EDWARD FARLEY: A THEOLOGIAN LOOKS AT CHRISTIAN EDUDCATION

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Edward Farley has produced a remarkable body of work in many areas of theology. His *Ecclesial Man* (1975) and *Ecclesial Reflection* (1982), works of philosophical or foundational theology based on phenomenology, present a strong basis and defense for Christian belief. He has written outstanding books on systematic theology, notably *Good and Evil* (1990), *Divine Empathy* (1996). Over the years he has also written pieces on practical theology, some of which are gathered in his *Preaching Gospel* (2003). Within practical theology he has contributed some penetrating pieces on Christian education that bear examination by religious educators. His first pieces on Christian pedagogy were written in 1965. More than forty years later he penned an essay reflecting on mistakes in his own pedagogical practice (Farley 2005).

In the early 1960's Farley was involved in a curriculum project for the Presbyterian Church out of which experience came a two-part article in *Religious Education* (1965a; 1965b) which was introduced by the editor of the journal as controversial and to which responses were solicited from religious educators whom Farley had criticized by name. Farley contended that church education was primarily an instructional activity not a form of religious nurture, contending that no special activity of the Spirit was involved. A lively debate ensued in the pages of the journal for the next year. Responses came from distinguished religious educators and theologians such

asD. Campbell Wyckoff, Iris Cully, David Hunter, and James Smart. Farley (1966) concluded the debate with a rejoinder to his critics.

From the educational point of view the debate was about nurture and instruction. The theological issue was about how education involves the work of the Holy Spirit, variously described as sanctification, salvation, conversion and redemption. The educational context for Farley was the church school of the institutional church, which he described as an instructional institution with teachers and materials, organized for the conscious and deliberate communication of specified content. For him this instruction was not a situation of nurture, which was the activity of family and church. He faulted educators for assigning many additional objectives to Christian education, all of which he termed vague, superfluous and unreachable. For Farley these objectives were those of the Church not of Christian education. Also, he contended that in calling education nurture Christian educators posited a causal effect to instruction and brought in the Holy Spirit as a mysterious X factor. For him the uniqueness of Christian education is instruction in which one learns and understands the gospel and its place in new social-cultural situations and problems. All of this is done in the Spirit.

David Hunter (1966) accused Farley of attacking a straw man by contending that no religious educator posited a special manifestation of the Spirit in the educational process. He judged Farley's view of church education as limited to rational or intellectual activity. For him Farley made too sharp a distinction between nurture and education, which was reduced in Farley's article to mechanical activities. Finally Farley seemed to have little place for the continuing activity of the Spirits in the Church. He credited Farley for criticizing the loose language that educators use in

speaking of the Spirit and for pointing out some of the Pelagian tendencies of Christian educators.

Iris Cully (1966) argued that Farley, with his many distinctions and divisions, presented an unreal and abstract picture of what happens in Christian education seriously limiting and distorting the activity of the Spirit. Wyckoff (1966) did not think that the article should be taken seriously from a historical, educational, or psychological perspective of view, though he thought it was valuable from a theological perspective. He noted that the traditional view that Farley speaks of was not well described. He accused Farley of mistaking Bushnell's view of nurture as not including direct teaching. He found Farley's description of the work of the religious education movement incomplete. He believed, however, that Farley was capable of a defensible and influential theology of Christian education rooted in the doctrine of the Spirit.

James Smart (1966) offered the strongest criticism of Farley's article. He faulted him for leaving the impression that church educators should not involve themselves with nurture but restrict themselves to mere instruction in the church school. Farley in his view did not deal adequately with the relationship between nurture and instruction. He is wrong in calling nurture non-verbal since words are an integral part of nurture within family and church. Education in the church has never been a purely intellectual activity. Like Wykoff, Smart found many things missing or confused in his historical narrative of church education. Smart defended the Presbyterian *Faith and Life Series* (criticized by Farley) with which he was involved as not developed on purely humanistic grounds, like the public school curriculum, but as including nurture unto Christian discipleship. This curriculum in Smart's view "tried to set the education

which takes place in the church school in the full context of all the agencies through which the Spirit of God can reach and influence the life of the child" (1966, 223).

Farley's greatest contribution to church education is contained in his major work on the reform of the reform of theological education in seminaries in his *Theologia* (1983), *The Fragility of Knowledge* (1988) and subsequent articles. In these works he presents the objectives of Church education in much broader terms than in his earlier articles. What has not been noted sufficiently is his contention that "while the essay is focused on clergy education, it is really about all education which purports to promote a Christian *paideia* which would interpret the Christian religion" (xi). He specifically states that his thesis is applicable to lay education (23, ftn 1).

Theological Understanding

The main thesis of *Theologia* is to restore unity and criteria to theological education, which he refers to as *theologia* or theological understanding. For Farley theological understanding is sapiential knowledge engendered by grace and divine self-disclosure. It is "a personal and existential wisdom or understanding" (133), which is possible in both clerical and lay education. This theological understanding does not come from a course of studies, which represents a technological approach to education that was criticized by Jaeger (1981) for its departure from the unified paideia of the ancient world (132-33).

For Farley theological understanding is essentially an interpretative process, a "self conscious exercised dialectic of consideration and appraisal" (1983, 176). All believers live in a world which they are always interpreting. "An interpretative

(analytic, assessive, imaginative) element is a part of any action, activity, decision, posture, and even policy" (1983, 1976). As this is the work of every believer, the main task of church ministers is to be engaged in theological understanding themselves and to enable this process in others through preaching, education, counseling and other ministerial activities.

It is Farley's contention that if theology is viewed as a *habitus* and a science of God, that is God as revealed in Scripture, then knowledge of God means knowledge of Scriptures, its texts, and ordering of the texts thematically interpreted into doctrines. The proclamation of that revelation would be a means of grace in preaching and catechizing. Also, all the disciplines taught in seminaries would be unified not as parts of clerical education but as aspects of a one unified theology (136) for all Christians.

Another of Farley's concerns is the fragmentation of theology. He contends that academic theology has just about almost been limited academic to dogmatic or systematic theology. All the other "theological disciplines" now receive their identity not from their relationship to theology but by their identification with a secular discipline: ecclesiastical history from history, biblical studies from language studies, pastoral care from psychology, catechetics from educational theory, and social ethics from sociology, etc. Some advantages have come from the connections of these areas of theology with secular areas of study but much has been lost, particularly the unity of theology and the relevance of theology for lay education.

Farley connects the fragmentation of theology with the fragmentation of education in the period after the Enlightenment that divided learning into discrete areas

of scholarship, thus abandoning the Greek ideal of *paideia* as the culturing of the human being in virtue. Like secular learning theologia has fragmented into areas of study or fields of scholarship as well as methods and processes with a loss of the central identity of theologia. For Farley the notion of theologia as personal and existential wisdom and understanding was lost and must be restored (153).

Theological understanding for Farley takes place at three levels. All Christians are involved in the first level. Believer live in and towards God and in a mode of redemption. When one's beliefs and life of faith become self-conscious one engages in theological understanding. The church school presents opportunities for personal reflection and searching in which believers engage their situation by reflecting on "the perennial features of that situation" gain personal self-insight and grasp the corrupted elements in the social situation, and the possibilities for redemption (157).

The two other matrices of theological understanding are in theological schools where ministerial leadership for the church is prepared to lead communities in traditioning, memory and pastoral care. An essential ministerial task is to prepare leaders for the activity of proclamation and education designed to evoke a believer's understanding and action. The third matrix is the graduate school where task is that of inquiry and scholarship, the determination and uncovering of truth (158).

The structure of theological understanding includes three permanent elements: the interpretation of the historic or past Christian mythos or message; the determination of the present truth of this mythos; and the future relating of this message to one's

individual or corporate situation. The pedagogy from this approach is the source-to–application model (164).

Farley presents a dialectical model of understanding which involves a self-correcting process that has a number of movements. The first movement is the thematization of the faith-world, of ecclesiality, of faith's language, references and realities. This mode of proclamation has a long history in Christianity, education and preaching. The second movement of the dialectic is the hermeneutic of suspicion, an ideological critique and uncovering of injustice in the fabric of society that raises consciousness to self-conscious awareness of the relativity and corruption of the situation (166). The third movement is distancing from and criticism of the tradition itself, raising consciousness about the tradition to determine what elements have served oppression, ideology and the legitimation of privilege. The fourth movement attempts to determine the normativeness of the tradition, that is, the fundamental truth involved in the tradition as well as the normativeness or relativity of the tradition. The fifth and final movement attempts to discern the possibilities of corruption, the place, legitimacy, beauty, redemptive possibilities and the theonomy of the situation. This can be in a person's life, the life of the community, a situation in the world (169).

Catechetics/Education

Farley explained that the field of catechetics has historically been viewed as a part of pastoral, practical, or applied theology (78). In the 19th century Lutheran and Pietistic tradition the conclusion of the whole seminary course was practical theology

which embraced homiletics and catechetics (60). The study of theology at this time was for the purpose of engendering sapiential knowledge or wisdom called theologia (62).

For Farley the clericalisation of theology, the clerical paradigm, has had many harmful effects in the area of seminary and church education. It has meant that theological education is restricted to the clergy; clerical or ministerial education entails the study of theology, lay persons do not study theology. Farley admits the benefits of both the early liberal oriented religious education movement and its neo-orthodox version in the "rejection of the old catechetics associated with the learning and transmission of doctrine" (130).What resulted from this movement, however, was not a clearly defined field or discipline but a teaching area in seminaries that has two major unrelated subject matters: the administration of church school programs and the psychology of nurture. Religious education has become the place where what used to be ascetic, spiritual, or mystical theology and formation are situated.

Lay education is not theological education because theology has been narrowed to mean clergy education. For church education to become theological education the structure of theology would have to be incorporated into church education. By definition the laity cannot be theologically educated since theology includes a cluster of studies that are pertinent only to the church's leadership (131). Farley would want to use the term theological education of the laity but he believes the battle has been loss for that change. The notion appears, however, in the new journal *Theological Education of the Laity*.

Despite modern movements in religious or Christian education Farley still believes that proper education of the laity does not exist in Christian churches. Some churches cling to a "detribalization through catechetics" while others offer assistance in Christian life and piety given either through the Bible or psychological approaches attuned to human development. What is missing in church education, however, is attention to knowledge and skills to be accumulated through educational program. What is lacking is a specific institution for doing this. The Sunday school is not that institution (1983, 196).

There is also a lack of educational subject matter for the theological education of the laity. Farley contends that "education in the truest and most serious sense of that word (*paideia*) needs to be introduced into the church" (196). Church educators have neither theological understanding nor the ability to enable this in others. As described above, this knowledge would include historical knowledge, the ability to interpret the life of the church, its mythos, literatures, and traditions. It also includes a self-conscious exercise of the dialectic that comprises theological understanding. The church educator should be able to deal with the believer's individual and corporate life and praxis of faith. All of this entails a new "institutionality and a new model of educational process which permits and evokes cumulative knowledge" (1983 197)."

Ordered Theological Learning

Furthermore Farley makes a strong case that church education for the laity should be a theological education through ordered learning. Only this mode of learning provides discipline and rigor for reflective interpretation on five types of situations:

vocation, tradition, truth of gospel, liturgy and praxis. Since believers already have the experience of faith what they need is the disciplined communication of basic nodes of interpretation already at work in the believer's situation (Farley 1983, 143). He adds the conditions for the disciplined theological learning:

> A cumulative, rigorous educational process and post-Enlightenment tools of analysis and interpretation…will have to be introduced into church education. A very different kind of church teacher will be called for. Directors of religious education will have to be more than administrators of church education. The educator on the church staff will have to be a theologian-teacher. But for that the church will have to reassess the axiom that it takes for granted: that church education cannot be theological education (1983, 99-100).

What prevents this from happening is that theological education has been identified exclusively with clergy education. Theology which was once a disposition of the believer has become what is taught by professionally trained men and women in seminaries and universities. In fact it has been narrowed to one branch of learning, the teaching of the doctrines of the church. What Farley has called for is a recovery of the meaning of theology as wisdom, discipline, and interpretation of past tradition, present truth, and interpretation of individual and corporate life (Farley 1988, 95)-

The second factor that prevents this ordered learning for the laity is dependence on the weekly homily and sermon as the principal means of lay formation. In Christian churches the homily uses the images, symbols and figures of the Scriptures to form Christian beliefs and attitudes. Though valuable, the homiletic tradition cannot be a complete and ordered education dependent as it is on the texts of the Scriptures. In Farley's view dependence on the homily actually

> enlarges the gulf between theological education and church education in that it requires ordered learning for the preacher, who must struggle with the texts,

> doctrines, and the problems of interpretation and application, thus withholding ordered learning from the process of faith itself. (1988, 97).

The believer is passive in this process, merely accepting what is proclaimed. What results for believers in this context is not ordered learning but moral or pious exhortation, limited content, a lesson for life, consolation, or some form of therapy.

The third factor that Farley identifies for the lack of serious lay theological education is that religious educators have generalized the meaning of education to include many forms of socialization and have spoken of education in terms that apply to all forms of church ministry. This broadening of the meaning of education has made ordered learning just another approach to Christian or religious education. Farley specifically singles out the socialization and enculturation theory of John Westerhoff, the shared praxis approach of Thomas Groome and the attempt of educators such as John Seymour and Donald Miller to develop taxonomies of approaches to religious or Christian education in which ordered learning is just one of the approaches (Farley 1988, 101). What results from this is that ordered learning is no longer the primary meaning of education. What is thus lost is the meaning of education as

> self-conscious attempts, usually in a corporate setting, to transmit by means of a sequential process of disciplined didactic activity both the insights and deposits of the past and the methods and modes of thought and work that enable new insights. Education in this ordinary sense comprises teachers, students, sequential cumulative learning, and appropriate disciplines. (1988, 98)

Farley commends the religious education movement for its efforts in broadening its purview to include social praxis, liturgy, formation, etc. These are all important elements of church life and ministry. However, he believes that when education is generalized to include all elements of the formative process, the tradition of ordered learning for the believer tends to get neglected, a task which he considers essential for

the church. The danger with the field of religious education is that it seems to boil down to administration and developmental psychology. Some religious educators such as Westerhoff have criticized the church school for taking on a schooling model. Farley criticizes it for not being a true school where ordered education takes place (1988, 102). What he called for is a rigorous effort at analysis and interpretation. The leader of the church school should be a theologian-educator.

Huebner's Critique of Farley's Proposal for the Reform of Church Education

Farley's call for a rethinking of theological education set off a spirited debate on clergy education. It has not done the same in the area of lay education. Dwayne Huebner (1993) offered a number of criticisms. First of all, he faulted Farley for "an inadequate mastery of critical historical detail" on lay education with regard to lay leadership, previous efforts to upgrade lay education, the development of the specialty of religious education, inadequate testing of the failure of the homiletic paradigm and a failure "to name the central issue in church education, namely the role of the clergy person" (29).

Huebner argued that the historic lay tradition in the Protestant Sunday School prevented attempts to introduce serious ordered learning. Publishing efforts to produce adequate materials have run into conflicts between publishers and church consumers. Publishers are influenced more by consumer interests than by theological experts. Many professional religious educators gave up on the Sunday school and directed their attention to the broader purpose of the education of the public, the education of religious citizens.

While Farley called for the DRE to be a theologian educator, Huebner does not think that the problem lies there but in the role of the clergy person who alone has the education and the authority to provide the ordered theological education he calls for. For Huebner the question is not "Can church education be theological education?" as Farley asked but rather "Can theological education be church education" (30).

Huebner admits that the sermon or homily does not provide adequate theological education of the laity. For him faith formation and nurture takes place in the context of pastoral care and counseling, though even this is not adequate. Huebner again places the blame on seminary education since

> by its teaching and curriculum, the seminary often demonstrates that formal educational experience, organized around disciplines, is unrelated to the formation and nurture of faith—this under the guise of scholarship or academic excellence" (33).

He also faults Farley for not including reflective interpretation of believers on their own journey of faith.

While Farley directs his proposals to church educators, Huebner faults seminaries for failing to prepare clergy for their teaching role, for failing to recognize teaching as a vocation that must deal with the tradition, the student and the institution. He concludes that,

> When teaching in the seminary is seriously accepted as vocation by teachers and students, teaching in the church will also be renewed. When the traditions of ordered learning in the seminary are taught truthfully and with serviceability in mind, then ordered learning in the church will become a possibility. Educational experts are not required if all can reflect critically and carefully on how education is but part of the journey of the self toward God. (37)

Farley's Retractions

Farley (2005) showed humility in admitting mistakes that he had made in own pedagogy. He recognized that he taught as if he were preparing students to be academic theologians like himself and without regard for students' own career choices and life in every-day situations. The demands of the field were foremost in his view rather than the post-school interests and pursuits of the students.

First of all, Farley recognized that as a teacher of theology he should have focused not on theology as a scholarly activity but on its primary mode, "which is thinking (inquiring, assessing, apprehending, clarifying) the manifest realities with which faith deal with in the situation in which faith has to live" (201). He now saw that in teaching theology to both lay and clergy persons

Farley second admitted mistake was to make the skill of interpretation and apprehension of the meaning of texts the primary mode of his teaching. He admitted that he modified this position in his books but did not do so in his own pedagogy. He explained that it is difficult not to view theology as text interpretation because of Christianity being a religion of the book and the nature of the humanities in the academic world as "objective (linguistic, hermeneutical, comparative, text-defining) interpretation of texts" 202).

Thirdly, Farley confessed that he overemphasized theology as inquiry into doctrines and ran the danger of suppressing the one thing that makes theological thinking critical thinking, the thinking on situations in everyday religious life. As he now sees it theology should be both prophetic and iconoclastic in questioning in a clear and passionate way idolatrous attitudes "toward sacred texts, Halacha, taboos,

hierarchical structures, gender hegemony, sexual casuistries, doctrinal clarifications, liturgy and so forth" (202). The emphasis on theology as text interpretation and doctrinal exposition often prevents this from happening.

Fourthly, he recognized that in his teaching he erroneously thought that theology is compromised when it concerns itself with situations of human life, history, culture, race and gender. Now that world-transformation theologies such as African American, liberation, and feminist theologies have challenged this notion, he recognizes that the proper response of theological departments and schools is not to add courses but to change the way all courses are taught. Theological reflections should focus on "personal situations, familial situations, political situations, global crises, congregational situations" (203). It should also be done with an awareness of religious pluralism.

Farley admits that he does not know what a theology based on these assumptions would look like. But he knows that it would demand rigorous contemplation to think "of, from, and under the Gospel…as it thinks from, toward, and in situations and contexts" (203). This mode of teaching must not ignore the primary subjects of traditional theology, the texts and doctrines with their stories, symbols, basic metaphors and interpretation. However, in this new mode theology would avoid remaining scholastic by being re-situated from being the aim and object of teaching to provide "perspective-determining contents and utilities" (203).

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