

Christian Education

Proverbs 4:1-17

The Book of Proverbs is perhaps the closest thing we have to the curriculum of the Jewish people, the best indication we can get as to what was taught by the schoolmasters of ancient Israel. We sometimes think that schools are a modern phenomenon, something relatively recent, definitely Western European in origin, and this impression was nurtured by the missionary appeals of the nineteenth century, where particularly British Christian missionaries set off for “darkest Africa,” the countries of Asia and the Pacific islands, not only to bring the Christian gospel to pagans, but also to take the advantages of modern education as a way of shaping and forming these people into civilised, enlightened and cultured nations. But we find records of schools and schooling as far back as the time when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees, and even then there are comments about how children hated going to school; there were other things they would much rather do than learn reading, writing and arithmetic.

The book of Proverbs records for us the teaching of the wise in the time of the united monarchy in Israel; the wisdom of Solomon and his court. There were even at that time people entrusted with the education of the young, who had special gifts from God in imparting wisdom and knowledge, learning and insight. And much of what they taught to the children of the nation of Israel is summarised for us in Proverbs. Thus we can learn much about what education ought to be like from paying heed to what is written there. For instance, read the words of the wise, the words which they taught to the children so long ago, in *Proverbs 4:1-17*.

Education is, then, as the Scripture teaches us, training children in wisdom, nurturing them in understanding, guiding them into the paths of righteousness, justice and truth. And the ultimate goal of education is to lead them into the paths they should follow for life. Education is not simply teaching children to read, to count, to write, to acquire technical skills and scientific knowledge, to appreciate literature and art, to speak foreign languages. Education is to introduce children to life in the world, to guide them into the paths they should follow throughout life, to teach them the truth and the meaning and purpose of everything they encounter. Education is a preparation for life, a time when children learn to learn, when they learn to discern, when they

learn the paths they are to follow. Education is not primarily about learning information and facts, because many of those “facts” and much of that “information” is quickly forgotten. How many of us can remember the specifics of what we were taught over many years in school, whether it is rather a long time ago, or even relatively recently? I know I cannot remember much at all of my days at school. But that is not what education is. Education has as its purpose the introduction of children to a way of living, a path for life, to point them to the meaning, the purpose, the significance, the ultimate reality of the world in which they live. It is to help them to understand who they are, why they are here, and what their task and calling is in life. In other words, education is to provide a sense of purpose and an orientation for life; if you like, a worldview.

Education cannot be isolated from a worldview, a way of looking and thinking and understanding, a perspective on the whole of reality, because at the heart of education is not knowledge, but wisdom. And wisdom comes not from learning, but from the fear of the Lord. That is why the writer of the Proverbs exhorts his sons to get wisdom above all else: knowledge is important as well, but the getting of wisdom exceeds even knowledge as a goal to aspire to. What then is wisdom? It is not simply the ability to make profound judgements, to be clever in what you say, to find solutions to problems that elude us. No, wisdom is more than that: wisdom is the ability both to know the right thing to do **and** to do it. Wisdom is intrinsically tied up with obedience. To be wise, then, is to know how to obey. But what or whom then should we obey? As Christians, we can only say that to be wise is to live a life of obedience to God. Anything else than that, anything less than that, is not wisdom but foolishness, not knowledge but delusion, not the way of life but the way of death.

Education then must have at its heart the goal of leading children into the obedience of God. This must be the purpose held out for all our living, the reason “why” that children want and need to know. As you know, children are always asking the “why” questions, the only questions that ultimately matter in life. We can always find out the “how,” the “when,” the “where,” the “who,” which after all can be found in any relevant book on the subject at hand. But only those who have understanding of the truth, the reality, of the world around us, are able to answer the “why” questions. And of course the only true answer that we can give to the “why” questions is to point

children to God as the loving, wise and forgiving Creator, Redeemer and Goal for the whole of life. The only truly satisfying, the only true, answer to the ultimate “why” question is that it is what God wants from us, what God calls us to, what God has prepared for us in Christ.

And because God alone is truly wise, what he requires of us is not a blind obedience, not merely going through the motions of morality and propriety, not merely fulfilling the terms of our contract with him, not merely paying our respects on a weekly or even daily basis, but rather he requires of us to live as he has commanded us to live, so that we are able to share the fellowship with him that he longs for us to have. And that, and that alone, is the ultimate goal of education, as indeed it is the ultimate goal of all that we do. We are called to be God’s fellow-workers, to be busy in his creation, caring for his world, nurturing the manifold creatures he has entrusted to our care, and enabling one and all to fulfil the tasks that God has allotted to each of them.

What then is our task in life? It is to be God’s fellow-workers, to be busy in God’s own creation that he has called into being, to be productive with the labours of our hearts, hands and minds, making this world into something suitable for the dwelling place of God, which is its ultimate purpose. For as we read in the book of Revelation, God intends to come down from heaven to share life with us for all eternity on this earth, an earth which will have been purified from its sin and degradation, because it is in every respect an earth which God loves. It is an earth which we are to care for, to watch over, to explore, to develop, to investigate, to use for the benefit of ourselves and others as we work together as the stewards of the living God.

Education has as its goal the introduction of a new generation of children into the path of life. It is to train them in the skills and understanding they need to participate in the task which has been given to all humankind. It is to help them develop the skills of learning, of discernment, of understanding, that they will need to take their place in the community of God’s people who are busy caring for God’s world, fellowshiping with him in their tasks. It is to help them to discover their particular skills, their particular contributions that they are called to make for the benefit of all humankind and for the service and honour of the only true and Living God.

But is this the kind of education which many of us have received? Is it the kind of education which many of the children in New Zealand are currently receiving? Sadly no, for instead of being trained to serve God as his stewards, we are instead training children for other purposes, other goals, other tasks in life. If we are not training children for the service of God, then who are we training them to serve? Because we cannot fail to serve someone in life: we are not self-sufficient beings, but servants, because that is how God made us, as Genesis so eloquently records. We must serve something other than ourselves; the question is, who or what will that be? We create for ourselves all manner of substitutes for God, replacements to fill the void in our lives to give us something that we can aspire to serve. Whether it is humanitarian ideals, self-aggrandisement, acquisition of wealth, aspiring to political or social status and power, leisure and pleasure, or even just finding love and contentment in a family of our own, we can seek after these things as the goals we set in life. And many of these things are fine in themselves, but when they are the ultimate goals, the purpose for our living, the meaning of it all for us, then they are no longer valid goals but substitute gods. We create for ourselves all manner of idols to serve, because we have the impulse implanted within us by God to serve him. If we will not serve God, we cannot serve nothing at all, we **must** find a substitute for God to put in his place, something else which we **are** willing to serve. That is the nature of humankind: we are religious beings, who are oriented to some source of meaning, purpose and direction for life which must come from outside ourselves. And that is inescapable in all that we do: the whole of our lives, every minute of every day, whether we are waking or sleeping, we are serving our god, whether that be the True God, or a fake, a substitute god we have devised for ourselves to fill the void where our object of service should be.

If we are prepared to argue, as many in New Zealand would, that we can find a valid source of meaning, purpose and direction within the creation, that we are not following other gods, but are simply living a normal human life, apart from all reference to God, then the ultimate answer to that is that all our problems, needs, desires, aspirations, and so on, must be able to be satisfied from within that same creation. After all, if it is really true that something from within the creation can provide all the meaning, direction, and purpose we seek for our lives, then that something can and must provide for us fulfillment and satisfaction at every level, in

every respect, in all circumstances and situations. Who of us can claim to have found something within the creation that can provide all of that? What could there possibly be that was able to do that? Surely only God himself, who implanted that desire for fellowship and service within us is able to satisfy that longing? Is that indeed not the essence of our Christian faith, that we can find no salvation, no fulfillment, no deliverance or satisfaction except in God himself?

This then, is the basis for Christian education for our children. It is not an attempt to isolate them from the world, to shut them up in a glass-house or a closet to protect them from the bad things that happen around us. It is not a repudiation of learning and knowledge for some kind of substitute learning that can't really cope with the world as it is. It is not a week-long Sunday school where children are exposed to nothing except Bible stories and choruses. It is instead an education that differs from other forms of education in one basic, foundational issue: where do we find the purpose, the meaning, the direction we need for life?

In other words, what does our education prepare us for? What shapes and directs the perspectives, the viewpoints, the understanding, the goals that must inevitably give character to that education? Is it the service of God as his loving, obedient stewards, or is it the service of some other goals in life? Who sets the direction for education - those who know and love the Lord and wish to see others do the same, or some politician or bureaucrat bound up in the service of some humanist philosophy, promoting a vision of life, a vision for life which is something other than the kingdom of God? Who would we rather trust with the lives of our children - someone who loves and serves God, and seeks to lead our children to do the same, or someone who loves and serves a false god, an idol, and seeks to lead our children to do the same? As Neil Postman has said, we are united in our schools not by having common goals, but by having common gods.

This is the choice with which we are confronted in New Zealand today. We must contend with one basic fact: education is not simply learning to read and write and do sums. Education gives children a vision for life; the goals to aspire to, the paths to follow, points them towards the One whom we are to serve. Who is setting the goals for your children? What paths are they teaching them to follow? Who are they being led to serve? If it is not the living God, who created us to have fellowship with him, to

grow in wisdom and understanding under his care, then we have failed our children at the most important point. God calls us all to love and obey him in everything we do. If we have not ensured that our children are being taught how to love and obey God in everything, in their maths, in their reading and writing, in their art and science, in their sports and music, then not only have we failed in our own responsibility before God, but we have also failed our children by not teaching them in their turn how to live responsibly before God, by loving and obeying him in everything. If we do not teach our own children to love God in everything, and ensure that they are likewise taught by others that loving God is the ultimate goal in all that they do, then who **will** do it? Who are you handing over responsibility for your children to? What account will you then be able to give to God for the children he has entrusted to you to care for?

The education provided for in our secular schools is just that: secular, devoid of any reference to God, devoid of any understanding that it is only in the service of God that we can find life, devoid of any purpose, meaning, direction or goal that is more than something we have manufactured for ourselves out of what we can find in the world around us. And surely that is all we can expect. After all, who has set the goals and direction for education in the secular schools? Not those who love and worship God, but those who have no time for God at all, those who despise and mock at God, those who are indifferent to God, those who have other gods they prefer to serve. And even if our child has a Christian teacher in the state school, how much will that achieve? Does that ensure, is it even possible, that they will be taught in the ways of truth and obedience, given that the education in state schools is not governed by individual teachers' desires and beliefs, but by those of the people who set the perspectives, the philosophy, the direction that that education is to follow. And what about the times when their teachers are not Christians, but atheists, or New Agers, or pantheists, or out and out sceptics who have no time whatever for any religion at all. After all, if we believe, as we should, that our ultimate commitment to Christ shapes and moulds us in everything, making us into the people he wants us to be, then what about those who worship other gods, whether the pagan gods of the New Age or traditional religions, the gods of Islam or Buddhism, or the materialistic gods of the average New Zealander? Are they not also being shaped and moulded by their gods, becoming what those gods want them to be? Listen to what the Psalmist says in Psalm 115:

Psalm 115:1-8.

*Not to us, oh Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.*

Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"

Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.

They have mouths, but do not speak;

eyes, but do not see.

They have ears, but do not hear;

noses, but do not smell.

They have hands, but do not feel;

feet, but do not walk;

they make no sound in their throats.

Those who make them are like them;

so are all who trust in them.

This then is the character of religion; not just of Christianity, but of all religion, even the secular religion of those who refuse to acknowledge God in any way at all. All of us, Christians and others, are being transformed to be like the one that we worship. Is that not why we gather week by week, to sing, pray, read the Scriptures, to study, to learn, to share with one another about our common faith and our common love in Christ, the only son of the true and living God, who made us and calls us back from our path of sin to love and serve him alone in all that we do? Is it not so that we can become like Christ, being transformed to be like him, to be renewed in the image of the invisible God who has made himself known to us in Christ? What then of others, are they not also transformed to be like the ones they worship? Will not someone who worships and serves the materialistic idols of our nation over time become anything except a materialistic, greedy, self-centred person? Will not someone who worships sensuality and sexuality become a thoroughly immoral, lustful, person, using others for their own gratification? Will not someone who worships political power become a

vain, self-centred, egotistical and exploitative person with no principles to guide them except the pursuit of more and more power over others? Do we then not all become like the gods we worship, and do we not seek to lead others to also worship them? After all, if we worship political power, then someone who worships Christ through humble service of others will not help in that pursuit of power, but will in fact stand in the way! If we worship the acquisition of wealth, will not a Christian who seeks to follow Christ in serving the poor and needy, striving to ensure that they are cared for and provided for in an unjust and greedy world, not stand in the way of the blind pursuit of wealth at every opportunity? Will not someone committed to gambling and chance as a way of life not find a Christian an impediment to that goal? Everybody seeks to have others worship what they worship; because then we can work together for a common goal, because after all, the common goal can be recognised only if we have a common god. We become then like the god we worship, and we seek to have others do the same. What then of education? Is that not one way in which we seek to train children in recognising what they should worship, and to lead them into a life in which they will worship that which we hold out before them as their god?

Christian teachers in state schools have an incredibly difficult path to follow, and we should support them and assist them to do whatever they can to serve God in that situation. But should we simply entrust our children to the state system, hoping rather futilely if we are frank, that they will somehow be taught the truth about the world we live in and the God we are created to serve? Is that a fair burden for children, to expose them to the most pernicious and godless philosophies of the day, and expect them to cope with sorting out the wheat from the chaff? Can we truly say that that is the best we can do? Are we prepared to take a chance with their teachers, entrusting them to lead them into the service of whatever gods they may have? If we are content with having the Christian teachers in state schools teach them in the ways of God in so far as they are able to do so within a system of education that refuses to acknowledge God let alone serve him, then we must also be content to have non-Christian teachers lead our children into whatever gods they serve. If we leave it up to the individual teacher to decide what will shape and direct the education they offer to children, according to their particular faith, then we cannot object if a new age or pagan teacher leads our children to the service of false gods, nor can we object of the

materialists and sensualists lead our children to worship and serve the pursuit of wealth and pleasure.

We become like what we worship and serve; we think accordingly, and see the world in the light of the god we see as providing the perspective, the worldview, the faith by which we live. Those who serve Christ will become like Christ, will lead others to seek Christ, will see the world in the light of Christ. Those who worship other gods will do the same; seeing the world in the light of their gods, seek to lead others to worship their gods, teach and instruct children to become like them. After all, is that not the ultimate recognition that all teachers seek, to have their students imitate them, to become like them, to adopt their views and perspectives and way of life? Disciples, Christ told us, are not above their master. But equally, disciples are not different from their master. You can tell what someone is really like by looking at the one who is discipling them, because that is where their discipling, their education, is leading them.

Christian education is not a retreat from the world, not a denial of reality, not a protection for children from what life is really like. Christian education worthy of the name will teach children the truth about the world, and lead them to serve and worship the one from whose hand all things come. Can we really say that to teach children that this world is God's world, that he is active within it to sustain it, to nurture it, to care for it, is to protect them from reality? Can we really say that to teach children that they are made in the image of God, called to be stewards of the world God made, to look after it on his behalf, entrusted with it to explore, to investigate, to shape and mould according to our desires, subject to the norms that God has put in place, is to shield them from the truth? Can we really say that to teach children that we have all gone astray, departing from the law of God, following after other gods, corrupting, polluting and abusing ourselves, other people and the world which God has put in our care, is to isolate them from the hard facts of life? Can we really say that to teach children that the only path to life is repentance from our sin and faith in Christ, placing our trust in him alone, turning away from the idols of this world, is to close our eyes to what life is really like? How then can we **dare** to say that to teach children anything **else** than this is the truth, to claim that to lead them to look at the world without God is reality, to deny that they are whom God declares them to be, is

how we should educate our children? What then will you do for your children? What will you seek as the best education for the children of this land? An education that honours God, or an education that denies God? May God give us all the grace to see our responsibility in this matter, because we shall all be required to give Him an answer on the Great and Terrible Day of Judgement, when all the books will be open, and He alone will be our Judge.