



Public Education and Christians: *Traveling the Same Trail?*¹

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Public education and “Christian education” have grown from the same root stock: Greek civilization, Greek assumptions about humankind and about knowledge; and Greek definitions of education as schooling. It is difficult to differentiate public education and Christian education as they are commonly practiced today.

In our own national history the first institutions of formal education were church-related, for the training of the “divine ministry.” But these institutions were patterned on the Renaissance European schooling institution, which was clearly understood to be part of the rebirth of culture and refinement of civilization. This was in terms of values and assumptions about human beings and knowledge traced squarely to the pre-Christian Greek philosophers and nation-states.

The pattern of development can be summarized in five steps (1) Greek thought and institutional models; (2) through western European traditions to the New world; (3) utilized specifically by the Christian sector of the American society; and (4) then generalized to the whole of the society’s perceived needs through the most extensive system of public education ever known. Thus public education, in one sense has been derived from religious education within our own National traditions.

Although there is little doubt that each of these steps has, in general, benefitted mankind, the values on which American education is based in this country are more secular than biblical. One illustration is highly visible in Jesus’ warning to his followers about the prevailing Greek styles of management and authority in reference to learning and leadership. To explore this issue, see Matthew chapters 20 and 23.

But there is yet a fifth step. For at least the past century, education in and for the church has been increasingly preoccupied with patterning itself on the schooling models from the secular society. Perhaps the irony is blunted by the fact that the secular institutional forms and practices were first employed in the New World by the church, but that historical accident is no justification for the failure to discipline the ways and means of so-called “Christian education” against any higher authority than the contemporary standards of the state. This flaw accounts for much of the weakness and confusion in contemporary “Christian education.”

While I don’t see how the schools can be blamed for creating all the ills in society, I must speak out against the pressures that schools place on children and youth: pressure *to conform*, pressure *to compete*, and pressure *to succeed* to materialistic ways. Christians, whose lifestyle needs to be characterized by *non-conformity* to what we see as worldly ways, *cooperation* for the benefit of others rather than competition that serves one’s own self-centered purposes, and *success measured in non-materialistic terms*.

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For this Christian the concern about pressure summarizes most of what I dislike in public education. But the *heavy* criticism is that the so-called Christian education is rarely any different!

In the following section of the address I will attempt to embrace a larger and more precise set of concerns by developing the thesis that the community of Christians has a relationship to public education based on mutual interests, in which both the Christian and the larger public need each other.

Though this thesis cannot be well supported in such a brief review, we can at least consider the key assumption on which it is based. For convenience, the assumptions are grouped into four sets that deal with knowledge, learning, education, and democracy. As I see it, these four sets of assumptions delineate the major elements of a Christian's posture in reference to public education. In fact, they constitute a basis for historical and contemporary cooperation of Christians in public education. Thus the list represents for this conference a reminder of the stake that Christians have and hold in the moral and intellectual development of the republic. I suspect that we can find in the list the rudiments of agreement and the basis for mutual respect.

It will be clear that many or most of the listed statements are presuppositional; that is, they are based in large part on what the Christian takes by faith as the starting point for rational analysis—what we hold to be true about God, about the universe, and about human nature. Presuppositional though they may be, these ideas can also be seen as propositions that are empirically demonstrable and highly defensible against rational arguments based on counter-presuppositions. Parenthetically, in my twenty-five years as an educator, I've seen notable movement in the scientific understanding of teaching and learning that has closed quite a few of the gaps between the Christian posture and the prevailing secular postures. As but one current illustration, behaviorism is now being called into question and may be on the wane after its twenty or thirty years in the academy. If time permitted it would be useful to consider many such shifts which, on the whole, seem to be leading toward positions more similar to those derived from biblical views of human nature.

After the four sets of statements relating to education in a democracy, one other list of propositions will be offered. In this list, I attempt to identify some of the crucial assumptions about the community of Christians. Any non-Christian who really wants to understand why certain educational issues are especially important to us will appreciate the statements. I would grant that this last list has less potential for establishing a common ground among educators in general; these are not the value positions we hold in common with others so much as the bases for our peculiarities as Christians.

As each of the assumptions is stated and elaborated please bear in mind that I am not suggesting that all Christians hold to the position in exactly the same form. Nor do I suggest that all non-Christians reject the assumption. Indeed, I don't believe that, and even if I did it would be counterproductive to polarize this conference on that axis. Much to the contrary, I am taking this approach so that as professional educators we can each examine our own assumptions and beliefs about the factors and issues that make this conference important. I am not asking if you agree with me, and certainly I'm not suggesting that even the other Christians here *should* agree with me. But I suspect that we will find ourselves in certain agreements across that line of belief in Jesus Christ, and further that certain disagreements cannot be identified easily with any particular religious position.

A. Propositions about Knowledge

1. All knowledge is traceable to one source: God. Immediately we see one basic conflict with a basic tenet of humanism: that "man is the measure of all things." But the crucial issue is even deeper: knowledge either does or does not extend beyond man's knowing.

2. God has revealed himself and his works to human beings through two modes: through his created universe and through his revealed word. For the Christian scholar (perhaps for scholars in general), it is important to realize with appropriate humility that though we hold that truth is perfect, our comprehension of it is in errantly imperfect and partial.
3. Any honest inquiry after truth is inquiry into God's truth. As human beings seek after truth, whether through scientific inquiry or through study of the Bible, what is found can be expected to converge on God's nature and works. When, for example, science and the Bible seem to disagree, the problem may lie in a faulty understanding of the Bible or a faulty handling or interpretation of scientific data. *Both* need to be reexamined again and again until the harmony is found.
4. Organization of experience into residual knowledge forms is an activity of human energy and insights; even when scientific, it is arbitrary and is always subject to revision. There are no inherent qualities or categories of knowledge that can rightly hold claim as universal taxonomies or basic disciplines. All academic organizations and mental structures of knowledge are relative.

B. Propositions about human learning

1. Learning is one of several developmental processes inherent in the nature of humankind. The human is a rational creature, though rationality is interwoven with subjective and super-rational components. The important issue is that it is *normal* to learn: teachers and parents need not anxiously bring learning *to* a child.
2. Learning occurs inside the person, through a process of constructing meanings and structures from experiences and thus becoming free of limitations. The process of perception is a basic aspect of learning. Meaning is not acquired as if it were a commodity from some shelf; it is unique to the learner and originates as the "externals" of the experience transaction with the complex "internals" of the person.
3. Transaction is the crucial activity through which learning occurs. Transactions with people, events, and circumstances are the facilitations of human learning. The array of factors in the learner's environment has an effect on learning. But the effects are not altogether predictable. The infinite variations of kind and quality of transactions that depend on what the learner brings to the experience rule out any behavioristic confidence in the outcomes of any given transaction.
4. Consequential learning is an internal complex of cognitive structures and affective commitments. It is not enough to define learning as behavior change. Granting the obvious impossibility of measuring anything deeper than behaviors, and even allowing for the dubious proposition that learning can be assessed by comparing behavior at time one with behavior at time two, the practical problems of measurement and assessment should not be allowed to limit the educator's concern for learning. Learning involves information acquired, skills gained, beliefs altered, and commitments strengthened or weakened.

5. Human development, especially cognitive development, is also seen in terms of moral development. Similarly a natural and transactional function, the development of moral judgment is the vital area of cognitive interlock with the spiritual aspects of the person.

C. Propositions about education

1. In any society, education is provided through a wide variety of informal, formal, and non-formal institutions. When considering education and educational resources, it is important to conceptualize broadly. To equate education with schooling is to fail to recognize the validity of such educational modes as church, family, living-learning communities, trade unions, social clubs, on-the-job training, etc.
2. The complexities of skills and knowledge needed for effective living in a modern society demand that institutions of teaching must be created and maintained. Ideally these would assume that resources and nurture to stimulate human development would be widely available. But because of our heritage in the Greek tradition, we tend to adopt the hierarchical model of teaching-learning with its place-and-time fixed assumptions about teaching efficiency. The model is called "School."
3. Every educational organization is value-laden. Whether the value is authority, coercion, individual freedom, democratic social organization, competitive greed, survival, or honesty, the educational form itself is carrying powerful moral and ethical messages. In a very real way, McLuhan's words apply: "The medium is the message."

D. Propositions about public education in a democracy

1. The philosophical presuppositions of democracy demand that certain competencies, especially decision-making skills, be broadly available within the society. Thus a non-elitist system of public education is vital to the functioning of national democracy.
2. A primary purpose, indeed one of the few completely unassailable purposes, of the public education system is to produce political competency. Here we ruefully observe that the levels of public participation are so low as to indicate default of the schools on this basic purpose. It is tempting to argue that American schools have taken on a wide array of non-essential duties in order to create a smoke screen around this crucial failure.
3. But, the dilemma of public schools in a democracy lies in knowing which of the many voices of the people to respond to. In America the public schools are under incredible pressure to be the force of change in the society, but as the whole impact of being a truly pluralistic society settles in. The schools are given confusing and often contrary signals from the legislative and judicial systems.
4. Many of the underlying values of the existence of public educational institutions are easily traced to biblical teachings. If public schools did not exist in American society, the community of Christians would be at the forefront of the movement to create them. They represent a concern for all the children of all the people, a social

commitment to truth and nationhood based on participation in processes of order and justice. Altogether biblical.

These four lists suggest a large common ground between Christian and secular educators in support of non-behavioristic models of education. (We are amused sometimes to note the common ground even with the neo-humanists, with all their deep-seated relativism.) But on the following propositions, we do not expect any agreement. We do welcome understanding. These are our key distinctives.

E. Propositions about the community of Christians

1. Being a Christian is both relational and functional. It is a relationship with God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ; the relationship is expressed in a life of functional processes. As we are being transformed and conformed to the image of Christ, we demonstrate God's own concern for the whole of humanity, but particularly for those who are needy, hungry, imprisoned, sick, and poor in spirit. We also demonstrate our relation to and our love of God through fellowship and love within our extended family of brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not intend to appear any more exclusive than any other family.
2. The community of Christians is in the world for a purpose. We are part of God's intervention in the affairs of people and nations. We are described as salt in the world—stinging and irritating sometimes, but bringing savor and preservation to a world seriously blighted by sin. Thus we have a stake in any and all agencies of social development, certainly including public education.
3. Christians appreciate democracy, recognizing it as the form of government in which personal and religious liberty has facilitated the growth of institutions of the church, e.g., the “modern missions movement.” However, Christians recognize the inherently secular assumptions underlying democracy, e.g., that the best way to determine the merits of a choice is to put it to decision among the broadest possible responsible electorate. By contrast we note that the biblical process for certain crucial decisions made within God's will consisted of the studied judgment of knowledgeable and responsible persons then put before God for divine intervention as the ultimate determinant.
4. The family is the basic and essential educative unit. The responsibility to shelter and nourish, to reward and punish, to model and exemplify, to transact and explore are assigned by the Bible to the family.

Although the lists could be longer, I could not make them shorter. These points are one attempt to create a parsimonious view of the Christians state in public education.

It is long a tradition of the church to come forward with creeds and declarations. A year ago in Lausanne, Switzerland, the International Congress on World Evangelization was almost brought to a standstill over the wording of what has become known as the Lausanne Covenant. Three weeks ago in St. Louis the Continental Congress on the Family got so bogged down in words that the pressure for a declaration was defused into a sort of press release representative of no one in particular and issued after the participants had packed for home.

In an effort to anticipate the urge to put forward a declaration and at the same time to illustrate the likely futility of such an activity, I offer the following summary of my remarks tonight, under the pretentious title following:

One Christian's Hope for Public Education in the United States

In the concern for an orderly and just society in which

The involvement of God in the affairs of humanity,
the redeeming love of Christ for all people,
the power of the Holy Spirit, alive and active within God's people,
the church, as the focus for community of God's people,
and the family, as the essential and rudimentary base of human development
may be realized and nurtured.

This Christian hopes for and is working toward public education that is characterized by
foundation on a broad definition and understanding of the nature of human development,
utilization of a broad array of educational procedures of which schooling is but one major
category,

respect for the uniqueness of personhood and accommodation of the needs for self-
realization,

reduction of emphasis on inter-personal competition and increased emphasis on cooperation,

reduction of coercive and circumstantial pressure to conform to norms of society,

reduction of emphasis on the artificial reward system of schooling,

decoupling of "success" in school from entrance and advancement criteria of the world of
work,

comprehensive concern and consequential preparation for the skills and understandings
demanded in the contemporary world, including the skills of social transaction with people of
various ethnic and social backgrounds,

respect for the right of the children of Christians and, indeed children of every religious
community, to participate in public education without being attacked or intentionally
undermined by any influence or pressure other than sincere inquiry after truth,

respect for the relationship between a child and his or her parents,

respect for the right of parents and the child to participate in the educational decisions that
affect the development and destiny of the child, and

reduction of moral relativism through an openness to accept the moral influence of God that
is present and available in biblical Christianity.

Recommended Reading

J. Donald Butler. *The Christian View of Man and the Meaning of Freedom and Authority in Education*, in
Selected Readings in the Philosophy of Education, ed. Joe Park, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958.

Paul G. Schrotenboer *The Continuing Reformation* (pp. 1-3) *Man in God's World* (pp. 11-30) in *International
Reformed Bulletin* #31, October, 1967

Merrit M. Thompson *The History of Education* (College Outline Series) New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1933.

John Hardin Best and Robert T. Sidwell (eds.) *The American Legacy of Learning*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co.,
1967.

Fred M. Hechinger *Watergating on Main Street: Education*. *Saturday Review*. November 1, 1975, pp. 27/57.