

# Education for the Kingdom of God

## “A Biblical Approach to Student Evaluation and Grading”

### For the *Chalcedon Report*, June, 2003

Ronald Kirk  
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Surely almost anyone has a horror story to tell of unjust grading by a teacher or professor. In a society with a now largely effaced Christian heritage, virtually every area of human activity requires re-thinking to establish a sound Biblical view. Student evaluation and grading is not the least element of education requiring a theological treatment. With the importance of testing and grades in our higher educational and vocational careers, this subject should prompt a general interest. For home and professional teachers, the subject is even vital. Consider this educator’s attempt to re-define student evaluation on Biblical grounds.

### ***Why Test and Evaluate?***

In the present educational climate, we cannot take for granted the question of whether we ought to test and evaluate students. First, the teacher’s job is to teach. Education essentially consists in feeding content to a student, then drawing out its expression. That expression proves learning, fixing it in the faculties of the learner. This corresponds to the proven character of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, testing is fundamental to the educational process. Second, the teacher must know the student’s present knowledge and skill with a subject and what yet remains to be accomplished. Tested expression reveals gaps and limits in learning. Testing informs the teacher as to the effectiveness of his teaching method as well. Sound evaluation provides the teacher with efficient clues for determining the next needed lesson. A ready child may shoot ahead. One struggling in a given area may need remedial work.

The next important reason to evaluate and grade students is communication. In home school, where the parent and teacher are one, less such communication may be necessary. Nonetheless, if Mom teaches, Dad ought to know how Bobby is doing. Biblically speaking, Dad bears the essential educational responsibility. Eventually, the child will enter the greater economic world. The home properly offers good documentation of the child’s true accomplishment.

Lastly, the student should know his own progress. Knowing I have accomplished something well is encouraging. Jesus said, “Well done good and faithful servant.” If I am not doing well, I need to know that I have work yet remaining.<sup>2</sup> Here is an opportunity to encourage faith, trusting God to persevere and make the best effort. The teacher can encourage the learner with the truth that when one trusts God and works by faith, God will bring the increase in due season.

### ***Justice and Grace in Grading***

The Apostle Paul says Christians will judge angels. God will certainly enable righteous judgment of our children’s school efforts. Student grading is an ethical and spiritual concern, one that requires character and faith in the student and grader alike. *Righteousness, justice*, sets the essential Biblical standard. A false measure is an abomination to the Lord (Deut. 25:15-16). Justice rests on a just law, which is God’s Word alone. Teachers must be diligent to uphold a righteous standard in grading. Here home school mothers face a decided moral challenge. Faithful mothers must resist compensating for a struggling child, but rather trust Christ’s most gracious effect in the child by faith. Accepting personal responsibility and the consequences of life is an important aspect of accepting God’s Providence.

Upon God’s Law revealing our sin, Jesus justifies the sinner by His grace. In opposition to God’s Law, self-justification—self-deceit—produces only legalism leading to death. God’s justice and His grace are *not* opposites or in any way antagonistic one to the other. Life out of death and strength out of weakness

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characterize God’s gospel work in men’s lives. Man accepts his own weakness, and God lends His strength. Apart from honest evaluation and confession of sin, grace cannot prevail. There is no need for grace. Applied to grading, judiciously applied justice and honesty amount to a means of grace in the educational process.

Both teacher and students should be encouraged. Though a student may momentarily fail, hope should always rule. Ultimately, Providence determines accomplishment in the faithful through native ability, circumstances, and most importantly, through diligence and faith. The modestly gifted person must be thankful for what he may accomplish by faith. The gifted and accomplished individual must not rest on past accomplishments, “for to whom much is given much is also required.” Pride, despair, and laziness defy the grace of God. Accomplishment is the fruit of diligence and faith. God brings that fruit in due season, after all the possible tending of the field or orchard for a given season is finished. Though we now stumble, God typically grants another opportunity to succeed. Even a poor high school record need not determine a young person’s future, if he will only repent and begin to work diligently by faith. A poor record may serve to goad a lazy or rebellious student into action. The learner and the grader both must trust God. In the end, honest evaluation represents the best means toward ultimate educational success. We must not inflate the importance of grading, increasing our temptation to cheat for our students. Neither should we inflate accomplishment, thereby destroying the meaning of grades and retarding real growth.

### ***What Grading Accomplishes***

Grades communicate the student's accomplishment manifested through various trials of his ability and effort over time. Due to the vagaries of the human mind in a fallen world, grades may not accurately reflect real accomplishment at any particular moment. Everyone will have a bad day sometimes. To make more of grades than that of an approximation of progress and accomplishment at a *given moment* corrupts their true value.

For example, to use grades as a standard for reward or punishment places a wrong materialistic emphasis. With a materialistic emphasis, we encourage the desire for selfish gain or avoidance of discomfort, which may easily result in cheating or other compensation. Stressing a materialistic reward undermines the purer joy of faithful learning and accomplishment. A system of reward and punishment encourages children to cheat or compensate, rather than to learn by faith. The use of grades to manipulate a child produce slavish conformance in contradiction to Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Sometimes shaming a child with a grade is appropriate. Jesus used public shame to reach the hard-hearted. However, shame makes a poor general educational instrument.

Justice requires that grades indicate a consistent level of student accomplishment resulting *over time*. Athletes practice, practice, practice in preparation for the game. The scorekeepers record their statistics for the game only. Constant critical evaluation discourages the learner, because it exacts performance or at least its appearance. In learning anything new, the learner will likely be awkward and unsure. At this moment, he needs encouragement, not judgmental scrutiny. Justice and grace require patience in evaluation, to allow God time to work in the student’s life. Lower grades may reflect nothing more than a momentary lack of maturity or inadequate development in the foundational or subject skills. *Effort*

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*leading to progress* marks a just measure for evaluation. Therefore, grades, during the course of a student's career are of value primarily as milestones. Just evaluation considers characteristic *patterns* of conduct.

### ***Grading Standards***

Justice is the key. Honesty is justice's necessary consort. However, purely *objective* evaluation is an impossible myth. Grading will never be purely scientific or objective. True Biblical education—discipleship—reproduces the teacher's mind, heart, and ability in the student. Teaching is a matter of relationship. Discipleship depends upon the educated individuality of the teacher. Jesus said, “It is enough to become like your teacher.” Therefore, you find no *pretense* of pure objectivity in the historical, Christian tradition of education. The teacher properly evaluates his student.

In a Biblical approach to evaluation, the teacher (or, for the sake of consistency, his school) defines a set of *standards* or *principles* of evaluation. The particular standards we now describe reflect an approach to grading I implemented in my schools over twenty years ago. To represent a range of accomplishments, our standards defined a spectrum of accomplishment ranging from failure at the bottom to excellence at the top. We began with a definition for *minimal success*. This first successful grade implies, not an *average* degree of accomplishment within a given group, but individual success with respect to certain *minimum rudiments* defined by the teacher. This first degree of success we called a **C** grade. The teacher with careful curriculum design can ensure the success of all but the most damaged, rebellious, or organically challenged student. For the special learner, discerning appropriate levels of success is crucial. We should understand that, even here and with few exceptions, anyone can grow incrementally in accomplishment. Rigorous practice with minimal content, such as rote memorization, serves to provide a safety net to ensure minimal success. Students of higher ability require a higher minimal standard.<sup>3</sup>

Working upward, the **B** or superior grade marks a more *diligent* effort. It also ordinarily represents, due to manifestly harder work, the fulfilling of a higher degree of accomplishment than the basic rudimentary level. It marks tangible progress toward excellence. The **B** grade allows for a more personal, that is, subjective evaluation between a narrowly defined minimal success and a more rigorous standard of excellence. The more subjective evaluation considers effort, circumstances, and existing abilities.

The **A** grade represents a standard generally acknowledged as a measure of excellence within certain limits. The limits include the scope of the course, and the foundational limits of the student, including such factors as maturity of understanding, maturity of motor movement, and former accomplishment. In the most general sense, God's workmanship defines excellence, which men may only approximate. However, excellence, at whatever level our human limitations will allow, ought to be our standard. Let the excellence of Christ in us, become the personal standard in all our lives.

**D** represents a lack of sufficient accomplishment to earn a **C** and move on to the next topic. A **D** grade usually results from a poor previous educational experience, one that has failed to lay proper foundations for achievement. Thus, the **D** grade may apply to the student who attempts diligent effort, but because of formerly developed bad habits or lack of training, he is not yet capable of the foundational skills and habits to support success. It represents a remedial condition. The **D** grade does not condemn, but rather

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indicates that improvement is needed for minimal accomplishment. The student nonetheless works by faith toward the better accomplishment. For the **D** grade, we expect the good fruit of the effort in due season and by God’s grace. Such requires that the student learn to be transparent, accept God’s grace, and walk by faith.

An **F** implies a complete lack of effort. The **F** grade, then, represents **failure** due to the absence of effort. The **F** grade corresponds in a minor way to the Apostle Paul’s turning the sinner over to Satan and the destruction of his flesh, for the saving of his soul. It is a bit of a comeuppance. If a student has earned an **F** over his rebellion, he should receive it. To deny an earned F grade eliminates the benefit of the possible remedial effect.

The youngest students ordinarily do not yet possess a sufficient force of will to fail self-consciously. In other words, except where parents have systematically failed to exert proper authority, parental awe should be sufficient to save a child from failure. Therefore, I have never used **F** for the nominal grades kindergarten through second. This cut-off is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but, as is often the case, *some* cutoff point is necessary and this one is useful.

Since character determines the **F** grade, we cling to hope for recovery and growth. Character can change! The teacher must intervene into the student’s habits, thus correcting the heart of the student with the command of God. The teacher structures the student’s conduct toward work. Work is appropriate thanks for God’s provision. Initial fruit encourages the student to trust God to make the effort. An **F** grade is no reason for despair, especially with the younger student. Rather, it should cause prayer and re-doubled diligence to help the student overcome his poor character. Parents should not protect their children from momentary failure.

Some special considerations in assigning evaluations are worthy of note: More capable students should be graded according to their individual abilities, as determined by the teacher. To whom much is given, much is required. At the opposite end of the spectrum, where a student may be more slow of learning, the converse is not necessarily true. The **B** grade serves to indicate the slower student’s greater diligence. But the **A** grade is reserved for those where excellence is the reality. Otherwise, the value of the **A** grade is inflated and becomes worthless as a standard of excellence. This approach represents the virtual opposite of grading on a curve, where a bright student may slip by without effort because of the accomplishment of the crowd surrounding him. The normal curve is not just.

This approach to grading is neither simple nor easy. It requires wisdom, grace and faith. As with many other areas of responsibility, grading on Biblical principle represents a challenge to our character to walk the narrow path with God in faith. Nonetheless, this grading program is eminently doable, and not as difficult as one might expect. After tremendous trepidations over my early grading ability, I found that establishing a spectrum of accomplishment standards was actually not difficult and that my intuition usually proved out. Moreover, as with any skill, the more you practice, the better you get! Carefully defining course goals and keeping the developmental level of the student in mind will aid in establishing grading standards for a particular course. The teacher continually asks himself, “What level of knowledge, skill, or reasoning ability represents success, the lack of success, or excellence?”

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 5:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 4:7.

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<sup>3</sup> “To whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48).