

Tools for Promoting Literacy
An Article for Chalcedon Report
By Ronald Kirk

Once, men looked up to Christians because they wielded wisdom, understanding, and accomplishment. With their Christ-centered foundation, they spoke with meaning and relevance to a dying world. Christians were often the most accomplished musicians, scientists, statesmen, and writers of their day, many leaving a distinguished mark on history. Christians were the head and not the tail. Sound intellectual development rose in part from rigorous literary training. For many, the Bible was life's textbook, and this accounted for much success. Today these things are not commonly so. Recovering the basic tools of literacy will help reverse that damage and lead to a new frontier of Christian achievement.

I find it somewhat ironic that I am writing this article. I grew up in a home with little literary inclination, though with a powerful work ethic. While always a voracious learner, I have also struggled with verbal expression. I acquired the ability to read in spite of "Dick and Jane." Although supposedly well educated with a degree from the University of California at Berkeley in a professional discipline, from my early moments as an aspiring Christian educator, I had to strive to re-build my own elementary education. I believe that God appointed me to this work as an encouragement to others who also struggle to learn or to teach. Modern education often discourages the desire for personal accomplishment. We come to believe we cannot learn. Bad psychology and poor methods permanently arrest our faculties. These things ought not to be. A remedy is at hand. The best encouragement I can offer is that if *I* can learn and attain modest ability, anyone can. I can also share the grounds of my success in teaching and learning.

The Rudiments of Literacy

All sound learning builds upon the Biblical tripod of education: *example*, *content*, and *discipline*. These three elements clearly appear in the way Christ taught His disciples. Most contemporary teaching methods emphasize either *content* (the cognitive view) or *example* (the environmental view), although the *affective* view (how one feels) has also gained prominence. In recent decades, discipline — practice under an appropriate level of government — has largely fallen into disrepute. Nonetheless, the three elements together comprise a rightly balanced approach to learning.

As to *example*, the ordinary use of elevated language in the home or school greatly serves the cause of literacy. Children will acquire their basic vocabulary, the needed foundation of literacy, from the use of language in the home. I have found that the home that loves literature and learning, in practice and together as a family, produces the greatest inclination to learning in the children. Regular family reading aloud makes a significant impact on the heart and mind of the child. Because of his natural commanding influence, the father's shared literary interest is particularly important.

As to *content*, we recognize that language is first oral; the root of *language* means *tongue*. Based on agreement over the meaning of articulate sounds, we communicate thought, mind to mind. Written language substitutes characters for the sounds of speech. Clearly, then, the sounds of speech and their representative letters comprise the most fundamental elements of literacy. Seventy or so basic phonograms (letters or combinations of letters) and about forty phonemes (basic phonic sounds)

comprise the building blocks for the whole of the English language. A system that concentrates on these basic sounds and their letter representations is more efficient than one that exercises with a multiplicity of possible consonant and vowel combinations, as in the common early phonetic systems.¹ Certain essential rules uniformly govern the assembly of the individual phonograms into words. These few rules guide the writing and reading of most English words. Such rules as guide syllabication and adding suffixes simplify learning a complex language like ours. Moreover, systematic learning ordinarily and very quickly helps build a *sense* of spelling for those patterns too numerous to learn under formal rules. The basic phonetic elements, a concise set of governing rules, and specific practice in spelling words provide an efficient and portable method adaptable to individual needs. The content of literature used to teach reading ought to correspond to the high standard of content appropriate to all Christian consumption. I have long used and recommend the original *McGuffey's Readers*.²

As to *discipline*, directed practice carves ability into the native faculties. We apply ourselves to both the principle and the particular. We know that sin confounds the faculties so that only consistent *correct* practice may unscramble them. The command, “Do this and live!” guides our faith. Few are good at any endeavor at first. Specific and precise exercise establishes the various neural pathways we recognize as *development* in knowledge, skills, and character. To learn, the student must overcome the natural reticence to undertake anything difficult. Difficulty yields to accomplishment in due season. We must believe that God Himself enables our ability. We practice the subject by faith in proper sequence, from the rudiments to the more demanding and advanced. Learning is not linear, and demanding accomplishment from one not ready is cruel. However, anyone *can try*. Anyone can improve. Accepting a period of investment without immediate fruit produces faith, patience, and the character for overcoming difficulty. Within weeks, upon an intensive investment in the mastery of the phonograms, almost any child can learn to read. No one I have taught has failed to read, including children and adults labeled dyslexic. Teachers of those who are physically or mentally handicapped can often find alternative means or use conventional means at a slower pace. Being a slower learner should not exclude a willing student from opportunity. A monolithic classroom pace necessarily restrains the more able and overwhelms the slower learner. In all cases, overcoming difficulty by faith remains the essential principle of learning. Dyslexic children recover. Children with speech impediments improve. Bright children soar, commonly spelling and reading at the fourth through seventh grade level by the end of their primary years (the time when the early literacy skills are begun, usually kindergarten and first grade).

In teaching literacy, I recommend balancing the student's various communication faculties — seeing, listening, speaking, and writing in every combination. While many children favor visual or auditory learning, they should exercise the weaker faculty as well as the stronger one. Learning to write on notebook paper from a blackboard exercises the eye in distance and near reading. This practice also trains a necessary spatial skill. Discerning top, bottom, left side, right side, and middle may very well be new to the young learner. Good posture serves to support the scholarly and most intellectual pursuits of modern man, as well as health. Good ergonomics help keep adults from injury. Forming the habit of good posture will similarly serve the child into old age. The teacher should self-consciously and particularly instruct, exemplify, and guide the practice of every skill needed for learning.

The Essential Learning Principle

God's truth finds expression in the simplest and most elegant forms, though ultimate expression is ever so complex and demanding. The simple statement “Love God and love your neighbor” supports the

whole of the Law and prophets and finds its full expression only in the seemingly infinite details of life's living. Although the actual constituents of physical motion are very complex, Isaac Newton's idealized formula regarding force and movement — $F=MA$ — provides a very useful instrument for predicting motion. Every individual is composed of parts, themselves discrete wholes of some kind, such as the organs and cells of a body. In turn, every whole forms a part of some greater whole. The inherent relationship of the whole to its constituting parts provides the philosophical ground for forming summarizing, abstract concepts of all kinds. For convenience and utility, most knowledge can thus be reduced abstractly to simple, general statements collected from the complex parts that comprise the whole. A school classroom is made of individual students. A fraction of the classroom may be taken without damaging the students (students love this graphic illustration). God's gift of abstraction provides the faculty needed to subdue and organize the individual topics of every complex subject for Christian dominion. This essential *organizational* principle is the essential *learning* principle.

The principle of related wholes and parts thus anchors the literacy paradigm. Rote learning of the basic phonograms and their sounds first establishes the basis for forming words, and then the sentence, paragraphs and larger units of human thought. The student quickly applies the phonograms to the spelling and reading of words. These are sequenced, in the beginning, from easy to more difficult. Students should, at first, learn and practice words on a phonetic basis. Later, the phonetically composed words appear as readable wholes. Still later, the student should read larger phrases and even sentences as discrete wholes. Such a skill comprises the basis for faster reading comprehension.

First attempts to separate a word into its recognizable phonograms present a formidable obstacle to discerning the word. Learning basic individual words in spelling lists assists the new learner in this endeavor. However, the young reading student will nonetheless often encounter words within his spoken vocabulary, but that are not yet readable by him. The student then seeks to discern phonograms that produce a recognizable word. Since a given letter combination can form different phonograms in different words, the reader must be a word detective. For example, *er* may often form a single basic phoneme (phonetic sound) as in *other*, or may sound separately as in *era* or *error*. Once the student has recognized his troublesome word, he ought to practice reading it phonetically several times, so that he may recognize it next time as a whole word. Because reading for whole thoughts is his goal, after decoding a difficult word, the student should re-read his sentence from the beginning. For a new reader, this can be a very tedious process. However, the procedure is necessary both for the particular reading skill and for the capacity for faith in any given effort. The teacher ought not to short-circuit the process, prematurely supplying a sought phonogram or word. The teacher better serves the student by guiding his *search* as needed, whenever possible.

The student may encounter a word beyond his vocabulary. At first, the young student may require his teacher to supply a definition. Later the student should learn to use the dictionary to discern a word's contextual meaning. Rigorous teaching of the English roots, suffixes, and prefixes greatly aids mastery of the language. These are skills learned from assiduous application and are usually acquired over an extended period.

The sentence is the first whole unit of human thought. Unless one can read and understand the sentence as a whole, communication of the intended thought remains incomplete. Again, a student may have to read and re-read a sentence many times to master it. However, as important as the sentence is, it is only the beginning of understanding. The paragraph represents the extended treatment of a single idea. In order to read a paragraph, as with sentence and word decoding, the student must understand its parts.

More advanced elementary students determine a paragraph's essential idea from the discernment of an overall single subject and predicate. We ask: What is the paragraph about? What does the paragraph essentially say of the subject?

If a student cannot understand a paragraph, he must parse or dissect the sentences. If he cannot understand a sentence, he must discern the words' meaning in context. If he cannot identify or does not know the meaning of a word, he must discover it. He then works to build understanding of the greater whole. If an element of reading is more difficult to understand, it is likely to be more *important*. Out of innate laziness—an aspect of the sin nature—many students tend to skip over difficult things. For true learning, the opposite should be true. Due to the vagaries of thought and language, the most important ideas are often expressed only with difficulty. Understanding is an economic principle, a matter of investment. Here too, students must learn to walk by faith and patience.

The whole and parts principle applies to extended expressions of a whole, single idea, such as chapters, books, and systems. Alas, “Of the writing (and reading) of books, there is no end, and it is wearying to the soul.” Nonetheless, this system is accessible. A home school mom once told me that she gained more understanding from this simple paradigm than she learned in two years of graduate study in a reading major.

With application to the minute details of learning, with the establishment of humble faith and character in the pursuit of learning, and with the regular application of the principle of the whole and parts, while incorporating the best content, sound literacy should result. Such a general accomplishment in the young and old and among those of greater and lesser native ability will go far toward restoring the ability of Christians to acquire Biblical wisdom, and once more to be the head and not the tail, to the glory of God.

¹ See Romalda Spalding, *Writing Road to Reading* (New York: Morrow, 1990). However, the consonant-vowel approach, such as Noah Webster's or Alexander McGuffey's spelling systems, or Samuel Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* (Boise: The Paradigm Company, 1991), may offer an easier means to *combine* the phonetic sounds. Including exercises with consonant and vowel combinations may be helpful for students who experience difficulty learning this skill.

² *The Original McGuffey's Eclectic Series*, by William H. McGuffey, is published by Mott Media.