JOURNAL
of
FAITH AND THE ACADEMY

‹ REVIEWS

ER 1, 2010

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FAITH AND THE ACADEMY CONFERENCE: FEBRUARY 12, 13, 2010

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Preparing the Soil: The Mission of Christian Teachers in Public Schools

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Christian teachers in public schools are provided an opportunity by the First Amendment to pursue a specific and active work to promote Christ. This must stop short of proselytizing yet does extend beyond teaching moral values or living as a silent witness. The parable of the sower provides the framework for exploring how this Christian mission of public school educators requires critical consideration of culturally held expectations of schooling in order to educate students to be inquisitive, rational, and to respect the value of intangible goods.

When I went to school in Kentucky several decades ago, my classmates were Christian or Jewish, or they were backslidden and they knew it. The times were "hardly Christ-centered," but they were "most certainly Christ-haunted."[1] In a different time and place, my children go to school with classmates who are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Hindu, a few who are Christian, and most that are completely religion-free. In my work as a teacher educator in a Christian University, I have been required by the demographics of my region to think carefully about what it means to be a Christian teacher in a public school in a diverse society.

The First Amendment and the Great Commission

Christian teachers understand the legal requirements of the separation of church and state. They are aware that, as representatives of a public school, they must not violate the intent of the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Nevertheless, they find ways to live according to their faith and within the law.[2]

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[1] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969) 44.

[2] This paper will consider the role of Christians in their work as teachers in the public school classroom with their students. It will exclude the important work teachers can do as members of the community and the church, as advisors and mentors to young people, or as witnesses of the gospel to colleagues, parents, and other adults in the school setting.

Many consider themselves a silent witness following the advice attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." They know that they need not hide the fact that they are Christians, and they can honestly answer student-initiated questions about their beliefs. They treat their students in a Christ-like manner, and they pray even as they work. While the First Amendment constructs many of the boundaries of Christian work in public schools, it should not define Christian work in public schools. The purpose of this article is to explore the possibilities for a specific Christian mission in public school teaching that is not defined by the federal law but by Christian principles.

Many Christians consider the First Amendment to be an impediment to the Great Commission, preventing any specifically Christian outreach in public school teaching. However, the First Amendment actually enables a specific Christian mission to public school students. First, it requires public schools to accommodate the religious beliefs of students and teachers in many ways. Christian teachers and students have the freedom to be a part of public schools, and they have the freedom to speak about and act on their faith in many situations. Second, the First Amendment prevents public schools from coercing students to participate in religious activities. Christian teachers are not permitted to coerce their students into participating in Christian prayer or other religious activities, nor are they permitted to use their power as teachers to proselytize. The same law that prevents Christian teachers from proselytizing prevents *other* teachers from proselytizing for other faiths. Although the First Amendment places restrictions on Christian teachers' religious activities in their roles as teachers, it also prevents public schools from excluding Christians as part of the educational community. Focusing on what the First Amendment prohibits should not prevent us from recognizing and maximizing the opportunities it provides.

The situation enabled by the First Amendment is a great trade-off in which Christians relinquish one privilege to gain another. What Christians give up is the privilege of explicitly preaching the gospel to students in the classroom. Jesus' principle from Matt 22:21, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" is appropriately applied in this situation. The public school system is Caesar's, so to speak, so when we are in Rome, we do what the Romans do and follow the laws of the land, insofar as the laws of the land do not require us to act against our beliefs.[3]

[3] The first clause in the portion of the First Amendment regarding church and state is called the Establishment Clause, that the government cannot make any laws establishing religion. The second clause of the First Amendment is called the Free Exercise clause, that the government cannot prohibit people from practicing their religion. Over the years, various legal decisions have been made that more precisely apply these two clauses. Under the Establishment Clause, schools (and individual teachers) cannot require or encourage students to pray, celebrate a religious holiday, or participate in a religious activity. Teachers may not initiate prayer or religious activity in their roles as teachers. School curriculum may include information about religion, but students must not be required to participate in any religious activity as part of that curriculum. On the other hand, teachers may not promote atheism or any other antireligious beliefs. Under the Free Exercise Clause, schools (and individual teachers) cannot prohibit students (and teachers) from gathering to pray or participate in religious activities, as long as these activities do not interfere with the work of the schools. Schools cannot prohibit students from speaking about their religious faith (or lack of it) in school assignments or among their peers, again, as long as these activities do not interfere with the work of the school. Furthermore, schools and teachers may not denigrate any religion or the lack of religion. Specific rulings have determined that a teacher cannot begin class with a prayer or a religious devotional reading; graduations or football games cannot be opened with prayer; and teachers cannot participate in school clubs which promote religion. If schools allow nonschool groups to use school facilities after school, religious groups must be allowed the same access as nonreligious groups. Schools cannot prohibit students from gathering to pray before school or during lunch, reading religious materials during these times, handing out religious literature at certain times and places, or wearing religious garments. On the other hand, schools can prohibit students from pressuring other students about their religious viewpoints. Currently active questions include whether to require students to recite or be present during the Pledge of Allegiance, whether to teach certain accounts of creation in science classes, and whether to select curriculum or make available certain texts which some people find objectionable on a religious basis.

In subjecting ourselves to the First Amendment, however, we gain the opportunity to become significant persons in the lives of children, youth, and families who may not be reached through conventional church efforts. To most of us, public school is a familiar cultural setting, and the ordinariness of the widespread cultural practice of sending children to public schools may obscure its significance. Families of all races, cultures, languages, social classes, and religions send their children to public schools. Children from families who would never agree to attend a Bible study or even a church picnic send their children to public schools. Public school teachers strongly influence the formation of young identities, characters, opinions, and perspectives. I can think of no other profession which personally touches the lives of so many young people on a daily basis.

Where I live in Los Angeles, a celebrity-obsessed culture values the power of exclusive access. If you know the right people, you can be admitted to places, events, and opportunities that are not open to the general public. A teaching credential is like a backstage pass or a celebrity party invitation in that it provides access. Not just anyone can walk into a public school and influence the lives of students, but public school teachers have daily access to the hearts and minds of young people. This incredibly significant opportunity has been obscured by the ordinariness of the public school setting and a largely unexamined cultural belief that work with children and youth is less significant than work with adults.

The positions taken in this article assume that a Christian teacher's loyalty to God supersedes her loyalty to the public school system and that promoting the kingdom of God takes precedence over promoting the agenda of the public schools. Furthermore, a Christian teacher's faith is not something that can be left on the school doorstep but is something that is just as active in his professional work as in

his personal life. Living out these assumptions may create conflicts institutionally between Christian teachers and the public school system or professionally between Christian teachers and individuals who are part of the public school institution.

C.S. Lewis writes about Christian communities as pockets of resistance against Satan in "enemy occupied territory," secretly engaging in "a great campaign of sabotage."[4] This metaphor, taken from World War events, connotes a flavor of intrigue—working underground, having a cover, and knowing things about your work that other people don't know. While the Christian life has very little "Mission Impossible" glamour, it is important to understand that having specifically Christian intentions in public school teaching could be perceived by some as a problem, even a legal problem. If a teacher, acting in her role as a teacher, intends to promote the Christian religion, she may be considered to be in violation of a 1971 Supreme Court Ruling,[5] which says, in part, that a school's actions must have a legitimate secular purpose. The impact of this ruling has been debated in the courts many times, but it is important to realize that the idea of a public school teacher with a specifically Christian mission will be objectionable to some. In addition, some of the practical applications of these principles challenge common contemporary and popular educational ideologies and practices, and that will be objectionable to some as well. Christian work in a public school is likely to engender controversy, in theory and in practice.

Finally, I assume the best about teachers as thoroughly prepared, highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring professionals. Carrying out a Christian mission in a public school is challenging, requiring an integration of spiritual discernment, practical wisdom about teaching, instructional knowledge and skills, and the courage to take professional risks. On one hand, adopting a Christian mission in public school teaching adds yet one more layer of complexity on an already complex work, but for many Christian teachers, this layer will give clarity and focus to a profession that hears and answers to many diverse voices and forces.

What We Have Heard

As in any Christian endeavor, our first source for direction is the Bible. But since the Bible does not say anything directly about this specific situation, we look for biblical principles and see how they may apply. First, there are several well-known directives to parents regarding child-rearing that could be applied to schools as they stand in *loco parentis*. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother" (Eph 6:1-2) reminds us that children need

[4] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 36.

[5] See The Oyez Project, Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602 (1971), available at: http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1970/1970_89/ (last visited Friday, January 30, 2009).

to learn obedience and respect. "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death" (Prov 23:13-14) reminds us that discipline is a necessary part of bringing up children. This theme is repeated in Heb 12:7-11, where the writer compares the endurance of hardship to the discipline children receive from fathers. The literal use of a rod is questionable in our culture, but we can feel comfortable with the idea of discipline as part of school life for a child.

On the other side of the coin, the Bible has a few directives for parents. After "honor your father and mother" comes Eph 6:4, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:9-11), Jesus assumes that parents know how to provide for their children: "Which of you; if his son asks for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?" And of course, the familiar passage that gives hope and immeasurable responsibility to parents: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov 22:6). These passages are some that speak most directly to the relationship between children and the adults who care for them, but they are not enough to build a complete foundation for the work of Christian teachers in public schools.

A second and often unnoticed influence on our theory of Christian work in a public school is our culture's expectations of what makes a good education. These are the cultural understandings that all of us who have grown up in the U.S. have experienced, taken in, and accepted to some extent as the normal way that schooling is done. Some of these expectations are clear because they contrast sharply with our Christian beliefs; ethical relativism and disregard for Christian perspectives are disturbing and obvious when they are implicitly or explicitly taught in schools. Other understandings are less apparent; although longstanding and comfortable, they are not necessarily the best understandings for the work that Christian teachers can accomplish in the public schools of the twenty-first century. Hidden cultural understandings are powerful because they invisibly define our world as the glass walls of an aquarium define the world of a goldfish.

We must be open to the possibility that some of our cultural expectations regarding the public school experience do not support a Christian mission in public schools. They are not biblical expectations, so we do not need to feel bound to them. Even the briefest study of the philosophy of education reveals dozens of theoretical and cultural influences on contemporary schooling. Following are three of the cultural sources that have contributed to our expectations of schooling that are relevant to an understanding of Christian work in public schools.

The first source is our Puritan heritage. Puritans took their beliefs seriously, especially, it seems, the doctrine of original sin, and this played out in how they educated their children. John Wesley warns, "The parent who studies to subdue [the will] in his child works together with God in the renewing and saving a soul.

The parent who indulges [the will] does the devil's work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable; and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body forever."[6] The image of the joyless Puritan classroom in which switch-beaten students recite Bible verses and portentous rhymes about sin and hell lingers in our conception of school and transfers easily from Puritan concerns for children's salvation to contemporary secular concerns for children's future earthly success. Puritan schools were the "custodian of the morals of the young,"[7] just as contemporary public schools are called to address character development, promote volunteerism, support mental health, increase children's self esteem, and improve behavior. Contemporary calls for stricter discipline, school uniforms, and longer school days and years fit well within a Puritan perspective on external discipline as a precursor to salvation and hard work as an outward indication of spiritual well-being.[8] The Puritan concern for orthodoxy is echoed in the current preoccupation with state and national standards, testing, and accountability.

The purpose of this section is not to criticize Puritan values nor denigrate the importance of hard work and discipline but to bring awareness to the power of our Puritan inheritance in contemporary public schooling. Designed explicitly to save children's innately sinful souls in early American Puritan communities, Puritan strategies may not be the best strategies to promote a Christian mission for Christian teachers in contemporary public schools.

The second influence is behaviorism. An early theory in psychology, behaviorism has been largely dismissed by psychologists as an adequate explanation for complex human learning of language, other symbolic systems, and abstract ideas. B.F. Skinner criticized the belief

> that men have a natural curiosity or love of learning, or that they naturally want to learn. We do not say that about a pigeon; we say only that under the conditions we have arranged, a pigeon learns. We should say the same thing about human students. Given the right conditions men will learn—not because they want to, but because, as the result of a genetic endowment of the species, contingencies bring about changes in behavior.[9]

[6] John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody, 1951) chapter 4, "Conquer the Child's Will," available at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iv.xx.html (last visited July 10, 2009).

[7] V.T. Thayer and Martin Levit, eds., *The Role of the School in American Society* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1969) 103.

[8] Ibid., 107; note that attitudes regarding authority and discipline in school tend to change as domestic and international tensions rise and fall. Calls for rigor, strictness, and conformity rise in response to perceived national threats. Currently the national economic crisis, terrorism, global economic competition, and urban problems may be driving demands for higher standards and accountability.

[9] B.F. Skinner, "Education," in *From Piaget to Plato* (William Cooney, Charles Cross, and Barry Trunk, eds.; New York: University Press of America, 1993) 211.

Skinner's theory of learning, developed through experiments on pigeons and rats, shows itself as starkly scientistic, positivistic, and simplistic when applied to the learning of humans. Nonetheless, a popularly understood version of behaviorism persists in schools as a stronghold in how we think about learning and motivation. Classroom management practices that rely on systems of rewards and punishments are founded on behaviorism, as are strategies that promise raffle tickets for fundraising and pizzas for reading. Kohn points out, "Rewards are used constantly in nearly every classroom to try to motivate children and improve their performance."[10] Students are offered stickers, stars, candy, extra recess, extra credit, honor roll recognition, even cash in exchange for academic achievement and good behavior. Students' grades are used as incentives at least as much as communicative measures of student achievement.

Behaviorism not only guides many school approaches to student motivation, it also guides the construction of a kind of curriculum that is familiar to almost anyone who has attended American schools. Curriculum that is theoretically based on behaviorism breaks down complicated learning tasks, such as comprehending an expository paragraph, into separate skills, focuses on one skill in isolation from other skills, and measures achievement of the skill with quantitative tests. Behaviorism is the theoretical foundation for behavioral objectives, statements which education students learn to write to direct their lesson plans and which read something like, "Given 10 cause-and-effect paragraphs, the learner will identify the causes and effects in each paragraph with 85% accuracy." Over time, behavioral objectives have evolved into the long lists of content standards that students must master at each grade level and read something like, "Distinguish between cause and effect and between fact and opinion in expository text."[11]

The standards have evolved into standardized tests that measure the achievement of the standards, and the standardized tests have evolved into standardized curriculum which is designed and "scientifically proven" to raise test scores. The dominance of direct instruction, one-size-fits-all curriculum, teaching to the test, and fragmentation of learning into discrete facts and skills "reflects, again, the enduring legacy of behaviorism. . . . The curriculum amounts to a series of individual, microlevel tasks, each taught and then tested."[12] The point in this section is not to criticize the systems of rewards and punishments, standardized curriculum, and standardized testing we are familiar with but to call attention to the pervasive-

[10] Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) 143.

[11] *English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools* (California Board of Education, 1997) 22.

[12] Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving beyond Traditional Classrooms and Tougher Standards* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) 69.

ness of practices founded in behaviorism that we accept as normal and good in our schools. While these methods can be effective for some specific immediate purposes, their theoretical foundation as well as their practical long-term effects should be considered when we think of what Christian teachers can do to prepare the hearts and minds of young students to receive the gospel.

The third influence is materialism. By this term, I am referring not to philosophical materialism but a value that easily follows: a broad perspective that values material progress, competition for limited resources, and the acquiring of wealth and power. It only makes sense that these secular goals are thoroughly entrenched in secular schools, but Christian teachers should be aware of this entrenchment. Materialism merges with the main premise from behaviorism[13] that learning is a measurable change in behavior and adds the value judgment that achieving more measurable outcomes at a faster rate is better than achieving fewer measurable outcomes at a slower rate. For instance, baby boomers in the United States were expected to learn to read in first grade. Now the *California English-Language Arts Content Standards* require the grandchildren of baby boomers to "Read simple one-syllable and high-frequency words"[14] in kindergarten.

The implication from this evolution seen in the Standards is that if reading in first grade is good, reading in kindergarten is better—for everyone. Materialistic competition plays a prominent role in contemporary schooling from classroom procedures to national policies. Students compete for grades, test scores, class rank, and academic recognition. Students resort to high-tech cheating, requiring school administrators to respond with higher-tech anticheating measures. Raising academic standards (higher than other people's academic standards) is seen as a necessary precursor to improving education. High-performing schools scramble to outscore other schools for a higher place in the norm referenced Academic Performance Index; low-performing schools scramble to raise their API and avoid state takeover. The ability to compete in the global marketplace drives much of educational decision making. Schools, teachers, students, and their families feel the pressure to achieve more and to achieve it faster.

Material gain is not part of the gospel message, but it is hard to resist the power of materialism when it seems that so much is on the line. Given the state of the world and American middle-class expectations, the worldly success of our students is indeed tied to their ability to achieve more things at a faster rate than other students. However, when it comes to their spiritual dispositions and their futures in the kingdom of God, the influence of materialism should be acknowledged and the value of narrowly defined material progress and achievement should be questioned.

These three sources of cultural expectations—Puritanism, behaviorism, and materialism—and their implications for schools deserve recognition and a critical treatment because they have had a powerful hand in shaping current educational ideologies and practices. Behaviorism and materialism are both rooted in philosophical naturalism and thus support one another. The belief that the physical world is all there is couples with the belief that learning is nothing more than an observable change in behavior. The value of materialistic competition and progress follows logically from these. Puritanism, its essence founded on theism, stands apart theoretically from behaviorism and materialism. However, the Puritan practices of external discipline, conformity, and hard work can be used to support the practices of materialism and behaviorism. Hard work, consequences, and achievement do have a place in public education. However, in order to construct an understanding of a Christian mission for teachers in public schools, the influences of Puritanism, behaviorism, and materialism on contemporary schooling must be recognized.

Lest the preceding paragraphs leave the reader with the impression that I am wholly disillusioned with the foundations and practices of contemporary public schools, I must acknowledge that there are many admirable qualities inherent to our public school practices that are consistent with Christianity and which enable a Christian mission. For instance, our schools educate all children regardless of background or ability, which isn't the case in other places or at other times. Furthermore, the nation as a whole recognizes that everyone has a responsibility to educate children and youth, and we pay taxes to support this work. School officials and teachers create policies, procedures, and activities that encourage students to be honest, kind, responsible, fair, and respectful.

One of the most hope-engendering qualities about public schools is that the overwhelming majority of teachers and others who work in education are people who genuinely care about children. As a result, in many important ways, our schools work well. Students who complete a public school education read and write, compute, and know quite a bit about the world. From a historical and global perspective, this is not a minor accomplishment. Of course, positive qualities are present in differing amounts in different schools, and too often those students who need the most support receive the least.[15] Yet even when the public school system fails children and their families, hope for improvement remains because the public schools are part of the democratic system, and people have the power to change and improve the schools over time through the democratic process.

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[13] Behaviorism is a philosophically materialistic theory in that it defines learning as outward changes in behavior, ignoring or denying the existence of internal states or phenomena. As such, materialistic values and behaviorism support one another well. See Michael L. Peterson, *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy of Education* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2001) 28-39.

[14] *English-Language Arts Content Standards*, 1.

[15] An argument can be made from biblical injunctions to serve the poor that Christian teachers have an important ministry opportunity to teach students who live in poverty.

The Problems of the Soil

Because Christians may not directly teach the gospel in their work as teachers, it may appear that Christian teachers have no way to promote Christ in their work as teachers. The limitations of the public school seem to preclude any kind of work that would explicitly impact the spiritual lives of students. Stronks and Stronks make an argument that Christian teachers can help students develop morals and values that are consistent with Christian beliefs, but they stop short of providing an explicitly spiritual rationale and provide a democratic rationale instead: "Students need to understand their responsibilities to themselves, to others, and to the earth even when they do not know the Creator because they need these understandings if they are to be responsible citizens in a democracy."[16] Praying for students and teaching in a Christian manner can be done with the hope that students will be impacted by a teacher's silent Christian witness. But there is another option—a specific and active work that Christian teachers can do to promote Christ that stops short of proselytizing yet extends past teaching Christian/democratic moral values or living as a silent witness.

This mission is to prepare students to receive the gospel—to prepare the soil, as Jesus explained in his parable of the sower, so that when the seed is planted, it can take root and grow. This is not an insignificant job. Any gardener knows that conditioning poor soil is an essential first step to a thriving garden. In the parable, Jesus contrasts good soil with three kinds of poor soil, each with particular problems that symbolize human faults that Jesus later explains to his disciples. Jesus does not explain how the types of soil or the kinds of persons they represent came to be the way they are. Nor does he provide his disciples with any guidelines about how to turn poor soil into good soil. This relevance relies on particulars of the times and locations of readers, and so we are left to make these applications ourselves.

Why does the soil need preparation? What is wrong with it in the first place? In the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1-17), only one type of soil was described as "good soil," where the seed sprouted, grew, matured, and produced, but there were three types of soil where the seeds did not grow well. We may infer that "good soil" people are somewhat alike, but there are many ways to be poor soil. Every generation has its particular problems and opportunities, so every generation has its particular kinds of poor soil. In this section, I will describe some specific challenges which diminish the quality of the soil of hearts and minds in contemporary society.

The first kind of poor soil described in the parable is the hard path. Jesus says, "Some [seeds] fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up." He later explains, "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not under-

[16] Julia K. Stronks and Gloria Goris Stronks, *Christian Teachers in Public Schools* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 36.

stand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart." Thus, one kind of poor soil is a person who does not understand the message about the kingdom. Although the gospel is complex enough to have kept many brilliant people intellectually engaged for centuries, it is also simple enough for a child to understand its core message. For just about anyone, the lack of understanding that Jesus is talking about in the parable is not the kind due to simple cognitive deficiency. For some, lack of understanding could be an active unwillingness to understand the gospel after a preliminary cost-benefit analysis. For others, it could be caused by a habit of passivity that precludes the mental and emotional effort required to understand something as challenging as the gospel. Apathy or lack of initiative, curiosity, interest, and passion are habitual ways of being that can prevent a person from understanding the gospel. Thus, C.S. Lewis writes, "The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts."[17]

However, in contemporary American schools, mental passivity is encouraged by curriculum and instructional methods that require students constantly to be passive recipients of facts and compliant participants in direct instruction. When this happens, students' interests, passions, and affinities play an extremely limited role in the curriculum. The pressure to raise test scores leads teachers to abandon methods and content which develop student choice, initiative, and intrinsic motivation. Too often, students learn to read a limited passage and identify causes and effects but not how to find a book, choose a book, read it for a purpose, reflect on it, and find significant meaning in it. Too often, students learn to write a specific form of essay in response to a prompt, but not how to make choices about what to write and how to write about it. Completing fragmented school tasks takes so much time that there is little time left for meaningful and authentic activities and projects. Behavioristic approaches discourage initiative as students' learning and actions are not considered to be self-directed but shaped by teachers' use of reinforcers. The Puritan value of hard work can paradoxically reinforce the passive learning common in contemporary schools; memorizing and completing disjointed assignments are cognitively simple yet tedious and accomplished only through determination and mental endurance. Over time, too many students come to believe that learning is reading a school textbook, completing short answers, writing an assigned essay, or filling in a worksheet; that learning is not interesting or relevant; and that learning is not something to be undertaken without being required. Investigating important ideas, such as Christianity, on one's own initiative is certainly not an attractive proposition. This attitude creates a desert soil so packed and hardened that no seed is likely to penetrate.

The second kind of poor soil is "rocky places, where [the seed] did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun

[17] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper, 1944) 14.

came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root." Later, Jesus explains, "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." At least three contemporary conditions contribute to this kind of poorness of soil. The first is a perspective of relativism combined with a propensity to avoid adversity. People who are searching for spiritual truth may hear the gospel and receive it with joy, but troubles because of the gospel put them back on the road searching for another spiritual truth that is less demanding. Switching roads is allowed by a relativistic or strong pluralistic perspective that tests truth not by rules of logic or by correspondence to external reality but by simple belief; truth is whatever a believer believes. If all roads lead to Rome, and the present road is causing trouble or persecution, just abandon the road and take another one.

Second, aspects of a postmodern perspective, which is a particular streak of relativism, allow a person to hold contradictory beliefs or act in ways that contradict his or her beliefs. Thus, a postmodern fragmented identity can travel several contradictory roads to Rome at once, which, from a traditionally reason-based perspective, would require one to sacrifice quite a bit of critical reasoning. Thus, excessively limited critical thinking becomes a third factor contributing to the rocky soil. When combined with the prevalent acceptance of learning as a passive recipient process, the development and use of critical thinking becomes even more distant. Years spent in a behaviorism-based educational system habituate students to expect an external reward for good behavior.

However, when a presumed good behavior (following Christ) results not in external reward but in external adversity, desire to avoid negative consequences may motivate a reward-dependent adult to abandon his attempt and reinforce his decision with a relativistic justification that following another path is just as good and true as following Christ. Although few classroom teachers seem to be explicitly teaching postmodern relativism and the abandonment of traditional critical thinking, these seep quietly into classrooms especially through the humanities and social sciences—disciplines entrenched in postmodernism at the university level. When people do not take the initiative to think critically about truth and contradiction, they can fall into postmodern and relativistic thinking about morality, faith, truth, and meaning.

The third kind of poor soil is infested with thorny weeds, "which grew up and choked the plants." Jesus explains, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." In other words, the thorny patch represents a person who is preoccupied with the concerns of the material world more than the concerns of the spiritual world, who values the accumulating

of wealth and power, or who is anxious about the consequences of not having enough wealth and power. The problem presented by the weed-infested soil is of someone who values the things of the world so much that she finds it too difficult to consider a way of life that denies the material self in many ways. Materialism presents a double threat to students' eventual receptivity to the gospel because the common human tendency toward materialism referenced in the parable converges with the materialistic values promoted by contemporary schools.

Preparing the Soil

Jesus says that the seed which fell on the good soil produced an abundant crop. He explains, "The one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it." Thus, if the mission of Christian teachers in public schools is to prepare the soil, the specific work of Christian teachers in public schools is to prepare students to hear the word and understand it. One way to begin teasing out what this means is to consider what the poor soils could represent and strive for an alternative to that. Recall that the hard path represents a person who does not understand the message, someone who is close-minded to the gospel or is a passive thinker who would not take the initiative to consider spiritual concerns. The rocky soil characterizes a person who falls away because of trouble or persecution, someone who abandons the gospel uncritically for another perceived truth. The soil with thorny weeds represents a person whose interest in the gospel is destroyed by worldly interests.

Alternatively to these poor soils, a person who is prepared to hear the gospel message and understand it is someone who is humbly open-minded, an active, inquisitive, determined learner, a competent critical thinker, and someone who values intangible goods more than material goods and worldly goals. Developing a typical school student into a humble, inquisitive, critical thinker with spiritual priorities may seem like an impossible task, especially when we consider the many powerful voices in children's lives. Nothing guarantees that a teacher will be able to point students in the right direction; furthermore, nothing guarantees that any given student will remain pointed in the right direction through the years. And sadly, no promise has been made that these personal qualities will eventually lead students to Christ. However, Christian teachers motivated by love will do their best to prepare students to accept the gospel and follow Christ when the time comes.

The practical means of preparing students to hear and understand the gospel message are beyond the scope of this article. Briefly and generally, though, they fall into three categories: surrounding students with the love of God, teaching students to love nonmaterial goodness, and helping students to understand and respect the power of narrative. Surrounding students with the love of God prepares them to recognize that God is good and that the Christian life is not exotic, oppressive, or

impossible. A school year immersed implicitly in the love of God creates a foundation of familiarity and a memory of safety and care that diminish inaccurate stereotypes of life in Christ. Like a pleasant fragrance remembered from years past, the love of God as it permeated the classroom of a Christian teacher will draw students to the love of God expressed explicitly in the gospel.

Teaching students to love nonmaterial goodness will help them later to understand that the intangible goodness offered by God is more valuable than the material profits offered by the world. Helping students understand the power of narrative may seem too discipline-specific to belong to this particular category. Why not teach students to appreciate the complex beauty of nature or even the elegance of a mathematical proof? Narrative deserves special honor because it is the medium that God chose to reveal himself. Realizing and appreciating the power of narrative in general to change lives may help students later to accept the power of the gospel narrative as something that can change their lives.

Conclusion

Compared to the rewards of ministry within a local church or an international mission, the results of preparing the hearts and minds of children and youth through public school teaching are distant at best and most likely will remain unknown and unrecognized. As difficult as it is to plant the seed of the gospel and leave it for others to cultivate and harvest, even more hopeful patience is required to prepare the soil for the eventual planting of the seed. Thousands and thousands of Christians have been called to public school teaching, and preparing the hearts and minds of students to hear and understand the gospel message may be the very ministry to which they have been called. The purposeful influence of this multitude of Christian teachers on the lives of young people and their families should not be underestimated.SCJ

Challenging the Idols of the Twenty-First Century: The Message of the Book of Ecclesiastes[1]

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Proper understanding of Ecclesiastes begins with the recognition that there are two voices in the book, the Teacher (1:12–12:7) and the frame narrator (1:1-11; 12:8-14). The frame narrator examines and evaluates the thought of the Teacher to give his son (12:12) a lesson on life. The Teacher expresses an "under the sun" perspective. The frame narrator encourages his son toward an "above the sun" perspective. Finally, Ecclesiastes is read in the light of the New Testament.

Ecclesiastes is an enigmatic book. The Teacher repeatedly declares that life is "meaningless" (הבל, *hebel*). He emphasizes his sad conclusion by describing the pursuit of meaning as a "chasing after the wind" (1:14,17; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:19). He concludes that there is "no profit" in life (1:3; 3:9; 5:11,16).

The book is neglected by many Christians, including preachers, because it is so difficult to interpret. A book that grapples with the meaning of life, however, is on the surface of it one that has great relevance to the present generation that also struggles with finding purpose to existence. The potential relevance of this book makes the effort to understand it worthwhile. The following essay is an attempt to bring clarity to reading it, not only according to its "discrete witness" in the context of the OT,[2] but also in its broader canonical meaning.

Two Voices

Many readers miss the subtle, yet clear presence of two speakers in the book. The failure to differentiate the two voices can lead to a serious misunderstanding of Ecclesiastes and its message. One speaker speaks in the first person and goes by the name Qohelet, while the second speaker addresses Qohelet in the third person. The

[1] This article is adapted from an address presented originally for the SCJ Conference, April 17-18, 2009, at Cincinnati Christian University.

[2] B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 95-118.