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Meeting the Challenge of Public Education: Lessons from the Past

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Meeting the Challenge of Public Education from the Past

By James Thompson

One of the few memories from elementary school that I can recall involves the time after lunch when the teacher regularly read to us from some story that was calculated to mark the transition from lunchtime to the afternoon. Of the books that our teachers read to us, I can recall only a few, including *Heidi, Black Beauty,* and the *Hardy Boys* mysteries. I also recall another book from the fourth grade, although I can remember neither the author nor the title. What I do remember is the story line about a community known as the "Sugar Creek Gang." The dramatic tension in these stories concerned the tent revivals that were held each summer in this community and the effect that these revivals had on some of its most disreputable citizens. We listened with rapt attention as we were first introduced to John Teal, whose drunken behavior disgusted all of us. But slowly the revivalists' words begin to have an effect on John, until he is finally transformed from a dissipated figure (as fourth graders might imagine this) into a Christian and a leading citizen. Once John Teal is transformed, the drama moves on to another disgusting figure who is also converted during the revival meeting. This story, like a television serial, had the potential to run until our interest waned because new villains kept turning up in the community of the Sugar Creek Gang, and each was transformed by the revivalists' preaching.

The students in my fourth grade class seemed to like the story very well, presumably because they could identify with revivals and conversion to this kind of religious expression. I liked the story also, but I had misgivings. Because the manner of conversion did not ring true to revivals as I knew them, I told my teacher once that the story was actually teaching Baptist doctrine. I had more misgivings than my fellow students because I represented a minority religious community that was very sensitive about the intrusions that the Baptists and Methodists were making in the public schools. They had succeeded in establishing the public schools as Protestant schools, and this Protestant tradition worked very well because few were present who would have had misgivings about it. I am amazed that our own minority community had been effective in preparing fourth graders for this challenge! My home and congregation had been serious about inculcating religious values that defined who we were.

More challenges were to come for me whenever religious faith was brought into the schools. There were awkward moments when we were asked to recite the Lord's Prayer or I was asked to lead in prayer at public functions and omit "in Jesus' name." I realized only later that we were not the only religious people who were uncomfortable with religious expressions in public education. Catholics were so uncomfortable with these Protestant public schools that they opted very early to develop their own educational system. Jews also faced the challenge of educating their children in this decidedly Protestant atmosphere, although their option of developing a separate school system existed

only in a few major cities. In our pluralistic society, public education presented a special challenge, especially where it took religion seriously.

The crisis we face today is, I believe, created more by the absence of education in the home and the church than by the relativistic claims of public schools.

Despite the doctrinal misgivings that dissenting religious groups had, this Protestant education served our purposes well. Besides introducing us to the common curriculum, it undertook the teaching of values and a worldview "on which all reasonable men agree."[0] Early educators acknowledged that the task of the public schools was to teach character and morality, particularly as they were understood in the Protestant Establishment. Horace Mann argued that the common school taught a purer form of Christianity than did the churches.[1] He insisted on the importance of "daily reading of the Bible, devotional exercises, and the constant inculcation of the precepts of Christian morality in all the public schools."[2] However, religious minorities were not long in noticing that this educational philosophy was intended to create a common culture and values that would silence the voice of religious minorities and place the state in an intermediate position between parents and their children.

The crisis that Ron Highfield describes is the logical outgrowth of Mann's dictum that the task of education is to teach values on which "all reasonable men agree." The result is that education has become neutralized to the extent that the views of religious minorities continue to be ignored or disdained. What "all reasonable men agree" on is the omission of the religious dimension of life. Under current interpretations of the first amendment, textbooks and teachers may deny religious claims, but they may not affirm them. The religious minorities in this case, however, are not only those who intend to pass on a particular sectarian vision, but all who wish to maintain a Christian worldview. Textbooks suffer from serious distortion by omitting the religious dimension of history and literature.[3] Few would deny that the school is the place for teaching values, but the values are those of liberal democratic society, not of the Christian faith. Liberal democratic society is left without any dominant or coherent idea of civic virtue that can replace the coherent Christian vision of the older Protestant schools. Thus, instead of the common Christian culture that Mann and the other founders of public education advocated, we are left with a public education that is shaped by an antipathy to religious values.

Education in the Early Church

Ron Highfield has accurately described the crisis in public education that faces Christian parents in a secular, post-Constantinian world. While I am sympathetic to his proposal for a decidedly Christian response to this crisis in the form of Christian schools and home schooling, I am convinced that the options he mentions are not the only ones available for Christian parents and the wider Christian community. Christians in the pre-Constantinian period faced a problem similar to ours, and their response to this challenge is instructive for us.

The earliest Christian communities inherited from the Jewish tradition a strong emphasis on childhood education. Although this topic is never developed at length in the New Testament, one can see the continuity between Jewish education and Christian education in some of the references in the New Testament. Paul's portrayal of his own education, in which he was "thoroughly trained in the traditions of the fathers" (Acts 22:3), reflects the Jewish ideal. His reminder to Timothy of the education that he had received "from infancy" (2 Tim 3:15) also reflects the Jewish values of education in the home (cf. 2 Tim 1:5). That this became the model of Christian education is evident in the household instructions of Ephesians 6:4, according to which fathers are to educate their children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

The New Testament gives no indication of the place of the common curriculum in the education of the children. It indicates only that the Christian education of children had an important place in the community. The presence of children in all aspects of the church's life was a part of this education. In addition, the Christian assembly provided encouragement to parents to fulfill the traditional educational roles in the family. Education in the faith was the paramount concern.

In the patristic period, we catch occasional glimpses of Christian communities as they struggled to determine the appropriate relationship between the religious and secular education of children. John Chrysostom censured fathers who showed more interest in the secular education of their children than in their religious instruction. While he assumed that Christians could not

forgo the pagan schools, their task was to develop a parallel educational program that would shape the character of Christian youth. He insisted that the Old Testament stories would be suitable for young children, while the New Testament would be appropriate when the children are older. The biblical stories would provide an alternative to the frivolous tales from mythology or the theater.[4] Tertullian argued that no Christian could teach in the pagan schools, but he never questioned whether Christians could attend. These writers, along with others in the pre-Constantinian church, were unanimous in their commitment to the Christian education of children in the home and the church. However, despite the fact that they saw clearly the dangers of the pagan school, they did not withdraw from the schools and establish a fully parallel curriculum.[5] The home and the church provided the setting for the education that both augmented and subverted the values of the pagan schools.

The experience of the pre-Constantinian church is, as I have suggested, instructive for the post-Constantinian church as it grapples with the education of its children. Although I agree with Ron Highfield's assessment of the problem and his suggestions for serious Christian engagement with the education of children, the experience of the ancient church suggests that our options are not limited to those he puts forth. While the establishment of Christian schools and educational cooperatives may be a viable alternative, we would do well to recall that the Christian response does not require the abandonment of public education. The more important Christian response is to accept the challenge of providing serious education for the youth through the Sunday school, summer programs, and after-school programs that may exist alongside the public schools. The crisis we face today is, I believe, created more by the absence of education in the home and the church than by the relativistic claims of public schools. In an earlier era, the function of the strong sectarian education given to elementary children in the home and Sunday school served to prepare children for the challenges of the dominant culture. If we committed the resources already available to the education of children and youth to meet the intellectual challenges that they face in the schools, we could take an important step in response to the current crisis. Children's education and youth programs could become more educational in nature, and they could be designed to inculcate the values of the children as definitely as sectarian education prepared students for the dominant Protestant culture.

The total inundation of our children with the relativistic claims of secular culture provided by the educational establishment presents a severe crisis for the church. However, the more severe crisis is that these claims go unchallenged by the church as it engages the religious development of its youth. If we learn from the ancient church, we will recognize the importance of the priority of education in the Christian faith over other types of learning. The Christian assembly, Sunday school, and youth ministry will offer the opportunity for sustaining the values of Christians as they learn to live as "worldview minorities" in the larger society.

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Notes

[0] Charles Glenn and Joshua Glenn, "Making Room for Religious Conviction in Democracy's Schools," in Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff, *Schooling Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 94.

[1] Glenn and Glenn, 94.

[2] Quoted in George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York: Oxford, 1994) 87.

[3] See Paul C. Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1986).

[4] R. Scholl, "Das Bildunsproblem in der alien Kirche," in H. T. Johann, *Erziehung und Bildung in der heidnischen und christlichen Antike* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976) 512.

[5] H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, repr. 1982) 316.