TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

I. THE NEED AND NATURE OF A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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Although education today has become so widely and thoroughly secularized, its beginnings reach back not only to the early Church but also behind the Church to the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and to the home and family as established by God. When Moses communicated to Israel the great truth of the unity of Jehovah and the commandment to love Him with all their heart and soul and might, he placed upon God's ancient people a binding obligation that continues in principle down through the ages. "Thou shalt teach them (the words of God) diligently unto thy children ..." wrote Moses, "and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."[1] In passages like this, making the home the center of godly training, and also in many other places, the Old Testament deals with teaching and learning. As for the New Testament, it records what is incomparably the most important teaching situation in history -- our Lord Jesus Christ's instruction of the twelve, and beyond the twelve, of many others, individually and in groups. The Great Commission as given in Matthew is essentially a teaching commission: "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."[2] The Book of Acts sets forth the apostolic teaching practice and the epistles give the content of that teaching as applied to particular needs in the church and in the life of the believer.

The Bible is marvellously rich in passages relating to education. Here is the book that gives us authoritative insight into the nature and needs of man. It shows us what God requires of man. It reveals the will and purpose of the great Teacher of us all, who is God the Father, and it shows us the perfect example of teaching in the ministry of God the Son. Moreover, it presents through God the Holy Spirit, who inspired its words, the central truths of revelation into which all other aspects and areas of truth must be integrated to find their fulfillment.

But just as the Scriptures present no organized doctrinal system but rather the data out of which theology is constructed, so, with Christian education, the data are these -- abundantly so -- in Scripture; the obligation is for us to derive from them a Christian view of teaching and learning. Christianity is the religion of the Book, and for us nothing short of a philosophy centered in Biblical truth has a right to the name of Christian.

But why, it may be asked, should we be concerned with formulating a Christian philosophy of education? Why not simply go on using and teaching the Bible? Why try to work out a philosophy of education based upon it? After all, we are reminded, from time immemorial the Bible has had its place in education. In countless schools and colleges today, including even many that are in actuality secular, it is read and studied. Moreover, religious observances, such as chapel services or classroom devotional exercises, are part of the daily program in large numbers of schools.

The answer to the question, "Why be concerned about a Christian philosophy of education?" may be plainly stated. Religious practices in education, even to the extent of chapel services and evangelistic meetings and regular Bible study, do not by themselves make education Christian. For a school or college to say, "We have Christian education on our campus; we have an evangelical program of education," is not enough. What ought rather to be said, providing that it accords with the facts, is something like this: "Our school, our college, is Christian education. For us the truth, as it is in Christianity and the Bible, is the matrix of the whole program, or, to change the figure, the bed in which the river of teaching and learning flows." To put it, then, very concisely, a thorough-going Christian philosophy of education is indispensable if the Protestant evangelical education to which we are committed is to have wholeness in God and if it is to go all the way for Him.

In The Republic, Plato says of the endeavor, essential to his educational theory, to discover the nature of justice: "Here is no path ... and the wood is dark and perplexing; still we must push on."[3] Today, despite the vast accumulation of knowledge in every field, education included, the wood is still "dark and perplexing" to an extent undreamed of in Plato's day. Nevertheless, we too must "push on." Advances in teaching have been numerous; the history of education is the history of new and more effective procedures from the catechetical method of early Christians through the trivium and quadrivium of the middle ages to the modern period beginning with Comenius and moving on through Rousseau, Pestalozze, Herbart, and Frobel to James, Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Brameld, and reaching beyond these to the language laboratories and teaching machines of the present. Yet, through it all, the search for meaning has continued. And this search for an over-all frame of reference, for a view of man and his relation to God and the universe that has wholeness, is in itself philosophical.

Over fifteen years ago, the Harvard Report, General Education in a Free Society, described the quest in these words: "Thus the search continues for some over-all logic, some strong not easily broken frame within which both school and college may fulfill their at once diversifying and unifying tasks."[4] Earlier in the same chapter, the authors acknowledged that "the conviction that Christianity gives meaning and ultimate unity to all parts of the curriculum"[5] was in the past general in America. Whereupon they turned to society for the source of a unifying educational philosophy. "It" [the over-all logic] is evidently to be looked for," they asserted, "in the character of American society."[6]

This endeavor to derive the real meaning of education from society still characterized secular educational philosophy, whether in its life-adjustment or reconstructionist, or other contemporary aspects. But there is a fatal flaw in this turning to society for an over-all frame of reference. Just as the physical organism must be nourished from without, so the human spirit cannot be self-nourished. No soul ever finds sustenance from within itself. If humanity, either individually or en masse, cannot lift itself by its bootstraps, no more can education. When it comes to the philosophy of education, the alternatives are the same as for the individual -- that is to say, man proceeds either upon the assumption that he can save himself, or else upon the assumption that he must have a Saviour. The former is the way of the secularist and the naturalist; the latter is the way of supernatural Christianity.

Now it is against all naturalistic and secularistic philosophies that Christian education stands resolutely opposed. In his Bampton Lectures at Oxford, entitled Christian Education, Spencer Leeson, former Headmaster of Winchester School and the late Bishop of Peterborough, has a chapter on Plato, whom he calls "the first thinker who ever speculated on the ends and methods of true education," and of whom he says "he lifts us up to the heights."[7] After an appreciative analysis of Plato's educational thought, he shows its inadequacy as measured against the Christian norm. Bishop Leeson concludes his critique with these words: "Again and lastly Plato fails us ... because he does not satisfy the deepest spiritual needs and instincts of man ... We need a living Saviour, Who will bring to our sinning souls not only a standard by which to judge ourselves, but a raising and purifying power from God Himself. Augustine summed the matter up in a sentence. The Platonists had taught him, he said, the same doctrine regarding the Word that he found in the opening verses of S. John's Gospel; but they did not go on to teach him, as S. John did, that the word was made flesh."[8]

What Spencer Leeson says of Platonism applies to all lesser philosophies, including the naturalistic views of our day. Prominent among them is scientism, by which is meant the misapplication of science to the extent of letting it practically play God in assuming for itself the solution of all human problems. Take for example this statement by Professor Polycarp Kusch, the Columbia University physicist, in recent lecture before the American Association for the Advancement of Science: "I cannot think of an important human need that cannot be satisfied by present scientific knowledge or by technology."[9] Tell that to the mother who has lost a child. Or try to satisfy with science alone a soul tortured by guilt. Despite the dogmatism of Sir Julian Huxley, when he said at the Darwin Centennial at the University of Chicago, "In the evolving pattern of thought there is no longer need or room for the supernatural. The earth was not created; it evolved. So did all the animals and plants that inhabit it, including our human selves, mind and soul, as well as brain and body. So did religion"[10] -- all purely human philosophies, scientism included, must in the long run fail, because they do not satisfy the deepest needs and instincts of man.

So we must continue to "push on." And the direction in which we must move has already been pointed out at the beginning of this chapter. We must turn to the Bible, not as one book among many studied in our schools and colleges, but as the greatest and ever-new source of our educational thought.

In point of fact there has not been the dearth of Christian educational philosophy that some writers lament. Roman Catholicism has its Thomistic philosophy of education. The reformers -- Luther, Calvin, and particularly Melanchthon, who is the unsung pioneer of the common school,[11] are far from poor in educational theory, although their primary concern was elsewhere. And behind Romanist and Protestant thought there stands Augustine who also dealt with education. As for recent American Protestantism, since the turn of the century there have been attempts at a philosophy of Christian education on the part of the Missouri Synod and other Lutherans, the Mennonites, the Christian Reformed Church, the Episcopalians, some of the liberal and neo-orthodox Protestant thinkers, and various other groups, such as the National Union of Christian Schools, the National Association of Evangelicals and its affiliate, the National Association of Christian Schools.

By and large, however, the weakness of these attempts at a Christian philosophy of education has been two-fold: on the one hand, a parochialism of thought that is limited by the distinctive views of the particular group; on the other hand, an eclecticism that combines, sometimes unconsciously, Christian philosophy with certain secularistic views. The result has been a fragmentization in Christian educational philosophy that has led to a variety of fairly restricted views with consequent neglect of a comprehensive Christian frame of reference. Thus Edward H. Rian, now President of the Biblical Seminary in New York wrote in 1949, "At the present time there is no comprehensive Protestant philosophy of thought and life," [12] while in 1957 he opened a published symposium on the Christian Philosophy of Higher Education with a chapter entitled, "The Need: a World View." [13] And Professor Perry LeFevre of the University of Chicago in a new book, The Christian Teacher, regrets the fact that "not many theologians have ... addressed this problem" --i.e., the interpretation of the religious meaning of the teaching-learning process. [14] Moreover, Herbert W. Byrne, writing out of the Bible-college movement, remarks in his volume, A Christian Approach to Education, "Little effort ... has been made thus far to develop a real Biblical philosophy of Christian education. The efforts that have been made may be described as Christian-secular education." [15] This is an accurate comment, as is his further statement, "In other areas of Christian education the efforts at building a true biblio-centeric curriculum have been few." [16]

The plain fact is that the same weakness afflicts most Protestant attempts at educational philosophy that mars Roman Catholic educational philosophy -- namely, a neglect of full reliance upon Scripture. And, let it be noted, this is true even of the theologically conservative groups; in doctrine they are thoroughly Biblical, but they have failed to see that the world-view of Scripture embraces even the so-called secular fields of knowledge. In spite of adherence to fundamental Gospel truth they have either not seen the unity of all truth in God or, recognizing this unity and paying lip-service to it, have done little to make it a living reality throughout the whole of education. Therefore, much of evangelical educational thought has yet to move beyond a kind of academic schizophrenia in which a highly orthodox theology co-exists uneasily with a teaching of non-religious subjects that differs little from that in secular institutions.

If Protestants in general and evangelicals in particular are yet in respect to a broad and deep Christian view of education, in a "dark and perplexing wood," one reason may be that they are like a man who owns a mine full of valuable ore, but who fails to work it, because some lesser project has captured his interest.

The time, then, is ripe to work the mine. In a day of revival of Biblical theology, the climate is favorable for the development of a view of educational philosophy that, instead of being a patchwork of naturalistic ideas and Biblical truth, will stand under the truth of the Word of God itself.

The relation between theology and a Christian philosophy of education is intimate. Even the layman cannot escape it. As Dorothy Leach of the University of Florida said, "The educator is forced by the nature of his work to be in some measure a lay theologian." [17] But theologians differ, and their differences are not trivial. For example, both Reformed and Arminian systems are within the framework of Protestantism, yet their divergences are major. Likewise the variations between evangelical, neo-orthodox, and liberal thought are of great significance.

An open-armed invitation for all to be instructed by Christ is found in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." This is the test that stresses the humility without which no one can really learn as he ought. And what of the educational implications of the great Christological passage in Philippians 2:5-11, which begins with the exhortation, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" and which shows, step by step, the voluntary humility of Christ that led to His exaltation. Or take the grand affirmation in Colossians 2 that in " Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

One of the greatest of all texts relating to Christian education is certainly John 17:3, where the gift of gifts that Christ purchased for us with His own blood is defined in terms of on-going knowledge of the eternal God and of His divine Son, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent." Again, there are the great companion texts regarding the truth, John 14:6 and 17:17, in which our Lord declared of Himself, "I am the truth;" and of Scripture as well as of Himself, "Thy Word is truth." And Philippians 4:8 shows the wide horizons of Christian education: "Whatsoever things are true, ... honest ... just ... pure ... lovely ... of good report ... think on these things." In fact, in Titus 2:11-14 the incarnation with all that it meant in Christ's gracious redeeming work is put in clear educational terms. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us" -- teaching us what? Teaching us the whole pattern of godly living -- "that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world: looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

Even such a brief sampling affords a glimpse into the wealth of Biblical material regarding education. It may be that some day a young Christian scholar, with the requisite preparation linguistically, theologically, and philosophically, will dedicate his talents to a thoroughgoing analysis and exposition of all the Bible says that bears upon education. If he does so, he may, under God, produce a work that will permanently affect the course of our Christian education.

But leaving mention of specific texts regarding education, let us consider the great Biblical doctrines that constitute the framework of our Christian world-view. The living God, the Creator of all things, the source of all being, the Sovereign of the universe; man created in the divine image, an image, ruined through sin beyond human power to repair but not beyond God's power to regenerate; the incarnation of the Son of God and His atoning and renewing work through His death and resurrection; the activity of the Holy Spirit in the outcalling of a Christian body, the Church; and the consummation of earthly history through the coming Lord Jesus Christ — these ore the spacious context of a Christian philosophy not only of education but also of any other area of human knowledge and concern. Nor is there anything sectarian or cultic regarding this framework; the truths comprising it are in the best sense ecumenical. Although they have sometimes been clouded by tradition and dogma or weakened by rationalistic concessions, truths such as these remain the essential frame of reference for a Christian world-view.[23]

What, then, does it mean to build a Christian philosophy of education upon them and upon the specific Biblical data such as the texts we have considered? Well, it means a realization of the

far-reaching implications of these Biblical distinctives. If God is the Creator of all things, the loving Sovereign of the universe, then naturalism is ruled out of our educational philosophy once and for all. If man is a fallen creature, then the sin that so easily besets us has radically distorted our life and thought. If Christ is the only Redeemer, then the distortion that began with the Fall can be corrected only by His work and by His truth, and education, along with all else, needs to be set right in Him. If Christ is really coming again, then even the greatest of human achievements must in humility be considered as under the judgment of the Coming One. Or, to sum it up in a single principle, the God who in His Son is the truth incarnate, the God whose revealed Word is truth, the God who does all things well, the God "unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid,"[24] the God who cannot lie, is the source and ground of all truth. Everything true is of Him. All truth, anywhere and of any kind, is His truth. For if, as Scripture affirms, God is the God of truth,[25] if His Son is the Lord of truth,[26] if His Spirit is the Spirit of truth,[27] then the truth in its boundless dimensions, unknown and undiscovered as well as known and discovered, must be at once the context and goal of our education. Therefore, at the heart of a Christian philosophy of education there must be sound Biblical theology wedded to unremitting devotion to the truth and openness to it in every field of knowledge.

This brings us to the great subject of Christian education and the truth, a subject that the next chapter will explore at some length. There is a human tendency to be timid about the truth. To put it plainly, there are some -- and they are in both camps theologically, liberal as well as conservative -- who are afraid of the truth. They suffer from a species of aletheiaphobia, to coin a word. Now when an evangelical is afraid of the truth, it may be because he has equated some particular human formulation with final truth. Therefore, when he sees some newly apprehended scientific truth, some break-through into wider knowledge as a threat to the system to which he is committed, he may react in fear and sometimes even anger. But, as Plato said, "No man should be angry at what is true."[28] To which we may add that to be angry at what is true is to be angry at God.

But what do we do when some new truth of radical implications faces us? Take, for instance, scientific investigation through molecular biology into the basis of physical life. What if a researcher succeeds some day in putting together substances that will produce a living cell? Or what if the exploration of space achieves communication with other worlds of intelligent beings? Are we to shrink back in terror from thought of such disclosures because we fear that they might jeopardize the doctrine of God as the sole Creator or devalue His love for us in Christ? Surely not. Should we not rather marvel at the greatness of the God who endowed man with powers capable of probing the mysteries of the microcosm and the macrocosm? And should we not remember that God's initial creation was ex nihilo, really out of nothing, that He is so great that the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, and that His love is boundless? Trusting, therefore, in the infinite greatness of the God of creation, whom we know as Father through Christ, we must resolutely put aside the fear of any valid disclosure of truth.

On the other hand, those of more liberal persuasion theologically are prone to another kind of aletheiaphobia. Priding themselves upon their openness to everything new, they may see in old yet unwelcome truth a threat to their cherished ideas. Theirs is not so much the fear of the expanding aspect of truth as it is the fear of the particularity of truth. But what if old truths that have been discarded as outmoded, mythological, or unhistorical suddenly came to life? Adjust-

ment to truth cuts both ways. So the undoubted trend of archeology to corroborate the historicity of many a Biblical passage discarded by some as unreliable; the overthrow of critical strongholds like the Wellhausen theory of the Pentateuch;[29] the demolition of the notion of the perfectibility of man through new revelations of human sin; the return to man's justification through the redeeming work of Christ -- these are a few of the particular areas of truth with which liberalism must come to terms.[30]

Let us rejoice, then, that all truth, whether old and cherished or newly revealed, is of God. Even more, let us welcome it and, when we cannot understand all of its implications, for this is an essential condition of our finiteness, let us be assured that there can be no real inconsistency in the truth of God and that ultimately all of it is reconcilable in Christ, whose name according to Revelation 19 is "Faithful and True." And let us not hesitate to ask ourselves in all honesty what our own attitude to truth is. Is it an attitude of openness or of timidity, of hostility or of welcome? The answers to these questions will reveal much about our spiritual as well as intellectual integrity.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Deuteronomy 6:7.
2. Matthew 28:16-20.
3. Collected Works of Plato, Trans., B. Jowett, New York, n.d. p.9.
4. General Education in a Free Society, Cambridge, 1945, p. 40.
5. Ibid., p. 39.
6. Ibid., p. 41.
7. Christian Education, Spencer Leeson, London, 1947, pp. 49, 51.
8. Ibid., 49, 51.
9. The Key Reporter of Phi Beta Kappa, Summer, 1961, p. 2.
10. Quoted in "Review of Religious Thought," Christianity Today. 4 January, 1960.
11. Melanchthon, The Quiet Reformer, Clyde L. Manschrek, New York, 1958, p. 144f.
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13. Toward a Christian Philosophy of Higher Education, J. P. von Gruenigen, ed. Philadelphia, 1957.
14. The Christian Teacher, Perry LeFevre, New York, p. 58, 147.
15. A Christian Approach to Education, Herbert W. Byrne, Grand Rapids, 1961, p. 176.
16. Ibid., p. 177.
17. Letter to Laymen, Journal of the Christian Faith and Life Community, Feb., 1961.
18. Paul's Use of the Old Testament, E. Earle Ellis, Edinburgh, 1959. Pp. 25, 26.
19. Matthew 5:18.
20. John 10:35.
21. John 17:17.
22. The Quest of the Best in Education, David R. Porter, Lebanon, Pa. 1960, p. 113.
23. Cf. The Pattern of God's Truth, Frank E. Gaebelein, New York, 1954 p. 34, 35 for the gist of this paragraph.
24. Book of Common Prayer of the Reformed Episcopal Church, p. 65.
25. Psalms 31:5.
26. John 14:6; Revelation 19:11.

27. John 14:16,17.
28. The Collected Works of Plato, Trans., B. Jowett, New York, n.d. p. 137.
29. Prof. Cyrus Gordon's article in Christianity Today, 23 November, 1959, "Higher Critics and the Forbidden Fruit," speaks to this point.
30. Cf. for the thought of these paragraphs "Corollaries of Biblical Scholarship," Frank E. Gaebelein, Christianity Today, 11 May, 1962.