

# KEEPING THE COVENANT

## Some thoughts on Christian Education

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*(based on an address given to the Ballymena Society for the Promotion of Christian Education, 16th March 1996.)*

“Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

2 I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old:

3 Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

4 We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.

5 For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children:

6 That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children:

7 That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments:

8 And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God.

9 The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle.

10 They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law;

11 And forgat his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them.”

- PSALM 78:1-11.

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### **Purpose of Education**

Education has been defined as “training for independent life.” Man is surely unique among the creatures in that such a large proportion of his existence is taken up with the development necessary for independent activity in the world. If he lives for threescore years and ten, then fully one quarter of that lifespan will likely have been

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lived in the parental home. There a life which began in complete dependence upon others is fitted for independence: an individual growing physically and mentally develops knowledge and skills and absorbs a culture; his whole life is shaped for the future. He learns not so much by instinct but by instruction and example. Education is therefore of great importance.

We must go beyond this however. Man is not only related to the world, but also to God. He is of the earth, earthy, but he is also a living soul. And this is the more fundamental relationship: Adam lived unto God before any human society existed, and men continue to be accountable to their Maker even when they leave this world behind. Therefore any education worthy of the name must take cognisance of this fact: that human beings have also eternal souls, which are developing for eternity.

Here we notice a crucial thing: the situation of man now is the direct opposite of what was the case before the Fall. Our first parents came into the world as independent adults, requiring no process of training: they were possessed of an intuitive knowledge of God and of His will, by virtue of their souls being made after His image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. And their spirits leaned in dependency upon God. Since the Fall into sin, when that image was lost, men and women arrive in the world as helpless babes needing to be weaned, and, most tragic of all, as rebels from God by nature. A proper training therefore will have these two aims: to prepare such an individual for independent life in the world, and for dependent life in relation to God. And the latter must be the true foundation for success in the former.

### Philosophy of Education

Probably most educational approaches today fall into either of two categories:-

1) *those that stress that education should serve the needs of the individual.* The emphasis here is generally upon intellectual development. It is agreed that each generation must build upon the work of the preceding one, particularly in the fields of science and technology, and therefore the ablest minds especially should be encouraged. Schooling is often ordered so that the brightest children may make the fastest progress, yet others stress that every individual must be given the opportunity to reach his or her full learning potential. This approach is generally the preserve of the middle and upper classes.

2) *those that stress that education should serve the needs of society.* Individuals function as elements in a wider society, and so other educational philosophies give weight to the development of personal character. In former generations the virtues of hard work, duty to superiors and loyalty to country were impressed upon the masses in order to produce an obedient workforce and fighting force. With the rise

of secular humanism, education has become a vital tool in large-scale attempts at social engineering: the ideal society posited by atheists and agnostics of every hue will be created as children are taught from the cradle onwards to forego any idea of moral absolutes and to abandon any sense of discrimination.

Against these alternatives there is a third: that is, *that education should serve the "needs" or requirements of God*. His purpose is to glorify Himself, and therefore our chief end must be to glorify Him, also in education as well as in the rest of our existence. Education too must begin and end with the glory of God. We may only glorify God by our loving obedience to His revealed will. We are bound to ask then, what are God's requirements for education? Surely He has not left us to our own imaginations in a matter we have seen to be so significant?!

### CHRIST-CENTRED

The title of Psalm 78 is "Maschil of Asaph": "A Psalm for Asaph to give instruction", according to the margin. Teaching about teaching. And the first thing we encounter is the Teacher. The speaker in verses 1&2 can only be God Himself: who else may address us with such authority, demanding our attention? Later revelation makes clear that it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is the mouth of God. In the midst of the seven illustrations of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 13, we read:

"All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world." (MATT. 13:34,35).

The Son of God was appointed the Mediator between God and men from all eternity. Under the Old Testament He revealed God's will by His Spirit in the prophets. On assuming our flesh He was seen to be "full of grace and truth" (JOHN 1:14) and people who heard His teaching were astonished at His wisdom (MATT. 13:54), convinced that He was a teacher come from God (JOHN 3:2), the true Prophet. He assumed to Himself the title Rabbi (MATT. 23:10) which the Jews used to address their teachers.

What relevance does this have to education generally? The Bible states that Christ is the centre of all true knowledge. "And he is before all things, and by him all things consist." (COL. 1:17). The whole created order is constituted in Him, the universe upheld by Him. He is as the hub of the wheel from which all the spokes go outward. He alone integrates the creation, making harmonious sense of all its aspects and diversities. Christ is also the circumference of all true knowledge. "In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (COL. 2:3). The boundary of what is wholesome for man to know is framed by Him. All truth is God's truth: outside of Christ we are eating the forbidden fruit.

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The point is that education must begin, proceed and end by giving us answers to the most basic questions of our existence: who am I? where am I from? what is my purpose? where am I going? Without answers to these questions, all education is ultimately vain and meaningless: it has failed in its object to properly prepare us for life in its fullest sense. But these questions are all answered in Christ, the “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.” (REV. 22:13). Only in knowing Him do we really know anything at all.

In verse 3 of Psalm 78 the speaker changes: Asaph refers to the means by which the Word of God in Christ is conveyed to God’s people: “our fathers have told us.” The word delivered through prophets was later inscripturated or committed wholly to writing, such that the Holy Scriptures are “the words of (his) mouth.” That word was read by father to son, from generation to generation. To say then that education should be Christ-centred is also to say that it should be Bible-based, for the Scriptures are now His mouth.

Such a philosophy of education sounds revolutionary to the majority of the Lord’s professing people today! The parable of the wise and foolish builders comes to mind. In this world we are each building our lives for eternity: every true Christian will agree that salvation is received only as our lives are founded upon the Rock Christ Jesus; “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (ROM. 3:24). But the principle so tenaciously held with respect to justification is neglected when it comes to sanctification! Not every area of my life need be grounded in Christ! In leisure, politics, economics, etc., and education the Lord has left us to our own devices. It is as though the believer begins with a house built on rock, but then may erect extensions as he pleases - which in fact rest on sand! But has he “planning permission” for this?

Such “pietism” is in fact nothing other than a flat denial that education is one of the “good works” for which the man of God is prepared by the inspired Scriptures (2 TIM. 3:16,17).

### COMPREHENSIVE

I refer here not to a system but to the scope of Christian education. What exactly is to be taught to children? The Psalmist was resolved to instruct the succeeding generation in the three broad categories of knowledge (v.4) which encompass all true knowledge:

a) “the praises of the Lord.” God’s being and attributes must be taught: children need to learn that God IS, and that God is GOD. The contemplation of God is the highest study of all. He is the alone explanation of all else that is. All true learn-

ing will stir us to worship with Paul, saying, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen." (ROM. 11:36).

b) "his strength." God's creation through His powerful Word, which brought the universe into being and sustains it. The Bible may not be a science textbook, but all true science will accord perfectly with it. Any study of the creation which is divorced from the wisdom of the Scriptures is "science falsely so called" and an "opposition" (literally "antithesis") to God (1 TIM. 6:20). Modern physical or natural science blunders because in "willing (wilful) ignorance" it rejects the inspired record of special creation and flood and substitutes for it the lie of evolution (2 PET. 3:3-6). The moral sciences are astray because they deny the reality of man's total depravity as a result of the Fall into sin revealed in Genesis 3. Even mathematics cannot be rightly understood apart from the truth that God is a God of order (cf. 1 COR. 14:40) and has established laws in His creation which render it susceptible to rational study, measurement, calculation. The man who believes that the universe is merely a complex of random events and undirected processes, and yet engages in the scientific method of observation, experimentation and induction, is being wholly inconsistent!

c) "his wonderful works that he hath done." God's providence is the only true explanation of the history of the world. By Him men are promoted or demoted (PSA. 75:6,7): without Him not even a sparrow can fall to the ground (MATT. 10:29); and this is because "his kingdom ruleth over all" (PSA. 103:19). Life and death are in His hands, and even the sins of men are governed by Him. The subject of history must be taught from the perspective that God is the sovereign Ruler who has ordained all things, and also from the standpoint that all things have an end or goal - the displaying of God's glory. The Bible is an infallible historical record as well as an infallible doctrinal manual. It reveals that the central figure in all human history is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the most significant historical fact of all is the crucifixion and resurrection of that same Christ. It shows that God is not far removed but is active continually in history, in grace for the salvation of His righteous people, and in justice for the punishment of the wicked. It teaches that the world will not continue forever. Time will have an end and Christ will judge the nations. The world's history cannot be understood at all except in the light of these truths. Moreover children must be taught that, in the light of the Last Day, they are accountable to God and responsible for their own actions: they are not the helpless prisoners of their environment or their own genes.

All the disciplines then that are taught to our children must be taught with respect to the laws and precepts of God. Christ is Lord of all (ACTS 10:36) and so His authority, mediated through His Word, extends to every sphere of our existence and may not be excluded from any by man. We say therefore that there can be no such

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thing as a “secular” education, because man has no secular life: the whole of his life is sacred! The dictionary defines “secularity” as “indifference towards future existence.” What believer would want to advance that, especially in his children?! The Word of God delivers a sharp rebuke to the sloppy thinking of our age when it counsels: “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 COR. 10:31). Nothing excepted. Education today has become a “high thing” that exalts itself against the knowledge of God: it must be made captive once more to the obedience of Christ (2 COR. 10:5).

### CONSISTENT

Imagine a young child growing up in a household where Christ is known and loved. His parents wish him to know the Lord too. To that end they pray for him, and read him a Bible story each night before he falls asleep. Probably they send him to a Sabbath School or equivalent in their local church. The aim in church and home is one: the salvation of the child.

They also send him to a state school during the week, where the aim is somewhat different, not to say opposed. There the Name of God is treated indifferently or even irreverently. Religion, even the Christian religion, may be taught as one of the subjects, but the school professes itself “neutral” with regard to Christianity’s truth claims: Christ said however, “He that is not with me is against me” (MATT. 12:30). The upshot is, that for one part of the week the child is brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and for another part he is subjected to the counsel of the ungodly. And as regards positive instruction by the written or spoken word, it is the latter which dominates.

How does this accord with the obligation God has laid upon Christian parents? Psalm 78:5 states it as their duty to see that the knowledge of His revealed will is passed on to their children. How extensive is this task? “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” (DEUT. 6:6,7). From sunrise to sunset, inside the home and outside, the Word of God is to be the basis of education.

It is of course not only the curriculum which influences a child’s education but also the teacher and the environment in which the teaching is conducted. We need to reflect again on the phrase *in loco parentis*. Do we realise what authority a school-teacher potentially commands? For thirty hours a week he or she occupies the position of the actual parents of the child. The child is expected to instinctively heed his instruction and obey his discipline. The teacher is a powerful role model for the child, for good or for ill.

The Bible inculcates absolute moral standards, specific and distinct gender roles, and the necessity of disciplining children. All these are increasingly opposed by our society and this is reflected in the schooling it sponsors. No longer may state education say that fornication and sodomy are wrong: that the calling of women is generally to marry and bear children ("keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands" - TIT. 2:5); and no more will it take the rod and apply it to the backside of errant youth as God requires (PROV. 23:13,14).

It is surprising, to say the least, that Christians who in their churches may take a strong stand against the downgrade and apostasy of this ecumenical age, yet seem happy to send their children to schools where values associated with this movement (evolution, sexual immorality, free thought, civil disobedience, etc.) are advocated!

In the child who is under these disparate influences a certain tension will inevitably be created. Two competing sets of values are being authoritatively set before the child. Given our fallen nature, it is not surprising that children from Christian homes who are sent to state schools so often bow to ungodly instruction and peer pressure and go the way of the world rather than the Way of Christ: at the least, many of them end up by leading lives that are hardly distinguishable from those of unbelievers. It seems reckless in the extreme to send forth our children into such an environment in the hope and prayer that they might be "salt and light." This may in fact be to sacrifice our children on the altar of secular humanism.

For a truly consistent Christian education then, we must ensure that the instruction given forms one clear, harmonious, whole. We require that the child be taught the truth and nothing contrary to the truth. The instructor must himself be for Christ, and the schooling should take place in the context of biblical standards of behaviour and discipline.

#### COVENANTAL

The Psalmist now sets education in its proper context: God's everlasting covenant of grace, whereby He saves His people in Jesus Christ. God establishes His covenant in the line of continuing generations, with believers *and their seed*, as was revealed to Abraham (GEN. 17:7). That this is not confined to the Old Testament is clear from its reiteration in the New: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." (ACTS 2:39).

As it is a key purpose of Christian marriage that a holy seed be provided for the Church of Christ (*Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXIV.II*), so education must be a handmaid to that goal. Godly instruction is to be transmitted from parent

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to child down the generations (PSA. 78:5,6). This is not a command that passed with the passing of the nation state of Israel: the fact that it is enshrined in the Psalter is indicative of this, but more importantly, education is something general that pertains to all peoples at all times. What is suited to one age will be applicable to another.

We noted earlier that educational philosophy today concentrates on the needs either of the individual or society: we see now that, biblically, education should serve the requirements of God in His covenant, and that here neither the individual nor society but the family is the important unit. The family is the divinely constituted and appointed sphere for the outworking of the covenant promise and therefore also for the conducting of education. The concept of parental control of education is established. No-one suggests that the parents themselves must provide all the instruction their children must receive, in all the varied branches of learning, but they remain responsible for it. If they delegate the work of instruction to others, it may only be to fellow Christians who believe the same things. The curriculum must be one which in all respects is sanctioned by the parents. The moral conditions ought to be such that the school serves as an extension of the home environment.

In verses 7-11, the aim of covenant education is set in contrast to a disastrous example from Israel's past. We are not told the details of the Ephraimite apostacy (the text may refer to the incident recorded in 2 CHRON. 25:7-10), but the failure of these "children" is summed in one telling phrase: "They kept not the covenant of God" (v.10). The evidence was that they "turned back in the day of battle." It was not that they lacked weapons, but that they forgot the wonderful works of God.

This is paralleled in the field of education. We must realise that for God's people in this life it is ever a day of battle: we are found "in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation" and called to "shine as lights in the world" by "holding forth the word of life" (PHIL. 2:15,16). It is not sufficient simply to arm our children with the weapons of intellectual equipment much as the world does: they must learn too the word and works of the Most High. They must learn the fear of Jehovah, without which there is not even the beginning of true knowledge (PROV. 9:10). And they must learn these things in the home, in the church and in the school. Then they will not flee the field of spiritual and ethical conflict but stand firm under the banner of their Captain, Christ Jesus.

What is your great goal for your child? For too many Christian parents the worldly ambition of exam success, university degree and well-paid career predominates. They fear that to give their children a thoroughly Christian education, perhaps in a small school with meagre resources, will put them at a disadvantage when they begin to make their own way in the world. Even if this were true (and I firmly



believe that it is not), what is earthly prosperity compared with a hope set in God (v.7)? With a meek, obedient, steadfast spirit (v.8)? Such children may never attain to great academic achievement or receive the plaudits of this present evil world, but they will surely give glory to God and be ornaments in Christ's Church. They will honour their parents and make them glad (PROV. 10:1). They will keep the covenant of God.

### Conclusions

The above is but a brief outline of principles which I believe are revealed in the Word of God. Many questions remain to be answered as we contemplate putting the theory into practice. It is an undertaking replete with many burdens and pitfalls, but also a privilege accompanied by much joy and satisfaction. It is only to be attempted by those who are convinced of its correctness and who have counted the cost.

The importance of this subject is grasped when it is realised that our children are the Church of the future. Someone has said that our children are the only possessions that we can take to heaven with us: it is also true that they are not ultimately our possession, but the Lord's; "Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward." (PSA. 127:3). They are loaned by God to their parents for a season. Their task is to rear them according to His will. That children undergo a Christian education is no guarantee of their salvation, but we can have no real comfort regarding their salvation if we neglect our responsibility in God's covenant.

Finally, perhaps it is not out of place to take the following words of Christ, precious to parents when they present their children for baptism, and to present them also as a plea for Christian education:

"Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come  
unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

*Further copies of this article and other information on the subject of Christian Education may be obtained from the following address:*

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