

Who Turned Out the Light? Educational Light in a Dark World

Keynote Address

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1. I want to take as a theme text for this address Philippians 2:14-16 and especially focus on the phrase ‘shine like stars in the universe as you hold (fast/forth) the word of life.’ Paul characterized the Roman empire as a “crooked and depraved generation” and challenged the Philippian church to shine like stars in that context. Today we live increasingly in dark times and so this call is urgent to us. Let me open with a parable of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a nihilist that lived at the end of the 19th century. With penetrating insight he saw that when God is eliminated from the life of a culture there is only darkness—no right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. The world of the late 19th century was not ready for his message. He went insane. Today, however, the words of Nietzsche appear to be prophetic. He has become a best seller in the university bookshops and is hailed as “the patron saint” of postmodernity. Listen to his parable.

2. “Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the market place calling out unceasingly: ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he caused a great deal of amusement. Why! Is he lost? said one. Has he strayed away like a child? said another. Or does he keep himself hidden? Is he afraid of us? Has he taken a sea voyage? Has he emigrated?—the people cried out laughingly, all in a hubbub. The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. ‘Where is God gone?’ he called out. ‘I mean to tell you! *We have killed him*—you and I! We are all his murderers!. . .Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker?. . . Do we not hear the noise of gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell divine putrefaction?—for even Gods putrefy! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!. . . Shall we not ourselves have to become gods, merely to seem worthy of it? There never was a greater event . . . Here the madman was silent and looked again at his hearers; they also were silent and looked at him in surprise. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, so that it broke in pieces and was extinguished. ‘I come too early,’ he said, ‘I am not yet at the right time.’ This prodigious event is still on its way, and is travelling—it has not yet reached men’s ears. . . This deed is as yet farther from them than the farthest star—and *yet they have done it!*’ It is further stated that the mad man made his way into different churches on the same day, and there intoned his *Requiem aeternam Deo*. When led out and called to account, he always gave the reply: ‘What are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and monuments of God?’ (‘The Madman’, from *The Joyful Wisdom*).

3. There is much interesting in this parable that we could examine. I want simply to call your attention to three things. First, Nietzsche says that we (in Western culture) have killed God. What could he possibly mean? He was referring to the growing atheism or the practical atheism (living as if God does not exist) that was the result of enthroning the authority of autonomous reason in science as an ultimate authority. Science reduced what was real to what could be captured in the scientific method. Since God is not open to empirical verification his existence is open to question; and in any case he does not play any kind of significant role in the functioning of society. Perhaps this is best seen in the way the gospel is kept out of public life by the spurious application of separation of church and state. Second, Nietzsche sees the terrible consequences. "Has it become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker?" He rightly recognized that without God there can be no meaning to history, no standards for true and false, no right and wrong, no good and bad. While many continued to live on the capital of the Christian faith Nietzsche saw clearly that the death of God in Western culture meant nihilism. He died an insane man. Third, Nietzsche saw churches as monuments and tombs of God. They were simply relics of a bygone era when people did believe in God. They were as fossils: the remains of something that was once alive.

4. The full implications of that event had not yet reached the ears of his contemporaries, Nietzsche rightly saw. However, it has reached the ears of the masses at the beginning of the 21st century in contemporary society. Postmodern society grows increasingly cold and dark as it struggles to come to terms with an absence of meaning in history. Paul says to the Philippian church in the darkness of Roman idolatry: Shine like stars. Paul says to the Western church in the darkness of postmodern culture: Shine like stars. How did we get to this contemporary darkness?

5. We need to return to the Enlightenment of the 18th century. At that time western humankind believed the light had gone on; they believed they now possessed the light in which they could rightly understand and control the world. They believed that the light they now possessed would light the way to a new world of freedom, justice, and prosperity. They had discovered the light of the world. All they needed to do was faithfully follow that light. What was that light?

6. This was best expressed at the time in the couplet of Alexander Pope: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night; God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light." The light was the scientific method that had been formulated by Newton. Human reason, without the guidance of God's revelation, was able to employ the scientific method to come to a true understanding of the world. Human beings

could understand the world through the scientific method; understanding the world, they could improve it. '*Scientia potestas est*' - 'Knowledge is power.'

7. This confidence in the scientific method remained rather limited in scope at first; only the scientists were really aware of the significance of Newton. However, two things happened that produced a widespread confidence among the masses that the scientific method was the key to future human happiness. The first was the incredible results of the scientific method. The new physics went from victory to victory in explaining all kinds of problems, anomalies and mysteries. As never before, a method produced spectacularly tangible results and produced them quickly. The second was the religious wars of the same time period. Unfortunately, at the same time that the scientific method was producing unity among scientists about the truth of the physical world, the gospel was producing terrible bloodshed. The common person drew the obvious conclusion: the gospel produces hatred, bloodshed, and division while the scientific method produces unity, agreement, and cooperation. Throughout the 18th century this confidence in the scientific method as the centre of human culture became widespread.

8. There are several other characteristics of this period of the Enlightenment that we need to observe. First, the scientific method was applied to human society. If the scientific method could produce such spectacular results in physics and astronomy, then surely its application to politics, society, economics, and education would produce a similar result. The Christian faith had produced bloodshed. Perhaps a scientific study of politics, economics, society, and education would lead to a consensus. This is the birth of the human sciences. Confidence is placed in science to produce a new social order. Second, this optimism in science was tied to an historical story of progress. Western society was moving inexorably toward a new world. It was simply a matter of time before the power of science would bring Western humankind to the heavenly city of man.

. . . the conviction that man was steadily and inevitably approaching entrance into a better world, that man himself was being progressively improved and perfected through his own efforts, constituted one of the most characteristic, deep-seated, and consequential principles of the modern sensibility. Christianity no longer seemed to be the driving force of the human enterprise. For the robust civilization of the West at the high noon of modernity, it was science and reason, not religion and belief, which propelled that progress. Man's will, not God's, was the acknowledged source of the world's betterment and humanity's advancing liberation (Tarnas 1991:322f.).

Third, it is here that we find the birth of modern education. Again, listen to the words of Richard Tarnas:

Proper education of the human mind in a well-designed environment would bring forth rational individuals, capable of understanding the world and themselves, able to act in the most intelligent fashion for the good of the whole. With the mind cleared of traditional prejudices and superstitions, man could grasp the self-evident truth and thus establish for himself a rational world within which all could flourish. The dream of human freedom and fulfillment in this world could now be realized. Mankind had at last reached an enlightened age (Tarnas 1991:281).

Education had an extremely important role to play in realizing this Enlightenment dream. Take children out of their home where they are being taught the Christian faith, put them into rational centres (schools), put a rational expert (teacher) in charge of a large number of students (class), and fill their minds with good rational information. This would produce the heavenly city of the Enlightenment dream. And so the entire educational enterprise was shaped by this understanding of the world and it has shaped education to this day—in its purpose, curriculum, pedagogy, subjects, etc.

9. The next century seemed to confirm the dream; the light appeared to burn even brighter. The Industrial Revolution produced a marriage of science and technology that gave humanity the power to control the forces of nature. In a famous essay by Lynn White on the ecological disaster of the latter 20th century, he writes that the marriage of science and technology “may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture, and perhaps in non-human terrestrial history as well.” (White 1967:1203). Technology demonstrated the practical value of science and appeared to be producing the world promised by Enlightenment philosophers. This confidence peaked, in North America anyway, in the secular decade of the 1960s. Listen to the unbelievably arrogant words of Emmanuel Mesthene at the 1966 Church and Society conference in Geneva:

We are the first . . . to have enough of that power actually at hand to create new possibilities almost at will. By massive physical changes deliberately induced, we can literally pry new alternatives from nature. The ancient tyranny of matter has been broken, and we know it. . . We can change it (the physical world) and shape it to suit

our purposes. . . By creating new possibilities, we give ourselves more choices. With more choices, we have more opportunities. With more opportunities, we can have more freedom, and with more freedom we can be more human. That, I think, is what is new about our age. . . We are recognizing that our technical prowess literally bursts with promise of new freedom, enhanced human dignity, and unfettered aspiration (1967:484f.).

10. But during this same decade of the 60s another movement was afoot which would prove to be far more important for the future. This was the emergence of rock music, the drug culture, the hippie movement, student uprisings, the development of a counter-culture that shouted a loud 'NO' to the light of science and technology. In his book *Making of a Counterculture* Theodore Roszak argues that the "youthful counter-culture have, in a variety of ways, called into question the validity of the conventional scientific worldview, and in so doing have set about undermining the foundations of the technocracy" (1969:205). The whole counterculture movement of the 1960s was a loud and angry protest against the light of the Enlightenment. Buffalo Springfield sang at this time: "Somethin's happenin' here. What it is ain't exactly clear." They had begun to see what would become more and more clear: the idolatry of science and technology has fatal effects—ecological, psychological, economic, military, social. The light of science, instead of leading to the prosperous heavenly city of human endeavour, was leading to devastation.

11. The most characteristic feature of our contemporary postmodern situation is its loss of confidence in big stories of progress. Jean Francois Lyotard has given the most well-known definition of postmodernity: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernity as incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984:xxiv). Metanarratives are big stories of progress; we are progressing toward a world of freedom, justice, and prosperity on the basis of science and technology. Postmodern humanity does not believe these stories any more. Listen to the words of a young high school fellow—a student in a *Christian* secondary school.

Generation X is our title. It's what I am. It's how I feel. We're a generation of people who will soon inherit a planet that our forefathers (and mothers) have trashed into uselessness. Our world, or at least the human race, probably won't survive until the year 2100, because our parents wanted more, they wanted it faster, and they wanted it "better."

If you'd rather listen to a more scholarly voice listen to Carl Jung:

I believe I am not exaggerating when I say that modern man has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and as a result has fallen into profound uncertainty. . . . I realize only too well that I am losing my faith in the possibility of a rational organisation of the world, the old dream of the millennium, in which peace and harmony should rule, has grown pale.

12. Let us return to the words of Buffalo Springfield: 'Somethin's happenin' here. What it is ain't exactly clear.' The light of science does not have the capacity to answer that question. What about the light of the gospel? In that light I think things are somewhat more clear. These growing problems are signs of the failure of our idols. We have placed our faith in human ability, science, and technology to redeem us, to produce a new social order. They have failed and their weakness is becoming clearer. The light of the Enlightenment is growing dim.

13. The famous Hungarian philosopher of science Michael Polanyi used a powerful image to describe the latter part of the 20th century (1958:265f.). It is quite appropriate to our theme of light! He said the explosion of modernity (the burst of light; from the Enlightenment to the 20th century) is the combustion of the flame of rationalistic humanism and the oxygen of the Christian worldview. Our postmodern condition is the result of the burning away of the oxygen of the gospel by the flame of scientific humanism. However, with the burning away of the oxygen—what Nietzsche called the death of God—the light of scientific humanism is flickering and about to die. A flame needs oxygen to burn.

14. It is not surprising that the failure of the Enlightenment dream has large implications for education. Voices complaining about the failure of public education are common enough. An education system built on the shifting sands of idolatry is bound to fail. Should we be surprised to hear that Johnny Can't Read? But the voices are concerned not only with the *quality* of education; they are also probing the *purpose* of education. Neil Postman speaks of 'the end of education' (1995). If the whole educational enterprise was shaped by the Enlightenment, and that view of the world is failing, the question arises as to the role of schools. If there are no more big stories of progress to give meaning to education, then what is its purpose? If the role of education was to train rational citizens to contribute to the building of the rational world of justice, freedom, and prosperity but we no longer believe that, then why have schools? The province of Quebec recognized that the

foundations of culture were shifting and that this meant a wholesale shift in understanding education. They commissioned J.F. Lyotard to address the question of the role of the university in a postmodern context. They rightly recognized that the whole shape of education is always tied to your understanding of the world. In other words, the whole structure of the educational enterprise embodies a worldview, a story about the world. The educational systems of the past couple hundred years have embodied the story of the Enlightenment: ‘We are progressing toward a better world on the basis of science and technology.’ If that story has been discredited, why have education in a postmodern world? Some are offering the following answer. Education is to equip students with information and the necessary skills—especially computer and information technology—to compete in the jungle of the market. The school is a vendor of useful information and marketable skills that will enable the privileged to compete in the market place. But surely this answer cannot satisfy!

15. We return briefly to our text. Paul describes the Roman culture as a “crooked and perverse generation.” If you were to turn to Deuteronomy 32 you would find the origin of those words. A crooked and perverse generation is a culture that has turned from the living God to serve dead idols. It is a society that finds its centre not in Yahweh but in idolatry. That was the Roman empire in which the Philippian church lived. That is the postmodern world in which we live. Nietzsche said that churches in a postmodern world were monuments, relics of bygone era, fossils. Paul has a very different view. ‘Shine like stars as you hold the word of life.’ In the midst of darkness, let the light of the gospel shine.

16. He says shine like stars but continues that this can only happen if we “hold the word of life.” If you had your NIV Bibles open in front of you, you would see that they translate this ‘Shine like stars in the universe as you hold *out* the word of life.’ Next to the word ‘out’ there would be a notation that this could be translated ‘hold on to.’ The sense is then: Shine like stars in the universe as you hold *on to* the word of life.’ Hold on to, hold out; hold fast, hold forth. The four most common translations are split. The NIV and KJV translate hold on or hold fast. The RSV and NASB translate hold out, hold forth. I would suggest that Paul chose the word precisely because it has both meanings. It is our analytic mindset that has to force the choice. It is more common in Eastern cultures to choose words that have a fullness of meaning. The implication then is: We shine like stars *both* as we hold fast and hold forth, hold on to and hold out, the word of life.

17. May I rephrase what I believe Paul is saying? In the midst of a culture whose story is failing, live fully in an alternative story, a different story, a contrast story, a counterstory. That is what it means

to hold fast or hold on to the word of life. But we are also to invite others into this alternative story, this counterstory, this story that differs from the Enlightenment. That is what it means to hold forth or hold out the word of life. The Bible also tells a story about the world. It tells us that through tremendous conflict the world is moving toward the kingdom of God. The death and resurrection of Jesus have revealed and accomplished that end. We can bank on it. That is the true story of the world. Paul calls us to hold on to that good news and live fully in the story of the Bible and to invite others to live in that story with us.

18. To live in the story of the Bible and invite others into it, we must shake ourselves free of the idolatry that clings to us. In other words, we must repent from the idolatry of the failing story of our culture. In our text, Paul exhorts the Philippian church to be ‘pure children of God.’ The word Paul uses for pure carries the idea of undiluted. It is applied to wine when it is pure wine, i.e. undiluted with water. It is applied to gold and other metals when it is pure gold, i.e. undiluted with impurities. Paul is saying, to shine like stars in a crooked and depraved generation, the Philippian church was to be pure, i.e. undiluted by the idolatry that permeated the Roman empire. If we are to shine like stars in the whole of our lives, including our educational task, we must be pure, i.e. undiluted with the idolatry that permeates Western culture.

19. Lesslie Newbigin has remarked and demonstrated that the church in Western culture is in “an advanced state of syncretism” (1983:23). Syncretism is the union of two incompatible worldviews. Each is compromised. Let me give you an example: in many Hindu temples throughout India, the Hindu priests offer a sacrifice to Jesus on Christmas day to celebrate the birth of this great guru. Few of us would rejoice in the fact that this is the first step of the conversion of India! The gospel has been accommodated and absorbed into the Hindu worldview. It has been compromised. That is syncretism. Newbigin suggests that the same thing is true of the Western church. We too have accommodated ourselves to the idols of western culture. Instead of offering a different story to our contemporaries, we have been absorbed into the same story.

20. Let’s bring this to bear on our Christian schools. We live in a culture in which the story that has shaped our culture for several hundred years is failing. The educational system tied to that story is also failing. The call to the Christian community in terms of its educational task is to embody a different story in our schools. The Enlightenment dream has shaped the purpose of education, the curriculum, the pedagogy, the structures, the subjects. The task of the Christian school is to reject the idolatry that has shaped the humanistic schools and embody a different story, a contrast story. The

story of the Bible is to shape the purpose we educate our children, the curriculum, the pedagogy, the structures, each subject, and more. The problem is that we are not as 'pure' (to use Paul's term) as we think we are. The light of the Age of Reason has shaped our schools far more than we care to admit. I believe the gospel's call in education is far more radical than most of us are willing to admit. In a postmodern world where the light of the Enlightenment is failing, the people of God need to double their efforts to ask 'What would a school look like if it were radically shaped by the gospel, by the Biblical story, rather than the Enlightenment story?' Let me at the end of this talk make some suggestions that are essential if a faithful educational embodiment is to take place.

21. First, we must understand the Biblical story as one unfolding story that reveals to us universal history. When the story is broken up into devotional, theological, historical-critical, or moral bits it is easily absorbed into the reigning cultural story. Holding fast the word of life means holding fast the Bible as one story that begins with the whole creation and ends with its renewal.

22. Second, we must understand much more adequately the foundational idolatrous assumptions and currents that are shaping western culture. We have been deceived by the myths of a Christian culture or secular neutral culture. A Chinese proverb says: "If you want to know about water, don't ask a fish." If you want to know about Western culture, don't ask someone who is Western! Yet the thriving churches in other parts of the world have enabled us to have a new set of eyes to view our culture. Let us struggle to understand the idolatry (and created goodness) of our culture.

23. Third, we must have a strategy for dealing with the idolatrous forms of education that are prevalent in our culture. We cannot simply reject them nor adopt them. What then?

24. Fourth, we must be ready to work and suffer. It will take hard work to understand the Biblical and cultural story. It will take hard work to discern idolatry and creational insight. Faithfulness will also bring suffering. Paul makes it clear that those who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer. When the church is faithful in challenging the idolatrous culture of its day, it is bound to pay the price. If status and success in the educational world are more important to us than faithfulness, we will not shine as lights but will inevitably adopt the prevailing norms.

25. Fifth, Christian schools must assume a posture of prayer and repentance. Perhaps if Paul wrote his letter today, with our broader understanding of astronomy, he would have written: Shine like *moons* in a crooked and perverse generation. Moons, of course, have no light of its own; they reflect

the light of the sun. Neither does the believing community have any light of its own. Jesus Christ is the light of the world. It is only in the light of his life, death, and resurrection that the world can be seen for what it truly is. We can only reflect that life if we abide in Him as branches in the vine so that sap of his life might flow to us. Christian schools ought to be vital communities of prayer and worship. From that radiating centre the gospel should permeate the whole educational enterprise. Only then can we shine like moons, reflecting the life of Christ in the midst of our culture. And since the conforming of our education systems to the gospel is a spiritual battle, and not simply getting our worldviews straight, constant repentance will be part of that prayer and worship. We bring to Christ and to the foot of the cross our dreadfully compromised educational practices; we ask his forgiveness; we ask for his wisdom; we ask for his empowerment to take a few more baby steps toward faithfulness. And—this is essential—we joyfully take up our task knowing that the kingdom belongs to Him. He will bring his purposes to pass, of that we can be sure. Unlike the idols of the Age of Reason God delivers on his promises. As so we rejoice, and hope, and seek to embody a little more faithfully this good news.

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