

Get Wisdom!

A Biblical Christian Philosophy and Method for Education ©

By Ronald Kirk

Finally, let us not forget the religious character of our origin. Our fathers were brought hither by their high veneration for the Christian religion. They journeyed by its light, and labored in its hope. They sought to incorporate its principles with the elements of their society, and to diffuse its influence through all their institutions, civil, political, or literary. Let us cherish these sentiments, and extend this influence still more widely; in the full conviction, that that is the happiest society which partakes in the highest degree of the mild and peaceful spirit of Christianity.

--Daniel Webster regarding the Pilgrims, 1820

Is it not that, in the chain of human events, the birthday of the nation is indissolubly linked with the birth-day of the Saviour?

--John Quincy Adams, 1837

Just as ancient Israel's experiences do not glorify Israel, but rather Israel's God, and just as their experience provide lessons toward everyone's edification, just so the providential American experience glorifies God and imposes a responsibility on the godly. The historic American Christian church's heritage of Christian thinking and action upon Biblical grounds, with expressions growing in expanding spheres, began to fade as Americans materially prospered toward the end of the 18th century. Many abandoned the faith for Unitarianism. Many looked backward toward Egypt (Europe) and its fashions, even sending the children to its schools, where old wineskins corrupted the youth. Replaced by the movement known as Pietism, Christians increasingly retreated into the walls of the church, limiting Christian expression to personal worship and evangelism. Now mainstreamed, this self-centered Christianity has long cut the heart out of universal Christian expression, producing an ineffective testimony to the world. Christian practices limited to attending church services, verbal evangelism, and missions alone do not fulfill the God ordained mandate of the whole Gospel. This weak testimony produces poor evangelical results, because it fails to exert all the effects of the Holy Spirit's work in men and their influence on others.

The Bible rather requires that we manifest comprehensive expressions of the faith of Christ. We are to make disciples of all nations and not mere converts. We are to be salt and light, and thus exert godly influence on others. The Scriptures tells us to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, so that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God. Furthermore, we are commanded to stir up our gifts to contribute to the building of the kingdom (e.g. 1 Cor. 12; c.f. 1 Tim. 1:6). Christians should produce good works of every kind, works which result in the glorification of God

to the world. Furthermore, we should share the growth of grace and wisdom toward our Christian brethren in the context of our every endeavor—so that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31; cf. Eph. 2:10). As Christians render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's, eventually the influence of the godly render Caesar irrelevant—a fact observed all through history where God's people assert His lordship in their personal and corporate lives, with expressions of the gentle and peaceable spirit of the faith of Christ. The good news is that many astute Christians are once more taking up the mantle of stewardship to see God's will done on earth as is it in heaven. Such a universal expression for the Christian faith has come to be known as Christian or Biblical worldview.

Education has perhaps suffered the most from weak Christianity, as psychology has displaced a strategic kingdom view of life and education. Psychology, the new religion, observes human behavior and concludes normalcy upon that observation. It walks by sight, not by faith. Modern psychology at its root contradicts the Biblical view of man, and instead institutionalizes sin in the name of science. Historically, child education is normative, reflecting contemporary culture and perpetuating it. We now live in a debased age where normal education merely perpetuates the humanistic status quo, which itself resulted from the successful humanistic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To highlight the impact of these movements, my informal surveys over the last ten years suggest that evolutionary, behavioral psychology provides the basis for educational theories in teacher preparation departments of virtually every Christian college and university in the United States, with only a handful of known exceptions.

Christian education, properly viewed, is the theory and practice of preparing the next generation for its ultimate calling in Christ. This means preparation for eternity and ministry to others. Through a careful study of America's legacy of Christian life and education in the light of good doctrine, a theologically sound and highly focused view of education promises to reproduce and even exceed the spiritual and practical accomplishments of former times. This historical Christian philosophy and method have produced very gratifying results in the crucible of experience, even though it is in the infancy of its development. Called the Get Wisdom! Program, it has well served families of every conceivable gifting and background. Over 20 years of success testifies to its effectiveness in serving every kind of pupil, from the broken and damaged to the gifted and accomplished.

Gospel Foundations

Why educate and to what end? Jesus requires Christians to make converted disciples of all nations, teaching them His ways in all things (Matt. 28:18-20). Fundamentally then, education must be evangelical.

Evangelism requires two elements: the Seed — the Word of God; and good soil — the human heart. No where in creation is good soil naturally found. Under the curse, the ground brings forth weeds and thorns. The soil must be worked and improved to support the life-sustaining crop. Just so, the human heart must be prepared in a character capable

of receiving grace, and in an ability and wisdom to live out a purposeful life of grace. Mere verbal evangelism fails the New Testament's witness of the power of God in real peoples' real lives. Thus, Christian education requires several often neglected elements.

Because all Biblical understanding of life is based in a rich content of knowledge, Christian education ought, of course, to prepare the individual to master imaginative and intellectual content of all kinds. Much of Christian education stops here. Yet Christ requires more.

The Bible itself largely appeals to the imagination. "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed." Education must inculcate a godly imagination, capable of conceptualizing the Gospel in real life, and of creativity for personal contributions.

The Gospel is fundamentally relational and character sensitive. An ability to form and sustain loving, Biblically principled relationships at all levels of human intercourse fundamentally supports the Gospel. Sin—to serve Self—tends to reduce us to essentially adversarial relations. Thus, the Gospel requires men to get along with each other! Not with merely superficial manners, the Gospel requires a solid ability for selfless friendship.

Further, the Gospel work requires liberty to obey Christ (2 Cor. 3:17; 1 Cor. 7:23). We need freedom from sin internally in the soul, and externally in civil society. Moreover, God called His people to take dominion over the earth (Genesis 3:26, 9:1-2; Psalm 8:6). This essentially means economic investment—taking the raw materials of creation and working them unto usefulness and beauty—of greater value than before. The Lord thus includes godly men in His plan toward restoring the earth from its cursed condition. Such economic productivity produces wealth, blessing men and producing leisure time and monetary capital for the Gospel work. Institutional liberty, as civil manners are the first sphere of civil government, depends upon the general capacity for self-restraint. As one observes increasingly selfish rudeness on the highways, for example, one observes the decline of free society. Since governments will require order, the less we are self-governed, the more intrusive and comprehensive will governmental regulation be.

Lastly, the redeeming of every subject of human endeavor in the hands of the redeemed produces godly influence over virtually every area of life toward the salvation of men. True education necessarily produces character, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, skill, friendship, and leadership in the whole man, and all are needed to support the gospel.

Humanism, found even in the church, institutionalizes selfish sin and discourages the Gospel work. Expressive individual godliness tends to produce institutional godliness through its influence. When Christians can articulate and practice, with Biblical wisdom, a Christian worldview applied to fine art, science, civil government, business and every other human endeavor, when Christians can generously give of themselves while standing for righteousness, earning the right to be heard and emulated, we will have truly become salt and light to the world.

Covenantal Relationship

Contemporary state laws require attendance in schools. Since the student must attend and the state must offer 'free' school, the burden of accomplishment in the student weighs upon the school. The student thus often adopts an entitlement mentality with little or no personal responsibility involved. Meanwhile, the school assumes a greater and greater authority over the student, but without the effective means to control the elements of life which influence education outside the classroom. This system leads to an adversarial and often combative relationship where parents require success of the school, students dare the school to make them learn, and schoolteachers, caught in the middle, harden to protect themselves from the abuse they often receive. Meanwhile no one assumes responsibility for success (though the school will take the credit when, because of a character-accomplished family, they are successful). To make matters worse the humanistic intrusions into education from the 1930s under the auspices of John Dewey and others have so succeeded that no area of the curriculum is free from humanistic and anti-Christian bias. From evolutionary pre-suppositions in science class, to statist politics in social studies, to behavioral presuppositions about human nature, godlessness prevails. There even Christian teachers must submit to the state-mandated content after they are trained in psychology-based educational theories. Egalitarian reduction of learning to the lowest common denominator forces the dumbing down of the educational process. In other words, the state curriculum (and the private schools which have adopted its presuppositions) *must* offend Biblically minded Christians. Indeed, as the state must adopt a monolithic view of life and education, state education must always offend anyone who does not agree with it. Christians in huge numbers accept this travesty, while the elite liberal rulers wisely send their own children to private academies where they might reproduce themselves.

Rather, all human relationships are properly based upon the commandment to love one another as the natural outworking of loving God. The Bible calls this kind of relationship, based in mutual agreement, *covenantal*. For school relationships, parents, students, teachers and headmasters form the constituents of learning. The school properly offers education on the grounds of its convictions and invites others to participate with it. Since the burden of success is upon the school and attendance is voluntary, it rightfully dictates the ground rules, within appropriate limits of its authority. Parents then choose the school that suits their family convictions and submit to that school's policies within its sphere. Thus, parents, administration and teachers share similar convictions and work together. Our covenantal schools, in spite of a great deal of relational immaturity often manifest in the Christian community (due to the success of statist education), found tremendous success in the program. When Christians walk selflessly arm in arm by faith and mutually depend on the Holy Spirit, success will result. Interestingly, our non-institutional approach to school design resulted in schools that looked remarkably like extended home schools.

The Tripod of Education

Christ's "tripod" of education, illustrated and identified in His own earthly discipleship, brings a proper balance to educational method. First, factual and parabolic content or

instruction directed to the imagination and the intellect provides the basis of all wisdom and understanding. Second, inspiration, or an infilling with the Holy Spirit, is necessary because nothing good comes of life apart from Christ and His power. Teaching by example is the human derivative of inspiration, and inspiration always points to Christ. Inspiration springs from an appreciation for God's immanent hand on the subject, from an understanding of the creative wonders He placed in the subject itself, not from some tempting frosting spread over the top of the subject. Third, discipline is well-governed practice that amounts to an effective effort toward some goal. Corrections are a way of life for the student, so that from practice, the student learns and remembers good habit and skill. Discipline requires government, either self-government or a decreasing level of externally imposed government, depending upon maturity. Discipline guides learning according to a rational development of the subject from its rudiments to its depth and breadth—toward Biblically defined mastery of the subject.

All three of inspiration, content and discipline are required for a complete education. Dependence alone on either content (cognitive approaches) or inspiration (as with affective approaches, often merely amusement) damages learning because these approaches neglect the need for a disciplined character and an active accomplishment with some degree of skill.

Training Replaces Ineffective Environmentalism

A Biblical Christian psychology must replace pagan, modern psychology. Psychology views man as environmentally determined over eons through the mechanistic process of evolution. Therefore, man's character cannot fundamentally change, but only his behavior. Therefore, as one example, the psychological and educational establishment increasingly resorts to drugs to control child behavior. Christianity assumes a new man, with a new fundamental character, created in Christ. True Christian education must therefore reflect a Biblical understanding of man. God created man in His own image, each with inherent value and potential. Yet, man is hopelessly lost in sin and needs redemption. God created Adam with a full command of his mental faculties and exquisite use of language (Genesis 2:23). The Fall destroyed the innate, fulfilled ability of man. Compensating, God gave man the ability to overcome the effects of the Fall by faithful effort, what we call education. Thus, education represents God's strategic means of preparing the soul for redemption—good soil, prepared to receive grace and capable of glorifying God. A godly education, upon evangelical conversion should result in great accomplishment, including the best historical expressions of restrained self-government, institutional liberty and justice, invention, industry, and voluntary philanthropy (John 14:12). Carefully identifying these historically tested qualities of Biblical character and accomplishment, the school curriculum may be directed toward these ends in the many, as well as in the highly accomplished few (1 Cor. 12:22).

The educational process is part of redemption. Discipline or training prepares the character, mind and conscience to receive the truth of salvation in due season. Specifically, naturally scrambled faculties are unraveled and potential fulfilled through discipline undertaken by faith in God. Development occurs not merely due to age and

environment, but upon increasingly accomplished levels of practice, even at a very early age. For the moment, the parent and teacher are the child's character, wisdom, knowledge, and skill, until by the child's continuous efforts in faith, he achieves these for himself. Even the aesthetic tastes can and ought to be inculcated. Child education produces far better results, is far less painful than corrections to the adult character, and without the many detrimental long term effects of neglected sin. The liberty of creativity abounds upon a mind and heart taken captive by Christ's discipline. Christians must reject the humanistic view that discipline and training stifle creativity. Christians must further reject the view that bad moral conduct may properly be treated (hidden) with psychotropic drugs, such as methamphetamine-related Ritalin.

Training Produces Character

Training forges a foundation for accomplishment as the student works to overcome the measured difficulty of learning. Each effort produces an increase in strength of character for overcoming difficulty the next time. Error or lapses can be corrected. Nothing is failure except a lack of effort, which demonstrates a lack of faith. Slow learning is no excuse for giving up. The capacity for easy accomplishment provides no excuse to avoid effort. "To whom much is given, much is also required (Luke 12:48)." Every element of learning and life contribute to or steal from godly character, depending on one's response to trial. A heart for ongoing, systematic repentance becomes a way of education and life. True societal liberty depends on a carefully trained, selfless character.

The principles and character which governed the world class statesmanship of early Americans derived from their forging in the ordinary educational processes of home, school, and local society. If we ever are to reproduce the former greatness of accomplishment, we must reproduce the Biblical Christian thinking and practice, the nobility and heroism, which originally created it, and, with God's grace and power, to perfect it beyond its former levels.

A Method for All

Free institutions require a generally accomplished and genuinely educated people. Graded modern education is mechanistic and linear. If a student fails to learn an element of a subject, the system typically leaves him behind.¹ Sound education neither lock-steps the more able, nor lets the weaker learner fall through the cracks. It is neither egalitarian nor elitist. Cornelius Van Til, a 20th century theologian, Biblical apologist and educator, developed a strictly Biblical view of knowledge². Adapting the Van Tilian learning spiral, the classroom teacher develops the subject from its rudiments to its depth and breadth according to the most able student's readiness, each time they visit the subject. The student thus continuously works both the foundations and the frontiers of ability to produce philosophical and practical mastery. The teacher identifies each student's level of accomplishment, and then urges the student toward new strategic knowledge and skills. Review is also a way of life to fill inevitable gaps resulting from the vagaries of the human mind in a fallen world. This aspect reveals some of the genius of the one-room schoolhouse, and its superiority over a graded curriculum. Furthermore, the

teacher never assumes a lesson may easily be apprehended by the student, but always supplies the needed forms — instruction, example, and directed practice — to ensure success. Then the teacher requires effort from the learner, his trusting Christ, until the Lord brings the increase and he masters the subject.

Effort by Faith

A one-to-one relationship between effort and accomplishment is a myth. As the farmer invests by faith, just so, the learner does what he is now able, and then trusts God to do His part to bring learning to fruition. In the meantime, the student learns to be patient and steadfast, thus eliminating the pervading and obdurate attitude that learning must come quickly and easily, or not at all. History demonstrates children have far more ability than contemporary pedagogy now expects. Correspondingly, faith-based learning precludes tyrannical and often superficial exaction of performance. Instead, a persistent, gentle discipline urges the student to do his best at all times, while encouraging him not to worry, nor to give up, but to apply diligence and faith that success will come in due season. It does. We therefore systematically discourage and correct an excuse-making, defeatist attitude and compensating behavior such as clowning, rebellion, tantrums, and cheating. No student is incapable of some advancement but rather is capable of much more than is usually expected. This is true because Christ is our power of accomplishment!

The Analysis Principle

One of the most important principles of this system is taking seriously the science of any subject. In this view, one seeks understanding of the true nature of a subject upon Biblical warrant and providential historical development. The teaching scholar takes a scientific organization of the subject and reorganizes it for learning, from its rudiments to its depth and breadth. As the learning scholar matures, he acquires the tools for learning. When confronted with complexity beyond his understanding, he learns to reduce the whole topic at hand to its constituent parts for analysis. Then, upon understanding of the constituent parts, the scholar rebuilds (organizes) toward an understanding of the whole. This process represents the essential learning principle. A paragraph is the statement of a coherent thought. To understand the paragraph, I must understand the constituent sentence. A word may hinder understanding the sentence. I must learn its meaning. I must be able to parse the sounds to identify the word. Due to the vagaries of language, the hard parts are generally the most important! I mustn't skip anything. Rebuilding the parts to a just whole completes the analysis process. When accomplished analysis produces the ability for creative synthesis, the student has achieved a significant degree of mastery. This approach derives directly from the historical understanding of the Biblical, Christian God — one God in three persons with equal homoousian ultimacy between each of the constituents and the whole.

Conclusion

This brief article illustrates how we may maintain the essential unity and harmony between the grand and ultimate revealed purposes of God and their practical details. The Get Wisdom! Program deals with the reality of human nature and God's purposes and provision among men. It is directed and meaningful. Moreover, it produces quick and remarkable results among teachers, parents and students alike, including those of modest attainment. This view, in the hands of God enabled scholars, ought once more to produce world-quality statesmen in every area of human endeavor at a rate similar to that found in early America, capable of producing hundreds in a few millions, rather than tens in hundred millions. A well-educated general constituency will in turn, support these leaders. Such accomplished scientists, artists, lawyers, businessmen, pastors, farmers and skilled laborers of all kinds will exert the same influence which Christians exerted in early America. Surely, by His grace, we can reproduce it. Indeed, we already have begun to see the results!

Editor's Note: The above article was rewritten from an article for Chalcedon Report, September, 2001

1. One student of mine lost a brother in the fourth grade, causing him emotionally to close down for a time. He missed lessons in fractions, but his school passed him on. He never learned math beyond the third grade level until he came to me in the ninth grade. He thought he was stupid and could not learn, until we systematically reviewed the material on fractions. He caught on in about two weeks of special half hour lessons and never looked back.
2. True knowledge *approximates* the world (properly guided by God's declaration of reality—His Word) within our minds. Our ability to *know* derives from forming associations in the mind between individuals of every kind into an increasingly complex understanding of reality.