



## NHI PAPER 7

# UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS

R J Frisken AM

A New Hope International Educational  
Monograph Number 7, Written December  
2004, Revised January, 2011

## INTRODUCTION

Children are important to Jesus. His disciples saw them as a distraction and wanted to discourage mothers who wished to bring their children to Jesus for a blessing. Jesus overrode the objections of his "mindes" and said, "Let them come" (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus reminded them of what he had previously told them of the importance of children (see Matthew 18).

They are to be received. If we receive them we receive Him! Do we stop to think of the implications of what this student has for us? If we reject them we reject Him!

We need to protect and guide them (verse 6-9). Failure to adequately protect has serious consequences.

We should not look down on children as of less importance than ourselves (verse 10). It is important that we recognise that students have an important place in life and in the class. Teachers are there to serve them.

We have a pastoral concern for them as a shepherd does for his flock. See the story Jesus told. The point to note from this story is the importance to the shepherd of the straggler. Teachers need to model the shepherd's heart when dealing with students - particularly those who are wayward. To care for the student going astray is to follow the example of Jesus.

## WHO THEY ARE?

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 we 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 we refer to as the Fall (Genesis 3) which has badly distorted the way we are like God. When Adam sinned, the effect of his action and his rebellion has somehow affected both himself and all his descendants so severely that we now function far beneath the level at which we were intended. We 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. God's image has not been lost, just badly distorted. People are fallen image-bearers. We must accept this premise because the Bible accepts it."

But in what ways are we 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 our appearance, but it is entrenched into the core of our personality. People are like God who is revealed in the Bible as a person and they have the characteristics and qualities of personhood. Animals and fish and insects and micro-organisms are non-persons. Despite the corruption and change that the coming of sin into the world brought these characteristics are that as persons we share with God, have survived (see Gen. 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3.9) and sinful people retain the image of God.

This essential difference between people and other forms of life becomes critical in understanding issues like abortion and euthanasia for from the moment of conception children become and remain a person for eternity. Many secular 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 that 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 higher organism but still just one of many animals. There is no intrinsic meaning to life except to survive and enjoy what we can of our life. Thus if life is not seen as enjoyable there may seem little basis for either hope or meaning and suicide or even killing others may appear to be entirely logical. It is the belief that people are important because that 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 could not have made their importance any clearer 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."

## **STUDENTS AS GROWING PEOPLE**

To provide pastoral care the teacher first of all needs to be aware of the needs of students. Students are growing up in a world very different to that faced by their

grandparents and even their parents. The breakdown of the institution of marriage has created new social relationships; one-parent families, broken families, blended families and now the homosexual family with children adopted or born by surrogate birth. Children in some of these relationships may suffer behaviour problems leading to increases in juvenile depression, self harming and other addictive behaviour such as drug taking. But these problems are not only found in children of disrupted family relationships. These and other problems such as attention deficit disorders (ADD/ADHD) occur across the spectrum of children and seem to be symptomatic of the breakdown in society of family values, the addiction to electronic entertainment and a loss of a sense of connectedness or community. A recent study by the American Institute of Values (2003) highlighted this in its executive summary.

“We are witnessing high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems among U.S. children and adolescents.

IN LARGE MEASURE, what's causing this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness. We mean two kinds of connectedness - close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning.

Where does this connectedness come from? It comes from groups of people organized around certain purposes - what scholars call social institutions. In recent decades, the U.S. social institutions that foster these two forms of connectedness for children have gotten significantly weaker. That weakening, this report argues, is a major cause of the current mental and behavioral health crisis among U.S. children.

Much of the first half of this report is a presentation of scientific evidence - largely from the field of neuroscience, which concerns our basic biology and how our brains develop - showing that the human child is "hardwired to connect." We are hardwired for other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent. Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential to health and to human flourishing.

Because in recent decades we as a society have not been doing a good job of meeting these essential needs, large and growing numbers of our children are failing to flourish.”

## **Christian Learning Communities**

One of the few encouraging hopes for our nation is to be found in the impact that over twenty years of Christian schooling is having on values. It is encouraging that a recent Church life survey showed that young people in Churches today are tending to have more conservative values than their parents! But this gain is at risk as secular values impact on the values taught even in Christian schools and homes. The Christian school needs, with God's wisdom and guidance, to try to do something about this situation.

God's plan is for people to live in strong Christian learning communities, in fellowship with Him and in strong relationship with each other. The Bible teaches (1 John 1:5-6; 2:9-11 and 15-16) that it is God's will for His people to have fellowship with Him. To do this, they must live in the light which means living in fellowship with other Christians. It is clear that what spoils this fellowship is the darkness

within, which results in the sins people commit against others. The darkness (sin) within may be seen in attitudes of hatred, judgment, envy and jealousy and in the sins committed against others which include theft, assault, insult, belittling comment and gossip. But they also include sexual immorality, pornography, adultery, and greedy materialism, which is idolatry. Christians are to walk in the light and their relationships should be transparent and open. If they sin, they should confess their sins to those they sin against as well as to the Heavenly Father. When others sin against them, they should forgive them, (Matthew 18:35) and if they see others going astray from the truth they should encourage them back. (James 5:19-20)

1. The Christian school that functions with the family and the Church as a Christian learning community is the ideal place to start creating communities that will meet the needs of a modern society.

## HOW FAITH DEVELOPS IN STUDENTS

It is easy to confuse faith and religion. Faith is deeply personal, dynamic and ultimate while religion is the way faith may be expressed. We can teach about religion but faith grows in community. The danger with teaching about Christianity is that we may well end up with well-educated atheists. Faith can be experienced within a community of faith but it cannot be given from one person to another.

### What is faith?

The Bible defines faith more in terms of action than in terms of what is believed. According to Hebrews 11:1, “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”. An examination of the remainder of Hebrews 11 shows that faith results in actions. For example, “By faith Abel offered” and “By faith Noah ... built an ark” or in the case of Abraham “By faith Abraham ... obeyed and went”. James says, “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17) and when speaking of Abraham he said “his faith was made complete by what he did” (James 2 20). It is clear that faith is more of a verb than a noun. Faith is something that leads to action and results from interaction with others. James also explained that faith needs to be tested by experience because “you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:3-4). Thus, people grow towards maturity as their faith is tested in their experience of life and interactions with others. Faith is best learned in community because without others to test it faith cannot grow. Only as people live with the problems encountered in community through the sin and imperfections of others that their faith is tried and grows. Faith is best viewed as a developmental process not as a state. However, just as a sapling is as much a tree as a forest giant so too faith may change as it grows but it remains faith.

### Growing Faith

Westerhoff (1976 page 89) in developing James Fowlers work on Stages of Faith suggested that there are, what he calls, four styles of faith. He says, “Each style of faith to be described is a generalisation, and none are meant to be boxes into which persons are placed; neither are they to be used as judgments upon ourselves or others”. The four styles he suggests are firstly, **experienced** faith, secondly **affiliative** faith, thirdly **searching** faith and fourthly **owned** faith. Like the tree in our previous analogy the forest giant is not better than the sapling it is just further along the growth

process. For faith to grow it needs the proper environment and if the proper environment, experiences and interactions are not present growth is arrested. The growth is not easily observable and takes time. Like a tree grows by adding growth rings so as faith grows it does not leave one style behind so much as adds another to the previous ones. "Faith is an action which includes thinking, feeling, and willing and it is transmitted, sustained and expanded through our interactions with other *faithing selves* in a community of faith"(Westerhoff 1976).

## **HELPING STUDENTS TO GROW**

Teachers are not experts in psychology or sociology and should not be expected to have answers for the deeper problems facing our society. Teachers should be experts in nurturing students. To understand the children they teach they not only need to be aware of the social problems increasingly being faced by students but they need the pastoral gifts and inclinations to enable them to give the nurture and care students need. To do this Teachers may use both formal and informal methods of observation. Of these two, the informal methods are much more important.

While teachers can develop skills they also need to be aware that there are spiritual gifts of discernment that they can ask God to give them through his Spirit.

Teachers not only have a "duty of care" as teachers, but as Christians they also have a responsibility to love their neighbour. They need to see that the children they teach whether they are from Christian or non-Christian homes are "their neighbour", and thus they have a responsibility to meet their needs and this implies noticing it (Luke 10:25-37). This may require that teachers look on their task in a different light. Teachers need to see themselves as leaders with their disciples or shepherds with their flock, rather than as "professional" or professionally detached teachers with their clients.

For teachers to be a servant to the students in their class means they must be aware of students' needs. This may involve using both formal and informal methods of observation but whatever the method the motive must be love and a desire to take responsibility to help.

## **Informal Observation of Students**

The best teachers are those who notice things. Teachers of young children are often trained to notice while high school teachers seldom are. Yet all teachers need to be those who notice. My own education would have been significantly improved if I had come across just one teacher who realised I was very short sighted. None of my teachers noticed because they were not trained to observe. There are many aspects to observation, which I have listed below.

### **Listening**

Teachers need to have patience and enough interest in children to listen to what the child is saying or not saying and also to what the child is meaning by what he or she says. (See James 1:18)

### **Observing**

Teachers need to observe what is happening to the children that they teach before commenting or judging on what they see. Being observant will help a teacher to be more sensitive to the students' needs. Looking for signs of distress or emotion may be

a key to understanding a student's reaction. Noticing signs of neglect or abuse (physical, sexual or emotional) is in many countries a legal responsibility for teachers but for Christian teachers it is primarily a pastoral responsibility. It is important to notice things that are different about a child, over a period of time as well as compared to other children of their age.

## **Discerning**

Discernment is different from observation. It implies a gift to "see below the surface". To be aware of things that others may not notice. It is a gift of the Spirit to discern things of the spirit. But there also seems to be a natural gift of discernment.

Teachers should seek to develop any gifts of discernment that they have and to ask the Lord for gifts of discernment to be given. A teacher may discern the gifts and abilities latent in a child. Teachers' hope and trust will be powerful influences to build up students as effective members of the Body of Christ. Pastoral care is not just fixing up problems; it involves exhortation and encouragement to develop gifts. Discerning can also involve being aware of which children are ready for growth and development or need particular help at a particular time.

## **Understanding Differences**

Each student, no matter how limited his or her gifting may appear to be, has a God-given role to undertake. A wise teacher who understands individual differences can help the students to understand their particular gifts and to grow in their gifts. (See 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 14-25). The Bible teaches that spiritual gifts are given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7) and as the Spirit determines. There are also differences in the natural abilities that God has endowed in us (1 Corinthians 12:14-25) and God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be (1 Corinthians 12:18)

## **Formal Observation of Students**

There are sometimes occasions when more formal observations of students are required. This may be because the teacher has become aware that something is wrong but is uncertain about what exactly the cause is or it may be a need that the teacher believes is beyond his or her ability to handle. Sometimes these formal observations may include use of surveys, sociograms, tests of various sorts, formal interviewing or referring students to specialist professionals.

A school should have policies developed based on biblical principles to guide the teacher in the use of such formal procedures. Policies should cover such issues as

- Protection of privacy of students and their families
- Maintaining the rights of parents to be involved in the life of their child
- Legal obligations to government by legislation such as child protection legislation.

Formal observations should always have as its aim to assist the student. Information should not be sought that is not needed to help the student. Any records that are kept should be maintained confidentially so that only those who need it have access. Students and their parents should be informed of the information that is held and should have access to it provided they are given a proper interpretation of it.

## ***Identifying Children Who Are Hurting***

There are many different ways that children can be hurting and in need of special care. Think of the different ways you would approach the following situations.

- Children from atypical (broken) homes
- Children from non-English speaking homes

How can teachers assist students who are suffering from traumas in the home? How could you assist in the following: -

- Relationship traumas such as serious illness of a close relative, the death of grandparent, parent, or other loved one or loss of a good friend who has died or just stopped being a friend?
- Structural traumas where perhaps father/mother has lost a job or when the family has newly moved into the district?
- Emotional/physical traumas such as deprivation of sleep the serious illness of a child a parent or a sibling?
- Allergic or other medication, or chemical responses?
- Abuse including sexual abuse, violent physical abuse or emotional abuse?
- Fears and anxieties?
- Perceived rejection or non-acceptance by peers?
- Spiritual traumas such as involvement with a cult, exposure to pornography or exposure to the occult?
- Hereditary, birth problems leading to developmental retardation?

## ***Giving Care***

Teachers have responsibility not only for the difficult or suffering individuals in the class, but for the class as a group. They are their flock. They should pray for them and ask God to help them understand the group dynamics that make the class what it is. Some times teachers will need real discernment to see a child or small group of children who adversely affect the group dynamics. They will also need wisdom in knowing how to change such dynamics. Teachers should observe the patterns of relationship in a class. They should be aware of the loners, the peer leaders, the extroverts and the introverts. Teachers should also be aware of the students with particular skills that can contribute to the development of other students. They should understand that it does not all depend on the teacher. Students may also minister to other students. Secondary teachers often have many classes for which they are responsible. This makes their role as pastor teacher difficult and sometimes well nigh impossible. Schools need to reconsider how they can minimise problems caused by the structure of the secondary school. Recent developments in middle schooling have been one way that secondary schools have improved in their ability for teachers to care for the children as a group.

Since teachers cannot pastor individually and intensively all the children in their care they need to discern those who need help most and those who will respond best to the help they can give. It may help to group children into those who need help most urgently either because of their hurts or their blossoming or to put students into groups with similar needs so that teachers can develop strategies to help them.

Each student in a class is an individual who has been given gifts by God. Students are all made in God's image and are precious in his sight. Teachers should respond to students as God would. Read the parable of the good shepherd Matthew 18:12-14 and ask yourself the question, "How can I meet their pastoral needs?" Try to develop a pastor's heart and accept this as your responsibility. In doing this you need to understand that you cannot meet everyone's need, and you are not to wear yourself out by carrying a load you cannot bear. There are others who also have a responsibility – e.g. people in the Church and the home may have a much greater pastoral responsibility than the teacher, You need to identify those God has called you to help. Who is your neighbour the student who has a need? You may also need to delegate the duties to others who can help such as using a peer support. There will be times when you need to refer difficult cases to people who may have more experience than you have. Teachers should never be afraid to ask for advice. Failure to help a student because you are too proud to ask for help is a serious failure of your responsibility.

The pastoral task is more one of facilitating. It involves accepting responsibility to

- Appreciate and to think positively about others,
- Cultivate the gifts of other people
- Delegate the task to others where appropriate
- Initiate ways of helping people and not be stalled by ignorance or apathy
- Supplicate; this is the job not a tool for it.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Crabb L** (1999). *The Safest Place on Earth*. Word Publishing. Nashville, Tennessee.

The Pro-Life Infonet, (April 1999) *Students Protest Princeton Professor Who Advocates Infanticide* <http://www.euthanasia.com/prince.html>. PRINCETON, N.J. --

**YMCA of USA, Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute for American Values** (Sept 2003) *Hardwired to Connect –The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* Institute of American Values New York [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org)