

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

by Alistair Begg, Parkside Church

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

Today, our culture is adrift on a storm-tossed sea of moral and spiritual confusion. The foundations that some of us enjoyed in our childhood that enabled us to receive an education framed by a biblical worldview—whether in a secular context or otherwise—have long since eroded and collapsed. It is in the face of this reality that the need for Christ-centered education becomes apparent. Let me take some space, then, to consider the distinctives of such an approach.

Education and instruction are not devalued in our culture. Rather, I would say they are overvalued. And this overemphasis isn't new! Truman once wrote, “Education is our first line of defense. In the conflict of principle and policy which divides the world today, America's hope—our hope—the hope of the world, is in education.” Andrew Carnegie, too, observed, “Just see, whenever we peer into the first tiny springs of the

national life, how this true panacea for all the ills of the body politic, bubbles forth—education, education, education.”

Western democracy provides more widespread education opportunities than any civilization in human history. But are our societies more secure and more satisfied as a result? Does education satisfy the hunger for meaning? Technological prowess does not appear to be matched by personal contentment. We're a more highly educated culture, but we're plagued by crime, violence, greed, and fear. We are more educated about civil rights and racism, but it's questionable whether there is any less discrimination arising in the human heart. We have mastered sex education to the point of stupidity, but we don't have a clue what to do with sex itself. Why? Because “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). When that

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TRUTH FOR LIFE PODCASTS

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fear is not present, then individuals, families, churches, schools, cultures, and nations live with the implication of their choice—the choice to “despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

Education without godly wisdom provides no basis for life and no ability to face death. That’s why it is so crucially important for us in the raising of our children. And unless parents and grandparents seek to ensure that the worldview of educators reinforces what the Bible teaches, then we have to accept the implications. The Bible says the fear of the Lord is the foundational principle. If that foundational principle is disengaged, then consequences will follow.

But what does it mean to *accept* that principle? First, it means that from the very infancy of our children we’re going to have to listen to what the Bible says about them. And what does it say about them? Psalm 58:3 says, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.” Or, here’s Isaiah 48:8: “Before birth you were called a rebel.” So, when you go and pick your new baby daughter up from the hospital, and you bring her home, and everything’s lovely and beautiful, just remember something: you just put a little rebel in her place. She is going to be rebelling against you from the start. Every vice begins in the nursery; there’s no question about it!

You see, we’re tempted to think that our newborn children are *tabula rasa*, that they’re blank slates—that they’re neutral. But they’re not. They don’t have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other shoulder; they have the devil right in their heart. It’s hard to say, but you need to read Romans 5. Our children are children

of Adam. God has not given us angels; he has given us sinners to train.

Therefore, the biggest concern of parents must not be our children’s careers, but our children’s conversion. Everything must be set in the light of eternity. They will live forever somewhere. I’m not saying that we need to put them in a place where somebody is presenting the Gospel to them all day, every day. What I’m saying is that within the overarching framework of our care and nurture, we don’t want to unwittingly or wittingly dismantle that which God has said is fundamental. And this needs to be done from the very dawn of life. If we allow our children to determine their own menus, their own bedtimes, their own noise levels, and their own demands for attention, look out! They can’t even verbalize anything yet, and you’ve already created a monster.

To reject the biblical principle for the education and formation of our children is the result of either ignorance or fear. If we reject it, it’s either because we just didn’t know it was there—in which case, we better find out—or we’re fearful of the reprisals in a culture that says, “You can’t possibly believe *that*! You’re not going to do *that*, are you?”

We don’t always realize that these things unfold in the light of a great spiritual warfare. Education may be distinct from grace, but when education is conducted in the Spirit and on the principles of the Word of God, it may be a *means* of imparting grace. Think about Deuteronomy 6, which explains the instruction to be given to a growing child—the same instruction that Jesus received as a boy: “These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (vv. 6–7). In other words, training a child is a full-time job. We’re not talking about formal instruction; we’re talking about the ebb and flow of life. That’s where godly wisdom is

learned.

It may not always be learned quickly, either! Further down in the chapter, verse 20 reads, “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son...” God, in other words, clearly envisages that children will learn for some time without fully understanding.

Years and years ago, I was travelling on a train in England. I wore a clerical collar then, which guaranteed me four seats, since no one would sit next to me. So, there I was, sitting by myself as a representative member of the clergy. There was a mother in the same car, and she had two children with her. It was a long journey south, so they had drawing books, coloring books, and everything—and I started talking to the mother, talking to the children, and was having an enjoyable time. Eventually, one of the girls came over, sat up with me, and we started coloring together. Everything was going very nicely—until I said to the little girl, “Sally, do you go to Sunday school?” That’s all I said. The mother said, “Sally, come back here immediately!” And as Sally went back, the mother turned to me and said, “I think we’ll just wait until Sally’s old enough to make her own decisions before we start talking about Sunday school!”

Now, it’s not my place to get involved in an argument with an unknown woman—but that is the height of absolute foolishness. Children cannot make a decision on the basis of nothing. They cannot make a decision on the basis of ignorance.

If you teach them now, you may have to wait fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty years until the time comes when they’re ready to say, “Hey, what was that stuff you were teaching me?” The Bible tells us, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). How old? Some of them may be seventy before the penny drops. But we must trust that God will fulfil his covenant promises—the promises to

us and to our children.

God uses these things. Think about John Newton, the slave trader turned song-writer turned pastor: his mother died when he was seven—and, if you read his biography, you’ll find that in the height of a storm that threatened his very life, he recalled that it was his mother’s words, his mother’s instruction, that came back to him and secured him.

We can start too late, but we can never start too soon. As families in an alien culture, we need every kind of agency and help to secure our conviction that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,” in order that we might see unbelieving boys and girls becoming the committed followers of Jesus Christ.