

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper looks at the nature of the students and how teachers can help them to grow into the people that God intended them to be. The Bible teaches that people are made in his image and made for community. This suggests the question, "How can teachers encourage the growth of students in a Christian learning community so that they grow up into Christ in all things?" (Ephesians 4:15).

Students are first and foremost God's creation made in his image. Walsh and Middleton (1984) believed that: -

The Bible thus shows us there are two important parts to being truly human. Firstly, we are creatures of God and we are not autonomous (which means a law to ourselves) but we are subject to God's law and secondly, each human is unique placed by God over his creation to cultivate it, care for it and develop it. 'Both servanthood and authority are central to our humanness. Herein is the initial biblical answer to the worldview question "Who are we?"'

The Bible clearly states that people were created in the image of God. Whatever else that means it is clear that the image is now distorted in some way; something terrible happened which is often referred to as "the Fall" (Genesis 3) which has badly distorted the way people are like God. Walsh and Middleton (1984) suggest that when Adam sinned, the effect of his action and his rebellion has somehow affected both himself and all his descendants so severely that people now function far beneath the level at which they were intended. They are like a bird with a broken wing. The bird is made to fly but with its disfigurement it can only flap around on the ground. So it is with people; God's image has not been lost in them, just badly distorted. People are fallen image-bearers. But in what ways are people still like God. Obviously this is not intended to reflect the material likeness as much as the spiritual or immaterial. The similarity lies not in people's appearance, but it is entrenched into the core of human personality. People are like God who is a person and they possess characteristics and qualities that combine to make up personhood. Animals and fish and insects and micro-organisms are non-persons. The Bible teaches that the characteristics that people share with God have survived the Fall (see Gen. 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9) and that sinful people retain God's image.

This concept is important for understanding issues like abortion and euthanasia for if there is an essential difference between people and animals then it comes into play the moment a child is conceived and remains there eternally.

Many thinkers such as Australian-born philosopher, Peter Singer now a Professor at Princeton University would deny this (Pro-Life Infonet, 1999). Singer who is widely considered the father of the international animal rights movement has argued parents should have the right to euthanize newborn children who have severe handicaps. In his books, Singer has said that children less than one month old have no human consciousness and do not have the same rights as others. "Killing a defective infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person," he wrote in one book. "Sometimes it is not wrong at all."

The issue of being made in the image of God is also critical for students' self-understanding. If students see themselves as merely the end-product of the evolutionary process they will think of themselves as a higher organism but still just one of many animals. There is no intrinsic meaning to life except to survive and enjoy what they can of their life. Thus if life is not seen as enjoyable there seems little basis for either hope or meaning and suicide or even killing others seems entirely logical. . It is the belief that people have importance because they are made in God's image that gives people significance. It is also the knowledge that they were created by God and loved by him that gives them hope for the future and a meaning for life that is not daunted even in the face of what looks like the triumph of evil and the experience of terrible suffering. People are human because they are made in God's image. All students share this characteristic. Jesus made their importance very clear when he said (Mat 19:14 NIV), "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

## **Made in God's image**

This first and most important statement about mankind is found in the first chapter of Genesis:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27 NIV)

The strong Trinitarian overtones of the statement "Let us make" reminds us that God is love; his triune personality expresses a divine community. Because people are made in God's image and likeness they have that community built into their very existence.

A recent study by the YMCA of USA, The Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute for American Values (2003 p14) confirms this innate structure in people when it states:

Essentially, science is increasingly demonstrating that the human person is hardwired to connect. First, a great deal of evidence shows that we are hardwired for close attachments to other people, beginning with our mothers, fathers, and extended family, and then moving out to the broader community. Second, a less definitive but still significant body of evidence suggests that we are hardwired for meaning, born with a built-in capacity and drive to search for purpose and reflect on life's ultimate ends.

Meeting the human child's deep need for these related aspects of connectedness - to other people and to meaning - is essential to the child's health and development. Meeting this need for connectedness is primarily the task of what we are calling *authoritative communities* - groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life.

I will return at the end of this paper to consider ways of developing what the authors call *authoritative communities* but which could also be called *communities of truth*. But first I want to explore what is meant by the statement that people are made in God's image.

There has been a lot of theological debate over the years as to what exactly is meant by the term "made in God's image". This paper does not go into that debate. It is clear that the Scripture teaches that humans are in some way and in some degree similar to God. This concept of "similarity" sums up some of the ways people are like God without indicating an exact equivalence. The term "image" is an immediate reminder that people are a reflection of the divine.

Even if this 'similarity' between humanity and God cannot be defined precisely, its significance could hardly be over-emphasized. Because of the similarity, humans are distinct from all other created being and not just the most highly developed form in an evolutionary process. The concept of the image of God, as used in Genesis affirms the dignity and worth of humanity, and elevates all humans - not just kings or nobility - to the highest status conceivable, short of making humans divine.

Teachers must understand that both teacher and students alike are made in God's image and are therefore of value, of great worth and of great significance to God. As Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31). Jesus also emphasised to his disciples that children have a special place in his kingdom.

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Matthew 18:3, 5-6)

He told them that they have a special access to his Father,

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 18:10-11)

And when, despite this clear teaching, they failed to understand what he was saying he rebuked them for sending little children away because they apparently considered them too unimportant to bother their leader. Jesus said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14).

In the context of this teaching Jesus told the parable of the shepherd:

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18:12-14)

Often, as a Principal, I was confronted by teachers demanding the immediate expulsion of a student who had seriously misbehaved. They appeared not to understand the importance and the value of a single child. While there are times that a student must be excluded, at least for a period, for the good of the whole community teachers should always have the shepherd's heart because of the value and the importance of each person in God's sight. Accepting and understanding what being made in God's image means will radically change the way teachers teach.

## People as Fallen Image-bearers

It is important to realise that through the sin of Adam and Eve against God all people have come under God's judgment and though the image itself has been damaged people are all still made in his image. This fact is clear from the reference to the image of God in the establishment of human governance after the flood

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. (Genesis 9:6 NIV)

People and their whole world have been deeply affected by the results of that rebellion but their similarity to God has been badly distorted. People are like a bird that has had its wing broken; unable to fly as they were designed they struggle to be what God intended them to be. However the wonderful truth is that the story did not end with the Adam's sin; Christ came to redeem people from the consequences of that sin and to restore them through his redemption. Thus they have hope of being made more like him.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18, 4: 1)

If they are to teach in a godly way, Christian teachers need to understand of what is meant by being made in God's image and also what the implications of the "Fall" are. Because people are made in his image they are created to rule, but because of sin they are ruled by their lower nature until they are new creations in Christ. But the fact of their divided nature means Christians need to keep in step with the spirit and not make provision for the flesh. Galatians 5:16 and 25.

## Made as whole people

Genesis records that,

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7 NIV)

This simple statement indicates both people's identification with the elements of the earth as their bodies are composed of these elements and their spiritual nature since people have within them the very breath of God. He breathed his spirit within in Adam and the fusion of that spirit and the flesh formed him as "a living being" the words used by NIV to translate the Hebrew word "nephesh" which the KJV translated as "soul"- the vital existence of a human being. It is important to note that use of "nephesh" indicates not that humans **have** a soul but that they **are** souls. Body and soul or spirit are not to be understood as separate components of a person, but rather as terms which supplement one another to describe aspects of the inseparable whole person made in the image of the triune God

One of the significant effects of the "Fall" has been the attempt by Satan to destroy this image of the undivided person, body, soul and spirit, a living being created in the image of its Creator, and to tempt people to live divided lives, in which they separate the physical from the spiritual so that their actions are governed by the fleshly nature and the self and not the spirit.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4: 22-24)

Palmer believes there is a hidden wholeness that can be recovered leading to an undivided life. He proposed what he calls “circles of trust” through which people can recover a more undivided life.

A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly "in the woods" with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are filled not with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person's capacity to learn from it. ... Few of us have experienced large-scale communities that possess these qualities, but we may have had one-on-one relationships that do. By reflecting on the dynamics of these small-scale circles of trust, we can sharpen our sense of what a larger community of solitudes might look like-and remind ourselves that two people who create safe space for the soul can support each other's inner Journey. (Palmer 2004 p59)

Whether or not his “circles of trust” are the way to discover an undivided life or whether it can be found in some other way, it seems clear that God is calling [people to live less divided lives that are under the lordship of Jesus Christ and that seek first his kingdom (Matthew 6:24 and 33)]. The divided life allows for the fleshly nature to rule certain areas of living such as sport, entertainment, and business life while seeking in other areas to be governed by the Spirit. But Paul makes it quite clear that,

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. (Romans 8: 5-9)

Christian teachers need to teach their students as “whole people who are active in their learning, working cooperatively together to serve God because he has made people for connection and for service. Students need to see the “hidden wholeness” in creation and to understand God’s greater purposes in creation a people for himself.

This cannot not be achieved using the standard educational paradigm which sees education in terms of instruction rather a new paradigm of educating is needed one that is based on a Christian learning community.

## **Learning in community**

Parker Palmer (2004) speaks of circles of trust Crabb (2003) talks of “turning chairs inwards” both metaphors that speak of people connecting with each other. I am convinced that if people are to grow into Christ they need to find ways of learning in a community of truth (Ephesians 4:15).

The Institute for American Values study (2003) call for the development of “Authoritative Communities” serves to emphasises the importance of the need for connectedness however that is to be achieved. In this last part of this paper I want to turn a review of how to create such learning communities.

## **Communities of Truth**

God calls Christians to be a people who are growing into Christ through doing the truth in love in all things (Ephesians 4:15). I understand this involves living with others in a relationship of

love that involves putting into practice the truth that is in Jesus ((Ephesians 4:21) and thus growing in their relationship with each other and with him as each person does his or her part (4:16)

In talking about this it is important to note that I am not suggesting a particular method or a predetermined type of community but rather I propose using the ideas suggested in Ephesians 4:15 as a biblical way forward. I suggest that Palmer's (1993 p xii) definition of teaching, "To create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" will assist teachers to understand how they can do this in a classroom setting.

### ***Creating space***

Because teachers and each of their students are unique, they will need to find their own ways to develop connectedness. This will however only be possible if the teacher has an undivided life. Teachers cannot lead others where they have not been themselves. They need to find ways to allow people to connect with their inner spirit, to listen to God and to teach from this understanding. Jesus tells a very profound parable about the Christian teacher.

He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." (Matthew 13:52 NIV)

If they are going to help students teachers need to have new treasures in their storeroom, they need to be led and refreshed by the Spirit so that streams of living water flow from within them (John 4:13-14). How they create the space and time for connectedness will vary with the individual but the idea of "creating a space" serves to remind teachers it will not happen unless they do something about it. Within the classroom teachers can perhaps begin to form connections between individuals in small informal groupings that could be called "circles of truth", people who are open to each other and to God, who will begin to pray for each other, who will truly listen to each other and to what the Body is saying.

Most class structure militate again this sort of "connectedness" so teachers are going to need to be creative in finding ways for people to connect with others in a meaningful way; to find ways to allow space for thought, for meditation and even for prayer within the busy program of a modern school classroom.

### ***Practicing the Community of Truth***

What is a community of truth? As a starting point consider the definition of an authoritative Community proposed by the Institute of American Values (2003 p 34)

#### **The Ten Main Characteristics of an Authoritative Community**

As an ideal type, an authoritative community (or authoritative social institution) has ten main characteristics:

1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
2. It treats children as ends in themselves.
3. It is warm and nurturing.
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.
5. The core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists.
6. It is multi-generational.
7. It has a long-term focus.
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.
10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.

These ten characteristics are consistent with the idea of being made in God's image. They may not all apply exactly to a classroom community but each is worthy of consideration.

**1. A social institution that includes children.**

The school is an institution that includes children but it needs to be more than an institution. While it has to fulfil its institutional obligations to both the State and the home it also has an obligation to Christ the Head of the Body to be organically part of his Body.

**2. It treats children as ends in themselves.**

While teachers may have some problem with the idea of children being "ends in themselves" because they are created in the image of God, for relationship and to live for his glory (Ephesians 1:11-12) they would certainly agree that they are never to be treated instrumentally as if they are a means to an end. "Authoritative Communities, according to this criterion relate to the whole person of the child and care about the child for his or her own sake" (Op cit p 36)"

**3. It is warm and nurturing.**

A Christian learning community will be a warm and nurturing community but also one with a commitment to justice and righteousness and as such it will maintain a triadic balance between love and mercy, justice and righteousness and faithful worship and service. (Micah 6:8)

**4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.**

A Christian Community's need to maintain triadic balance (as above) means that limits must be set and expectations made clear. Love and mercy must be balanced by a commitment to justice and righteousness and should lead to faithful service.

**5. The core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists.**

At first, this would appear to be a feature that is not shared by a school learning community. But, in fact that is only because education is being viewed through the "schooling/instructional paradigm" (Westerhoff 1976). A proper understanding of how education as occurs will recognise that the core of that work is not done in the schoolroom but in the home and in the church and that the work of the school is supplemental to the work of the home and not in itself the core educational activity. This recognises the valid place of the professionally trained teacher, administrator and support person but it even more strongly asserts the prior and more important role of the home - a role that is undermined and largely unsupported in most schools.

**6. It is multi-generational.**

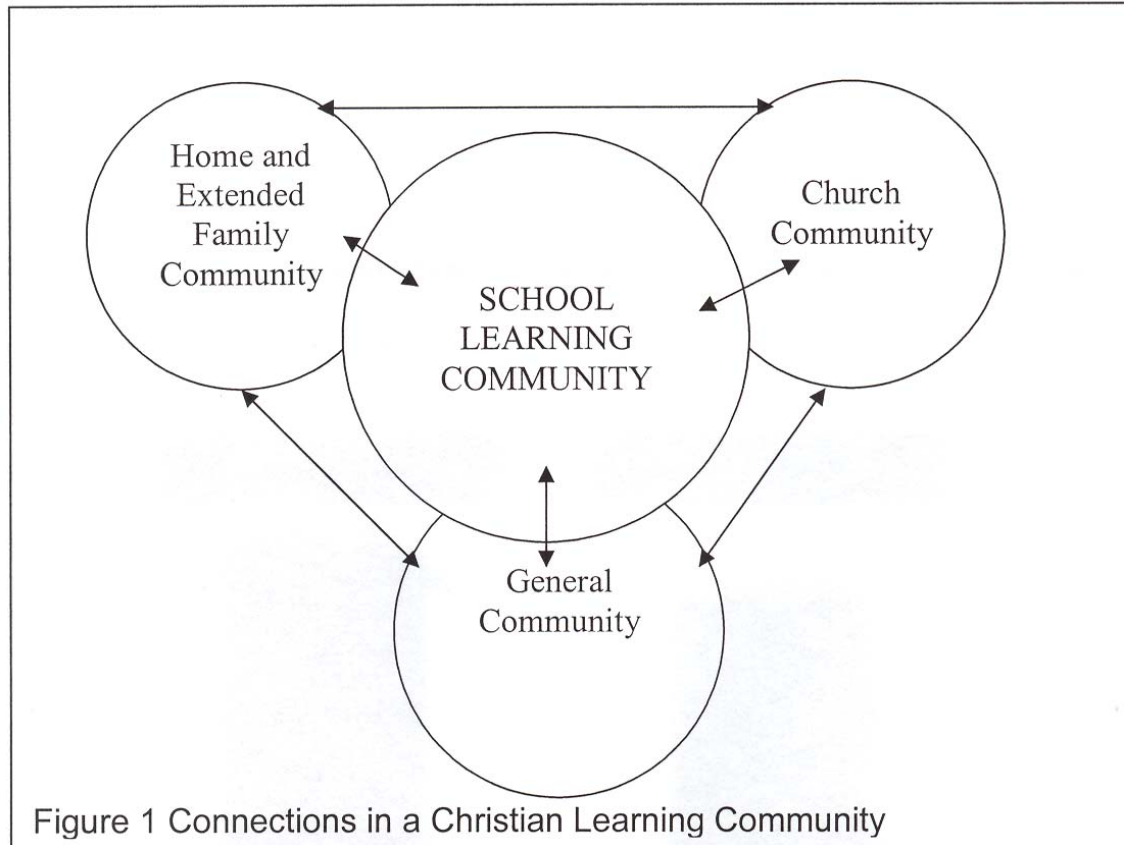
Again at first inspection this also might appear not particularly relevant to a school community. However the logic above which sees the school as serving the interest of the home and church would mean that it is necessary to view the learning community as involving people outside the classroom itself. (See Figure 1) "A community that is multi-generational is significantly more likely to reflect, as a core part of its identity, the quality of *shared memory*, a key dimension of human connectedness and a vital; part of civil society. Shared memory can help to deepen identify and define character, largely by giving the child clear access to lessons and admirable persons from the past. "(Op cit page 37)

**7. It has a long-term focus.**

A Christian learning community certainly should have a long term focus. However a Christian school that operates on a schooling/instructional paradigm is more likely to have its focus on a year by year basis and to look for outcomes in these terms. This criterion is thus a critical one for a Christian school to have in mind if it wishes to change its teaching and learning paradigm.

### 8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.

For the Christian learning community this concept clearly comes from the Bible and the life and example of Jesus who is the head of the Body of which the community is part.



### 9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.

A Christian learning community sees life as a whole and spiritual development is integral to life. Thus it does not set out to integrate faith and learning as if these are separate but it recognises that faith is integral to all life and thus to learning and that all learning takes place from a faith perspective (though not all learning comes from a Christian faith perspective) and behind all world and life views there is a religious dimension. What a Christian learning community therefore does is to make explicit the links between learning and faith and to encourage the development of the whole person, which includes, as a key component, spiritual growth and development as the truth is practiced in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.

Because of the biblical teaching that people are made in the image of God, a Christian learning community will accord equal dignity to all people regardless of age, sex, race, ability or disability and social status. Because it seeks to follow the commandments of God it will encourage its members to love God and their neighbours, for these two commandments, according to Jesus, all the requirements of a person to his or her fellow and to God their Creator can be summed up (Matthew 22:36-40)



### ***A Community of Truth***

While a community of truth will share the characteristics of an “authoritative community”, as a Christ-focussed community it will share the vision of Christ for the world which he loved and for which he gave his life will thus have three key focuses:

1. It recognises the value, individuality and contribution of each member (Ephesians 4:7). It understands that each person in the community is gifted with what Fowler calls “office” (Ireland, Edlin and Dickens 2004 p120) which he or she has been given grace to fulfil. Paul refers to the use of this office as an administration of grace. (Ephesians 3:2)
2. It seeks to develop unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God through which people can grow to true maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:12-14)
3. It encourages members to work together to build up the whole body rather than having as a focus individual achievement and competition with others (Ephesians 4:15-16)

It will be based on an epistemology that understands truth as relational and revealed rather than on a modernist or postmodernist epistemology. Thus its main task is not instructing in knowledge skills and values, nor even in imparting cognitively a concept of what is a Christian world view but rather it should be understood in terms of forming a faithful relationship with Christ who is the truth and of practicing what the Bible tells about people’s responsibilities to their God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and their fellow human beings.

Thus it will be a community where truth is practiced rather than just spoken about. This has two major implications:

- That education is for now and is to be applied in here and now, rather than as a preparation for the future.
- That what is learnt can, and should be, put into practice.

While there is a lot more that could be said, the above provides a framework that should enable the teacher to think more about why and how a school can become more of a Christian learning community.

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