



MINISTRY WITH WORKING CLASS AMERICANS

The Craft of Discipleship

Tex Sample

I worked my way through college in the oil field. One day we were laying a pipeline. The gang pusher, the leader of the gang, told me to give a try at “stabbing pipe,” something I had not done before. I had to aim my joint of pipe so that it would screw straight into the collar of a pipe propped up on the board. These pipe are two inches in diameter, twenty feet long and weigh two hundred pounds, so I had to get the threads lined up just right while wrestling with this pipe that outweighed me by twenty pounds. It didn’t help that the pipe bends a little making it even more difficult to line up exactly. Further, I was using a small chain wrench. You turn the wrench with one hand and hold the pipe in line with the other.

I was obviously inept and struggling. As I wrestled that pipe, Shucks Burt, a trucker in the gang who reveled in my incompetence was laughing and stated the issue with no little accuracy.

“Hey, college boy, there’s a right way to do that and all the other ways are wrong and your opinion don’t mean a damned thing.”

The entire gang collapsed in laughter.

This remains my most vivid experience with the craft tradition of knowing. The longer I live the more important it has become, not only in connecting pipe and things of a laboring kind but in academic thought as well. It is a wonderful critique of notions that we must first get our ideas together and then go and apply them. The craft tradition takes a radically different approach.

Perhaps the **first** thing to be said is that if you are going to lay

pipe, you do not start with your opinion or some universal notion of reason or some general kind of knowledge. While no one begins to lay pipe “from scratch,” nevertheless, to lay pipe you have to pay attention to pipe. You have to know weight and balance and aim. You have to have the feel and the practiced use of wrenches, and so on. As Alasdair MacIntyre has said, in the craft tradition of knowing, our minds are not adequate to the task until we have conformed ourselves to the objects on which we are focused.

So it is also that in the life of the church, one does not begin with generalized notions of religious knowledge. Karl Barth rigorously argued that God made Self a Subject in Jesus Christ as a revelation of the character of God. Any true knowledge we have comes as the gift of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is the free act of God making Self known as Subject in Christ. We do not know how to know God conceptually on our own

terms. Knowledge we have of God in human terms is knowledge from the world in Barth’s understanding. Hence, I argue that in the working class church we “begin” with Jesus Christ and his centrality for the church and for our life together. To be the church, the central focus of our attention is Jesus Christ. To know Christ is to be formed by him. In the language of craft, Christ is our “mentor;” to know Christ is to apprentice with and for him.

The **second** thing to be said about a craft tradition is that the stress is not on knowing about but rather on knowing how to do

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things. Again, this is an approach to knowing that makes enormous connections with working class jobs. Marie Dudley in her study of autoworkers found that a person's value had little to do with their "position" or educational achievements, but rather that "individual ability is demonstrated by what people do—by their actions rather than words, by deeds rather than fancy degrees, and most important, by the tangible results of their labor." Furthermore, the fact that one must be formed by pipe in order to lay it has fascinating connections to Barth's understanding that if we are to know Christ, we must be formed by him. It is a connection open to a wide range of narrative witness with working people.

The **third** thing to say about the craft tradition of knowing is the importance of skills. Most working class jobs require skills, and skills require practice. While learning to stab pipe can be done after a few tries, it is but one in an enormous range of skills required to work well in the oil field: being able to operate around and inside oil tanks, maintaining giant compressors that pump gas back into the ground, cleaning complicated machinery or repairing it, replacing ball bearings in a large number of moving parts, knowing how to work and be safe, the arduous range of skills for working on an oil well drilling rig and so on.

So it is in the faith. There are many such skills, of course, but I will illustrate this with just one example, the skill of reading the Bible. My father finished the fifth grade when he had to quit school to help support his family because his father was murdered. He continued a commitment to self-education that enabled him to "read, write, and do his numbers." But higher education was a threatening thing to him. He was too concerned about his own "lack of learning" when around people who had been to the university. When he was in his nineties, he took a course on drafting at a community college. According to the professor, Dad was making a grade of B well into the semester, but he was so intimidated by being in a college class that the pressure was too much, and he quit.

Yet thirty years before that he drafted and built a creosote plant almost single handedly. My uncle bought the machinery to set up the plant, and my father who had never worked in that kind of production, nevertheless went off visiting such plants in Mississippi, taking with him a pile of brown paper bags. He went from plant to plant drawing plans on those brown paper bags and went back to Learned, Mississippi, and built a creosote plant that worked! To be sure, it took false starts and practice, most of them on the job, but he built and then learned how to creosote lumber. It was, he said, "just a bunch of things I had to learn but I never had any question that I could do it."

All his life he loved the Bible. Even when I was in grammar school, he would ask me to come in at night and read the text to him. He especially loved the Psalms and the Gospels. He would

have loved to study the Bible more formally, but it was too threatening to him except in Sunday school, where he did not have to "perform." I wonder what would have happened if someone—me, for example—had told him that it was just a "bunch of skills" like building and running a creosote plant and that he could do it on "brown paper bags."

A **final** thing, which is all we have space for here, is the connection between the craft tradition of knowing and the role of

apprenticeship learning. Any semi-skilled or skilled trade requires apprenticeship. It may seem that my father belies apprenticeship learning in his building of and supervising the creosote plant, but he had worked in a wide variety of jobs around machinery, tanks, pumps, gauges, etc., so he had done a great deal of apprenticeship learning directly relevant to a creosote operation.

Likewise, life in the church is the learning of a great many skills: worship, prayer, Bible reading, confession, thanksgiving, servanthood, caring

for others, living peaceably, witnessing, Eucharistic practice, being just, and many others. To approach these practices as skills to be learned through apprenticeship would be a very helpful way to address working people. I noticed as a pastor of a working class congregation that the Scouting program drew a good many people who would not go to worship or Sunday school. After no little observation of this pattern, I came to believe that one of the reasons was the merit badge approach to learning in Scouts. This program was oriented toward learning different skills and doing so through apprenticeship to the Scout leaders. It had a direct draw to working class youth, as well as to their leaders.

I have often wondered what it would be like to develop an entire discipleship effort around the development of skills in the church and the larger community and to do so with mentors working with the students. Also, this would need to be done precisely in the language of skills and apprenticeship so that the connections between working class life and the work of the church are direct, indigenous, and faithful. □

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TEX SAMPLE is guest editor of this issue of *Circuit Rider*. He is Robert B. and Kathleen Rogers Professor Emeritus of Church and Society at Saint Paul School of Theology and is the author of several books. His most recent book is *Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus* (Abingdon Press, 2006). See Easy Order Form at www.circuitrider.com to order.