Sunday, education Sunday, this Sunday, that Sunday) that basically celebrates institutional survival, not the gospel. The ordering of time is the organization of our life.

Stewardship is a fourth area—the ordering of our resources. We want to help people realize that we are all stewards of God's gifts. Everything we have belongs to God, and in gratitude we use it for God's purposes. A lot of churches first write a budget, and then they go and have a stewardship drive. What people are really doing here is voting for the budget. This has nothing to do with stewardship. If you really want to teach stewardship, you get people to give what they need to give, and then, after you have the money, you have the budget. Now, you would have to take time to form people that way because most of us have been formed the other way. It is not going to happen overnight, but if you do that over time, children will learn.

Fifth is communal interaction—how we treat one another. The normal patterns of behavior are very important. When we eliminate children from being with adults (except for their Sunday school teachers) they do not learn very much about the way humans interact. If they never see us angry with each other and working it out, or praying with each other, or reconciling with each other, they will never learn to do those things. Children learn behaviors by observation and imitation. Therefore, they have to be present at the community's gatherings and participate in the community's activities. They have to be able to see adults at our worst and at our best—but seeing us always doing something that redeems us. They need to see how people treat each other when they believe that someone in the community is not acting as he ought to act. How graciously is he confronted and helped? Children never see that. How are they ever going to learn to do it if they do not see it? Children see very little because we are always shutting them off someplace where they can be with each other rather than letting them be with adults.

And by the way, we will mess up on occasion. The key is not that we never mess up; the key is what we do about it after we have messed up. Do we know how to make peace? Can we admit when we were wrong? A lot of people do not know how to say they were wrong or they are sorry. They cannot say this to God, let alone anyone else, because they have never seen anyone else do it.

Sixth is role models. Who do we play up, past and present, as being important? In society today it is basically athletes and entertainers. Are they the ones Christians want to model? Who are the role models we set up? What kind of people? Do we set up the kind of people who really do live Christ-like lives, or do we adopt secular standards?

The next area is discipline. Discipline is very important in formation. Discipline is what we practice. Do we “practice what we preach”? If we believe certain things about the Gospel, do we practice them as a community? Do we practice caring, compassion, giving of our alms, simplicity of life, forgiveness? Do we practice the things that we talk about? And do we get children to practice them with us? Just as they learn to swim or ride a bike, children learn the disciplines of the Christian life by practicing them with us.

The last area is language. Language shapes us if we are attentive to it. For example, someone says, “Jesus is my savior.” He or she must understand that this means, “I can never again blame anyone or anything for my situation. I cannot blame my parents or my environment or whatever. I have been freed from those things by Christ. Now I have to be responsible to him for how I live.” I have a suspicion that a lot of people would not confess Jesus as savior if they knew they could not get off the hook anymore and that they would have to be totally responsible for their lives. And consider the words we often hear people pray: “God, come and be present with us.” Now that is a strange way to talk. What we should be asking is, “Enable us to be aware of your presence.” We don’t have to invite God in; God is already here. The issue is our awareness of his presence. It is amazing how, if you just listen, our language gives away how we have been formed, and it continues to form us. Children hear those words, and they are formed as well. That is why the words of worship are so important. They shape us.

Can you summarize the education the church ought to be doing and relate it to instruction on the one hand and formation on the other?

Education is critical reflection on life in the light of the Gospel so that one can be more faithful. Although formation is the way to make or fashion Christians, education is the process by which it is done faithfully. Thus, education is at the very heart of it all. Now education cannot take place without some instruction. We have to know what scripture says in order to reflect on it. But the final goal, we must always keep in mind, is a Christ-shaped life. Instruction provides the knowledge base to do that; education, the process to do it; but the final way that we really shape people’s lives is through formation. When we think of children, what they need most is formation. As they get older, they can begin to participate in education. They can begin to learn to be self-critical, and they can get instruction. The older they become, the more instruction they need. We tend to reverse the process: start with instruction, never get to the critical reflection, and neglect to even think about formation.

A congregation should *be* an educational ministry, not have one. It should be the natural way Christians live: self-critical of their personal and communal life, always bringing the Gospel to bear on what they are doing, always reforming their life where necessary, forever serving each other.

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