

# UNLEARNING: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

*by Douglas Wilson, Christ Church*

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## KEY ISSUES

- The need for reform in education is radical, not superficial.
- True reform means trying something different, not trying the same thing over again.
- Recognize that many of the things that need to be questioned are invisible to you, because they are part of our generation's shared assumptions.

Will Rogers once famously said that “it isn’t what we don’t know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t so.” Nowhere is this problem more pressing and evident than in the task we have of rethinking what is meant by true education. The problem is a common one, and so we have many proverbs or phrases to express it—from straining at gnats and swallowing camels to rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. When it becomes obvious that we have a true problem, we try to address that problem with superficial solutions.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between radical and drastic? Why is this distinction important?
2. What are three unspoken assumptions that parents might bring to a private Christian school? Can you cite any others?
3. If many of our assumptions are invisible to us, what is the best way to make them visible?

## RADIX MEANS ROOT

Our word *radical* comes from the Latin word *radix*, which means root. A radical solution, if it is truly a radical solution, means something quite different than drastic. If you discovered that your house was invested with termites, to burn the house down as a solution to the problem would certainly qualify as drastic. But it wouldn’t be radical—it would not address the problem at the root.

Often, if a problem gets bad enough, there will be

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many drastic solutions proposed. But principled thinkers want a solution that goes to the root. If our first graders are not learning to read, to spend an extra billion dollars to do much more of the same thing that we were already doing is drastic, but not radical. To switch from a look/say method of teaching to a phonics program is radical, and drastic to some, but it would address the problem.

## LEARNING TO CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS

Many Christian parents have come to the point where they first consider private Christian education because they have a series of bad experiences in the government schools. There was one drug deal too many in the school parking lot, or one condom too many in the latest sex ed promotion, or one politically correct history too many in the classroom. So they finally say “that’s it, we’re out of here.” And so they go down the road to a classical Christian school, knowing that all the things they object to will not be present there.

But there are many assumptions about things they never objected to that they might bring along with them. They never made a connection between these things they believe to be “good” and those things which they know to be bad. Someone has wisely said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting a different result. An illustration I have often used is that of renting a movie that someone recommended to you. You watch it for half an hour and a wildly inappropriate scene comes on. Whatever it is you usually do, it is probably not going back to the menu and starting the movie over again. It is *going* to come to that scene again.

The government schools we have today came from the government schools that Ozzie and Harriet sent their children to. If we are simply wanting to “get back,” we are still working with unchallenged assumptions.

## SOME EXAMPLES

What are some examples of this? Here are just a few. One of the common questions that administrators of private schools are asked by prospective parents is this one: “Is your school accredited?” But the entire reason they are there in the first place is that they are thoroughly unhappy with the accredited schools their children are stuck in. Accreditation doesn’t mean what people think it means.

Another example might be the matter of religious neutrality. They believe that the government schools began intrusively teaching a hostility to Christianity, but they do not yet see that this was inevitable and necessary. Education is one of the most innately religious things we do, and the idea of a “secular” neutrality was a fraud from the beginning. Secularism is not neutral; secularism is necessarily hostile to biblical Christianity. So Christian parents might show up at a Christian school because they wanted a place where their child would not be bullied on the playground, but they do not yet see the necessity of the Christian faith permeating every subject in every classroom. Consequently, they might like the “nice” atmosphere, but believe that the Christian school is overdoing it on the Jesus things.

A third example is that the education of children can be completely farmed out or delegated entirely to a school. The government schools encourage this, but a good private school wants to attract parents who want to be intimately involved in the ongoing education of their children. A good school wants to attract parents who are taking their parental responsibilities seriously. This means more than an occasional parent/teacher conference. So an unspoken assumption might be that you are going to drop off your children, just like always, but now you drop off a tuition check. No, that tuition check is not a pay-off—it is a symbolic statement that bringing up children in the nurture and admonition of

the Lord is a profound, parental responsibility (Deut. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:1-4).

## NOT ALL ASSUMPTIONS ARE VISIBLE

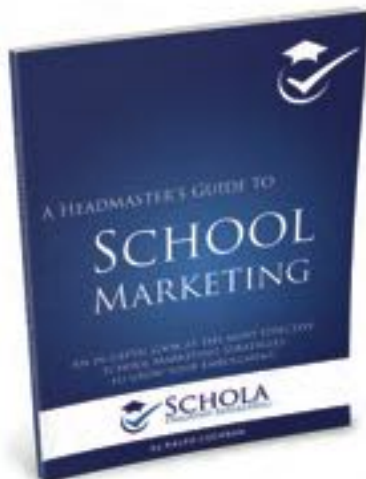
A story is told about a man in the nineteenth century who successfully perpetrated an archeological fraud. He manufactured an Etruscan artifact and successfully passed it off. The fraud was not discovered until the next century. When the museum curator was asked how they discovered it, he replied that the culprit had put into his artifact every Etruscan feature he could see . . . and every Victorian feature he couldn't see. Of course, at the time, he was successful because his fellow Victorians couldn't see those things either. But as time passed, the observers came to the point where the previously invisible features came to light, and one day somebody asked what that ancient Etruscan king

was doing in a top hat.

Sometimes the things we know that “ain’t so” are things that we know without reflection, and without appropriate examination. The best thing we can do is make a point of looking at ourselves hard and without self-flattery, in the mirror of God’s Word.

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