

Technology in Spiritual Transformation

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Introduction

I am in seminary distance education. More accurately, I am in technology-mediated education since many of our graduate students are not indeed "at a distance," but campus students who have chosen our DVD ROM / Internet courses to advance their training.

It is an exciting field at an exciting time as we watch long-standing pedagogical, geographical, and other access barriers to the training of men and women for ministry fall one-by-one. The number and nature of schools offering technology-mediated courses and programs, and consequently the number of students enrolled in those programs, has exploded. And with the growth has come the research data that overwhelmingly demonstrates that there is "no significant difference" between cognitive learning outcomes achieved in traditional classrooms and those achieved through well-designed, technology-mediated instruction.

The evidence is so convincing that the discussion surrounding the use of technologies in theological education has changed. When I first entered the field it was sufficient for those uncomfortable with non-traditional delivery options to say that, for the sake of this conversation: "distance education was simply not as effective as traditional instruction in achieving learning outcomes." Today, with that concern largely resolved, the comments are more like this: "Yes, technologies can be useful for the cognitive learning outcomes, but they cannot do what a teacher can, they cannot do spiritual transformation."

That would be a fatal flaw if true. Our seminary, as part of its mission statement, says that the school is to be a "catalyst and resource for spiritual transformation." If that is our mission, and if the technology-mediated courses of the distance education program cannot meaningfully support that goal, then it would be improper to strive to grow the program. Students should be returned to the classroom where, it is argued, that spiritual transformation can, and does, take place.

So the topic of technologies in the delivery of theological education turns to spiritual transformation. It is unwise, however, to ask first the question, "Does the absence of a live teacher in face-to-face classroom community mean that technology-mediated theological education cannot achieve spiritual transformation." That question will come. I believe the first question we must ask is "What is spiritual transformation."

I teach a four-hour workshop on the topic. Suffice to say, there is not time here to cover all that I do in that event. Still, several points are critical to our understanding, and, as always, the place to begin is with the Scriptures.

The Biblical Foundations

The passage that anchors our understanding of spiritual transformation is an old favorite of the church, Romans 12:1-2:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

The two contrasting imperatives of v. 12 provide insight into the true meaning of the verse. We are not to be conformed, the Greek verb “*συσχηματιζεσθε*” meaning an external, outward conformity to a standard, but rather we are to be transformed, here the Greek term is “*μεταμορφουσθε*.” We are to undergo a true metamorphosis impacting every aspect of our character and conduct. It is an inward transformation that is increasingly evidenced in our outward actions and conversation. The respected commentator Matthew Henry believes these verses refer to the two-fold process of conversion, an one-time event, and sanctification, the life-long journey that is to be the experience of every believer.

In this passage of scripture we see revealed the core of the matter. Spiritual transformation is not of human agency. It is the unique work of the Holy Spirit. It can neither be accomplished in the classroom by a teacher, nor can it be achieved through the effective use of technology. It is the work of the Spirit, and His alone.

So what happens in the classroom? What is the role of the instructor? What role can technology play in the process of spiritual transformation? Let us begin by considering some of what attempts to pass for spiritual transformation in today’s educational environment.

What Spiritual Transformation is Not

In my 15 years in higher education leadership at both the collegiate and seminary levels, I have heard a lot of ideas passed off as evidence of transformation.

Transformation is not Information.

In secular education it is often said that the difference between a productive, contributing individual is their access to quality education. The ills of our day can be overcome if we just get kids into the classroom and provide them the information they need to function effectively in society. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest that more education equals better people. As Theodore Roosevelt is reported to have said ““A man who has never gone to school may steal from a freight car; but if he has a university education he may steal the whole railroad.” Education makes people more aware, more capable of achievement, but alone it does not change the heart of an individual.

Transformation is not Conformation.

Many in the Christian community consider the external appearance to be the barometer of an internal reality. Before coming to Western Seminary I worked in a Bible college where male students and faculty were required to wear jackets and ties to class, while the female students wore skirts and dresses extending at least two inches below the knee. Television viewing was restricted and closely monitored. Magazines and newspapers were limited to those that reinforced the teaching position of the school. Students were pressed into a mold that would shape their external appearance, activities and perhaps even conversation. But this is conformity, not transformation. Indeed, many of the colleges students would shake off these shackles to find a very different path in the years following graduation.

It must be said that this approach can be satisfying for a season. Doesn't everyone like it when young people "look Christian?" In reality, this is not transformation, but a form of Christian acculturation, not dissimilar to that pursued in Jewish, Catholic or Islamic schools. Those faiths seek to pass on what it means to be a Jew, a Catholic or a Muslim. We, in turn, hope that our educational efforts will pass on our values, what we believe it means to be and act as a Christian.

Transformation is not Affectation.

Does anyone remember Eddie Haskell? He was the character on "Leave it to Beaver" in the 1960s that everyone disliked for his duplicity. When with adults, his voice had the tone of an angel. In every other setting, however, he was a conniving, obsequious character that everyone loved to hate. That, I believe, was because we all knew someone just like Eddie Haskell.

Unlike externally imposed efforts at conformation, affectation is an inward choice. "I can get what I want, and do what I want, if I just learn the language and the actions of a committed believer." It is Christian camouflage, Christian hypocrisy. Having been in the faith for more than 30 years, and having been in churches all that time, I know that affectation is not restricted to the young. It is a pervasive, sad reality that knows now age limit. Our educational efforts must strive always to touch the heart, and not accept outward fluency in the language of Christianity as evidence of a transformed spirit.

Transformation is Not Reformation.

A change of behavior is not evidence of transformation. Schools that approach the training program as boot camps designed to smooth out rough edges and compel behavioral change do see results. The time I spent in police training – my boot camp - a lifetime ago changed the way I walked, talked, and acted in crisis situations. I could shoot, handcuff and scuffle with the best of them. It did nothing, however, to change who I was. I was still a sinner deeply in need of grace. I was more skilled and more competent on the outside, but inwardly, I was lost.

Schools that approach education as a boot camp must remember one thing: Transformation is a renewing of the Spirit, not the breaking of the spirit. It is life-giving because it is the loving touch of God in an individual's life, not the harsh hand of discipline that yields temporal results, but utterly without eternal consequence.

So What is Spiritual Transformation?

Simply, it is the work of the Spirit in the life of an individual. It is a spiritual resurrection as individuals pass from death to life and the beginning of a pilgrimage that will take each person to places yet unknown to accomplish the purpose of God in his or her life. It is not of human agency, nor even of human intervention. Each day I am more convinced that in too many instances the desire of God to do his unique work is impeded by our well-meaning, but often unprofitable efforts to do His work for him. In too many churches, in too many classrooms, we draw attention to ourselves, placing ourselves between the individual and God, effectively eclipsing His image as surely as the much-smaller moon is able to eclipse the radiant glory of the sun.

It is also a miraculous work. Nothing else can account for the metamorphosis. No amount of conniving, no amount of manipulation, no amount of money nor even a lifetime of good deeds can transform a life. Preachers and teachers can be mightily used of God in ministry, but there comes a point when they must step back and get out of the way. They cannot do the miraculous work that is His alone to do.

Finally, for the purposes of this discussion, spiritual transformation is a completed work. With redemption God seals the eternal destiny of the believer, assuring him or her of a sure home in heaven. Nothing can change that, no one can steal it away. Without the completed work of the Spirit in salvation, nothing that an individual will do will, however attractive and winsome it might be, will matter. And all the fine work we do as teachers will amount to nothing as well.

What is the Role of the Teacher?

If spiritual transformation is the unique work of the Holy Spirit, and it is, what then is the role of the teacher? This understanding is vital to our consideration of the ability of technology to support spiritual transformation, since technology-mediated instruction typically subordinates the role of the live teacher to other teaching systems.

The teacher in the classroom is often lauded for being inspirational, motivational, or affirming and good teachers seek to be all three. One should not confuse any of these good qualities, and the results they can produce (inspired, motivated, or confident students), however, as either evidences of, or pre-requisites for, spiritual transformation. I am sure all of us can look back with a smile as we remember a teacher who brought these qualities and more to the classroom. I know I can. Nevertheless, growing up as a student in public education, spiritual transformation was never the goal of any of my teachers, regardless of gifting or teaching style, nor was it an outcome in my life. There was no cause and effect relationship.

That is not to say the teacher has no role in the classroom other than teaching a specific curriculum, and teaching it well. The teacher must be a model of the believer, reflecting growth toward the goal of Christian maturity that the end game of sanctification. The teacher should reflect as well the integrated life, a “24x7x365” life where all aspects of our activities, conversation and thought-life honor God. Students quickly reject belief that can be turned on and off as the occasion warrants. And the teacher should demonstrate what it means to have surrendered his or her will to that of Christ. No lesson I learned in bible college was more significant than that taught silently as I watched my professors, men and women I had come to respect deeply, bow their heads and their hearts in worship of one far greater than themselves. This was revelatory to me and has served even after all these years to buttress my faith against my personal seasons of doubt.

The Role of Technology in Spiritual Transformation

Like the classroom teacher in many respects, technology is a tool in the hands of God. Nothing more. Neither can achieve spiritual transformation, and neither should be allowed to get in the way of what the Holy Spirit is trying to do. Technology is a way to communicate a lesson and achieve a learning outcome; it does not determine the content of that message. That is our responsibility as teachers and educators.

When we approach the matter of technology in our culture and society, we must always seek to put it in perspective. It is typically neither good nor evil. It simply is. The use we get from it depends on our understanding of our purpose. In this instance, our goal is spiritual transformation, and technology just cannot achieve that outcome.

But neither can we. It is God’s handiwork. In the classroom or by distance / mediated education, that outcome is reserved to His Holy Spirit. Our challenge always is to create an environment where Christ is lifted up, His word is taught and honored, and our lives in support of the effort reflect the truth of the message. And then we get out of the way.