Is Being Touched by an Angel Enough?

Don Closson evaluates what's good about TV's "Touched by an Angel" and identifies areas where it lacks substance from a biblical perspective.

Society's Interest in Spirituality

During a recent television ratings week, a relatively new program, "Touched by an Angel" ranked third with a 16.6 Neilsen rating. That means more than 16 million households were tuned in to watch three angels communicate God's love and offer of eternal life to people in various difficult, real life situations. Also, *TV Guide* magazine has featured a special report called "God and Television" which includes an article by Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography* and quotes popular writers James Redfield, author of *The Celestine Prophecy*, Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Jack Canfield, coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and others.(1) One might conclude that TV has suddenly found God, and to a degree, that conclusion is right.

TV producers are finding out that typical TV watchers are hungry for programming that includes spiritual themes. In *TV Guide*'s own survey, they discovered in a national telephone poll that 56% of adults feel that religion does not get enough attention on prime- time TV; only 8% feel that it gets too much. Of those responding 61% desired more references to God, church attendance, and other religious observances; 68% were eager to see more spirituality as long as it was not tied to organized religion, and 82% wanted more emphasis on moral issues. One of the most successful programs at attracting these viewers has been "Touched by an Angel."

Although it had a rough beginning and was almost canceled, the

program has made a miraculous recovery subsequent to hiring a professing Christian as executive producer and changing the focus of the program to more mature topics. The stories center around the activities of three angels played by Della Reese, Roma Downey, and John Dye. In the words of the *TV Guide* article, "Never has prime-time network entertainment presented God in such an unabashed and earnest fashion."(2) Recent programs have dealt with death in a sophisticated manner, relating how the angels help humans come to grip with both our mortality and the existence of a loving God. Significant topics such as the nature of God, works, eternal destiny, and faith itself have entered into the dialogue. In the words of executive producer Martha Williamson, "our show is God's truth," which is that, "God exists. God loves us. God wants to be part of our lives," and, Della Reese adds, ". . . he has a plan."(3)

Recently, the three actors and their producer were on the Oprah Winfrey show where they remarked about the popularity of the "Touched by an Angel" program. The actors have received thousands of letters relating how the program has changed viewers' lives by making a spiritual reality more plausible and by focusing on the love of God. The actors are very proud of how they are portraying God. In the words of John Dye, who plays the angel of death, "If we're doing it poorly, I just don't think God would bless the show and allow it to continue."(4)

Are we experiencing a cease-fire in the culture war? Is the Christian right winning the battle for the media? Some might argue that only the most cynical observer could find something wrong with programs that promote a loving, personal God who wants a relationship with us and is concerned about our salvation. But, now let's consider what is good and not so good about programs like "Touched by an Angel."

Audience Response

This development new TV programs that are using God-talk during prime-time hours and getting good ratings for it is a new phenomenon. “Promised Land,” “Seventh Heaven,” and especially “Touched by an Angel” are boldly going where no producer would have previously gone in the spiritual realm. With four new shows about angels, spirits, and ministers lined up for the next season, it might be suggested that TV is changing for the better. Maybe the networks are finally listening to the public’s demand for programming that is more family oriented and morally uplifting.

In fact, I believe that they are. And although not perfect, the new programs are providing a positive service to the viewing community. Let me explain why. Christians have been decrying for years what Richard John Neuhaus called the “naked public square” in a book by the same name.(5) We have lamented the fact that public institutions such as government, education, and the media, rarely leave room for a spiritual reality. Naturalism, as a worldview, has had a monopoly. Christianity, if referred to, was ridiculed and parodied—what I like to call the “Frank Burns” form of Christianity. Frank Burns, the character from “M.A.S.H.,” was hypocritical, emotionally weak, and possibly dangerous when given any real authority.

Current programming like “Touched by an Angel” offers a competing worldview to naturalism. It lends plausibility to the notion that there is a loving, personal God. Although the angels seem to struggle somewhat with their own understanding of God’s will, they are performing, in a general sense, the most prominent role of angels in Scripture, that of being a messenger from God.

The audience also gets a reasonable picture of what life might be like if a spiritual reality is taken seriously. Contrary to the prevailing naturalistic hopelessness that pervades much of

our culture, “Touched by an Angel” does offer hope via a relationship with the Creator of the universe. Characters in the episodes are encouraged to seek God and to have a relationship with Him. And importantly, they are told that they will not earn salvation by following a set of rules. People in the show are generally treated as complex individuals with weaknesses and strengths, and they respond to life’s tragedies in a fairly realistic manner. All of this contributes to a positive influence that the other networks should be encouraged to emulate. As Christians we are quick to condemn, but slow to admit when something positive occurs. This type of programming, which in many ways reminds me of how God would have been expressed or talked about on TV in the late 50s or early 60s, is a bright spot amid new shows like “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” or “Pacific Palisades.”

But while the program does promote belief in God and the legitimate place that faith should play in one’s daily affairs, it falls short in a number of significant ways from being all that Christians would like to see in a bold presentation of biblical truth. Its most glaring omission is the “J” word, as in Jesus Christ. Also, God is seen as loving and caring, but little is said about His other attributes such as being holy and righteous. “Touched by an Angel” might be a useful springboard from which to present the biblical plan of salvation, but its message is too shallow to be depended upon to evangelize the viewing public on its own.

Let’s turn now to take a closer look at the ways in which “Touched by an Angel” might be a handicap to saving faith for its many fans.

The Nature of God and the Nature of Man

In our look at the return of God to prime-time TV programming, particularly the “Touched by an Angel” show, we have thus far considered the positive aspects of the show; now we will focus on how it might be improved.

Granting that “Touched by an Angel” points to a personal God, encourages a personal relationship with that God, and even teaches that our good works are not enough to establish that relationship, it still falls short of teaching a specifically Christian message because of one glaring omission. It never offers a means for that personal relationship. In theological terms, the program never tells us how we are to be found righteous before a holy God. The Bible teaches a concept known as justification which explains how God, being perfectly holy can declare us righteous enough to enter His presence. The angels on TV assume that God will accept us on our own merit, that simply turning to Him will bridge whatever separation exists. This lack of clarity could be the result of a number of reasons. The writers may feel that there is no need for justification either because God isn’t Holy or humankind isn’t sinful or fallen in the biblical sense. Both of these ideas are popular today. While people may accept the biblical teaching that God is love, they often ignore the equally important truth that God is just and holy. Most portrayals of human nature identify lack of education as the source of our problems, not a sinful nature.

If God is loving, but not righteous, then the Apostle Paul is in great error when he says in Romans 2:5 that “. . . because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” And concerning human nature he adds that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). This great chasm between man and God is an organic part of the Christian gospel and is missing in much of TV’s current focus on spirituality.

On what basis can people have fellowship with a holy God? If you argue that God is merely a projection of human attributes, He is neither holy nor a real spiritual being. If all of us are God, as New Age pantheists often teach, all we need to do is realize our godness via meditation. However, since Jesus

walked on the earth, He has been the hope of many in their quest to close the gap between man and God. But again, there have been many different ideas about what Jesus' life accomplished. Some see His life as an example to be copied. Others accept Paul's teaching in Romans 3 that Jesus provides a righteousness from God, apart from living according to the Jewish law, through his death on the cross. But again, there is confusion about who Jesus is. Mormons teach that Jesus was a pre-mortal, as we were at one time, and that everyone can become gods like He is now. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of Adam, but that Jesus was an angel who lived a sinless life in the form of humanity. They also insist that good works are necessary to please Jehovah.

These different views cannot all be true. For all the good that shows like "Touched by an Angel" might accomplish, they allow for all of the above views to be seen as equally valid. When asked in an interview which God they are representing on the show (Christian, Jewish, Muslim), Della Reese responded by saying that they talk about a Supreme Being, not about religion. But one has to ask, Which Supreme Being? We will examine this question next.

Sin and Salvation

We turn now to determine which Supreme Being, which God is being referred to by these programs. When "Touched by an Angel" actress Della Reese argues that her program refers to a Supreme Being, not to a religion, just what does she mean? Della Reese, whose TV character Tess was chosen in a TV Guide survey as the person most parents would like for their children's Sunday school teacher, is the pastor of a metaphysical congregation on the West side of Los Angeles and participates in the "New Thought Movement." The New Thought movement describes itself as "creedless" and "celebrates individual freedom," but not freedom from acting ethically.

Cult leader Barbara Marx Hubbard and author Marianne Williamson of the Course in Miracles fame recently attended a conference with Ms. Reese, the 81st annual meeting of the International New Thought Alliance.(6) All of this is mentioned not to condemn Ms. Reese or to deny her the right to support the New Thought movement, but merely to observe that she is anything but a neutral portrayer of God's nature and activities.

To claim that one can speak the truth about God, and do so from a creedless perspective is a bit disingenuous. Anyone who claims knowledge about God must also tell us how they came by this knowledge. If they reject revelation, or the Christian creed that results from the Bible, where do they receive their information from and why should we accept it? Has God spoken to them personally? Are they accepting revelation from another source? How do they know what they proclaim to know about God? They must also tell us why their approach to having a relationship with God is the right one. Even if they hold to the view that all paths lead to God, or all religious perspectives are valid ones, we must ask why they believe this is true and why it is an appropriate way to think about God and salvation.

All that having been said, Christians can use "Touched by an Angel" as a beginning point in talking about God and salvation from a Christian perspective. But the Christian will begin with the message that humanity is fallen and in need of atonement and justification. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry John the Baptist said of Him "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). This brief sentence is filled with profound implications. First is the notion of sacrifice. Jesus is both the victim and priest, both the sacrificial lamb and the high priest who offers the sacrifice. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament taught the necessity of blood sacrifice as payment for sin. Christ's sacrifice was the once-for-all payment for sin against a Holy

God. Paul says that we are now justified by Jesus' blood and that He has reconciled to Himself all things, making peace by the blood of His cross (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 2:13). Jesus' death was an act of propitiation; in other words, it removed God's wrath against sinful humans; it appeased His anger. It was also a substitutionary death; He died on our behalf and in doing so bore our sins on Himself.

It is these truths of Scripture that the new TV programs leave out by not mentioning the "J" word. Without Jesus in the picture, being "Touched by an Angel" leaves us as sinners before an angry God.

The Gospel and the Great Commission

Finally we will consider whether or not programs like "Touched by an Angel" can be used to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul reveals in a concise way what the Christian gospel is and its significance to believers. He writes, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." Paul is serious about what is and is not the gospel. Paul continues by teaching that the gospel is "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day." Paul then notes that Christ appeared to Peter, the Twelve disciples, five hundred believers, James, then to all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself. To Paul, belief in the atoning death of Christ and His resurrection is necessary for salvation.

What Paul claims to be the gospel of Christianity is entirely missing from today's spiritually enlightened programming. As good as programs like "Touched by an Angel" are compared to the rest of TV's weekly fare, they fall far short of giving

viewers what they need to know to experience a relationship with God. The God of these programs is enigmatic, we know that He exists, but how we can experience His love and forgiveness is a bit obscure.

But we should be neither surprised nor angry about this situation. Instead, these programs offer great stepping stones to serious discussions about spirituality and the Christian gospel. Evangelism depends upon the common ground that we humans all share, including questions about God, fear of death and suffering, alienation, and other topics that are highlighted by these programs. In order to take advantage of these stepping stones, believers must get beyond the temptation to see Christianity as just another personal enrichment program or self-esteem therapy.

Fallen human beings are unable to satisfy God's judgment and wrath against sin. In this sense we are totally depraved. We are not as bad as we could be that would be absolute depravity but we are completely unable to please God via our good works. As Isaiah wrote, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6). Paul, writing to the Church at Ephesus, states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). If it were not for God's imputing, or attributing, Christ's righteousness to us when we placed our faith in His sacrificial death on the cross, we would have no hope for eternal fellowship with God regardless of how many angels we have been touched by.

Network TV should be applauded for recognizing and responding to the public's desire for programs that deal with important moral and spiritual themes. However, Christians cannot become complacent or believe that TV will now bring about the Great Commission. As always, that job is to be accomplished by spirit-filled ambassadors for Christ who teach the gospel as revealed by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Notes

1. *TV Guide*, March 29-April 4, 1997, pp. 24-45.

2. "Angels & Insight," *TV Guide*, March 29-April 4, 1997, p. 43.

3. Ibid., p. 44.

4. Ibid., p. 55

5. Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

6. Larry Poland, *The Mediator* (Redlands, Calif.: Mastermedia International), vol. 12, no. 1, 1997.

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The Deity of Christ

The belief that Jesus was and is God has always been a non-negotiable for Christianity. Don Closson explains that this belief is based on Jesus' own words as well as the teachings of the early church.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

I recently received a letter from someone who argues that there is only one God, and that He is called many names and worshiped by many different people who hold to many different faiths. This kind of thinking about God is common today, but its popularity does not reduce the intellectual problems that may accompany it. For instance, does this notion of god include the god of the Aztecs who required child sacrifice?

What about the warrior gods of Norse mythology: Odin, Thor, and Loki? How does the Mormon belief that we can all become Gods if we join their organization and conform to their system of good works fit into this theological framework? Even John Hick, an influential religious pluralist, believes that only some of the world's great religions qualify as having a valid view of God. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are valid, but Satanism and the religions of the Waco, Texas, variety are not. Belief that all religious systems worship one God raises difficult questions when we see how different groups portray God and seek to describe how we are to relate to Him.

The issue becomes even more acute when one religious tradition claims that God took on flesh becoming a man and walked on the earth. The Christian tradition has claimed for almost two thousand years that God did just that. The Gospel of John proclaims that, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John is, of course, talking about Jesus, and this claim presents an interesting challenge for a religious pluralist. If what John and the rest of the New Testament writers claim about Jesus is true, then we literally have God in the flesh walking with and teaching a small band of disciples. If Jesus was God incarnate as He walked the earth, we have a first hand account of what God is like in the biblical record. Truth claims about God that counter those given in the Bible must then be discounted. In other words, if Jesus was God in the flesh during His time on earth, other religious texts or traditions are wrong when they teach about God or about knowing God in ways that contradict the biblical record.

In this essay we will consider the evidence for the deity of Christ. Christianity's truth claims are dependent on this central teaching, and once accepted, this claim reduces greatly the viability of religious pluralism, of treating all

religious beliefs as equally true. For if God truly became flesh and spoke directly to His disciples about such things as sin, redemption, a final judgment, false religions and true worship, then we have the God of the universe expressing intolerance towards other religious claims- -specifically claims that discount the reality of sin and remove the need for redemption or the reality of a final judgment. Some might not agree with God's religious intolerance, but then again, disagreeing with God is what the Bible calls sin.

Rather than begin with a response to attacks on Christ's deity by modern critics like the Jesus Seminar or New Age gnostics, our discussion will begin with Jesus' own self-consciousness, in other words, what did Jesus say and think about himself. From there we will consider the teachings of the Apostles and the early church. My goal is to establish that from its inception, Christianity has taught and believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that this belief was the result of the very words that Jesus spoke concerning His own essence.

Christ's Self-Perception

As we begin to examine evidence that supports the claim that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh or God incarnate, a good starting point is Jesus' own self concept. It must first be admitted that Jesus never defines His place in the Trinity in theological language. However, He made many statements about himself that would be not only inappropriate, but blasphemous if He was not God in the flesh. It is important to remember that Jesus' life was not spent doing theology or thinking and writing about theological issues. Instead, His life was focused on relationships, first with His disciples, and then with the Jewish people. The purpose of these relationships was to engender in these people a belief in Jesus as their savior or Messiah, as their only source of salvation. Jesus told the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of His day, that they would die in their sins if they did not believe that He was

who He claimed to be (John 8:24). And to one Pharisee, Nicodemus, Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Millard Erickson, in his book *Christian Theology*, does a nice job of laying out evidence that Jesus considered himself equal in essence with God.(1) Unless He was God, it would have been highly inappropriate for Jesus to say, as He does in Matthew 13:41, that both the angels and the kingdom are His. Elsewhere, angels are called “the angels of God” (Luke 12:8 9; 15:10) and the phrase Kingdom of God is found throughout the Scriptures. But Jesus says, “The Son of man will send **His** angels, and they will gather out of **His** kingdom all causes of sin and evildoers” (Matt. 13:41).

When the paralytic in Mark 2:5 was lowered through the roof by his friends, Jesus’ first response was to say that the man’s sins were forgiven. The scribes knew the implications of this statement, for only God could forgive sin. Their remarks clearly show that they understood Jesus to be exercising a divine privilege. Jesus had a wonderful opportunity to set the record straight here by denying that He had the authority to do what only God can do. Instead, His response only reinforces His claim to divinity. Jesus says, “Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, Rise, take up your pallet and walk’?” To confirm His authority to forgive sins, Jesus enabled the man to pick up his pallet and go home.

Two other areas that Jesus claimed authority over was the judging of sin and the observance of the Sabbath. Both were considered God’s prerogative by the Jews. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” Jesus also claimed authority to change man’s relationship to the Sabbath. Honoring the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, and the Jews had been given strict

instructions on how to observe it. In the book of Numbers, Moses is told by God to stone to death a man who collects wood on the Sabbath. However, in Matthew 12:8 Jesus says that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

These examples show that Jesus made claims and performed miracles that reveal a self awareness of His own divinity. In our next section, we will continue in this vein.

Christ's Self-Perception, Part 2

At this point in our discussion we will offer even more examples of Jesus' self knowledge of His essential equality with God.

A number of comments that Jesus made about His relationship with the Father would be unusual if Jesus did not consider himself equal in essence with God. In John 10:30 He says that to see Him is to see the Father. Later in John 14:7-9 He adds that to know Him is to know the Father. Jesus also claimed to have existed prior to His incarnation on earth. In John 8:58 He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Some believe that the words used here by Jesus constitute His strongest claim to deity. According to the *Expositors Bible Commentary* this passage might more literally be translated, "Before Abraham came into being, I continuously existed." The Jews recognized the phrase "I am" as one referring to God because God used it (1) to describe himself when He commissioned Moses to demand the release of His people from Pharaoh (Exodus 3:14), and (2) to identifyhimself in the theistic proclamations in the second half of Isaiah. Jesus also declares that His work is coterminous with the Father. He proclaims that "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). The Jews hearing Jesus understood the nature of these claims. After His comment about pre-existing Abraham, they immediately picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy because they understood that He had declared

himself God.

In Jesus' trial He makes a clear declaration of who He is. The Jews argued before Pilate in John 19:7, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." Matthew 26 records that at Jesus' trial, the high priest tells Jesus, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."Jesus replies, "You have said it yourself, . . . But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." This would have been a wonderful opportunity for Jesus to save himself by clearing up any misconceptions concerning His relationship with the Father. Instead, He places himself in a position of equality and of unique power and authority. Again, the Jews understand what Jesus is saying. The high priest proclaims, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy." He calls for a vote of the council, and they demand His death (Matt. 26:65-66).

Another indicator of how Jesus perceived himself is in His use of Old Testament Scripture and the way He made His own proclamations of truth. In a number of cases, Jesus began a sentence with "You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you. . . ." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28). Jesus was giving His words the same authority as the Scriptures. Even the prophets, when speaking for God, would begin their statements with: "The word of the Lord came to me," but Jesus begins with: "I say to you."

There are other indications of how Jesus saw himself. For example, Christ's claim to have authority over life itself in John 5:21 and 11:25, and His use of the self referential "Son of God" title point to unique power and authority and His essential equality with God.

The Apostles' Teaching

We will turn now to look at what Jesus' followers said of Him. The Gospel of John begins with a remarkable declaration of both Christ's deity and full humanity. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." Later in verse fourteen John remarks that this "Word" became flesh and walked among them and points to Jesus as this "Word" become flesh. What did John mean by this remarkable passage?

The first phrase might literally be translated: "When the beginning began, the Word was already there." In other words, the "Word" co- existed with God and predates time and creation. The second phrase "The Word was with God" indicates both equality and distinction of identity. A more literal translation might be "face to face with God," implying personality and relational coexistence. Some groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, make a great deal of the fact that the word "God" in the third phrase "The Word was God" lacks an article. This, they argue, allows the noun God to be translated as an indefinite noun, perhaps referring to "a God" but not "the" almighty God. Actually, the lack of an article for the noun makes the case for the deity of the "Word" more clearly. The Greek phrase, *theos en ho logos* describes the nature of the "Word," not the nature of God. The article *ho* before the word *logos* shows that the sentence describes the nature of the Word; He is of the same nature and essence as the noun in the predicate; that is, the Word is divine. It is interesting to note that verses 6, 12, 13, and 18 of the same chapter refer unambiguously to God the Father and use an anarthrous noun, i.e., a noun without the article.(2) Yet strangely the Jehovah's Witnesses do not dispute the meaning of these passages.

The author of Hebrews writes plainly of Christ's deity. The first chapter states that, "The Son is the radiance of God's

glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word." The passage also states that Jesus is not an angel nor is He just a priest. In Colossians 1:15 Paul adds that, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Although Paul clearly attributes godlike qualities to Jesus, the use of the word firstborn often causes confusion. The word can be a reference to priority in time or supremacy in rank. Since Jesus is described as the Creator of all things, the notion of supremacy seems more appropriate. Philippians 2:5-11 also talks of Jesus existing in the form of God. The Greek term used for form is *morphe*, denoting an outward manifestation of an inner essence.

Mention should also be made of the use by New Testament writers of the word *Lord* for Jesus. The same Greek word was used in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, as the translated word for the Hebrew words Yahweh and Adonai, two special names given to God the Father. The Apostles meant to apply the highest sense of this term when referring to Jesus.

The Early Church

Thus far we have been examining the Christian claim of Christ's divinity, first considering Jesus' own self-concept and then the thoughts of those who wrote the New Testament. It is not within the scope of this essay to argue that the words attributed to Jesus by the writers of the New Testament are indeed His. Instead, we have argued that the words attributed to Jesus do claim an essential equality with God the Father. The traditional view of the Christian faith has been that God has revealed himself to us as three separate persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who shared a common essence.

Belief in Jesus' essential equality with God the Father was communicated by the Apostles to the church fathers to whom they handed the task of leading the church. Even though these early leaders often struggled with how to describe the notion of the Trinity with theological accuracy, they knew that their faith was in a person who was both man and God.

Clement of Rome is a good example of this faith. Writing to the church at Corinth Clement implies Jesus' equality with God the Father when he says "Have we not one God, and one Christ and one Spirit of grace poured upon us." Later, in his second letter, Clement tells his readers to "think of Jesus as of God , as the judge of the living and dead." Clement also wrote of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God; in other words, Christ existed before He took on human flesh. Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Christ's nature in his letter to the Ephesians, "There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God." A little later, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 140-202.) had to stress the humanity of Christ because of Gnostic heresy that argued that Jesus was only a divine emanation. Irenaeus wrote, "There is therefore . . . one God the Father, and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who . . . gathered together all things in himself. But in every respect, too, he is man, the formation of God: and thus he took up man into himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in himself" (*Against Heresies III*, 16). During the same time period, Tertullian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 155-240) wrote of Christ's nature that "what is born in the flesh is flesh and what is born in the Spirit is spirit. Flesh does not become spirit nor spirit flesh. Evidently they can (both) be in one (person). Of these Jesus is composed, of flesh as man and of spirit as God" (*Against Praxeas*, 14). Later he added, "We see His double state, not intermixed but conjoined in one person, Jesus, God and man" (*Against Praxeas*, 27).

By A.D. 325 the church had begun to systematize Christianity's response to various heretical views of Christ. The Nicene Creed stated, "We believe in God the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being."(3)

The belief in Jesus Christ being of the same essence as God the Father began with Jesus himself, was taught to His Apostles, who in turn handed down this belief to the early church Fathers and apologists. Christ's deity is the foundation upon which the Christian faith rests.

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 684-90.

2. Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), pp. 28-29.

3. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 26.

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Intellectual Capital

The Learning Gap

A recurring truth of education in America is that children from high income homes who have highly educated parents tend to do well in school. Likewise, those from low income households who have relatively uneducated parents tend to do poorly. In this country, no other factor comes close to explaining the success of some students and the failure of others.(1) What is worse, recent studies are beginning to show that the gap between low socio- economic students and their fellow classmates is beginning to grow again after a period of narrowing.(2) Because of this, a major goal of education reform is the eradication of this learning gap which is arguably the primary cause of continued poverty, high crime rates, and general distrust between those who participate in the American dream and those on its margins. Unfortunately, there is considerable disagreement as to how American public education should be reformed.

Professional educators have tended to endorse a package of reforms that have been around since the 1920s and 30s. These reforms are associated with the Progressive Education Movement which emphasized “naturalistic,” “project-oriented,” “hands-on,” and “critical- thinking” curricula and “democratic” education policies.(3) Beginning in 1918 with the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, published by the Bureau of Education, educators have challenged the emphasis on subject matter and have attempted to replace it with what might be called the “tool” metaphor.

The “tool” metaphor maintains that students should not be filled with a lot of useless knowledge, but instead, should be taught how to learn. Although various arguments are used to promote this view, the one most often heard goes something like this: “Since knowledge is growing so quickly, in fact it is exploding, we need to teach kids how to learn, not a bunch of facts that will quickly become outdated.” It has been shown

by historian Lawrence Cremin that our elementary schools have been dominated by this metaphor since the 1960s, and that our secondary schools are not far behind.(4) The result of this monopoly has been a reduction of what might be called "Intellectual Capital." The loss of this "Capital" is the focus of an important book titled *The Schools We Need*, by E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch is an advocate for what has been called "cultural literacy," the notion that all children need to be taught the core knowledge of our society in order to function within it successfully. Implementing his arguments may provide our only chance for equal opportunity for all Americans, regardless of class, race, or ethnicity.

For Christians, this is an issue of justice and mercy. Unless we are comfortable with the growing number of people unable to clothe, house, and feed themselves and their families, we need to think seriously about why our educational system fails so many children. Teachers are more educated than ever before, class-sizes have continued to decline, and teachers have made great gains in personal income. But while America continues to spend much more to educate its children than do most countries of the world, it also continues to fall behind in student performance. Could it be that the problem lies in the philosophy which drives what teachers teach and how they teach it? Our argument is exactly that—that educators, particularly at the elementary school level, have adopted a view of education that places an extra burden on those who can least afford it, our least affluent children.

Defining Intellectual Capital

Earlier we stated that poverty and suffering in America can be partially blamed on an education system that fails to prepare children from lower socio-economic backgrounds with a foundation that will allow them to compete with children from middle and upper-class homes. Central to this argument is a notion called intellectual capital. Let's begin this

discussion by defining the term and explaining its importance. In his book, *The Schools We Need*, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., argues that "just as it takes money to make money, it takes knowledge to make knowledge."(5) He contends that those children who begin school with an adequate level of intellectual capital have a framework upon which further learning may be built. Those who lack the necessary educational experiences and sufficient vocabulary tend to fall further and further behind.

Not just any information serves as intellectual capital. According to Hirsch the knowledge taught and learned must be of a type that "constitutes the shared intellectual currency of the society," or put another way, "intellectual capital has to be the widely useful and negotiable coin of the realm."(6) Just as play money doesn't purchase much in the real world, neither does knowledge that falls outside of this "shared intellectual currency." The current controversy surrounding Ebonics is an example. I doubt that Hirsch would agree that time spent either teaching or affirming a supposedly African-based language system is helpful to young people who need to compete in the American economic system.

Understanding Hirsch's point about intellectual capital would interesting, but not very useful, if not for the fact that research has shown that initial deficits in specific children can be overcome if done so at an early age. Other nations, with equally diverse populations, have shown that early disparities in learning can be remediated if this notion of a shared knowledge base is taken seriously. France is an example of such a nation. Its "knowledge intensive" early childhood education programs have performed an amazing feat. "Remarkably, in France, the initial gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, instead of widening steadily as in the United States, decreases with each school grade. By the end of seventh grade, the child of a North African immigrant who has attended two years of French preschool will on average have narrowed the socially induced learning gap."(7)

One might ask what American schools are teaching if not a knowledge intensive “core curriculum” like the one found in the French model. This question is difficult to answer because there is no agreed- upon curriculum for elementary students in this country. Our desire to treat teachers as autonomous teaching professionals often means that little or no supervision of what is taught occurs. There are a number of good arguments for local control of our schools, but when it comes to the curriculum, it has resulted in little consistency from one school to another, and even from one classroom to another in the same building.

Can’t we all agree that by the end of the first grade students ought to be able to do and know certain things? Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. At this point, we will look at some of the philosophical reasons for the vast difference in teaching methods and goals that are being advocated by different education experts.

Romantics and Traditionalists

In his book *The Schools We Need*, E. D. Hirsch argues that there are two distinct camps of education reformers in our country today. One group, virtually in control of the elementary and much of the secondary school curriculum, consists of what Hirsch calls the anti-knowledge progressives. This group emphasizes critical thinking skills over mere facts, the “unquestionable” value of self-esteem as a curricular end, and teaching “to the child” rather than from a curriculum focused on the content of the subject matter. They also argue against forcing a child to learn what they believe to be developmentally inappropriate schoolwork. This thinking reflects the eighteenth century Romantic era view that all children possess a spark of divinity, a notion that coincides with the pantheistic philosophies of eighteenth-century thinkers like Rousseau, Hegel, and Schelling. In 1775, Schelling wrote that “the God-infused natural world and human

nature were both emanations of the same divine substance."(8) All things natural are good. Evil lies in separation from nature, such as seating children in rows and requiring intense study from books for several years.

Rather than allowing for a mystical view of child development, traditionalists support a "core curriculum." Hirsch points to four errors made by progressive reforms. He argues that: "(1) To stress critical thinking while de-emphasizing knowledge actually reduces a student's capacity to think critically.(2) Giving a child constant praise to bolster self-esteem regardless of academic achievement breeds complacency, or skepticism, or both, and ultimately, a decline in self-esteem.(3) For a teacher to pay significant attention to each individual child in a class of twenty to forty students means individual neglect for most children most of the time. (4) Schoolwork that has been called 'developmentally inappropriate' [by progressives] has proved to be highly appropriate to millions of students the world over, while the infantile pabulum now fed to American children is developmentally inappropriate (in a downward direction) and often bores them."(9)

As parents and taxpayers, the most vital question we want answered is, "Who is right?" Is there research that supports one side of this debate over the other? Hirsch contends that there is much evidence, from various perspectives, that supports the traditional view. However, because of the current monopoly of the progressive mindset in public education today, the traditional view is rarely even considered. Hirsch goes as far as to say that for most public school officials there is no **thinkable** alternative to the progressive view. "No professor at an American education school is going to advocate *pro*-rote-learning, *pro*-fact, or *pro*-verbal pedagogy."(10) Education leaders usually respond in one of four ways to criticism: 1) They deny that our schools are ineffective. 2) They deny the dominance of progressivism itself. 3) They deny

that where progressivism has been followed, that it has been authentically followed. 4) They blame insurmountable social problems on poor performance rather than the prevailing educational philosophy.

Remember, this discussion is about more than which group of experts wins and which loses! If Hirsch is right, our current form of schooling is inflicting a great injustice on all students, but even more so on those from our poorest homes and neighborhoods. Now, we will look at some of the evidence that argues against the progressive approach to education and for a more traditional curriculum.

Looking at the Research

Research has confirmed the superiority of the traditional, direct instruction method which focuses on the content to be learned rather than on the child. E. D. Hirsch, in his book *The Schools We Need*, has a chapter titled "Reality's Revenge" which lends considerable detail to his argument that progressive educational theory lacks a real world foundation.

Hirsch uses evidence from three different sources to support his rejection of the progressive model for instruction. Classroom studies, research in cognitive psychology, and international comparisons all point to a common set of practices that promote the greatest amount of measurable learning by the largest number of students. This list of common practices are remarkable in that they are exactly what progressive educators in this country are arguing that we should do **less** of.

First, let's consider the finding of two examples of classroom studies. Jane Stallings studied 108 first grade and 58 third grade classes taught by different methods and found that a strong academic focus rather than the project-method approach produced the highest gains in math and reading. The Brophy-Evertson studies on elementary students in the 70s found that

classroom teaching was most effective:

• When it focused on content
• When it involved all students
• When it maintained a brisk pace
• When it required students to read aloud often
• When decoding skills were mastered to the point of over-learning
• When each child was asked to perform tasks resulting in immediate nonjudgmental feedback.

Summarizing the results of numerous classroom studies, Hirsch states, “The only truly general principle that seems to emerge from process-outcome research on pedagogy is that focused and guided instruction is far more effective than naturalistic, discovery, learn-at-your-own-pace instruction.”(11)

Cognitive psychology confirms, from another viewpoint, what classroom research has already told us. Research into short term memory has uncovered important reasons to have children in the early elementary years spend considerable effort memorizing language and mathematics basics. The argument goes something like this: Individuals have only so much room, or short-term memory, in which to juggle a number of ideas at once, and this memory space is particularly restricted for young children. In reading, children end up having to focus on both the basics of decoding and word recognition as well as on high level comprehension strategies. This gives those who have memorized phonics and who have a larger vocabulary a significant advantage over those who don’t. Children who over-learn decoding and word skills, have more time, memory- wise, to focus on higher-level kinds of thinking. In other words, rote memorization of the basics leads to higher order thinking, which is exactly the opposite of what is being stressed by progressives.

If Christians want to see our public schools become tools for social justice, to educate all children regardless of

background, a content-oriented curriculum is essential. An early emphasis on higher-level thinking skills is not only a poor use of time in the classroom, but can actually slow down students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is particularly true of early elementary years when decoding skills and a large vocabulary are being acquired.

Next, we will see how international studies add more evidence to this argument for a content-focused curriculum.

International and Domestic Examples

In the discussion thus far we have been trying to discern why much of what happens in many of our classrooms fails to provide the intellectual capital elementary school children need. At this point, it should be noted and emphasized that we are not questioning the desire of our classroom teachers, or those who write curricula for the classroom, to benefit our children. We do argue that the philosophical foundations for today's educational theories are often not supported by research, nor by a biblical view of human nature.

Earlier we noted classroom studies and findings from cognitive psychology that refute progressive educational practices. Now we will turn our attention to large-scale international comparative studies. These examples can be found in E. D. Hirsch's book, *The Schools We Need.*

Just as it was found that the best American classrooms were businesslike and focused on the job at hand, international studies found that Chinese and Japanese teachers have a low tolerance for errors and rarely let self-esteem issues get in the way of correcting them. In fact, these errors are used by the teachers for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of various tactics for solving a problem. Asian classrooms begin a period with reciprocal bows and a description of what will be accomplished during the lesson. The period ends with a summary of the work. The pace tends to be slower than American

classrooms, but skills are taught with greater thoroughness. Fewer problems are covered with the focus on mastering them rather than simply getting them done.

Asian teachers tend to use whole-class instruction, utilizing students' responses to generate dialogue that moves the class towards the desired knowledge or skill. Students know that they may be called upon at any moment to provide a solution to the problem at hand. They are engaged and focused on the material. During the period students might work together in groups on a problem, but only for a short time. Asian teachers assign less seatwork to their students and embed it throughout a lesson rather than at the end of class. The American practice of giving students a long block of time at the end of class to do homework usually causes students to lose focus and become bored with the repetitive tasks.

To achieve the greatest results, the classroom must be content oriented and the teacher must be working hard to keep all students engaged in the work. Too often, American classrooms lack one of these two essential ingredients.

Hirsch's proposals, although revolutionary to many of today's teachers, would seem obvious to most teachers of a generation ago. They are also obvious to many Christian educators. A good example is the classical Christian education model advocated by Douglas Wilson and his Logos Schools organization.(12) Wilson endorses the Trivium curriculum model which focuses on grammar in the early grades, dialectic or logic in the middle school, and rhetoric in high school. Grammar is the memorization of the basic rules and facts of any subject matter, whether it be language or mathematics. The dialectic stage teaches students how the rules of logic apply to a subject area, and rhetoric teaches students how to communicate what they have learned. All of this can be done in a way to make it both challenging and meaningful to the vast majority of public and private school students. However, failing to accomplish this soon, we will continue to see a widening gap

between those who have been vested with intellectual capital and those who have not.

Notes

1. “Quality Counts,” A special supplement to *Education Week*, Vol. XVI (22 Jan. 1997), p. 19. The text notes that a major study concluded that 75% of students’ achievement is the result of home and family.

2. “Achievement Gap Widening, Study Reports,” *Education Week*, Vol. XVI, No. 14 (4 Dec. 1997), p. 1

3. Hirsch, E.D., Jr. *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 7.

4. Ibid., p. 49.

5. Ibid., p. 20.

6. Ibid., p. 21.

7. Ibid., p. 42.

8. Ibid., p. 74.

9. Ibid., p. 66.

10. Ibid., p. 69.

11. Ibid., p. 184.

12. Wilson, Douglas. *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 91.

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How Do You Spell Truth?

What is Truth?

Do you remember the commercial that asked, “How do you spell relief?” To the horror of elementary teachers everywhere, you were supposed to answer “R-O-L-A-I-D-S.” In a similar fashion, today, if you ask someone, “How do you spell truth?” you might be surprised by the response. As a young Christian in college, I was greatly influenced by the writings of Francis Schaeffer. I will never forget the impact of his critique of modern culture and his use of the phrase “true truth.” True truth might be thought of as truth with a capital “T” because it is based on the existence of a personal God, the creator of all that exists, and a revealer of Himself via the Bible and the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus. Today, if you ask average men and women how to spell truth, their responses will probably indicate a view that is strictly earthbound truth beginning with a small “t.” God is not in the picture; in fact, belief in God would be seen as a handicap in discerning truth accurately. The methodology of science provides this type of truth and also sets its limits. However, there is another spelling for truth that is finding more and more adherents. Today, especially on college campuses, the question might be answered with C-O-N-S-T-R-U-C-T, as in social construct. Like the Rolaids answer above, this response doesn’t seem to fit. In this approach truth is generated by the social group, whether they be white middle-class male Americans or female southeast Asians. What is true for one group may not be true for another, and there is no such thing as universal truth, something that is true for all people, all the time.

These three conceptions of truth describe three comprehensive systems of thought that are active in Western culture and in the U.S. The first (Truth) portrays Christian theism (what some refer to as a pre-modern view). Although this view is

still quite popular, many in our churches function as if they were members of the second group which is often classified as a modernist perspective (truth). The third group (truth as social construct) is a fairly recent arrival, but has become highly influential both in academia and in common culture. It has been called postmodernism. People within these three different perspectives see the world quite differently. Until recently, Christians focused their apologetics, or defense of the faith, mainly at modernists and as a result often attempted to justify belief within a modernist framework of truth. Now we are being called upon to respond to a postmodern view that will require a far different approach. Although postmodernism has many aspects that Christians must reject, it has also revealed just how much Christian thinking has been influenced by the modernist challenge.

In this discussion we will look at modernism and postmodernism in light of Christian evangelism and apologetics. We are now fighting a two-front battle, and we need to develop different tools for each. We also are in need of a vaccine against assuming the presuppositions of either modernism or postmodernism as we attempt to live and think within a biblical framework. Much of this debate revolves around the notion of what is true, or perhaps how we as individuals can know what is true. This may sound like an ivory tower discussion, but it is a vital topic as we attempt to share the truth of the Gospel to those we encounter.

The Modernist View

In their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*{1}, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh use an interesting metaphor to describe the different views of truth and the ways that we perceive it in our culture. Imagine three umpires meeting after a day at the park. As they reflect on the day's activities one ump declares, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds,

“There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call ’em the way I see ’em.” The third says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and they ain’t nothin’ until I call ’em.” Each of the umpires may make the same call, but they will be making it for very different reasons. The position of the first ump is known as naive realism. He believes that his calls correspond to something quite real and substantive called balls and strikes. He is also very confident that he can discern what is a ball or a strike with a high degree of accuracy. This confidence is a trademark of modernism. As we will see later, the other two umpires reflect positions that reject such a confidence in knowing what is true. It doesn’t mean that they don’t make decisions, they just lack the confidence that their decision conforms exactly to what is really “out there.”

Modernism grew out of the Enlightenment and matured in the last century to dominate much of European and American thought. Its greatest American advocate has been John Dewey. Writing around the turn of the century, Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism has dominated American educational theory to this day. In his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy,*{2} he highlights the difference between pre-modern and modern thinking. First, modernism rejects the reality of supernatural events or beings. It focuses on this world and the secular. Second, it rejects the authority of the church or religion in general and replaces it with the power of individual minds utilizing the methodology of science. Third, it replaces the static world of the middle ages with a belief in progress towards a future human utopia. Finally, it believes that the patient scientific study of nature will provide the means for this utopia. Humankind is to conquer and control nature for its use.

The implications of modernism were and are profound. Under its umbrella, humans were seen as biological machines just as the universe became understood as an impersonal mechanism needing neither a creator nor a sustainer God. All of human behavior

could conceivably be explained biologically, given enough time for science to study the data. As a result, humans are viewed as self- governing beings and free to embrace whatever their rational minds discover. Modernists might be called rationalistic optimists because they are quite confident in their ability to perceive "reality as reality, relatively unaffected by our own bias, distortion, or previous belief system"{3}. One's conclusions can reflect reality outside ourselves, not just thoughts within our own minds.

With the advent of modernism Christianity found itself under the cold calculating eye of science. Modernism tells a story of mankind as its own savior that is, with the help of science, modernism has no need for a savior provided by God. Sin is not in its vocabulary, and redemption is not needed; humans lack only education.

Next, we will look at the arrival of postmodernism and its accompanying challenges.

The Postmodern Condition

We have considered the impact of modernism on the question of what is true. Now we will focus on the postmodern view. Where modernism is very confident that it can discover truth via science, postmodernism is defined by its skepticism that truth of any type can be known. Much of postmodernism is negative response to the confidence of modernism. Yet, postmodernism is a strange combination of a vague romantic optimism that mankind can solve its social and economic problems, with a dramatic pessimism of ever knowing truth at a universal level. This reflects the strong influence of atheistic existentialism on postmodern thinking. Individuals are told they must stand up and confront an absurd existence and impose meaning and order on to it, all the while admitting that there is no universal truth guiding what they choose to do.

To a postmodern, modernism ended with atomic bombs being

dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Modernism led to imperialism and the colonialization of the third world by the supposedly more modern and advanced industrial nations. It led to the destruction of the environment, and it has led to a naive confidence that technology can solve any problem in its path.

Often, postmodernism is known more for what it doesn't believe than for what it does. One author writes that we have come to the point where answers to the "questions of ultimate concern about the nature of the good, the meaning of truth and the existence of God are taken to be unanswerable and hence, in some fundamental sense, insignificant."{4}

Let's consider some of the significant themes that postmodernists have written about. The first is the theory that truth is a social construct. This theory would argue, for example, that Western modernity which has come to dominate the globe and define what is rational and normative for human life is not in place because it is any truer than other worldviews. Instead, it is a set of ideas that people have used to manipulate others with in order to gain power over them. Those who are not "scientific" are viewed as primitive and as a result are marginalized and finally oppressed by Western culture. Western culture, then, has not discovered how things really are; instead, it has imposed one view on the world to its advantage. Our basic problem is that all ideas, all concepts, and all truths are communicated via language, and all language is man made. No one can step outside of language to see whether or not it corresponds with reality. In the words of one postmodernist, all principles (or ultimate truths) are really preferences.

As a result of postmodernist thinking, anyone who claims to know something that is universally true, true for everyone, everywhere, anytime, is accused of marginalizing those who disagree. Once a person or group is marginalized, a justification has been established to oppress them. To

postmodernists, a totalizing meta- narrative (a story that claims to answer all the big questions about reality) always results in violence towards those outside the accepted paradigm. They point to Western culture's aptitude towards conquering and destroying other cultures in the name of progress and modernization.

One can easily see that a Christian worldview conflicts with much of what postmodernity teaches. Christianity claims to be true for everyone, everywhere. It is not surprising that postmodern feminists and others have pointed their finger at Christianity for oppressing women, gays, and anyone else who holds to a different construct of reality. How do we as Christians respond to this critique? Do we side with the modernists and join the fight against postmodern influences? Or can we find something helpful in the issues raised by postmodernism?

Postmodernist Kenneth Gergen argues that, "When convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it." Another has written that modernity has given us "as much terror as we can take."{5} Postmodernists argue that by claiming to know the truth we automatically marginalize and oppress others. It encourages the questioning of everything that modernism has come to accept as natural or good. Capitalism, patriarchy, and liberal humanism are just a few ideas that modernity has left us with and that we have to realize are just social constructs. We are free, according to postmoderns, to throw off anything that doesn't work since all institutions and social norms are social constructs created by society itself. However, with this freedom comes disorientation. The current social scene in America is a prime example of this effect. Traditions about family, gender roles, economic responsibility, and social norms are being questioned and abandoned. This has left us with a sense of loss, a horrifying loss that acknowledges that there is nothing solid

undergirding why we live the way we do. It has left us with an amazing amount of pluralism and a radical multiculturalism that some feel has removed essential buffers to chaos.

The confidence of modern man in rugged individualism has been deconstructed by postmodernism to reveal the inevitability of violence and subjugation. What is left? Many postmodernists argue that not only is the self a construct, that the autonomous self is a myth, but that the self is actually a servant of language. Most people see language as a tool to be used by individuals to express ideas to another person. Many postmodernists see things quite differently. They would argue that our language uses us instead. Another way of thinking of this is that we don't have a language, a language has us. All that we know of reality is given to us by the symbols present in our language. This has created a self- identity problem of dramatic proportions for postmoderns. Many have responded by embracing this lack of rootedness by seeing that life is being in a "state of continuous construction and reconstruction."

Now that we have briefly surveyed both the modern and postmodern positions, let's begin to think about them from a biblical standpoint. We should first acknowledge that when doing apologetics, or defending the faith, we are not merely attempting to win arguments or make others look foolish. Apologetics should always be done in the context of evangelism, the goal of which is to share the gospel in a meaningful way, to convey the truth of special revelation concerning God's plan for salvation with humility and compassion.

Christians should probably reject both the confidence of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism regarding our ability to know and understand truth. Modernity's dependence on science as the only valid source for truth is too limited and fails to consider the effects of the fall on our ability to know something without bias. We are often sinfully rational, willfully rejecting what is true. On the other hand,

the postmodern view leaves us without hope that we can know anything about what is really real. It holds that we are literally a prisoner of the language game played by our culture group, regardless of its social class or race.

Next, we will consider how postmodern thinking should affect evangelism.

A Christian View of Truth

We have been considering the challenges of modern and postmodern thinking to the notion of truth and the communication of the Gospel. Earlier we used the metaphor of umpires who call strikes and balls within different frameworks for knowing. The ump who "calls 'em the way they are" is a naive realist; the second ump who "calls 'em like he sees 'em" represents the critical realist view, and the ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" portrays a radical perspectivist view. The questions before us are, What view should a Christian take? and How does this choice affect the way in which we do apologetics and evangelism?

If we accept the view of the first ump who "calls 'em the way they are," we have adopted a modernist perspective. Unfortunately, experience tells us that the assumptions that come with this view don't seem to hold up. It assumes that common sense and logic will always lead people to the Truth of the Gospel we just need to give people enough evidence. While this approach does work with some, it works mainly because they already agree with us on a theistic, Western view of reality. However, modernism has also led many to see the universe as a godless machine run by the logical laws of nature as discovered by science. For example, New Agers or Hindus have a common understanding that leads them elsewhere. Their basic assumptions about reality are quite different from ours, and it is much more difficult to find common ground with them. In fact, they have consciously rejected the Western view of reality.

The third ump who says “they ain’t nothin’ until I call ’em” sees truth as entirely personal. Although we admit that people do create personal frameworks for interpreting life and reality, there is ultimately only one true reality, one true God. However, we might learn from the perspectivist in order to find common ground when witnessing. One commonality is the notion of an acute consciousness of suffering by marginalized people. Christianity shares this concern yet offers a radically different solution.

The second umpire states that there are balls and strikes, and “I call ’em as I see ’em.” This view of truth, called critical realism, recognizes that there is one true reality, but that our ability to perceive it is limited. The Bible teaches that sin has distorted our view. Even as believers we must admit that we don’t always understand why God does what He does. This is partially because truth is personal in the sense that it is rooted in a personal God, and we can never know all that there is to know about Him. Even Peter, who walked with Christ, didn’t understand God’s plans. He rebuked Jesus when Jesus told His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, be crucified, and resurrected.

The best evangelistic approach attempts to find common ground with an unbeliever while never relinquishing all that is true of the Christian worldview. If rational, logical arguments are persuasive, use them. If storytelling works, as in the more narratively oriented societies of the Middle East, use it. We should not be limited to either a modernist or postmodernist view of truth, but work from a distinctively Christian perspective that holds that the God who created the universe wants us to gently instruct others in the hope that He will grant them repentance and lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than*

It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.

2. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), pp. 47-49.

3. Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1996), pp. 23-26.

4. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.

5. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, p. 35.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 52.

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Human Nature

Don Closson provides an overview to how naturalism, pantheism and Christian theism view human nature. He discusses questions considering how each view deals with purpose, good and evil, and death.

In the twenty-five years prior to 1993, the federal government spent 2.5 trillion dollars on welfare and aid to cities. This was enough money to buy all the assets of the top Fortune 500 firms as well as all the farmland in America at that time.({1} As part of the Great War on poverty, begun by the Johnson administration in the 1960's, the government's goal was to reduce the number of poor, and the effects of poverty on

American society. As one administration official put it, “The way to eliminate poverty is to give the poor people enough money so that they won’t be poor anymore.”{2}) Sounds simple. But offering money didn’t get rid of poverty; in fact, just the opposite has occurred. The number of children covered by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program has gone from 4.5 percent of all children in America in 1965, to almost 13 percent of all children in 1991. One of the reasons for this increase has been the rapid deterioration of the family for those most affected by the welfare bureaucracy. Since 1960, the number of single parent families has more than tripled, reflecting high rates of children born out of wedlock and high divorce rates.{3} Rather than strengthening the family in America and ridding the country of poverty, just the opposite has occurred. Why such disastrous results from such good intentions?

Part of the answer must be found in human nature itself. Might it be, that those creating welfare policy in the 1960’s had a faulty view of human nature and thus misread what the solution to poverty should be? In this essay I will look at how three different world views—theism, naturalism, and pantheism—view human nature. Which view we adopt, both individually and as a people, will have a great influence on how we educate our children, how and if we punish criminals, and how we run our government.

Christian theism is often chided as being simplistic and lacking in sophistication, yet on this subject, it is the naturalist and pantheist who tend to be reductionistic. Both will simplify human nature in a way that detracts from our uniqueness and God-given purpose here on this planet. It should be mentioned that the views of Christian theists, naturalists, and pantheists are mutually exclusive. They might all be wrong, but they cannot all be right. The naturalist sees man as a biological machine that has evolved by chance. The pantheist perceives humankind as forgetful deity, whose

essence is a complex series of energy fields which are hidden by an illusion of this apparent physical reality. Christian theism accepts the reality of both our physical and spiritual natures, presenting a balanced, livable view of what it means to be human.

In this essay I will show how Christian theism, naturalism, and pantheism answer three important questions concerning the nature of humanity. First, are humans special in any way; do we have a purpose and origin that sets us apart from the rest of the animal world? Second, are we good, evil, or neither? Third, what happens when we die? These fundamental questions have been asked since the written word appeared and are central to what we believe about ourselves.

Are Humans Special?

One doesn't usually think of Hollywood's Terminator, as played by Arnold Schwartzenegger, as a profound thinker. Yet in *Terminator II*, the robot sent back from the future to protect a young boy asks a serious question.

> Boy: *"You were going to kill that guy!"*
>
> Terminator: *"Of course! I'm a terminator."*
>
> Boy: *"Listen to me very carefully, OK? You're not a terminator anymore. All right? You got that?! You just can't go around killing people!"*
>
> Terminator: *"Why?"*
>
> Boy: *"What do ya mean, Why? 'Cause you can't!"*
>
> Terminator: *"Why?"*
>
> Boy: *"Because you just can't, OK? Trust me on this!"*{4}

Indeed, why not terminate people? Why are they special? To a naturalist, one who believes that no spiritual reality exists,

options to this question are few. Natural scientists like astronomer Carl Sagan and entomologist E.O. Wilson find man to be no more than a product of time plus chance, an accident of mindless evolution. Psychologist Sigmund Freud and existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre agree, humankind is a biological machine, perhaps slightly more complex than other animals, but governed by the same physical needs and drives.

Yet as Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame put it in the original *Star Trek* movie, logic and knowledge aren't always enough. He discovered this by mind melding with V-GER, a man made machine that, after leaving our solar system, evolves into a thinking machine elsewhere in the galaxy and returns to earth to find its creator.{5} If logic and knowledge aren't enough, where do we turn to for significance or purpose? A naturalist has nowhere to turn. For example, Sartre argued that man must make his own meaning in the face of an absurd universe.{6} The best that entomologist E. O. Wilson could come up with is that we do whatever it takes to pass on our genetic code, our DNA, to the next generation. Everything we do is based on promoting survival and reproduction.{7}

Pantheists have a very different response to the question of human purpose or uniqueness. Dr. Brough Joy, a medical doctor who has accepted an Eastern view of reality, argues that all life forms are divine, consisting of complex energy fields. In fact, the entire universe is ultimately made up of this energy; the appearance of a physical reality is really an illusion.{8} Gerald Jampolsky, another doctor, argues that love is the only part of us that is real, but love itself cannot be defined.{9} This is all very consistent with pantheism which teaches a radical monism, that all is one, and all is god. But if all is god, all is just as it is supposed to be and you end up with statements like this from the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh:

> There is no purpose to life; existence is non-purposive.

> That is why it is called a leela, a play. Existence itself has no purpose to fulfill. It is not going anywhere—there is no end that it is moving toward…{10}

Christianity teaches that human beings are unique. We are created in God's image and for a purpose, to glorify God. Genesis 1:26 declares our image-bearing nature and the mandate to rule over the other creatures of God's creation. Jesus further delineated our purpose when he gave us the two commandments to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Romans 12:1 calls us to be living sacrifices to God. Unlike naturalism or pantheism, the Bible doesn't reduce us down to either just our material, physical nature or to just our spiritual nature. Christianity recognizes the real complexity of humanity as it is found in our physical, emotional and spiritual components.

Are We Good, Bad, or Neither?

To a naturalist, this notion of good and evil can only apply to the question of survival. If something promotes survival, it is good; if not, it is evil. The only real question is how malleable human behavior is. B. F. Skinner, a Harvard psychology professor, believed that humans are completely programmable via classical conditioning methods. A newborn baby can be conditioned to become a doctor, lawyer, or serial killer depending on its environment.{11}

The movie that won "Best Picture" in 1970 was a response to Skinner's theories. *A Clockwork Orange* depicted a brutal criminal being subjected to a conditioning program that would create a violent physical reaction to just the thought of doing harm to another person. Here is dialogue between the prison warden and an Anglican clergyman after a demonstration of the therapy's effectiveness.

> Clergyman: *"Choice! The boy has no real choice! Has he? Self*

> *interest! The fear of physical pain drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement! Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice."*
>
> Warden: *"Padre, these are subtleties! We're not concerned with motives for the higher ethics. We are concerned only with cutting down crime! (Crowd Applause) And with relieving the ghastly congestion in our prisons! He will be your true Christian. Ready to turn the other cheek! Ready to be crucified rather than crucify! Sick to the very heart at the thought even of killing a fly! Reclamation! Joy before the angels of God! The point is that it works!"*{12}

Stanley Kubrick denounced this shallow view of human nature with this film, yet Skinner's behaviorism actually allows for more human flexibility than does the sociobiology of E. O. Wilson, another Harvard professor. Wilson argues that human emotions and ethics, in a general sense, have been programmed to a "substantial degree" by our evolutionary experience.{13} In other words, human beings are hard coded to respond to conditions by their evolutionary history. Good and evil seem to be beside the point.

Jean-Paul Sartre, another naturalist, rejected the limited view of the sociobiologist, believing that humans, if anything, are choosing machines. We are completely free to decide who we shall be, whether a drunk in the gutter or a ruler of nations. However, our choice is meaningless. Being a drunk is no better or worse than being a ruler. Since there is no ultimate meaning to the universe, there can be no moral value ascribed to a given set of behaviors.{14}

Pantheists also have a difficult time with this notion of good and evil. Dr. Brugh Joy has written,

> In the totality of Beingness there is no absolute anything—no rights or wrongs, no higher or lower

> aspects—only the infinite interaction of forces, subtle and gross, that have meaning only in relationship to one another.(15)

The Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh wrote,

> I am totally passive. Whatsoever happens, happens. I never question why, because there is no one to be asked.{16}

Christianity teaches that the universe was created by a personal, moral Creator God, and that it was created good. This includes humanity. But now creation is in a fallen state due to rebellion against God. This means that humans are inclined to sin, and indeed are born in a state of sinfulness. This explains both mankind's potential goodness and internal sense of justice, as well as its inclination towards evil.

What Happens at Death?

Bertrand Russell wrote over seventy books on everything from geometry to marriage. Historian Paul Johnson says of Russell that no intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell. Holding to naturalist assumptions caused an obvious tension in Russell regarding human nature. He wrote that people are "tiny lumps of impure carbon and water dividing their time between labor to postpone their normal dissolution and frantic struggle to hasten it for others."{17} Yet Russell also wrote shortly before his death, "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."{18} One has to ask why he would pity these self-centered lumps of impure carbon and water?

Most people over forty begin to question the nature and consequence of death. Some become obsessed with it. A recent movie called *Flatliners* focused on what death might hold for us. It involved a number of young doctors willing to die

temporarily, to find out what was on the other side.

> Young Doctor #1: *"Wait a minute! Wait! Quite simply, why are you doing this?"*
>
> Young Doctor #2: *"Quite simply to see if there is anything out there beyond death. Philosophy failed! Religion failed! Now it's up to the physical sciences. I think mankind deserves to know!"* {19}

Philosophy has failed, religion has failed, now its science's turn to find the answers. But what can naturalism offer us? Whether we accept the sociobiology of Wilson or the existentialism of Sartre, death means extinction. If nothing exists beyond the natural, material universe, our death is final and complete.

Pantheists, on the other hand, find death to be a minor inconvenience on the road to nirvana. Reincarnation happens to all living things, either towards nirvana or further from it depending on the Karma one accrues in the current life. Although Karma may include ethical components, it focuses on one's realization of his oneness with the universe as expressed in his actions and thoughts. Depending on the particular view held, attaining nirvana is likened to a drop of water being placed in an ocean. All identity is lost; only a radical oneness exists.

Christianity denies the possibility of reincarnation and rejects naturalism's material-only universe. Hebrews 9:27 states, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment…" It has always held to a linear view of history, allowing for each person to live a single life, experience death, and then be judged by God. Revelation 20:11-12 records John's vision of the final judgment.

> "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small,

> standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books."

All three versions of what happens at death may be wrong, but they certainly can't all be right! We believe that based on the historical evidence for Christ's life and the dealings of God with the nation of Israel, the Biblical account is trustworthy. We believe that those who have placed their faith in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross will spend eternity in glorified bodies worshiping and fellowshiping with their Creator God.

Evaluation & Summary

In his autobiography, entomologist E. O. Wilson writes that as a young man he accepted Christ as his savior, but because of what he perceived to be hypocrisy in the pulpit he walked away from the church shortly after being baptized. Later at Harvard University he sat through a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Sr. and then a series of gospel songs sung by students from the campus. He writes that he silently wept while the songs were being sung and said to himself, "These are my people."{20} Wilson claims to be a naturalist, arguing that God doesn't exist, yet he has feelings that he can't explain and desires that do not fit his sociobiological paradigm. Even the staunchly atheistic Jean-Paul Sartre, on his death bed, had doubts about the existence of God and human significance. Naturalism is a hard worldview to live by.

In 1991 Dr. L. D. Rue addressed the American Association for The Advancement of Science and he advocated that we deceive ourselves with "A Noble Lie." A lie that deceives us, tricks us, compels us beyond self-interest, beyond ego, beyond family, nation, [and] race. "It is a lie, because it tells us that the universe is infused with value (which is a great fiction), because it makes a claim to universal truth (when

there is none), and because it tells us not to live for self-interest (which is evidently false). `But without such lies, we cannot live.'"{21} This is the predicament of modern man; either he lives honestly without hope of significance, or he creates a lie that gives a veneer of meaning. As William Lane Craig writes in his book *Reasonable Faith,*

> Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value or purpose. If we try to live consistently within the atheistic worldview, we shall find ourselves profoundly unhappy. If instead we manage to live happily, it is only by giving the lie to our worldview.{22}

The pantheist is little better off. Although pantheism claims a spiritual reality, it does so by denying our personhood. We become just another impersonal force field in an unending field of forces. Life is neither going anywhere nor is there hope that evil will be judged. Everything just is, let it be.

Neither system can speak out against the injustices of the world because neither see humankind as significant. Justice implies moral laws, and a lawgiver, something that both systems deny exist. One cannot have justice without moral truth. Of the three systems, only Judeo-Christian thought provides the foundation for combating the oppression of other humans.

In J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*, Packer argues that humans beings were created to function spiritually as well as physically. Just as we need food, water, exercise, and rest for our bodies to thrive, we need to experience worship, praise, and godly obedience to live spiritually. The result of ignoring these needs will be the de-humanizing of the soul, the development of a brutish rather than saintly demeanor. Our culture is experiencing this brutishness, this destruction of the soul, on a massive scale. Only revival, which brings about personal devotion to Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy

Spirit, will reverse this trend. Since we are truly made in God's image, we will find peace and fulfillment only when we are rightly related to Him.

Notes

1. Stephen Moore, "The growth of government in America," *The Freeman*, April (1993), 124.
2. Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C: Regnery, 1992), 174.
3. William Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 50.
4. *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (Carolco Pictures Inc., 1991).
5. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Paramount Pictures, 1980).
6. John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 50.
7. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 3.
8. Brugh W. Joy, *Joy's Way* (Los Angeles: J.B. Tarcher, Inc., 1979), 4.
9. Gerald G. Jampolsky, *Teach Only Love* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 52.
10. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *I Am the Gate* (Philadelphia: Harper Colophon, 1977), 5.
11. Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 105.
12. *A Clockwork Orange* (Warner Bros. Inc., 1971).
13. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, p. 6.
14. Robert D. Cumming, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Random House, 1965), 363.
15. Joy, *Joy's Way*, p. 7.
16. Rajneesh, *I Am the Gate*, p. 5.
17. Israel Shenker, "The Provocative Progress of a Pilgrim Polymath," *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 123.
18. Ibid.
19. *Flatliners* (Columbia Pictures, 1990).
20. Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (Washington, D.C.: Island

Press, 1994), 46.
21. William L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 71.
22. Ibid., p. 70.

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The Christian Canon

Don Closson provides a summary of the process through which the books of the New Testament were selected by the early church fathers and brought down to modern times. Understanding how the books of the Bible were determined according to important criteria of authorship, wide acceptance and relevance, help give us an appreciation for the wonder of God's word to us.

The Early Church Fathers

Some Christians are unnerved by the fact that nowhere does God itemize the sixty-six books that are to be included in the Bible. Many believers have at best a vague notion of how the church arrived at what we call the Canon of Scripture. Even after becoming more aware, some believers are uncomfortable with the process by which the New Testament Canon was determined. For many, it was what appears to be a haphazard process that took far too long.

Furthermore, whether talking with a Jehovah's Witness, a liberal theologian, or a New Ager, Christians are very likely to run into questions concerning the extent, adequacy, and accuracy of the Bible as God's revealed Word.

In this essay, therefore, we will consider the development of

the doctrine of the Scriptures in the Church Age. Just how did the church decide on the books for inclusion in the New Testament? This discussion will include both how the Canon was established and the various ways theologians have viewed the Bible since the Canon was established.

The period immediately following the passing of the Apostles is known as the period of the Church Fathers. Many of these men walked with the Apostles and were taught directly by them. Polycarp and Papias, for instance, are considered to have been disciples of the Apostle John. Doctrinal authority during this period rested on two sources, the Old Testament (O.T.) and the notion of Apostolic succession, being able to trace a direct association to one of the Apostles and thus to Christ. Although the New Testament (N.T.) Canon was written, it was not yet seen as a separate body of books equivalent to the O.T. Six church leaders are commonly referred to: Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius (Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 37). Although these men lacked the technical sophistication of today's theologians, their correspondence confirmed the teachings of the Apostles and provides a doctrinal link to the N.T. Canon itself. Christianity was as yet a fairly small movement. These Church Fathers, often elders and bishops in the early Church, were consumed by the practical aspects of Christian life among the new converts. Therefore, when Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the early church did not have a technical theology of the Trinity, they are basically right. There had been neither time nor necessity to focus on the issue. On the other hand these men clearly believed that Jesus was God as was the Holy Spirit, but they had yet to clarify in writing the problems that might occur when attempting to explain this truth.

The early Church Fathers had no doubt about the authority of the O.T., often prefacing their quotes with "For thus saith God" and other notations. As a result they tended to be rather moralistic and even legalistic on some issues. Because the

N.T. Canon was not yet settled, they respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. The books of Hermas, Barnabas, Didache, and 1 and 2 Clement were all regarded highly (Hannah, *Lecture Notes for the History of Doctrine*, 2.2). As Berkhof writes concerning these early Church leaders, "For them Christianity was not in the first place a knowledge to be acquired, but the principle of a new obedience to God" (Berkhof, *History of the Christian Church*, 39).

Although these early Church Fathers may seem rather ill-prepared to hand down all the subtle implications of the Christian faith to the coming generations, they form a doctrinal link to the Apostles (and thus to our Lord Jesus Christ), as well as a witness to the growing commitment to the Canon of Scripture that would become the N.T. As Clement of Rome said in first century, "Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 11).

The Apologists

After the early Church Fathers comes the era of the Apologists and Theologians, roughly including the second, third, and fourth centuries. It is during this period that the Church takes the initial steps toward establishing a "rule of faith" or Canon.

During this period both internal and external forces caused the church to begin to systematize both its doctrines and its view of revelation. Much of the systemization came about as a defense against the heresies that challenged the faith of the Apostles. Ebionitism humanized Jesus and rejected the writings of Paul, resulting in a more Jewish than Christian faith. Gnosticism attempted to blend oriental theosophy, Hellenistic philosophy, and Christianity into a new religion that saw the physical creation as evil and Christ as a celestial being with

secret knowledge to teach us. It often portrayed the God of the O.T. as inferior to the God of the N.T. Marcion and his movement also separated the God of the Old and New Testaments, accepting Paul and Luke as the only writers who really understood the Gospel of Christ (Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 54). Montanus, responding to the gnostics, ended up claiming that he and two others were new prophets offering the highest and most accurate revelation from God. Although they were basically orthodox, they exalted martyrdom and a legalistic asceticism that led to their rejection by the Church.

Although the term *canon* was not used in reference to the N.T. texts until the fourth century by Athanasius, there were earlier attempts to list the acceptable books. The Muratorian Canon listed all the books of the Bible except for 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, Hebrews, and James around A.D. 180 (Hannah, Notes, 2.5). Irenaeus, as bishop of Lyon, mentions all of the books except Jude, 2 Peter, James, Philemon, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. The Syriac Version of the Canon, from the third century, leaves out Revelation.

It should be noted that although these early Church leaders differed on which books should be included in the Canon, they were quite sure that the books were inspired by God. Irenaeus, in his work Against Heresies, argues that, "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God [Christ] and His Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 12). By the fourth century many books previously held in high regard began to disappear from use and the apocryphal writings were seen as less than inspired.

It was during the fourth century that concentrated attempts were made both in the East and the West to establish the authoritative collection of the Canon. In 365, Athanasius of Alexandria listed the complete twenty-seven books of the New Testament which he regarded as the "only source of salvation and of the authentic teaching of the religion of the Gospel"

(Hannah, *Notes*, 2.6). While Athanasius stands out in the Eastern Church, Jerome is his counterpart in the West. Jerome wrote a letter to Paulinus, bishop of Nola in 394 listing just 39 O.T. books and our current 27 N.T. ones. It was in 382 that Bishop Damasus had Jerome work on a Latin text to standardize the Scripture. The resulting Vulgate was used throughout the Christian world. The Synods of Carthage in 397 and 418 both confirmed our current twenty-seven books of the NT.

The criteria used for determining the canonicity of the books included the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in general, and specifically Apostolic origin or sanction, usage by the Church, intrinsic content, spiritual and moral effect, and the attitude of the early church.

The Medieval and Reformation Church

In the fourth century Augustine voiced his belief in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the N.T. text, as did Justin Martyr in the second. This meant that every part of the Scriptures, down to the individual word, was chosen by God to be written by the human writers. But still, the issue of what should be included in the Canon was not entirely settled. Augustine included the Book of Wisdom as part of the Canon and held that the Septuagint or Greek text of the O.T. was inspired, not the Hebrew original. The Church Fathers were sure that the Scriptures were inspired, but they were still not in agreement as to which texts should be included.

As late as the seventh and eighth centuries there were church leaders who added to or subtracted from the list of texts. Gregory the Great added Tobias and Wisdom and mentioned 15 Pauline epistles, not 14. John of Damascus, the first Christian theologian who attempted a complete systematic theology, rejected the O.T. apocrypha, but added the Apostolic Constitution and 1 and 2 Clement to the N.T. One historian notes that “things were no further advanced at the end of the

fourteenth century than they had been at the end of the fourth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.3). This same historian notes that although we would be horrified at such a state today, the Catholicism of the day rested far more on ecclesiastical authority and tradition than on an authoritative Canon. Thus Roman Catholicism did not find the issue to be a critical one.

The issue of canonical authority finally is addressed within the bigger battle between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. In 1545 the Council of Trent was called as a response to the Protestant heresy by the Catholic Church. As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself. It proposed that all the books found in Jerome's Vulgate were of equal canonical value (even though Jerome himself separated the Apocrypha from the rest) and that the Vulgate would become the official text of the Church. The council then established the Scriptures as equivalent to the authority of tradition.

The reformers were also forced to face the Canon issue. Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Luther was troubled by four books, Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation, and though he placed them in a secondary position relative to the rest, he did not exclude them. John Calvin also argued for the witness of the Spirit (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.7). In other words, it is God Himself, via the Holy Spirit who assures the transmission of the text down through the ages, not the human efforts of the Catholic Church or any other group. Calvin rests the authority of the Scripture on the witness of the Spirit and the conscience of the godly. He wrote in his Institutes,

> *Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to*

> *the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God.*

He goes on the say, "We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate."

Modern Views

Although the early church, up until the Reformation, was not yet united as to which books belonged in the Canon, they were certain that the books were inspired by God and contained the Gospel message that He desired to communicate to a fallen world. After the Reformation, the books of the Canon were widely agreed upon, but now the question was, Were they inspired? Were they God breathed as Paul declared in 2 Timothy 3:16?

What led to this new controversy? A great change began to occur in the way that learned men and women thought about the nature of the universe, God, and man's relationship to both. Thinking in the post-Reformation world began to shift from a Christian theistic worldview to a pantheistic or naturalistic one. As men like Galileo and Francis Bacon began to lay the foundation for modern science, their successes led others to apply their empirical methodology to answering philosophical and theological questions.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), although a believer, began his search for knowledge from a position of doubt, assuming only that he exists because he is able to ask the question. Although he ends up affirming God, he is able to do this only by assuming God's existence, not via rational discovery

(Hannah, *Notes*, 4.2). Others that followed built upon his system and came to different conclusions. Spinoza (1633-77) arrived at pantheism, a belief that all is god, and Liebnitz (1646-1716) concluded that it is impossible to acquire religious knowledge from a study of history.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) took another step away from the notion of revealed truth. He attempted to build a philosophy using only reason and sense perception; he rejected the idea that God might have imprinted the human mind with knowledge of Himself. Another big step was taken by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Attempting to protect Christian thinking from the attacks of science and reason, he separated knowledge of God or spirit and knowledge of the phenomenal world. The first was unknowable, the second was knowable. Christianity was reduced to a set of morals, the source of which was unknowable by humanity.

The 1800s brought with it the fruit of Kant's separation of truth from theology. German theologians built upon Kant's foundation resulting in man becoming the source of meaning and God fading into obscurity. Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) replaced revelation with religious feeling, and salvation by grace with self-analysis. The Scriptures have authority over us only if we have a religious feeling about them first. The faith that leads to this religious feeling may come from a source completely independent of the Scriptures.

David Strauss (1808-74) completely breaks from the earlier high view of Scripture. He affirms a naturalistic worldview by denying the reality of a supernatural dimension. In his book, *Leben Jesu* ("The Life of Jesus"), he completely denies any supernatural events traditionally associated with Jesus and His apostles, and calls the Resurrection of Christ "nothing other than a myth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.5). Strauss goes on to claim that if Jesus had really spoken of Himself as the N.T. records, He must have been out of His mind. In the end, Strauss argues that the story we have of Christ is a

fabrication constructed by the disciples who added to the life of Christ what they needed to in order for Him to become the Messiah. Strauss's work would be the foundation for numerous attacks on the accuracy and authenticity of the N.T. writers, and of the ongoing attempt, even today, to demythologize the text and find the so-called "real Jesus of history."

What Now?

As one reviews the unfolding story of how the Canon of Christian Scriptures has been formed and then interpreted, we can get a fairly accurate picture of the changes that have taken place in the thinking of Western civilization. Two thousand years ago men walked with Christ and experienced His deity first hand. God, through the Holy Spirit, led many of these men to compose an inspired account of their experiences which revealed to the following generations what God had done to save a fallen world. This text along with the notion of Apostolic succession was accepted as authoritative by the emerging Christian population, and would eventually come to dominate much of Western thought. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation rejected the role of tradition, mainly the Roman Catholic Church, when it had begun to supersede the authority of Scripture. Later, the Enlightenment began the process of removing the possibility of revelation by elevating man's reason and limiting our knowledge to what science could acquire. This was the birth of Modernism, attempting to answer all the questions of life without God.

The wars and horrors of the twentieth century have crushed many thinkers' trust in mankind's ability to implement a neutral, detached scientific mind to our problems and its ability to determine truth. As a result, many have rejected modernism and the scientific mind and have embraced a postmodernist position which denies anyone's ability to be a neutral collector of truth, which might be true for everyone, everywhere. This has left us with individual experience and

personal truth. Which really means that truth no longer exists. What does this mean for the theologian who has accepted the conclusions of postmodern thinking? One theologian writes, “At the present, however, there is no general agreement even as to what theology is, much less how to get on with the task of systematics. . . . We are, for the most part, uncertain even as to what the options are” (Robert H. King, *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 1-2).

This same theologian argues that Christian theology can no longer rest upon metaphysics or history. In other words, neither man’s attempt to explain the causes or nature of reality nor the historical record of any texts, including the Bible can give us a sure foundation for doing theology. We have the remarkable situation of modern theologians attempting to do theology without any knowledge of God and His dealings with His creation. It is not surprising that modern theologians are seeing Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhism, along with other Eastern traditions, as possibilities for integration with Christian thought or at least Christian ethics. These traditions are not rooted in historical events and often deny any basis in rational thinking, even to the point of questioning the reality of the self (King, *Christian Theology*, 27).

Once individuals refuse to accept the claim of inspiration that the Bible makes for itself, they are left with a set of ethics without a foundation. History has shown us that it rarely takes more than a generation for this kind of religion to lose its significance within a culture. How then do we know that Christianity is true? William Lane Craig, in his book *Reasonable Faith*, makes an important point. As believers, we know that the Scriptures are inspired, and that the Gospel message is true, by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent. We make belief possible by

using both historical evidence and philosophical tools. However, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that softens hearts and calls men and women to believe in the God of the Bible.

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Student Rights

Introduction

A number of years ago a school in Missouri was instructed by court order to sponsor school dances over the objections of parents and the school board because the court claimed that the opposition was of a religious nature thus violating separation of church and state. Students have been stopped from voluntarily praying before athletic events, informal Bible studies have been moved off campus, and traditions such as opening prayer and benedictions during graduation ceremonies have been halted by court order or administrative decrees. Textbooks have also been purged of Judeo- Christian values and teachers have been ordered to remove Bibles from their desks because of the potential harm to students that they represent. Have the schools created an environment that is hostile to Christian belief?

Stephen Carter, a Yale law professor (*The Culture of Disbelief*, Basic Books, 1993) argues that religion in America is being reduced to the level of a hobby, that fewer and fewer avenues are available for one's beliefs to find acceptable public expression. Our public schools are a prime example of this secularization. This has caused undue hardship for many Christian students. Some administrators, reacting to the heated debate surrounding public expressions of faith, have

sought to create a neutral environment by excluding any reference to religious ideas or even ideas that might have a religious origin. The result has often been to create an environment hostile to belief, precisely what the Supreme Court has argued against in its cases which restricted practices of worship in the schools such as school-led prayer and Scripture reading. The fallout of removing a Christian influence from the marketplace of ideas on campus has been the promotion of a naturalistic worldview which assumes that the universe is the consequence of blind chance.

This whole area of student rights is a relatively recent one. In the past, the courts have been hesitant to interfere with the legislative powers of state assemblies and the authority of locally elected school boards. But since the sixties, more and more issues are being settled in court. This trend reflects the breakdown of a consensus of values in our society, and it is likely to get worse.

When public schools reinforce the values held in common by a majority of parents sending their children off to school, conflicts are likely to be resolved locally. But in recent decades school administrators have been less likely to support traditional Judeo- Christian values which are still popular with most parents. Instead, schools have often abandoned accommodating neutrality and purged Christian thought from the school setting. Parents and students have felt compelled to take legal action, claiming that their constitutional rights of free speech and religious expression have been violated.

How should the U. S. Constitution’s guarantee of freedom of religion be balanced with the growing diversity in our public schools? In a time of growing centralization in education, how can schools cope with the rights of students that are far more diversified than in the past?

In this pamphlet we will look at some of the specific issues surrounding the concept of student rights beginning with a

definition of the often used phrase “separation of church and state.” Then we will cover equal access, freedom of expression, the distribution of religious materials, prayer, as well as the Hatch Amendment.

Separation of Church and State

In 1803 Thomas Jefferson helped to ratify a treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians resulting in the United States paying one hundred dollars a year to support a Catholic priest in the region, and contributing three hundred dollars to help the tribe build a church. Later, as president of the Washington, D.C., school board, Jefferson was the chief author of the first plan for public education in the city. Reports indicate that the Bible and the Watts Hymnal were the principal, if not the only books, used for reading in the city’s schools. Yet those who advocate a strict separation between church and state usually refer back to Thomas Jefferson’s use of the phrase in 1802 when speaking to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut. By using this phrase did Jefferson hope to separate Christian thought and ideals from all of public life, including education? Actually, Jefferson was a very complex thinker and desired neither a purely secular nor a Christian education.

What then, does the phrase “separation of church and state” mean? More importantly, what did it mean to the Founding Fathers? This is a crucial issue! A common interpretation was recently expressed in a major newspaper’s editorial page. The writer argued that public school students using a classroom to voluntarily study the Bible would be a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment, and that the mere presence of religious ideas and speech promotes religion. His reasoning was that the tax dollars spent to heat and light the room puts the government in the business of establishing a religion. Is this view consistent with a historical interpretation of the First Amendment?

Recent Supreme Court cases dealing with church/state controversies have resulted in some interesting comments by the justices. In the *Lynch vs. Donnelly* case in 1984, the court mentioned that in the very week that Congress approved the Establishment Clause as part of the Bill of Rights for submission to the states, it enacted legislation providing for paid chaplains for the House and Senate. The day after the First Amendment was proposed, Congress urged President Washington to proclaim a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. In *Abington vs. Schempp* the Court declared that the Founding Fathers believed devotedly that there was a God and that the unalienable rights of man were rooted in Him and that this is clearly evidenced in their writings, from the Mayflower Compact to the U. S. Constitution itself.

The Supreme Court has recognized that every establishment clause case must balance the tension between unnecessary intrusion of either the church or the state upon the other, and the reality that, as the Court has so often noted, total separation of the two is not possible. The Court has long maintained a doctrine of accommodating neutrality in regards to religion and the public school system. This is based on the case *Zorach vs. Clauson* in 1952 which stated that the U. S. Constitution does not require complete separation of church and state, and that it affirmatively mandates accommodation, not merely tolerance of all religions, forbidding hostility toward any.

Any concept of students' rights must include some accommodation by our public institutions in regards to religious beliefs and practices. The primary purpose of the First Amendment, and its resulting "wall of separation" between church and state, is to secure religious liberty.

Equal Access

On the surface, this issue seems fairly uncomplicated. Do students have the right to meet voluntarily on a high school

campus for the purpose of studying the Bible and prayer if other non-curricular clubs enjoy the same privilege? Yet this issue has been the focus of more than fifteen major court cases since 1975, the Equal Access Act passed by Congress in 1984, and finally a Supreme Court case in 1990.

To many, this subject involves blatant discrimination against students who participate in activities that include religious speech and ideas. By refusing to allow students to organize Bible clubs during regular club meeting times, administrators are singling out Christians merely because of the content of their speech.

To others, the idea of students voluntarily studying the Bible and praying presents a situation "too dangerous to permit." Others see equal access as just another attempt to install prayer in the public schools, and they hold up the banner of separation of church and state in an attempt to ward off this evil violation of our Constitution.

Let's review exactly what legal rights a student does enjoy thanks to the "Equal Access" bill and the Mergens Supreme Court decision in 1990. First, schools may not discriminate against Bible clubs if they allow other non-curricular clubs to meet. A non-curricular club or student group is defined as any group that does not directly relate to the courses offered by the school. Some examples might be chess clubs, stamp collecting clubs, or community service clubs. School policy must be consistent towards all clubs regardless of the content of their meetings. The specific guidelines established are:

- *The club must be student initiated and voluntary.*
- *The club cannot be sponsored by the school.*
- *School employees may not participate other than as invited guests or neutral supervisors.*
- *The club cannot interfere with normal school*

activities.

It also goes without saying that these clubs must follow other normally expected codes of behavior established by the school. The federal government can cut off federal funding of any school that denies the right of students to organize such clubs. This is a substantial penalty given that title moneys for special education, vocational training, and library materials are a significant portion of many schools' income.

One would think that the passing of the Equal Access Bill and its affirmation by the Supreme Court would have settled this issue. It didn't. Mostly due to ignorance of the law and occasionally an anti-religion bias, school administrators sometimes still balk at allowing Bible clubs. Unfortunately, it may take a letter from a Christian legal service in order to bring some school administrators up to speed on the legality of the clubs. Even so, some schools are removing all non-curricular clubs in order to avoid having to allow Bible clubs. This is a remarkable position for school administrators to take and is yet another evidence of the polarization taking place in our society between religious and non-religious people.

The way that students utilize the right to equal access is important. The agenda for any such club should be (1) to encourage and challenge one another to strive for excellence in every area of life and (2) to be a source of light within the secular darkness covering much of our teenage culture today. Angry confrontation with administrators and other students would ruin the positive witness such a club might otherwise accomplish.

Other Rights of Christian Students: Freedom of Speech

In 1969, two high school students and one junior high student

who wore black arm bands in protest of the Vietnam war. They were warned of potential expulsion, an admonition which they ignored, and were subsequently removed from school.

The resulting court case made its way to the Supreme Court which determined that students do not shed their constitutional rights at the school house door. This landmark decision, known as the Tinker case, greatly affected the way school administrators deal with certain types of discipline problems. Since the students chose a non-aggressive, non-disruptive form of protest, and since there was no evidence that they in any way interfered with the learning environment of the school, the Court argued that the administrators could not forbid protest simply because they disagreed with the position taken by the students or because they feared that a disruption might occur.

A two-point test has been suggested as a result of the Tinker case. Before setting a policy that will forbid some student behavior, administrators must prove that the action will interfere with or disrupt the work of the school, or force beliefs upon another student. Christians that wear crosses or T-shirts with a Christian message violate neither test. The same idea applies to the spoken word. The Tinker decision embraced the idea that fear or apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right of freedom of expression. Words spoken in class, in the lunchroom, or on the campus may conflict with the views of others and contain the potential to cause a disturbance, but the Court argued that this hazardous freedom is foundational to our national strength.

The Supreme Court has affirmed the right of Christians to distribute literature on campus, with some qualifications. In the case *Martin vs. Struthers* the Court equated free speech with the right to hand out literature as long as the literature in question was not libelous, obscene, or disruptive. If the school has no specific policy concerning the distribution of literature by students, Christians may

freely do so. If a policy exists, students must conform to it. This may include prior examination of the material, and distribution may be denied during assemblies and other school functions. Outsiders do not enjoy similar privileges. The literature must be selected and distributed by the students.

Although the Supreme Court has outlawed school-sponsored prayer and reading from the Bible, it has not moved to restrict individuals from doing so. Graduation prayers by students have created a legal battle which resulted in *Lee vs. Weisman*, a Supreme Court decision which found that a prayer which was guided and directed by the school's principal was unconstitutional. The Court basically said that the school cannot invite a professional clergyman to a school function in order to pray. Students or others on the program may pray voluntarily. The student body may choose a student to act as a chaplain. Another scenario might have parents or students creating the agenda for the graduation ceremony, thus removing the school from placing a prayer on the program. Students do not shed their constitutional right to free speech when they step to the podium.

Christian students on campus must remember that certain responsibilities coincide with these rights. Proverbs 15:1 states that, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." If we use our rights and privileges in a Christlike manner we will indeed be His ambassadors, anything less would be contrary to His will.

Other Student Rights

In 1925, the Supreme Court case *Pierce vs. Society of Sisters* debated the right of parents to send their children to private schools. In that case, justice James McReynolds said, "The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations." In 1984, Congress held a series of hearings on

reported abuses by educators who were attempting to change the beliefs of their students in a way that might again be a challenge to parental authority. Congress found that some schools might be overstepping their traditional role by concentrating more on what students believe than on what they know.

The result of these hearings is a law commonly known as the Hatch Amendment. The law protects students from federally sponsored research and experimental programs that make inquiries into students' personal sexual, family, and religious lives. The law stipulates that all materials, including manuals, audio-visuals, and texts are to be made available to parents for review. And secondly, students shall not be required to submit to psychiatric testing, psychological examination, or treatments which delve into personal areas that might be considered sensitive family matters. But there is one big problem with the law, it only covers federally funded experimental or research-driven programs. What about abusive course-work which isn't funded directly by federal research?

In regards to day-to-day classwork, the courts have made a distinction between mere exposure to objectionable material and a school's attempt to coerce its students to adopt a particular political or religious viewpoint. Parents who can prove that coercion is taking place will have a much greater chance in court of forcing the school to accommodate to their beliefs by changing the school's practices. If coercion is not taking place, and a child is merely being exposed to objectionable material, being excused from the class is more likely.

On the positive side, Christian students do have the right to include religious topics and research in their school work when appropriate. In *Florey vs. Sioux Falls School District*, Circuit Judge McMillian clarified why students have the right to use religious materials in the classroom. He states that,

“To allow students only to study and not to perform religious art, literature and music when such works have developed an independent secular and artistic significance would give students a truncated view of our culture.” In another case titled the *Committee for Public Education vs. Nyquist*, the Supreme Court stated, “The First Amendment does not forbid all mention of religion in public schools. It is the advancement or inhibition of religion that is prohibited.” When presented objectively any religious topic is fair game for both student and teacher. Indeed, both could make good use of this freedom in covering such topics as the religious views of our Founding Fathers, what role Christian thought has played in important issues such as slavery and abortion, and how Christian thought has been in conflict with other worldviews.

Students can be an effective instrument for reaching other students with the Gospel, but only if they are living consistently with what they believe. This is possible given the rights granted them by the U. S. Constitution. It is our job as parents to see that our schools protect the rights of our children not only to believe, but to live Christianly, for what good is freedom of religion if it covers only our private lives?

Resources

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Evaluating Education Reform

Changes in Education

It's the end of your child's first semester of high school and you are expecting the usual report card. Instead, he brings home a portfolio of work which exemplifies his progress towards achieving a series of educational goals established by the district. What's a parent to think?

Or perhaps you have just found out that your first grader will be attending a multi-aged classroom next year which utilizes a cooperative education format and a whole language, interdisciplinary curriculum. What should a parent do?

How about finding out that your fifth-grade daughter attends a school that endorses mastery learning, site-based management, and an effective schools administrative plan? Is it time to panic?

In such circumstances, what is the proper course of action? Should you pull your children out and home school them? Or, should you enroll them in a private school?

Educational reform, which seems to be never ending, often places Christians in a difficult position. Frequently it's hard to know which reforms are hostile to Christian truth, which are merely poorly conceived ideas, and which are actually worthwhile changes in the way we educate children? Many Americans, Christian or otherwise, are becoming cynical regarding educational reform. Every new innovation promises to revolutionize the classroom, and yet things seem to get

progressively worse. The last decade has brought more sweeping reform to our schools than ever before, yet few seem to be convinced that our elementary and secondary schools are performing as we would like them to.

In this essay we will evaluate the notion of educational reform in America's public schools. First, we will consider how one might evaluate reforms in general and then look at specific reforms that are currently being debated. These debates often center on five concerns, or what some call crises, in our schools. They are the crisis of authority, the crisis of content, the crisis of methodology, the crisis of values, and the crisis of funding. The term *crisis* is used here to connotate "a turning point" rather than "collapse or abandonment." Although your local school district may not be embroiled in all five of these concerns, each are widespread throughout the country.

Never have so many Americans been so unsure of their public schools, and many of these people are looking for answers, any answers that will solve the problems that they feel are destroying the effectiveness of education in America. This time of crisis coincides with a split in our society over some very basic notions of what America should be and on what intellectual and moral foundations its institutions should rest. This makes our response to these crises as Christians even more significant. It is also a time of opportunity to have considerable impact on the way our schools operate.

Although the terminology surrounding these crises can be esoteric, they are anything but ivory tower issues. Not only is a great deal of money involved, literally billions of tax dollars, but how our children or perhaps our neighbor's children will be educated will be determined by the resolution of these issues.

Each crisis also represents an opportunity for the Christian community to be salt and light. In order to act as a

preservative we must be a discerning people. Too often the Christian community responds to societal change with anger or passivity, when neither are appropriate. Once we gain an understanding of what is happening to our schools we need to respond in a biblically informed manner that seeks the best for both our children and those of our community.

How to Evaluate Reform

Your local school district has just announced that it is installing a new grade school curriculum based on the most recent innovations from brain research. The staff touts the program as widely implemented and research based. As a parent you have yet to take a position on the program, waiting until you have more information, but you feel at a loss as to what type of questions might be appropriate to ask in order to begin your evaluation.

The first step is to understand what is meant by a research-based innovation. For a school program to be truly research-based, an incredible amount of effort must be invested. Unfortunately, few educational reforms are based on such foundations. Two professors of education, Arthur Ellis and Jeffrey Fouts at Seattle Pacific University, have written a book titled *Research on Educational Innovations* that offers some realistic guidelines for evaluation. The first step in evaluating any reform is to realize that "Theories of human behavior have real, lasting consequences when we try them out on human beings." For that reason alone we should be careful when applying theory to our classrooms.

There are actually three levels of research that need to be finished before proponents of a theory can claim that their curriculum or innovation is truly "research-based." The first level is what might be called "pure research." This often consists of medical or psychological discoveries from clinical experimentation. This kind of research is most effective when specific in focus and highly controlled in methodology, but it

might be also be the result of philosophical inquiry. The thinking and writing of Jean Piaget on the development of the intellect is an example of a theoretical source for educational reform that was derived from both observation and philosophical speculation. Unfortunately, this is where the research support of many programs ends, but in order to be called research-based much more needs to be done.

The second level of research involves testing and measuring a theory's implications for actual learning. Here, the theory discovered in the laboratory or minds of philosophers must be implemented in a classroom setting. With the help of carefully controlled groups, researchers can determine whether or not the innovation actually aids in achieving stated educational goals– that kids really do learn more. A third level of research requires educators to discern if this innovation can be applied successfully school-wide and in diverse settings.

To complete research on an innovation at these three levels takes time, money, and tenacity, three things that are often found lacking in our schools. With the incredible political and social pressures to fix our system, educators often turn to programs that make dramatic promises yet lack the necessary testing and trial periods to substantiate the claims of their promoters.

For the Christian parent, establishing whether or not an educational reform is adequately researched is just the beginning of the evaluation process. Even if a program works in the sense that it achieves its stated goals, not all goals are equally desirable. Every reform must be weighed against biblical truth, because they often make assumptions about human nature, about morality, and the way we should answer some of the other big questions of life. Christian parents can never sit idly on the sidelines regarding their children's educational experiences, because education, in all its many facets, helps to shape our children's view of what is real and important in life.

Current Reforms

Outcome-based educational reform is causing some very heated debates throughout the country. At its core OBE is a fairly simple framework around which a curriculum may be organized. It shifts schools away from the current focus on inputs to outcomes, from time units to measured abilities. It assumes all kids can learn, but not at the same speed. Instead of having all students take U.S. history for two semesters of sixteen weeks each, students would be given credit when they master a list of expected behavioral and cognitive outcomes. Not all students will complete the objectives at the same time. The focus is on the tasks to be accomplished, not the time it takes to accomplish them.

OBE would not qualify as a research-based innovation. It claims little or no research at the basic or primary level. At the classroom level, much of the associated research has been done on the concept of mastery learning. There has been considerable amount of work done on this teaching method, and many think that it is a good thing. Others, like Robert Slavin, argue that mastery learning produces short-term or limited results. This still leaves much of the OBE system without a research base. Level three research which seeks to determine if a reform innovation actually works at the district or school level is mostly anecdotal. Stories of how districts have been turned around by OBE are rarely published in journals for critical review.

This doesn’t mean that OBE is without merit; the point is, we really don’t know. What most people get upset about is how many in the educational bureaucracy have used OBE to establish a somewhat politically correct agenda as educational outcomes, often dealing more with feelings and attitudes than with knowledge and skills.

Another reform which creates conflict is the implementation of thinking skills programs. The idea is to formulate content

neutral classroom exercises that will enhance thinking skills across the curriculum. This assumes that there are skills that can be isolated from content and be taught to students. Unfortunately, there isn't an agreed upon list of skills that should be included. Brain research, cognitive science, and information processing theories are possible sources for such a list, but according to Ellis and Fouts in their book *Research on Educational Innovations*, these have not been tied to basic research programs yet. Since there are ambiguities at the basic level, little level two research has been done to decide if learning can indeed be effected. One study done in 1985 (Norris) concluded that we don't know much about critical thinking and that what we do know suggests that it tends to be context sensitive which strongly argues against the entire notion of thinking skills courses.

School or district wide analysis of these programs tends to consist of "success stories" with little analysis. Again, at this point there is very little evidence that thinking skills can be taught independently of content.

Both outcome-based reform and higher reasoning skills programs are examples of ideas that have found great favor among educators, but little support among Christian parents. This often reflects the imposition of naturalistic or pantheistic assumptions via these reforms by some educators, rather than a critical evaluation of the reforms methods themselves. Unfortunately, some Christians have resorted to personal attacks on the reformers motives, rather than a careful study of the innovation or methodology itself.

Some school reforms are questionable from the beginning—comprehensive sex education being one that comes to mind. But others may contain helpful attributes and yet be poorly implemented or grow into a dogma that drives out other good or necessary parts of the curriculum. Cooperative education and whole language programs can often fit this description.

The two methodologies are different in that cooperative education has a well established research base supporting it, while whole language lacks much beyond the level one or basic research. Christians have generally been against both concepts, but for different reasons. Let's first describe the innovations themselves.

Cooperative education grew out of Kurt Lewin's research in the 1930s on group dynamics and social interaction. One description, offered by an advocate states, "cooperative learning methods share the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own." The idea is to use group motivation to get individuals to excel and grow. Most models of cooperative learning programs stress:

- *interdependence of learners*
- *student interaction and communication*
- *individual accountability*
- *instruction on social skills*
- *group processing of goal achievement.*

Advocates of cooperative learning have been charged by some Christians with wanting to do away with personal excellence and using group pressure to get children to conform to secular moral norms. I am sure that both of these complaints have justification, but this doesn't have to be the case. In fact, many advocates of cooperative learning don't want to do away with the competitive aspect of schooling, they just want to moderate it and to help students to develop the skill of working in groups. Working in groups does not conflict with Christian thinking. In fact, Christian schools and seminaries make use of similar techniques all the time.

A problem occurs when over-zealous promoters of cooperative learning declare all competitive learning to be dangerous, or offer cooperative learning as a schooling panacea equivalent

to a cure for cancer. Some teachers fail to hold students accountable for their work which can lead to unequal effort and unjust rewards for individuals. This lesson damages student motivation and the integrity of the teacher.

Whole language has much less research to support its claims, most of which is at the theoretical or basic level. Whole language theorists argue that language is acquired by actually using it rather than by learning its parts. It rejects a technical approach to language which encouraged learning phonics and grammar rules rather than the simple joy of reading and writing. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this approach teaches students to read and write well. A large study done in 1989 by Stahl and Miller concluded (1) that there is no evidence whole language instruction produces positive effects, and (2) that it may well produce negative ones.

This is not to say that some whole language ideas might not be implemented beneficially with the more traditional phonics, spelling, and grammar instruction. Its emphasis on reading actual literature, not basal readers, is a positive step, as is encouraging students to write often on diverse topics.

There are a number of problems from a theoretical viewpoint that I have with what is promoted as whole language theory, but my response as a Christian should be to work with the teacher and school my child attends, or to find a setting that teaches in a manner that satisfies my expectations. In any case, a Christlike humility should pervade my contact with the teacher and school.

Educators vs. The Public

In spite of the fact that most Americans see the need for improving our public schools, there has been tremendous resistance to reform, both from parents and many teachers. Information found in a recent study titled *First Things First:*

What Americans Expect From the Public Schools, published by the Public Agenda Foundation might give us some reasons why.

Focusing on parents of public school children, and particularly on Christian and African-American families, the report found that these groups support most of the same solutions to our school's problems. Both groups want higher educational standards and clear guidelines for what students should know and what teachers should teach. They reject social promotions and overwhelmingly feel that high school students should not graduate without writing and speaking English well. African-American parents were even more dissatisfied with their schools than others, and more concerned with low expectations on the part of educators.

A second finding was that school reform was viewed in fundamentally different ways by educators and the public. Most educators believe that schools are doing relatively well while the public feels that much improvement is needed. In Connecticut, 68% of educators felt the schools are better now than when they were in school. Only 16% of the public agreed. Educators and parents differ radically in their explanations for our school's problems. Educators blame public complacency, taxpayer selfishness and racism. Although the public supports integration and equal opportunity, it rejects the notion that more money will automatically fix our schools.

Parents' chief concerns are safe, orderly, and focused schools. Nine of ten Americans believe that dependability and discipline will help our students learn better than reforms in test taking or assessments in general. Three out of four parents support permanently removing students caught with guns or drugs from our schools and temporarily removing those who misbehave. Unfortunately, educators rarely make these issues the center of reform proposals. Other findings include the belief that stable families are a more decisive factor for determining student success than a particular school setting is and a perception that educators are often pushing untested

experimental methods at the expense of the basics.

Educators and parents were far apart on a number of classroom methods as well. Parents find nothing wrong with having kids memorize the 50 state capitals and where they are located, or to learn to perform math functions without the aid of a calculator. Educators are much more likely to stress higher-order reasoning skills and early use of calculators. Parents in general are less preoccupied with the need for sex ed, AIDS education, multicultural experiences, and even school prayer. They tend to want schools to be safe, orderly, and academically sound.

There seems to be much common ground that the vast majority of parents, and other taxpayers, agree on. As Christians, we probably would be much happier with our schools if they were safe, orderly, and academically sound. Most Christian parents understand and accept the fact that their public schools will not be overtly Christian. On the other hand, they feel that the Christian faith and its presuppositions should receive fair treatment when reforms are instituted. In recent years many Christian parents have seen their schools initiate programs that both challenge and ridicule their beliefs. This isn’t necessary, and it has alienated the very people who must fund and support the schools if they are to be successful.

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Hermeneutics: Accurately

Interpreting Bible Teaching

Don Closson provides a good understanding of hermeneutics, the ways in which one interprets the Bible with accuracy and integrity. He provides a step by step guide to understanding and interpreting Scripture in a consistent way. He helps us understand how to deal with the cultural, historical and language barriers we face in dealing with a text written in a different language and culture than our own.

Understanding the Bible

If you have ever had a prolonged discussion with a Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, or New Ager over a passage of Scripture, you might relate to an experience that I had recently. I sat down with someone who had obviously spent considerable time in the Bible, who stated a desire to know God's truth and was willing to work diligently to please God, sacrificing both time and money. However, when it came to determining what the Bible taught concerning how we might please Him and what we must do to be saved, we found little we could agree upon. At times it felt as if we were reading two completely different texts.

The problems I encountered were the result of different rules of interpretation. These rules are part of a discipline known as hermeneutics, which many consider to be both an art and a science. The rules that one uses to interpret Scripture play a vital role in determining the meaning of a passage, and thus, our understanding of God and ourselves. Does John 1:1 refer to Jesus as the co- creator of the universe, existing with God the Father eternally, indeed, being of the same essence as the Father? Or is Jesus' divinity somehow inferior to the divinity of God the Father, a view that Jehovah's Witnesses hold? The way we interpret this passage will be determined by the rules of interpretation we bring to our study. It is obvious that both interpretations cannot be correct. When John wrote the words for his Gospel, and specifically for the first chapter,

he had one meaning in mind. He may not have understood all of the implications of what he was writing, nor could he have imagined all of the applications possible in future contexts. However, via the inspiration of the Holy Spirit John's words were to communicate a specific truth about God.

There are three good reasons why we have difficulty understanding the biblical text. First, we are separated from the historical events written about by thousands of years of history. Second, we live in a dramatically different culture, and third, the biblical texts were written in foreign languages. These obstacles to understanding can be daunting to those who want quick and easy comprehension of the Bible. They also make it possible for others to place their own agenda over the text, knowing that few will take the time to uncover what the writer's original intent might have been.

Our goal should be to exegete, or draw meaning from the Scriptures, rather than to impose meaning onto them. Jehovah's Witnesses have decided that Jesus cannot be God; they claim that it is an irrational doctrine. As a result, they have worked hard at interpreting direct references to His deity as something else. In Hebrews 1:6 the angels are told to worship Jesus. Since the Witnesses at one time taught that Jesus was an angel, they translate the word found in the passage as obeisance rather than worship. More like a gesture of respect than the worship of the one true God. Unfortunately, they have to misquote a reference work in order to justify their translation. Their New World Translation has changed numerous passages in order to keep their doctrines intact.

In this essay we will review some of the principles of hermeneutics that have been accepted by the majority of conservative Protestants for many years. Our goal in doing so is that we may be able to rightly divide the Word of truth.

God’s Communication Link

One of the first steps to correctly interpreting Scripture is being aware of what the Bible says about itself and understanding how it has come down to us through the centuries.

Rather than causing a complete text about Himself and His creation to simply appear, God chose to use many individuals, over thousands of years to write His words down. God has also revealed something of Himself in nature. General revelation, in the world around us, gives us an indication of God’s glory and power. However, without special revelation, the specific information found in the Bible, we would be lacking the redemptive plan that God has made available through Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly claims to have revealed information about God. Deuteronomy 29:29 declares that, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” In 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 the writer adds that, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

The unique nature of the Bible is made clear by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. Paul tells Timothy that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

None of the original writings, or autographa, still exist. Nevertheless, textual criticism has confirmed that the transmission of these writings have been very accurate. The accuracy of the Old Testament documents are attested to by the Dead Sea Scrolls which gives us copies of parts of the Old Testament almost a thousand years closer to the original texts than previously available. The dependability of the New

Testament is confirmed by the availability of a remarkable volume of manuscripts which were written very near the time of the original events.

Once we appreciate what God has done to communicate with us, we may begin to apply the principals of interpretation, or hermeneutics, to the text. To be successful this process must take into account the cultural, historical, and language barriers that limit our understanding of the original writings. There are no shortcuts to the hard work necessary to accomplish this task.

Some have wrongly argued that knowledge of the culture and languages of biblical times is not necessary, that the Holy Spirit will interpret the text for us. The role of the Holy Spirit is to illumine the believer in order to accept and apply what is found in Scripture. The Bible says that the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14). The Greek word for "accept" means "to take something willingly and with pleasure." The key role of the Spirit is not to add information to the text, or to give us special translating abilities, but to soften our hearts in order to receive what is there.

The goal of this process is to be mature in Christ. The Bible is not an end, it is a means to becoming conformed to the image or likeness of Christ.

What Is a Literal Interpretation?

Prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, biblical interpretation was often dominated by the allegorical method. Looking back to Augustine, the medieval church believed that every biblical passage contained four levels of meaning. These four levels were the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the eschatological. For instance, the word Jerusalem literally referred to the city itself; allegorically, it refers to the church of Christ; morally, it indicates the human soul; and

eschatologically it points to the heavenly Jerusalem.(1) Under this school of interpretation it was the church that established what the correct meaning of a passage was for all four levels.

By the time of the reformation, knowledge of the Bible was scarce. However, with a new emphasis on the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, the fourfold method of interpretation was beginning to fade. Martin Luther argued that the church shouldn't determine what the Scriptures mean, the Scriptures should govern what the churches teach. He also rejected the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture.

Luther argued that a proper understanding of what a passage teaches comes from a literal interpretation. This means that the reader must consider the historical context and the grammatical structure of each passage, and strive to maintain contextual consistency. This method was a result of Luther's belief that the Scriptures are clear, in opposition to the medieval church's position that they are so obscure that only the church can uncover their true meaning.

Calvin agreed in principle with Luther. He also placed great importance on the notion that "Scripture interprets Scripture," stressing that the grammar, context, words, and parallel passages found in the text were more important that any meaning we might impose on them. He added that, "it is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.(2)

Another approach to interpretation is letterism. While often ignoring context, historical and cultural setting, and even grammatical structure, letterism takes each word as an isolated truth. A problem with this method is that it fails to take into account the different literary genre, or types, in the Bible. The Hebrew poetry of the Psalms is not to be interpreted in the same way as is the logical discourse of

Romans. Letterism tends to lead to legalism because of its inability to distinguish between literary types. All passages tend to become equally binding on current believers.

If we use Jesus as our model for interpreting Scripture we find that He treated the historical narratives as facts. Old Testament characters and events are talked about as if they actually existed and happened. When making applications from the Old Testament text, Jesus used the normal, rather than allegorical meaning, of the passage. Jesus condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for replacing the original intent of the Scriptures with their own traditions. Jesus took a literal approach to interpretation which took into account the literary type of the passage.

Paul tells Timothy that he is to do his "best to present himself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Having the right method of interpretation is a critical precursor to accomplishing this admonition.

Applying the Hermeneutic Process

Next, we will look at how one might approach a specific text. A first step should be to determine the literary genre of the passage. A passage might be legal, narrative, polemic, poetry, wisdom, gospel, logical discourse, or prophetic literature, each having specific guidelines for proper interpretation. For instance, the wisdom literature found in Proverbs is to be seen as maxims or general truths based on broad experience and observations. "They are guidelines, not guarantees; precepts, not promises.(3)

Now, it would be helpful to identify the use of figurative language in the passage. Various forms of Hebrew poetry, simile, metaphor, and hyperbole need to be recognized if the reader is to understand the passage's meaning. Hyperbole, for example, uses exaggeration to make a point. John says that the

whole world would not have room for the books that would be written if everything about Jesus's life was written down (John 21:25). John is using figurative speech. His point is that there were many things that Jesus did that weren't recorded.

The Hebrew language of the Old Testament is filled with examples of figurative text. Judges 7:12 claims that "The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore." Were there actually billions of camels in the valley, or is this an overstatement for the sake of making the point that there were many camels present? Interpreting a passage begins by looking for the plain literal meaning of the text, but if there are obvious contradictions of known facts we look for a figure of speech. Clues for interpreting a figure of speech are usually found in the immediate context.

After a passage's literary type is determined and figures of speech are identified, we can begin to focus on the content of a section of Scripture. Four levels of study are recommended. Word studies come first. Words are the building blocks of meaning, and by looking at the root origin or etymology of a word; its historical development over time; and the meaning of the word at the time of its use in Scripture we can gain insight into a passage's meaning.

Much is to be gained by focusing on the verbs and conjunctions within a text. In the Greek language, verbs have a tense, a mood, a voice, and a person. For instance, Ephesians 5:18 says to not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit. Does "be filled" mean a one time event? Do we accomplish this via hard work? Actually, the passive voice and present tense of the Greek word used translates better as "be kept being filled in Spirit." It implies an ongoing process that God performs as a result of our submission to Him, not as a result of our personal

efforts.

Connective words like “and” or “for” are important when reading long or difficult passages. The word “for” introduces a reason for a preceding statement. In Romans 1:15-17 Paul says that he is eager “to preach the gospel . . . **for** I am not ashamed . . . **for** it is the power of God for salvation . . . **for** in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” And, in Romans 8, “for” occurs 15 times.

Other techniques for studying words include looking at synonyms, antonyms, and cross references. Cross-references might be verbal, parallel (using the same words), or conceptual (using the same idea).

Continuing the Hermeneutic Process

Syntax is the way in which words are grouped together within phrases, clauses, and sentences. Two types of phrases are prepositional, like “in Christ” and “from God our Father,” and participial, such as “speaking the truth in love” or “making peace.” There are dependent clauses like “when we pray for you” and independent clauses such as “we always thank God.” There are simple and compound sentences, simple ones having only one independent clause, compound ones having at least two.

Why do we need to know about syntax? Because without it we have no valid assurance that our interpretation is the meaning God intended to convey. Since God used languages that function within normal grammatical rules, knowing these rules is necessary in order to discern the meaning of a text.

The next level of study should be context. First locate the beginning of an idea and its topic sentence. Start with the paragraph, and then consider the chapter and the entire book. Determine who is being addressed, who is speaking, and what the occasion is. Hebrews chapter six has been interpreted in a

number of different ways depending on how one answers these questions. Since the book was written to Jewish believers, deals with Christian maturity, and begins by exhorting the reader to leave elementary teachings and press on to maturity, many feel that the passage deals with Jewish believers tempted to return to Temple worship and the Jewish community. It warns not of the loss of salvation, but the negative impact on their Christian life if they return to the Jewish community and worship. In other words, they cannot start over if they ruin their testimony among the Jews.

Finally, ignoring the cultural context of a passage is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation. By culture we mean the behavior of a people as reflected by their thoughts, beliefs, social forms, speech, actions, and material artifacts. If we ignore culture, we often wrongly read into the Bible our twentieth century ideas. Knowledge of the religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, and domestic practices of biblical times will decrease the likelihood of misinterpreting difficult passages.

God’s plagues on Egypt is one example of how cultural knowledge can help us to understand a text. The specific plagues sent by God spoke directly against the Egyptian gods. Turning the Nile into blood invalidated the protection of Isis, a goddess of the Nile, as well as Khnum, a guardian god of the Nile. The plague of frogs defied the Heqet, the goddess of birth who had the head of a frog. The plague of gnats ridiculed Set, god of the desert. Other plagues mocked Re, a sun god; Hathor, goddess with a cows head; Apis, the bull god; Sekhmet, goddess with power over disease, as well as others. God was communicating very clearly with the Egyptian people concerning His role as the creator and sustainer of the universe.

Reference works like Bible dictionaries, concordances, word study books, and commentaries are available to assist us in our study of the Bible. The goal of this process is to apply

God’s Word to our lives, but we must first have accurate knowledge of what God’s Word means. Understanding precedes application.

As Psalm 19:1 explains, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Paul, in Romans 1:20 says, “…since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Notes

1. Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 63.

2. Ibid., p. 67.

3. Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991), p. 132.

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Self-Esteem Curricula

Controversy Over Self-Esteem Curricula

In the last several years a controversy has been building over the use of self-esteem curricula in our schools. Educators claim that these programs encourage creativity, increase concentration, decrease drug use, and delay sexual activity. These so-called life skills programs are being used in gifted, sex-ed, drug-ed, and regular classrooms, in public and private schools.

Opponents of the programs argue that the current focus on self-esteem is a direct result of a change in the way we view human nature. This change has been towards a relativistic view of morality, which discourages belief in transcendent moral values. Students are prompted to seek truth within and to see moral values, or ethics, as emanating from that process. Truth is seen as tied to a particular person; it becomes biographical. What is true for you may not be true for me.

Hundreds of self-esteem-oriented programs are now used in schools. “Quest,” one of the most popular programs, is used in 20,000 schools throughout the world. “DUSO” and “Pumsy” have caused controversy in hundreds of elementary schools across the country.

Although the philosophical foundation for these programs goes back a number of decades, a turning point occurred in 1986 when California sponsored a study on self-esteem called the “California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The driving force behind the legislation was California State Assembly member John Vasconcellos. His personal search for self-esteem sheds light on the nature of this movement. Vasconcellos was raised in a strict Catholic home. He writes, “I had been conditioned to know myself basically as a sinner, guilt- ridden and ashamed, constantly beating my breast and professing my unworthiness.”(1) But in the 1960s he went through a period of Rogerian person-centered therapy with a priest-psychologist and claims that he became more fully integrated and more whole. Thus he turned his life work toward this issue of self-esteem.

Vasconcellos sees two possible models for defining human nature. The first he labels a constrained vision, supported by the writings of Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes, and Frederick Hayek. The second is an unconstrained vision, associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. The constrained vision sees man as basically evil, needing to be governed and

controlled. The unconstrained vision sees man as "basically good, even perfectible." Vasconcellos chose the second view after hearing Carl Rogers speak on the subject. Vasconcellos argues that the self-esteem movement is built upon the "faith that people are basically good and that a relationship exists between self-esteem and healthy human behavior. He adds that self-esteem is a "deeply felt appreciation of 'oneself and one's natural being,' a trust of one's instincts and abilities."(2) This information about Vasconcellos is important for understanding why this controversy is so heated and significant. It is not just about what curricula will be used to teach our children, but about how we view human nature itself. Our view of human nature will determine the kind of education we design for our children and the goals towards which that education will aspire.

Visualization and Self-Esteem

Vasconcellos believes that self-esteem results from developing a deeply felt appreciation of oneself and one's natural being. But what is our natural being? Some who hold an Eastern view of human nature have argued that our natural being is spiritual and ultimately one with the rest of the universe.

A subtle example of this is a curriculum called "Flights of Fantasy" by Lorraine Plum. The manual says that

> *Flights of Fantasy is designed to enhance and refine children's natural inclination to image and fantasize—to use this special ability as a powerful vehicle for developing language, creativity, relaxation and a positive self-concept.*

It adds that

> *…only when we consciously and consistently provide experiences that acknowledge the body, the feelings, and the spirit, and honor both hemispheric functions of the brain, can we say with any sense of integrity that we are striving*

to develop the whole person.(3)

Just what is meant by providing experiences that acknowledge a person's spirit?

The author argues that two types of seeing are available to us. The first is "external seeing," a combination of optical sensory abilities and the interpreting ability of the brain. The other type is "internal seeing," which utilizes the brain's ability to visualize or fantasize. Plum believes that both are real experiences in the sense that our bodies respond equally to both. Finally, here's the pitch for an Eastern view of human nature: Plum asserts that, with its visualization and fantasy experiences, "Flights of Fantasy" will help students feel connected to nature and the entire universe, be more open to risk-taking, develop a sense of wonder, and become aware of personal power. All of these notions fit well into an Eastern, New Age perspective.

A monistic, Eastern worldview believes that all is one. Distinctions in the physical realm are mere illusions. When we get in touch with this oneness, we will have inner powers similar to Christ and other so-called risen masters. In a sense, humans are gods, limited gods who suffer from amnesia. A consciousness-raising experience is necessary to reconnect with this oneness. Various meditative states, visualization techniques and Yoga are used to experience oneness with the universe.

Not every instructor using these materials buys into this religious view. Many use them innocently, hoping to bring experiences into their classroom that might somehow benefit troubled students. But authors such as Jack Canfield, a friend of John Vasconcellos, have a definite purpose in mind. In his article "Education in the New Age," Canfield promotes activities that put children in contact with wisdom that he believes lies deep within each of us. He sees himself as a

bridge between Eastern and Western thought, particularly in our schools.(4)

At minimum, "Flights of Fantasy" gives the impression that people can change their psychological state by sheer self-will. The manual states that if our mental images are

> *…portraits of self-doubt and failure, we have the power to replace them with self-confident, successful images. If we are unable to get into the image mentally, we will not get into the behavior physically.*

This view of human nature leaves out any notion of sin or an obligation to a transcendent moral order. In its view we are perfectible, self-correcting, autonomous beings.

The curriculum may also be laying the ground-work for an Eastern view of human nature, one that conflicts dramatically with the biblical view that we are the creation of a personal, all-powerful, loving God.

Pumsy

A very popular theme of modern culture is the concept of "wisdom within": the heroes in George Lucas's Star Wars trilogy used the power of "The Force," and Shirley MacClaine's New Age gospel teaches that we must turn inward to find truth. Pumsy, a self- esteem curriculum used in primary schools across the country, focuses on this "wisdom within" theme. Although Pumsy teaches behavior that Christians can wholeheartedly endorse and attempts to help children be independent from peer influence, it also teaches in a subtle way that children have an autonomous source of wisdom within themselves.

Advocates of self-esteem curricula argue that these programs are needed to help those children who are overwhelmed by the negative aspects of culture or home environment, but they also

claim that all children can benefit from class time spent focusing within themselves and being told how naturally good they are. Again we find the idea that by getting in touch with our natural goodness we will automatically behave in a manner that is personally rewarding. An example of this belief in our natural goodness is found in the Pumsy student storybook:

> *Your clear mind is the best friend you'll ever have. It will always be there when you need it. It is always close to you and it will never leave you. You may think you have lost your clear mind, but it will never lose you.*

Attributes of this clear mind are worth noting. According to the workbook, "It always finds a way to get you to the other side of the wall, if you just listen to it . . . trust and let it do good things for you." According to the manual, clear minds are also a source of peacefulness and strength.

When Pumsy, an imaginary dragon, is in her clear mind, she feels good about herself; when she is in her mud mind, nothing goes right—she doesn't like herself or anything else. Students are told that they can leave behind their mud minds and put on a clear mind whenever they choose to. In other words, bad feelings can be overcome merely by choosing to ignore them, by positing a clear mind.

Songs sung by the children focus on the same theme. Lyrics to one say, "I am special. So are you. I am enough. You are, too." Another says, "When I am responsible for my day, many, many things seem to go my way. Good consequences. Good consequences. That's the life for me!" The message of this curriculum is not very subtle: Humans have the power to perfect themselves emotionally and psychologically, they only need to choose to do so. The only sin that exists is not choosing a clear mind.

This curricula prompts some important questions. Are all negative feelings bad? Is it necessarily a good thing to be

able to shut off mourning for a lost loved one? Can a person really alter his or her situation merely by thinking positively? We all recognize the importance of self-confidence, but how closely does the self-esteem taught by this program match reality? Does it really benefit our students? When we read that American students perform poorly on international math tests, yet feel good about their ability to do math, something is wrong. Could we be causing students to develop a false security based on feelings that may not match reality? From a Christian viewpoint, our children need to know that they bear God's image, which bestows great dignity and purpose to life. They must be aware that they are fallen creatures in need of redemption and transformation and a renewal of their minds in order to be more like Christ.

Quest

Quest is one of the most used drug-education programs in America. It includes high-school, junior-high, and some grade-school components. What makes discussion of this curriculum difficult is that its founder, Rick Little, is a Christian who used input from other Christians in its development. In its original form, the program used values clarification and other non-directive techniques, visualization exercises, and moral decision-making models. These methods have not proven successful in reducing drug use and have been accused of promoting a value-relative worldview. Howard Kirschenbaum, who is closely associated with the values- clarification movement of the 1970s, was hired to write the original curriculum and directed the program towards this approach. Quest makes some of the same assumptions about human nature as Pumsy. If students get in touch with their true selves, which are by nature good, they will not do drugs or be sexually active at an early age. If they see their true value, they will choose only healthy options. The key, according to Quest authors, is not to preach or be highly directive to the kids. Teachers are to be facilitators of discussion, not builders of character.

The students naturally determine what is right for them via the decision-making model presented in class. Once they arrive at the right values, Quest assumes they will live consistently with them. The presumptions are that humans desire to do what is right once the right is determined and that they can do so using their own moral convictions.

To be fair, some of the more blatant values-clarification and visualization techniques have been removed, and Kirschenbaum is no longer part of the program. But many still find the overall emphasis to be non-directive and morally relativistic. Ken Greene, an executive director who left the company in 1982, has said,

> *We thought we were doing God's will and had invested tremendous amounts of energy and time. . . . It still leaves me a little confused. I sometimes say "Lord, did we forsake the cross?(5)*

Dr. James Dobson, a contributor to the original Quest textbook, has recently voiced his concerns about parts of the program. Although he notes that the curriculum has positive aspects, he adds that the authors have incorporated the work of secular humanists into the curriculum and have prescribed group exercises and techniques closely resembling those employed in psychotherapy. This, he argues, is a "risky practice in the absence of professionally trained leadership."(6) According to William Kilpatrick,

> *Despite its attempts to distance itself from its past . . . Quest remains a feelings-based program. It still operates on the dubious assumption that morality is a by-product of feeling good about yourself, and it still advertises itself as a child- centered approach.(7)*

In spite of the fact that non-directive, values-clarification-based curricula have been used for decades, there is little

evidence that they actually reduce the use of drugs or other harmful behaviors. In 1976, researcher Richard Blum found that an "affective drug program" called "Decide" had little positive effect on drug use. Those who sat in the class actually used more drugs than a control group. He found similar results in a repeat of the study in 1978. Research was done on other affective programs in the 1980s. "Smart," "Here's Looking at You," and Quest all were found to increase drug use rather than reduce it.(8 Some states have removed Quest from their approved drug education list because it fails to comply with federal mandates that these programs clearly state that drugs are harmful and against the law.

Criticism and an Alternative

Although an early advocate of non-directive, self-esteem-oriented therapy, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow began to question the use of this approach for children later in his life. He argued that

> *…self actualization does not occur in young people . . . they have not learned how to be patient; nor have they learned enough about evil in themselves and others . . . nor have they generally become knowledgeable and educated enough to open the possibility of becoming wise.They have not acquired enough courage to be unpopular, to be unashamed about being openly virtuous."(9)*

Nondirective therapeutic approaches used by Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and William Coulson produced a pattern of failure in schools even in the hands of these founding experts. Coulson now says, "We owe the American public an apology. Can we expect relatively untrained teachers to achieve better results?"

One specific objection to these programs is their use of hypnotic trance induction and suggestion techniques.

Psychologists feel that the constant use of trance-induced altered states of consciousness may cause difficulty for some students in differentiating reality and fantasy. An altered mental state is the mind's defense mechanism, particularly in children, for enduring extremely stressful situations. If these self-protective mechanisms are taught when a child is not under life-threatening stress, the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy in the future may be impaired.

Some feel that affective educational programs undermine authority as well. Along with an emphasis on moral tolerance, these programs often state that there are no right or wrong answers to moral questions. This leaves students open to the considerable power of peer pressure and group conformity and reduces the validity of parental or church influence. Although this approach may leave students with an uncritically good feeling about themselves, there is little evidence that this feeling correlates to academic success or healthy, moral decisions.

Many wonder whether schools can deal with values in a manner that isn't offensive to Christians and still be constitutional. Dr. William Kilpatrick, an education professor at the University of Boston, thinks they can. He advocates "character education, an approach that fell out of favor in the 1960s.

Character education is not a method. It is a comprehensive initiation into life rather than a debate on the difficult intricacies of moral dilemmas. It assumes that most of the time we know the right thing to do; the hard part is summoning the moral will to do it. Thus its emphasis is on moral training; the process of developing good habits. Honesty, helpfulness, and self-control need to become second nature, or instinctive responses, to life's daily temptations and difficulties.

In reality, one cannot choose to do the right thing unless he

or she has the capacity to do so. Selfless behavior is only possible for those who have been trained, via modeling and correction, not to be self-centered. Until we recognize that the virtuous path is the more difficult one, we rob our children even of the possibility of moral discipline. Values-clarification methods, on the other hand, are easy to teach and are fun for the kids. They require little commitment or moral persuasion.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi,

> *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.*

This maxim transfers well into the secular realm. Children who are exposed to noble,virtuous behavior, who are given heroes that exhibit selfless sacrifice, are much more likely to do the same when confronted with moral choices.

Notes

1. Andrew M. Mecca, ed., *The Social Importance of Self- Esteem* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), xv.
2. Ibid., xii
3. Lorraine Plum, *Flights of Fantasy*, (Carthage, Ill.: Good Apple, 1980) 2. Emphasis added.
4. William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 216.
5. Michael Ebert, *Quest's Founder Listens to Kids* Citizen (20 July 1992), 15.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong,* 47.
8. Ibid., 32.
9. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong,* , 33.

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