

# In Defense of History

*Don Closson critiques the postmodern notion that we have limited or no access to history, except through biased lenses. He vies for a humble, but confident view of history as a scholarly pursuit, while writing in defense of history as a bedrock of Christian truth claims.*

A convenient claim of our postmodern times is that historical truth does not exist, or, at the very least, is not accessible to us. It is fashionable to believe that all historical writing is fiction in the sense that it is one person's subjective opinion. History as an enterprise is more like the creation of literature, say some, than a scientific investigation. Because we cannot be certain about the events of history, all perspectives must be treated as equally valid. One historian has written, "The Postmodern view that language could not relate to anything but itself must . . . entail the dissolution of history . . . and necessarily jeopardizes historical study as normally understood."[\[1\]](#)

If history is something that we create rather than uncover via the rules of scientific historical research, why do history at all? The postmodern response is that all history is politically motivated. French philosopher Michel Foucault became famous for insisting that power creates knowledge rather than the traditional assumption that knowledge is power. He wrote that since there is no access to value-free historical information, the need to write about history must come from the desire to control the past for political purposes. In effect, all historical writing is a form of propaganda.



This popular way of viewing history has dramatic implications for Christians who share their faith. One of the first objections that a Christian is likely to encounter when

sharing the Gospel is the denial of any confident access to what has happened in the past. Since Christianity is a faith that is tied to history, this creates an immediate impasse. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ has not been raised from the dead in a real historical sense, then our preaching is useless, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all men. Christian evangelists and apologists often point to the existence of archeological remains, ancient manuscripts, and written accounts of historical events in arguing that Christianity is a reasonable faith and that the Bible is a trustworthy and accurate account of the life of Christ. The Judeo/Christian tradition stands on the belief that God acts in history and that history reflects this divine incursion.

## **The Argument Against History**

Until recently, students of history had two competing approaches to their craft to consider. One approach, represented by Sir Geoffrey Elton, argued that historians should focus on the documentary record left by the past in order to find the objective truth about what actually happened. These pieces of data are then used to construct a narrative of political events which, in turn, becomes the core of any serious historical writing. Put another way, it's the facts that count, and the facts should be used to understand the actions and motivations of political leaders who determine the paths taken by nations or kingdoms. All of this assumes our ability to discover objective truth about history.

The other approach represented by E. H. Carr and his book *What is History?* argues that history books and the people who write them are products of a given time and place. Therefore, history is seen and written through the lens of the historians' prejudices. This is often called the *sociological view of history* where a study of the historian is just as important as the comprehension of his writings.

Over the last three or four decades, Elton's emphasis on facts has been slowly losing ground. As one writer put it, "Few historians would now defend the hard-line concept of historical objectivity espoused by Elton."[{2}](#) Even worse, Carr's sociological view is being replaced by one that is even further removed from seeing history as objective truth. The arrival of postmodern theory in the 1980s eradicated the search for historical truth and diminished the voice of professional historians to be just one discourse among many.

Historian David Harlan commented that by the end of the 1980s most historians—even most working historians—had all but given up on the possibility of acquiring reliable, objective knowledge about the past.[{3}](#) By the mid-1990s some historians were saying that "History has been shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations."[{4}](#) An Australian academic went so far as to declare the killing of history.[{5}](#)

The denial of objective historical knowledge is impacting our culture and the church. Individuals involved with a movement called [the Emergent Church](#) generally agree with postmodernity's denial of our ability to know objective historical truth. They also claim that those who believe they can be certain about the past are dangerous. But it is the culture at large, and especially the unsaved that makes this issue so important.

## **A Double Standard**

A close look at this issue reveals a growing tendency to utilize a double standard when it comes to determining what happened in the past.

It seems that the only historical record that Western culture is certain of is that the Nazis committed mass genocide against six million European Jews. The rest of history is relegated to the uncertainties of our postmodern suspicions.

This loss of confidence has become so extreme that some nations, especially in Europe, have resorted to the force of law to regulate what can and what cannot be said regarding some historical events.

Let's look at one example. France has made it a crime to deny the Holocaust and has successfully prosecuted a number of authors who have questioned the particulars of the event. Once a nation goes down this path of legislated historical truth, it's difficult to turn back. French lawmakers recently attempted to legislate away denials of the Armenian genocide in 1915 by the Turkish Ottomans. The problem with these actions is not the historical accuracy of the position taken by the French government (the historical evidence supports the French view), but rather that history is being decided by legislative acts rather than by a consensus of historians who hold academic standards in high regard.

The temptation to legislate historical truth lures the other side to legislate its own version. Turkey has now prosecuted authors for admitting the possibility that the Armenian holocaust actually happened in 1915. It was decided that such a view was un-Turkish.

If objective historical truth cannot be discerned, it doesn't make much sense to legislate one version of it. This Orwellian response to a loss of academic confidence only creates mistrust and a greater opportunity for the abuse or propagandistic use of history.

How should Christians respond to this battle over the past?

History is important to the Christian faith. We need to encourage high standards of academic scholarship, even when the outcome doesn't immediately support our biblical views. We also need to humbly concede that the process will be inexact, and that absolute certainty regarding any single event will always escape our grasp. Our goal should be to find a middle

position between absolute certainty about what happened and the complete despair that some postmodernists advocate.

## Converging Lines of Evidence

Can we really know anything about history? Thus far we have considered some of the arguments against what is called objective historical knowledge or historical certainty. Let's look now at three ways of thinking about doing history that might help restore confidence in the process.

The first method is called the *converging lines of evidence* approach. How would this technique apply to the subject of the Holocaust? The first sources of evidence would include written documents and photographs from the period, including personal letters, official papers, and business forms. German administrators were highly efficient record keepers, thus making significant amounts of data available. Another source of evidence would be eyewitness accounts from survivors. These have been carefully collected and recorded over the years. Evidence from the physical remains of the concentration camps themselves and inferential evidence from comparing European population counts before and after the war provide more resources. None of this information is taken at face value, and no one line of evidence is conclusive. But as the evidence accumulates our confidence in understanding the event rises with it.

The second model for acquiring historical knowledge is called the *hermeneutical spiral*. This method argues that every time we ask a question regarding a topic, the research gives us answers that bring us a little closer to understanding the event. It also gives us new questions to research. Each pass we make at understanding brings us a little closer to the event itself. If applied to understanding Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, one might begin by reading the letter in English and attempting to understand its purpose or message.

This would raise questions about Paul's audience, prompting research into the culture of the first century. Eventually one might learn biblical Greek to better understand exactly what Paul was trying to communicate. As D. A. Carson writes, "I hold that it is possible and reasonable to speak of finite human beings knowing some things truly, even if nothing exhaustively or omnisciently."[\[6\]](#)

The third approach is known as the *fusion of horizons* model. Just as no two people have an identical view of the horizon, no two people will have an identical perspective on a historical event. They will interpret the event differently because of their cultural backgrounds. To overcome this, the learner must try to step out of his or her current cultural setting, with its beliefs and presuppositions, and then become immersed in the language, ideas, and beliefs of the past, attempting to step into the shoes of those participating in the event itself.

## History and Christianity

Bernard Lewis, perhaps America's foremost scholar on the Middle East, writes that great efforts have been made, and continue to be made, to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda.[\[7\]](#) How does this falsifying of history impact Christians and the church?

First, the Christian faith stands on a historical foundation. Unlike other religious systems, a real person, not just teachings or a life example, is at the center of Christianity. Jesus provided a once-for-all payment for sin, and it is our faith in that provision that makes salvation possible. Christians also believe that God has revealed himself through the inspired writings of the Old and New Testaments. Since their influence depends on both their antiquity and authenticity, archeological remains and ancient manuscripts are vital for making a defense for the authority of the Bible.

Second, historical knowledge is important when we answer critics of the Christian faith. A current example is the comparison of Islam and Christianity regarding tolerance and civil rights. The myth of Islamic tolerance was created in the seventeenth century when French Protestants used Islam to shame the Catholic Church.<sup>[8]</sup> Unfortunately, they had little or no firsthand experience with the brutality of Islam towards those under its rule. This tolerance myth has been utilized in recent decades by Muslim writers in the West to continue the misinformation. Only recently have scholars begun to speak out and refute the tolerance myth and uncover the brutality of worldwide jihad over the centuries. It is ironic that as this program is being written, the president of Iran has convened a conference to promote the idea that the Jewish Holocaust is a myth created by the west to impose a homeland for the Jews in the Middle East.

Whether it's the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the slave trade in the west, we need to be able to trust the consensus of historians who are committed to high academic standards to get an accurate picture of what actually happened so that we can give a wise response to our critics. In some cases, we may need to apologize for those who acted in the name of Christ yet whose actions violated the teaching of Scripture. In other cases, we may have to gently correct misconceptions about an historical event in the media or in our schools that are the result of inaccurate or incomplete information.

If we give up on the possibility of acquiring historical knowledge, we also give up an important tool for showing that our faith is reasonable.

## Notes

1. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 3.
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 4

4. Ibid., 3
5. Ibid., 4.
6. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2006), 116.
7. Serge Trifkovic, *Defeating Jihad* (Regina Orthodox Press, 2006), 265.
8. Robert Spencer, ed., *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005), 17.

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## **“There Is No Compelling Reason to Accept the Books of the Bible as Special”**

I have some comments and questions regarding [your article on the church canon](#)—in particular, the last paragraph. You state that:

“We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent.”

However, there are numerous inconsistencies throughout the bible—in both the old and new testaments—and in particular throughout the gospels and the accounts of the life and death of Jesus—as most non-believers can readily point out. While the inconsistencies as a whole do not negate the viability of the scripture, it does indicate that the canon as it stands is NOT systematically consistent.

You also state that:



**“We make belief possible by using both historical evidence and philosophical tools.”**

**Philosophical, yes—but historical, no. Archeological and historical research has done as much to prove as disprove the scripture—at best a 50-50 balance.**

**And you also state:**

**“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.”**

**True—however, it is not sufficient to take the word of one source in regards to origin or inspiration. In other words, just because one book of the bible (a collection of documents written at very different times and by very different authors) says so isn't sufficient to make it so for the whole. At the time that portion of the bible was written, the whole did not yet exist and the reference to inspiration could only be referring to the work in which it appears.**

**If that is the argument—then there is no need for philosophical or historical tools to aid in believe. You cannot “have your cake and eat it too” in this case—either use science (history, etc.) to prove the reliability and uniqueness of the canon or base it on faith—one or the other, not both.**

**It seems to me—that despite an otherwise well researched and argued explanation of the canonization of the current bible—there still is no compelling reason for the current books of the bible to be held in any higher esteem than those of the apocrypha or the writings of early church fathers.**

**Thank you for the thoughtful response to my essay on the canonization of the Bible. Let me briefly respond to some of your points.**

*However, there are numerous inconsistencies throughout the bible in both the old and new testaments—and in particular throughout the gospels and the accounts of the life and death of Jesus as most non-believers can readily point out. While the inconsistencies as a whole do not negate the viability of the scripture, it does indicate that the canon as it stands is NOT systematically consistent.*

The question of consistency regarding the Gospels has been hotly contested. Perhaps the problem partly lies in defining what we mean by consistency. No one denies that the writers were attempting to give different perspectives regarding the events and ministry of Jesus. My view and the view of conservative theologians is that the teachings of the four Gospels are consistent even though individual details might differ. Where some see inconsistency and conflict, others see different perspectives of a single or similar event. The Gospels were not written as a history text or as a biographical work in the modern sense, to hold these texts to this kind of standard would be placing unwarranted restrictions on the writings.

*Archeological and historical research has done as much to prove as disprove the scripture at best a 50-50 balance.*

The role of archaeology and historical evidence in affirming the NT writings is also a complex one. You seem to be arguing that if one places their faith in the teachings of the NT they cannot use historical and archaeological evidence to defend the texts in any manner. While I would agree that neither archaeological nor historical evidence can prove that the teachings of the Bible are theologically true, they can affirm a number of things about the nature of the texts. First, they give us expanding knowledge of the geographical setting of the events that are described. Second, they help us to understand the religious milieu of the time (ex. Nag Hammadi findings). Third, they constrain the attempts of some to mythologize the NT. The discoveries of the Well of Jacob, the Pool of Siloam,

the probable location of the Pool of Bethesda, and the name of Pilate himself on a stone in the Roman theater at Caesarea lend historical credibility to the NT text. Certainly the reliability of the NT writings can benefit from positive archaeological and historical evidence.

*At the time that portion of the bible was written, the whole did not yet exist and the reference to inspiration could only be referring to the work in which it appears.*

The high regard that the church Fathers had for the OT writings did not transfer to the NT texts until the church was forced to respond to threatening issues. Since some had been disciples of Apostles, the urgency to define the canon was not intense. Once given the need to do so in the second and third centuries, believers held to those writings that affirmed the tradition that had been handed down from the beginning. The place given to the Apocrypha by the early church is another issue which I address in [my essay](#) on those writings.

Thanks again for your comments.

Sincerely,

Don Closson

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## **“I Have Questions about the Christian Canon”**

I just read Don Closson's article about the history of the [Christian Canon](#) and found it to be interesting and helpful. I have recently been looking deeper into my religion and other Christian religions to get a better understanding of the various beliefs. However, I have some questions.

Don mentions that the Church Fathers respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. Why are these books no longer considered important? It's almost as though there were some kind of stock market drop in the value of these writings. If certain writings were so important as to guide the early Christians in what was probably the most difficult time for the Church why do they not hold the same value today? Also, were any of the early teachings taken from the Apocrypha?

My other question is more of an observation. When you explain the process of determining the Canon of the NT after the Reformation you write, "As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself." Then you go on to say, "Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." To me this seems to be a very biased statement in an otherwise objective article. From what I understand, the Catholic Church also believes in the internal witness of the Holy Spirit working through its leaders. And since the NT of both Protestants and Catholics is the same (a surprising fact I just learned and which your article was a little misleading) would you not say it probably did inspire both groups?

Thanks for the thoughtful questions and observations. Let me try to respond to each issue you raise.

*Why don't we read the writings of the Church Fathers today?*

It appears that there has been an ebb and flow regarding the popularity of these writings among average believers. Protestants may have carried the notion of *Sola Scriptura* too far, fearing that spending too much time in the writings of the early church might lead to an unhealthy elevation of these works. However, there appears to be growth in both interest in, and appreciation for, the works of the early church among all Christians that might move us towards a better balance. I recently finished *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers*,

by Christopher Hall (an InterVarsity publication) and found that his admonition to delve into the writings of the early church an enticing one. Part of the problem is that many Christians do not read theological works of any type, much less serious works that are planted in a very different set of cultural challenges. Theological writing is done in response to the demands of pressing cultural questions and issues. The foreignness of the cultural milieu surrounding the early church can make reading the Church Fathers a considerable effort. I do see a trend, especially among the post-baby-boomer generations, towards desiring a deeper spiritual life, one that is often exhibited by the leaders of the early church. People are looking to that era for models of devotion and authentic community that are often lacking in our modern, and postmodern, society.

*My bias against the Roman Catholic Church.*

You are right, my statement is overly biased. I need to revisit that section of the essay and restate my views. I do not mean to say that the Catholic Church does not claim guidance from the Holy Spirit, but that they have depended more on the decisions of a centralized leadership (magisterium) in deciding on the canon rather than on actual use and acceptance by the universal church and individual believers. Thanks for pointing this out. If you don't mind I am going to paste into this response a portion of an essay that I wrote on the [Apocrypha](#) that might help explain my view.

*In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued "that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it." Protestants have responded with the view that "Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles." However, he*

admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn't think so. He writes, "[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God's Word." He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, "it is the 'norm that norms' the church's teaching and life."

Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deuterocanon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.

On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, "Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?" If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet, and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic. Others contain extensive

*factual errors. Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.*

*A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.*

Sincerely,

Don Closson

Probe Ministries

Please check out the related posts below for more information.

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## **“Bishop Spong is a Hero!”**

Dear Mr. Closson,

**I have recently been introduced to Bishop Spong’s works, and find them deeply affirming and inspiring! His claims are not speculative, but rather based in logic and a profound knowledge of biblical scholarship. For those of us who will not compromise our integrity with literal biblical interpretations and nonsensical, mythical stories, his works are a “special revelation.”**

**Our society is overflowing with thinking people who feel alienated from Christianity. Better the church embrace its alienated multitudes, than eventually dwindle into insignificance. The truth should never shy away from new ideas**

and open discourse. Because in the end, no matter what is said or done, the truth always prevails simply because it is the truth. If Christianity speaks the truth, it should stand up and embrace people like Bishop Spong and the rest of us. Show us the truth we are missing. Instead, I see Christianity shying away and hiding behind the security of premodern themes that require unthinking and unquestioning followers.

**Just thought you might like to know.**

Thanks for the thoughtful response to my [essay on Bishop Spong](#). Your challenge to “show us the truth we are missing” is a reasonable request and one that I would like to respond to. But first I might suggest that one’s approach to the evidence regarding the deity of Jesus Christ or the authority of the Bible (or any religious claim) is greatly affected by the presuppositions one holds regarding the nature of reality itself. Dr. Spong is a product of the enlightenment and approaches the issue with a strong naturalistic bias. His view of biblical scholarship, along with the members of the [Jesus Seminar](#), is filtered through this naturalistic grid that not only rules out supernatural events but placing mankind’s “happiness” (often sexual) as the ultimate good. He is perfectly free to do this, but to claim that this is “Christian” seems to be like trying to place a round peg in a square hole. Whether or not people are alienated by traditional Christian beliefs seem to be beside the point. Jesus himself said that the path is narrow and that many who called him Lord were not part of his kingdom.

It would seem to be far more consistent for Bishop Spong, and others who hold to naturalistic presuppositions, to claim a naturalistic form of humanism and quit using the language and symbols of Christianity as a cover for their humanity-centered (rather than God-centered) ethics.

As for Bishop Spong’s profound knowledge of biblical scholarship, I do not challenge his knowledge of the Bible or



his sincerely held convictions about it. I would merely point to the fact that there are those with equal or superior academic credentials who accept the traditional view of the Bible as supernatural revelation, and that it calls individuals to saving faith in Jesus Christ. These scholars offer a thoughtful alternative to the ideas held by Spong and others of like mind. A couple of books that might interest you are:

*A Passion For Truth, Alister McGrath (InterVarsity Press, 1996)*

*Reasonable Faith, William Lane Craig (Crossway, 1994)*

Thanks again for your comments.

Sincerely,

Don Closson  
Probe Ministries

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## **The Old Testament Apocrypha Controversy – The Canon of Scripture**

*Don Closson analyzes the controversial issue of the Apocrypha, weighing the evidence on the canonicity of these books, affirming their value, but agreeing with the Protestant tradition which does not regard them as inspired Scripture.*

## The Source of the Controversy

A fundamental issue that separates Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions is the question of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Catholics argue that the Apocrypha was an integral part of the early church and should be included in the list of inspired Old Testament books. Protestants believe that the books of the Apocrypha are valuable for understanding the events and culture of the inter-testamental period and for devotional reading, but are not inspired nor should they be included in the canon, the list of books included in the Bible. This disagreement about which books belong in the Bible points to other differences in Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs about canonicity itself and the interplay between the authority of the Bible and the authority of tradition as expressed in the institutional church. Catholics contend that God established the church and that the Church, the Roman Catholic Church, both gave us the Bible and verified its authenticity. Protestants believe that the Scriptures, the writings of the prophets and apostles, are the foundation upon which the church is built and are authenticated by the Holy Spirit, who has been and is active in church congregations and councils.

The books of the Apocrypha considered to be canonical by the Roman Catholic Church are first found in Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. According to Old Testament authority F. F. Bruce, Hebrew scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek around 250 B.C. because the Jews in that region had given up the Hebrew language for Greek.<sup>{1}</sup> The resulting translation is called the Septuagint (or LXX) because of legend that claims that seventy Hebrew scholars finished their work in seventy days, indicating its divine origins.

The books or writings from the Apocrypha that the Roman

Catholic Church claims are inspired are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Letter of Jeremiah, additions to Esther, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna (Daniel 13), and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14). Three other Apocryphal books in the Septuagint, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 & 2 Esdras, are not considered to be inspired or canonical by the Roman Catholic Church.

This disagreement over the canonicity of the Apocryphal books is significant if only for the size of the material being debated. By including it with the Old Testament one adds 152,185 words to the King James Bible. Considering that the King James New Testament has 181,253 words, one can see how including the books would greatly increase the influence of pre-Christian Jewish life and thought.

This issue is important for two other reasons as well. First, there are specific doctrines that are held by the Roman Catholic Church which are supported by the Apocryphal books. The selling of indulgences for forgiveness of sins and purgatory are two examples. Secondly, the issue of canonicity itself is reflected in the debate. Does the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, recognize what is already canonical, or does the church make a text canonical by its declarations?

As believers who have called upon the saving work of Jesus Christ as our only hope for salvation, we all want to know what is from God and what is from man. The remainder of this article will defend the traditional Protestant position against the inclusion of the Apocrypha as inspired canon.

## **The Jewish Canon**

As we are considering the debate over the canonicity of the Old Testament Apocrypha or what has been called the "Septuagint plus," we will first look at evidence that Alexandrian Jews accepted what has been called a wider canon.

As mentioned previously, Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) hundreds of years before Christ. Because the earliest complete manuscripts we have of this version of the OT includes extra books called the Apocrypha, many believe that these books should be considered part of the OT canon even though they are not found in the Hebrew OT. In effect, some argue that we have two OT canons, the Hebrew canon of twenty-two books, often called the Palestinian canon, and the larger Greek or Alexandrian canon that includes the Apocrypha.

F. F. Bruce states there is no evidence that the Jews (neither Hebrew nor Greek speaking) ever accepted a wider canon than the twenty-two books of the Hebrew OT. He argues that when the Christian community took over the Greek OT they added the Apocrypha to it and "gave some measure of scriptural status to them also."[{2}](#)

Gleason Archer makes the point that other Jewish translations of the OT did not include the Apocryphal books. The Targums, the Aramaic translation of the OT, did not include them; neither did the earliest versions of the Syriac translation called the Peshitta. Only one Jewish translation, the Greek (Septuagint), and those translations later derived from it (the Italia, the Coptic, Ethiopic, and later Syriac) contained the Apocrypha.[{3}](#)

Even the respected Greek Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria never quotes from the Apocrypha. One would think that if the Greek Jews had accepted the additional books, they would have used them as part of the canon. Josephus, who used the Septuagint and made references to 1 Esdras and 1 Maccabees writing about 90 A.D. states that the canon was closed in the time of Artaxerxes I whose reign ended in 423 B.C.[{4}](#) It is also important to note that Aquila's Greek version of the OT made about 128 A.D., which was adopted by the Alexandrian Jews, did not include the Apocrypha.

Advocates of the Apocrypha argue that it does not matter if the Jews ever accepted the extra books since they rejected Jesus as well. They contend that the only important opinion is that of the early church. However, even the Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint differ in their selection of included books. The three oldest complete copies we have of the Greek OT include different additional books. Codex Vaticanus (4th century) omits 1 and 2 Maccabees, which is canonical according to the Roman Catholic Church, and includes 1 Esdras, which they reject. Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) leaves out Baruch, which is supposed to be canonical, but includes 4 Maccabees, which they reject. Codex Alexandrinus (5th century) includes three non-canonical Apocryphal books, 1 Esdras and 3 and 4 Maccabees.[{5}](#) All of this points to the fact that although these books were included in these early Bibles, this alone does not guarantee their status as canon.

Although some may find it unimportant that the Jews rejected the inspiration and canonicity of the Apocrypha, Paul argues in Romans that the Jews have been entrusted with the “very words of God.”[{6}](#) And as we will see, the early church was not unanimous regarding the appropriate use of the Apocrypha. But first, let’s consider how Jesus and the apostles viewed the Apocrypha.

## **Jesus and the Apostles**

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that both Jesus and his followers were familiar with the Greek OT called the Septuagint. They also argue that when the New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages, they are quoting from the Greek OT. Since the Septuagint included the additional books of the Apocrypha, Jesus and the apostles must have accepted the Apocrypha as inspired scripture. In other words, the acceptance of the Septuagint indicates acceptance of the Apocrypha as well. Finally, they contend that the New Testament is full of references to material found in the

Apocrypha, further establishing its canonicity. A number of objections have been raised to these arguments.

First, the claim that the Septuagint of apostolic times included the Apocrypha is not certain. As we noted previously, the earliest manuscripts we have of the entire Septuagint are from the 4th century. If Jesus used the Septuagint, it may or may not have included the extra books. Also remember that although the 4th century copies do include the Apocryphal books, none include the same list of books. Second, F. F. Bruce argues that instead of using the Septuagint, which was probably available at the time, Jesus and his disciples actually used the Hebrew text during His ministry. Bruce writes, "When Jesus was about to read the second lesson in the Nazareth synagogue . . . it was most probably a Hebrew scroll that he received." [\[7\]](#) It was later, as the early church formed and the gospel was carried to the Greek-speaking world, that the Septuagint became the text often used by the growing church.

Bruce agrees that all the writers of the New Testament made use of the Septuagint. However, none of them gives us an exact list of what the canonical books are. While it is possible that New Testament writers like Paul allude to works in the Apocrypha, that alone does not give those works scriptural status. The problem for those advocating a wider canon is that the New Testament writers allude to, or even quote many works that no one claims to be inspired. For instance, Paul may be thinking of the book of Wisdom when he wrote the first few chapters of Romans. But what of the much clearer reference in Jude 14 to 1 Enoch 1:9, which no one claims to be inspired? How about the possible use of a work called the *Assumption of Moses* that appears to be referenced in Jude 9? Should this work also be part of the canon? Then there is Paul's occasional use of Greek authors to make a point. In Acts 17 Paul quotes line five from Aratus' *Phaenomena*, and in 1 Corinthians he quotes from Menander's comedy, *Thais*. No one

claims that these works are inspired.

Recognizing the fact that the Septuagint was probably available to both Jesus and his disciples, it becomes even more remarkable that there are no direct quotes from any of the Apocryphal books being championed for canonicity. Jesus makes clear reference to all but four Old Testament books from the Hebrew canon, but he never directly refers to the apocryphal books.

## The Church Fathers

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that the early church Fathers accepted the books as Scripture. In reality, their support is anything but unanimous. Although many of the church Fathers held the books in high esteem, they often refused to include them in their list of inspired books.

In the Eastern Church, the home of the Septuagint, one would expect to find unanimous support for the canonicity of the "Septuagint plus," the Greek OT and the Apocrypha among the early Fathers. However, such is not the case. Although the well-known Justin Martyr rejected the Hebrew OT, accusing it of attempting to hide references to Christ, many others in the East accepted the Hebrew canon's shorter list of authoritative books. Melito of Sardis, the Bishop of Sardis in 170 A.D., listed the OT books in a letter to a friend. His list was identical to the Hebrew canon except for Esther. Another manuscript, written about the same time as Melito's by the Greek patriarchate in Jerusalem, listed the twenty-four (see footnote on how the books were counted) books of the Hebrew OT as the canon. [\[8\]](#)

Origen, who is considered to be the greatest Bible scholar among the Greek Fathers, limited the accepted OT scriptures to the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon. Although he defends the use of such books as the History of Susanna, he rejects their canonicity. Both Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus

limited the OT canon to the books of the Hebrew tradition. Athanasius, the defender of the Trinitarian view at the Council of Nicea, wrote in his thirty-ninth festal letter (which announced the date of Easter in 367) of his concern about the introduction of “apocryphal” works into the list of holy scripture. Although he agreed that there are other books “to be read to those who are recent converts to our company and wish to be instructed in the word of true religion,” his list of OT agrees with the Hebrew canon. Gregory of Nazianzus is known for arranging the books of the Bible in verse form for memorization. He did not include the “Septuagint plus” books in his list. Eventually, in the 1600’s, the Eastern Church did officially accept the Septuagint with its extra books as canon, along with its claim that the Septuagint is the divinely inspired version of the OT.

In the Latin West, Tertullian was typical of church leaders up until Jerome. Tertullian accepted the entire “Septuagint plus” as canon and was willing to open the list even wider. He wanted to include 1 Enoch because of its mention in Jude. He also argued for the divine nature of the *Sibylline Oracles* as a parallel revelation to the Bible.[{9}](#)

However, Jerome is a pivotal person for understanding the relationship between the early church and the OT canon. Having mastered both Greek and eventually Hebrew, Jerome realized that the only satisfactory way to translate the OT is to abandon the Septuagint and work from the original Hebrew. Eventually, he separated the Apocryphal books from the rest of the Hebrew OT saying that “Whatever falls outside these (Hebrew texts) . . . are not in the canon.”[{10}](#) He added that the books may be read for edification, but not for ecclesiastical dogmas.

Although Augustine included the “Septuagint plus” books in his list of the canon, he didn’t know Hebrew. Jerome later convinced him of the inspired nature of the Hebrew OT, but Augustine never dropped his support for the Apocrypha. The



early church Fathers were anything but unanimous in their support for the inspiration of the Apocrypha.

## The Question of Canonicity

The relationship between the church and the Bible is a complex one. The question of canonicity is often framed in an either/or setting. Either the infallible Roman Catholic Church, having absolute authority, decides the issue, or we have absolute chaos with no possible guidance whatsoever regarding the limits of what is inspired and what isn't.

In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued "that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it."[\[11\]](#) Protestants have responded with the view that "Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles."[\[12\]](#) However, he admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn't think so. He writes, "[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God's Word." He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, "it is the 'norm that norms' the church's teaching and life."[\[13\]](#)

Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deuterocanon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role

whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.

On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, "Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?"[{14}](#) If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic.[{15}](#) Others contain extensive factual errors.[{16}](#) Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.

A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.[{17}](#)

## Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 43.
2. Ibid., 45.
3. Gleason L Archer., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*

(Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), 73.

4. Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p 99.

5. Archer, 73.

6. Romans 3:2 (NIV)

7. Bruce, 49.

8. *Ibid.*, 72. Ezra and Nehemiah were often combined into one book, as were Lamentations and Jeremiah and the twelve minor prophets.

9. *Ibid.*, 87.

10. *Ibid.*, 90.

11. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 187.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1999) 85.

15. *Ibid.*, 32.

16. Unger, 109-111.

17. Geisler, 31

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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 connote "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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# **Outcome Based Education**

## **Outcome Based Education**

Times are changing. The pressure on our public schools to improve, and change, has become intense. Since 1960 our population has increased by 41%, spending on education has increased by 225% (in constant 1990 dollars), but SAT scores have fallen by 8% (or 80 points). Although few would argue that the schools are solely to blame for our children's declining academic performance, many are hoping that schools can turn this trend around.

The decade of the 80s brought numerous education reforms, but few of them were a dramatic shift from what has gone on before. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one of those that is new, even revolutionary, and is now being promoted as the panacea for America's educational woes. This reform has been

driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.

The focus of past and present curriculum has been on content, on the knowledge to be acquired by each student. Our language, literature, history, customs, traditions, and morals, often called Western civilization, dominated the learning process through secondary school. If students learned the information and performed well on tests and assignments, they received credit for the course and moved on to the next class. The point here is that the curriculum centered on the content to be learned; its purpose was to produce academically competent students. The daily schedule in a school was organized around the content. Each hour was devoted to a given topic; some students responded well to the instruction, and some did not.

Outcome-based education will change the focus of schools from the content to the student. According to William Spady, a major advocate of this type of reform, three goals drive this new approach to creating school curricula. First, all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day or in the same way. Second, each success by a student breeds more success. Third, schools control the conditions of success. In other words, students are seen as totally malleable creatures. If we create the right environment, any student can be prepared for any academic or vocational career. The key is to custom fit the schools to each student's learning style and abilities.

The resulting schools will be vastly different from the ones recent generations attended. Yearly and daily schedules will change, teaching responsibilities will change, classroom activities will change, the evaluation of student performance will change, and most importantly, our perception of what it means to be an educated person will change.

## What is OBE?

Education is a political and emotional process. Just ask Pennsylvania's legislators. That state, along with Florida, North Carolina, and Kansas, has been rocked by political battles over the implementation of outcome-based educational reforms. The governor, the state board of education, legislators, and parents have been wrestling over how, and if, this reform should reshape the state's schools. Twenty-six other states claim to have generated outcome-based programs, and at least another nine are moving in that direction.

Before considering the details of this controversy, let's review the major differences between the traditional approach to schooling in America and an outcome-based approach.

Whereas previously the school calendar determined what a child might do at any moment of any school day, now progress toward specific outcomes will control activity. Time, content, and teaching technique will be altered to fit the needs of *each* student. Credit will be given for accomplishing stated outcomes, not for time spent in a given class.

The teacher's role in the classroom will become that of a coach. The instructor's goal is to move each child towards pre-determined outcomes rather than attempting to transmit the content of Western civilization to the next generation in a scholarly fashion. This dramatic change in the role of the teacher will occur because the focus is no longer on content. Feelings, attitudes, and skills such as learning to work together in groups will become just as important as learning information—some reformers would argue more important. Where traditional curricula focused on the past, reformers argue that outcome-based methods prepare students for the future and for the constant change which is inevitable in our society.

Many advocates of outcome-based education feel that evaluation methods must change as well since outcomes are now central to

curriculum development. We can no longer rely on simple cognitive tests to determine complex outcomes. Vermont is testing a portfolio approach to evaluation, in which art work, literary works, and the results of group projects are added to traditional tests in order to evaluate a student's progress. Where traditional testing tended to compare the abilities of students with each other, outcome-based reform will be criterion based. This means that all students must master information and skills at a predetermined level in order to move on to the next unit of material.

## **Implementing OBE Reform**

Reformers advocating an outcome-based approach to curriculum development point to the logical simplicity of its technique. First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviors, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created. Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome. Third, students are tested. Those who fail to achieve mastery receive remediation or retraining until mastery is achieved. Fourth, upon completion of learner outcomes a student graduates.

On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable approach to learning. In fact, the business world has made extensive use of this method for years, specifically for skills that were easily broken down into distinct units of information or specific behaviors. But as a comprehensive system for educating young minds, a few important questions have been raised. The most obvious question is who will determine the specific outcomes or learner objectives? This is also the area creating the most controversy across the country.

## **Transitional vs. Transformational OBE**

According to William Spady, a reform advocate, outcomes can be written with traditional, transitional, or transformational



goals in mind. Spady advocates transformation goals.

Traditional outcome-based programs would use the new methodology to teach traditional content areas like math, history, and science. The state of Illinois is an example of this approach. Although outcomes drive the schooling of these children, the outcomes themselves reflect the traditional content of public schools in the past.

Many teachers find this a positive option for challenging the minimal achiever. For example, a considerable number of students currently find their way through our schools, accumulating enough credits to graduate, while picking up little in the way of content knowledge or skills. Their knowledge base reflects little actual learning, but they have become skilled in working the system. An outcome-based program would prevent such students from graduating or passing to the next grade without reaching a pre-set mastery level of competency.

The idea of transformational reform is causing much turmoil. Transformational OBE subordinates course content to key issues, concepts, and processes. Indeed, Spady calls this the "highest evolution of the OBE concept." Central to the idea of transformational reform is the notion of outcomes of significance. Examples of such outcomes from Colorado and Wyoming school systems refer to collaborative workers, quality producers, involved citizens, self-directed achievers, and adaptable problem solvers. Spady supports transformational outcomes because they are future oriented, based on descriptions of future conditions that he feels should serve as starting points for OBE designs.

True to the spirit of the reform philosophy, little mention is made about specific things that students should know as a result of being in school. The focus is on attitudes and feelings, personal goals, initiative, and vision—in their words, the whole student.

It is in devising learner outcomes that one's worldview comes into play. Those who see the world in terms of constant change, politically and morally, find a transformation model useful. They view human nature as evolving, changing rather than fixed.

Christians see human nature as fixed and unchanging. We were created in God's image yet are now fallen and sinful. We also hold to moral absolutes based on the character of God. The learner outcomes that have been proposed are controversial because they often accept a transformational, changing view of human nature. Advocates of outcome-based education point with pride to its focus on the student rather than course content. They feel that the key to educational reform is to be found in having students master stated learner outcomes. Critics fear that this is exactly what will happen. Their fear is based on the desire of reformers to educate the whole child. What will happen, they ask, when stated learner outcomes violate the moral or religious views of parents?

For example, most sex-education courses used in our schools claim to take a value-neutral approach to human sexuality. Following the example of the Kinsey studies and materials from the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States, most curricula make few distinctions between various sex acts. Sex within marriage between those of the opposite sex is not morally different from sex outside of marriage between those of the same sex. The goal of such programs is self-actualization and making people comfortable with their sexual preferences.

Under the traditional system of course credits a student could take a sex-ed course, totally disagree with the instruction and yet pass the course by doing acceptable work on the tests presented. Occasionally, an instructor might make life difficult for a student who fails to conform, but if the student learns the material that would qualify him or her for a passing grade and credit towards graduation.

If transformational outcome-based reformers have their way, this student would not get credit for the course until his or her attitudes, feelings, and behaviors matched the desired goals of the learner outcomes. For instance, in Pennsylvania the state board had recommended learner outcomes that would evaluate a student based on his or her ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of families. Many feel that this is part of the effort to widen the definition of families to include homosexual couples. Another goal requires students to know about and *use* community health resources. Notice that just knowing that Planned Parenthood has an office in town isn't enough, one must use it.

## **Parents vs. the State**

The point of all this is to say that transformational outcome-based reform would be a much more efficient mechanism for changing our children's values and attitudes about issues facing our society. Unfortunately, the direction these changes often take is in conflict with our Christian faith. At the core of this debate is this question, "Who has authority over our children?" Public officials assume they do. Governor Casey of Pennsylvania, calling for reform, told his legislature, "We must never forget that you and I—the elected representatives of the people—and not anyone else—have the ultimate responsibility to assure the future of our children." I hope this is merely political hyperbole. I would argue that parents of children in the state of Pennsylvania are ultimately responsible for their children's future. The state has rarely proved itself a trustworthy parent.

Outcome-based education is an ideologically neutral tool for curricular construction; whether it is more effective than traditional approaches remains to be seen. Unfortunately, because of its student-centered approach, its ability to influence individuals with a politically correct set of doctrines seems to be great. Parents (and all other taxpayers)

need to weigh the possible benefits of outcome-based reform with the potential negatives.

## **Other Concerns About OBE**

Many parents are concerned about who will determine the learner outcomes for their schools. One criticism already being heard is that many states have adopted very similar outcomes regardless of the process put in place to get community input. Many wonder if there will be real consideration of what learner outcomes the public wants rather than assuming that educators know what's best for our children. Who will decide what it means to be an educated person, the taxpaying consumer or the providers of education?

If students are going to be allowed to proceed through the material at their own rate, what happens to the brighter children? Eventually students will be at many levels, what then? Will added teachers be necessary? Will computer-assisted instruction allow for individual learning speeds? Either option will cost more money. Some reformers offer a scenario where brighter students help tutor slower ones thereby encouraging group responsibility rather than promoting an elite group of learners. Critics feel that a mastery-learning approach will inevitably hold back brighter students.

With outcome-based reform, many educators are calling for a broader set of evaluation techniques. But early attempts at grading students based on portfolios of various kinds of works has proved difficult. The Rand Corporation studied Vermont's attempt and found that "rater reliability—the extent to which raters agreed on the quality of a student's work—was low." There is a general dislike of standardized tests among the reformers because it focuses on what the child knows rather than the whole child, but is there a viable substitute? Will students find that it is more important to be politically correct than to know specific facts?

Another question to be answered by reformers is whether or not school bureaucracies will allow for such dramatic change? How will the unions respond? Will legislative mandates that are already on the books be removed, or will this new approach simply be laid over the rest, creating a jungle of regulations and red tape? Reformers supporting outcome-based education claim that local schools will actually have more control over their programs. Once learner outcomes are established, schools will be given the freedom to create programs that accomplish these goals. But critics respond by noting that although districts may be given input as to how these outcomes are achieved, local control of the outcomes themselves may be lost.

Finally, there are many who feel that focusing on transformational learner outcomes will allow for hidden agendas to be promoted in the schools. Many parents feel that there is already too much emphasis on global citizenship, radical environmentalism, humanistic views of self-esteem, and human sexuality at the expense of reading, writing, math, and science. They feel that education may become more propagandistic rather than academic in nature. Parents need to find out where their state is in regards to this movement. If an outcome-based program is being pursued, will it focus on traditional or transformational outcomes? If the outcomes are already written and adopted, can a copy be acquired? If they are not written yet, how can parents get involved?

If the state is considering a transformational OBE program, parental concerns should be brought before the legislature. If the reform is local, parents should contact their school board. Parents have an obligation to know what is being taught to their children and if it works. Recently, parental resistance halted the OBE movement in Pennsylvania when it was pointed out to the legislature that there is no solid evidence that the radical changes pro-posed will actually cause kids to learn more. While we still can, let's make our voices heard on

this issue.

## Notes

1. "Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education," *Educational Leadership* (October 1991), p. 67.
2. "Taking Account," *Education Week* (17 March 1993), p. 10.
3. "Beyond Traditional," p. 70.
4. "Amid Controversy, Pa. Board Adopts 'Learner Outcomes,'" *Education Week* (20 January 1993), p. 14.
5. "Casey Seeks Legislative Changes in Pa. Learning Goals," *Education Week* (3 February 1993), p. 19.
6. "Taking Account," p. 12.

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