

Education for the Kingdom of God “Toward Magnanimity”

Ronald Kirk
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Education constitutes far more than our generation generally allows. Educational goals ought to result from well-defined *life* goals. However, due to human nature coupled with prevailing views of the Faith today, Christians have tended to settle self-indulgently for far less of the adventurous and abundant life than Christ intended. Christians must return to the Biblical standard for man’s character and accomplishment. We must in turn, make that standard the object of education in the Christian home and school.

Education reflects life aspirations

Sinful human nature is essentially lazy and self-centered. In the absence of want or external force, we tend to indulge the desires of the flesh (Romans 13:14). God imposed the economy of difficulty at man’s fall and ejected man from the Garden for just this reason (Genesis 3). Imagine infinite ease for sin-infested man. Infinite ease and leisure tend to produce infinitely sinful self-indulgence.

The Lord prospered the hardworking piety of early Americans such as the Pilgrims, the Puritans, the Scottish Presbyterians and many others. However, as the Lord prophesied to Israel in Deuteronomy 28, prosperity brought decline as Americans increasingly turned to Europe’s worldly fashions, thought and culture. Many adopted Unitarianism. Secularization fathered the abject materialism of the Gilded Age and the Twentieth Century. Our great material wealth and socialistic removal of economic consequences have removed much of the external incentive to rise above the crowd.

Furthermore, no great Christian movement has yet effectively resolved America’s materialism. Indeed, political liberalism is now mainstream, and even influences otherwise conservative evangelical Christians. Today rights are *entitlements*, not what is right under God’s Law, the standard of His benign rule. Working in Christian schools, I have often found a mentality for entitlement to be so deeply ingrained that psychological and socialistic principles practically displace the clear Biblical principles of personal responsibility and covenantal free association. Rather than encouraging work by faith until Christ brings the success of achievement, parents would rather protect their child from the experience of that process which best teaches faith, while simultaneously demanding success for the child from the teacher—requiring in effect an outcome-based education. Such conduct (without condemnation, for there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus) defies the Biblical requirement to train obedience and the capacity for faith in children, and is a form of idolatry.

Christians now often refuse to live for great accomplishment because we see earthly life as solely a queue for eternity. Without greater purpose in *this* life, we tend to adopt worldly fashions and morals or exact arbitrary standards of external holiness. Passive entertainments consume our hours. It is far easier to live the adventure of life vicariously through movie characters, than actually to hazard our comfort and security for some higher purpose and greater accomplishment. Alternatively, we may strive merely to provide a living and make ourselves secure and comfortable. In any case, with the absence of a purpose born of Biblical conviction, Christians make little impact on the world for the gospel and inhibit our own actual growth in holiness.

Educational practices reflect our essential aspirations. Successful contemporary Christian education encourages personal devotion and perhaps a missionary or evangelical sensibility—laudable ends certainly. Many schools stress high intellectual accomplishment as an end in itself. However, without an articulate vision of how life ought to be, life remains essentially irrelevant or of essentially selfish purpose by default. We may thus either ooze into the complacent life of the masses or strive to become

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part of the accomplished elite, neither with much real capacity for compassionate service to Christ in all life’s ordinary and extraordinary spheres.

The Biblical pattern

Awareness of our condition prepares us for the remedy. The Bible determines the appropriate goal for education, which is Christ’s goal for mankind: Christ-likeness in character and readiness to live. Rather than settle for normal education—the mere reproduction of current culture—the Biblical view aims for the way things ought to be according to God’s power of redemption and sanctification.

From the time of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13), we recognize godly men and women by their magnanimity in deed. From the outset of His ministry Jesus made it clear that our lives belong to God and not ourselves. We are to lay down our lives for His sake (Matthew 10:39). The Beatitudes define selfless people who find their reward in successful relationships—in moral and eternal terms. We are to be merciful, pure in heart and peace makers (Matthew 5). “Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be added” (Matthew 6:33). We are to be a living sacrifice—dead to self, alive to Christ (Romans 12:1). Furthermore, Paul the Apostle says we are saved for works to walk in (Ephesians 2:10).

The terms *magnanimity*, *nobility* and *heroism* aptly embrace the Biblical character and accomplishment. It is difficult to improve upon Noah Webster’s definition of magnanimity from his 1828 dictionary:¹

Greatness of mind; that elevation or dignity of soul, which encounters danger and trouble with tranquility and firmness, which raises the possessor above revenge, and makes him delight in acts of benevolence, which makes him disdain injustice and meanness, and prompts him to sacrifice personal ease, interest and safety for the accomplishment of useful and noble objects.

Webster’s first and most basic definition for *nobility* declares “Dignity of mind; greatness; grandeur; that elevation of soul which comprehends bravery, generosity, magnanimity, intrepidity, and contempt of every thing that dishonors character.” In the Middle Ages, people originally submitted to feudal nobles because they recognized individual virtue in the nobleman sufficient to warrant such a trust of power. King Alfred the Great of England is an example of such a nobleman. Alfred, the only “Great” king of England, was a man of distinguished accomplishment and of impeccable character. Historian John Lord said of Alfred,

It was a strong sense of duty, quickened by a Christian life, which gave the character of Alfred its peculiar radiance. He felt his responsibilities as a Christian ruler. He was affable, courteous, accessible. His body was frail and delicate, but his energies were never relaxed. Pride and haughtiness were unknown in his intercourse with bishops or nobles. He had no striking defects. He was a model of a man and a king; and he left the impress of his genius on all the subsequent institutions of his country.”²

(This definition opposes the term applied to people of inherited rank apart from personal merit. However virtuous the nobility of later times may have been in the cause of chivalry, greed, conceit, arrogance and bigotry marred Biblical nobility’s ideal.)

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The term *heroism*, though of Greek origin—a hero was a demigod—yet remains an apt term as the Christian heritage has redefined it. Webster says heroism is “The qualities of a hero; bravery; courage; intrepidity; particularly in war.” Early America defined the hero first in its history, and then in its literature. A hero is disinterested, modest, and self-restrained. He is meek—restrains personal power—except when needed to assist or protect the weak. The hero perseveres in difficulty and is never discouraged. He accepts danger and privation with cheerfulness. He is never peevish or sullen. Clearly, these attributes reflect the Scriptures description of the *fruit of the spirit* and of *agapé* (Ephesians 6 and 1 Corinthians 13). James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo of the *Leather-Stocking Tales* is a typical example. Even Superman, though a reversion to the Greek view and reflecting a modern abject dependency on experts and other human saviors, retains many of the qualities of the Christian hero. The Biblical view aims to form heroes generally among the saints, by the power of the Holy Spirit. A community of such selfless and courageous saints will suffer little want and will eschew a disposition to consumption and dependency.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17). One of the great fruits of historic magnanimity is America’s capacity for self-government and institutional liberty. Liberty works when people practice self-restraint; that is, they need little external coercive force to do what is right. Such self-restraint upon the ground of a magnanimous character is manifestly the chief attribute required to support liberty. In addition, wisdom associated with nobility protects free institutions, as it stands vigilantly against corrupting ideas. The difficulty of maintaining liberty and free institutions reminds us of our great need of Christ as the source of our power to do good.

Some examples

One of my favorite American heroes is a man from history—Jedediah Smith. Smith, a young entrepreneurial businessman, set out to explore the unknown western territories of North America to find new sources to replenish the dwindling fur industry. Smith was the first white man to discover a pass through the Sierra Nevada. Smith may very well have been the toughest man alive at the time. No privation or difficulty dissuaded him. Yet this “Bible-Toter” found himself equally comfortable in polite society. Contrast him with Smith’s infamous counterpart and sometime companion Mike Fink. Fink, who could “outrun, outjump, outshoot, outbrag, outdrink and outfight any man on the rivers, and in no way behindhand with the wimming either,” murdered his companion in a drunken shooting game, which was a ruse to end a conflict over a woman. A third companion, in revenge, murdered Fink, but soon faced his own demise, drowning in the Teton River during a swim. Christian businessman Jedediah Smith stands mountain peaks above such in courage, character and accomplishment.³

The entire Scriptural record defines the kind of character the man or woman of God ought to possess. A character for magnanimity, nobility and heroism ought to be the norm. Now that God has shed His Holy Spirit abroad, like King David or any of the many Biblical heroes, Christians ought generally to live as “mighty men of valor.” For the Christian, this is not primarily in a military sense, but rather in the sense that a life of faith requires continuous courage and virtue against the difficulties we face. We ought to be ready to lay our lives down for His and our neighbors’ sake.

Furthermore, we have work to do and life to live. Real life does not begin when we have died and gone to our reward in eternity. Rather, the abundant life begins when we resign our lives to Christ’s purposes. While we continue to fight the good fight in difficulty, pressing into the Kingdom of God by faith, we also experience tremendous reward as Christ presents us with temporal and eternal victories. The

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Gospel requires that we take every thought (and therefore action) captive to Christ. We are to subdue every material area of life for Christ, not by revolution or fiat, but through diligent application and productivity. Note that diligence derives from a Latin word which means *to love*. We ought to undertake the art of life applied to the home, business, recreation, civil relationships (government) and any and every special avocation we pursue. For example, living well with one’s wife or husband is an art, and one which requires tremendous character, if the relationship is not to sink into selfishness and strife.

Consider the great relative liberty, goodness, prosperity, and generosity we now enjoy. Such greatness of freedom and accomplishment is otherwise unknown in history. Many insist on seeing only the negative, only the evil in our midst. It surely exists. (We may well ask how much of the evil we observe in the world today is the result of Christians leaving a vacuum of moral leadership in the world.) Nonetheless, it must be a person quite blind to history not to see that we generally enjoy far more comfort and wield far greater personal resources than perhaps any other generation in history. When we live well by the Spirit of God, when the Christian art of life has grown to maturity, we both enjoy blessings and possess the resources *to be* blessings. This is life in Christ.

In the last article, I argued that Christians ought to consider education a universal, life-long endeavor, quite beyond that which we ordinarily accept from our schools and ourselves. Rather we all—adult and children alike—ought to make education a continuously enterprising effort to push back the frontiers of our abilities and sensibilities, so that Christ may have the use of both for the building of His Kingdom for His glory. In a word, we ought increasingly to prepare ourselves for extraordinary service to the King. This preparation includes growing in the ability to love our neighbors as ourselves in many particulars, as well as to take dominion over the material things of life, according God’s gifts to us.

Our goal is Christian magnanimity, nobility, and heroism in character and deed—Christ-likeness. In order to handle this tall order—loving our enemies as well as our friends, and fighting the effects of a cursed world by faith—we require a particular kind of character, an elevated character illustrated by the lives of many Biblical saints and by the clear teachings of the Scriptures. The prototypical American hero of legend aptly illustrates the kind of character we seek, as the American hero was born of historic Christian heritage. We Bible believing Christians ought universally to be heroes of the faith. We accept this challenge to our character and culture because it is Christ’s challenge to us. We accept this challenge because He is the author and finisher of our faith. What He requires, He is just and able to accomplish in us.

We will next consider how practically a family may live and rear children to produce Christian magnanimity in our own homes and communities.

¹ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language (1828)* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1980).

² John Lord, *Beacon Lights of History, Volume 8* (New York: James Clark and Co., 1902), p. 58.

³ Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), p. 47-49.