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COMMUNITY AND EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Christian Community Schooling has become a generic term to describe a form of Christian schooling which deliberately sets out to be a Christian learning community operating under the Lordship of Christ. In this Paper I explore the implications of the term Christian Community as it refers to schooling.

COMMUNITY IS A BIBLICAL CONCEPT

Educational ideas are deeply influenced by our culture and, in turn, deeply affect it. It is therefore not surprising that our ideas on what constitutes education have been strongly influenced by secular humanism, which is the underlying philosophy of educational psychology. Humanist thought has stressed the role and importance of the individual and has given as a goal of education 'the autonomous person' who makes right personal and moral decisions independent of the need for any external authority. Concepts such as 'self-actualisation', 'self-esteem', 'a good self-image', 'free expression' and 'assertiveness training' all come from the demand for more individualisation.

The Bible, on the other hand, speaks of the Christian life in terms of relationships. The believer is brought into a family and into the body of Christ when he believes. God is his Father and other Christians are his brothers and sisters. The Church is described in relational terms rather than institutional terms; the body of Christ, the household of faith, the people of God, etc. The aim of growth according to Ephesians 4: 15, 16 is that by speaking the truth in love we might grow into Him who is the Head of the body from whom the whole body grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Howard Snyder (1977) defines the Church as the community of God's people called to serve and to live in true Christian community, as a witness to the character and value

of His kingdom. This means that the Church not only has the task of spreading the Gospel, but it must also demonstrate to people how they are meant to live under the Lordship of Jesus and in a relationship of love to one another. It must also be an agent for God's purpose in reconciling the world.

It is thus both a reconciled and a reconciling community. Those who are converted must find new relationships within its fold; they must find acceptance and a function or service within the new community God has created. The Church is part of God's plan to sum up all things in Jesus Christ and to bring all things under His dominion. If God's sphere of action encompasses all of creation and the Church is called to be part of God's reconciling work in the world among men and in creation, then there is no place for excluding God from any part of reality. Nor can the Church be just concerned with the so-called spiritual aspects of reality. All areas must come under the Lordship of Christ.

It is one of Satan's lies that there is a dichotomy between the religious and the secular. Satan wishes to divide off for himself a territory where God has no part. God demands to be Lord of all creation. One of the unfortunate offshoots of this division is that there has often been seen to be a polarity between evangelical (the pronouncement of the Gospel of grace without works) and the social Gospel (salvation by good works). Both poles are false to the teaching of the Bible and the life and words of Jesus Christ. Those who are born-again members of His new humanity are called to have a part in His plan of reconciling the world. We must acknowledge that the final fulfilment of this reconciling task will not be accomplished until He makes a new heaven and a new earth. Yet as Jesus showed and taught we need to be involved in reconciling here and now not only by preaching, but also by being and doing. As Jesus said, *'all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another'* (John 13:35).

We need to recognise that the Church must be understood predominantly as a gifted community in relationship with each other and serving the Lord. Too often we see the Church in institutional terms as a well-organised, smooth running machine, which, like most big business, has a veneer of personalism. By this I mean that like big business corporations it advertises itself as being interested in the individual but all its concern is accomplished through its paid staff and its organised programs. The members of the Church are not involved in each others lives-there is no real participating or sharing the concepts behind the biblical word of 'fellowship'. With its paid staff and well-organised program it gets on with its business of disseminating God's message. Many Christian schools that started out with high ideals have lost their Kingdom vision and have become instead efficient educational institutions with a veneer of personalism and no Christian relationships evident.

What Jesus founded was a caring community of believers totally sold out to Jesus and radically caring for each other. This community turned the world upside down, not by their motions or petitions, nor by their courses on church growth or evangelism or their theories of Christian education but by the sheer quality of the life and the relationships shown.

Although the Church does not primarily exist to transform society, it does so as a by product when it is living and growing and being perfected in love. For the Church, being is fundamental rather than doing, but doing is the natural consequence of being.

The concept of community is of vital importance to the Church and our loss in the twentieth century of a true sense of community explains much of the weakness of

Westernised Christianity. Unless there is a community distinct from the rest of society, there can be no real proclamation, since the evangelistic call is to enter a community that is distinct from the world. Protestantism has tended to emphasise the individual over the community and, in this sense, humanism is a Protestant heresy. There needs today to be an emphasis on the building of community, since biblical truth emphasises the priority of community.

Community is important for several reasons:

- It is in community that individual growth occurs (Ephesians 4:15, 16). This concept has an important bearing on the purposes of Christian schooling and on the way we conduct them. It is by speaking the truth in love, that is in relationship, that the individual grows into Christ which is of course into relationship not only with Christ the Head but with the whole body which builds itself up in love as each part works effectively (Ephesians 4:16).
- Fellowship and community life are necessary within the Church to equip Christians for their various kinds of witness and service. As the Christian experiences the enabling of the common life of the Church, he is equipped to witness. Much of the weakness of the Church is due to the fact that there is little common life and therefore little enabling, and consequently little witnessing.
- In community we demonstrate the reality of Christ's life in us as we minister to a needy world as the body of Christ. The individualism of modern Christianity is not biblical at all.

RELEVANCE OF COMMUNITY TO CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

The Bible clearly indicates that the equipping of all believers for ministry and their growth towards maturity is a ministry of the Church (see Ephesians 4: 11-16). On this premise therefore Christian Community Schooling is seen to be properly a ministry of the Church. This is not, of course, to claim that Scripture commands the church to run day schools. We cannot do that any more than we can claim that Scripture requires churches to have Sunday schools or to hold two services each Sunday. What relevance then will community have for Christian schooling?

Firstly, the nature and purposes of the Christian community should be evident in the school of that community. To function effectively, the school must function as God intended the Church to function.

Secondly, since the community is called to be an agent for reconciliation with its sphere of action all of creation, so the school must bring Christ, as Lord, into all areas of life. There must be no separation of the religious from the secular. That view is an unbiblical and unchristian view of life.

Thirdly, though the school must be primarily concerned with being, there must be action flowing from what is learnt and experienced. This leads us naturally into a consideration of what must be the nature of a school of the Christian community.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL?

A Christian school is a school of the Christian community in which, and through which, those called to the task of training or educating young people can exercise their gifts to equip students for the work of the ministry that they might grow to true maturity. It is a community where the love and mutual acceptance of the members

provide the proper environment for growth to maturity. In relationships where the truth is spoken in love the growth towards maturity is facilitated. Ephesians 4:12 speaks of the unity of faith and of knowledge of the Son of God that enables us to come to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

What are the marks of a Christian school? In his paper 'Society and Schools, World and Church - Some Models', Dr Bill Andersen points out that a Christian school is one in which relationships and atmosphere are Christian, rather than one in which the criteria are that the staff members are Christians, that the instruction has biblical content, and that Christian worship is practised. He goes on to make the point that like a Christian family the focus of the school must be on the following factors:

- The importance of the quality of relationships in the school between staff, between staff and students, and among the students themselves;
- The presence of love, authority and discipline initiated by the teachers and involving the students;
- The need for a basic integration between what one says, what one believes and approves, and what one does; and
- The opportunity within the school to be able to state clearly what one thinks and to express doubts without shame.

This is another and more detailed way of saying that the school must be Christ-focused. I want to spend a little time elaborating on each of these points.

1. The Quality of Relationships in the School

Jesus said about students and teachers, that every student, when his learning is completed, will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). Children learn not only information and skills from their teacher, but also values and attitudes that are far more important in the long run than the subject matter and the skills taught. This is sometimes called the 'hidden curriculum'. It is therefore vital that staff members love and accept one another and recognise that they are part of a real community in which bonds of love are more important than status or rank. This is not to deny the importance of good leadership, but scripturally, good leadership is founded on being first subject to the needs of your brother or sister. Being effective members of a team means having a willingness to put the interests of others above your own. It means also being willing to bear your own burden gladly and cheerfully while always being willing, where needed, to take up another's burden.

For teachers, this attitude means being willing to receive the children God has given them and not see them as an imposition, a problem, or an interruption to their day. If there is a true community, a praying, loving, sharing, learning community of teachers, we may be sure that the relationships among the students will begin to show the same qualities and the school may begin to aspire to the title of a Christian school.

2. The Presence of Love, Authority, and Discipline

Since the characteristic of a Christian is love, it is vital that love be the motivating force in the Christian school. We may note that when Paul talks about growth in maturity it is growth into the body of Christ, and this occurs by speaking the truth in love. True education must be understood as edification in love that is, building up a person so that he or she grows in Christian maturity. Love is the vital ingredient. Love accepts a child where he or she is but love also demands that we ensure that the child

grows. So love demands authority because the child needs authority if he is to truly find himself and be an effective member of the community. Love will also discipline as much as is needed to ensure the growth of the individual and the health of the whole community. This will sometimes involve discipline that includes the removal of the offending child from the school so that the child may recognise the seriousness of his action and so that the health of the whole community may be preserved. The amalgam between love, authority and discipline is seen in Ephesians 6: 1-4, where children are commanded to obey and honour their parents. The parents however are to respect the personhood of the child, to be aware of the needs of the child for self-acceptance and not to provoke the child to rebellion by failing to take cognisance of those needs.

A truly Christian community will demonstrate the balance between the justice and the mercy of God. Our proper response to both is true worship. This is clearly brought out in Micah 6 where the prophet tells us that what God requires of us is not simply external worship. The proper response is to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. Many schools that call themselves Christian stress only the justice of God and fall into the trap of legalism. Others emphasise only the love of God and have a shallow and sentimental permissiveness that is far from the nature of God. Still others see worship only in terms of public acts of worship. Whether this is intense and emotional or formal and dignified, it is shallow and not acceptable to God if it fails to take justice and mercy seriously) see Isaiah 58:2-10, or James 1:27; 2:14-20).

3. Integration between What One Believes and Approves and Does

In Christian Community Schools we speak about Christ-focused, Bible-integrated teaching. We need to remember that this does not primarily refer to incorporating biblical doctrine but to acknowledging the Lordship of Christ in all areas of life, accepting His values, living in obedience to what He teaches, and acting out what He says. Schools should not only be places where students learn about love, discipline, and a caring environment, but places where they are loved and love, are disciplined and do discipline, and are cared for and care. Children will quickly see the inconsistencies in our lives. They may or may not blame us for them, but they will certainly imitate them. A Christian school should be strong in doing, not just strong in teaching doctrine.

Many Christian schools emphasise academic learning and skill development-the students are continually taking in knowledge. They need opportunities of putting into practice what they learn; they need opportunities to serve and to apply their learning in real life situations. They need to see that their teachers are also committed to serving the Lord and that they are prepared to give of their time and effort in His service.

4. Being Able to Express What One Thinks Without Shame

What we have said before about loving and accepting means that we will listen to what a child says without wanting to force on him what we believe is the correct doctrine. We will lead, nurture, encourage and exhort, but we will not want to impose a legalistic system on the child. Important as sound doctrine is, children, and indeed all people, need to be able to seek the truth for themselves. If we teach children to conform instead of to think, we are not educating them, we are binding them into a new legalism. Paul rightly said, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test

and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will' (Romans 12:2). This is the most exciting definition of education. I will comment on it more fully in the next section, but here we will notice we are called to test and approve what God's 'good, pleasing and perfect will' is, not simply to do what others say is good.

An important part of proving what is good, pleasing and perfect is knowing the mind of Christ. We usually think of the mind of Christ in a mystical way or as some far off influence from God upon us, or in a somewhat literal way as what is revealed about the thinking of Jesus in the Gospels. There is, however, a very real mind of Christ, which will be expressed in the thinking and the attitudes of the Christian community, the body of Christ.

This mind will have a powerful moulding influence. The mind of Christ must never be reduced to dogma that must be accepted uncritically. Jesus taught us to understand the principles that underlie the commandments of God. To work these out in our lives we will need the freedom to discuss them with others. Children who are free to challenge what the school holds true will be free to find the truth. Those who are faced with a legalistic approach are more likely to rebel or sink into unthinking apathy. We do not teach children simply by codifying something and getting them to commit it to memory. There is value, of course, in such codification and memorisation to provide a framework for an understanding of what we believe. It is much more important, however, that the students should themselves search out the truth of God by applying the Bible's teaching to their own lives.

We also need to be careful that we do not confuse the Christian cultural heritage, or our church's cultural heritage, with the mind of Christ. Sometimes church-approved values are no more than a Christianised version of the socially approved values of the world. This is evidence of the fact that the Church itself has been conformed to the world. The child needs to be taught to challenge all such values by the word of God and to be fearless in challenging such culture. We will not do so by encouraging acceptance of the 'official' viewpoint. In 'Gospel into Education, Exploring a

Translation' Dr Andersen says: For a school to be irrigated and nourished from the store of Christian wisdom, it is needful for its Christian staff members to be in themselves 'running streams', that is, to be on the move in terms of their own exploration and investigation of the 'deep things of God'.

This raises an important issue-the tension that we must face between protection and exposure.

PROTECTION AND EXPOSURE

The school is an extension of the home, whose role it is to nurture the children to ensure that their total upbringing is 'of the Lord'. The homes of the students form an important part of the school and the school should never (because of the professional skills of its teachers) see itself as superior to the home or as properly able to succeed without the wholehearted support of the home. Nurture includes proper protection and equipping of students with the spiritual armour of salvation, faith, righteousness, truth, the Gospel of peace, and the word of God. But students also need to learn to stand, and this involves exposure to the wider community of which the school is part. Students should not become cocooned or isolated from society. The big question is how much exposure and at what stage of development. This is a question that parents and teachers alike must face. It will include consideration of questions such as how much and what type of sex education ought to be conducted in the school; what

novels, plays or films or literature ought to be studied, and when. It is clear that students will need to be prepared to face the thought patterns of the world. By the time they leave a Christian high school they will need to have considered fully the implications of the evolutionary hypothesis, of existential philosophy and of Communist ideology. They need to be aware of the types of literature to which they will be exposed and to have clear guidelines as to what they will read and view, and why.

THE NATURE OF EDUCATION

We have seen that from a Christian viewpoint education involves the building up of the person in love and the equipping of him or her for service in the body of Christ. We can call this 'edification in love'. The Bible also talks of the renewal of the mind (Romans 12: 1, 2), which is the proper basis for effective service for the Lord. This surely has an important part to play in any genuine Christian education as it allows for the work of the Spirit of God through the community of believers as the believer dedicates himself or herself to serve the Lord and His body

Education as Edification

Ephesians 4:15 says, *Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*

Here the process of growing up to maturity is in community. Its basis is speaking the truth (lit. in Greek 'truthing') in love, its direction of growth is into the Head of the body, growing part of the body of Christ, and its result is effective working as part of the community (Ephesians 4: 16).

Speaking the truth ('truthing') in love means immersing the students in the truth in a loving, accepting and supportive atmosphere where they will be loved enough to be corrected and disciplined, but will be free to respond to, explore and practice truth themselves. It presumes a community where people care for each other, share with each other and support each other. If the Christian school becomes such a community it will also help revolutionise the Church as it changes the quality of relationships within the Church and creates an example of what true Christian love is all about. It will also become one of the most effective witnesses the wider community has seen. But because the quality of the school community depends on the quality of community existing in the Church, we need to work, not only on improving the quality of relationships in the school but also in the home, the prime area of influence, and in the Church which proves to be the ultimate model of what children see Christian relationships ought to be.

Growing up into the Head involves accepting the Lordship of Christ over your own life. It also will involve accepting the Lordship of Christ in your relationships with other members of the body. So not only do we grow up into Christ in a mystical sense, but there is the much more important area of that growing into a real community, the body of Christ. This must result in effective service and growth for the whole community.

As churches and/or schools grow big, there is often a loss in the genuine sense of community. The staff becomes less cohesive, and members see the school as an institution employing them rather than a community of which they are part. Administration becomes imposed rather than an expression of the desires of the

school for its pupils. We cannot accept the institutionalisation of either our schools or our churches.

Education as Renewal of the Mind

Paul in his letters (see 1 Cor. 1 and 2, esp. 2:16) speaks about the mind of Christ, which we as a community have. This is the normative mind of the community. As Christians, we are not to be conformed in our minds to worldly thinking, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Our minds are renewed as we present our bodies as living sacrifices, as we have our thinking challenged by the thinking of the whole body, and as we seek to prove what is the good and pleasing and perfect will of God. Education that is real education involves a growing understanding of the mind of Christ, which is mediated to the individual by the work of the whole Christian community. Those especially gifted have an important part to play, not just in an individualistic performing sense, but as caring, loving, sharing members of the school-church- home community, who thus enable the students to be transformed by the renewing of the mind. Contrast this to the secular school, where the pressure to conform to the alien mind of the world constantly impinges on the child.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The world and sadly the church have forgotten much about what is involved in the word · community. The New Testament clearly shows that the Church was meant to be a true community marked by love and fellowship. For Christians to love one another and genuinely to share with one another is not a mere option. It is a commandment.

If in your church and school you establish a true community of love, your children will grow up as they are meant to and the wider community will be influenced for good. It may sound idealistic, but it is achievable. If our churches and schools can become again such loving communities, we shall see revival in our land. We shall see our nation substantially, though not completely, transformed.

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