

The Nature of Theological Education: Values and Direction for Christian Involvement

Stephen M. Clinton

The International Leadership Council

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Introduction

Many diverse purposes are served by Christian/theological education today. At the K-12 level Christian schools have to teach basic educational skills (reading, etc.), teach doctrine, make sure the children learn the essence of our conservative Christian culture, meet the requirements of states for schools, and represent the church, or other constituency which funds and/or directs each school. For this activity, the schools often have too little funds, over-worked staff and faculty and, sometimes, inadequate facilities. What happens on any given day of the school year, in any specific classroom is the result of the interplay of these elements.

How do we measure success in these Christian schools? It is rare for specific educational objectives to be given by which we can measure success. Even when measurable objectives do exist it is unusual for them to be specific beyond basic reading and writing skills. Even then, how do educational objectives fit into a Christian value system? Objectives were first officially introduced to education through application of American business training programs. Such objectives are under fire today from many sources.

What of other value issues? Are the textbooks we use any better in communicating Christian values about life and knowledge than the secular books? Do they have more than just a few Bible verses scattered throughout? Are our classroom processes more humane than the public schools? Or, are we following many of the public school methods in how we treat people: teachers, administrators, children, parents?

Reflect for a moment with me. What things would a Christian school do in order to fulfill the highest standards and the most complete goals: biblically, morally, in basic educational skills training, in vocational preparation, in character formation, etc., etc.? Should schools even have these goals? I don't know one school that believes it is doing all that can possibly be done.

Is the situation better in Christian colleges? Having taught in two and having been close to others I don't think they are much better off. Any Christian college president or dean can list the problems (opportunities) and it's usually a long list, because they have dreamed of what could be done to resolve problem X, if.... Without going into details, let's agree things could be better.

How does seminary education fare? For almost a hundred years evangelical seminaries have struggled to fight liberalism, to regain respect in the academic world, to keep their doors open in times of financial hardship, and, in the midst of these struggles, to educate leadership for the pastorate, missions and schools. That our Christian seminaries have not failed is demonstrated by the many evangelical pastors and teachers we have and in many other ways. That we have not been fully successful is demonstrated in the spiritual, and often moral, anemia of American churches today. Are our teaching methods and goals any different than liberal or secular graduate school goals? Usually not. This situation is tragic.

Can we simply excuse this by saying we have done our best? No, I don't think that would be true. Shall we simply say, "Well, that's the way things are. There's not much we can do." No! That reveals an almost total lack of trust in God. Shall we, as some are saying today, fight to make things better? Certainly. But before we enter into the fray we need to answer some important questions.

Just what is it we are going to fight for? Here I must take an activist position. Our current situation (the nature and form of Christian education today) is not what we want to perpetuate.¹ The reason we feel any concern about Christian education is because we want to improve it. But what do we want to improve? How will we improve? What is to be the role and form of Christian education today? Should we influence or infiltrate public schools, should we build a totally separate but equal or identical Christian system, should we build on a whole different model, or some combination of all these?

Does this mean we should quit? Of course not. With whatever problems may exist, a good Christian education is much preferable to no Christian education. But there is need for improvement. The improvement will have to begin with the basic philosophy of education. This article will present some basic conceptual points regarding the nature and values of theological education, and then present visionary ideas about how these concepts might be implemented. To answer the questions above we must begin with our calling from God.

1. The Nature of the Christian Educational Task

In Genesis 1, mankind received what we call today the cultural mandate. God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it and rule over the fish of the seas and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (1:28) The interpretation of this passage, plus similar messages in the Pentateuch, Prophets and Epistles, justifies the Christian believer's involvement in cultural and creative activities, alongside worship, fellowship and evangelism. Academically this mandate brings in the liberal arts and the sciences.² This is, in part, why we were created.³

At the same time, however, it is true we live in a fallen world. This has a number of consequences, from individuals making decisions without consulting the Lord, to outright deceit and manipulation, even by Christians. It also means that mankind has a fallen understanding of the things of life and the world. By ruling God out of the picture, a final understanding of the nature of reality and of the place of man in the scheme of things must be twisted. Modern secular philosophies tend to overrate (humanism) or underrate (existentialism, Marxism) the individual person. In these paths, mankind will never fulfill

God's mandate to subdue all things and rule over them.

In addition to the cultural mandate, Christians have the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) which is directed to all Christians.⁴ A simple study of this verse shows that we are responsible (1) to be discipling people by introducing them to Christ (evangelism) and training them in the commands and doctrine of the Lord (teaching) and (2) to be helping one another grow in maturity in Christ (edification).⁵

Please note that this is not new. As the Israelites were coming out of Egypt they were called to be a nation of priests to the world (Exodus 19) and were commissioned to pass the law of God onto each succeeding generation. (Deut. 6:10). In this last area the injunction was specifically laid on the fathers to be responsible.

Certain values may be specified as a result from this study. We are responsible to rule over the world with justice, reach the people of the world for Christ, train them as Christians, and educate and train each generation to carry on the tasks of evangelism and justice! Each individual is important and has worth because they are created in the image of God. The work of education and training is carried out in communities, either families or local groups of believers. These biblical values must influence our decisions about education.

When we look at how we are doing in the educational area in light of this broad mandate, it is clear we not failed, but neither are we a great success. At a minimum we can say there is room for improvement.

An important subpoint here is to clarify the distinction between education and training. I am using education in the common sense of imparting knowledge and stimulating people's minds. By training I mean both education and going beyond, into helping form character and conviction, train for skills and building in behavioral habits that lead to righteousness. The task of Christian education includes both of these. This I understand to be in keeping with the definitions given in 11 Timothy 3:14-17.

II. A Christian Philosophy of Education

As a philosopher and theologian it is very tempting to go into some depth on the nature of truth, and even more on the epistemological process, for that has tremendous implications for the learning process, and the learning process has implications for the teaching process, and that has implications for understanding the nature of theological education. I will not go to that depth, but I do need to touch on some issues.

Since Kant, most Christian philosophers have adopted a position of realism or dualistic realism.⁶ A genuine idealist, in the strict sense, is hard to find. Most of the important discussion in the past thirty years has gone on in the field of epistemology, and, more recently especially, in value theory and ethics.⁷ In the area of philosophical epistemology I am following a modified form of phenomenal realism. The basic work here has been to deal with knowledge at a personal level without becoming lost in the subjective morass of relativism.

The best work on this form of realism has been done by James Collins and Geddys MacGregor.⁸ Similar work in the field of apologetics was done by E. J. Carnell⁹ and is being worked out in different ways in theology by Jacques Ellul, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Oliver O'Donovan and John Jefferson Davis.¹⁰

Collins calls this position "realistic theism." He begins by calling each individual to responsibly develop his own world view. The place to begin is with the person's own religious experience. This is the same point secularism, in all its forms, begins. But secularism believes we never get beyond our own perceptions to a real world, and therefore has no basis for absolute truth or for a point of contact between persons. Collins' point is that if there is a real world then our experience must be existential and must be interpreted by our phenomenological apprehension of the data. But, in contrast to secularism, we do have an objective basis for pursuing truth and for developing a corporate view of truth based on the image of God in each person and our common shared experience. This common experience includes personal religious experiences and the experience we share historically with other human beings. Collins outlines three philosophical tasks to be done: cultural, methodological, and doctrinal.

MacGregor has done good work methodologically on religious experience. He says that if someone will hold an open judgment on spiritual matters, and seek to find truth within his personal and social experience, he will find it in the triune God of Christianity, and most specifically in the historic incarnate person of Jesus Christ.¹¹ This may sound like traditional evangelistic apologetics to you, but let me assure you that MacGregor has developed a philosophical foundation using this approach, and it is not simplistic.

The point philosophically is that we can begin where people are in terms of their own experience and proceed on sound methodological grounds to a full Christian theism. In evangelistic terms this procedure is dependent on the work of the Spirit, as He uses our proclamation.¹²

Let's carry this point over to education. The nature of education prior to John Dewey was unified in an historic objective position, now usually called classicism. Truth was given as an external set of facts or ideas; the student was to learn them. Having learned truths, the student was to inter-relate them, and hopefully find some creative way to add to our human body of knowledge, based on both special and general revelation.

With the rise of a pragmatic, relativistic form of education, all this changed. Truth is relative, therefore there is not a body of truths to learn. Rather, we enter into the process of discovery through dialogue. This method is permeating both secular and Christian education. In the context of individual and class instruction there is nothing wrong methodologically since this procedure helps us to integrate the facts into our experience. But in the context of relativistic pragmatism, everything is distorted because there is no real world, there is no truth, to discover. This method has its roots historically in Socratic dialogue, but Socrates operated it within a commitment to a real world!

In the age of Dewey, educators began to see their duty as a socialization function. The goal became to

socialize the children of the immigrants and to prepare people to be good citizens and to prepare them for jobs in society. The more purely academic function has been played down. Occasionally we see efforts to move back to the basics. But these efforts have usually lost the values about humanity which characterized education in the nineteenth century.

We can see the transformation in the pages of Democracy and Education, undoubtedly the most significant work on popular education written in the twentieth century. Dewey begins by assuring us that all life educates and that deliberate education represents only one small part of the total education of the child. Furthermore, he tells us, there are many forms of deliberate education, including that given by the home, the shop, the neighborhood, and the school. So far, Dewey is a Platonist. But then he advances the characteristic complaint of early twentieth century progressives: industrialism is destroying the traditional home, shop, neighborhood and church; they are no longer performing their education functions: some other institution must take on these functions; ergo - and here, Dewey takes the grand jete of twentieth century educational theory - the school must do so. By the middle of the book, Dewey is talking about the public school as society's great instrument for shaping its own destiny.¹³

The position of secular humanistic education today is that there are many different truths (no absolutes). Science teaches us some truths. Others are found through dialogue. Some are totally personal. Any religious theories are relegated to the third category, as are most moral issues.

Some secularists are honest enough to admit that we need a more substantial basis for moral law than pure personal relativism, therefore they adopt a social contract view of morals. The problem that arises in a social contract view of truth is that the majority impose their will on the minority. This view is not well received today by the American populace.

In science this pragmatic relativism leads to positivism. In counseling it leads to stimulus response behaviorism. In education it has led to behavior modification. The backlash among secularists, leads to new age mysticism.

One factor was hidden in the early forms of this relativistic pragmatism. It's presence was felt but not consistently applied. If there are no absolutes, then we have no foundation for moral behavior or for the value and dignity of the individual or the community. Historically this point was seen by philosophers, but was brought to public attention largely in the fields of literature, drama and art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently it has been clearly articulated by B. F. Skinner. If Skinner's scenario is followed, the United States will be taken over by a group dictatorship, led by ten behaviorist social scientists.¹⁴

An even more impressive, and terrible, model of this position was seen in the philosophy of Nietzsche and was implemented in Nazi Germany. The new man is above morals. All actions which further my ends are good. Any which would hinder my goals are bad. This same position is in the world politically today in materialistic Communism. Gorbachev has said, when speaking to the pope (December, 1989), that Russia needs the values which are found in religious faith.

Many educators, counselors, etc. cannot live with Skinner's position. In an effort to give value to the individual, there is a movement to humanize the classroom through affective education. Affective education is still in its infancy. Various teaching approaches are being developed and the overall direction of humanistic education is still being defined. Despite its infant state, the climate for affective education has changed in the last few years. A few years ago it was unheard of to consider the use of meditation in schools, but today meditation is used in a variety of educational settings.¹⁵

But the reality of the situation is probably best given to us in the field of science. There is no serious alternative to experimental behaviorism, except theistic realism.¹⁶ There is no middle ground. Either there is a real world and absolutes, or there is not. Personal relativism and social contract theories are not tenable philosophically for scientists.

I have drawn this contrast philosophically because the attitude Christians hold often is, 'We will adopt the existing world system and Christianize it. Then we will have a Christian way of doing things.' This position is almost universally true in Christian education today. It is my contention that a system based on an anti-theistic philosophy that has anti-God goals has very little I want in it. Just how much of the world's system can we buy into without being contaminated? The Bible talks about the problem of leaven. Should we accept the world's view of truth? No. Maybe a position on the nature and destiny of man? No.

But if we are consistent in our philosophy of education, these two questions are all we need to ask. Everything else in education depends on these two issues. Please don't buy the world's system if you don't buy the world's philosophy. There is a role for integration, but it has often been improperly developed.¹⁷

So. We need a fresh, total, Christian philosophy of education. Could we perhaps go back and pick up the system of 100-200 years ago? I don't think so. The sterility and elitism of that system is what led to the pragmatists' revolution. In any case, as Miller pointed out, before the pragmatist revolution formal education was only a small part of a total training process.

No, we can't just go back. To make the old system relevant to life today and to the truths of man and the world which we know now, would entail more work than to develop a new system from the beginning.

Where do we find a new system of education? We begin in the Bible and in the reality of our life before God. We know about this in part. We write about Jesus' discipleship of the twelve, his prayer life, his use of the Bible. But we have not related this discipleship approach to education, government, media, etc. The major structures of society need to be transformed.¹⁸

I see the task of Christian/theological education as two-fold. First, we must prepare people for service as Christians. This takes the wide view perspective that education is a total training process including 1) formal academic educating, 2) personal discipling, and 3) preparation for a career. Of course this process

can specialize more and more as the levels progress. But the entire education system, kindergarten through seminary, should share in the effort to achieve these three goals. The essential elements of each objective should be spelled out and implemented at each grade level.

Before we get into detail let me introduce the second task. In addition to personal development, Christian education needs to train people to fulfill the cultural mandate and the Great Commission. This means that all Christians should be able to articulate why they are Christians, why and how someone else can become a Christian, and what their own place is in building a Christian society. "The purpose of Christian education is thus very frankly to enlarge the scope and extent of man's power under God. Power is not to be decried but to be used."¹⁹

III. Application and Some Dreams

It was at about this stage in the development of my own thinking that I said, "Wow! Schools can't do this. This is a job for the church!"

I am personally responsible for the training of whatever disciples God gives me, for the training of my own children, and for spreading the gospel, in all its personal and philosophical manifestations, to the world. I have been given brethren in Christ with whom to work, but the responsibility is essentially personal. The corporate institution does not have these goals.²⁰

If I am to delegate most of the outworking of training my children and my disciples to the church or to a school, what would the situation be like? We would have a system that begins with parent training for newlyweds and multi-year discipleship training for new Christians. There would be elementary and secondary schools sufficient to handle all Christian children. The schools would have accepted the formal job of the three-fold training, not just academic education or biblical indoctrination.

Christian education is breaking out of the mold of the school. Fresh questions are being asked about the nature of teaching and learning, and we've caught a glimpse of Christian nature as something involving all the activities and transactions that take place within the Body of Christ.²¹

The curriculum would be totally integrated to perform the biblical function of raising up a godly generation, which would surely include the basic educational skills in which the state is interested, and go far beyond. Thus, academic excellence would be a basic component of the system.

Each town would have a college supported by and responsible to, the local churches. A fully self-aware system of high level personal discipleship, academic excellence and career training would be taught by teachers who model the academic integration of a Christian world view and have the practical experience in their own academic field to prepare students for active involvement in life work. All of this should be done with the best educational planning and technology available.

I suspect the curriculum content would change drastically. All majors would be vocationally oriented (i.

e. life related). The study of the Bible and theology, would penetrate all fields as well as being taught for their own sake (but never without application).

The problem of theological education from the students' points of view probably centers on the facilitation of the process of personal growth and maturity in Christian faith and church commitment. They recognize the need for enough rational structure to the process so that they may receive the basic intellectual and practical equipment to become effective ministers. Yet they need enough flexibility so that they may develop around those centers of meaning in Church and faith which give personal coherence and make possible an orderly Christian interpretation of nature and human existence.²²

These local colleges would also serve the adult constituency of the towns. This would include what we have today as adult Bible institutes and adult education. But it should go far beyond this into continuous career training, seminars and workshops, cultural development, civic involvement training, etc. The National Institute of Education concluded, "The idea of adulthood as a period of continuing change and learning is replacing the longstanding notion that adulthood is a stable period of life in which a person applies the learning acquired in adolescence and childhood."²³ If these secular educators recognize the need for this ongoing adult educational opportunity, we Christians should be in the vanguard exploring how to do this. If we don't, we will lose one more round to the enemy.

What about seminaries? To begin with, we must reemphasize the need to fulfill two goals -self development (academic and spiritual); and development for ministry (both philosophical and vocation). Here again, the faculty should be practicing models of what the school seeks to produce. At this graduate level in a professional school, the primary aim will probably be on producing pastors and missionaries. Then pastors and missionaries who have excelled at both the academic doctoral level and in ministry should be the faculty. Since all 'truth is God's truth' the faculty could go anywhere for their doctorates. This faculty body should model the qualities of elders as given in Scripture, and their faculty meetings should be models of working together for the sake of the gospel, of 'looking out for the interests of others' (Philippians 2:4)- all faculty should be involved in the total training of the student. The student faculty ratio would probably be about 6 to 1.

The curriculum would provide all the theoretical and practical training the students needs in order to move into successful ministry. Of course once the pastor is out he would have the local Christian college, and, as needed, the seminary, as backup to his continued growth. In commenting on a needed seminary curriculum Niebuhr wrote:

Each division of studies is defined in relation to its place in achieving the major objectives of theological education:

I. To prepare the minister to understand and foster the program of the Church.

II. To show that the Church exists within, not outside of, its society and that, though molded by that society, it must nevertheless challenge its unChristlike character.

III. To show that the Church can accomplish its task in its society only as it knows clearly whereof it speaks.

IV. To show that the heart of the heritage is the Bible, and the revelation of God in Christ which it contains.²⁴

(Note that this plan was developed in the 1950's but has not been consistently implemented anywhere.)

The students would be selected based equally on their ability to handle the level of study and their promise of future contribution as Christian leaders. The seminary is to produce leaders who have the results of scholarship at their disposal in carrying out ministry.

Those very few faculty who genuinely are at the cutting edge of making new contributions to knowledge ought to be supported by the churches to do just that - make the intellectual contribution. If a local church does not feel like it wants to support a missionary to the intellectual world, then perhaps a denomination should establish a 'think-tank' of scholars to research and relate back to the colleges and seminaries. The context for their work would probably be a research center. It ought not to be a seminary classroom, unless they individually also model the necessary practical abilities and desire this involvement. They should be available for occasional interaction, but not tied down. They should be free to develop the specially God has given them - scholarship. They will be resources for ongoing academic training of the Christian college faculty.

Overall, the seminary could share the four goals of all graduate education:

1. The basic objective of advanced study is to help interested people to achieve, over their lifetimes, mastery of a field of knowledge.
2. Since any field of knowledge may be used in various ways, only one of which is teaching, persons who undertake advanced study should be helped to acquire reasonable versatility and mobility in their careers and in other lifetime experiences.
3. Advanced study should be conducted in ways that will help individuals to become well-educated and cultivated persons as well as professional experts.
4. Advanced study in the aggregate should bring about certain outcomes for society, for example, manning the institutions of society with competent professionals and leaders, providing a pool of human resources available to meet social exigencies, serving as carriers and developers of the cultural heritage, promoting sound national economic development, etc.²⁵

(This study was part of a work done by the International Conference on the Philosophy of Graduate

Education. They are proposing that all graduate education incorporate these goals.)

Conclusion

This paper has presented some ideas. None are beyond the realm of possibility. But neither are we likely to change all elementary, secondary, college and seminary education. What then is a realistic conclusion?

At one point we separated two world views. the secularist and the Christian. Is the secularist on your nearby college campus becoming more Christian? Or is your Christian college slowly falling more into the secularist pattern?

Each one of us must accept personal responsibility for the call of God upon our lives to make a difference in education. We cannot afford to be above all this, in an isolated ivory tower. It is your responsibility and mine, to begin in our schools and in our churches to do things differently. We must be about the business of improving Christian/theological education: practically, culturally, and biblically.

ENDNOTES

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