

Celebrating the Vision of Christian Education

The Biblical story and education

MICHAEL GOHEEN



As followers of Jesus Christ our thinking about any subject, including the Christian school, must begin with the gospel. When Jesus emerged onto the stage of world history he proclaimed the good news that the healing power of God's kingdom had broken into the creation. The power of God to renew the entire creation was now present in Jesus by the Spirit. In his life this liberating power was demonstrated in Jesus' life and deeds, and explained by his words. At the cross he battled the power of evil and gained the decisive victory. In his resurrection he entered as the firstborn into the resurrection life of the new creation. Before his ascension he commissioned his followers to continue his mission of making the gospel known until he returned. He now reigns at the right hand of God over all creation and by his Spirit is making known his restoring and comprehensive rule through his people as they embody and proclaim the good news. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is creator, redeemer, and Lord. But until then the church has been taken up into the Spirit's work of making the good news of the kingdom known.

To understand how education is shaped by the gospel, the following three observations are important. First, the gospel is a redirecting *power*. It is not first of all religious doctrine or theology but the renewing power of God unto salvation. The gospel has become the instrument of God's Spirit to renew all the creation.

Second, the gospel is *restorative*, that is, it restores the creation. The most basic categories present in the gospel are creation, fall, and redemption. The gospel is about the restoration and renewal of the creation from sin. In the history of the western church redemption has often been misunderstood to be salvation *from* the creation rather than salvation of the creation. As the British New Testament scholar N T Wright has put it: "Very often people have come to the New Testament with the presumption that 'going to heaven when you die' is the implicit point of it all... They acquire that viewpoint from somewhere, but not from the New Testament." Bound up in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the understanding that Christ is restoring and renewing the good creation that has been infected by sin.

Third, the gospel is *comprehensive* in its scope. The gospel Jesus announced was a gospel of the kingdom. Surprisingly even though this was the central category of Jesus' proclamation and ministry it has often disappeared into obscurity. The result has been a greatly reduced scope of salvation, limited to humanity, even human souls. Scripturally, the kingdom is about God's reign over his entire creation. In other words, the kingdom stresses the all-encompassing nature of the salvation Jesus embodied, announced, and

accomplished. The gospel which forms the lens through which we look at Christian education is the *power* of God through which the exalted Christ, on the basis of his death and resurrection, *restores all of life* by his Spirit to again live under his authority and word.

The Bible as one unfolding story of redemption

This gospel stands as the centre and climax of the biblical story. If we are to understand the biblical purpose of education we must understand that the Bible tells *one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and sin*. One way to illustrate that is to describe the Bible as one play that unfolds in six acts. The acts are as follows:

Act One: *God creates his world as a kingdom*

Act Two: *Sin corrupts God's kingdom*

Act Three: *God sets out to restore his kingdom in Israel*

Act Four: *God accomplishes the restoration of his world in Jesus' kingdom mission*

Act Five: *The church continues Jesus' kingdom mission*

Act Six: *God completes his kingdom restoration*

This illustration highlights that there is a narrative unity, one story that binds all the parts together. It also shows us that there is progressive, unfolding structure.

The problem has been that we often don't understand the Bible as one unfolding story. A learned Hindu scholar once complained that Christians have misrepresented the Bible. In his words: "As I read the Bible I find in it a quite unique interpretation of universal history, and therefore, a unique understanding of the human person as a responsible actor in history. You Christian missionaries have talked of the Bible as if it were simply another book of religion. We have plenty of these already in India and we do not need another to add to our supply." His complaint is that the Bible tells one unfolding story about the world, the whole world – universal history, the true story of the world – yet Christians have reduced it into a book of religious or theological truths.

How has this happened in our churches? The one story of the Bible is broken up into little bits. Theological types break the Bible up into little theological proof-texts and reconstruct the truths into a systematic theology. Others use devotionals to break the Bible into little devotional bits that give immediate comforting promises and challenging exhortations. Others break the Bible into little moral bits that provide moral guidance. The problem is serious; this is not simply a matter of misin-

interpreting parts of scripture. It is a matter of which story is shaping our lives? Some story will shape our lives. When the Bible is broken up into little bits – theological, devotional, spiritual, moral bits – then these bits can be nicely absorbed into the reigning cultural story with all its idols! One can be theologically orthodox, devotionally pious, and morally upright and yet be significantly shaped by the idolatrous western story. The Bible loses its forceful and formative power by being absorbed into the more ultimate cultural story.

Today the modern story of our culture is losing steam. It is an ideal time to offer the biblical story as an alternative. As Brian Walsh puts it:

If the tale of capitalist progress is beginning to fray at the edges then perhaps this is an evangelistically opportune time for Christian education to offer another story – one that replaces the self-salvation of economic progress with the tale of the coming kingdom of redemption.

We will be unable to offer the biblical story as ‘another story’, indeed the true story, if we have no sense of its narrative unity!

Witness to the Kingdom: Our place in the Biblical story

We must not only know the Bible as one unfolding story of redemption, we must also know our place in that story. The Old Testament looked to a time when the kingdom of God would be ushered in, in fullness. This was the goal of God’s redemptive work. When Jesus emerged he announced the arrival of the kingdom yet it did not come as expected. Examining the gospels and listening to Jesus we hear that the kingdom of God is *already* here but *not yet* arrived. What can this mean? If my wife tells me that our guests from out of town are already here but not yet arrived I would wonder what was being said. How can the kingdom be already here but not yet arrived?

I spent one course in theological seminary looking at all the passages in the gospels that said ‘the kingdom was already here’ and then at the passages that said ‘the kingdom is not yet arrived’. But I don’t remember the professor pointing out two very important things. First, how strange this is. The disciples couldn’t understand it and struggled with it. But more importantly, why God did it this way. What is the significance of the ‘already-not yet’ time period of the coming kingdom?

First we have been given a foretaste of the kingdom. The gospels often compare the kingdom to a feast, a banquet. When the end comes we will enjoy the full banquet of the kingdom. However, the church has been given a *foretaste* of that kingdom banquet. If I go home and smell spaghetti cooking, and I take a quick bite, have I had supper? Yes and no. Yes I have tasted supper; but it tells me that more is on the way. We are those who have a foretaste of the salvation of the kingdom – not a sniff, but a real foretaste.

A foretaste of the kingdom constitutes us as witnesses. The reason we have been offered a foretaste of the salvation of the end is so that we can witness to that salvation. Let me offer another illustration. The people of God are like a movie preview or trailer. A movie trailer gives *actual footage* of the movie that is coming in the future *so that people will want to watch it*. The people of God are a kingdom preview. We embody the salvation of the kingdom which is coming in the future so that people will see it and want it. That is what the witness is all about. We are a sign that points to the coming of the fullness of the kingdom in the

future. We witness to its presence and its future consummation. In the church I grew up in, witness was reduced to verbal evangelism with a smattering of personal ethics. Alternatively a biblical witness is a witness to the kingdom in the whole of life.

Perhaps, then, before making the connection between witness and education it is important to say one more thing about the salvation of the kingdom of which we have a foretaste. Unfortunately, the pagan roots of our western worldview in Plato have reshaped the biblical idea of salvation.

In the Bible, salvation is the renewal or restoration of the creation. The Bible tells a story that culminates in resurrected bodies, on a new earth, living the fullness of creational life, redeemed from sin. Salvation is the restoration of the good creation and the destruction of sin. Salvation for many in the west, however, is the salvation of ethereal souls in heaven. Salvation is *escape from* the creation rather than *renewal* of the creation. Under the influence of pagan Greek philosophy we have made salvation entirely future, ethereal, vertical, and individual. In scripture, the salvation we embody is as wide as creation. It is present and future, creational, horizontal, and cosmic in scope. Salvation is the renewal of our marriages, the renewal of our families, the renewal of politics, economics, even education. Our witness is to Jesus Christ who is the creator and the redeemer of all things. Witness is the embodiment of this comprehensive salvation.

It is an ideal
time to offer
the biblical
story as an
alternative.

The Contemporary Testimony of the Christian Reformed Church entitled *Our World Belongs to God* confesses this beautifully:

The Spirit thrusts God's people into worldwide mission. He impels young and old, men and women, to go next door and far away into science and art, media and marketplace with the good news of God's grace...(32)

Following the apostles, the church is sent— sent with the gospel of the kingdom... In a world estranged from God, where millions face confusing choices, this mission is central to our being...(44)

The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world. To follow this Lord is to serve him everywhere, without fitting in, as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling world. (45)

Witness to the Kingdom and education

We can speak of the relationship between witness and education as *education for witness*. There are a number of good suggestions out there about the purpose of education – ‘education for’: education for responsive discipleship (Stronks and Blomberg); education for freedom (Fowler, Van Brummelen, Van Dyk); education for responsible action (Wolterstorff); education for commitment (Theissen). All are helpful as they point to some aspect of scripture’s teaching. I am suggesting that the word witness may be an appropriate one for our postmodern times. The task of the Christian school is to train students, transmit insight for the purpose of equipping them to faithfully witness to the gospel of the kingdom in the whole of their lives.

Now why do I speak of witness and believe it to be an important word for today? I believe that Lesslie Newbigin is right when he suggests that the western church is in an advanced state of syncretism. Too often we train our students, not to lovingly challenge the existing culture, but to accommodate themselves to it, to fit into it. Too often our goal as Christian educational institutions is to establish ourselves and gain recognition according to prevailing standards – even when those standards are derived from an alternative story. I believe we need to develop a missionary mindset. When missionaries go to another culture, they strive to recognise and challenge the underlying religious worldview that shapes the whole culture, including the language, the institutions so they won’t be conformed to it. Witness is a clash of fundamental faith assumptions as they are

embodied in the whole of life. Educations for responsive discipleship, for freedom, for responsible action, for commitment are all biblical phrases. But they can be misunderstood and read in terms of education *to fit in*. A missionary can never fit in; that is, as educational missionaries we are charged with the task of educational witness. A faithful witness, properly understood, will not be conformed to this culture. Witness means an encounter between faiths in all of life.

Christian education will not shape students who fit in but stand against the idolatry of our culture. How can we train our students to be people of hope over against the despair and consumer satiation of our culture? How can we train them to pursue justice over against the economic and ecological injustice that permeates our world? How can we teach them to stand for truth in a confident yet humble way over against the pluralism and relativism all around us? How can we teach them to offer their lives in selfless giving rather than conforming to the selfishness of today? How can we bring the gospel to bear on the purpose of education, the curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation, structures, classrooms, leadership, and each discipline so we can accomplish this purpose?

There have been two continual dangers for the Christian community. The first is to accommodate ourselves to the culture with its reigning idolatry. The second is to attempt to withdraw so we can live out our commitments in peace. Both are unscriptural. We are called to live as members of our culture, participating with love, sympathy, compassion, and justice in cultural development. However, we are to continually live out that responsibility in the light of the gospel. That will mean an encounter. And the Bible is very realistic about this. We are not to expect a final victory until Christ returns. We are to expect opposition, rejection, and even suffering. Our task is not to build the kingdom; but to be faithful witnesses to it. A faithful witness in education will challenge the idolatrous patterns of public (humanistic) education and may well bring opposition. Jesus says to his disciples, preparing them for their mission in the world: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:18-20).

Perhaps I can pull all of this together in conclusion by focussing on the centre and supreme witness of our faith – the cross of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, the cross was God’s ultimate expression of

This is a foundational article which we recommend for discussion in your staff rooms. We've added some suggestions for further reading that elaborate on the main themes of this article and the implications for Christian education: (your CTJ editors)

his love for the world. It was an act of solidarity with the sin and suffering of the world. It was an act of identification with idolaters he loved and came to save. On the other hand, the cross was God's ultimate expression of judgement on the sin and idolatry of the world. It was an act of separation from the sin and idolatry that shaped culture. It was an act of rejection and opposition to that which destroys his creation. It was therefore an act of solidarity and separation, identification and rejection at the same time. Believers called to take up the cross and follow Jesus must assume this same stance: a faithful witness (including in education) will involve both sides of the cross. On the one hand, we live in solidarity and identification with our contemporaries, our educational colleagues who are attempting to transmit insight to the next generation. Education is a good part of cultural development. On the other hand, we stand against, reject, and separate ourselves from the sinful idolatry that shapes the humanistic educational institutions of our day. Faithfulness will require this twofold stance.

Faithfulness in Christian education will require discernment and wisdom. What is creational in the western humanist educational system that can be incorporated into Christian education? How can these creational insights be separated from the idolatry that twists it? Faithfulness will also require a healthy devotional life, centred in scripture and prayer that will enable us to be rooted in Jesus Christ.

Michael Goheen
Redeemer University College
Ancaster, Ontario, Canada
ngoheen@redeemer.on.ca

Mike is associate professor in the religion and theology department of Redeemer College in Ontario Canada. He lectures in the areas of worldview studies, mission and world Christianity and biblical theology. He is also minister of preaching at First Christian Reformed Church, Hamilton and adjunct associate professor in worldview and education at Trinity Western University.

He was educated at Florida Atlantic University – BA; Westminster Theological Seminary – MA; Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto – PhD Studies; and University of Utrecht –PhD. Mike is married to Marnie and they have 4 children aged from 16-22.

Introduction to 'World View' and the Biblical drama generally

- Brian Walsh. *The Transforming Vision* (a golden oldie; still foundational)
- Albert Wolters. *Creation Regained* (excellent development of salvation story)
- Brian Walsh. *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be* (solid but very insightful)
- Brian Walsh. *Subversive Christianity* (provocative and challenging)
- Frank Gaebelien. *The Pattern of God's Truth*

Resources for Christian curriculum development

- Van Brummelen. *Walking with God in the Classroom* (a must for all new teachers)
- Van Brummelen. *Stepping Stones in Curriculum* (extensive and excellent)
- Stronks & Blomberg. *A Vision with a Task* (essential resource for Christian schooling)
- Noel Weeks. *The Christian School*
- Mark Roques. *Curriculum unmasked*
- Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (eds). *Reclaiming the Future – Australian Perspectives in Christian Schooling*
- Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (eds). *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty – towards a critique of Christianity and Christian education*
- CCS. *Primary Science Support Document*
- CCS. *Primary Studies of Society and Environment Support Document*
- CCS. *Primary English Support Document*
- CCS. *Primary and Secondary Curriculum Materials CD*

Resources for specific subject areas

- Richard Wright. *Biology Through the Eyes of Faith*
- Richard Chewning. *Business Through the Eyes of Faith*
- Ronald Wells. *History Through the Eyes of Faith*
- Ronald Wells. *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*
- Ronald Wells. *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*
- David Fraser. *Sociology Through the Eyes of Faith*
- Loren Wilkinson. *Earthkeeping* (excellent on ecology, environment and stewardship)
- Cameron Nun. *Unreal Books for Real Kids* (Chr. Pers. On literature)
- Mary Van Leeuwen. *The Person in Psychology*
- Calvin Seerveld. *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*
- Calvin Seerveld. *Rainbows for a Fallen World*
- Egbert Schuurman. *Perspectives on Technology and Culture*