

Holding Fast: Christian Education Across the Centuries

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Once there was a perfect classroom with perfect students and a perfect Teacher. But not for long. Both of the students broke the Teacher's only rule, and He threw them out of the classroom. Ever after, all students were prone to break rules, and they all had to study in an imperfect environment.

Only the Teacher remained perfect. He provided a way for his students to want to do right, and He ordained education as a means to help them do right. But the fallen students thought they knew the best way to educate themselves—apart from the Master Teacher.

And thus began the battle between secular education and Christian education. Christian education began in the Garden of Eden—a fact not often cited by education historians but one substantiated by Scripture.

The Bible is God's infallible textbook for life and the very essence of God's revealing Himself to man. In II Peter 1:3, the apostle says that the knowledge of God is all we need for "life and godliness." Thus, those who ignore what the Bible has to say about any matter, including education, are missing an essential element to life as God intended it.

So what does the Bible have to say about education? A lot. Both the Old Testament and New Testament are filled with examples of teachers who sometimes failed, sometimes succeeded their students: Eli; Manoah, the father of Samson; the Wise One of Proverbs; Christ with His disciples; and many others.

God often emphasizes the influence of teachers upon students. In Luke 6:40, Christ says that every student, when fully trained, will be like his teacher. In Ephesians 6:4, He instructs fathers to bring up their children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” John 14:6 identifies Christ as the source of all truth.

Yet, across the years, Christian education has struggled to find a prominent role among even the Christian community.

During the years before Christ’s birth, Jewish children were required to receive their education at the synagogues where they studied mostly the Old Testament. Synagogues also offered a more advanced form of education, mainly for boys.

Years later, during the Roman Empire, some early Christians enrolled their children in the Roman public education system. Others, however, were wary of secular education. Records reveal that Christian schools, some former Roman public schools, sprang up. Many believe that the Christians in the catacombs also established some form of Christian education.

The present Christian school movement can be understood only as a part—certainly in these times a very significant and necessary part—of the total endeavor of Christian education. A full understanding of this movement requires

an examination of the basis upon which its educational theory and practices rest: its “philosophy of education.” Accordingly there follows, first, a presentation of the basic beliefs of Christian education and, second, an application of these beliefs to the specific mission of the Christian school.

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic church opened schools of its own, some to train priests and others to focus more on grammar and the liberal arts. Though education grew to be technically separate from the church, the Catholic church continued to have a widespread influence on education.

With the Renaissance came a revived interest in learning, and schools became more accessible to the common man. Many schools were still associated with the Catholic church. Elementary schools, secondary schools, and universities slowly spread.

As learning became more and more available, it also became more and more secularized, and Scripture lost its central place in most schools. Among the few noteworthy exceptions were the Brethren schools.

Martin Luther said, “In my judgment there is no other outward offense that in the sight of God so heavily burdens the world, and deserves such heavy chastisement, as the neglect to educate children.” Luther’s educational philosophy centered in the home, but he eventually supported state cooperation in education. He saw the state’s role as helpful with compulsory attendance and financing, but he still insisted on a fundamentally Christian education with the Scriptures at the center.

In the late Middle Ages and leading up to the Reformation, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and others risked their lives to provide the common people with the Bible in their own language. Christian schools sprang up by the hundreds, and many met in secret to teach people to read the Scriptures in their native tongue. The spread of the Scriptures in the people's native tongue would soon prove integral to the Reformation.

In the wake of the Reformation, Christian schools were no longer uncommon in Europe. According to some historians, during the sixteenth century France had more than two thousand evangelical Protestant Christian schools, organized and populated largely by the French Huguenots.

In spite of the horrible persecution the Huguenots faced during the Catholic Counter-Reformation, they did not relent in giving their children a firmly Christian education. As an affront to the spread of Protestantism through Christian schools, the Jesuits established their own schools to indoctrinate children with Catholicism. Across Europe, the Protestants were slowly ousted, and the Jesuits took over.

The Jesuits' educational influence was felt not only in France but also in other countries, such as Austria, the Netherlands, and even Canada and America. Surviving the CounterReformation were some Pietistic Christian schools, mostly in northern Europe, influenced largely by John Comenius of Moravia and August Francke of Prussia.

As England's formal system of education developed, the schools were at first largely influenced by the Catholic church. The political situation fluctuated and

eventually stabilized under Protestant monarchs, and the Anglican church either took over or destroyed most schools that had once been Catholic.

Seeking freedom to worship according to conscience and wanting to give their children a thoroughly religious education, the Separatists left England for Holland and later settled in the New World. As settlers arrived in the New World, many educated their children with private tutors or apprenticeships. Church groups, including the Mennonites, Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Catholics, eventually formed their own schools, which offered essentially religious

In 1559 John Calvin himself founded a school, the Geneva Academy, and he was very influential in creating Christian schools throughout the city of Geneva. Calvin understood that for the effects of the Reformation to continue, providing children a Christian education was essential. John Knox helped form Christian schools throughout Scotland, and these schools operated in conjunction with both the church and the state.

education to their youth. The Puritans in New England attempted a community governed by religion, and thus their “public” schools were thoroughly religious.

In 1647 the Old Deluder Satan Act was passed in Massachusetts, requiring children to be taught to read and write and understand the Scriptures. Thus, the primary motivation for much of early American “public” education was to perpetuate Christianity.

During the early days of the nation, the majority of public schools in the United States, including the universities, began with a strong religious element

and continued to operate that way. Slowly, however, religious zeal waned, and movements such as modernism, individualism, and intellectualism, pushed the idea of the separation of church and state and forced true Christianity out of most schools.

Before World War II, various parochial schools, including Lutheran, Mennonite, and Amish schools, were in operation. The National Union of Christian Schools, which was formed in 1920, promoted Christian parent society schools throughout the Midwest, and Dr. Mark Fakkema, their educational director, was largely responsible for the growth of these schools. At the request of the National Association of Evangelicals, he and Dr. John Blanchard started and promoted the National Association of Christian Schools in 1946. The NACS evolved into the National Christian School Education Association in 1974 and in 1978 became the Association of Christian School International, which now represents evangelical schools.

In the middle and late 1900s, as Christian parents realized how much their children were being affected by the increasingly secular, humanistic public schools, they began to clamor for an alternative. They wanted schools with moral standards and discipline as well as a distinctive, biblical, Christ-centered approach in every subject. Pastors challenged congregations to provide Christian schools for the children so that the influence of the Bible teaching of home and church would not be nullified.

Slowly, the modern Christian school movement gained momentum. It began to flourish in the 1950s and 60s, and by the 1970s and 80s, the movement had exploded. All across the United States, faithful people were planting Christian schools, thousands of which continue today.

Several Christian colleges and universities rose to the occasion and began training teachers with a view toward Christian education. Christian publishers began producing educational texts and materials, and today many Christian textbooks are available at all grade levels—even some at the college level. Modern technology continues to make Christian education even more accessible for many families with video, satellite, and computer-based classes and curriculum.

The age-old battle between Christian education and secular education continues today. And many are wondering where Christian education is headed in the future. For Christian education to thrive, pastors must teach their congregation its importance. Universities must train quality Christian teachers. Christian textbook publishers must produce thoroughly biblical, educationally sound materials. And Christian educators must get these truths and resources into the hands and minds of the students.

Sunday schools in England and in the United States contributed greatly to the cause of Christian education. In the late 1700s the Sunday school movement began to thrive in Great Britain, with Robert Raikes being one of its most well-known leaders. Sunday schools began as a separate entity from the church with the primary goal of offering religious and moral education to poor children on Sundays. As the movement progressed, it broadened in scope to reach a larger variety of children. Sunday schools soon spread to the United States where by the nineteenth century more than 100,000 were in operation.

Above all, we must invoke God's hand of protection and blessing upon so great an endeavor. For we would surely not want the Christian to slip out of Christian education. Not on our watch.

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