

The Big Difference:

The Case for Christian Education

In the mid-1970s, veteran Adventist educator Lowell R. Rasmussen told a faculty convocation at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California: “Our big problem in promoting Christian education in earlier years was to convince church members that SDA schools were as good as those offered in the public sector. Hard evidence to the contrary dispelled that notion once and for all in favor of our schools. Our big problem today is to convince the membership that there is a significantly sufficient difference between our schools and worldly schools to justify the ever-increasing cost of Christian education.”

Two decades later, that issue remains the “big problem.” And as more and more SDA youth attend public schools, it is clear that we have not publicized to our constituencies the nature of that significant difference in compelling-enough terms to stem the tide.

A substantial number of church members blithely assume that the only difference in our schools is the tacking of religion courses onto an otherwise standard secular curriculum, holding chapel exercises, and (in boarding schools) conducting morning and evening residence-hall worships, in addition to Friday night and Sabbath services.

But they couldn't be farther from the truth!

May I suggest three major categories in which significant differences exist? (1) goals and objectives, (2) philosophy, and (3) methodology.

Educational Goals and Objectives

Public Education. The goal of public education as mandated by the state is to produce adequately functioning citizens. No more, no less. This does not ignore the fact that many public school teachers live

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**By Roger
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morally upright lives and hold personal hopes for their students that far transcend the minimal goals mandated by the state. But, in perhaps the majority of nations, they are powerless to implement these objectives because of the restrictions placed upon them by the state. The government of the United States, in particular, strictly forbids the teaching of religious principles in its public schools.

In earlier days, American public schools succeeded admirably in producing good citizens. Indeed, this institution was the single most significant factor in unifying a disparate collection of immigrants into a homogeneous nation.

Tragically, today that public system has broken down under tremendous multiple pressures, external and internal, to the point where many wonder if it can be salvaged. Illegal drugs, insubordination,

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deteriorating buildings, lack of funding, and general violence are rapidly making a mockery of a once-effective institution and creating a new endangered species—teachers.

Christian Education. Christian educators have few problems with the state's goals—they simply believe that these

goals do not (and cannot) go far enough. Christian education seeks to make its students not only good citizens of the present world—the “kingdom of grace”—but also to fit them to one day soon enter a heavenly land—the “kingdom of glory.”

Christian educators see obedience to civil powers as not only a secular duty, but also a sacred responsibility. In Romans 13:1-10, the Apostle Paul equates opposition to civil leaders with opposition to God Himself, since it was He who instituted government as necessary for a productive society.

Paul says, and Christian education teaches, that citizens are to “live peaceably with all men” and to “do that which is good” in the here and now (Romans 12:18; 13:3, KJV). They are to support the state by paying their taxes in a faithful and timely fashion. Further, they are to show respect—even honor—to the leaders of civil government.

But Christian education goes one step farther: It seeks to make good citizens not only for the present, but also for a coming world order, when “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

Paul valued highly his Roman citizenship (Acts 21:39). However, he treasured even more highly his citizenship in Christ's kingdom (Ephesians 2:19), the moral regeneration that is bestowed at the time of a Christian's “new birth” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul recognized that problems would inevitably arise from a Christian's “dual citizenship.” In any such conflict with “Caesar,” the Christian, of course, must clearly give allegiance to the demands and claims of Christ (Acts 5:29).

Citizenship in God's kingdom—whether present or future—depends upon a moral regeneration of the individual's sin-tainted character. It is in this realm that public education reveals its utter impotence. Because it excludes religious principle from the classroom, it is powerless to achieve this regeneration.

Educational Philosophy

Public education builds upon three philosophical underpinnings that are an

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anathema to Christian education: (1) *secular humanism*, (2) *naturalism*, and (3) *relativism*. As the Scriptures remind us, if a stream's source is contaminated, water drawn from it will inevitably be polluted (Job 14:4). Human beings, who by nature are "accustomed to do evil" cannot from within themselves find the power to "do good" (Jeremiah 13:23).

(1) *Secular Humanism* deifies the human intellect. (The term should never be confused with "humanitarianism"—a most noteworthy Christian ideal.) It declares, without the slightest hesitation, that the unaided human mind is the highest possible source of knowledge, as well as the test of all experience. It holds, in short, that human reason is the final court of appeal in determining the validity of any idea or ideal.

In the fifth century B.C., Sophist philosopher Protagoras summed it up well: Generic "man [and the human mind, in particular] is the measure of all things." Thus the term "Christian humanist," which is bandied about so glibly today in some Christian circles, is

seen by many language purists as a contradiction in terms, although the expression has evolved to describe some traits that Christian educators would applaud, such as individualizing instruction and creating a more humane classroom climate.

(2) *Naturalism* builds upon humanism, and declares that there must be a "natural" explanation for every humanly observed phenomenon in the universe. In other words, nothing can have a supernatural origin. Since there is no such thing as a "miracle," the acts of God in Bible times (and today, as well) can all be explained "naturally."

(3) *Relativism* brings up the rear in this false trilogy by declaring that there are no moral absolutes in the universe—everything can be viewed contextually, in relative terms. The situational ethics of Philosopher Joseph Fletcher, of 1960s fame, has become their creed.

Bible-believing educators couldn't disagree more!

Christian education respects—indeed, highly values—the human intellect, for

human beings were created in the image of God, with everything positive that this concept implies. Ellen G. White repeatedly spoke approvingly of "the kingly power of reason"—while still holding that it must be subordinated to divine inspiration and revelation, knowledge that comes directly from God through His appointed channels.

Christian education has always placed an exceptionally high value upon academics and creativity. Human beings are held in high esteem, not merely because of their high intrinsic value, but also because of the price Jesus paid at Calvary for their redemption and restoration.

Naturalism too is repudiated by Christian education because it scoffs at the existence of a supernatural God. It thus denies that God has ever intervened in human affairs, that Jesus Christ was both God and man, and that Scripture was divinely inspired. This strikes at the very heart of Christianity!

While Naturalism denies the existence and power of God, Relativism rejects His authority. It cannot coexist with divine absolutes such as the Ten Commandments and every "Thus saith the Lord!"

Educational Methodology

I once took ED 800 ("Crucial Issues in Education") at Michigan State University from an anthropologist who viewed with distaste Christian clergy in general, and who had a near-pathological hatred of Christian missionaries in particular.

Like many in his profession who had adopted the "Myth of the Happy Savage," he viewed all missionaries as perpetrators of a grave social injustice to people of developing nations. They were seen as taking the "native" partway out of his own culture, but not completely into the missionary's Western culture, thereby abandoning him in some sort of hapless no-man's-land. Needless to say, the professor and I had some interesting conversations in his office.

One day, he dropped a bombshell by announcing that he was going to break a Michigan State law that forbade discussion of sectarian religious beliefs in state-supported classrooms. "We are going to deal with a basic theological issue today—because we simply have

to,” he declared. “How you, the teacher, view the basic nature of mankind will absolutely determine how you operate, pedagogically, in your classroom.

“There are three basic theological positions regarding the intrinsic nature of human beings,” he went on. “First, many (including most in Judaism) hold that mankind’s nature at birth is basically good—though, of course, people occasionally may do some terribly stupid, even brutal, things.

“Second, many (including most behavioral scientists) believe that people are basically neutral—a sort of *tabula rasa* (‘clean slate’), and that their subsequent development depends solely on influences from their outside environment.

“Third, many (including all evangelicals and most Roman Catholics) believe that mankind’s nature is essentially evil (though, admittedly, people may occasionally do some good things).

“Now,” the professor went on, perceptively, “your performance as a classroom teacher will be determined by your *a priori* view of the nature of your students. If, for example, you see human beings as basically good, you as a teacher will focus—first if not solely—upon helping students acquire factual information.

“If, however, you see human nature as basically neutral, your first priority will be to create an environment conducive to learning, before pushing data.

“But if you view human nature as basically evil, your first priority will not be to push information or to create a good learning environment. Your first concern must be to supernaturally transform the character of the student in your classroom—before you ever think about the learning environment or the imparting of information.”

And he was right!

For committed Seventh-day Adventist teachers, character transformation is of primary concern. While they are committed to creating an ideal learning environment and recognize the importance of curricular content, they know their priorities and proceed accordingly.

Conclusion

Authentic Christian education that is worthy of its name and heritage is concerned with:

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- Educational goals and objectives: the making of a good citizen fitted for the future immortal life as well as the present earthly existence;
- An educational philosophy that rejects the foundational underpinnings of public education: Humanism, Naturalism, and Relativism; and
- An educational methodology that, first of all, focuses upon the transformation of sinful human character, and then—and only then—upon an optimum learning environment and the body of knowledge in each academic discipline.

There is, indeed, a big difference today between public education and genuine Christian education. And it is vastly far more than tacking a religion course or two onto a mainly secular educational program, or the holding of religious ser-

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vices for students and staff. Ellen White sums it up well:

“True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come” (*Education*, p. 13).

May God help us as Adventist educators to internalize that difference, and genuinely to implement it in our respective classrooms, whatever our specialty or discipline. ✍

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