Teaching Scripture at Greater Atlanta Christian School

Introduction

Since the beginning of the fledgling nation of Israel, God has commanded his people to instruct and educate their children not only about Him but about the history of His people which they are now a part of. After Joshua leads Israel into the promised land, God commands the people to stack twelve stones on the other side of the Jordan. Joshua then speaks to the people, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over.” 1 Joshua does this because he knows that if the people of God forget their story, they will lose the core of their identity and walk away from the one who brought them out of Egypt. It only takes one generation to stop a movement, and so education works as a sort of preservative for the people of God. It reminds us where we have been and who we are, and not only that but it grounds Christians as they seek to discover what it means to be the people of God today.

This is the task set before the Church today. Will the Church be able to effectively pass on the Christian faith to their descendants, or will the next generation forget what God has done? The scope of this paper is to explore what it looks like to help shape a people into the people of God within a particular context. The context is Greater Atlanta Christian School (GACS) and will be discussed at length below. As will be explored further, the education within this context needs to contain both a religious instruction element as well as a transformational element. The

1 Joshua 4:21-23a
teacher at GACS needs to embody the life of Christ in an incarnational and self-emptying way as she teaches her students.

**The Context**

GACS is a school of approximately two thousand students located on the Northeast side of Atlanta, Georgia. It contains students from pre-kindergarten through high school. However only the high school education will be discussed within this paper. Some students have attended GACS since they were four and others are new to the high school in the ninth grade. New students enter the school every year, so there is a wide variety of experiences.

The school is a private institution, and the majority of the students come from wealthy backgrounds. GACS is very intentional about offering scholarships for students who cannot afford to be there otherwise, and because of this there are many students from a lower economic class in addition to the students from multi-millionaire families. Many GACS parents are very generous and often pay for students to attend GACS who financially could not otherwise. The majority of parents are owners of businesses and entrepreneurs, however in the midst of that there are some who are blue collar workers as well. Parents tend to be typical “helicopter parents,” and are heavily involved in their children’s academic and sports achievements however more often than not they are not interested in the faith of their children.

Around eight hundred of the two thousand students at GACS are enrolled in the high school. The school was first founded by a group of people associated with the Church of Christ about forty-five years ago. Originally the overwhelming majority of students were from the Church of Christ tradition. This has changed within the past ten years, and now only a small percentage are from the Church of Christ. While preferred but no longer a requirement for
employment, the majority of staff and faculty currently attend Churches of Christ. Bible classes are taught from a Church of Christ interpretational stance even though practically speaking the school looks different than a majority of Churches of Christ. Instruments are used during worship in Chapel, and women teach Bible and speak regularly in Chapel. Other elements of the Church of Christ are still strong. Baptism is always by immersion, and the Bible is seen as authoritative, as well as an emphasis on involvement within a local church.

**The Students**

As a whole, GACS is predominantly Caucasian. About five years ago, the school made a conscious decision to intentionally attempt to become more racially and economically diverse. In 2000, African Americans made up five percent of the student population, however today they make up over twenty percent of the population with over a third of GACS students in the high school now a minority.\(^2\) While these percentages are not necessarily representative of the neighborhood surrounding GACS, there is a gradual shift occurring within the student population, not only racially but economically as well.

Around eighty percent of the school identifies as Christian. The other twenty percent contains a wide range of religious beliefs and practices from Islam, to Hinduism, to Buddhism to Atheism to simply secular with no religious affiliation. This range creates a unique context in which to minister and teach the Bible. We have had some problems in the past with Hindu students desiring to be baptized against their parents’ wishes. There are other students who often begin to come to faith, but when they discuss their beliefs with their family, their parents quickly

\(^2\) These statistics come from previous research done for a paper submitted to Dr. Tim Sensing for the course Leadership in Intercultural Contexts.
squash the seed of faith which was planted in them. Often GACS more closely resembles the
mission field than the Southeast United States.

To add to this complicated mix, the majority of the eighty percent which identify as
Christian are nominal Christians. These students generally only attend church on Easter and
Christmas and other important religious holidays. Many of their parents while they may identify
as Christian do not live lives which practice their faith in any tangible way. While some of these
students have gone through Confirmation or been baptized, for a large majority their faith stops
there. Their knowledge of the Christian faith as well with those described in the previous
category come solely from what they experience, witness, and are taught at GACS. Many of
these students come to a fuller faith in their time GACS, and GACS has struggled with how best
to equip and disciple them in their faith journey. The last category of students are those who are
devout Christians and come from devout families. Their faith traditions come from across the
range of Protestantism and Catholicism with no real majority present within the school. This
religious dynamic becomes interesting when students are asked a question like, “What is
baptism?” The response can be anything from an articulate belief in a doctrine of baptism from a
variety of traditions, while some will have almost no knowledge of a simple definition of
baptism, and others will have experienced baptism themselves and with their siblings, but their
knowledge and beliefs do not go beyond that experience.

This varied make up among the students creates a unique and challenging teaching
experience. Bible is required every year a student is at GACS, and mandatory chapel is held
three times a week. They are also encouraged to go on short term mission trips across the United
States and around the world. These elements create great opportunities to teach students about God through the Bible, and to practice a transformational model of education within the world.

**Theology of Teaching at GACS**

In the same way Joshua’s stones help preserve the story of the people of God, the Scriptures in many ways fulfill the same role. While many Christians would like to believe that the Bible is an inerrant Scripture which fell from the sky, it is not that. While it does contain instructions, it is not an instruction manual. While it does contain laws, it is not a law book. It is a collection of stories, songs, poetry, letters which the people of God have written over the years. The study of Scripture is important because it reveals who God is throughout history which enables us to interpret what it means to be the people of God today.

The center of the Christian faith is not the Bible but God as he has revealed himself through Jesus Christ. In this way, the Bible then becomes central not because it itself is holy (although it deserves respect) but because it points the way to the Holy One. A serious Christian should read and study the Bible seriously because it is the greatest authority on who God is revealed through Jesus Christ. The Bible carries weight not because it was handed down from on high but because the people of God for centuries have attested to its accuracy and truth and have sought to live in line with what the writers say is true about God.

Sadly for much of America, we have fallen victim to worshiping the Bible and not the One which the Bible points to. Christian Smith identifies this as biblicism which he defines as a “theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistence, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability.”

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3 Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), viii.
they would not describe it in such terms, many of the students at GACS believe these exact ideas about the Bible. As one of my colleagues who graduated from GACS in 2003 put it, “It wasn’t until college that I realized some old man didn’t write the Bible from cover to cover in one sitting.” One of the first tasks which will be detailed below is a proper idea of what the Bible is and how it came into being. The goal then is build up a framework which makes the Bible authoritative without falling into the idolatry of the Bible.

The Bible

N.T. Wright proposes such a framework. He separates out the story of God found in the Bible into four separate acts. Wright then compares interpretation to actors who are given the first four acts of a play and are then asked to act out the final fifth act without a set script. The actors are given hints as to how the play should end, but how the fifth act flows is a decision the actors must make. The actors cannot simply write whatever they wish for the characters to do because they have the first four acts to use as a source. If they were writing the fifth act of Romeo and Juliet, they could not simply have Romeo begin to not love Juliet because that would not be true to who Romeo is. In the same way, new interpreters cannot begin to propose ideas or an ethic contrary to what God has already revealed to be true of himself and of His people.

Obviously a knowledge simply of Scripture is not sufficient for such a task. As Wright himself asks, “Did we ever imagine that the application of Biblical authority ought to be something that could be done by a well-programmed computer?” Churches need teachers who can serve as pastoral guides to not take their churches on the same old trip but to travel with

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5 Ibid., 19.
them into \textit{new} territory.\textsuperscript{6} Teachers cannot simply relive acts one through four, but must actively
and creatively invent act five and help their students to do likewise. Christians receive the
context of this interpretation through the work of acts one through four (Old through New
Testament), and the information they receive about the end of the story as revealed in the Bible.
Teachers then are to carry out an incarnational act by not only teaching the old stories but also
helping guide their students into a new one by asking the question, “What do the people of God
look like in our present context?” Obviously it will not be exactly the same but certain elements
should carry over from one act to the next. Every moment in life is new territory and while
disciples of Christ receive hints through history as to how they should proceed, every context is
different and may require a different response. Even the lengthy genealogies found in the Old
Testament and Matthew and Luke tell the reader they are part of a much larger story than the one
present before them. They are speaking to a larger context and saying to their audience this is
where you as a people were and where you came from.

\textit{Incarnational Teaching}

Great teachers act as sage guides\textsuperscript{7} for their students. They help students navigate the
complexities of life, and truly great teachers will equip and empower their students to understand
what Christ is doing in their midst \textit{for themselves}. The goal of a teacher is not only to teach the
story up until the present (although important) but to empower their students to flesh out Christ
in the present. Andrew Purves writes, “As the risen and ascended Lord, Jesus does not now sit in
heaven with his arms folded waiting for us to do something religious that he can affirm...Rather


\textsuperscript{7} A phrase coined from Osmer’s \textit{Practical Theology}. 
Jesus has his own resurrected ministry."8 Jesus Christ is not only a historical figure but because of the Resurrection He is a present reality. The teacher then acts as a guide for her students and attempts to teach students to see Jesus Christ active in their midst.

One of the best ways a teacher can do just this is to live out the way of Christ in his own personal life. In our media driven world, students are constantly being bombarded with images of what it means to be everything. The media portrays archetypes of what it means to be American, female, male, Black, White among many others. Students then, especially children and teenagers, need to see Christ incarnated in their midst to begin to understand what Christ might look in their own context. Ray Anderson writes that the youth of today lack an interpretational framework. The metanarrative of a grounded truth has disappeared which has led to a “distrust of reason [which] means that truth must be experienced to be believed.”9 This is exciting for Christian education because what we teach is both believed and lived. As Robin Meyers writes, “What led to the remarkable growth of Christianity for three centuries was not the attraction of competing doctrines but a distinctly alternative lifestyle.”10 This then puts the onus on teachers to not only have knowledge of the Bible but also have a wisdom to their life which they can embody among their students. This is not a show put on only within the classroom but a real life change which has occurred within the life of the teacher himself. Students today are searching for something true, and the life of Christ is one of the greatest lessons on what that truth looks like. Christian education begins then with the teacher being transformed by the Holy Spirit and and then embodying Christ among his students.

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8 Andrew Purves, The Resurrection of Ministry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 44.
9 Ibid., 20.
This sort of incarnational teaching often begins in the form of imitation. As students are attracted to a way of life in their teacher, they begin to imitate what they see. Paul over and over uses imitation as a form of education. To the Corinthians, Paul exhorts them to imitate him. However this is not for the glorification of Paul because Paul himself notes later on that he is following Christ, but he is asking the Corinthians to simply follow him as he follows Christ. Today, “identification with exemplars who embody certain aspects of the Christian moral life remains a potent source of moral formation in contemporary congregations.” A great teacher then follows Christ primarily in her own life and then exhorts others to follow along.

However if the education ends with imitation this is not success. Christian education is not in the business of creating clones. True education is when a student can incarnate Christ in their own unique context. For this to happen a teacher, in the same way Christ emptied himself, must empty herself upon her students. At some points, the teacher must trust that the Holy Spirit is as active in her life as in her students’. This is difficult because Christ will look different in the lives of a teacher’s students than in her own life. To use N.T. Wright’s metaphor from above, our goal is to teach the first four acts faithfully so our students can live out the fifth one equally faithfully. Thomas Groome urges educators “to trust that people can be agents of their own knowing in Christian faith; that they are not only recipients, but agents as well.” This requires a teacher to step back and allow God to work among her students which requires a self-emptying act by the teacher. When a student arrives at their own beliefs through the guiding of a wise

11 1 Corinthians 4:16
12 1 Corinthians 11:1
teacher, those beliefs are much more deeply rooted in the student’s life. Furthermore, the educator is not only helping a belief develop much deeper roots, but equipping the student with the skills to form their own beliefs. Even the best educator cannot discuss every possibility of the future for Christian living, but hopefully by emptying herself she can empower the Spirit to work among her students in a way that they can wisely live as Christ did in their own contexts.

To see God in the present, a teacher must teach the way God has worked in the past, so that his students will know who God is in order to see Him today. The true goal of Christian education is the transformation of the person and society, however this cannot occur in a simple spiritual realm. Transformation without knowledge is shallow, and knowledge without transformation is hollow. To focus on transformation is not to forget about knowledge because one cannot simply learn and not be transformed, rather the two bleed into each other.

Osmer notes that often Paul’s exhortations follow an indicative/imperative structure. With the indicative being “the way Paul describes the Christian life as grounded in God’s prior activity in Jesus Christ.” Paul then uses the imperative to exhort Christians on how to live in light of that activity.\(^{15}\) It is this knowledge which helps create a new identity. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spends the first three chapters expounding upon what God has done through Jesus Christ. He discusses how the Ephesians have been made alive in Christ, how they are now God’s chosen people, and how Christ has authority over all things. In Chapter 4, however, he makes a move away from the high theology and writes, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”\(^{16}\) In this shift Paul connects the two

\(^{15}\) Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*, p. 41.

\(^{16}\) Ephesians 4:1
sections. The first is theologically rich, and the second imparts to the Ephesians what life looks like now in light of what Christ has done. Paul begins by explaining the calling the Ephesians have received and then spends the second half explaining what a life worthy of that calling looks like.

In line with this Incarnational teaching, Groome proposes that Jesus’s primary pedagogy was to “lead people from life to Faith to life.”17 By this, he means that teachers need to begin with the lives of their students and then move to faith and then reapply what is learned there to the life of the student. This has the benefit of allowing “participants to come to see for themselves” what the Christian faith might mean for their lives.18 As discussed above, a teacher must trust that the resurrected Christ is still present in the world in His own ministry. Also, only the student can know his exact context, and it is best for a teacher to not pretend to be an expert in a life she has not lived. For some, this may seem to be too laissez-faire in its approach to the formation of a student which is why it is so important for education to be a community event. The community along with mentors and teachers provides a balance as a student attempts to embody Christ in his own life. Christian education is not merely knowledge (although that is important). Christian education cannot be taught by someone who has not experienced the life changing power of the risen Christ. It must be done by a whole community of Christ-changed persons. As discussed above in the story of Joshua and the stones, the stones were to serve as reminders for the whole community, and the whole community has a responsibility to educate. While theology may require a specialized core of instructors with special giftings, this is not the

17 Groome, Will there be Faith?, 34.
18 Ibid., 324-25.
only form of education which must occur. If the life of Christ is truly incarnational, then students need to learn from those who are embodying Christ in the lives of men, women, single mothers and fathers, recovering addicts, rich, poor, Black, and White among many others.

Models for Education at GACS

Peter Hodgson, using Alfred Whitehead’s terms, describes education as a cyclical process where students move from ‘romance’ to ‘precision’ to ‘generalization.’ Education then is a continual repetition and cyclical process. One of the difficulties with Christian education at GACS is that students come from a wide variety of stages in the educational process. In an average class, students of Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Secular, Jewish, Mormon, and Atheist traditions will all be present, and all will have varying levels of knowledge of their own tradition. While this lack of knowledge may be overcome within the four year educational process, thirty to forty new students of all grade levels arrive every year. This creates difficulties in moving a group of students through an informational and transformational experience.

With this in mind, any curriculum adopted at GACS should include a review period to start the year. Ideally, this review period should be led through student projects. In line with theology of teaching from above, a teacher should set out to make himself a guide and instructor for the students. By allowing students to teach the review section, the teacher allows the students to further internalize the messages and stories they are teaching. The more a student guides the learning, the more they will learn. As this is a school students will receive grades and have course work beyond a traditional Church setting. At GACS teachers have found that if there is not rigor in the Bible curriculum, then students will not treat the subject seriously enough to be

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impacted by it, however if the course work becomes burdensome then students lose interest and merely begin to perceive the Christian life as an intellectual exercise.

**Religious Instruction**

The curriculum will take two approaches from the models presented in class. These will be a religious instruction followed by transformation. As GACS students come from a variety of backgrounds, religious instruction is a necessity. Many incoming students have never heard the stories of Israel and do not know what the Exodus was or why it matters. Religious instruction is necessary for students to see the whole story of the people of God. If they are to understand Jesus today, then they need to understand the story Jesus Christ entered into in Palestine.

In the religious instruction model of Christian education, the goal is the transmission of practices and understanding of the Christian story. To the detriment of their students, many curriculums take the Christian story to simply include the story of Israel and Jesus Christ, or even more detrimentally simply the story of Jesus Christ. As discussed above, the Christian story moves beyond the first century. Jesus Christ is still active today among his people, and understanding the Christian story properly should include the story of the early Church, the Church through the Middle Ages, the Church post-Reformation and then the story of the Church today. If the goal of education, is to open a student’s eyes to Christ among us, then educators should begin by pointing out Christ among His Church within the past thirty years.

**Transformation**

This leads into the second model of education GACS should implement within its curriculum which is transformation. A transformation model is in line with the theology of education stated above which is incarnational. Transformation does not simply see the life of
Christ as an intellectual exercise with dogmas to be assented to but as a liberational force for both individuals and society as a whole. The role of a teacher in this context is to engage students to view what they can do in their contexts to expand the Kingdom of God well beyond the classroom. Through transformation teachers are not only impacting the lives of the students but hopefully that impact moves through the students to change the student’s own context with the liberating force of the Kingdom of God.

The majority of GACS students come from very wealthy homes and have little knowledge of the pain and suffering which is present throughout the world. A transformational education will seek to bring awareness to the destructive nature of sin in the world, not only spiritually but physically as well. Structures which entrap people in cyclical poverty and what students can do about these structures will be discussed within the classroom. This education will not only occur within the classroom, but occurs outside of the classroom through service within the city and beyond. Students are encouraged to participate in both international and domestic short term mission trips. The goal of these trips is to aid established missions. This process moves the educational process into the world which is a setting for transformational education. Also, these trips open the eyes of students that God is just as active in other areas of the world, and that America does not have a corner on Christianity. By forming relationships with the poor, students will begin to learn how to care about for poor in responsible ways, and also learn that the poor have as much to offer the wealthy.

Methods & Texts

Ideally a student will be present in the GACS High School for four years. The texts proposed below are designed to be taught sequentially from freshman year to senior year of a
student’s high school career (eight semesters). An educator will not only review at the beginning of the semester but will routinely attempt to review past stories and topics which have been taught before as they come up in the curriculum. The courses will be divided into semester blocks as this works best with the current school calendar.

**First & Second Semester: Story of Creation to Exile**

These two semesters will encompass the story of Israel found within the Hebrew Bible. The first semester will primarily focus on Genesis and Exodus stories. Both of these books set a backdrop for much of the rest of the Bible. If we are to use NT Wright’s metaphor, it is the first act. Topics for this semester will include Creation and the nature of sin among others. Is sin something humanity is born into or do we choose it? Or is it a little of both? While discussing Creation, teachers will cover a Christian’s duty to the environment and how one responds to current topics such as climate change. When the Exodus story is taught, teachers might want to cover topics of slavery not only within the Bible but also modern day slavery and modern movements to end human trafficking. To teach these topics, teachers may use modern day media to discuss these topics. *The End It Movement* is a great resource for efforts to end modern day slavery.²⁰ Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray’s *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts* is an excellent resource for connecting ancient themes to popular culture.²¹ Teachers will want to attempt to make these foreign and ancient texts relevant to today’s present period whether through linking themes or using modern media to connect the two time periods. Even if a teacher does not feel adequate to use popular culture in their classroom, students will

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²⁰ [www.enditmovement.com](http://www.enditmovement.com)

appreciate the effort. In this way a teacher should become a student of their students’ culture. As Ronance writes, “One hour a month with the library’s copy of *Rolling Stone* goes a long way.”

The second semester will cover the Exile and the Prophets. For time’s sake the curriculum will quickly gloss over other parts of the Canon such as the historical books. While these are beneficial, there is not time to include everything and the goal is to hit enough of the critical points so students can understand the whole story. Stories such as Creation, Exodus, and Exile are essential not only to the people of Israel but also to understand Jesus Christ’s context. The prophets suggest that God is “bringing an end to the world as we have known it,” and that the prophets “bear witness to the evocation of a new world.” Teachers should discuss possibly how might the prophets of past critique the Church of today, and what is the old world which God is bringing an end to? This should bring students to an awareness of the systems of sin in the world. An assignment would be to write a critique of the old world in the form of poetry and end with highlighting the new world which God is creating.

**Third & Fourth Semester: Story of Jesus**

These two semesters are designed to tell the story of Jesus in its entirety. He is the cornerstone of the Christian faith and thus an entire year is dedicated to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. One way to practice Groome’s life to faith to life might be to spend several weeks focusing on how society has viewed Jesus over the years. This could be through listening to music which is written about Christ. Another week could then be spent of Christ in art, and finally another week could be used to discuss Christ in movies. A beneficial study would be to

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22 Ibid., 10.

watch several movies of the life of Christ and then discuss how each director chose to represent Christ differently. Students might want to explore how they would make a film similarly or differently than the directors. After discussing the Christ represented in culture, then the class could move to Christ in the text. Watching film critically is an excellent way to tune students to the nuances within a text. “It is generally assumed that the process of ‘reading’ a film is a good analogy for reading a text.”

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**Fifth & Sixth Semester: Story of the Church to Present**

The fifth semester should focus on the story of the Church as told through the Bible, and the sixth semester will cover the story of the Church to the twentieth century. This is an excellent occasion to use case studies. Why did Martin Luther feel the need to write his 95 theses? How did American churches justify slavery? Such a case study would be an excellent chance to discuss interpretational problems and hermeneutics. Role playing in many cases is excellent as well to discuss many of the controversies present throughout Church history. A teacher might want to teach the Nicaean Controversy by assigning one group of students to play the role of the Arians and another to play the role of Athanasius and his supporters. This could lead up to a debate to be held within the classroom.

The teacher should not gloss over painful details of the story of the Church but instead should be willing to engage the mistakes the Church has made through the years. The teacher might possibly want to ask, are there mistakes the Church is making today? In this way, the teacher will help her students take a sympathetic view to the men and women of Church history. The goal here is for students to understand they are part of a long story of Christian tradition.

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24 Gray and Roncace, *Teaching the Bible*, p. 91.
They should realize these women and men were not perfect saints, but people genuinely trying to understand Christ in their culture in many of the same ways we are doing today. Students should begin to see the Church as a transformative power within the world and special focus should be given to the Church’s role for education and hospitality in the world.

**Seventh & Eighth: Story of the Church Today**

These two semesters should attempt to bring about the final act of the story of the people of God. The goal of this semester is to work out what it means to be a Christian in the students’ own contexts. This will mean discussing world issues such as poverty, hunger as well as topics specific to America and the Church such as abortion and homosexuality. Again case studies and storytelling are essential to this year. As students engage in conversation over these topics, they should be able to articulate their own views as well as the views of others. Multiple voices should be given respect within the classroom in a way to aid students to understand multiple viewpoints on topics. Also, the teacher would be wise to bring in guests to help discuss potentially controversial viewpoints. If one week the class is discussing homosexuality in the Church, perhaps the teacher can invite a homosexual to discuss what it is like to be a homosexual in the Church.

The goal of education is to form people into the people of God and help them faithfully live out the story of God in their own context. A teacher cannot do this without embodying Christ in his own life. The teacher then shares their life with the students and acts as a mentor, instructor, and guide to the students as they attempt to live Christ faithfully in their own lives. This is a self-emptying work, and one where a teacher must trust that Christ is at work within the
students’ lives. If the Church is to thrive in the next century, then Christian education is a must
as it aids students to live Christ in their own world.

Bibliography


