

Education without application is useless and vain. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake undermines wisdom and particular skills to support the productive activities of life before God. Conversely, ill-informed action often results in more harm than good. In truth, education and action form a necessary and reciprocal relationship. Godly education requires an outlet. Godly action requires wisdom and skills, the fruit of a sound education.

Cooperating Principles

Christian life requires action. Jesus declares that Christianity in the world should bring both preservation (salt) and progress (light)—both principles of action. Saltiness expends effort to protect holy things and inhibit evil. Light makes important things clear, exposing error and magnifying truth, to give direction for the future. According to Christ, Christian salt and light yield *works*, for the sake of the lost in the world and the building of the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:13-16).

However, unless action is informed and trained, it will naturally tend to produce sinful fruit (Gen. 6:5; Heb. 12:1). Institutions formed of sin—from psychological and educational to civil governmental and media establishments—all conspire to encourage the further practice of sin. Sinful institutions form easily. Thoughtless, sinful actions become habit. Habit influences those exposed to it. Through general influence, sin becomes mainstream.

The opposite of natural, sinful foolishness is Biblical *wisdom*. In Proverbs 1:2, wisdom is *skillfulness*. In verse 3, wisdom is *circumspection or caution*. In verse 4, subtlety is *cleverness*, from knowing the reality of a situation in detail. Biblical wisdom may be summarized as seeing clearly and finely what is real, and then acting prudently upon perceived reality in a skillful fashion. When the Christian more accurately handles God’s reality, he is likely to produce more good than harm.

How does one acquire this ability? In verse four, the Hebrew term translated *knowledge*, gives a hint. Knowledge here is *seeing*, that is, as Van Til teaches, analogical knowing¹. Practically, this means experiencing life and interpreting it upon Biblical grounds, which is the only means to understanding reality. Because knowledge is analogical, it must be tested. Untested knowledge is mere Greek speculation. Rather, the Christian searches the Scriptures for principles of action and attempts, through deductive reasoning, to apply them. Because man is vulnerable to sin, he will not perfectly apply the Biblical imperative. Therefore, he judges his resulting action according to the fruit it produces. In other words, he applies inductive reasoning, proceeding from particulars back to the principle. He then takes his experience—where he succeeded and where he failed—back to the Scriptures to repent and to further verify his understanding. True knowledge grows as one visits and re-visits various topics and increasingly apprehends them in context. Knowledge thus grows in depth and breadth in the Van Tilian learning spiral.² As his experience grows, the Christian develops greater power and skill to deal with reality—to take action—on God’s terms. Thus, learning requires action, and action requires learning.

Combined acquisition and exercise of godly wisdom incidentally produce other Gospel imperatives. The effort to learn by faith forges the character as the soul militates against inevitable difficulty. Because the risk of capital loss always looms real, investment in Christian action requires faith. To glorify God in the exercise of loving, active faith—thus exemplifying godly character—is a fundamental of evangelical influence. Natural ineptness upon the attempt of anything new further illustrates the very need for faith. Skills do not form until exercise proves them in practice over time. Halting initial steps eventually give way to skillful running and climbing. The Lord uses men with wisdom and skill formed

of obedient discipline and practice (Exodus 35:35). Thus, Jesus aims to forge well-prepared and action-oriented disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Education, action, and faith are a package deal.

Faith seeks God. Facing God means learning of Him. Godly learning produces conviction. Conviction produces action. Action produces habit. Habit produces influence, and influence produces godly institutions. Godly institutions increasingly support Gospel action, as the Lord brings the increase.

Civil Christian Action

Civil applications provide instructive examples. Early Christian America revolutionized the idea of politics on Biblical grounds, recognizing God as king, and civil government as a holy trust. Liberty meant individuals and communities serving God without interference from the state. They knew that liberty depended upon personal and civil self-restraint. General understanding and application of these concepts matured only after centuries of Christian experience. Only a concerted educational effort to inform the intellect as to wise principles of ruling could and did produce the America we have inherited. Anyone who has read the Federalist Papers (and every Christian should) knows what ponderous reading they represent. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay wrote those essays for publication in New York newspapers to persuade the common populace of the necessity of the Constitution! How accomplished we once were! How the mighty have fallen! Today, ignorance among Christians threatens the very existence of Christian liberty. Worldly men naturally pursue sinful means toward wicked ends. With ignorant zeal, Christians may blindly leap into politics to play the same secular power struggle game. How can God bless Christians who, without consulting Him, enter politics according to the rules of humanistic morality? Such action legitimizes humanistic means, and hurts the cause of Christ and the rule of faith and providence. Unless Christians can offer a viable alternative in the form of faithful and restrained political leadership and influence, we feed the monster.

Christian action must comply with both its Biblical ends and its Biblical means, including love, faith, and enterprise. Love requires mastering godly rules for living among men in practice. For example, common Christian manners once bore the greatest burden of civil government among Americans, each restraining himself for the good of his neighbor. Such restraint by faith, generally practiced, required little of external government, resulting in the greater liberty. The great principles of relationship described in the Federalist Papers were, to a significant degree, formal, civil elaborations of then common personal manners. Christians must know how to handle power without abuse. We must know when we properly possess no power over another, that is, when in a peer relationship. We must be clear regarding the rightful purpose of authority. We must know the proper limits of any authority we possess. Christianity posits both liberty and sacrificial love (the constraint of covenantal union). The believer must learn to walk in the balance of both. Economically, we must learn that godly exchange results from agreement between private parties. Where sinful greed corrupts mutual economic exchange, Christians must actively pursue justice, suppressing coercion and fraud. Again, we note that the skill for these things is not natural, nor even the desire for them. Men must *learn* godliness in action through the discipline of study and practice.

Resistance to Action and Education

Certain human factors militate against Biblically informed action. Natural laziness inhibits the pursuit of both education and action. Such laziness is sin, resisting obedience to learning and living according

to Christ’s ways. Related to laziness is the love of peace at the expense of obedience. Jesus promised that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matt. 10:34-39).

Most of us are quite happy with whatever intellectual framework we have acquired. The greater the imposition of a new idea, the greater the resistance to it. The more radical the change, the greater the resistance. A Christian schoolteacher trained in evolutionary psychology may well resist Biblical theology. The Biblical view requires dealing with original sin in the student. The evolutionary viewpoint necessarily assumes a naturally determined character. In such a system the concept of sin and of redemption have no meaning. This schoolteacher accepts the Gospel, but denies it in practice. The last thing human beings wish is the work and trouble required to re-integrate our intellectual framework. Yet that is exactly what the Gospel requires. To *repent*, in Scripture, means to abandon the natural and sinful way of thinking and living, and instead embrace God’s supernatural way.

Christians should reject the notion that a degree represents an absolute of accomplishment. Rather, the term *degree* applied to school matriculation essentially means a small, incremental accomplishment—a step. Of all accomplished people, Christian pastors, teachers, and professors ought to be the most open to further education. True education creates a more humble though more sure learner, one more sure of Christ. In a fundamental sense, Christianity itself is a demand for education, where education means filling up that which is lacking, and correcting that which is wrong. Christianity makes the individual useful to Christ now, while simultaneously preparing him for eternity.

Prepare, Work

Education clearly plays a vital role in the Christian life well lived. The practical implications of the dual principles of action and education should be evident. Those involved in educational institutions ought to rethink educational objectives to encourage the acquisition of skills and willingness to put them into practice. For example, aside from its obvious moral lessons, history is an excellent subject to train the memory for retention of particulars. Mathematics can provide a tremendous framework for training a general problem solving method, useful in every other area of life. Science teaches patience and enterprise in dealing with the recalcitrant material creation. On the action side, to avoid the pitfalls of humanistic objectives and means, activists of all kinds ought to trust God sufficiently to slow down and study their discipline on Biblical grounds. Then, the godly activist, rather than flowing timidly by sight and expediency, will confidently wade against the mainstream for true contribution to the kingdom of God and to His glory.

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1969), p. 16.

² Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1995), 29.