

Surrender and Recovery of the Unbearable Tension

Michael W. Goheen

If the Christian educational community is to be faithful to the gospel in its educational endeavours it must take a stance in its culture as *critical participants*. This phrase brings out the two sides that characterize the church's engagement and encounter with its culture. *On the one hand*, the church's relationship to its culture is positive: it is part of and lives in solidarity with that culture. The Christian community lives *at home* in its context identifying itself with it. As members, fellow citizens and participants in the cultural task it learns to cherish all of its culture's created goodness. Christians are residents of the culture. *On the other hand*, the church also takes a negative stance against its culture living in opposition to it. The believing community finds itself *at odds* with its culture, rejecting and challenging the idolatry that twists and distorts its development. Christians are also dissidents within the culture. Thus, there are two sides to a faithful engagement—affirmation and rejection, participation and opposition, solidarity and separation, involvement and dissent.

This twofold posture is based on an obedient commitment to the Biblical story. A positive stance is founded on the creation mandate (Gen. 1:26-28) as well as by virtue of Christ's Lordship. Abraham Kuyper has stated this forcefully: "There is not a square inch of the entire domain of human life of which Christ the Sovereign does not say 'That is mine!'"¹ C.S. Lewis comments similarly: "There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan. . . . It is a serious matter to choose wholesome recreations."² If Christ is Lord of every human culture, its development and all areas of that culture, his followers may not withdraw but must press his rightful claims.

A positive stance alone would lead to an unfaithful accommodation and domestication to the idolatry of a culture; instead of faithful witness, the word of the gospel would be muffled by absorption. Thus, the Biblical story also mandates a negative stand. Perhaps this is most clear in

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Sovereinteit in Eigen Kring* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880), 32 (our translation). Dutch reads: "Geen mensch, Christus niet heeft (Groot Rapidsche kerk, 1967), 33-34. Christus, die aller Souverein is, niet

Paul's charges, which come in various places in his letters and in various words, to 'not be conformed to this world' (Rom.12:2). World, here, is the realm of human culture polluted by sin. The hands of humanity are dirty, and it transfers to everything they touch. Human rebellion stamps itself on every cultural product, relationship, and institution. Sin is structural, built right in, as it were, to the very constitution of cultural development by a sinful humanity. The whole of culture has been corrupted by sin to some degree. The church, therefore, must oppose what the disobedience of humanity has done to cultural unfolding.

This twofold positioning within culture has often been expressed in terms of being 'in the world but not of it.'³ The language is based on Jesus' prayer where, just before Jesus leaves to return to the Father, he intercedes on behalf of his disciples' mission in the world:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18 TNIV).

The cross—the center and supreme witness of our faith—wonderfully illustrates the two-sided responsibility of Christian participation in culture. 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. On the cross Christ totally identified with the world and at the same time totally separated himself from it. The cross, therefore, is an act of solidarity and separation, identification and rejection at the same time. Newbigin states this clearly: "The Cross is in one sense an act of total identification with the world. But in

³ It has been said that Christians are too much of the world but not enough in it—a direct contradiction of Christ's demand.

another sense it is an act of radical separation. It is both of these at the same time.”⁴ Believers called to take up the cross and follow Jesus must assume this same relation to the world: a faithful witness will involve both sides of the cross.

We must always, it seems to me, in every situation, be wrestling with both sides of this reality: that the Church is for the world against the world. The Church is against the world for the world. The Church is for the human community in that place, that village, that city, that nation, in the sense that Christ is for the world. And that must be the determining criterion at every point.⁵

Living at the Crossroads: An Unbearable Tension

Yet there is a priority to the affirmative side of our commitment to our culture. It is precisely because the church stands in loving solidarity with its culture that it takes a stand against the sin and idolatry that oppose the abundant life of good creation. God loves the creation and the cross of Christ is an expression of his judgment on the sin that has corrupted the creation. The church follows Jesus. As the fundamental faith commitments of its cultural community have a detrimental impact on the life of its people the church opposes its unjust structures. As the religious idolatry inhibits the fullness of life God intended for his children, the people of God counter its deformity. The starting point for the church’s relation to culture is God’s love for his world.

This positive affirmation does not, however, lessen the deep sense of tension the believing community will feel in relationship to the various institutions and structures of its culture.

4 Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 98.

5 Newbigin, Lesslie, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 54. Elsewhere he says: “A society which accepts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as its ultimate standards of reference will have to be a society whose whole style of life, and not only its words, conveys something of that radical dissent from the world which is manifested in the Cross, and at the same time something of that affirmation of the world which is made possible by the resurrection.” *Stewardship, Mission and Development*, Unpublished address given at the Annual Stewardship Conference of the British Council of Churches, Stanwick, June 1970, 6.

Indeed, the church will feel something of what Newbigin calls an ‘unbearable tension.’⁶ This unbearable tension is the result of being members of two communities anchored in two different stories. On the one hand, the church is a member of the cultural community that shares and is shaped by the cultural story. On the other hand, the believer is a member of the Christian community, a citizen in the kingdom of God, a people formed by the story of the Bible. The Biblical and cultural stories are two different stories, incompatible to some degree. Newbigin expresses this:

In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of the species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery of nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God’s election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. *These are two different and incompatible stories.*⁷

It is precisely in this tension that the church finds the way of faithfulness. Hendrik Kraemer urges the church in its mission in the world to take upon itself this tension. Moreover, he warns of the danger of losing this tension; it results he cautions in a tepid witness.

The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the Church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in this world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that has lost its savour.⁸

Yet the church in Western culture has lost this sense of tension necessary for faithfulness. What

⁶ Newbigin, Lesslie, *Unfaith and Other Faiths* (Unpublished lecture given as one in a series of three to the Twelfth Annual Assembly of the Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1962.

⁷ GPS, Emphasis mine.

⁸ Kraemer, Hendrik, *The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 36.

has led to this comfortable feeling of being at home in culture without the necessary accompaniment of being at odds?

Living at the Crossroads

When we understand that human life is constituted by the embodiment of a story we also begin to see an inevitable conflict for the believing community. The Christian community participates in two different communities that are shaped by *two* all-embracing and competing stories. These two stories are fundamentally incompatible and this brings a clash of worldviews at every point of our lives. Lesslie Newbigin speaks here of a ‘unbearable tension.’ To continue with Newbigin’s phraseology, which phrase characterizes the Christian community in the west today – advanced state of syncretism or unbearable tension?

The nature of conflicting and competing stories can be illustrated with a diagram “Living at the Crossroads.” The two roads are the story of western culture and the story of the Bible. They intersect in the Christian community as the church lives as part of two communities that embody these two stories. The question that is pressed throughout the class is: How can the church live faithfully in the Biblical story and at the same time be members of a community that share a different story? These two competing stories will shape the academic enterprise in different ways at every point – purpose of education, institutional form, leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, theory formation, and so on. How can we be faithful to the Bible without withdrawing from or being absorbed into the story that shapes our culture? These are always the two dangers for a minority community living in a different story than the dominant story: withdrawal or compromise, isolation or absorption, irrelevance or syncretism, ghettoization or domestication.

I have noted the little expression by Lesslie Newbigin – unbearable tension – but I have found that few students and teachers – even educational leaders – feel this tension as unbearable. Why do we not feel the pressure to either conform or withdraw to relieve the tension? And probably if we do not feel this tension, the cultural story of the west is shaping our lives more than we would like to admit. In the language of Paul, we are conformed to this world rather than transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom.12:1-2).

"Unbearable Tension"?

Why do we not experience this unbearable tension living at the crossroads between the two stories? Let me offer four possible reasons for your consideration. *First*, I believe we do not have a firm grip on the understanding of Scripture as *one* unfolding story. A learned Hindu scholar has 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 – universal history – 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 systemic theology. Others 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. Much preaching I have heard succumbs to the demands of immediate gratification. Many families use devotionals that skip all over the Bible looking for immediate applications. The problem is serious; this is not simply a matter of getting our hermeneutical method wrong or misinterpreting parts of Scripture. It is a matter of *which story is shaping our lives?* When the Bible is broken up into little bits – theological, devotional, spiritual, moral bits – then they can be nicely absorbed into the reigning cultural story with all its idols! One can be theologically orthodox and morally upright and yet be shaped by the Western story in much of his or her life and thinking. The Bible loses its forceful and formative power by being absorbed into a more ultimate story.

A *second* possible reason we do not experience this unbearable tension between two incompatible stories is because we don't have a deep sense of the religious and idolatrous roots of our cultural story. We need what may be called a missionary consciousness. Let me illustrate with the experience of a cross-cultural missionary. When a missionary goes to a culture where the controlling faith assumptions are rooted in a religion hostile to the Christian faith she is very

careful to analyze that culture with a view to understanding its controlling assumptions and foundational religious beliefs. She is aware that in a Hindu culture, say, the cultural plausibility structure or story will be incompatible with the gospel. It is shaped by religious idolatry so there will be a conflict between the gospel and Hindu cultural assumptions. She will be very aware of the antithesis. But at the same time she will seek to embody the gospel in a faithful way by looking for currents in that culture that affirm creation. Since she is aware of her task to witness to the gospel in a culture that is at odds with the gospel she will be careful not to be absorbed into its controlling assumptions. But since she wants to be good news to that people she will want the gospel to be at home there as well. She lives with the tension of the gospel being at home and at odds with the cultural story. This constant awareness will produce in her an inner dialogue between the Scriptural story and the cultural story that will ever guard against the twin dangers of irrelevance or syncretism, withdrawal or absorption. She learns to live so fully within both traditions that the debate between them is internalized. As a Christian she is committed to live fully in the Biblical story making that story, its language and models her language and models and the clue to her story so she can see the her host culture through the lens of the Bible. This inner dialogue becomes a way of life, a state of mind, a constant approach in her relating to culture.

With this missionary consciousness her antennas are up, sensitive to deep-rooted idolatry that shapes her host culture. This missionary consciousness has been blunted in western culture. The primary reason is that we do not have critical distance from our culture. As the Chinese proverb says: if you want to know about water don't ask a fish. Perhaps a further reason is an unconscious assimilation of one of two myths: the myth of a Christian culture (one nation under God) or the myth of secular neutrality. In other words, our culture does not pose a threat to the gospel since it is either Christian or has been shaped by the gospel or is neutral. The idols of our culture are then hidden. The antithesis is blunted and we are much more easily absorbed into the cultural story.

Expansion on this last point opens up the *third* reason we have lost an unbearable tension between the Scriptural and cultural story. This is what I call the Christendom *mindset*. Note I said 'mindset.' Historical Christendom was shattered by the emergence of the modern world. The Enlightenment dealt the final blow to the partnership of church and state. However, the

mindset lingers.

The thesis of H. Richard Niebuhr in *Gospel Against the World* (Niebuhr, Pauck, and Miller 1935) is quite insightful in this regard. In this little book with two other authors, he describes what takes place when the gospel and church are part of a culture for a long period of time. When a church is young and a minority its identity is defined by mission and a critical engagement with culture. This missional understanding issues in a community with a distinctive identity and a rigorous evangelization of the culture. Gradually, in a Christendom setting a working arrangement with the powers and institutions of society develops as the gospel permeates more and more of culture. There is a lessening tension between church and culture since the culture is not as pagan as it once was. The final state is one of corruption, where the church is domesticated and absorbed into the culture. This end result is one of cultural captivity.

In Christendom the church is an established church. The redemptive tension, the prophetic-critical stance of the church in relation to culture diminishes. The church becomes part of the constellation of established power within the state, part of the status quo. It takes its place alongside of the political, economic, military, social, and intellectual powers within the empire. The church's identity is shaped by cultural story rather than the Scriptural story. The church becomes an arm and instrument of state policy rather than an instrument for God's redemptive purposes. Its task is to contribute to the maintenance of the existing political and social order – one nation under God. It is to uphold and support the status quo rather than prophetically critique it for after all – in God we trust. An established church is domesticated by the culture. The stories or worldviews of the church and the broader society become one. Critical engagement is lost. There is the assumption that the gospel and church are at home in a Christian culture.

Paradoxically the Christendom mentality remains very operative in the modern or secular society. It is our Christendom heritage that has led us down this path of privatization. The church has been established as part of the status quo, as part of the constellation of powers for so long it knows of no other relationship to culture. As an arm of the state the church still has its role to play. However, it has been greatly reduced, since the Enlightenment, to a privatized institution that cares for the religious needs of its members and perhaps influences the individual morality of the nation. She may market her religious wares to religious consumers but the public life of

the nation – politics, economics, education, media – is shaped by an accepted framework of shared rationality. Her acceptance of banishment to the private realm constitutes an absorption into and capitulation to the dominant cultural story.

There is a *fourth* reason that the tension between the Scriptural and cultural story has been lessened. It is closely related to what has just been said; however, it more specifically relates to the reformational tradition that has shaped CSI schools (in North America) for years. In other words, how has the Christendom mindset been operative in the reformational tradition. I am referring to the eclipse of the antithesis by an emphasis on creation. This is especially curious since the antithesis has been so central to the writings of reformational scholars.

Two poles have governed the articulation of the reformational worldview. The first is creation – creation order, creational mandate, the goodness of creation, and so forth. The second pole has been the antithesis – that is, the struggle between two regimes for the realm of creation, two dominions for the domain of creation. John Calvin referred to these poles with his kingdom of creation and the kingdoms of sin and redemption. Al Wolters refers to these two poles with the words structure and direction (Wolters 1985:72-95). It is my sense that in Christian school circles the former of these two poles – creation – has dominated and perhaps even eclipsed the second. Participation in the cultural task or creational mandate has not been sufficiently placed in the context of a life and death struggle for the direction of that cultural development.

It is a combination of these factors – the fragmentation of the Scriptural story, a comfortable co-habitation in a seemingly harmless culture, a Christendom mindset that accepts a privatized role, and an eclipse of the antithesis by an emphasis on creation – that has led to a loss of the unbearable tension between the Scriptural and cultural story.

Faithfulness to the gospel in any realm of life, including the educational sphere, will require a deepening experience and understanding of the incompatibility between the two stories and the impossibility of embodying both of them. One cannot serve both Christ and the idols of western culture. As Jesus has put it: ‘No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon’ (Matthew 6:24).

Put in the context of our educational task, faithfulness to the gospel will require us to discern the way the Scriptural story and the way the western story shape the educational enterprise. We

cannot embody both stories. As educational leaders, we must ask how can we be faithful in our schools to the story of the Bible.

Living Faithfully at the Crossroads

How does one live faithfully at the crossroads? How does one discern what is faithfulness to the gospel and what is cultural captivity? This is a highly complex matter, but I would like to make only a few brief comments. Missionaries and missiologists have been struggling with questions of faithfulness to the gospel in a pagan culture a lot longer and harder than anyone else in the church in the West. Today there is huge body of literature on contextualization, as it is called, that deals with this issue and it is of enormous importance in helping us with this problem. It would be hard to even summarize the most salient points of the discussion so perhaps the best way to proceed would be by way of an example from the early church. The early church was dominated by a missionary self-consciousness – they existed to witness to the coming kingdom. They had their birth in the Roman Empire. They knew that the Roman Empire was pagan – Roman society was shaped by idolatry. They knew that idolatrous faith commitments dominated and shaped the whole public life of Roman culture. How, then, could they be faithful in the Roman Empire? How could they be both at home and challenging to their contemporaries?

The primary social institution of the Roman Empire was the *oikos*--the household. It was a very different institution than in our culture. It was the basis for social ties that went beyond the family; it was the basis for the Roman economy and shared in political authority. It included extended family as well as economic relationships. As it existed it was shaped by sinful oppression. The place of the woman, children, and slaves was often a little more than chattel. It was structured on the worst form of oppression. How should the early church embody their faith? Should they simply affirm this institution? Should they reject the *oikos*, the household as a perverted and oppressive institution? In fact, it became precisely this distorted and oppressive institution that opened up the witness of the church. Relationships within the *oikos*--husband to wife, father to children, masters to slaves – were re-formed, reshaped on the basis of the gospel. It reshaped a new household which was God's household (I Tim.3:15). The point is that they adopted the social structures of their day. They discerned the idolatrous currents of death in those

structures--hierarchical and domineering authority, oppression, patriarchy, inhumanity, etc.--and rejected them and in that way they restructured the *oikos*. On the other hand, they discerned creational currents of life in those structures--the marriage relationship between husband and wife, the family relationship between parents and children, the economic relationships between master and slave. They put those relationships on a new foundation--the foundation of the gospel. It subverted the institution from within but maintained the creational relationships involved. The end result was a newly shaped institution that affirmed the creational relationships but rejected the idolatrous distortion.

Contextualization studies are challenging us to ask similar questions today. What are the idolatrous currents of death and creational currents of life evident in our modern/postmodern culture? Faithful educational leaders today will increasingly be called to give visionary leadership that is deeply rooted in the Scriptures. The school as it exists in North America is an institution deeply formed and shaped at every point – from institutional structures to leadership patterns to pedagogy to curriculum to the theoretical formulations of various disciplines – by the idolatrous currents of modernity and, increasingly, postmodernity. The Christian community is called to transmit her story and insight into creation to the next generation and equip that generation for faithful witness. Should she simply affirm the school as it exists in the west? Should she reject the institution of the school? Or should she seek to reshape that institution according to the story of the Scripture? The example of the early church would suggest the latter. But it will take bold, committed, discerning, visionary leaders to give direction in the light of the gospel. It will take leaders who know the Biblical and western story well.

The reformational tradition that has shaped the CSI schools for decades is a precious legacy. But, as with all traditions, if we are to remain faithful to the cherished insights of our tradition, it must be continually reformed and reshaped in new contexts. The reformational tradition emerged during the modern period in a Christendom setting in Holland. Today we are living in an increasingly postmodern time which is increasingly like the missionary situations of the past. How can we update and renew our tradition in this postmodern, missionary situation? It will be a difficult and painful struggle, yet one that ought to be pursued communally in joy and boldness. In the sphere of education it will require educational leaders who will not simply ride the wave of a past tradition but will forge new paths of faithfulness in the light of Scripture.

An illustration may clarify this. In the early part of this century there were a number of towns in England whose chief industry was shipbuilding. One of the professions in this town was that of a ‘compass-adjustor.’ After a ship was built and the compass installed it was necessary to employ a skilled professional to adjust the compass in order to compensate for the magnetic attraction of the steel-work in the ship. The ship was taken into a quiet bay, away from anything that affected the compass, and the adjustment was done. After the compass was rightly adjusted the ship could go to the ends of the earth and know that the compass was giving him true directions. What is desperately needed in our day is educational leaders who are compass-adjustors rather than simply ship-captains. What I mean is that we need educational leaders who do more than rely on ‘compasses’, that is, directions that are already set. We need leaders who will take the time to gain the wisdom and discernment necessary, the understanding of western culture and Scripture to become clear about educational direction and goals. A ship’s captain simply relies on the compass-adjustment of another. A compass adjustor takes the time to set direction of the ship.

Three Requirements for Visionary Educational Leaders

As educators we gather during this conference *coram Deo*, ready to hear His word afresh on our educational task. As educational leaders we stand before the throne of God ready to offer our hearts in prompt obedience to his bidding for education in this time. Three requirements are necessary for faithful and visionary education leaders that would carry out their task *coram Deo* and would be educational compass-adjustors. *First*, faithful educational leaders must have a growing sense of the Scriptural story as *one* story and as *their* story. This must be the most real story of their lives. This must be the lens through which western culture is interpreted. This must be the compass that gives direction to the educational task. This must be the foundation upon which the Christian educational task is constructed. This can only happen, it seems to me, if these leaders are deeply immersed in reading and struggling with the Scriptures as one story and asking what is our place in the story?

Second, faithful educational leaders must have a deepening sense of the religious direction of western culture. What are the idolatrous currents that shape western culture? What are the

creational currents that continue to be evident in western culture? In what way has western culture been shaped by its long legacy with the gospel? This will require leaders who know their culture well in terms of its foundational currents.

Finally, faithful educational leaders will need growing wisdom and skill in living at the crossroads, discerning what a faithful embodiment of the gospel in the educational setting would look like. It will require a sanctified imagination that envisions what a faithful enfleshment of the gospel in a school might look like in a postmodern world. This would require a sense of the >unbearable tension= of living at the crossroads between the Scriptural and cultural story that would lead, in turn, to an inner dialogue between the gospel and present educational forms in the west today. It is only out of this dialogue that there can emerge educational forms and practices faithful to the gospel.

None of this can happen apart from prayer. I mention in passing here something that I believe is much more important than a brief comment deserves. In the reformational tradition, often a fear of pietism has led to a loss of true Biblical piety and especially the importance of fervent prayer. In Luke it is clear that God=s kingdom comes as the Spirit works in response to prayer. Christian educational leaders who are to be faithful in such a complex and difficult calling must be above all men and women of prayer. And on that note I end with the prayer of Paul for the Colossians which is an appropriate prayer for educational leaders.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:9-14).

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