

Hide It Under a Bushel? No! Education and Witness

Keynote Address

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1. If our educational endeavours are to be faithful, they must be shaped by the Scriptural story. Put another way, our schools must work in the light of Jesus Christ rather than the light of scientific rationalism or relativistic pluralism. If the Bible is to shape our lives and educational practices four things are necessary: a) We must know and feel the thrust of the story of the Bible as it moves toward its goal in Jesus Christ. b) We must know our place in that story and its significance. c) We must know the creation, fall, redemption story line. This means understanding more fully Scripture's teaching on creation, sin, and redemption and their relationship. d) We must understand how that Scriptural teaching can be brought to bear more specifically on the educational practices of the Christian school. I want to focus for a moment on the second one: Where are we at in the Christian story.

2. One way to gauge whether or not we 'feel' deeply our place in the Biblical story is by asking: 'Do you recognize the question in Acts 1:6 to be the most natural question in the world?' Initially that may sound strange but let me explain. The expectation of every Jew living at the time of Jesus was that the Biblical story would close with the climactic, immediate, dramatic, visible coming of the kingdom of God ushered in by the Messiah in the power of the Spirit. When Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, he immediately gained followers but most fell away when he did not fit their expectations. But a few disciples continued to believe and hold fast to Jesus. Even though Jesus tried to help them understand the necessity of His death, they could not comprehend it. Finally, Jesus was crucified and that little band of disciples was scattered. Three days later Jesus was alive from the dead. He gathered them again together and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. Now they were coming to see the significance of the crucifixion. Jesus had to die to defeat the sin of the world. Now the kingdom could come; now the Spirit—which the prophets portrayed as an end-time gift—could be poured out; now the end could come. Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit, the coming of the kingdom. So they ask the most natural question in the world: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" If you are filled up with the Old Testament story, living in that story, like the disciples were, you would expect the Messiah to usher in the end. The crucifixion and the humble Messiah would not fit; however, when you came to understand that (i.e. the necessity of the crucifixion) you would think that the way was now paved for the end. Now you are going to restore

the kingdom, right?

3. Jesus' answer is extremely significant. It is no doubt very perplexing to the disciples. He tells them that the end will be delayed. He also tells them the significance and meaning of that delay; in other words, what their calling is in the time before the end would be. The Spirit will be poured out and you will be witnesses.

4. The prophets portrayed the Spirit as the one who brought the salvation of the end-time kingdom. With the outpouring of the Spirit, the church now has begun to experience the salvation of the end. Let me use an example. 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 disciples—now the church—have 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.

5. Jesus makes clear that 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. A movie preview 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 (actually possess) that is coming in the future so that people will see it and want it. That is what the witness is all about. We are signs that point 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 or micro ethics—filthy five, nasty nine, or dirty dozen. Here witness is a witness to the kingdom in the whole of life.

6. Perhaps, then, before making the connection between witness and education it is important to say one more thing about the nature of salvation 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 Greek pagan 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. That is the witness of which Jesus speaks in Acts 1.

7. Now I began by asking about our place in the story. The Bible pictures a time when the final judgement and consummation has been delayed so that there is a space, an opportunity for folk to repent and believe the good news about the kingdom come in Jesus. The way that people will realize that the good news is true is by seeing a community that embodies that salvation and that good news in the whole of their lives—and this includes our schools. If we proclaim, “good news, the kingdom has come” then our contemporaries have every right to say, “Where? Show me” If our lives do not validate those words they remain empty.

8. This means that our witness is going to be a clash of ultimate faith commitments. The story that shapes our culture has placed their faith in science and technology (more recently in a laid-back pluralism) to redeem us and usher in a new world. The story of the Bible pictures a clash between the gospel and all other worldviews that ultimately culminates in the victory of the kingdom. In the West there are two fundamentally different stories; they are irreconcilable. They are different faith commitments and they will shape every part of human life—including the whole educational enterprise—in a different way. Witness means the people of God embodying an entirely different, an alternative, a contrast story—a story rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus assures the faithful church that this will mean an encounter, struggle, and probably suffering. Witness is the clash of two different ways of life shaped by two different faith-commitments.

9. Let me give a rough analogy. When European settlers came to North America they found a native culture. If you compare these two different cultures, you will find two very different ways of understanding and living in the world. The clash between these two worldviews meant that one had to give way to the other. They could not both shape the human community. When there is a clash of stories or ultimate commitments, there is only two choices: accommodate yourself to the reigning story (syncretism) or be faithful and expect a challenge, a clash. The gospel is not simply about a future, individual, spiritual salvation that has little to do with most of life. It is about a whole understanding of the world and a life shaped in every part by the good news right now. Faithfulness will mean a clash, an encounter at every point. This includes education.

10. This is what Jesus calls the disciples, the nucleus of the church to do. They were to be witnesses to the coming kingdom. They were to embody in the whole of their lives the story of the gospel *in contrast* to the reigning assumptions of the Roman world. They did; and they suffered; and the attractive alternative drew numerous converts. People were converted from understanding and living in the world according to the public doctrine of the Roman empire to understanding and living in the world according to the gospel. The church grew dramatically and began to exercise a formative influence on the Roman empire. Then something totally unexpected happened about three hundred years after Jesus; the Roman emperor converted to Christianity. The Christian faith which had been an illegal religion now became the religion of the empire. You can see what might happen to the church's task to witness! Instead of a clash, an encounter between the church's embodiment of the gospel and the Roman empire, the church now became part of that empire. The encounter was minimized as both ways of understanding the world shaped the other in a syncretistic fusion. The church took its role, its position, its place within the culture rather than challenging it in the name of Jesus. (Now this was not all bad; many good things resulted from this *symphonia*. But it is not our purpose to pursue that today.)

11. The church in the West developed its characteristic attitude toward culture during a period when it was established as one thread in the whole cultural fabric. It learned to take its part; a missionary encounter, a challenge or clash, a witness to an entirely different way of living in the world was obscured. We will not trace that story. However, we must briefly attend to one profound way that it has shaped us today. Science arose in the 17th century to be the most powerful culturally formative force in the West. Science became the undisputed authority for truth. All other authorities—including the Bible—had to be conformed to its rule. All truth claims about the world had to be judged at the bar of science and reason. This produced a dichotomy that lies at the root of our culture between facts and values, truth and opinions, knowledge and faith, public and private. This has had devastating effects on the Christian witness in education. Education is a public enterprise, shaped by the knowledge and truth of science. The gospel is confined to the realm of the private, a value, an opinion that can be held in the privacy of our homes and churches but has no right in the classroom, the courts, the media, the government, the market place. Unfortunately, Christians have too easily accepted this kind of dichotomy and have viewed the Bible through the lense of scientific rationalism rather than viewing our culture through the lense of the Bible. This dichotomy has shaped our lives rather than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

12. It is not hard to see how this has disemboweled the church's witness. Instead of standing against this dichotomy witnessing to another authority—Jesus Christ and His Word—we have accepted the

authority of scientific reason. The church in the west is similar to the church in India that accommodates the gospel to the Hindu worldview.

13. The call of the gospel to us as educators is to be witnesses to the coming kingdom in our educational institutions and practices. That is, to carry out every part of the educational enterprise in the light of the gospel over against an educational system that works in a different light. Our constant question must be: How does the gospel shape the purpose of education as over against the prevailing public doctrine? How does the gospel shape curriculum as over against the Enlightenment or Postmodern worldview? How does the gospel shape the environment or climate, the playgrounds, the structure of the class room, the relation to parents, each subject, leadership, etc. as over against the way that the prevailing worldview of our culture would shape each of these aspects. Our task is to witness to the coming of the kingdom in our schools.

14. Let me speak of the relationship between witness and education in two ways. First, education *for* witness. There are a number of good suggestions out there about ‘education for.’ For example, Stronks and Blomberg speak of education for responsive discipleship; Fowler, Van Brummelen, and Van Dyk speak of education for freedom; Wolterstorff speaks of education for responsible action; Theissen speaks of education for commitment. 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. What do I mean? I mean that the task of the Christian school is to train students, transmit insight for the purpose of equipping them to faithfully witness to the gospel in the whole of their lives.

15. 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 we are 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 worldview. I believe we need to develop a missionary mindset. When a missionary goes to another culture, they strive to recognize the underlying religious worldview that shapes the whole culture, including the language, the institutions so they won’t be conformed to it.

There are two sides to this witness. On the one side, she will want to be part of that culture, make it her home, participate in its life, contribute to a healthy development, live out her life according to the patterns of that culture, witness in ways that are familiar. Yet on the other side—and this is what I

am stressing in this talk—the missionary will not accommodate herself to the culture; that would be disastrous as the witness to the gospel would be gone. She will recognize that culture to be idolatrous. While she will want to be at home and witness to the good news in terms and patterns familiar to the people, she will also be very wary of accommodating herself to the idolatrous culture. Her antennae will be up; there will be a constant dialogue between the gospel and the culture. She will be aware of the core religious assumptions that are shaping the whole of that cultural life. Witness will bring about an unbearable tension between the gospel and the host culture. I believe we need to recover that kind of mindset. Witness is a clash of fundamental faith assumptions as they are embodied in the whole of life. Education 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 what we are educational missionaries charged with the task of educational witness. Witness, properly understood, cannot be conformed to this culture. Witness means an encounter.

16. So I speak first of all of education *for* witness: we educate to train our students to witness to the gospel over against the reigning idolatry of our culture. Second, I speak of education *as* witness. There is another danger for Christian schools. It is easy for us to hide our educational light under a bushel. Some of you may have learned the little chorus in Sunday School that I learned: ‘This little light of mine. I’m going to let it shine.’ The second verse goes: ‘Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m going to let it shine.’ That needs to be the confession of our Christian schools. It is much safer and more comfortable to withdraw into our education enclaves in distant safety from the public schools. A challenge to the dominant patterns of education may mean the loss of funding, marginalization, loss of recognition, maybe hard questions we cannot answer. However, our very institutions and processes of education ought to be witnesses *in themselves*. In other words, we do not only prepare students for witness but in the very act of educating in light of the gospel function as educational witnesses, as light to the power of the gospel. In a dark world where education is breaking down under the weight of idolatry, we need to clearly point to a different light—the light of Jesus Christ. Stuart Fowler has put it well:

We are not called to establish closed Christian communities in the world, but to penetrate as salt into the world. Our Christian communities deserve the label ‘Christian’ only so far as they facilitate penetrating this world in keeping with Jesus’ words to his father concerning his disciples in all ages: “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18).

It is valid to maintain Christian schools and colleges as manifestations of our community in Christ. They are not valid if they function within a closed Christian educational network. To be authentic they must be open to other educational communities in the world around us. We do not maintain our Christian integrity by isolating ourselves from the world around. Rather, such isolation denies our calling and falsifies our witness (Fowler 1993:24).

17. There have been two continual dangers for the Christian community. The first is to lessen the tension, the antithesis, the encounter and accommodate ourselves to the culture with its reigning idolatry. The second is, when we see the irreconcilability, to somehow 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. 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).

18. I want to make two qualifying statements lest I be misunderstood. First, I have been stressing the antithetical responsibility we have in our cultural calling. However, I do not want this to be misunderstood in simply a negative way. As Christians we are called to participate in the cultural development of the societies in which we live, not simply stand in perpetual protest. There are two sides to our responsibility—participation and antithesis. I have been emphasizing the second. The second qualification is this: I recognize that the gospel has had a salting impact on Western culture and that the encounter is not as sharp as it would be in, say, a Muslim or Hindu culture. It is precisely for that reason I stress the antithesis. It is too easy for us to forget the antithetical side of our calling when the sharpness of the encounter is reduced. Our culture is one that serves idols and has been called pagan or neo-pagan by many. That idolatry has deeply shaped our educational institutions and therefore an antithetical stance will be one side of our faithfulness.

19. 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 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.

20. This twofold stance will require discernment and wisdom. Its form will be different in each place. Discernment is not a matter of intelligence—so take heart those of you who feel like Winnie the Pooh who complained he was a bear of little brain—but of wisdom and spiritual sensitivity that comes with a close walk with Jesus Christ—Creator and Redeemer. God has granted you teachers here in the West many fine people and resources to enable you to develop that sensitivity and discernment in the educational process. The responsibility is yours to take with seriousness, hard work and prayer. May God grant you the wisdom, stamina, and courage to seek faithful educational institutions that embody the good news that God reigns.

Work Cited

Fowler, Stuart. 1993. *Communities, Organizations, and People, Pro Rege*, June.