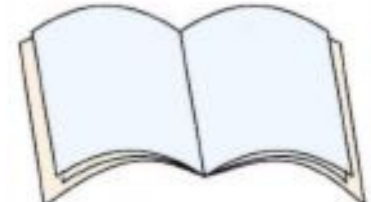
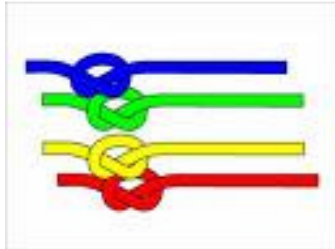


Knots, Nuts & New Space

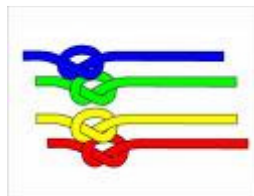


(Three theological models underpinning Christian mission with children and young people)

Lurking behind every Church, outreach project or Diocesan Board of Education is a theological model that frames the work commissioned. These models will arise from historical assumptions, psychological preferences or Biblical references but they are often hidden from view, difficult to access and not easily articulated. A means of discussing them is to identify three models that are able to be presented visually as a knot, a nut (or a seed) and a blank sheet of paper.

1)

The Knot



(presented as a knotted rope)

This represents original sin, namely the theological idea that the child or young person demonstrates aspects of the Fall. In other words they are "born in sin and shapen in iniquity" (Psalm 51 v 5).

This is a theological understanding particularly articulated by Augustine and later popularised by Calvin and expressed in Churches that emphasise the need for a child to be converted. Is this evangelism?

2)

The Nut



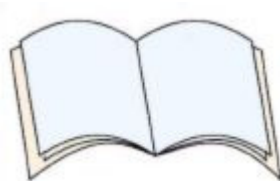
(presented as a nut or a seed)

This represents original blessing, namely the theological idea that the child or young person contains the seed of God within them because they were made in the image of God. In other words, "In Him we live, and move and have our being" (Acts 17 v 28).

This is a theological understanding particularly articulated by Karl Rahner and expressed by movements that emphasise the need for a child to be encouraged within a framework of faith. Is this nature?

3)

The New Space



(presented as a blank sheet of paper)

This represents the more secular idea that the child or young person is a blank sheet on which society is writing or on which we are making an imprint. It has also been called the "tabula rasa" beloved of the seventeenth century empiricist John Locke.

As a supposedly 'value-free' concept it has been cherished by humanistic organisations that emphasise the equality of all humans and the need for all to have the same opportunity. Is this education?

Exercise

- a) Initially reflect on your own immediate view as to the child's status (fallen, blessed or neutral) – 2 minutes.
- b) Discuss this with another.
In your discussion consider the ways in which each model reflects a biblical or a distinctively Christian way of thinking. What are the merits and pitfalls of each model? What model influences the way your organisation operates? - 10 minutes.
- c) Feedback your thoughts into a plenary session. Might such theological analysis cause you to re-focus your aims and objectives?

Comment

I have used this exercise with gatherings of headteachers, Church ministers (from different demoninations), a training session for diocesan directors of education and with Anglican ordinands. In each context it has allowed for a conversation that engages with theology and focuses onto how theology influences mission and ministry.

It is of considerable importance that people working with children and young people (as well as adults) should be able to distinguish between evangelism, nurture and education and to know what are the opportunities and drawbacks for each context. Similarly, rather than operating from one theological model that can be held as being truth, it is important for evangelists, ministers and teachers to be aware of different Biblical and theological strands.

Whilst it may not be possible to form a synthesis position between all three models, Christian theology can state that initially God created what was good and blessed and only subsequently did the fall occur, heralding the need for redemption. Therefore, if someone prefers the knot model (original sin), it might be pointed out (as John Calvin has) that the human was originally made in the mirror image of God and even if the mirror has been shattered, each shard still reflects something of the creator. Similarly, if someone prefers the nut model (original blessing) it needs to be stated that although this is a comforting metaphor, it does not consider the issues of sin or fallenness and therefore has an inadequate understanding of redemption. Finally, the blank sheet model (tabula rasa) is clearly a false construct if it presumes that there is no natural imbalance by genetic, gender, class or chance selection but it is of huge value if a wider, universal and statutory discussion is to be had concerning provision for children and young people.

So, take it, use it and do theology with people working in mission. It is all about being a reflective practitioner, finding the right model for the 21st Century.

Howard Worsley

Published in the Journal of Anglican Secondary School Headteachers, Sept 2008 Vol 21 pp24-26.