

How many of you attended Sunday school or some form of Christian education as a child? If you didn't, don't be embarrassed. But see how many hands went up. Some of us remember the attendance pins. The first was a pretty round pin in white and gold with the words of your denomination on it. For a second year of attendance you could attach a gold wreath. And for each succeeding year of attendance a little bar suspended from the pin.

Christian education from young children to your last breath is a vital part of our Christian faith, life and church. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the young church in Thessalonica, Greece, he underscored how critical it is to declare the gospel of God, that is to speak the word of God, to share the gospel of God, not only in words, but in actions and living. The Greek word translated as gospel in our Bible is *euangelion* from which evangelical derives. More simply and initially *euangelion* means good news. In fact, the English word gospel is a contraction from the old English God tale or God spell, the **message**, the good news about God, Christ and salvation.

The etymology of the word evangelism refers back to the **preaching** of the Gospel, the God tale, the good news. Hence we have the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John....the four Gospel writers, good news writers, telling the story of God, Christ and salvation.

But today, and for some time past, the word evangelical has taken on a specific, somewhat pejorative connotation of fundamentalist, someone who believes in a narrow, literal translation of the Bible. However, not all evangelicals are fundamentalists.

In colonial New England, education both Christian and secular was considered a pillar of a responsible and progressive society. Primmer schools were established almost as quickly as churches, and even colleges were quick to follow: Harvard in 1636, Yale in 1701, Brown in 1764, and Dartmouth in 1769. The first college for women, Mt. Holyoke in MA, was established by Congregationalists in 1837. But even before that, Oberlin College in Ohio was established by Presbyterians and Congregationalists in 1833 for men and women.

Where would we be as a society, indeed the USA, without Christian education? Perhaps some of you remember a time when some public schools opened the day with a prayer, the Lord's Prayer, or a reading from the Bible. In our more heterogeneous society where we understand the importance of the Constitutional separation of the institutions of church and state, we don't do so any more. **But that makes it imperative** to continue to nurture a strong Christian education program in our church. If not us, who? If not here, where? If not now, when?

Unfortunately, evangelical has come to express a faith and people that reject reason and a liberal education...liberal meaning the broad embrace of learning and inquisitiveness, the discipline of seeking scientific as well as theological truth.

Last Tuesday (10/18), Professors Karl Giberson, a former professor of physics, and Randall Stephens, an associate professor of history at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, MA, wrote an Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times* titled “The Evangelical Rejection of Reason.” Both men are evangelicals. They write, “We accept the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ and look to the Bible as our sacred book, though we find it hard to recognize our religious tradition in the mainstream evangelical conversation. Evangelicalism at its best seeks a biblically grounded expression of Christianity that is intellectually engaged, humble and forward-looking. In contrast, fundamentalism is literalistic, overconfident and reactionary.”

They continue by pointing out that fundamentalism appeals to certain evangelicals who have become convinced that their country has been overrun by a vast secular conspiracy; denial is the simplest and most attractive response to change. And so these professors point to such political persons as Herman Cain, Rick Perry and Michele Bachman as illustrations of evangelical anti-intellectualism who deny that climate change is real and caused by humans, while Rick Perry and Michele Bachman dismiss evolution as an unproven theory. They express their concern that among many evangelical leaders their rejection of knowledge amounts to what the evangelical historian Mark Noll described as an “intellectual disaster.”

Professor Noll called on his fellow evangelicals to repent for their neglect of the mind, decrying the abandonment of the intellectual heritage of the Protestant Reformation. “The scandal of the evangelical mind,” he wrote, “is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”

There are signs of change. Within the evangelical world, tensions have emerged between those who deny secular knowledge, and those who have kept up with it and integrated it with their faith. Almost all evangelical colleges, like Eastern Nazarene College, employ faculty members with degrees from major research universities...a conduit for knowledge from the larger world.

Perhaps you have heard of Dr. Tony Campolo or Jim Wallis, both evangelicals but not fundamentalists. **Dr. Compolo** is professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University, a Christian university outside Philadelphia, and a former faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the founder and president of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education.

Jim Wallis is an evangelical and founder of Sojourners, a nationwide network of progressive Christians working for justice and peace. Wallis also serves as editor of *Sojourners* magazine covering faith, politics and culture. One of his books has the catchy title God’s Politics; Why the Right gets it wrong and the Left doesn’t get it. Mark Noll and other evangelical scholars who are not fundamentalists recognize that the Bible does not condemn evolution and says next to nothing about gay marriage. They understand that Christian theology can incorporate Darwin’s insights and flourish in a pluralistic society.

Professors Giberson and Stephens, the authors of the Op-Ed piece, conclude with this paragraph. “Americans have always trusted in God, and even today atheism is little more than a quiet voice on the margins. Faith, working calmly in the lives of Americans from George Washington to Barack Obama, has motivated some of America’s finest moments. But when the faith of so many Americans becomes an occasion to embrace discredited, ridiculous and even dangerous ideas, we must not be afraid to speak out, even if it means criticizing fellow Christians.”

So...we have a Christian education ministry here that covers the range from nursery school through adulthood. We have a traditional Sunday school, youth groups, a Confirmation class and adult Christian education groups. If not us, who? If not here, where? If not now, when? We have a Director of Christian Education to run this ministry for our younger children. Debbie has been a great blessing to us for eleven years. Her faith, energy, commitment, compassion and knowledge have helped us to put forward this excellent ministry. Now we seek someone to succeed Debbie as we continue. We don’t seek a replacement. Each person is unique. We seek a successor to carry on this vital ministry.

You and I as a congregation need to give vigorous support of our time, our treasure and our talents to nurture this ministry and assure that we don’t falter in these challenging times, but in the fullness of our faith and commitment continue this work, begun with those earliest disciples, sling-shotted by the Protestant Reformation, nurtured by our Puritan ancestors and continued by successive generations of men and women in and beyond our congregations. To declare the Gospel of God, the evangel of God, the good news; to teach the great commandments, and to live as example the Christian faith!