

**Education for the Kingdom of God**  
**“Teaching and Learning Christian Wisdom and Character**  
**through Literature”**

**For the *Chalcedon Report*, April, 2003**

Ronald Kirk  
Created February 11, 2003  
Modified February 11, 2003

Teaching Character through Literature

By Ronald Kirk

We Christians should use every available means to rebuild a Christian culture. Historic Christian literature offers a splendid opportunity for learning to apply Biblical principle to every endeavor. Christian literature illustrates how extraordinary character in ordinary life contributes to the Great Commission through godly influence. To take advantage of this opportunity, we must reclaim our heritage of scholarly skills. Upon such skills, the treasury of Christian literature holds considerable promise toward reacquiring historical Biblical wisdom and the fruit of its resulting personal character.

***Christian Worldview Literature***

Imaginative literature once reflected tremendous insight into the Christian worldview. In a mature Christian literary era, from Spenser to Dickens, the best writers distilled the trials of personal and historic realities and resolved them with Biblical understanding. Story characters often struggled against their own sinful natures as events tried their souls. As in real life, these trials eventually forged such attributes of character as heroism, statesmanship, gracious family and social manners, aesthetics, and many other aspects of appropriate Christian expression.

Great literary expressions grew quite naturally out of a society with ancient and deep Biblical Christian roots. In this sense, imaginative literature offers a concise history of ideas with their consequences. Thus, Rosalie Slater calls literature the “handmaid of history” in its instructional value.<sup>1</sup> Reclaiming the Christian literary legacy will enable us to share the old wisdom with a new generation. Ideal Christian attributes can serve to exert a godly influence on our neighbors, as we ourselves learn to live them. In addition, deep literary study should enable Christians to make *new* creative contributions of classic quality, further building the collected body of Christian wisdom and extending its influence. Therefore, the old literature can offer substantial benefits to Christians today.

***The Need for Biblical Skills of Observation and Analysis***

To achieve a godly use of literature, we must both view the Scriptures as a textbook or manual for life and learn how to apply them particularly. If we view the Bible as merely a means to personal salvation, we fail to understand our extended Christian responsibilities. God commands mankind to take dominion over the earth as a means to facilitate His ways among men, to prepare the soil of men’s hearts for the Gospel. We are to make disciples of men for Christ. To make a disciple, we must first *be* disciples. Disciples are scholars or *learners*. Discipleship requires discipline. True learning supplies the student with skills, and with wisdom to apply those skills in a productive and godly way.

To prepare for such Biblical discipleship, we must be ready learners, ready particularly to repent in submission to God’s ways and willing to ask, “How do I specifically fall short of God’s glory?” Educational change requires a humble heart. Biblical accomplishment requires knowing the Bible systematically, that is, bringing the whole of Scripture to bear on a given subject. Systematic scholarship brings any subject into equilibrium, a non-antithetical tension of truth. Jesus teaches that narrow is the path that leads to life and broad is the path that leads to destruction. Balance, through letting the Scriptures speak for themselves, is key.

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Sound applied scholarship requires a philosophical understanding of the subject. Briefly stated, we develop a vocabulary defining the nature of the subject as a foundation for its further study. Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* amply serves here. Upon an articulated vocabulary, we search the Scriptures for God’s observations about the subject. We next read history, especially the history of ideas, to discover God’s hand in the subject. The scriptural standard places historical development in context. When good fruit emerges, we seek the Biblical root cause. Finally, we must learn to discern the underlying principle, theme, or leading idea found in the particulars of the story. Every story possesses a theme, an underlying causal viewpoint leading to the story’s action. Biblical scholarship analyzes the particulars of a story or history to identify the theme. This is inductive logic. Then we consult the Bible to discern whether the principle affirms or denies the Biblical principle. Having identified the Biblical principle, we make an effort by faith to put that principle into practice. This is deductive logic. The sound doctrines of the historic faith, particularly those found in the heritage of the Reformation also help in the task. Again, we examine the fruit of such application to test our success. Such inductive and deductive investigation comprises the basis of a reciprocal, self-correcting Biblical system of scholarship that leads to real accomplishment.

### ***What Constitutes Christian Literature?***

One of the most important elements we seek in literature is the portrayal of godly character, fully developed or in development. I prefer to consider godly literary character in terms of the prototypical American hero or heroine, an icon of the Christian era. Christian meekness — power and authority restrained and directed toward good — comprises the essence of this heroism. The Christian hero corresponds to the Biblical man or woman of faith. Christian literature presents the historical legacy of faith. Christian education may then appropriate the lessons of that legacy to our generation’s instruction.

We may identify a Biblical character in the heritage of the American Pilgrims. The Pilgrims knew how to keep their eyes on God and their hands on the plow. Their industry and faith in adversity coupled with their strictly Biblical vision forged a character that stood for God in any circumstances. Their many material trials and trials of persecution helped produce their capacity for compassion and mercy for others. These experiences coupled with their understanding of New Testament liberty forged their ability for local self-government. Their biblicity, love of liberty, and proven character laid the foundation for America’s free institutions. When we find such elements of character in literature, we may be assured that we have found some degree of Christian expression.

Most importantly, Christian literature is God-centered. Treating good as evil and evil as good commonly characterizes non-Christian literature. Christian literature favorably regards the Ten Commandments and Christ’s Two Commandments as determinative of right and wrong. Moreover, most literature promotes one view of salvation or another. Pagan literature finds leading characters saving themselves or being saved through mere circumstance based on a materialistic determinism. Christian literature acknowledges God, however subtly, as the One who saves.

### ***Examples from Little House***

The *Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder represents one of the most complete treatments of familial Christian character in the increasingly secular and decadent world of the 1870s and 1880s. Unlike the unrealistic easy-evangelism that characterizes so much of contemporary Christian literature,

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the *Little House* books deal with faith in Jesus Christ as a given. Mrs. Wilder is never preachy. Young Laura’s mother taught the Scriptures so diligently that when Laura was fifteen and her teacher read a Psalm to start school each day, Laura commented that, though she knew all the Psalms by heart, she loved to hear them over and over again. Similarly, when Laura heard the Declaration of Independence publicly read as part of a town Fourth of July celebration, though she knew the document by heart, she loved to hear it again. Laura realized that America had no human king. This fifteen year old realized in a very adult moment that God is America’s King. Americans needed no dictator. This meant that she was free and independent, but it also meant she had responsibility to live well apart from external constraint. She must answer to God.

In her masterpiece, *Little House in the Big Woods*, Mrs. Wilder immediately introduces her theme. The Little House lies in the Big Woods. The wolves and wildcats and bears that inhabit the woods are dangerous and scary to a five-year-old girl. “Laura knew that wolves would eat little girls.” Pa’s answer? “Go to sleep, Laura. Jack [the brindle bulldog] won’t let the wolves in.” Moreover, in their material life, though rude by contemporary standards, the family appreciated refinement, beauty, and grace. While Ma added salt to the kerosene lantern to keep it from exploding, she also added red colored cloth to make the oil pretty. The little house was a safe and beautiful sanctuary in a wild and dangerous land.

How can a family be secure in such a place? The rest of Chapter One relates the annual preparation for winter and is a veritable economic textbook. Chapter 3 finds Pa cleaning his flintlock long-rifle for the next day’s hunting. Mrs. Wilder’s description would supply even a novice with the instruction needed to care for a black powder weapon. Pa meticulously makes the bullets, cleans the barrel, and reloads. He tells Laura and her sister Mary to watch for mistakes, but he never makes any. Moreover, “Laura and Mary were never afraid when Pa went alone into the Big Woods. They knew he could always kill bears and panthers with the first shot.” Contrast this illustration of Pa’s excellence of character and skill with Laura naughtily touching the hot bullets out of the mold.

In this same chapter, Pa tells Laura the story of when he was “a naughty little boy.” This story seems out of character in a chapter on competence, excellence, and all the character and skills needed to survive and thrive in the big woods. Why is it there? The story tells of nine-year-old Pa losing himself in play while tending cows. The sun goes down and the cows are gone! He hears a great screeching sound. The negligent and now frightened boy runs through the darkened woods, badly stubbing his toe. Once home, he finds the cows waiting outside the corral. Laura’s grandpa cut a switch and gave the boy a thrashing, so that he “would remember to mind him after that.” How does one grow from a naughty child to a self-possessed, accomplished man capable of living in such a wild place? His father trains him and corrects him when needed. Sloppiness and casual rearing can ruin a man. Careful, diligent, and loving training will produce an able and independent manly man. Pa’s Pa concludes with the counsel, “If you’d obeyed me, as you should, you wouldn’t have been out in the Big Woods after dark, and you wouldn’t have been scared by a screech-owl.” A family in a little house may live secure and thrive. The now careless child eventually acquires the character and skills to match the wild and dangerous landscape. How times have changed! Or have they? While we may not experience such imminent physical danger, sound economy and careful moral training are more important than ever!

The rest of the book observes the seasons passing to complete a year in the life of the Ingalls family. *Season* has a dual meaning here. Seasons mark the passing of time and the changes that accompany

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them. However, seasoning is the process of hardening and strengthening wood, so that it makes suitable and long-lasting building material. Just so, character seasons and hardens through living and training, overcoming trials by faith, and, in a word, through growing up. Mrs. Wilder ingeniously both expands her theme and ties her simple story containing no plot into a masterpiece of literary Christian Americana. Every new chapter and every one of Pa’s stories make history come alive in a homely and personal, but engaging manner. More importantly, they impart valuable character lessons of tremendous utility — if we are careful to observe them.

The Ingalls’ story is but one example. Laura wrote similarly, in the book *Farmer Boy*, of her husband Almanzo Wilder’s family in Upstate New York. What would young Almanzo do with the fifty cents his father gave him? How much work did that fifty cents represent? Almanzo rehearsed for his father the work it took to raise potatoes. Fifty cents represents all the work it took to produce half a bushel of potatoes. Would he drink it up in lemonade at the fair to impress his friends? Or would he invest it in a sucking pig with the potential of earning ten to twenty dollars?

In another story, Almanzo attempts to haul logs with his father. Almanzo takes his homemade sled and his newly broken ox calf. He attempts to carry too much wood, hurts his foot, and flounders in the snow with the too-heavy load. His father does not help Almanzo. Is his father cruel? Does Father ask too much of the young boy? Was Father disappointed that Almanzo actually carried so little wood? Clearly, Father’s purpose is educational. He wishes Almanzo to learn certain economic lessons. He also wishes him to forge character and wisdom through the difficulties of his experience.

### ***Additional Examples from Literature***

The early Christian classic *Beowulf* portrays Christianity emerging from a pagan and superstitious culture. *Beowulf* teaches us that God is patient with our present state as He brings us from glory to glory into His image. Part of *Beowulf*’s virtue is the example of the selfless heroism of the warrior Beowulf. Beowulf also confronts us with the place of war in the Christian heritage. The story emphasizes faith with respect to restraint in war, giving place to God to decide the contest, not by might, but by His Spirit. Beowulf demonstrates that courage is appropriate for the Christian, as Providence prevails in all things.

We may also see the Christian heritage compromised in Louisa May Alcott’s stories, such as *Rose in Bloom*. Miss Alcott wrote with a high regard for Christian virtues, but these were mixed with humanistic principles. For example, Uncle Alex believes that one must experience the consequences of one’s bad actions truly to learn a moral lesson. Such a premise denies that one may act upon the Word of God by faith. As is typical in humanistic literature, the hope of reform rests with oneself, not upon Christ’s gift of salvation.

*Carry on Mr. Bowditch* by Jean Lee Latham is the delightful narration of the life of Nathaniel Bowditch, mathematical genius and naval navigation pioneer. His work, the *American Navigator*, remains the essential manual for ocean-going travel. Bowditch reduced complex arithmetic to simple addition and subtraction using logarithms so that the common and poorly educated seaman could perform advanced shipboard navigational functions. When he was young and his hopes were disappointed, Nathaniel learned to sail by “ash breeze.” That is, when his life was “becalmed” for lack of helpful, fresh winds to

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fill his sails, he *rowed* with ashen oars. He overcame his difficulties by faith — a faith he had plenty of opportunity to practice.

We would be terribly remiss if we neglected the great stories of faith and character we find in the Scriptures. These stories possess the added virtue that they are true. They represent precise life lessons, as they are the very Word of God. Moreover, they represent the timeless and fundamental principles of good story telling. Other literature will necessarily contain omissions or corruptions of God’s view of life, because they are the product of sinful men. While we ought not to dismiss the literature of men for the Christian testimonies they represent, we ought to consider the stories of Scripture the greatest of treasures.

These are just a few examples of the available stories of Christian literature. Christians should seek out the rich heritage of Christian literature based upon a carefully developed Biblical method of scholarship. If we do so, we may recognize and perhaps achieve the elevated character of our forefathers in our children’s and our own lives. Such Christian character will serve the work of the Great Commission.

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<sup>i</sup> Rosalie J. Slater in James B. Rose, Ed., *A Guide to American Christian Education for the Home and School* (Camarillo, CA: American Christian History Institute, 1987), p. 327.