



2006

The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by John Hendrix



Sunday school — “a priest at every elbow”

According to Carlyle Marney, one of the last of the Baptist prophets, the laity has been denied their heritage as priests. For centuries the church has refused to see the need to put “a priest at every elbow.” The clergy cannot give this power of priesthood where it belongs; laypersons must take it.

We might say the Sunday school is the laity’s unconscious rebellion against the clergy, returning to their rightful priesthood. No matter what else is going on in the church, once you close the door to the classroom it is all yours — with no one looking over your shoulder, a priest at every elbow.

“No one speaker has the answers; indeed, he may have naught but questions. The group answers (with mutters, or denial, or misunderstanding, or assent), and in the converse which is proclamation the whole church is involved in making persons while using its book, its minds, its converse, and its experiences in its Lord” (Marney, *Priests to Each Other*, p. 19). That sounds like the Sunday school to me.

While pondering all of this, an experience of 50 years ago kept coming back to me. I was in my first ministry position as the minister of music and youth at the First Baptist Church of Versailles, Mo. Being a rookie, I thought I should set a good example by attending an adult Sunday school class.

The time was 9:15, and I had 60 minutes before the choir would begin gathering at 10:15. After an opening assembly of singing, brief devotional thought and prayer requests, the men’s class gathered in a classroom with a table in the center of the room. The men left their offering envelopes (with the six-point record system) on a side table for the secretary, and most of them would throw in a dollar or two for the next class fish fry. All the while they were jostling with each other and pulling their chairs around the table — a priest at every elbow.

What happened next was a game of sorts.

After a little chit-chat, the teacher had a prayer and then suggested the rules of the game. He took a block of a scripture text and assigned a couple of verses to each person with the simple instructions to read the verses in a clear voice and make comments. Several interesting things happened:

- The text was read with different voices and heard from different voices.
- The lesson was text-specific, maybe no more than a dozen verses.
- The focus of attention was on the person speaking and the assigned text.
- The speakers directed their voices toward the text — not toward any one person.

The playing ground was flat; there were no hierarchies, and no one had the last word.

The teacher moved the process along, bringing the group back to focus on the text when the conversation began to wander. He made a few comments, holding their feet to the fire of the text. After all, he did have a teacher’s guide with some information that others did not have. This process continued, week after week, month after month. Visitors would come and observe a couple of times, but they could not stay on the sidelines. Eventually they were required to come to the table and perform: “Let’s see what you have.”

Read and make comments ... On the conscious level, this process seems simplistic, even archaic. Observing it, however, is enough to bring us to open-mouthed astonishment. Here is a person seeking meaning, a soul coming out of hiding, operating at multiple levels. We hardly recognize the imaginative work involved. It is an invisible process akin to the backstage labor of producing a play.

Here is that enchanted loom of the brain with millions of flashing shuttles weaving a meaningful pattern and a shifting harmony of subpatterns. It’s like the desktop computer except there is no actual desk, no saving to fold-

ers, no shuffling from one folder to another, no discarding files to the trash.

What we get is a performance. Here is the blending of millions of bits and pieces of neurons at lightning speed and leaving no clue of how they got there and how complex they are. Does all this work best unnoticed? Perhaps. But once it is noticed we might assume this person is speaking some truth and we must listen closely to discover it.

So here comes this group around the table, responding to a biblical text, not only from their minds, memory and imagination, but also from their bone marrow and the sweat glands in the palms of their hands. Is this worthy of our attention? What does this farmer, this county agent, this insurance salesman, this owner of the drug store on the corner of the county square, and this guy behind the counter in the hardware store down the street have to say to us? What we will get is the basic rudiments of performance, outward displays of what is known, a truth telling, a testimony and perhaps even a proclamation. If we don’t get it in Sunday school, where do we get it?

All of this seems to be circling back, like finding something we buried a long time ago. We might have lost it in that great eye-opening moment of critical reflection and the excessive confidence in the conscious mind. But then some disturbing quiet voices, the whispers of the inner teacher, elements of a long-forgotten past, images of a deeper self, come out of hiding. Some would call that a “willed naïveté,” a bending back to a childlike and unaffected simplicity on the other side of critical reflection, alive to paradox and contradiction. Loosening all that up connects with what went before in a re-enchancing, a reclaiming, a reforming, a re-envisioning, a remembering, a recalling, a recollecting.

We learn what we already know. We can go home again, not with ties that bind but ties that bend; not with ties that blind, but ties that blend. **BT**

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month’s page was written by John Hendrix, former professor of Christian education at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and currently the co-pastor with wife, Lela, of the University Baptist Church, Starkville, Miss.