



## SAYING NO TO RELEVANCE, POPULARITY, & POWER: CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIAN TEACHING TODAY

BY KAREN-MARIE YUST

Varied messages about the nature and purpose of teaching pervade contemporary culture. Society frequently portrays teachers as experts who provide students with the information necessary to master a set of facts. Society also expects teachers to be magicians, drawing forth from students (like rabbits from a hat) universal truths hidden in the human soul. Politicians want teachers to produce effective test takers. These perspectives are replicated in religious education settings. Persons are reluctant to volunteer as church school teachers because they don't know enough. We hope that providing a positive environment will be sufficient to magically make participants faithful disciples. We evaluate confirmands on their ability to give the right answers. Thus, we reinforce social ideas that are actually impediments to teaching well.

### Cultural Relevance

Henri Nouwen observes that those who want to have an influence on others believe that cultural relevance is key. To make a difference, we may – like marketers who hype popular buzzwords to reel in customers – spout the “in” words of the age group we’re teaching without challenging learners to encounter the other in different perspectives that they might not consider

relevant to their worlds. Nouwen argues that emphasizing relevance focuses our attention on what we can do, show, prove, and build rather than on our vulnerability to error and our need to remain open to emerging truths discovered in communal learning (*In the Name of Jesus*, 16-17).

To resist this temptation, we need to engage in a spiritual practice of contemplation that redirects our attention from the question of what is relevant to the question of whether we are creating spaces where learners can make meaning using historic *and* contemporary resources. Nouwen notes that teachers “cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time” (31). Instead, we must be lifelong learners who “learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself” (31). This means that preparing a lesson is more about listening for what God is teaching us and imagining how we might help others listen as well, than it is about figuring out how to get through the whole lesson plan or entertain the participants so that they will return next week.

### Popularity

A second temptation—a longing for popularity—encourages teaching strategies that

promote appreciation for the teacher rather than creative engagement with the subject of all religious education: God. This is particularly a temptation in youth ministry, where churches often equate the success of a youth program with the popularity of the youth leader. Implicitly, most activities come to focus on getting learners to like the teacher and what the teacher has to offer. In adult Bible studies, this temptation may take the form of inviting in popular speakers to inform the congregation while learners passively receive the material offered. In children’s ministries, it may involve suspending the lesson to let children play so that they’re not bored and leave feeling like they had fun in class.

The antidote to a misguided emphasis on popularity is a spiritual practice of confession and forgiveness. We need personal and communal ways of examining our teaching practices for misplaced values, failures of courage, presumptions of excellence, and too much or too little humility. Confession may entail admitting that we do not have all the answers and need to learn alongside those in our class. It may mean acknowledging that we sometimes want to avoid the hard work of learning or prefer to have others accept what we say without question. Forgiveness comes in asking those with whom we teach



to take responsibility for active engagement in their own learning and to hold us accountable for creating spaces where genuine learning occurs.

### Power

The third temptation we face is age-old. Nouwen writes, "Ever since the snake said, 'the day you eat of this tree your eyes will be open and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil' (Genesis 3:5), we have been tempted to replace love with power" (59-60). If we secretly desire to be viewed as all-knowing, all-powerful, and always-present by those we teach –

and it is perhaps the latter trait most often cultivated by religious educators who work like Energizer bunnies – we point persons away from God and toward us as their ultimate source of wisdom and support. We become demigods rather than fulfilling our rightful role as companions on a spiritual journey.

To resist this temptation, we need a practice of critical imagination, in which we ask where God is leading us rather than where we are supposed to lead others. Such a practice involves cultivating a habit of attentiveness, in which we

suspend our own convictions and invite God to illumine our hearts and minds. Like Jacob, we wrestle with God (and expect others to do likewise), expecting a blessing but uncertain about the form it will take. We model this approach by asking a variety of questions about the Bible and faith, providing resources for biblical research and opportunities to put faith into action, listening carefully to what God has done and is doing in people's lives, and practicing hospitality and loving-kindness in our congregations.

### Books by Karen-Marie Yust

*Taught by God: Teaching And Spiritual Formation* with E. Byron Anderson (2006)

*Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* edited with Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenburg Sasso, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (2006)

*Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* with Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (2004)

*Attentive to God: Spirituality in the Church Committee* (2001)

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