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Introduction

There are certain times in our lives when, for whatever mysterious reason, we stumble into a new state of awareness — about self and the way the world works; perhaps even about God, ultimate reality, and what it all means. Sometimes it's the result of a cosmic convergence of the right moment, the right setting, the right need, and the right teacher. As the saying might be phrased, "When the student is ready, the teacher will come." With eerie clarity, I can recall that in all my personal episodes of new awareness, a teacher has been there. They weren't all teachers by office or title, of course, but many of them were.

As any Christian educator in the church setting soon discovers, one of the most critical components in the health of a church is the quality of teaching that is available to its members. Yet one of the perennial struggles for churches is the recruitment and training of teachers for educating children, youth, and adult members in matters of faith. With the increasing difficulty of training teachers in the craft of Christian teaching, the need to staff our church educational programs often degenerates into a matter of finding a warm body for a classroom or securing at best a sitter for children coming to receive Christian instruction. Sadly, many churches still seem to see the role of Christian teaching as secondary to the life of the church. Participation in learning is seen as an optional activity of little or no consequence to the spiritual or personal development of the members.

This flies in the face of the Search Institute's 1990 findings from their national study of Protestant congregations. In their summary report titled *Effective Christian Education*, the researchers concluded:

Christian education, then, takes on new importance. Done well, it has the potential beyond any other congregational influence to deepen faith and commitment. Knowledge of its importance makes the need for educational revitalization all the more urgent. There is much work to be done. The fact that involvement in Christian education ends for most Protestants at the 9th grade is only one problem. Equally serious is the fact that those adolescents and adults who choose to participate are not often exposed to particularly effective programming.¹

I am convinced that one of the most critical ways of ensuring an effective Christian education in the local church is by training effective teachers. Trained clergy and professional church educators can do only so much. Indeed, some of my most significant moments of new awareness about self and God were a direct result of the work of a dedicated and skilled lay teacher. Most church teaching is done by volunteer teachers, many of whom often have little understanding of the nature of Christian education and sometimes even less training in the craft of Christian instruction.

This book will help Christian teachers by providing a basic orientation to an authentic approach to the craft of Christian teaching. Within that framework the book leads the reader from considering foundational issues of Christian teaching to practical matters on the craft of Christian instruction. At the heart of this book is the question of what are authentic skills and approaches to Christian instruction in the local church and related settings. Throughout the book, these fundamental questions are addressed:

- Is Christian teaching essentially different from other forms of teaching?
- Are some approaches to Christian teaching more appropriate than others?
- Is there a different way of learning that more effectively impacts matters of faith?

- What skills in the teaching craft does the Christian teacher need to possess for effective instruction in the church?
- Which methods of teaching are most consistent with an authentic approach to Christian instruction?

To discover the answers to these questions for yourself, you are encouraged to consider the Points for Further Thought at the end of each chapter. This critical exercise will help you apply the ideas found in the book to your own teaching ministries. As a teacher, I can think of no more gratifying feeling than knowing that when a student was ready, I was called to enter into his or her life to help bring about life-changing learning. That calls for commitment to the task of being the best you can be at the craft of Christian teaching.

Note

1. Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations: A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990), 2.