

An Everyday Philosophy of Christian Education

Some truths are so obvious within Jewish and early Christian thought that they are hardly mentioned within Scripture. People today question their validity or importance because of the lack of Scriptural page-space allocated to them, not realising that much of Scripture was written to address issues of need in the immediate culture. Where there is minimal mention it cannot be assumed that this equates to unimportance, as it can simply indicate that this particular truth seemed to have been grasped by the people at the time. When we read God's Word we need to hunt for the assumptions present within the culture. One such assumption within Jewish and early Christian thought was the absolute responsibility of parents to bring up their children in the ways of the Lord.

Many of us ask the 'schooling' question without beginning at the beginning. Our starting position is 'what school should I send Bobby to?' Inherent within this question is a huge assumption. The assumption is that all people must send their children to school somewhere. It is a 'given' within our society. But why? Does Scripture tell us to send out kids to school? Scripture tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Scripture tells us to train up our children in the ways of the Lord. Scripture tells us that we parents are responsible for the training our children receive. If we really took that mandate seriously we would at least question the assumption that all children must be packed off to a school at all, least of all the local state-funded, human-focused, secular training establishment down the road. So let's begin at the beginning by looking at what Scripture says about the training of our children and perhaps expose some misplaced presuppositions.

Old Testament.

The father was the head of the family and had responsibility for the spiritual, material and social well-being of his family. Men were prohibited from marrying non-Israelite women to protect the spiritual inheritance of the children from foreign religious practice. Solomon is a tragic example of failure in this regard and the resulting devastation in the nation testifies to the insidious influence of compromise. Exodus 12:24-27 shows how Israelite men were commanded to teach their children the ways of the Lord through partaking in the Passover ceremony and through answering questions that the ceremony would bring to the minds of the children. The Great Commandment given in Deuteronomy 6:5 is to

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'

This is followed by an instruction regarding all of the commandments in verses 6-9;

'These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.'

These are the incidental moments in a day, the equivalent to discussing biblical ideas as we drive our children to soccer practice.

'Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.'

This is intentional, overt teaching about God. In fact if it isn't a mandate for God-saturated education then I am a fried goose. Notice the reason for this teaching is stated back in verse 2.

'.....so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live, by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.'

Proverbs 22:6 teaches the Israelites;

'Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.'

Proverbs 13:24 confirms that this training includes and necessitates parental discipline of children. Parents were responsible for the training of their children. This was obvious and inescapable within Israelite culture and it provides the backdrop for the New Testament. Parental responsibility for educating children is not frequently stated, not because it was unimportant but because it was assumed.

New Testament.

Ephesians 6:4 commands fathers to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord and in 6:1 children are reminded to obey their parents, harking back to the Jewish roots of Deuteronomy. In Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy 3:10-17 he expounds on the value of Scripture in teaching (3:16). He also highlights the benefit of learning the Scriptures at a young age (3:15) from people who are known and trusted (3:14). This is deliberately contrasted with the false teaching that feeds a worthless knowledge leading to depravity (3:6-9).

If the Old Testament warned against mixed marriages leading children astray, the New Testament takes a slightly different approach, still with a focus on God's people remaining in purity and being careful to avoid positions or associations of compromise. Instead of a pure Jewish race the New Testament speaks of a pure church. Instead of avoiding mixed marriages the New Testament warns against

mixed messages! In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul refers to the Corinthian Church exposing itself deliberately to false teaching.

'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers'

This passage is often applied to marriage, but that is not the original context. Neither is Paul commanding that Christians separate themselves out from the world in communal isolation. He makes this very clear in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10. What then is he actually saying? Paul is taking exception to the Corinthian Christians deliberately subjecting themselves to teaching that is not in line with the Christian gospel. The church was sponsoring bigwig high-flyers who were endorsed by other important people, but who preached a false gospel. They were not to be entertained. Their acceptance as teachers within the Christian church would result in confusion in the minds of hearers who would blindly accept everything they had to say and be led astray. Paul's command was to not let the true gospel be preached from the pulpit one service and a false gospel preached the next. This is unequal yoking.

Do we see a parallel here? If this is the approach Paul takes to false teaching within the church, what would he say about us deliberately, knowingly choosing to let the humanistic state educate our children? Is it much of an interpretive leap to suggest that when Christian parents send our children to be educated under a humanist mindset - yes the NZ Curriculum reads a bit like a humanist manifesto - we are indulging in the same unequal yoking that Paul was worried about? Perhaps it is an 'inconvenient truth' that we would rather ignore. Why do we give our children to the State to be taught humanism, when we are charged with teaching them the ways of the Lord?

Our mandate as Christians, citizens of God's Kingdom, is not to send our kids to school. It is to train up our kids in the ways of the Lord. Simply put it's like this....

Christian Schooling might be optional.

Christian Education of our kids is essential.

If Christian Education is essential, the next question to face is how do we best provide it for our kids? The mandate is clear, but is there one way that fits all families? Is there a guaranteed method that will always turn out good Christian citizens by the time they are 18? From where I sit it seems that there are four common approaches taken by Christian parents. The first is the 'don't worry be happy' approach. The second is 'rebuttal and replacement' - teaching Christian truth from home and making sure the kids also get regular quality Christian teaching from Church and/or youthgroup to counter the humanistic ideology. The third option is homeschooling, where all that is taught is done so through a

Christian worldview, using Christian resources. The fourth option is Christian schooling, where parents entrust much of the instruction of the children in the ways of the Lord to teachers who use a range of resources but are careful to teach according to a Christian worldview. It is useful to take a closer look at each approach.

1. Don't worry be happy. Dualism!

Dualism divides life into dual realms or dual realities operating separately, at the same time without being connected. Christian dualists tend to divide life into the secular realm and the spiritual or sacred realm. The secular realm is by necessity spiritually impotent and includes such disciplines as mathematics, science, technology and most skills and academic subjects taught at school. Hence education generally is seen as a purely secular event, immune to spirituality. The spiritual realm consists of private and personal faith and the ethics that stem from it. A dualist can therefore happily send his or her kids off to a state school because under this way of thinking the curriculum of a secular school is spiritually / religiously neutral. Matters pertaining to faith and Christianity can be adequately taught from home and from church. The spiritual and the secular realities seem so disconnected from each other that the concept of Christian education appears unnecessary and even a bit silly. People with this mindset who still choose Christian schools for their children generally do it because they like the protected environment and the high academic standards.

However there is no division between secular and spiritual realms. Education is highly spiritual. For example when I studied at a certain training college I was told by a lecturer that Social Studies was important as a subject primarily because it upheld secular humanism. How religiously neutral does that sound? Secular humanism is all about the death of 'God' as a concept and the elevation of humanity as our own saviour. The reality is that there are no 'neutral' subjects. All truth is God's truth but every fact is communicated with an agenda that is generally not stated but is either Christian or anti-Christian. Christian teachers in state schools seek to promote Christian thinking and they generally do a fantastic job, but their wings are clipped by an overtly humanistic curriculum document that they are legally bound to teach to. The agenda within the NZ Curriculum is that humanity is accountable to itself, that we are highly evolved animals who need to work together to improve our planet. We are our own saviour and our heaven is a utopian earth, improved through technology and through our own evolution (See Charles Colson, *How Now Shall We Live*, Tyndale House, pp 148-149). A quick look at the new NZ curriculum (try pages 8 to 10) will show that state education in this country is more about producing a certain type of person than it is about producing 'neutral' knowledge that can be used by individuals at their own discretion (See Michael Drake's article in Investigate magazine November 2009 pp 34-41 '*Children of the State*').

If dualism is rejected and the spiritual loading of the NZ curriculum is taken seriously, the idea of educational neutrality ends up in tatters and the 'don't worry be happy' parents would do well to take another look.

2. Rebuttal and Replacement. State School plus Christian input from home and church.

There is an acknowledgement among Christian parents not suffering from 'dualism disease' that the curriculum is humanistic and that there are other ungodly influences from school that could be harmful to the developing Christian worldview of our children. The approach usually taken is one of deliberate rebuttal and replacement with biblical truth. Erroneous ideas that surface at school are used as a springboard from which to teach biblical truth. This sounds excellent, but the problem is that much of what is absorbed is subliminal and is not processed knowingly by students. Changes in the NZ Curriculum in recent years are only increasing the deliberate promotion of humanistic ideals (Ibid).

Another issue with the 'rebuttal and replacement' approach is one of saturation over time. If we see the same advertisement enough times it gets into our heads. It sticks whether we want it to or not. Kids are at school under the humanistic influence for about 6 or more hours each day, not including homework, school camps, that extends the influence. I hear people counter with 'but aren't we supposed to be in the world as salt and light, not shut away from it in our little hothouses?' That is an excellent question. Our lives need to be lived in the world as salt and light, in the world but not of the world, in contact with people, but maintaining our distinctiveness from underlying motivations and guiding paradigms of the world. The problem is that kids need to first learn to be salt and light before we put them 'in the world'. No reasonable nation enlists 5-year-old children into its army because they aren't strong enough to fight. Expecting our littlies to be immersed in secular culture and not lose the 'saltiness' that they haven't even properly acquired yet is pretty hopeful. Teaching them the ways of the Lord needs to happen while they are young. Is this an isolated hothouse? Yes. Plants grow best if they start their lives in hothouses and then are gradually introduced to the 'real world'.

'Rebuttal and replacement' if it is to be effective takes a lot of time and a huge amount of spiritual discernment. For every attack on Christianity that a young child is aware of at school there are probably ten other forms of attack that are not even detected. We all know about evolution and how it opposes God's unique role as creator. That is obvious. What about the subtleties of the Social Studies Curriculum with its liberalisation of values and tolerance of everything except intolerance itself? This secular humanist philosophy underpins everything and it is

a huge challenge for a few bedtime discussions and youth-group meetings to rebut and replace with any adequacy.

With that said, state schools do need suitable enthused and equipped Christian students who will wholeheartedly share the gospel. My suggestion is that parents choose carefully the season and the circumstances in which they send their child or children into enemy territory. Some excel, some survive, but many struggle and are swamped. In some cases a state school is the only practical option due to financial pressures. God knows! Fervent prayer, a good listening ear, plenty of time and a good church and / or youthgroup are good safeguards. Commissioning young people to go into secular schools as missionaries is a positive approach if either there is no alternative or if there is a clear call.

3. Home-Schooling.

This method is probably the most biblically pure way to train up children. There is no delegation of responsibility to others. Parents take full responsibility and do the job themselves, choosing their resources, their examples, their teaching methods and their activities. There are homeschool networks and good books available and for those who have the skills it is a brilliant way to train up their children. The difficulty is that most parents are not confident to teach both the biblical worldview and all the necessary subject matter in such a way that students can gain state qualifications by the time they reach senior years. Whether we like it or not we live in a world of competition. Students compete for qualifications and we want to see them achieve to their best. Many parents are daunted by the task of teaching, and this is understandable because teaching is not just a skill but also a gift that some have and many do not have. Socialisation can also be an issue for homeschooled children, with children being isolated from others of their own age, although families can agree to combine for various activities on a regular basis, mitigating this problem.

4. Christian Schooling.

A Christian school seeks to blend the best of homeschooling with a classroom environment. Christian schools take seriously the mandate to bring up our children in the ways of the Lord and so they seek to partner with parents, acknowledging that parents are entrusting the school with this huge responsibility. It is very important to remember that a Christian school is not first and foremost a 'school' as defined by the state. It is first and foremost a servant of parents who want assistance to train up their children. Comparing state schools and Christian schools is comparing apples and oranges. They have different objectives and functions. A Christian school sees Christian education as its primary objective. Second to this but also important is the aim to train children to do well in the qualifications system

on offer. It is a credit to Christian schools that they often achieve excellent academic results, because this is generally not their primary objective.

A certain amount of similarity between Christian school classrooms and state school classrooms can be observed, but this is a similar looking shoot stemming from an entirely different root. The rule of Pythagoras is $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ whether the class is learning maths in a state school or a Christian school. The difference is in the motivation behind the teaching. A Pythagorean triangle shows the order of creation, the patterns that God has established and the 'discoverability' of our universe. In a secular classroom there might be a degree of fascination, but the emphasis will be on how to harness this law and make it work to our advantage in technology. This utilitarianism is a chief motivation in the whole state school system. Education is primarily about getting trained to be able to get a good job, to be able to make lots of money. Christianity sees our training as training to serve and money as important, but not central to our service. In some subject areas the difference is more overt. History can either further the humanistic quest or can highlight the hand of God. Science can either promote Darwinian views on the life evolving through chance and sufficient time, or it can provoke wonder at the creator of our privileged planet. Whether the Christian school lessons appear to converge with their state counterparts or whether they are markedly different, the issue is that the former are taught from a Christian worldview whereas the latter are fundamentally humanistic.

The other thing that people compare unwisely and unfairly is the cost of Christian education versus the cost of state education. The taxes that we all pay help to fund the humanistic education system. If we choose to bring up our children in the ways of the Lord by enrolling them at a Christian school, then we must pay for it. State integrated Christian schools receive full government funding and in return are required to teach the complete NZ Curriculum. Independent schools receive minimum state funding and can only operate through charging fees to cover teacher salaries and other educational costs

Immanuel Christian School seeks to train up young people in mind, body and spirit to be salt and light in our secular culture. Our vision is that when students finish their education at Immanuel they can engage with contemporary culture as salt and light, equipped to put their years of biblical training and discipleship into practice. We achieve excellent academic results as we teach the core material that state schools teach, but we teach it from a uniquely Christian perspective, with all lessons pointing students towards God as creator, sustainer, Lord and one to whom humanity will one day give account.

Christian decline and Revival

It is no secret that Christianity is in serious decline in the western world. New Zealand is no exception. I wonder if the increasing secularisation of our country has anything to do with the dearth of Christian discernment and biblical thinking in the church today? We are no longer distinctive. We are no longer salt and light. Too often we are a loveless sounding gong on moral issues and an object of mockery when yet another high profile leader falls into sin. If Christians of today had experienced Christian education in their childhood would our Christian community today be stronger? What if Christian families twenty or thirty years ago had truly talked about God's ways when we sat at home and when we walked along the road, when we lay down and when we got up. What if we had tied them as symbols on our hands and bound them on our foreheads, written them on the doorframes of our houses and on our gates? Maybe Christianity would be stronger than it is now. We cannot change history but we can act in the present to change the future.

If today's Christians will face the challenge of training up our children in the ways of the Lord, maybe we can help to turn Christianity around in New Zealand. It is not easy and it is not cheap either. Anybody taking Christian education seriously needs to count the cost and make a commitment to it. Sometimes we feel that we cannot afford it, yet the reality is that as a Christian community we cannot afford not to do it! Evangelism of adults is difficult. Minds seem to set like concrete with age. It is much easier to mold them when they are young, so why do we give the state the best years of our kids' lives, when they are most easily influenced and most readily shaped. It is a tragedy, but it need not stay that way.

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Christian Education is essential.

Immanuel Christian School exists to serve today's Christians by educating tomorrow's. We will delight in discussing the possibilities of Christian education with parents.

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