

Faith Formation Is About Heart, Mind, and Action

By Dr. Dick Hardel

There was a time in my pastoral ministry that I was going to write a commentary on the Book of Romans in the New Testament. My undergraduate major was in Greek and my focus and passion through the seminary training was in New Testament exegesis. As I thought through an outline for my commentary, I quickly realized that I did not have much to say. In other words, my commentary would be very, very short. I will share my entire commentary with you in the following paragraph:

We are only recipients of a gracious God. The only action that we can take in the gift of faith is to say "Thank you." We say "Thank You" through loving acts of kindness that flow from our faith. God uses our loving acts of kindness so that other people can see that they, too, are recipients of a gracious God.

That's it! That is my entire commentary on the Book of Romans. It is short, but it is full of the grace of God through Christ Jesus as is the text of Romans 12: 2 that I was asked to use as the basis of this article written to Christian educators.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
(New Revised Standard Version)

St. Paul is saying that when one is baptized into Christ Jesus that Jesus Christ is to be Lord of every area of a person's life: heart, mind, and action. How a person lives in Christ Jesus does make a difference in faith and faith formation in others because the Holy Spirit is at work in that person's life and in the community and culture surrounding that person.

The practice of faith is practical theology. It is incarnational theology. God is at work in people. We are the body of Christ and should be at work in the world to transform culture.

In the book *Passing On The Faith* that I wrote with Dr. Merton Strommen, we defined faith as an affair of the heart that commits the mind and shows itself in good action. It is all three of those all the time, not one of the three once in a while. How we live from our faith is about faith formation and God is at work in us.

In some baptismal liturgies of mainline Protestants, upon the baptism of a child or adult, the parents, family, or sponsors are given a lighted candle symbolizing Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, that now shines in the life of the baptized child of God. Often the passage from Matthew 5:17 is stated: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven." In other words, we are recipients of a gracious God and we can only say, "Thank you." We say "Thank you" by our good actions. God uses our good actions so that others see that they, too, are recipients of a gracious God.

The sinful world wants to squeeze us into its mold and shape how we live, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ, into whom we have been baptized, immersed, is counter cultural. It transforms us inside out so that we live differently and so that others can see the grace of God at work.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah, states that individualism is one of the habits of the heart that dominates the American culture. When individualism guides a person there is a change and we are squeezed into the mold of the world. Being good becomes being good at things, and being right shifts from right relationships to having the right answers, utility

replaces duty, and self-expression replaces authority. We no longer see God. We lose the focus of the third article of The Apostles' Creed—I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints... We think it is about us.

Tex Sample, in *US Lifestyles in Mainline Churches*, shares how the American culture's focus on individualism has developed a self-fulfillment ethic that is the direct opposite of the Christian ethic of self-denial, sacrifice.

The emphasis on individualism has created a culture of narcissism. With no interest in the future because narcissism has no interest in the past, the culture loses its succession of the generations and its motivation to effectively pass on faith to the next generation. Squeezed into this mold we no longer pass on faith to our children and prepare them to live in society in a manner so others can see that God in them.

St. Paul urges us to live a life counter to the culture. Don't conform, but be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit work in us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In her book *Practicing Passion*, Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean powerfully states that transformational ministry into which we are called to make a difference in the world as uncles, aunts, grandparents, godparents, brothers, sisters, moms, dads, and Christian educators.

Christ's Passion transforms adolescent desire into sacrificial love that finds expression in the witness of the church and is made visible in the practices of Christian community that shape human relationships according to a "cruciform pattern" of self-giving love. The Holy Spirit employs these relationships to infuse the world with Christ redeeming Passion. Jesus enters the world in these practices again and again — only this time, through us. (page 15).

God is at work in our good actions of thanksgiving so that others see that they, too, are recipients of a gracious God. The Light of the World shines in us so that others see God. It is not about us. It is always about a gracious God at work in us.

Romans chapter 12 shows that God wants to be involved in our actions as well as our thinking and our believing. A major task of Christian educators is to train people to use their gifts in accordance to the faith given by a gracious God. Christian educators are to help uncles, aunts, godparents, neighbors, friends, grandparents, brothers, sisters, moms, and dads practice the faith in their daily life and see themselves as Christian educators in partnership with the ministry of the congregation so that others can see God and so that we pass on faith in Jesus Christ to the next generations.

At the former Youth & Family Institute we suggested that congregations offer intergenerational training events for parents and other care-giving adults to learn skills in nurturing faith in the home and daily family activities. We ask congregations also sponsor Faith Milestones celebrations in the corporate worship services to connect God with more milestones in a person's life.

The intergenerational training events would help families connect to God in daily life through four key faith practices (Developed by Dr. David Anderson):

Four Key Faith Practices

1. Caring Conversations

Discussion about what is going on in life and where is God

Suggested Resources: *FaithTalk® With Children* (available at www.faithwellmt.com); *Taking Faith Home* (available at www.milestonesministry.org)

2. Devotions

Sharing prayers at mealtime, telling Bible stories and prayers at bedtime, singing songs of faith, reading Scripture together

Suggested Resources: *Scripture Talk* or *Heart Ignite* (available at www.peerministry.org); *Taking Faith Home* (available at www.milestonesministry.org)

3. Service

Doing loving acts of kindness as a family to make a difference in the quality and longevity of the lives of others

Suggested Resource: *Best of Building Assets Together: Favorite Group Activities that help Youth Succeed* (Available at www.searchinstitute.org); *The Busy Family's Guide to Volunteering* by Jenny Friedman (available at www.amazon.com)

4. Rituals & Traditions

Naming, gifting, and blessing special gifts of God shared in, with and through the family

Suggested Resources: *For Everything A Season: 75 Blessing For Daily Life*, or *Milestones Blessing Bowl* (available at www.milestonesministry.org)