

## **Message from the President: The Way I See It**

**Byron D. Klaus, D.Min.**

President and Professor of Intercultural Leadership Studies,  
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

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I attended seminary in the early 1970's. My focus of study was on what was then called Christian Education. Small groups were a cutting edge strategy and Sunday school was still the mainstay of most church's efforts at disciplining believers. There has been a lot of change in the last 35 years, not all for the better, when it comes to the developing of mature believers in the Church. Two books that were part of my reading in my seminary days are now out of print, but still carry significant impact. Lucien Coleman's *Why the Church Must Teach* was a strong biblical challenge to re-establish the priority of Jesus' foremost ministry during his time on earth: the ministry of the taught Word.

James Smart's *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* was already a classic when I attended seminary and the following words struck home to me. In 1954 Smart challenged the church to realize that its educational ministries (discipleship ministries) were effectively producing a type of Christian that would almost certainly find themselves helpless in the face of a world that denied Christian faith. Sunday school is viewed as ancient history by some and discipleship all too often gets a back seat to popular events that can draw big crowds. Even Garrison Keillor, noted in an edition of Lake Wobegon news, that he was concerned about the state of vacation bible school in the Lutheran church because Scripture

memorization had been replaced by Gospel clowns.

Beyond the dialogue about what methods are most effective in current discipleship models, we all need to take a deep breath and realize that our church, let alone our nation, not only is biblically illiterate, but is failing miserably in its connecting of faith and morality. Stephen Prothero, head of the department of religion at Boston University, has recently published the volume *Religious Literacy*. Prothero argues that Americans historically have had six crucial links to being knowledgeable of religious matters and integrating them into public life of our nation. Churches, schools, households, Sunday schools, colleges and Bible-tract societies were those historic links. Secular inroads into the life of Americans have come as churches starting focusing on a sentimental view of Jesus, rather than actively obeying His biblical directives. Sunday Schools became more concerned about novel moral lessons than biblical awareness. Prothero empathically suggests that the cost of not knowing about religion is too high in a world in which religion is so volatile.

I think the observations of Coleman and Smart are worth remembering in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My greatest fear is that the compelling quest

for the most up-to date methodology is trumping our deep need to ask some long term impact questions. Maybe it's a function of my age creeping upward, but being the purveyor of the latest new innovation simply doesn't peak my interest much any more. I've seen the latest strategies and ministry models come and go. In the larger framework,

followers of Jesus impacting their nation with lives radically committed to Jesus Christ have plenty of room for improvement. I commend this issue of *Encounter Journal* in its sterling effort to take most seriously the faithful continuation of the disciple making function of the Church.