

Education for the Kingdom of God “Toward Magnanimity, Part 2”

An Historical Example

Ronald Kirk
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Last month we discussed the need for a superlative character, a nobility and magnanimity of spirit, with courage to accept the onslaught of adversity in a fallen world. We fight the battle internally and externally. We fight against our own sinful impulses and we fight against the temptations of the world to take the easy and expedient route toward personal comfort and security. Godless selfishness characterizes history and tends to characterize our own lives except when Christ is our King and we live by the Spirit of God. On the other hand, Christian magnanimity stands upright upon the Rock, in every circumstance, and is victorious. Such magnanimity is ready to live well and produce for Christ, to contribute to the Kingdom that which will last in its influence, yea, from generation to generation.

When I first seriously sought an educational principle upon which to build a system of education, I asked the obvious question: How did the great men and women of Christian history acquire the character for their accomplishments in life? Taking the American Pilgrims as perhaps the classic example, I discovered a dual Providence at work which will serve as an educational paradigm for greatness of heart and accomplishment in ordinary people. This dual Providence is a profound belief in the Scriptures as the sole authority of life and living, coupled with a readiness to encounter hardship by faith.

An Historical Example

The Pilgrims as a body of believers were born in England of a deep personal and corporate conviction that the Word of God is the sole and fundamental source of understanding of life and living. The Pilgrims' Puritan brothers had not yet entirely discarded the notion that a godly community, the City on the Hill, could grow through external means through purifying the national church. The Pilgrims however, under the teaching of the Reverend John Robinson, believed simply that they as individuals and a corporate body bore the responsibility and right to form their own expressions of worship and of life in general, upon Biblical grounds.

This choice of the Pilgrims for a more pure and independent worship brought innumerable hardships and excruciating suffering. For quietly gathering for worship in rural Scrooby, England, the Pilgrim congregation lost their jobs and farmlands, their very livelihoods. At the cost of everything they owned, they migrated to Holland. There these rural families, without commercial skills or financial capital, suffered terrible disadvantage in the mercantile economy. Moreover, the secular culture threatened to absorb their children. Therefore, they decided to embark for America. For many years, they suffered the effects of a pioneering venture in a wild land. Half their number died the first year.

Nonetheless, they reformed families, widows marrying widowers and in turn adopting children to maintain the essential foundation of a culture in the new world—the home. They reasoned civil government from Biblical principles. They learned to live equably among the “Strangers,” those fellow colonists not members of their church, and the natives. The historic record shows that Governor William Bradford dealt quite hospitably with a Jesuit priest, including feeding fish to him on his fasting Friday, a Roman Catholic practice the Calvinists abhorred.¹

Upon this foundation of the Bible and an overcoming faith, God endowed a structure and patina to the character of the Pilgrims which made them at once very tough, very sturdy, and yet gentle and

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peaceable, even with foes. The Pilgrims pioneered civil self-government. It seems they defined the loving home.

How to Train Magnanimity

We parents and teachers may likewise apply ourselves to the dual educational principle—Scripture and discipline. We must equip ourselves with a Biblical fluency applied to specific areas of endeavor. (We will address this Biblical fluency other times.) We must then apply the Biblically grounded content to discipline. We introduce a measured level of difficulty into the child’s life, appropriate to his development. Practice produces increased skill at any given level. The disciplined learning of anything new itself represents such a difficulty. *Discipline* is practice under an appropriate level of government. The parent and teacher’s job is to determine the right level of difficulty—neither too easy to eliminate the challenge to character growth, nor too difficult, to frustrate and encourage quitting. One error loving parents often make is prematurely to intervene to help a child, before the child has had chance to test himself. A parent doing a child’s homework for him is no real help to the child’s learning. Trials build character (Romans 5:1-5). God sometimes leaves us walking on the water alone for a moment. Again, there will always be a wilderness time in discipline where success momentarily eludes us. Nonetheless, persistent faith prevails. Such trust is consistent with the economy of difficulty, for the Lord brings the increase of the investment in due season. Sometimes an adult’s hand over the child’s helps guide for a brief time, as corrected practice eventually *will* bring success. Then the child, by himself, tries again. Artificial devices to make the child more instantly successful actually weaken him and retard real growth in an overcoming faith. The Lord will reward patient encouragement and perseverance with an increase in *His* good time. Tried by persevering effort, true character forms, providing the child with Christ-confidence to attempt new and greater challenges.

Corresponding to the practice of discipline for achievement is the principle of obedience. Parents must resist the contemporary, man-centered psychology which demands that parents must allow the child to choose what interests him and what he will therefore learn. “*Train up a child in the way he should go.*” Children are sinners! They will choose what is easy. Parents must observe and correct selfishness whenever it appears. (Yes, good parenting *is* exhausting!) Successful practice of Spirit-filled obedience will completely deconstruct the sinful flesh. It reckons the old man dead. The home, the first federal republic, is the perfect place to practice obedience. Not only must parents themselves model selflessness toward each other, they must require the practice by their children of it, so that it eventually becomes second nature. Magnanimity requires thinking in terms of the Biblical principle of love: What would love do? A child who throws a tantrum when told to do some thing reflects the exact opposite of magnanimity. Why do we obey God? We obey God because He is God, by faith, not because He explains every detail as to why a thing is good for us or not. Just so, children must learn to obey their parents so that, once grown, they will possess the skill to obey God.

(Of course, as children are increasingly ready, parents must balance the requirement of obedience with appropriate instruction in the Biblical command or derived principle behind the requirement. At the appropriate stage of readiness for the Gospel, Jesus told His disciples He called them no longer servants but friends, because He revealed His Father’s Word to them (John 15:15). Our children deserve the same dignity as they are ready to receive it (Matthew 19:14.)

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The fact that love does not always surrender to another’s desire complicates training for magnanimity. For example, private property and its protection are Biblical principles. “You shall not steal.” “You shall not covet.” My property, therefore, ought not to be disposed according to another person’s desire. I have a *right* (because it is right) to protect my property from damage or theft. However, selfless generosity is also a Biblical principle. “Why not rather be defrauded,” Paul says, than be litigious with the Christian brethren. Jesus said not to throw pearls before swine, that is, do not give valuables (especially spiritual gems) to those who will have contempt for the gift. These are the essential principles of property.

To implement these principles ask, how must I handle my property for Christ? Am I willing to part with the precious possession for Him? Ought I to protect it for Him? Ask children in property disputes, “Who is being selfish here?” Usually both parties will be guilty of some selfishness. What would Jesus have us do to show love to one another? Selflessness ought to find some reward, at least in acknowledgement. Jesus says, “Well done good and faithful servant.” Parents must learn to teach both truths, in theory and practice. A great deal of wisdom is necessary then to apply the Biblical faith. There may be times when one shares a valuable toy with an immature cousin for peace in family relationships. After a record of destruction, it may be proper to protect the property. Perhaps another toy may be shared without fear of its demise. Perhaps there is a time to share, and another time not to share. Life is a complex of actions and habits which form the Christian character upon the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to live well.

One more concern: Life is an art, built upon the practice of craftsmanship in it. Magnanimity will result from self-consciously applying its principles. Teach children the principles and sensibilities required for successful adult Christian living and responsibility. For example, tithe on life. Encourage a life-long love of learning with the undertaking of some endeavor which tests the frontiers of character and ability. Imposing new character-building challenges on ourselves spares God the need to bring so much trial to build us up. These challenges further help build the foundations of the Gospel where we self-consciously apply Biblical principles in our accomplishment. The discipline of overcoming its material and relational problems brings character, wisdom and accomplishment—greater nobility.

A general heroism will result when cultural selflessness grows. Selflessness frightens us because our experience seems to teach that no good deed goes unpunished. Rather, the Scriptures teach us to walk by faith. Consider the closing statement of the Declaration of Independence, which says: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” Thus, our founders practiced Christian magnanimity in a very practical way, promising to give up their very lives, liberty and fortunes, in order to secure the same for others. A culture where one cannot out-give others is a culture where want tends to evaporate. America has long practiced generosity and magnanimity. If we will once more self-consciously apply principle unto practice, to our children, and ourselves, we may renew, maintain and increase America’s Christian heritage of magnanimity.

¹ Gabriel Druillettes, Volume 36 of the "Jesuit Relations" (*La Mission des Jesuites chez les Hurons: 1634-1650*, as translated by Frs. Bill Lonc S.J. and George Topp S.J.), (Pilgrim Hall Museum Website, January 22, 2002) <<http://www.pilgrimhall.org/jesuit.htm>>