

EDUCATION AS SOULCARE: TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Christian education defines us. It is what we aim to accomplish and it establishes the kind of community of learning we are. Our philosophy of education, the content of our curriculum, and the method and administration of our teaching are all means towards the end of providing an education in wisdom and virtue. As Christians, we believe that the only completely true education is a Christian education, one which acknowledges and explains all of God's truth precisely as God's truth, examining what that truth teaches about all other truths, about ourselves, and, ultimately, about God Himself. So just what does a Christian education look like? What defines it?

The Bible clearly sets forth the task of educating children in religious truth. The two most well-known passages are Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and Ephesians 6:4:

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:6-9).

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses instructs the people of Israel to constantly teach the words of God to their children. They are to teach them in all places and at all times, marking both their bodies and their homes as places that are dedicated to studying the teachings of God. The Ephesians passage actually employs two specific Greek words to further explain this sort of instruction. The first word which we translate as "training" is actually *paideia*, from which we get our word "pedagogy," and it means the training of both the body and the soul. The term which we translate as "admonition" is from a word that refers to the formation of the will, of one's ethical character. Thus Paul is saying that parents must educate their children in a way that addresses the whole person, including moral and spiritual matters. Both Deuteronomy and Ephesians are clear that this teaching must be "in the Lord."

Neither of these passages primarily commands the creation of a formal Christian school, but they do command that Christian people educate their children.

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This in an intentional and consistent manner. Whatever mode of education a Christian chooses for his child, the quality of that education must be obedient to these passages from God's word. This means that Christians must provide a Christian education for their children, and so the Christian school is a tool to help them do that in an efficient and concentrated manner.

MORE THAN PROOF TEXTS

But what exactly makes something a Christian education? There are many Christian schools and Christian curriculum publishers who present "conservative" or "family values" material with various Bible verses attached. Others assume that prayer and chapel make the school "Christian." While the ethical content is important, and the presence of prayer ought to be constant in the life of a Christian, the mere addition of these elements to the more-or-less traditional American school is not what we believe the Bible means by "the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

In Deuteronomy, the education of our children is described as being both organic and holistic: inside and out, evening and morning, hands and mind. In Ephesians, the terms used speak to the whole person: to the mind, soul, and will. We are not only imparting information but also forming identities, and to do this "in the Lord," we must make sure that everything we do points the student towards Christ in every way. This means that in whatever it is that we are learning, we seek to discover what that truth teaches us about God and what God has said about that truth, whether explicitly in the Scriptures or implicitly through what we know of God's character and creation. Thus the content is always religious.

Learning doesn't only come about through content, though. It also comes through context, both intellectual and social, and so a truly Christian education must take place in Christian community and as a Christian culture.

The entire learning environment must exude a Christian aroma, and this means an aroma of Scripture, an aroma of holiness, and an aroma of grace. This means that everyone involved in the education must be working together towards the shared mission, and they must do so as Christians at all times.

Having said all of this, a Christian school does not require "Christian versions" of every subject or textbook. Since truth is objective, Christian education is looking for what Francis Schaeffer called "true truth," wherever it may be found. Some disciplines will obviously differ in form in a Christian education than in a non-Christian or secular one. The humanities, for instance, whether literature, history, or the various social sciences, are wholly dependent upon what it means to be human, and for Christians that must always direct us to God in whose image all men are created. More formal disciplines, like logic and mathematics, will hardly differ at all, though a Christian education always intentionally relates those disciplines to the larger universe of knowledge, knowing that their foundation is the one God and his unchanging order. What makes the Christian education unique is that all learning is done in gratitude and that all truth leads our minds above to the God of all truth.

SOULCARE

Perhaps most of all, what makes a Christian education unique is its ultimate goal. Christian education is not primarily concerned with preparing students for college or a career, though it does do this too. The ultimate goal is not even the acquisition of information or the learning of skills, though again, a good Christian education ought to provide those things. The chief end of Christian education is to teach the soul, to train the student to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Education as soulcare means that learning is a good in itself. The activity of mastering a subject is itself a discipline of the mind, training it towards its goal. This

also means that learning is service towards God. As the Apostle instructs us:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1–2).

The Christian transformation occurs by the renewal of the mind, and this is an act of Christian worship. In fact, the Greek word for “service” there means “worship.” At St. Augustine School, each subject will be treated with its own integrity, and each subject’s own respective disciplines will be learned. Yet every discipline is itself a part of the larger task of Christian discipleship, and thus the entire school is offered to the Lord. This means that it all matters. The curriculum, the fellowship, the decorum, the dress, the attitudes—these must all be understood as components of the educational liturgy, as part of our reasonable service to God.

A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

All of the biblical passages listed have been directed to parents. This is because the parents are the most basic teachers of their children. They have the primary jurisdiction, and it is parents to whom the responsibility of education has first been given. But as Jethro instructed Moses, good leaders know when and how to delegate responsibility. The Christian school is a way for parents to combine their resources to hire experts in various subjects and to provide a communal environment for their children to learn with others.

Schools play a rich role in our Christian heritage. The disciples were students of Jesus himself, and the apostle Paul was formally trained by the famous rabbi Gamaliel

(Acts 22:3). Christians began creating schools in the early Middle Ages, and at the time of the Reformation there was a massive increase in the founding of Christian schools and academies. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism promotes the creation and maintenance of religious schools as a means of keeping the fourth commandment: “Question 103. What does God require in the fourth commandment? Answer: First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained...” One of the authors of that catechism explained, “The maintenance of schools may be embraced under this part of the honor which is due to the ministry; for unless the arts and sciences be taught, men can neither become properly qualified to teach, nor can the purity of doctrine be preserved and defended...”

So at St. Augustine we are seeking to provide a Christian education. This has to be a true education, the effective imparting of knowledge. It also has to be truly Christian, honoring the Lord with all of our heart, mind, strength, and soul. We have outlined the basic principles of the Christian character of our education in this essay, and we will explain the other aspects of our educational philosophy, curriculum, and structure in our essays explaining classical education and the university model.