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CONTEXTS FOR EDUCATION

Delbert Wiens*

THE ALTITUDES FROM WHICH WE SEE

There will always be those who climb higher than others in some aspect or another. But it is not true that only the elite have the opportunity to climb towers and mountains. Nor is it true that superior insight into all areas of life is granted those who do. Each of us has the opportunity to learn to think at different levels. And most of us learn to do so where we have experience.

We will not solve the crisis faced by our colleges unless we understand their "elevating" function. Nor will we understand what is said about them unless we separate out the different levels from which the criticisms and solutions come. I shall first illustrate these levels from the business world.

Level One: The Traditional Store-keeper

His Service: to stock what people need

His Method: to increase his profit margin by cutting overhead

His Effort: to work very long hours

Level Two: The Entrepreneur

His Service: to dream up a better product or service and to convince people that they want it

His Method: to increase his profit by expanding his market, even if he has to cut his profit margin

His Effort: to scheme (in the good sense of systematizing production and sales)

Level Three: The Magnate

His Service: to keep the production lines moving

His Method: to coordinate the knowledge and skills of others

His Effort: to manage and to think, always keeping the long range in mind

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From this I derive the following lessons:

Lesson One: The “higher” levels of business wisdom are different in kind from the “lower” ones. Level two is not level one done better. Nor is level three the same thing as level two with more money. It is not even so simple as having different thoughts at each level. It is rather that there are different sorts of thinking, each appropriate to its perspective.

Lesson Two: When businesses get bigger the higher levels must supercede, but not do away with, the wisdom and the knowledge of the preceding levels. Great industries fail if they lose entrepreneurial creativity, and entrepreneurs fail if no one watches costs.

Lesson Three: One of the major causes of business failure is the frequent inability of successful businessmen to make the transition to the higher level demanded by their growing businesses.

These three types apply also to our schools and churches:

Level One: This type of thinking accepts the status quo (*this* given way of living, *this* way of learning, *this* set of doctrines, *this* congregation) and seeks to operate as efficiently as possible. Although the limits are narrow, one often finds profound insight into human nature and human life among those who have remained within this world-view. In *From the Village to the City* I have described this level of thinking and living as “village”.

Level Two: This type is outward-going, progressive, creative, rational, expansionist. Those who have this sort of world-view amass great quantities of systematically organized knowledge. I have described this level as “town”. A successful town becomes a “city”.

Level Three: If knowledge grows faster than our understanding of its place and of its limitation, and if everything is done that can be done, then the city is revealed as Babylon, the place of chaos and of ultimate destruction. If, however, knowledge is married to insight, then a great culture can emerge.

AN APPLICATION TO MENNONITE BRETHERN AND THEIR SCHOOLS

The appropriate place to teach the principles of level one and to get the experience that leads to its sense of judgment (its “common sense”) is the home community. The fundamental insights about the self and about others must be learned there. Shop-keeping is best learned in apprenticeship to a shop-keeper.

Our Mennonite Brethren colleges were created to help Mennonite Brethren youth learn the principles needed for success at level

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two. By educating them ourselves, we hoped that they would return to our communities with the sort of knowledge that even villages need (store-keepers now need to be lawyers and accountants and farming has become more level two or three than level one). And so the colleges were fought by those who were content with level one. But the future lay with level two and the schools prevailed. Level two is our "common sense" and our established orthodoxy.

By now the success of level two has created the necessity for level three. The "city" is everywhere and, as the older "villagers" suspected, the advent of level two has fundamentally altered our old communities. But the wisdom of level three is hated by those who prefer to remain to level two. And so our colleges, which are places where level three necessarily and obviously surfaces in both good and bad ways, once again become controversial.

The colleges that were created to teach the wisdom of level two now seem to be undermining it. Indeed, almost everything, not least its own success, appears to be undermining this way of being. The halting attempts of our schools to come to terms with level three (and how can we *not* do so?) seems treasonous to those at level two. And so our recruiters, fund raisers, and administrators need not only to convert our old "village" dissenters but most anxiously seek to reassure our "town" friends.

Perhaps most serious of all is that we fail to ignite the interest and support of level three. By constantly reassuring level two that we are "safe", we are in danger of being despised by those who have gone beyond it. If our schools are not careful (and more honest), those who operate from level three in a "city" world will consider them to be as irrelevant to their world-view as is the "official" level two rhetoric which still dominates most of our churches. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that many who have broken through to level three in their vocation or business may still think religiously, politically, and philosophically in level two terms, for their experience in these fields is limited. But such people cannot long remain happy with this inconsistency and crave more relevant teaching. But only level three theology and discipleship can answer the questions and needs which surface for those whose week-day life is spent in a level three world.

WHAT ARE OUR RESOURCES FOR SHAPING OUR COLLEGES?

This question can obviously be asked from these different points of view. Those at level one will take the present constituency, faculty, buildings, boards, and ideas for granted and try to be more efficient with them. I am quite sure that someone must pay attention to this level. But if that is all any of us do, then I am also sure that our colleges' future will be a short one. Without a vision even schools must eventually perish.

Those at level two will ask how the boundaries can be expanded. What innovations will “sell”? What approaches will stimulate giving? This too is important. But I am also sure that if this is all we do, then we will dart about in a hundred directions, trying anything and everything that might help us to survive, and end by ceasing to have any good churchly or academic reason to do so.

Level three people will know that our thinking must be more than short-range and will have more to do with meaning than with survival. From this perspective, what are our resources?

1. *Constituencies.* Not so very long ago one would have put that in the singular, “The Mennonite Brethren Church is our constituency.” But that answer would never have been very helpful, for we have never possessed a single mind-set. From their beginnings, our colleges have been caught between level one and level two expectations, and they have been at their best when they have understood that they must, therefore, be controversial. We now are moving into a world where the debate must include level three. Are our schools to move boldly to understand and prepare youth for this “city” reality? If they do not they shall have failed them. If they do, the anxious defenders of levels one and two will be profoundly disturbed. For the demonic aspects of this “city” world have been more clearly revealed than has its creative potential.

I do not know any good models for us. Some schools are refusing to admit this level, and their rhetoric attracts so much support that the temptation to imitate them is almost overwhelming. But their stance is regressive and, I would argue, their gospel is false. Unfortunately, those schools which have tried to enter the new realm also seem to me to be in trouble. Most of them are probably headed toward secularism and the loss of a Christian vision.

It is my hope that the Mennonite Brethren heritage possesses the strength to become relevant to this “city” world. We need to rise above the old debate between “village” and “town” and to unite the strengths of both. The human and spiritual insight of our “village” elders needs to be resurrected and made more powerful by expertise of the “town”. As an ethnic group, we have so far been able to hold levels one and two together while at least flirting with level three. My hope is that if our schools and our churches come together with openness and patience that we will be equal to the times. And our schools can then become models for others.

2. *Faculty.* A significant number of our teachers are struggling to cope honestly with level three while fully appreciating level two. And many do so with some memory of the genuine greatness of level one at its best. But it is easy to be demoralized by the psychological

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demands imposed by having to battle on so many fronts without a clear sense of a master strategy. In any case, those who try to forge a higher vision out of divergent world-views are always at a disadvantage when facing those with tunnel-vision (single-minded defenders of any level).

3. *Students*: We must cope with the "city", not run from it or persist in the illusion that level two thinking will be able to tame it. But this does not mean that our colleges should indiscriminately push the third level on their students. One of the truths that was taken for granted in the "village" was that life is a growth process which must take time. Maturation, like a harvest, cannot be greatly rushed. This was not wholly forgotten by the partisans of level two, but they did assume that everything that needed to be taught could, in principle, be put before college students.

Many of our students have already absorbed healthy doses of levels one and two and are fully ready for "altitude". But others may not be ready for this. It is both a challenge and a problem that some students are ready for serious reflection while others still need "Sunday School". But it remains true for everyone that education is more a matter of achieving "elevation" than it is the cramming of facts or the honing of skills, as important as those may also be.

FOURTH LEVEL

Beyond the industrial magnates are those who must shape economic policies that apply to whole nations and blocs of nations. At this level many more complexities arise and its "wisdom" must include political and social factors as well. For macroeconomics is not microeconomics done with bigger numbers, and what is good for General Electric may not be good for the country.

Our colleges are not ends in themselves. If they are to be Christian, they must fit into a larger picture. They must serve the church. Christianly speaking, they do not need to exist (provided that something else fulfills their function). If they do not fit into the larger church patterns, then the church needs to cut loose from them. But this is not the whole story. What the schools have learned about this world and the knowledge (and even, sometimes, wisdom) they have harbored are needed by a church that would have all the resources it needs to know itself and to understand and speak redemptively in our present age.

If it is true that the schools must fit into the larger patterns of the church, then it is also true that the church must go beyond them. If it does not, the schools may lead students to higher levels of Christian maturity and yet fail to help the churches that created them. The best of our youth will not go back to churches that do not take them farther

than the college has taken them. If our colleges are to function as undergraduate institutions in the becoming of our youth, and if all of life is a becoming mature in Christ, then our churches must become the place for “postgraduate education” and must be seen to be so. It is the purely arbitrary bias of level two thinking that imagines that the “elevating” arts and sciences do not need a church context after age twenty-two.

Not all of our church members will break through to level three, or even level two. But then, no business would thrive whose employees are all magnates or entrepreneurs. Nor can businesses or churches thrive if they do not provide a context for “promotion” to superior levels. Without such a larger context, the success of the colleges will mostly serve to help individuals—to outgrow us. A church which cannot offer the solid food needed by the best will end by requiring milk, needing someone “to teach you again the first principles of God’s word” (Hebrews 12:11-14).

The crisis of our colleges will not be solved if it is treated only as a *school* problem. By making the colleges the central concern of the Board of Education of the United States Conference of Mennonite Brethren, we have actually placed the colleges at the periphery of the church. When the center for our continuing spiritual and intellectual ascents becomes the community and the church, then the schools will discover their rightful place. If that does not happen, a college must either cease to be Mennonite Brethren or die.

A PROPOSAL

I propose that the United States Area Conference elect a board which will be able to discern the appropriate content and rhythms of learning and to take responsibility for guiding the programs which seek our Christian understanding and maturation. Such a board would set policy for, and supervise, subsidiary Sunday School and youth commissions, the board(s) of our college(s), and “adult education.” Its aim would be to assist the churches to deliver every man mature in Christ. Only a board which is responsible to the church and which addresses itself to the entire church is likely to understand what is appropriate for that part of the church which is eighteen to twenty-two years old—or any other part.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers (II Corinthians 12:28).

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded (Philippians 3:12-16).