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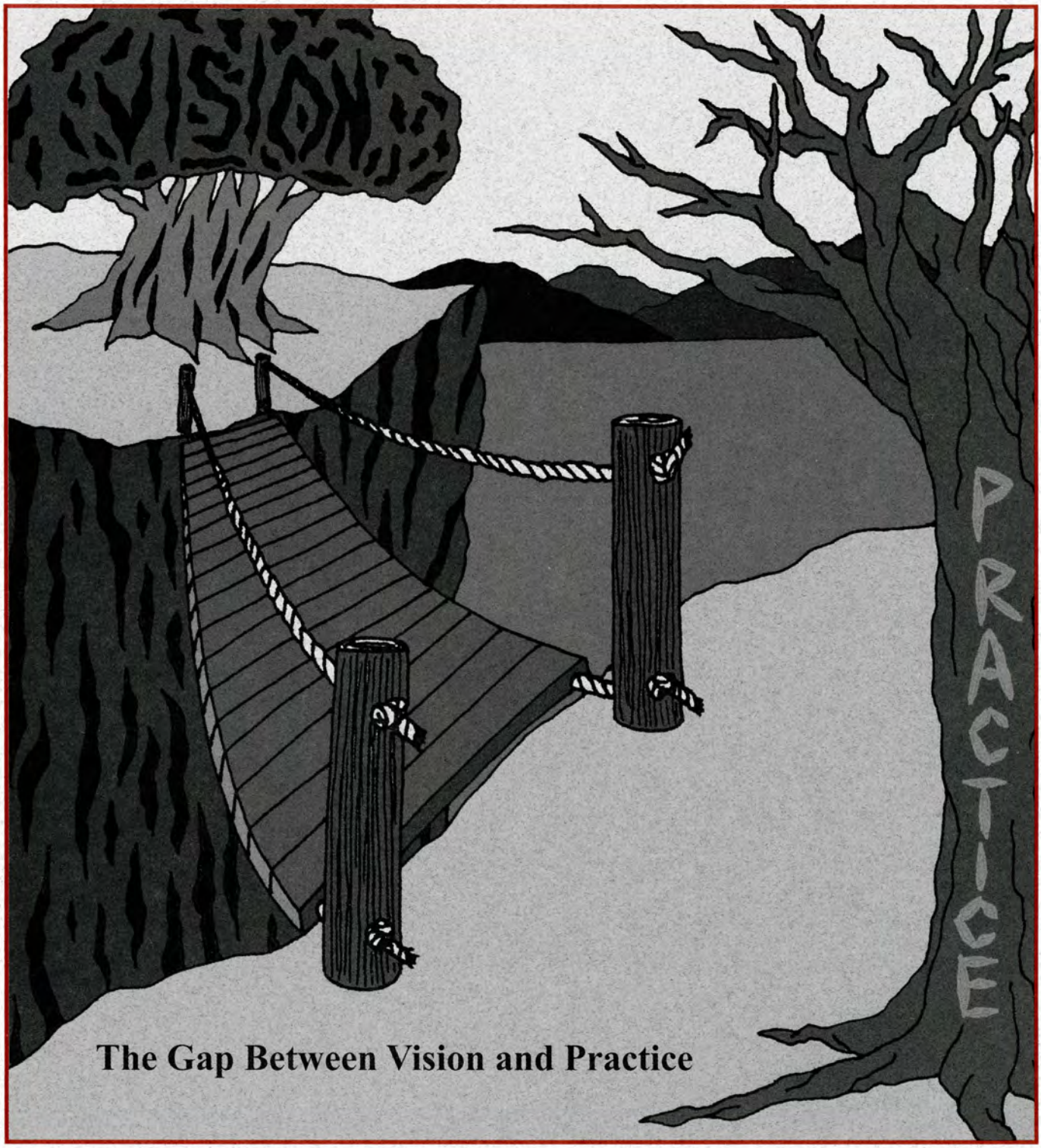
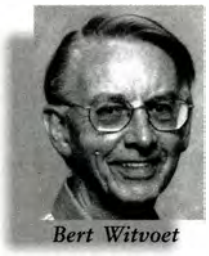


The Gap Between Vision and Practice

Editorial


Bert Witvoet

No Vision Without Risks

When educators use the term "vision," they have something else in mind than the visions seen by Daniel, the Israelite noble who rose to prominence in the courts of Babylon. Daniel saw things in his dreams that foretold the future. His visions were highly symbolic and needed interpretation. But they pointed to a coming reality and were God's way of foretelling events that were to come. The visions did not originate with Daniel; they were sent by God and they appeared in his dreams.

When educators talk about "vision" they also look to the future, but they themselves are doing the shaping of the vision while they are wide awake. And the vision that results from their thinking is not so much a prophecy of things to come as a statement of what they would like to see happen in the future. Visionary educators are educators who realize that the current system they work in can be improved. Their vision sets before them a preferred reality, a reality that will do greater justice to the needs of learners … they hope.

Dutiful practitioners

Not all educators are visionary. Many teachers accept for what it is the system they work in (the curriculum, the school's organization, the testing and grading system, the age-determined groupings), and they try to do their best to realize the goals that are set before them. They are good practitioners of their craft, and they may well be the recipients of awards for excellent teaching. But they are not necessarily people with vision. They make the current system they teach in work as well as it can possibly work. But they do not spend much time asking themselves where the weaknesses are and what would happen if they radically changed the way they do education.

They lose no sleep over such questions as: Does how I test and grade my students produce cultural misfits for a society that practices the survival of the fittest? Is the way I teach my subject and set expectations conducive to having students accept full responsibility for their learning? Am I insisting that my students be authentic and disciplined about the way they express their thoughts and feelings? Am I sheltering them from the reality of evil in education, politics and economics? What really is the end product I have in mind when a student graduates from our school?

A radical reshaping

So far I have not made the discussion specific to Christian education. What I have written applies to all educators, regardless of their worldview and beliefs. For Christian educators the question becomes even more urgent.

Christians are expected to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. What we know about this kingdom is that it is not of this world. The implications of that other-worldliness are vast. For Christian schools it means that we can't imitate what this-worldly schools do and are. Seeking first the Kingdom of God puts us on a collision course with the establishment and even with Christians who, when it comes to shaping school curriculum, seek first the kingdom of this world. All the vision statements about making students fit into their society and preparing them for a successful career must go out the window. Christ sets before us a preferred future — a vision statement, you might say — that goes to the root of all our assumptions about education.

What if our classrooms take as their vision statement the Beatitudes: Blessed are — the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted because of righteousness? And what if that poverty in spirit results in a grading system that rewards effort rather than result? And what if that mourning grips the hearts of teachers and students because people are dying of AIDS in Africa? And what if that purity of heart acknowledges the sins of consumerism, the pride of nationalism, the worship of celebrities? And what if that righteousness expresses itself in a strong sense of social, economic and environmental justice? And what if our peacemaking forbade us to put our trust in weapons and missiles and urged us into the direction of prayer and works of mercy? And what if our hunger and thirst for righteousness made us realize that the choice is not between the political left and right but between political justice and injustice?

Christian schools are called to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Salt flavors and preserves a society and its culture, both of which would otherwise be in danger of breaking down. Light pierces the darkness that has fallen on our world. But in order for Christian schools to play that role, they have to be distinctly different from their environment. If the salt loses its saltiness, it's no longer good for anything. You may as well throw it away and save yourself a lot of money and effort. If the light is placed under a private religion bushel, it does not enable others to find their way to the Father in Heaven.

No Utopia

Of course, there will always be a gap between our vision and our practice. I'm not a Utopian. I'm not asking Christian educators to *build* the Kingdom of heaven. Just to seek it. With Robert Browning I say, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" In that statement we find both a reaching for the

vision and a realization that the grasp will fall far short of that vision. Yet, the poet's advice is clear: stand on tiptoe, reach and almost lose your balance as you stretch out your arm and close your hand on what ultimately is obtainable in a sinful world. A Christian educator's reach should exceed her grasp, or what's the Kingdom of heaven for? There's no room for pragmatism here. No room for idealism. But plenty of room for working out your educational task in fear and trembling.

Visionary teaching is risky. You may be persecuted. You *will* be persecuted. People will insult you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Jesus. If you invite Jesus into your school, he's the kind of guest that will comfort you as well as make you uncomfortable.

Which reminds me of a sermon I preached four years ago. It was entitled, "Jesus as Houseguest." Here's how the sermon started:

A troubling request

The other day, Alice and I got an e-mail letter. It was a very short letter. It simply said, "I would like to stay at your house for a week. Can you put me up?" The letter was signed: Jesus of Nazareth. Alice and I looked at each other. What could we say? You don't say No to Jesus. So we e-mailed him back, saying he was more than welcome. Everybody knows the e-mail address, right? Jesus@heaven.com.

But after we had clicked on the button "Send," we looked at each other and wondered whether this was going to be such a good idea. We had just read the Sermon on the Mount for devotions, and in it we read that Jesus wanted his disciples to be perfect. "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." Now under the best of circumstances, we always get a little nervous when we have guests over at the house. Is the house clean enough? Is there enough food? But to have Jesus over — a seemingly perfectionist guest — well that's a tall order. That's enough to make a body faint!

But then I said to Alice, "Let's not worry about the appearance of the house and about food and drink, because Jesus never considers that very important. Jesus is more interested in doing his Father's will, and he told his followers that life is more important than food and the body more important than clothes. So let's relax, because when Jesus says he wants us to be perfect, he's not talking about our being a perfect host. He is more concerned about how we live our lives."

Well, Alice felt a lot better. But no sooner had I put Alice's mind to rest, then *I* began to get worried. If Jesus is going to spend a week in our house, I thought to myself, and he wants us to be perfect in how we live our lives, then I am not so sure I am going to enjoy myself during that week. Just imagine, Jesus going through our house and noticing that we have two television sets, two bathrooms, a computer, a sound system, four radios, four telephones, one of them a portable. And that's only our possessions. Then he's going to listen in on our conversations, see the books and newspapers I read, see me watch television programs like "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire." And he will notice that my prayers are a bit meager. What if I get mad at Alice or I complain about the food? What if he hears me call my neighbor Bill a fool? What if he sees me putting only a few measly dollars in a church envelope?

"Suppose we tell him that he shouldn't come because our son is getting married and we are planning to buy a cow?" I said to Alice. "That won't work," she says, "because he has heard those lousy excuses before."

Just when I was going to send another e-mail to Jesus in which I honestly told him that I was very uncomfortable having him stay at our house for a full week, I woke up.

Phew! It was only a dream. But what a dream! And as I reflected on my dream, I began to realize that there was a kernel of truth in my dream. It's wonderful to invite Jesus into our heart, but would we like him to stay at our house? For a full week?

I might ask the same thing of Christian educators. Are you sure you would like Jesus to be a guest in your classroom for a full week? And that after having made the Beatitudes your vision statement?

Bert Witvoet

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Bringing Your School's Vision To Life in the Classroom or Watch Where You're Going!

by May Drost

May Drost (wdrost@ebtech.net) is a retired teacher of English, who this past fall gave the following speech to the teachers of the Woodstock District of OCSTA in London, Ont. She and her husband, Wayne, live in Sarnia, Ont.

"School," said Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in 1969, "is the one institution in our society that is inflicted on everybody, and what happens in school makes a difference for good or ill.... One way of representing the present condition of our educational system is as follows: It is as though we are driving a multi-million dollar sports car screaming 'faster, faster' while peering fixedly into the rearview mirror. It is an awkward way to tell where we are, much less where we are going, and it has been sheer dumb luck that we have not smashed ourselves to bits–so far" (*Teaching As a Subversive Activity*, 13).

What these two social critics said of public schooling in North America 34 years ago still seems generally true. In the introduction to his book *Between Memory and Vision*, Calvin Professor Steven Vryhof says that people and organizations involved with public schooling have put out "streams of position papers and press releases" which endlessly repeat the same old ideas for reform until many of us "do believe that fancier technology, and longer days, newer text books and higher pay, smaller classes and better teacher training, are indeed the educational issues of the day" (Vryhof, Introduction, xiii).

Flip flop strategy

My own experience bears this out. Since 1963, when I started teaching, governments have increased funding or withheld it, class sizes have increased and then been reduced, special programs for the gifted or challenged have come and gone; methods of evaluation have changed, and these changes, in turn, have prompted further revisions. Many of you will have been through the phonics versus whole language debate, and there are a multitude of answers to the "why Johnny can't read" question.

At the high school level, first, there was streaming, then destreaming, and then streaming again with some new terminology. When the OACs (fifth-year level courses) were eliminated from Ontario high schools, many complained that the resulting curriculum was too difficult for students to master in four years. Others thought the change was long overdue. Similarly, there has been disagreement and division over teacher evaluation and professional development.

Strike rumblings are in the air again. Everybody claims to have the best interest of children at heart.

We don't agree

Although our own Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (OACS) have been founded on principles entirely different from those in the public sector, we also have not been immune to division, and we, too, have suffered from lack of direction and lack of agreement about founding principles.

Take our "view of the child," for example. Are we to approach our students as immature beings in need of forming? As sinners in need of correction? As mission projects? As little saints to be protected from a bad world? As empty vessels to be filled up with information? And what skills and attitudes do we want our students to have by the time they graduate?

I also remember many noisy debates about structure and policy. At one time, many questioned the need for OCSTA, for example. Then there was Schedule N, the contract clause about lifestyle, which caused a fair amount of acrimony between teachers and boards. There have been issues about library policy, drama selection, science curriculum, and student lifestyle.

"What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted"

Some within the OACS school system are in favor of a "no tolerance" approach to student discipline; others have grave reservations about it. In short, just as our public school colleagues aren't all on the same page, neither are we. And that makes teaching harder than it has to be.

But more to the point, that makes it ever more necessary to keep going to the drawing board to make sure we're all seeing the same picture and interpreting it the same way, and, what is more important, seeing where and how changes to the picture have to be made. I believe we have to keep asking ourselves and each other the question, "What are our schools for?" and, "What is my part in the enterprise?"

Lots of frustrations

I don't have to tell you that teaching comes with challenges; it's like parenting. If we had any clue beforehand what we were getting into, we'd think twice before committing ourselves. Choosing to spend six to seven hours a day in a confined space with two dozen or so of other people's kids could easily be mistaken for a death wish or at least a martyr's dream. A recent study done in Quebec shows that more teachers than ever are suffering from burnout and depression.

Even if you're the kind of teacher who doesn't worry too much about the larger picture, (though I think you should), there's not only your own classroom to worry about, but also the staff meetings, schoolyard patrol, gym duty, disciplinary hearings, new report card formats (that must have made a lot of sense to the people who made them up), interviews with parents, not to mention curriculum meetings — you know the drill.

Finally, there's the frustration of being unsure about the connection between the day-to-day happenings at a school and the reasoning behind the whole enterprise of Christian education. And when the gap between a school's stated objectives and its daily practice gets too large, we can really get discouraged because we begin to lose our way. We start to blame our board or our principal, or, maybe, lack of cooperation on the part of parents. We start feeling isolated and, in some cases, alienated. We may even begin to question our own competence, and then discouragement and cynicism will surely set in. We start feeling like the writer in Ecclesiastes: "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted" (Ecclesiastes 1:15). And so we resign ourselves to a plodding teaching life that merely consists of "putting one pedagogical foot in front of the other." In that case, it's a long dark road from September to June!

Positive focus

And yet you're all here and still smiling. You may not have known what you were getting yourselves into when you started teaching, but now you're hooked, as I was forty years ago. And most of you wouldn't want it any other way!

I'd like to speculate on what it is that gets us Christian teachers out of bed every school day, and how we can transcend what we call the daily grind by being intentionally aware of the larger context in which our classrooms exist. In other words, I'd like to talk a bit about how we can keep ourselves focused in our day-to-day work by bringing our schools' vision and mission statements to life, or, if you like, by keeping our theory and practice together. If we can do that, our work will have integrity and meaning, and our load will be lighter.

What needs to happen to make the coming school year not only manageable, but also memorable for the joy and satisfaction it has brought?

First of all, we have to remind ourselves that the basic terms of Christianity — Creation, Fall, Redemption — are not theological points governing personal belief and church life. They are the truths we live by; they provide a context for all of human culture, and the world of nature as well. They are the foundation for all teaching in Christian schools.

Eyes wide open

I'll try to be concrete here, and I'll start with the concept of **Creation.**

Good teachers are interested in stuff and have a good time finding out about new things. They think that whatever there is, in nature and in culture, in past or present, is worth looking at and talking about. They think this because they not only love God as a Creator, but also as One who takes providential care of what he has made and showers his creatures with blessings. Good teachers face the day with optimism and the hope that God will spring a surprise or two. They can identify with e.e.cummings:

I thank you God for this most amazing day
For the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite, which is yes

(I who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any — lifted from the no
of all nothing — human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

"There are so few Christians out there in the world, that when you do come across one, you embrace them; you don't check out their bloodline."

Now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened

Say that to yourself after the alarm clock rings, and you'll be up for whatever the day can throw at you! When novelist and scholar Henry James was giving advice to writers once, he said, "Be one on whom nothing is lost." That's good advice for teachers, too, because one of your main tasks is to help your students develop ears that hear and eyes that see.

God's enjoyment

Part of our task as teachers is to be good models. Then think about the fact that, as good teachers we **image** God when we are interested in the world he made. Theologian Dallas Willard says that "God leads a very interesting life and is full of joy. Undoubtedly, he is the most joyous being in the universe.... We pay a lot of money to get a tank with a few tropical fish in it, but God has seas full of them, which he constantly enjoys" (quoted in Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 25).

God's own words in the book of Job bear Willard out. His description of the leviathan and the behemoth show that he knows all his creatures in detail and takes pride in them. God has to be smiling, for example, when he describes the ostrich: "The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully. . . . She lays her eggs on the ground and lets them warm in the sand, unmindful that a foot may crush them, that some wild animal may trample them. She treats her young harshly, as if they were not hers; she cares not that her labor was in vain for God did not endow her with wisdom or give her a share of good sense. Yet when she spreads her feathers to run, she laughs at horse and rider" (Job 39:13-18). You get the idea that God is speaking with love and pleasure as he tells Job, "She's dumb, but she's fast!"

So, because God describes his world as good, and because he gets a charge out of the delightful things he made, good Christian schooling involves developing familiarity with the environment and instilling a sense of awe and wonder at the world God made. We come to know God himself in part by becoming familiar with his handiwork. We come to be good stewards by understanding our environment and interacting with it. Every staff member of a school has to be clear on this: the creation is not some giant holding-tank to be endured till we get to heaven. It is our home; it is full of delight as well as trouble, but Christ died for it, and we have work to do. There is more at stake than our own souls. This respect for the created world should be reflected in the vision and mission statements, in school policies, but, above all, in curriculum choices and classroom practice.

Creaturely response

There is also the matter of culture, which can be defined as the human response to creation and the will of the Creator. As human beings we haven't done well here, having forged many more swords than ploughshares, and having destroyed more than we've built. Since there were no earthly or heavenly resources to fix all that went wrong, God had to do it himself in the person of his son Jesus. This truth about the redemptive work of Christ is crucial to Christian education; it defines who we are as human beings — fallen creatures in need of redemption. All Christian teachers believe this. How they work it out in an educational setting can differ, however, and the kind of school you end up with will depend largely on where you line up on this issue. I need to illustrate:

In Part Three of his book *Between Memory and Vision,* Steven Vryhof analyzes three faith-based schools in the USA. They're all Christian CSI affiliated schools, but the differences between them are quite remarkable. Holland Christian Middle School is his first example. This is an excellent, award-winning school, strong on academics, parent involvement, and competitiveness, a school strongly reflective of the Reformed Christian community in which it exists. Vryhof's second example is Bellevue Christian School in Bellevue, Washington. The emphasis in this school is on cultural involvement. It has little connection to a Dutch or Christian Reformed past. The student body represents about 160 different churches, and this leads to intense discussion about the mission of the school between the more fundamentalist participants and what I might call the "culture-transformationists." The school is a private corporation run by a twelve-member board of directors, because it is feared that to have a parent-driven school would be to invite chaos. This board maintains the school's original vision, which emphasizes cultural engagement and transformation. The third example is Mustard Seed School in Hoboken, New Jersey. Representing an ethnically diverse community, it draws students from many different Christian traditions and ethnic groups. It has been remarkably successful in bringing about racial and ethnic reconciliation in the community it serves. It has a non-restrictive admissions policy. One of its founding teachers said, "There are so few Christians out there in the world, that when you do come across one, you embrace them; you don't check out their bloodline"(Vryhof, 112). Vryhof notes that there is no Reformed jargon in any of the school's materials, though as part of its educational philosophy, the school has adopted the *Twelve Affirmations* document (full title: *Reformed Christian Schooling for the Twenty-first Century).*

Schools, like classrooms, can take on a

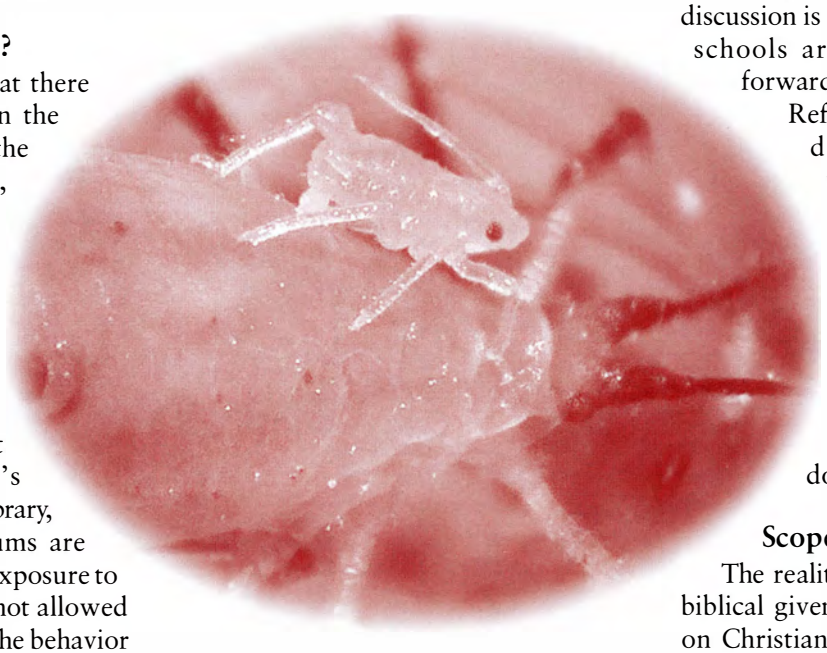
"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet"

certain character. There are always distinctive ways in which the guiding principles are interpreted and worked out. Some are positive, and some not so positive, but the main sticking point always seems to be in the area of cultural engagement versus "protectionism."

Protection or involvement?

Every Christian believes that there is a clear distinction between the community of believers and the so-called world. Some, however, make the subsequent assumption that the task of a school is to protect children from evil influences and to avoid any activities that are perceived as leading to sin. To that end, in some schools, the theory of evolution is not taught, Madeline L'Engle's books are not allowed in the library, and field trips to art museums are carefully monitored to avoid exposure to offensive material. Drama is not allowed if it causes a pupil to re-enact the behavior and words of a bad person. In such schools, moral behavior is paramount, and materials are chosen, classroom protocol is established, and discipline is administered for their potential to encourage such moral behavior.

Others believe that it is not so easy to draw a line between individuals and the world. They realize that sin penetrates every heart and mind. They would agree with Alexandr Solzenitsyn who said, "If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"(quoted in Plantinga, 49). People in this camp believe that, because sin is so pervasive and personal, a major goal of Christian education should be not to provide protection so much as to teach discernment. They believe that protectionism will lead to superficial thinking. They would agree with theologian Richard Foster when he says, "Superficiality is the scourge of our age.... The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people" (quoted in Plantinga, 128).



It's not a question of either/or, of course. Both moral behavior and discernment are biblical concepts, and we ignore either one at our peril. But whether your school vision emphasizes a deep understanding of culture, with all its sins and blemishes, or it attempts separation from that culture, will make a huge difference in the kind of school you end up with, and, of course, the kind of students you graduate. At this point in our history, when many OACS schools are trying to branch out into their communities by attracting a clientel that does not necessarily share a Calvinist or Reformational heritage, it is more important than ever to achieve clarity on the issues. Confrontation and argument are counter-productive, but frank open discussion is absolutely necessary if our schools are to survive and move forward. It has been said that the Reformed tradition is a mile deep and an inch wide, whereas evangelicalism is a mile wide and an inch deep. Seems to me that these two traditions would make a great partnership, but we have to be willing to work at it. I'm glad that many of our schools are already doing so.

Scope of redemption

The reality of **redemption** is a third biblical given that has a direct impact on Christian educational theory. And, again, there are differences in how this biblical truth is woven into our practice. What's important in a school, the saving of individual souls, i.e., bringing students to Jesus? Or is there an emphasis on the total redemptive work of Christ? In the latter case, students will learn that it is possible to confront bad things in culture and make them better; in the former case, the emphasis will be on keeping students unspotted from an evil world. Again, though the alternatives are real, they are not mutually exclusive, and could even be said to be complementary.

In his little book *Wishful Thinking,* for example, Frederick Buechner says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (119). That is, the deep

"Mud here, mud there, it's all the same."

gladness that results from personal redemption motivates us to help redeem and reform a sick culture. If this is what schools want their students to learn and to live (and I believe it is) it is necessary to create a curriculum that allows for building awareness of the deep needs that exist in each other, in the local community, and in the world at large.

Again, teachers teach with integrity only when they know how to incorporate their own deepest beliefs and their school's vision into their curriculum and practice. One of my former colleagues at London Christian High School often argued that teaching in abstractions is like sitting down to dinner, and then talking about it rather than eating it. It's absurd, and it makes no sense.

When an interviewer once asked him what he would like to be remembered for, Mike Harris (former Premier of Ontario) replied, "He did what he said." Good teachers will bring their school's vision and mission statements to life. If you can't wholeheartedly agree with your school's stated main task, your work is probably a lot harder and less satisfactory than it should be, because you are swimming against the tide. And when individual staff members are riding off in all directions on crucial issues, a school will soon be riding off into the sunset of cultural irrelevance.

Arguing is alright

What I regret about many of our schools is that there is not enough time for staff discussion, argument, calling each other to account, and regular debriefing. What I regret so much about the Christian community at large is that we can't often argue without animosity. We come together armed with our so-called bottom lines, and when we're done talking, we are no closer together than we were before. You've all heard the expression "too busy not to pray." Well, I would like to suggest that you're all too busy to ignore reflection on what you're doing.

In his autobiography, G. K. Chesterton, one of my favorite essayists, talks about his brother. "My brother, Cecil Edward Chesterton," he says, "was born when I was about five years old; and after a brief pause, began to argue. He continued to argue to the end.... I am glad to think that through all those years, we never stopped arguing; and we never once quarreled. Perhaps the principal objection to a quarrel is that it interrupts an argument"(quoted in Plantinga, 131).

Because we're still on this side of the Jordan, none of us has "arrived," and none of our schools is perfect. So we need to keep talking, arguing, if you will, and being willing to change if necessary. We have to keep re-evaluating our vision and mission, as well as our practice, and we have to keep working at establishing common cause with all Christian educators who want to acknowledge the kingship of Jesus Christ. If we can do this with humility and goodwill, who knows what our schools may look like another 50 years from now!

Focus on wonder

Our minds and hearts need to be open to the surprises that God may have in store for us. In his book *Eyes Remade for Wonder,* Rabbi Lawrence Kushner talks about the cost of being oblivious to God's miracles and surprises: "Jewish tradition says that the splitting of the Red Sea was the greatest miracle ever performed. It was so extraordinary that on that day even a common servant beheld more than all the miracles beheld by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel combined. And yet we have one midrash that mentions two Israelites, Reuven and Shimon, who had a different experience.

Apparently the bottom of the sea, though safe to walk on, was not completely dry, but a little muddy, like a beach at low tide. Reuven stepped into it and curled his lip. "What is this muck?"

Shimon scowled, "There's mud all over the place!"

"This is just like the slime pits of Egypt!" replied Reuven.

"What's the difference?" complained Shimon. "Mud here, mud there, it's all the same."

And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way across the bottom of the sea. And because they never once looked up, they never understood why, on the distant shore, everyone else was singing songs of praise. For Reuven and Shimon, the miracle never happened"(11).

You have a choice: you can go into this school year watching your feet, (or looking in the rearview mirror as Postman and Weingartner suggested, or you can look upward and outward with the expectation that God will surely bless you with energy, with stamina when the going gets tough, and with the miracle of faith, so that even when you're up to your knees in muck, you can believe that you'll make it to the end of the school year, and find that the journey was worth singing about.

And speaking of singing: I was alerted by my brother to a passage in the book of Zephaniah, which I believe is the only place in Scripture where God is described as singing over his people. Consider it God's blessing over you as you begin this new school year: "This is the Word of the Lord: "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3 :17). ej

The Six Million Dollar Band or...

by Jan Kaarsvlam

Jan Kaarsvlam was released from his previous employment because of a fourth-grade in-class silkworm/night crawler cross-breeding experiment that went awry. He had hoped to create fishing bait that could cast its own net. The resulting chaos put an end to the school's hot lunch program, possibly for good. He plans to start soon in his new position as head janitor for Unity Christian School in Fulton, Illinois.

"This can't be true!" Christina Lopez shouted as she burst through the staff room door. In her right hand she clutched the minutes from the previous night's school board meeting. Her nostrils flared in rage.

"What now?" Red Carpenter said to no one in particular. He was tired of what he considered the histrionics of his colleague in the English Department. As he often said, it was appropriate that Lopez directed the school's plays; after all, she was the drama queen. In fact, though, it was not her penchant for being dramatic, but rather the drama department itself that caused her latest harangue. Or more accurately, it was her school's lack of appreciation for the fine arts.

"The board shot down our fine arts center again!"

Red snorted and returned to his reading of the sports page. Cal VanderMeer, the erstwhile Bible teacher who occasionally helped build sets for plays, gave Christina a sympathetic look. For fifty years, the school had limped along without an auditorium. Six different times in the last twelve years, proposals had gone before the school board to finally add an auditorium to the school (perhaps nestling it between the three gyms), but each time the board had killed the proposal. The latest murder had been executed the previous night.

Cal patted the seat next to him, and she sat down. "It's hard, isn't it," he said.

For a moment, Christina looked as if she was going to cry. Then she mastered her emotions a bit. "I really thought it was going to happen this time."

Red snorted again. "Look, I'm sorry that you didn't get what you wanted, Christina, but after all, you guys only do a play twice a year. It hardly seems worth spending two million dollars on a structure that is going to be used for only six performances per semester."

Cal feared he might have to restrain Christina. For a moment, a fire came into her eyes, and it looked as if she was going to attack Red. If that happened, Cal would put his money on the drama director rather than the golf coach.

Instead, Christina's rage gave way to a wry smile. She spoke, though, still with a bit of an edge to her voice. "On another note, nice chapel yesterday, Red!"

"Why,thanks," Red Carpenter beamed, pleased that Christina had the maturity to look past his criticism of her opinion to compliment him.

"Yeah, I especially liked the part about developing all of our talents."

Red smiled even wider. "Did you? That was straight out of my catechism class. We're studying the Reformed Confessions."

"I liked the part where you said we need to develop all of our talents. You know, like in your example about how a kid could be a banker or a garbage man or a preacher. What God really wants is for those talents to be developed fully and then put into service in his kingdom."

"Well, thanks again, Christina." There was some hesitation in Red's voice, for he noticed that Cal Vandermeer was grinning ear to ear. When Cal actually began to chuckle, Red grew defensive. "What? What's so funny?"

Gord Winkle, who happened to be walking by at that moment, slapped Red playfully on the shoulder with one of his meaty hands. "Ever hear of the word irony?" Red turned to see Gord holding a Suzie-Q and a diet Coke in the same hand; he thought to himself, I'm looking at it.

Cal, as always, gently explained to Red what others wanted to bludgeon him with. "Red, your chapel speech implies that God values all our talents, that God wants us to develop all our talents, to use them to further his kingdom."

"Absolutely!" Red exploded, his head pumping vigorously.

"Then explain, if you can, why we have three gymnasiums and no auditorium. Why does our athletic program have an annual budget of nearly $40,000 while our fine arts program receives less than $8,000? It seems to me that there's a considerable gap between the vision you cast in your chapel speech and the reality we work in every day."

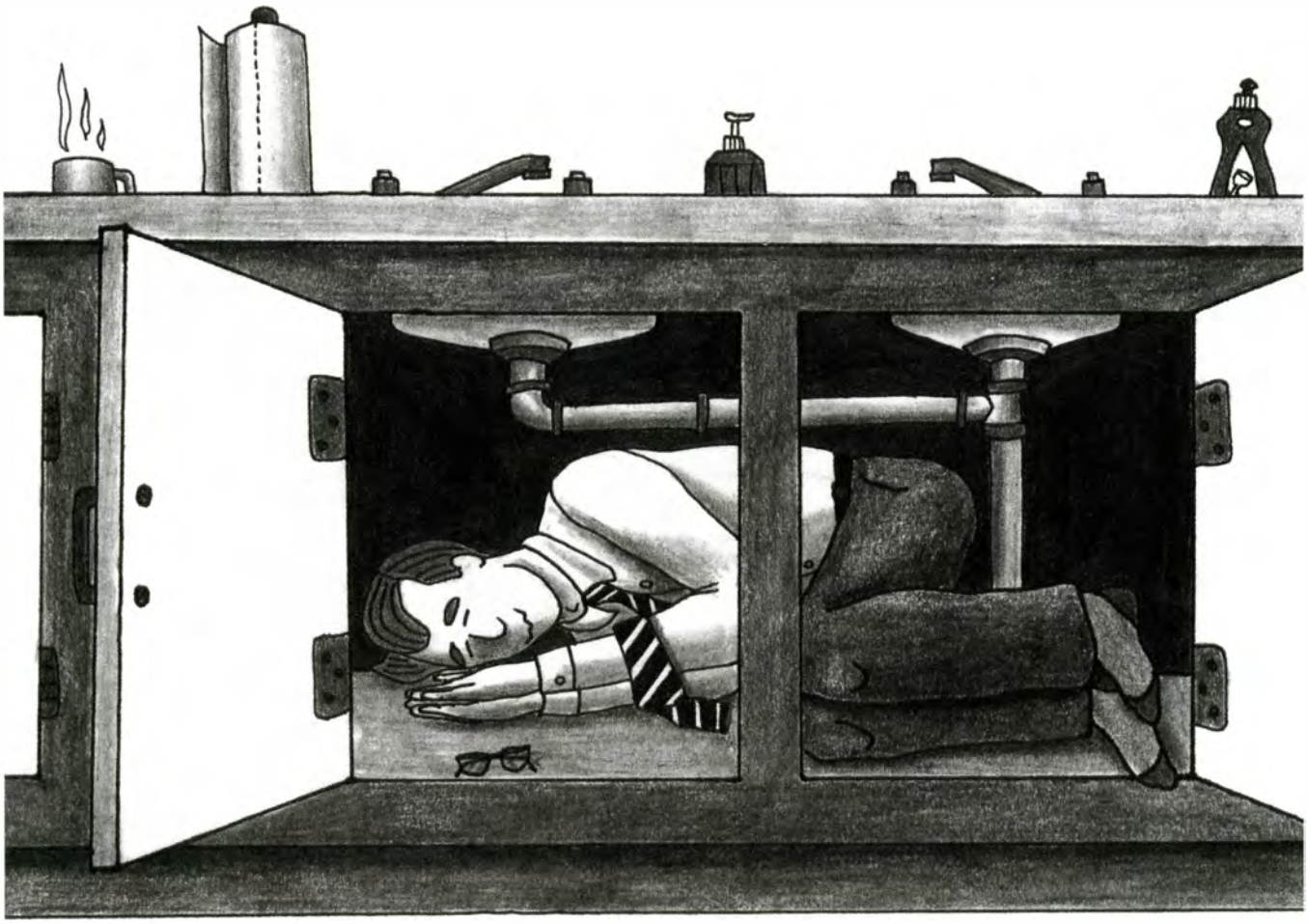
Red frowned, but stayed silent.

The cupboard doors under the sink opened, and Jon Kleinhut, Bedlam's paranoid librarian, unfolded himself into the room. He stood, brushed himself off, and returned the incredulous stares of his colleagues with a glare of his own. "It just so happens," Kleinhut explained with a sneer, "that I was checking to see if the school's plumbing is in accordance with local code."

"Why did you have the cupboard doors closed, then?" asked Gord Winkle from behind a second Suzie-Q.

"Fell asleep," replied Kleinhut dismissively. "But I woke up when I heard this conversation. I can't believe how naïve you people are. Do you want to know the real reason that this school doesn't have an auditorium?"

A Theater, a Theater, My Kingdom for a Theater.



The room fell silent. Kleinhut's conspiracy theories usually teetered on the border between being fascinating explorations of a demented mind, and simply tedious. Kleinhut completely misinterpreted the silence as a longing to know The Truth. He put his palms down on the table and leaned forward toward his colleagues. The hair on the right side of his head where he had been sleeping protruded from his head like a horn. He cleared his throat and whispered.

"The real reason we have no auditorium is because of the United Nations. England and France have some strange bedfellows, if you know what I mean."

The silence went from the silence of anticipation to the silence of the stunned. Finally Christina spoke. "What are you talking about, Jon?"

"Think about it," Kleinhut said. "The wait time on material at construction sites around the United States is running 48 percent longer than twelve months ago. Brick deliveries for some jobs have been pushed back twelve to fourteen weeks. And why? Where are all the bricks going? I'll give you a hint. Check out Terraserver.com and look at the latest satellite photos of Uzbekistan. I think you'll find something pretty interesting."

Cal VanderMeer cleared his throat uncomfortably and said, "You'll have to excuse me, Kleinhut. I have to get ready for my next class.."

"Yeah," added Gord Winkle, stuffing the last bite of Suzie-Q into his mouth, "I have to go read that heart-healthy book I picked up the other day."

"Athletics budget is due, gotta go get that done," said Red Carpenter.

"And I am going to go to my classroom and try not to lose all hope for someday having a place for the fine arts," said Christina Lopez with a sigh.

In short order, Kleinhut found himself alone in Bedlam's staff lounge. He checked to make sure that no one was hiding in the room, then crawled back inside the cupboard for a nap. ej

The Gap Between Vision and Practice in Christian Education

Part I

by **John E. Hull**

John Hull teaches at The King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta. *This article has been gleaned from an article entitled, " There's Christian Education and There's 'Not Exactly,"* published in Christian Scholars Review, *XXXII:2, Winter 2003, p. 203-224. Because of its length, we publish it in two installments, starting in this CEJ issue.*

The prevailing view in the Christian school movement assumes that Christian education more or less happens when Christians teach in Christian schools. I demur. I side with those educators who associate a higher level of difficulty and frustration with this challenge. In fact, I am convinced that the obstacles connected with this challenge are sufficiently fixed in place that Christian school educators typically settle for a smaller vision of Christian education than the one they aim for. Furthermore, I believe this trading down of visions follows a well-established pattern in the broader world of public school education as well.

With some justification, many Christian school educators will find this interpretation of the situation exaggerated and even contentious. They can appeal to the rich body of literature written in support of Christian education as proof that Christian school teachers know what they are talking about and how to carry it out. They could also legitimately argue that the education provided by their Christian schools, though imperfect, is noticeably different from the one the local public school delivers.

I do not dispute these claims. Christian schools are distinguishable from public schools, and we who teach in them are not clueless about the meaning of Christian education. What concerns me is that, in spite of the things Christian educators know and do, what normally passes for *Christian education* can be more accurately named *Christians educating*. At first glance, the difference between these two terms may seem trivial, if not simply semantic, but I believe they represent two very different visions for Christian schools.

Radical difference

Christian education connotes a biblically grounded, alternative kind of education that rejects the whole matrix of scientific and humanistic ideals which currently vie to define the purpose of the public school. In order to put this large biblical vision of education into action, Christian educators must base their schools on a comprehensive and distinctively Christian educational philosophy. The expected consequence of implementing such a philosophy is the transformation of the school's educational goals, curriculum, pedagogy, student evaluation and organizational structure.

Across the ledger, *Christians educating* stands for a Christianity-enhanced public school brand of education. Inside this status quo frame of reference, the distinguishing character of the Christian school revolves around what the teachers 'add' to the students' educational experience by means of their moral integrity, devotional piety and biblical insights into a select group of controversial topics. Guided by this smaller vision, Christian school educators can expect to reach their goals without overhauling either the school system or the popular notion of what it means to be educated. Whereas *Christian education* leads to a new and different model of education, *Christians educating* utilizes different people (people of faith) to elevate the academic and spiritual standards of the traditional public school model. Stated succinctly, Christians educating changes the *personality* of a public school education whereas Christian education seeks to reshape its *structure*.

A vague picture

The literature surrounding the Christian school movement covers a broad spectrum of categories, everything from worldview, vision, philosophy and curriculum theory to unit and lesson planning. On every front, Christian educators stress the need for an alternative approach to the public school system. However, very few authors manage to connect the details of reform with the rhetoric of vision, and this leaves Christian school educators with only a vague picture of their task and a false sense of security.

Paul Keniel, a long-time executive director of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), is one of many writers who have outlined the basic contours of a Christian education. In a short book that offers a set of rationales for choosing a Christian school over a public school, he says Christian education entails parental responsibility, academic excellence, a community of believers, a Bible-based curriculum, moral integrity, evangelism, Christian perspective, and firm discipline.[1]

In a more recent article, Jack Fennema summarizes what Christian education means to Reformed Christian educators.[2] According to Fennema, Christian education is driven by a biblical worldview centered on the theme of creation, fall and redemption. Several key theological principles are embedded in this worldview, such as the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scripture, the creation as God's Kingdom and the covenantal nature of God's relationship with creation. Alongside its theological substructure, which is a trademark of Reformed thinking, Fennema also acknowledges the contributions of evangelical educators. These include an emphasis on the place of holiness and piety,

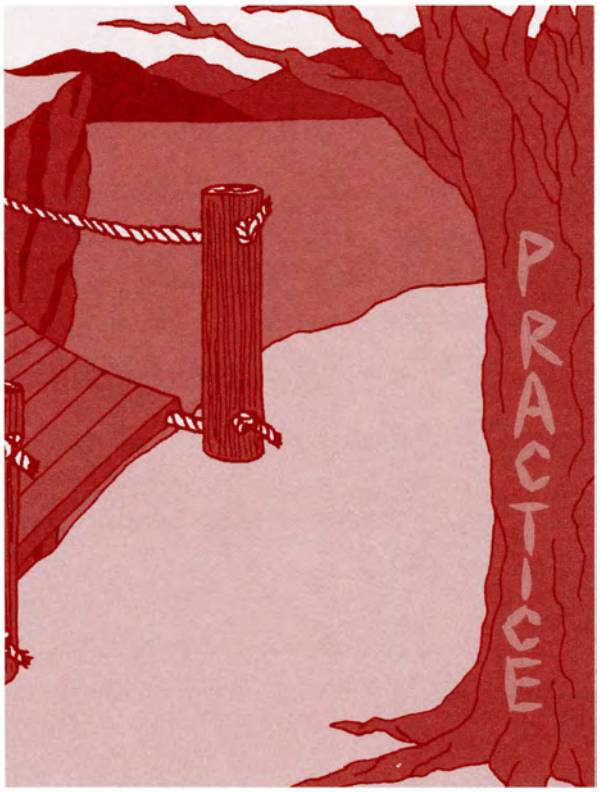
a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, a prominent role for the Bible, and room for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of students.

Authors like Keniel and Fennema perform the important task of identifying the prerequisite conditions for an education to qualify as Christian. But they rarely unpack the implications these conditions have for the day-to-day operation of the school as an institution. What emerges is the general idea that Christian education refers to Christian teachers educating Christian students in a Christian environment for the purpose of promoting Christian thought and action.

Efforts to transcribe foundational principles, biblical worldview and educational vision into a working Christian educational philosophy have sharpened our image of Christian education to some degree. Typically, Christian school educators compress their Christian philosophy of education into catch phrases like: a Christ-centered curriculum, an inner reformation of the sciences, a biblical perspective on all areas of learning, or a Christian world and life view. Over time these slogans have dove-tailed into one universal concept called Christian perspective, and this term more than any other has become synonymous with Christian education.

All-embracing vision

To unpack Christian perspective as the defining concept in Christian education, we must look primarily at John Calvin and one of his chief interpreters, Abraham Kuyper, the leader of the neo-Calvinist movement in Holland. In his seminal work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin likens the Bible to a pair of spectacles. Only by looking through these "glasses" can a person see the world in proper perspective.[3] Without the aid of the biblical lens our picture of the world is both incomplete and distorted. For Calvin, neither biblical perspective nor the world it interprets can be limited to the so-called religious side of life. He totally rejects the segregation of reality into the realms of the sacred and the profane. Calvin's expansion of Scripture's role in the pursuit of truth paved the way for today's Christian school movement and its claim that the Bible underpins learning in all the academic disciplines.



Kuyper believed that Calvinist Christianity offers an "all-embracing system that transformed the way people engaged in society."[4] The system must be all-embracing because biblical perspective is all embracing. Christianity starts, but does not end, with a person's "rebirth into Christ." Personal regeneration naturally leads to societal transformation. Central in Kuyper's social theory is the belief that the world holds two kinds of people — those transformed by the power of God and enlightened with biblical perspective, and everyone else. The fact that there are two kinds of people means that inevitably there must also be two kinds of science, two kinds of politics, two kinds of economics, for example. Wolterstorff[5] cites this key quotation from Kuyper's *Principles of Sacred Theology*:

> ...but one is inwardly different from the other, and consequently feels a different content rising from his consciousness; thus they face the cosmos from different points of view, and are impelled by different impulses. And the fact that there are two kinds of *people* occasions of necessity the fact of two kinds of human *life* and *consciousness* of life, and of two kinds of science...[6]

Kuyper's understanding of social structures not only rejects the idea that science stands outside the authority of Scripture; it places him at odds with the Enlightenment notion that politics and science are philosophically and theologically neutral. For Kuyper, one takes either a secular or a Christian approach to all societal responsibilities, including education. In his view Christianity and secular humanism function as two antithetical faiths.

Elusive vision

A compelling logic upholds the neo-Calvinist perception that Christian education is the natural product of teaching from a coherent biblical perspective. The line of reasoning goes like this: a) all

schools embody a philosophical perspective, b) the public school personifies a secular perspective that greatly diminishes the claims of biblical Christianity, c) to overcome this deficiency in Christian schools, teachers must implement a Christian philosophy of education, and d) the implementation of this philosophy naturally culminates in a distinctive, biblical model of education. Adhering to this series of locutions, many Christian school educators firmly believe that their schools and public schools not only offer two distinct species of education, but they do so necessarily.

Throughout my teaching career, I have found this way of thinking both persuasive and elusive. I am left chagrined by the fact that the thing we Christian school educators most take for granted consistently escapes us. As far as I can tell, Christian schools do not provide an alternative Christian education, if by that term we mean that our biblical perspective on life leads to a biblical model of education. To negotiate the jumps from worldview and theological principles to educational philosophy, and from there to transformed school model, Christian school educators must ultimately demonstrate how biblical perspective changes the contours and content of education. In other words, Christian perspective must reshape and redirect the curriculum, pedagogical theory, student evaluation, educational goals and school structure — an over-ridingl concept which includes various mechanisms for controlling student behavior, everything from the way classes are timed and students are grouped to the arrangement of classroom furniture. And this, I maintain, we have yet to do!

Good gaps, bad gaps!

After twenty years of teaching in a visionary Christian high school, I know first hand how difficult implementing a Christian education can be! My colleagues and I made significant headway on several fronts in that school, but we never developed a new model. In fact, the more radical we tried to be, the greater the resistance we faced. Does that mean we failed to provide our students with a Christian education? The answer is not a clear-cut yes or no.

In the face of this difficult (and personal) question, I find it helpful to distinguish between a *gap challenge* and a *gap problem*. Every school community with clearly stated ideals can expect to come up short in meeting those expectations. In fact, one could argue that achievable ideals do not make very good ideals. In line with this way of thinking, the gap that separates educational ideals from actual practice is unavoidable and even desirable. Bridging this gap represents the perpetual challenge for every good school.

Gap challenges, however, can degenerate into gap problems. This occurs whenever the distance between the ideal and the real becomes so great that we lose sight of the goal. Or it happens whenever the implicit ideals of practice are incongruent with the ideals espoused.

With these categories in mind, I look back on my former school as one engaged by a gap challenge. To the extent that we stayed on track with respect to our vision, our school delivered a Christian education — even though, as I have noted, we never disentangled ourselves from the public school model or its supporting structures. Insofar as we conformed to that model we succumbed to the practice of Christians educating.

Lack of distinctives

Several studies conducted in the nineties indicate that many Christian schools face gap problems rather than gap challenges. My own study of thirteen Canadian Christian high schools revealed that school vision statements are not usually education specific.[7] Their generic form makes them equally applicable to every other kind of Christian institution. Predictably, this leaves the educational vision of the school open to different interpretations.

The schools I visited seemed caught between two different understandings of their vision for Christian education. Some teachers equated Christian education with the task of discipling students into a biblical lifestyle. Others thought of it as the formation of Christian minds. Neither interpretation seemed very effective. The

following quotation from a student expresses a popular sentiment: "The Christian perspective is forced, added on, and we know the game; if you want points you give the teacher the expected answer. Then, when they say, 'Finally, you've got it!' you feel funny, because you don't really believe it, you just put down the expected."[8]

After sifting through dozens of surveys, interviews and observation notes, I concluded in my study that, on the whole, there was nothing distinctively Christian about these schools in terms of their curricular design, pedagogy, evaluation procedures, organizational structure, or the lifestyle of its students:

"[These] schools are patterned after the comprehensive school model that streams students into earlier and later entries into the work force. From scheduling to the organization of the school day [these schools] adhere to the traditional production mould of schooling. Neither is there evidence of a distinctively Christian curriculum tailored to facilitating a transforming vision of education. The fact is, in one school after another, no CSI published materials can be found in use, not even in biblical studies. The curriculum is dominated by textbooks written from non-Christian perspectives and other materials that require constant teacher interpretation in isolation from other Christian colleagues. Many educators are quite adroit in discerning the difference between Christian and non-Christian ideas, but few have the time or resources to evaluate the presuppositions that shape the curricular framework these books assume or to properly fill in what is known to be missing in their texts."[9]

No cultural alienation

In his study of American Christian high schools, Kaufmann[10] wanted to find out if Christian school graduates take ownership of their schools' vision. Taking into account what the vision statements of these schools said about Christian education, he assumed the graduates would stand out as both "competent" and "culturally maladjusted." "Competent students" refers to those who have discovered and developed their gifts for service in God's Kingdom. "Culturally maladjusted students" reject the "wisdom" and priorities of their surrounding secular culture in favor of the wisdom and priorities expressed by their school's vision for Christian education. If Christian high school graduates receive a truly Christian education, then, by definition, they are people who not only "dream about [but] begin to work for a world characterized by justice, compassion, and moral integrity."[11] Kaufmann concludes that the graduates he observed did neither.

After teaching in the Christian school movement for many years, Badley observes that both CSI (Christian Schools International) and ACSI educators have recently adopted the common rhetoric of faith and learning integration.[12] But, according to Badley, each association has a particular weakness that prevents it from successfully addressing faith and learning integration in its schools. The Evangelical tradition still "lacks philosophical reach" and is only just beginning to grapple with the implications of saying faith re-forms the academic disciplines in particular and the school in general. Despite the fact that the Reformed tradition has a strong legacy in the theological and philosophical foundations of education, Badley argues that these theoretical building blocks have yet to be incarnated into a distinctive Christian brand of educating.

Visionary rhetoric

Stronks and Blomberg [13] edited a book for the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship in the early nineties that involved a variety of Christian school leaders. The research team conducting this extensive study found the following questions to be the most pressing for educators in the Christian school movement: "What is Christian education? What makes a Christian school distinctive? How can we define our identity in the context of the current discussions in education?"[14] The study indicates that, under the veneer of high-road visionary rhetoric, we hide our uncertainty about the meaning and purpose of Christian education. The underlying assumption in this book says a lack of faith and learning integration prevails in Christian schools precisely because educational vision is not accompanied by an equally strong sense of task. Without alternative goals and a stronger commitment to reflective planning, the Calvin team does not believe a distinctively Christian education can emerge.

When confronted by all this evidence, my own allegiance to the ideal of Christian education sometimes wavers. The challenge of implementing a different, biblical model of schooling appears so far out of reach that I am tempted to think the whole idea might be wrong-headed. At times I wonder if there really is such a thing as a Christian model of education. This suspicion not only burdens my career; I think it plagues the whole Christian school movement.

As I see it, the history of the Christian school movement in Canada and the United States boils down to this: either its pursuit of Christian education has been a struggle to implement the right kind of educational vision, or it has been barking up the wrong tree! If the first interpretation is true, then we must better understand what makes the implementation of Christian education so difficult. If we have been chasing after a false vision, then we have to change some

of our basic assumptions about Christian education.

Let us consider these options in the next issue of CEJ.

Endnotes

[1]Paul A. Kienel, *Reasons for Christian Schools* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1981), pp. 14-17.

[2]Jack Fennema, "Education Within the Reformed Tradition: What Are We Really Talking About?" *Christian Educators Journal* February, 2001: 20-21.

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. 6. 1, Henry Beveridge, trans., (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1964).

[4]John L. Hiemstra, *World Views on the Air* (Lanham, University Press of America, 1997), p. 14.

[5]Nicholas Wolterstorff, "On Christian Learning," in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*. Paul Marshall, Sander Griffioen, Richard J. Mouw, eds., (Lanham, University Press of America, 1997), p. 59.

[6]Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 154.

[7]John E. Hull, *Christian Education and the Deep Structure of Schooling* (University of Toronto: doctoral dissertation, 1993), p. 83.

[8]Hull, *Christian Education,* p. 81.

[9]Hull, *Christian Education,* p. 100.

[10]Stephen Kaufmann, "Student Ownership of the Mission of Selected Christian Schools," unpublished conference paper Toronto: Christian Schools International Convention, (July 30-31, 1992).

[11] Ibid.

[12]Ken Badley, "Two 'Cop-Outs' in Faith-Learning Integration: Incarnational Integration and Worldviewish Integration," *Spectrum,* 28, no.2 (Summer, 1996): 110.

[13]Gloria Stronks and Doug Blomberg, eds., *A Vision with a Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993).

[14]Stronks and Blomberg, *A Vision,* p.9.

ROOM 219

Nancy Knol
Column Editor
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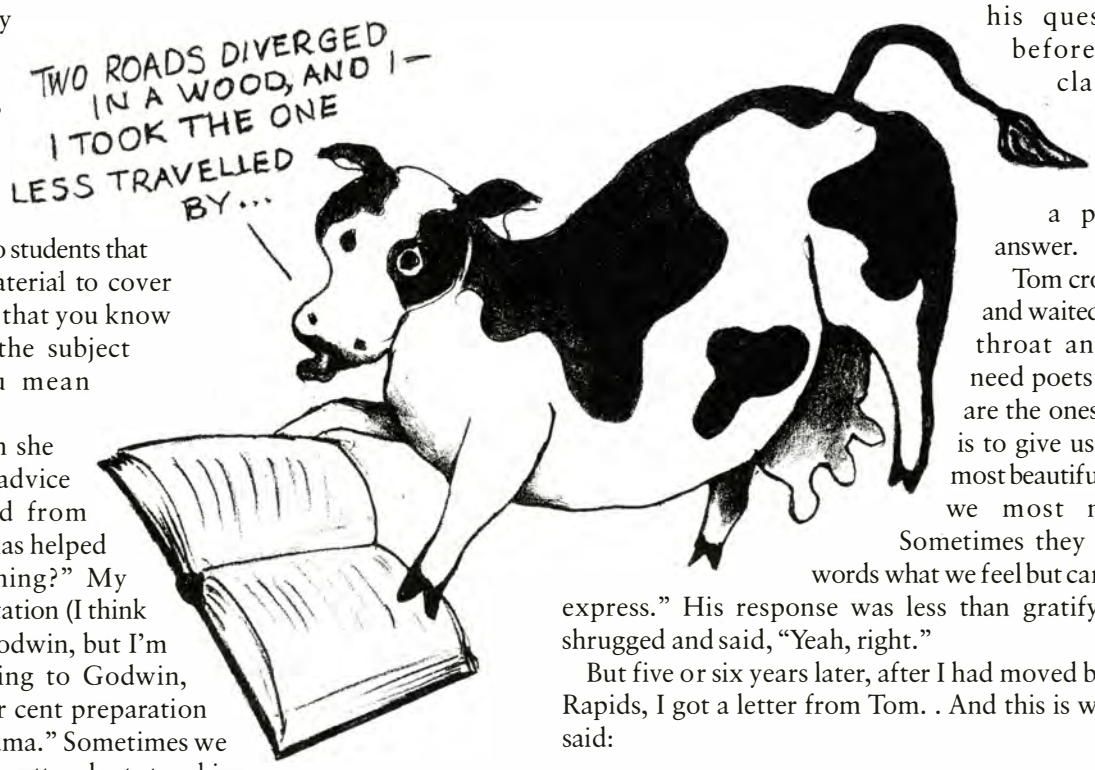
Thank You, Robert Frost

Nancy Knol teaches English and Religion at Grand Rapids Christian High School in Grand Rapids, MI. She is co-author of the book Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents. Most days you can find her in room 219.

A former student e-mailed me recently to ask if she could possibly interview me as part of an assignment for her education class. She came with a long list of questions, and they were good questions.

One of them was: "Give one piece of advice to a new teacher in regard to how to maintain discipline." My response was: "Be prepared — in fact, be *over-prepared*." Even now, as a seasoned teacher, I am certain that giving the message to students that there is a lot of material to cover convinces them: a) that you know something about the subject and, b) that you mean business.



Another question she asked was: "What advice have you received from someone else that has helped you in your teaching?" My response was a quotation (I think it was from Gail Godwin, but I'm not sure). According to Godwin, "Teaching is 20 per cent preparation and 80 per cent drama." Sometimes we teachers have to be pretty adept at making fools of ourselves in order to get the point home.

One final question this former student asked was: "What is one of your best stories about a *real* teaching moment?" That one was easy. Oddly enough, it occurred some time ago, and although I would not have identified it at the time as one of my best teaching moments, I certainly do now. Here is my story:

Early in my teaching career, I was required to teach a unit on Modern Poetry. I knew almost immediately that one boy — I will call him Tom — was pretty hostile to this course. He was a farm boy who had no appreciation for English courses in general and poetry in particular. During one of the first days of class, he raised his hand in the middle of my instructions to ask, "Why do we have to learn about this stuff anyway? It's stupid. Especially for me. I'm gonna graduate from this school and then work full time with my dad on our farm. I don't think any of our cows are gonna care if I know some stupid poem."

I looked at him for a long moment without saying anything, mostly because I honestly had no clue as to how I should answer him. Then I gulped, and said, "Well, Tom, I'll give you an answer to that question ... tomorrow." And that night I thought long and hard about what I could say to him that might make some sense.

The next day I brought up his question again before the whole class and told him that I had what I thought was a pretty good answer.

Tom crossed his arms and waited. I cleared my throat and said, "We need poets because they are the ones whose job it is to give us the best and most beautiful words when we most need them. Sometimes they just put into words what we feel but can't adequately express." His response was less than gratifying. He just shrugged and said, "Yeah, right."

But five or six years later, after I had moved back to Grand Rapids, I got a letter from Tom. . And this is what the letter said:

Dear Mrs. Knol,

I bet you're surprised to hear from me, aren't you? Well, if you remember me, I was in your English class. And last month I remembered you because something awful happened to me. My dad died. He died of a heart attack in our barn. And so now I work alone, and it isn't as good, but I am okay. But this is what I remembered: "Nothing gold can stay."

Tom

The line comes from a poem by Robert Frost. I will always be grateful to him for proving my point with such simple eloquence. Teaching is the best job in the world. ej

Pathways to Preteens

by Jane Cline Rubicini

Jane Rubicini (jrubicini@rogers.com) is an elementary school teacher in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. This article builds on the theory of multiple intelligences, first brought to light by Howard Gardner's book Frames Of Mind *(1983).*

Squirmy attitudes, nonstop chatter and short attention spans. How could I ever discover treasures in my unruly class of eleven-year-olds?

My Eureka moment burst into light one rainy afternoon. I had been flip-flopping between my students, detailed lesson plan in hand, frustration mounting as I scolded a pair of fidgety boys, shushed a group of talkative girls and re-directed cartoon doodlers. Each desk held the identical project, but every child's work shone with its own spirit. Unique approaches, springing from diverse kinds of thinking.

I ditched my daybook. Let's tap into these learning styles, I thought. I will offer choices to these students, build self-esteem and inspire faith in themselves, in others, and in God. Learning programs, in any subject, can be enriched with thoughtful consideration of the following six key intelligences:

The Talker

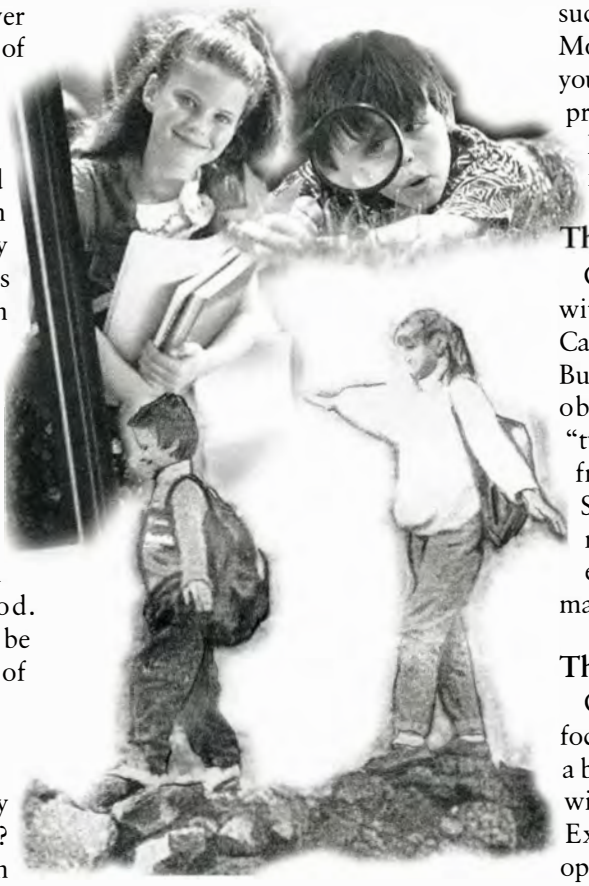
Clue into the sociable nature of chatty preteens. Whom are they talking to? Their friends, of course! Adults begin to take a back seat at this age as issues of faithfulness and friendship surge to center stage.

Listen with care when they role-play biblical characters or dramatize real-life problems, such as David and Jonathan encountered.

Opportunities to explore personal applications for the power of faith will emerge in their conversations.

The Builder

Here is a child eager to display her talents by working with her hands. Bible stories offer a wide range of inspiration for these kinesthetic learners. Think structures: Noah's ark, the Tower of Babel, Nativity scenes. Extend the builder's explorations in stability by linking



knowledge to the rock-solid foundations of love in the house of God. Develop community spirit by utilizing these skillful students in cooperative building projects.

The Singer

Journey beyond childhood tunes to reach the rappers and the hiphoppers. Encourage children to compose new songs with universal messages about kindness and goodness. Successful outreach connections, ranging from preschool groups to senior citizens, abound as audiences for preteener performances.

The Counter

Allow the light of God to shine in a mathematical style. Preteens with organized minds see patterns in sequences of events such as the seven days of Creation and Moses and the Ten Commandments. Allow your counters to investigate information and present their findings in creative ways. Perhaps your students will chart a course for the three wise men in a heavenly sky!

The Mover

Capture the interest of this active learner with stories brimming with adventure: Calming the Storm, Moses and the Burning Bush, Jonah and the Whale. Use tactile objects to prompt memory pegs for "tweeners" with short attention spans. A fruit snack for remembering God's spirit. Sandpaper and wood to smooth away the rough spots in life. Reel in these high-energy movers with plenty of concrete materials.

The Reader

Check out the quiet preteeners, the focused learners, always with their nose in a book. Visually strong individuals thrive with reading, writing and art activities. Extend their visions with leadership opportunities and display their knowledge to others. Churches or community centers can provide space for art shows. Hand-designed Christmas cards and bookmarks by tweeners would brighten many lives.

Join my journey along the winding pathways to preteens. Keep your eyes, and your heart as well, open. Scoop up a spoonful of enthusiasm; add a dash of patience and a sprinkle of faith. A recipe for successful learning! ej

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What Is Postmodernism, Anyway?

ClarenceJoldersma(cjolders@calvin.edu) professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asks his panel: "Are we living in postmodern times? If so, is this something we as teachers in Christian schools should welcome? Or is it something Christian education ought to fight against? What is postmodernism, anyway?"

January 3, 2005

Johanna Campbell

Clarence, you ask: Are we living in postmodern times? If we view modernity, (a time frame falling roughly between the storming of the Bastille to the falling of the Berlin Wall), as the age of reason and objective scientific truth, and we consider postmodernism as the worldview that offers no absolutes, no objective truth, only a string of subjective stories, strung out by each individual in the universe, yes, then we are living in postmodern times. That does not mean that everyone adheres to the postmodern position: many of us still think in a framework of modernity. Postmodernity believes that truth has become individualistic. There is an "incredulity toward metanarrative," as Jacques Leotard has said, and we are floating in a sea of relativity.

Should Christians fear this movement or should they welcome it? I don't think we should fear anything, since the Bible constantly admonishes us not to fear. I actually think we can welcome postmodernism boldly. It is really no different from any human-centered worldview. We do need to know its tenets so we can battle the enemy effectively. I think the postmodern worldview offers Christian teachers an excellent opportunity to show how God's truth is eternal, unchanging and Rock-solid. It challenges us to contextualize the Christian faith anew, demonstrating how no postmodern perspective measures up to the Christian life and worldview. Of course, sticking to the fact that there are no absolutes is an absolute in itself, and that is a good starting point for the Christian teacher when discussing this worldview.

Johanna

January 5, 2005

Lois Brink

Clarence, for the K-12 Christian educator, the question about modernism or postmodernism may be "So what?" Your ideas about understanding postmodern tenets and contextualizing Christianity are helpful.

The notion of the importance of Image, for instance, is one that we can work with in a variety of school contexts. Underlying this tenet could be the pulsing messages of our popular and "high" culture as well as the wonderful tool of visualization and image that we were given as part of our creation. Educators can help student reflect on these, enjoying Image as a path to God, critically "discerning" the messages of society for fallen and restorative elements. Using the notion of Image to explore and reuse media and messages, for instance, we should ask ourselves, Are we bringing these into God's kingdom? I wonder, is every tenet of postmodernist thought redeemable, renewable and reusable in a Christian context?

And what about modernism? What about, for instance, the tenet that mathematical and scientific methods are ultimately reliable and constitute the most credible path to the discovery of explanatory laws? Is this a creation-order law? Does this premise need some kind of restoration?

Perhaps, then, the question that educators ask is, "How can I help my students to understand and respond to or renew all kinds of assumptions and myths presented in our learning or in our everyday lives?" and, " How do I think critically about or respond to or restore these messages, premises and myths that flow around us ?" (even in our educational resources and systems, I might add). Do I just pick and choose? Your question, Clarence, provokes more questions than answers.

Lois

January 7, 2005

Agnes Fisher

Lois and Johanna, one of the main problems with postmodernism is the relativism it advocates. Even Scripture is interpreted depending on who approaches it or from what point of view or contemporary popular criticism it is taken. Along with this approach comes the proposal to "teach tolerance," which sounds very Christian but really proposes a kind of universalism. All religions are to be respected because they lead to the same end. Christ is not the only way. Yet, there


Clarence Joldersma

is a spiritual searching that goes on in postmodernism, a quest that is healthy, since this search in itself, through the work of the Spirit, may be the means to finding Christ. So we need to use the good and discard the evil, as in so much else in this world.
Agnes

January 11, 2005


Pam Adams

Lois and Johanna, I agree that, whether it is modernism or postmodernism, both are human-centered worldviews. In some ways it is easier to discuss Christianity in a postmodern era because after all "we are all entitled to our own opinions." When I was doing graduate studies at the U. of Iowa, my professors were very open to my writing a dissertation that addressed matters of belief. However, we need also to be aware of the subtle influence postmodernism has had on all of us and, in particular, on our students. Students are less accepting of a teacher "preaching" to them because, after all, "we are all entitled to our own opinions." In many ways, things have not changed. Sin has always clouded our acceptance of the Truth.
Pam

January 13, 2005


Tony Kamphuis

I once heard a Christian leader address the question of "modernism," "postmodernism" and the Christian, and he wanted us to ally ourselves with Athens (his symbol of modernism) over against Babylon (his symbol of postmodernism). That seems wrong-headed to me. We need to use the normative insights of each one to help us intelligently address the other, but in the long run we are going to say, "A pox on all your houses," at least in terms of their ultimate starting points. That being said, there seems much to learn from both these traditions. Would we be bold enough to try and guide our students into that sort of analysis? Or is it safer to stick with a here's-how-the-Bible-shows-that-these- people-are-wrong strategy?
Tony

January 14, 2005

I agree with you, Tony, that we need to use the "normative insights" (if such a term can be used in this postmodern world) of each worldview to our advantage, just as Paul did on Mars Hill. He latched on to connecting points and then presented his alternative. Is relativism the absolute of postmodernism? Then we need to show our students that ultimately relativism leads to chaos; that is why God has given us norms and laws. Do we generally deconstruct other worldviews until we finally reach meaning? We need to deconstruct postmodernism as well and show how it leads to despair. Is there despair because modernism has not delivered us the utopia we ultimately hoped for? Is there hopelessness because modernity has brought us world wars, the nuclear threat, environmental disasters, and the AIDS pandemic? We need to show by our walk and talk that we honor the earth since it belongs to God; we respect our fellow man and we suffer with him for the sake of Christ; we honor our bodies because we're created in God's image; we have hope since we are not living for ourselves. Our eternal bliss is yet to come. Is the postmodern individual looking for life-style enclaves, as Stanley Grenz puts it? We have a community that serves, loves and points beyond itself to the ultimate Servant, who has shown us that to lose our life is to gain it. If we look to the early church and live that ancient faith, we can point our students to the future with confidence because ultimately God is in control. All these facets of postmodernism can be used in our favor! We have much reason to encourage our students to reach for the hope we have in Christ, who is the anchor of our soul, who is the Truth, who gives our life purpose. Many books have now been written about the Christian's role in these postmodern times. God's Holy Spirit has promised to lead us into all truth. If our students see our joyful, hope-filled walk, we don't at times even have to use words.
Johanna

The panel consists of:

Pam Adams (padams@dordt.edu), professor of education and director of graduate education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

Lois Brink (LBrink@grcs.org), curriculum coordinator and media director at Grand Rapids Christian High School, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Johanna Campbell (ctabc@twu.ca), executive director of the Christian Teachers Association of British Columbia, Langley, B.C.

Agnes Fisher (agnesfisher@easternchristian.org) is a teacher of English, Humanities and Art at Eastern Christian High School, North Haledon, New Jersey.

Tony Kamphuis (TonyKamp@aol.com), executive director of the Niagara Association for Christian Education. He lives in Smithville, Ont.

How level is your outhouse?

by Bert Witvoet

According to the Christian gospel, all human beings are fatally flawed and need to be rescued. It's not a popular teaching for those who consider themselves basically good or, at least, good enough to earn some brownie points with God or with their own conscience.

I can well understand why people not immersed in the teachings of the Bible cringe at the thought that our human condition is in a state of crisis. It can't be as bad as that! Isn't Plato right when he describes our condition as a carriage pulled by two horses that want to go in opposite directions? We are a mixed bag of goodness and evil and thousands of shades in between, aren't we? Read today's newspaper. I predict that you will find good-news and bad-news stories in it. So what's all this stuff about needing to be saved that Christians talk about?

The difficulty here, as I see it, is that we often think and talk exclusively at the psychological level. Ever since Sigmund Freud, we have begun to evaluate our moral status in terms of the self and our feelings. And while doing that, we often compare ourselves to others. But Scripture, when it talks about our moral condition, uses spiritual, not psychological categories. When we evaluate at the psychological level, we use emotional gauges and often take our own experience as the measuring stick: "I'm not such a bad person, especially when I compare myself with others." When we engage in spiritual evaluation, using God's will as it is expressed in Scripture as the measuring tape, we soon come to the conclusion that we are not so hot after all. God is holy. God is perfect in goodness and beauty. God is Love. God expects the same from us. But none of us measures up. And whether we fail by an inch or a country mile, it doesn't really matter in this spiritual business — we all fall short of the glory of God, and we are stuck, unless God steps in to save us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let me illustrate this idea with a modern-day parable. Let's say that the Kingdom of God is like a person who has been asked to enter a competition. That person is you. The goal of the competition is to see how far you can throw a stone.

There is someone else in the competition — an Olympic athlete who the year before won a gold medal in discus throwing. What chance do you have to win that competition? But wait, the rules of the game are somewhat unusual: The object of the competition is not to see who can throw the farthest but to see who can throw a stone onto the surface of the moon. Now the fact that you are up against an Olympian athlete is irrelevant. Neither of you can throw that far. Both of you will lose the competition.

And so it is with our spiritual status in life. Some of us may be a little or a lot more righteous than others, but none of us can pass the test of holiness that God demands of us. We all fall short of the glory of God, even the so-called saints.

The bad news for self-improvement moralists is that you can't be a little fallen from grace, just like you can't be a little pregnant. You are either pregnant or you aren't. And you are either fallen, or you aren't. The gospel message makes sense only if you start out by confessing that you are hopelessly mired in sin. This is not a put-down doctrine. It's a descriptive doctrine that puts us all at the same level. People who deeply believe this are not astonished by evil, for example. They see themselves as spiritually no better than the worst criminal. You and I need salvation just as much. Thank God it's available to everyone.

My former pastor gave an enlightening example of how using an imperfect measuring device wreaks havoc on our lives. He decided to build himself an outhouse near his cottage. He had no level, and his neighbor's shed was locked. So he improvised. He took a measuring cup with a line all around it, filled it with water and used it to see whether his structure was level. He was rather proud of his own ingenuity. But when it came time to add the fourth wall to his outhouse, he couldn't make it fit, and adding a roof to it was a total disaster. A few days later, when his neighbor was around again and let him use a real level, he right away saw how far out of square his outhouse had been.

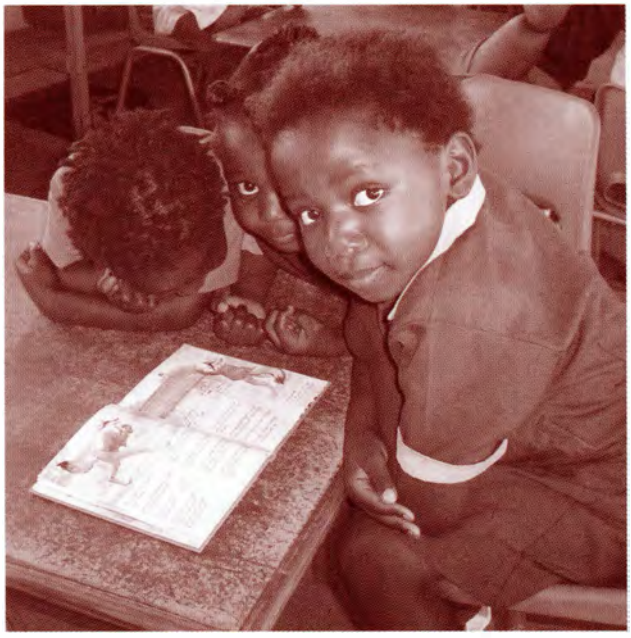
And, so, it all depends on whether we use God's good will for our lives to determine whether we are good or bad, or whether we use social and psychological measuring sticks. In the end, though, the truth about our spiritual status will come out. If you believe, as I do, that there is a judgment day coming, then you will know *that* is the time the fourth wall and roof are added to our structure. Our flawed human nature will be exposed to the full light of day. ej

Book Aid for South Africa's Christian Schools

by Deborah Meroff

Ms. Meroff (deborahmeroff@aol.com) is an American journalist based in London, England, who for the last nineteen years has written primarily about developments in world missions. A few months ago, while on assignment in South Africa, she happened to stay with a committed Christian librarian from Tasmania, named Linda Abblitt. When she found out what Linda was doing there, she believed it was the kind of human interest story that might encourage others in the field of Christian education.

When librarian Linda Abblitt of Tasmania, Australia, first explored the idea of putting her skills to work in the mission field, she found herself overwhelmed by options. Hundreds of Bible schools and theological colleges, mission centers and international schools worldwide, it seemed, were eager to improve their library resources! Eventually she decided that she could serve the most people by training others to "drive" what she sets in motion. And that's precisely what she has done over the last ten years. Linda has reorganized and computerized dozens of existing libraries — or else started them from scratch — and then trained people who could stay long-term to run them. Each project has taken six to eighteen months.



South Africa calling

In 2001 Linda's consultation work led to conducting library workshops at the All-Africa Educators' Conference in Pretoria, South Africa. When she asked participants in one class why they were there, every person present stated they wanted to learn how to set up a library in their school! Linda was to learn that, of South Africa's 27,000-plus primary and secondary schools, fewer than 20% had libraries. In fact, 28% had no running water, 45% no electricity, and 35% no telephone! It was an eye-opener. The words on a poster, "Readers Become Leaders," kept coming to mind. God seemed to be impressing Linda that if the current generation of children in Christian schools had no books, future leadership in South Africa's churches would suffer. She decided she had to do something.

During her next break at home in Tasmania, Linda managed to collect one ton of children's books to send to South African schools. Theoretically, donated books aren't supposed to be charged customs, but bureaucracy has its own ways, and it took perseverance to see the books successfully to their destination.

But this project, while helpful, wasn't enough. The Lord spoke to Linda through another friend, asking her to consider returning to South Africa. Further prayer over the next months, while she set up a new library in Central Asia, confirmed God's direction. So Linda moved to Pretoria in 2004, joining the OM team there, and began to make a list of Christian schools in the country. Her research turned up about 200. A survey to each of them asked, among other things, if they had a library, or wanted one. All of the 100 or so schools that responded had below the minimum standard of 2,000 books plus ten to fifteen per student. In addition, few students even had access to public libraries.

The partner plan

Linda identified fifty schools with an English-based curriculum that had no library at all, in South Africa's poorest areas. Her next step was to send out hundreds of letters to Christian schools in the USA with a student body of over 400, inviting them to partner with a needy target school, and contribute books.

So far she has had a dozen positive responses. A principal from Chico Christian School in California wrote: "We have an extensive library, and I have a dear friend who was a missionary in Africa for some time, so my heart leapt at your message! We would LOVE the opportunity to partner with you in this endeavor!"

Other letters came from Colorado, Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana and Texas. The Head of Imani School in Houston responded excitedly, "God placed it in my spirit a number of years ago to partner with a school in South Africa, but I had no clue as to how to begin. This is an answer to prayer. Our school is eager to participate in helping to build the libraries and [participate in] the cultural exchange which will also ensue. Count us in!"

With the formation of each partnership, Linda victoriously pinpoints the location on her map of South Africa. She hopes to find partners in Australia as well. One of her goals is for the children in each country to learn more about each other. She is even

encouraging some of the American librarians to use their holidays to visit African partners. Linda herself has started travelling to all of the target schools to monitor progress and train library staff.

Recently she visited Nazarene School in Limpopo province. The principal eagerly showed Linda their start at a "library" that contained less than 100 books for 450 children. The school struggles along with few textbooks and none of the usual visual aids, posters, or basic playground equipment. The woman almost cried when she saw the books that Linda had brought with her.

Another project is to help schools and orphanages find resources for non-English speakers. A non-profit organization in Cape Town called Biblionef specializes in distributing books in South African languages. Children can "earn" these books by doing community service, such as helping the sick or tending gardens.

Linda very much experiences her dependence on the Lord to make this project a success. The "flack" she receives from the enemy, such as illness or misunderstandings, is a regular reminder that he is not happy with her objectives.

Want to Serve in South Africa?

Theocentric Christian College in South Africa is looking for a couple who could serve as school managers for one academic year. The couple would fill the positions; while the full-time managers of the above mentioned institutions serve in Australia and Russia during their sabbatical year.

The couple will occupy the homestead of the principal and his wife and also have use of their vehicles, phones and tools, all of which they must maintain. They will also receive remuneration.

Post 1. Principal of Theocentric Christian College
Applicants must have more than three years experience in Christian Education on Senior School Management level — such as the position of principal, vice principal, administrator, head of department.

Post 2. Manager /Educator at Maestro Kids pre-primary

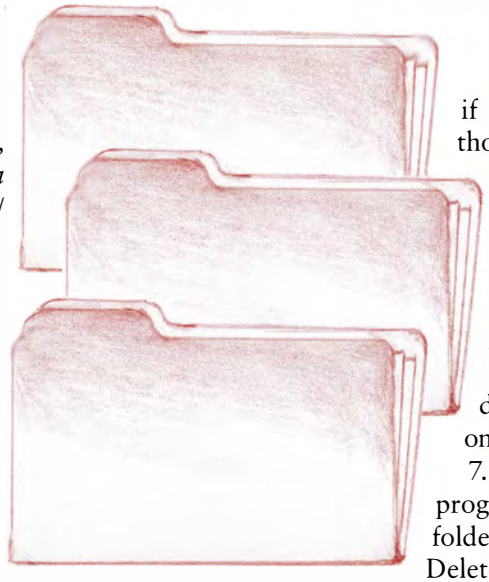
The applicants must have a qualification in pre-primary education and have more than three years experience in this field.

About the institutions:

Theocentric Christian College is a school with more than 500 learners from preschool to grade 12. TCC is located on two campuses in the Venda and Tsonga tribal trust lands, one in Bungeni and one in Matsila. The learners are from two racial groups — the Vendas and Tsongas. The first language at TCC is English and the second language is Afrikaans (African Dutch). The approach is from a Christian Reformation worldview. Theocentric Christian College belongs to the Theocentric Association for Christian Education. (TACE). More information about Theocentric Christian College can be obtained from Jim Vreugdenhil, Lee Hollaar (B.C.) Marc & Dora Stroobosscher, Diana Bruinsveld, and Wilma Wierenga, all of whom have visited the school (Contact the office of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools).

Maestro Kids pre-primary school is a private institution. It has an enrollment of about 20 learners. The age of the learners ranges between 2 - 5 years. It also runs a program for mentally and physically disabled learners. Although it is a private institution, it does get support from NGOs (not financial) because it provides services to the community. Organizations that support it are the Rotaries, Round table and Ladies circle. Maestro Kids is located in the town of Louis Trichardt, where the Pienaars live. Herman Pienaar is principal of Theocentric Christian College and Mariè Pienaar is owner and manager of Maestro Kids.

How to Organize Your e-mail



by Robyn Pearce

Robyn Pearce, of TimeLogic Corporation, has helped thousands of folks in "Getting a grip on their time." Visit http://www.gettingagripontime.com for FREE subscription to her e-mail that includes "how-to" practical time management assistance, books, tapes, products, and more.

1. Treat your e-mail system like a filing cabinet. Set up folders for every major topic of interest, and sub-folders under key headings. To create, highlight the heading under which you want the new folder placed. Then right-click, New Folder, and give a name.

2. Never leave read mail in your Inbox for more than a few days. Treat it as you should handle paper on your desk — if it's worth keeping move it into a named folder by a click/hold/drag action.

3. Develop a low tolerance for a mailbox where you can't see blank space at the bottom of the page. In most Inboxes, that gives you about 12-15 messages to look at, although the size of your Mailbox can be altered by clicking on the line in the middle of the page and dragging the line up or down to suit your needs.

4. Be prepared to shift mail of long-term interest to folders unread, and schedule in reading time. One could be entitled "Newsletters to read," and another one called "Web research to do." This saves you getting distracted, (a common challenge once we start scrolling) and you can do your "further education" at a less busy time.

5. Something you mustn't forget, and you're scared you'll lose sight of it if shifted to an "Action Pending" file. There are two options, depending on whether you're visual or not. If you feel happy to get it out of the Inbox as long as you can find it again when you need it, use your contact management system or diary of whatever sort (as long as you're using them regularly) to put an alert on the date you want to do the action and where you've filed the message. The electronic systems are the most reliable — they annoy the heck out of you until you do something with them! The other option, if you're seriously visual and panic at the thought of shifting mail out of sight before it's acted on, is to leave mail in your Inbox that still needs attention, but keep it minimal. If you've developed the sense of discomfort we talked about in Point 3, this will help to drive you to action, and reduce procrastination.

6. Be ruthless about deleting e-mails you don't need. Remember — they're usually only an alternative to a quick phone message.

7. Unless you have installed a default, most programs don't automatically empty the Delete folder. Many people think an item dragged into Delete is gone. It's not. You almost always have to instruct it to Trash or Empty. With modern equipment, a right-click gives you that option.

8. Store sent mail as well as received items in your folders, putting "like with like" as you would file paper in a filing cabinet.

9. If it is important to keep a full record of correspondence, save your Reply rather than the incoming message. Then both parts of the story are together. The quickest way is to develop the habit of going to the Sent box as soon as you've dispatched an important posting, and dragging it immediately into the relevant folder.

10. Every month empty your Sent box for as far back as you're comfortable to delete. Click, hold, and drag any really important messages and delete the rest. I keep only two months worth of messages. Most of it will be rubbish by that time. ej

Query

Gentleness and Love in Student Discipline

Tena Siebenga-Valstar is a principal at Fort McMurray Christian School, Alberta. We encourage teachers and principals to submit questions for this column, even if they think they know the answer. Send your questions to Dr. Tena Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta., T9H 4R2, or e-mail her at tvalstar@telus.net.

Discipline is guidance

Question # 1.

Our principal seems a little too "easy going" when it comes to discipline. She claims it is because she wants to "move every student forward," and she wants to be an "agent of reconciliation." I think some of our more manipulative students are taking advantage of the situation, but what can I do about it?

Response:

As I reflect on this situation, one of my questions is, "Who is the 'I' asking the question?" As in all differences of opinion, we come to each situation with our own background and experience. I will respond as if the questioner is a classroom teacher who has a concern about one of her own students. One of the concerns most teachers have regards the practice and policy of discipline. Most want the assurance that what they believe about discipline is consistent with the practice in the school.

Discipline comes from the word disciple. A disciple is one who follows, and, in the case of Christian education, that means students, staff and administration following Jesus Christ. Discipline, then, should encourage students to be followers of Christ and should involve guiding the students on the right path. Initially we see it as a preventative measure rather than as a punishment.

Although I trust you work communally within your school so that your classroom practice of discipline is consistent with that of the school, you may want to look at your classroom practices and examine them to see how they encourage students to walk in Jesus' steps. Is your classroom one in which love and trust prevails among students and between student and teacher? Is it a place where students are free of fear? In 1 John 2:18 we read: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

If we are honest with ourselves, we will find that we are all fearful of something. A student who is fearful is in a vulnerable place in the classroom. "Fear always seeks an object. If I feel insecure in myself, I will almost always find some scapegoat for my fear, someone or something that I can turn into an object of my fear and then my anger" (Vanier, 1998, p.73). Greene indicates that, because of our sinful nature, we learn to practice our independence of God. Students "come to school with fears, and the pressure of the competitive classroom and their critical peers tend only to deepen those fears" (Greene, 1998, p. 241).

Teachers can, in cooperation with their students, put guidelines in place so that the classroom is a place where students are built up and encouraged to become all what God intends them to be. Posting these guidelines in a prominent place in the classroom allows both the teacher and the students to make reference to them. This encourages students to take responsibility for their own actions and, in a relatively easy way, point their classmates to the guidelines as well. At the same time students can formulate consequences that are fair and just should the classroom guidelines not be followed. The class may decide on communal classroom action, or they or the teacher may decide on action to be taken by the teacher. You as a teacher must remember that loving your students is "learning to discipline them faithfully, consistently and sensibly" (Vander Ark, 1995, p.56).

Discipline also involves chastening or correcting (2 Timothy 2:24-25, 1 Corinthians 11:32, Hebrews 12:5-11). All children need to be held accountable, even those who may be experiencing a difficult home life. This may involve more talking with the student, so that the student feels understood. Our own experience of God's grace in our lives allows us to realize our weaknesses and short-comings. I daily have to be reminded of this as I deal with students who are going against the grain and ask myself, "What can I do to promote healing?"

You make reference to manipulation. I believe you have to deal with your own students first and try, to the best of your ability, to discern if manipulation is occurring in your classroom. If you must involve the principal, if your school policy asks for that, then she is also accountable to follow the school policy. If you have followed school policy, you should be able to count on her support.

I believe the picture painted is one of a classroom where reconciliation can occur. Open and honest communication between teacher and principal can also promote reconciliation as together you lead your student in Christ's way.

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and Colleague Correction

Tena Siebinga-Valstar

Correcting each other

Question #2

How can a teacher respectfully correct another teacher's grammar? I often see other teachers making errors on the board and am uncertain how to talk to them about it without seeming snotty.

Response:

This is not an easy question to answer, other than to say it must be done in gentleness and love. As Palmer says, "When teaching is reduced to technique, we shrink teachers as well as their craft — and people do not willingly return to a conversation that diminishes them (1998, p. 145). Possibly the better question to ask is how can we together improve our teaching? Teaching is often a private enterprise, and, although we teach in front of students, we seldom teach in front of our colleagues. Often others do not know what or how we teach. "Good talk about good teaching is what we need — to enhance both our professional practice and the selfhood from which it comes" (Palmer, p. 144). If we are willing to take the time to have real conversations about teaching over an extended period of time, I believe we would build up the kind of trust relationship where we can be honest with one another. Through this talk about teaching we may reveal our times of joy and our times of frustration, our strengths and our inadequacies, our successes and our challenges, and even our difficulties with grammar or spelling.

A good educational leader will intentionally schedule times to invite the staff to discuss teaching issues, construction of units from a Christian perspective, student evaluation, classroom management and discipline. Teachers planning together, team-teaching units, or having opportunities to observe one another are ways to improve one's practice. To encourage discussion a principal may take a class so that a teacher can observe a colleague teaching. This is a wonderful opportunity to discuss what contributes to good teaching both between the teachers involved and between the principal and teacher for whom he taught. In all our conversation about our teaching, I believe we must follow the biblical directive: "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4: 1b - 3).

Bibliography: Palmer, P. (1998). *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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Please make sure that all camera-ready ads are e-mailed as PDF files to the editor before the following due dates:

October Issue — August 15
December Issue — October 15
February Issue — December 15
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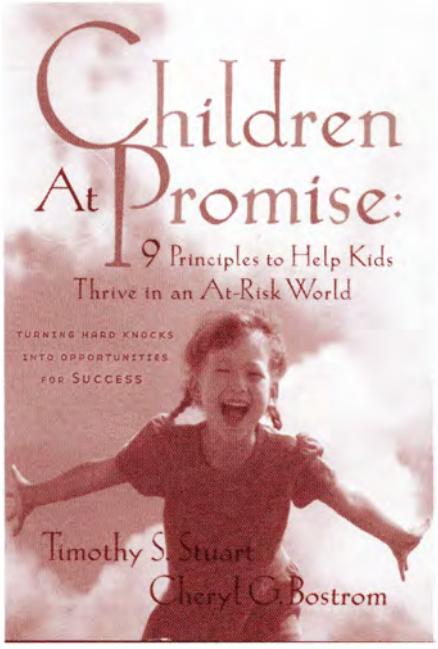
Pain as Pedagogy

Timothy S. Stuart and Cheryl G. Bostrom, *Children at Promise: Nine Principles to Help Kids Thrive in an At-Risk World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (a Wiley Imprint). 2003, 163 pages plus 16 pages of guide to study, and notes.
Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Retired)

The life and energy of *Children at Promise* derive from the immersion of the authors in the lives of children. Both have extensive experience as educators and resource persons. Stuart is a high school principal at Rehoboth Christian School and Bostrom has taught and mentored both junior and high school students in both public and private Christian schools. The authors remind us of much that we forget at various points in our lives and relationships.

Their focus is sound. Every child — no matter to what dereliction or fecklessness they may at times succumb — retains the image of God, however at times that image may be obscured. Other grounds for responding to such misery as may befall them will provide only temporary respite: critical tolerance and shallow optimism of the self-esteem movement, for example. Educators, parents, mentors must habituate themselves to look beyond what seems incorrigible behavior and attitudes and build on the true nature with which the child has been endowed.



Building on this basis for identity, the authors organize their discourse in terms of the paradigm — and acronym — they define as AT PROMISE. We begin with Adversity and Trust; we proceed next to these seven character traits: Perseverance, Responsibility, Optimism, Motivation, Integrity, Service and Engaged Play. They develop each chapter with lively details and case histories. Their hope is that their book will enable all those involved in the rearing of children to view their responsibilities in a more positive light than we find people doing in contemporary culture.

The first two themes — Adversity and Trust — shape the work throughout and need to be examined closely. They contend that no child will come to maturity without experiencing "interpreted adversity." It is a mistake, they tell us, to shield children from "useful hurt." Overprotecting our children does them a disservice. Adversity, often accompanied by pain, provides the resistance to which the child must respond if he is to come to maturity. Pain and adversity constitute "essential components in a child's positive development...." The normal circumstances of life are not sufficiently challenging: "Children need experiences that evoke frustration, failure, disappointment, anger, and worry." (119) That child is not to be envied who grows up without struggles or hardships of some kind. Of course, the child is not expected to navigate through these perilous adventures all by himself. Here is where the wise and trustworthy adult counselor comes into the picture. He must help the child use pain as character-building pedagogy.

Anyone who has observed life keenly can enumerate situations which prove the rightness of this formula. And they are right in saying that a given disaster can make one more fit to deal with additional disasters. But one needs to ask whether people learn life's lessons because of life's distresses or in spite of them? The authors seem to me to be pushing too hard in the direction of romanticizing what are often life-crushing burdens — divorces (some children, they say, make satisfactory adjustments to the new situation which develops), poverty, abuses, an atmosphere of fear in the home, deprivations which impede normal development. So, as for adversity, they say, bring it on. You can't grow up without it.

To be sure, these authors recommend the resources of divine grace for resolution of catastrophes — and concede that some of them may not be resolved in this life. Still, I find them a bit sanguine about adversity. In the best of all possible worlds, the qualities of perseverance, optimism, motivation, identity and the rest would not require disasters to promote character.

Does the child have to experience every form of adversity first-hand? The authors refer very appropriately to the novel *Les Miserables* as a model for how we should treat people. But they need to write a whole chapter on the power of literature — novels, poetry, plays — to provide vicarious experience which can powerfully shape character and direction for life. As Sir Philip Sidney observes in his treatise on the subject, one can learn from literature, and learn safely.

One more reservation: it is unusual for people involved in Christian education to endorse the views of Rousseau and Dewey without appropriate reservations about their philosophies.

Stuart and Bostrom have come to this meaningful conclusion — overshadowing the reservations I have just outlined: "Neither disadvantages nor advantages, neither risks nor protection from risks seem to be sole predictors of whether or not young people will grow up to make positive contributions to their societies." (2) And their study guide makes the book accessible for many a lively discussion. ej

Faith Formations

John Van Engen, editor, *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans. 2004, 350 pages.
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What an ambitious project! And what competence, insight, and diligence it demonstrates by contemporary historians of older religious manuscripts, many of which have only recently come to light. Fifteen scholars — Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox — report how their respective communities of faith sought to enfold the young, but the adults as well, into the beliefs and practices of their religious fellowship. Editor Van Engen, in a magisterial introduction, states the assignment of the essayists: to describe "...distinct communities of belief and practice animated by transcendent allegiances, and the assimilation of peoples over time into that collective life." (26) The book is divided into three sections: "Early Synagogue and Church," "The Middle Ages," and "The Reformation Era."

The essays, collectively, put forward a number of pedagogical paradigms which, though not necessarily practical on a day-to-day basis, can be ultimately useful for teachers, clergy, and lay practitioners of the various faiths. I cite some examples. Should religious formation be directed to personal piety, or to integration into the faith community? What proportion of religious training needs to be carried on in the home, and what matters need to be relegated to professionals and clergy? How important is the environment, in its most comprehensive sense, in the formation of the young mind, as well as for the adults (the whitewashed, stripped-down interior of Zwingli's church, for example, contrasted with the pervading symbolism of an Eastern Orthodox sanctuary, with its icons, art, liturgical protocol, and the rest?)

Collective practices

With great skill, observing the highest standards of historical scholarship, the essayists present their materials objectively and fairly, with the intent, not of winning adherents to their cause, but of imparting a greater understanding of the religious practices which bound — and still bind — adherents of the differing fellowships committed to beliefs anchored in transcendence, beliefs which shape life here and now and provide a vision for the future. I can do little more than suggest the basic theses of these essays.

Robert Goldenberg studies three bodies of ancient materials — the writings of Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and early Rabbinical texts. These have in common the formation of the sage — not the saint — as they uphold the ideal of continuing mastery of all but unattainable ideals of understanding. Beginning with Moses, and Sinai, these early writers wrestled with divine revelation, the Torah, and the rabbis of their own time. Religious fulfillment is achieved only in a holy community. Interestingly, these practitioners ignored the pedagogy of children. They and their families were on their own. But, as it turns out, it was the mass of common Jews who carried on the tradition of Judaism, rather than the elite adults in pursuit of holiness.

Robert Louis Wilken traces the indebtedness of the Christian tradition to the Hebrew and the classical legacy. The Hebrews provided the theological underpinnings of spiritual formation. The classicists talked about the supreme good, defined virtues as having ends beyond themselves, explained the importance of maxims, habit, and discipline. The early Christians — Basil and Origen among them — supplemented, supplanted, and transformed this dual legacy. And they had much to say about pedagogy. The children must learn the Bible stories — but the teachers must tell them, not only read them. The affections — heart and will — were given their due beyond what the classicists assigned them.

Edifying the faithful

John C. Cavadini's essay gives Augustine high marks for the rhetorical skills which he used to edify his hearers in his preaching. His commentaries develop the implications of the faith. But in his preaching he accommodated himself to his hearers — not condescendingly, but in an earnest attempt to clarify: "He rhetorically positions himself and his audiences as embarked upon a joint venture of inquiry." (75) A Caesarius, of Arles, by contrast, though he admired Augustine's plain style and imitated it, saw his hearers not as participants but as children and dullards. Such contrasts help us distinguish genius from mediocrity.

Stanley Harakas opens the second section by demonstrating the power of incarnational pedagogy. In the world of Byzantium, literature, law, and architecture — all based on a Christian world view — were held to be profound shaping influences on the child, who initially undergoes the rituals of baptism, chrismation, and first communion. Home schooling early spilled out into private

schools — especially for the elite — and all instruction, until the 14th century, at least, was inspired and formed by a Christian agenda. Michael A. Signer deals with the idealization of education in the early years of pre-modern Judaism. People obviously had to earn a livelihood, but people of faith should never lose their passion for studying the Torah. They took seriously the mandate of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, that they were to be intimately involved in the teaching of their children.

Socio-historical data

Editor John Van Engen provides one of my favorite essays. How can we tell what went on in those thousands of parishes, sites which mapped Europe "into a grid of sacred spaces forming people into local communities..." (152) We do know that on a given Sunday people were worshipping in their parishes and, by so doing, affirming the centrality of that institution in their lives — often by coercion. But the people had choices of activities beyond the parish — ranging from going to hear visiting preachers, developing the cult of saints, para-religious societies, and the highly attractive progression of the art of drama, beginning in the church and spreading out into the streets. Eventually people began to write and read literary compositions (cf. *Piers Plowman* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*) and other forms of literature.

Elliot R. Wolfson deals with the question raised by elitist scholars about how to exercise stewardship over the deep religious truths of the community. They would say that, ideally, this wisdom should never be written down; it should be transmitted "from the mouth of a kabbalistic sage to an ear that receives." Once it is sent into the world in writing, it can no longer be controlled and becomes subject to misinterpretation. However, the practical problem of human forgetfulness sometimes compelled them to preserve these truths in writing. But it is Wolfson's larger purpose to show that, in their oral deliberations, these mystical fraternities were all the while exegeting the biblical texts.

Joseph Goering traces the development of parish practices from the beginning to the end of the 13th century. The earlier priests were expected to do little more than preserve the culture, as a man of the local community — to preside over the rituals and ceremonies of the church. As the century progressed, distant authorities demanded more in the way of literacy, including preaching and teaching. The earlier, less-structured decades allowed for greater initiatives on the part of the family, community, and laity. When some of the practices launched during this period were declared superstitions and magic by the learned regime later in the decade, the middle ages had come to an end.

Radical turning

We come now to the Reformation essays — David C. Steinmetz on Luther, Lee Palmer Wandel on Zwingli, and Robert M. Kingdon on Calvin's use of the Catechism. These will fill in many a gap to us novice historians. All three essays speak to the awesome accomplishments of these reformers; it was like turning a battleship around. People had not only to be taught the "Reformed" way of thinking, but needed help in unlearning the old, erroneous approaches to the Christian faith.

Steinmetz indicates how Luther based his defense of reformational principles by appeal to antiquity — the early years of the Christian era — before the man-made practices, requirements, and mendacity had attached themselves like barnacles to a ship. Luther, of course, had much to say about many things — including proper rules for penance, pedagogy, and the role of the catechism in formation of the young. Palmer, in his essay on Zwingli, shows how church and the town council converged to make the city what we would call a theocracy. Education was seen as a matter of religious obligation — the more one knows the more one can bring to the text (and the experience of communion), and the better one can discern God's will for life. Calvin did in Geneva what Zwingli did in Zurich. The old order had to go into exile, and a handful of men had to replace what hundreds did before the Reformation. Many were immigrants. Very early Calvin insisted that the resources of the home were not sufficient for a child's formation. For one thing, one could never be sure whether the parents had sufficiently transformed their own thinking. But for all, attendance at church and participation in communion were essential, not only as believers, but as conditions for citizenship. And for the children, the catechism was of prime importance in forming the young mind. Kingdon observes that by 1564 most Genevans had received religious instruction in catechism classes while they were children.

Philip M. Soergel introduces his essay with the account of George Whitefield's dismay at the grotesqueries of the religious processions he observed while visiting Lisbon. He then explains how the Council of Trent had spoken to such problems — setting new guidelines, curbing excesses, but also legitimizing the continuing use of a wide array of popular religious practices. Thus, despite the coercive power of the state, penitents combined old and new expressions of their convictions in their attempts to deal with their fallen natures.

In the concluding essay, Lawrence S. Cunningham traces the role of mentoring in Christian formation — both vertical, from superior to inferior, to horizontal, friendship between equals. The tradition is long and unbroken, with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessing a flowering of writings providing leadership in the art of encouragement. Gregory said it well: "The direction of souls is the heart of the arts." Modern life has introduced complications in the art of spiritual leadership. It can go badly, and wrong, and can be harmful when attempted by amateur psychologists. And sometimes there is no substitute for competent therapy. The essays in this book not only represent a high level of historical writing, but deal with a subject of immense significance, nothing less than the transmission of beliefs which even today can risk martyrdom.