



## NHI PAPER 3

# **The Heart of a Christian School**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### ***Problems in Australian Education***

Christian Community schooling was born in 1974 at a time when people were becoming aware that there was something seriously wrong in Australian society. The impact of the hippie culture, the Vietnam protests, and the post war immigration had shaken the foundations of Australian society. Parents, in particular, were alarmed at what was happening to their children as Christian values were discarded and children were being taught to make up their own minds about what was right or wrong. In the schools and universities young people were being exposed to secular humanist values based on a worldview that had no place for God and saw human existence as a result of the evolutionary process.

### **People today are more complacent**

In the twenty-five years or so since Christian schools were started, parents have come to accept many of these changes and are thus more complacent about what is happening. Our society continues to suffer from many serious problems most of which have grown out of a sense of disconnection that the emphasis on the individual has brought. Palmer (1993) speaks of the “pain of disconnection”. I think the pain is there, though I am not sure that most people would describe it as pain. Like an undiagnosed illness, the loss of community affects all of our society and all of us suffer to some extent because of it. We are a wealthy society but the cost of prosperity has been high. We see it in the ever-growing problem of crime, drugs, despair, depression and youth suicide most of which come from this disconnectedness.

## Declining education standards

The last twenty-five years has also seen serious declines in educational standards. The current controversy about standards in University is one result of the dropping in educational standards in schools. Sadly, Christian schools have not always maintained the high levels of education that could have provided a benchmark for our society.

## The importance of community

Christian Community schools have always had a commitment to be **learning communities where the truth was taught and learnt in love**. Thus they believed that God had given to them a strong biblical mandate to proclaim the good news that there is an answer to the sense of disconnection – That there is what Palmer calls “a hidden wholeness” or an experience of community which like the disconnectedness is very largely hidden from people but it is there, nevertheless. God has designed us to live in community and thus by His Spirit there is always the possibility of the rediscovery of this “wholeness”, which we experience in being and living as the “the Body of Christ”. The Western church has largely lost sight of this “wholeness” by making the church into an organisation or an institution. However, there is an organic reality called the body of Christ which can be discovered wherever “two or three come together in my name” (Matthew 18:20 NIV). This wholeness is possible for any of God’s people who seek “a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus” (Romans 15:5). It is also found in a more fragmented form in all people in all places. By God’s Spirit, there is always the possibility of the formation of godly community. God called Christian Community schools to the task of forming Christian learning communities. We have not always been fully aware of this calling, or faithful to it.

## HOW CAN COMMUNITY BE FORMED?

### *A Spirituality of Sources*

But how can community be formed in a Christian school in the context of Australian (or other Western) society? This is clearly very difficult and some would say impossible, especially in a high school setting. Yet growing community offers hope in an otherwise fairly hopeless situation and was the basic reason why Christian Community schools were formed. Palmer (1993 page xi) believes that schools should be concerned with “**a spirituality of ‘sources’** in education rather than one of ‘ends’”. He says, “A **spirituality of ends** wants to dictate the desirable outcomes of education in the life of the students. It uses the spiritual tradition as a template against which the ideas, beliefs, and behaviours of the student are to be measured. The goal is to shape the students to the template by the time their formal education concludes. But that sort of education never gets started, it is no education at all”. The outcomes approach to education that dominates current educational thought predisposes us towards an education of “ends” and as such limits its effectiveness.

### **Authentic Spirituality**

“Authentic spirituality wants to open us to the truth – whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a

spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox”. (Palmer, 1993, page xi)

There is profound truth in what Palmer is saying but we need to understand clearly that this does not mean there are no absolute standards or there is no revealed truth. What it does remind us is that “we know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9 NIV), and that we need to be humble learners of Jesus. We must also remember that our “modern” understanding of truth, as that which can be logically demonstrated, is not what the Bible refers to as “truth”. We cannot even, by our best doctrinal or theological thinking, reduce the complexity of God into the propositional statements that contain all His meaning. Moreover, even if we could do this we would not have found the truth of which the Bible speaks.

### **We are to teach the truth in love**

We are to be people who seek, live and teach “the truth in love” so that “we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ”. (Ephesians 4:15 NIV) Biblical truth is personal and relational. Thus we should teach “the truth that is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21 NIV). Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6 NIV). He also said, about the truth, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NIV). Neither empirical facts nor doctrinal knowledge will set us free from our fears, loneliness, oppressions and hurts. It is only the presence of Jesus indwelling his people and showing his love through them that will set us free.

### **Authentic spirituality releases us from fear**

Palmer (1993, page xi) believes that “an authentic spirituality of education will address the fear that so often permeates and destroys teaching and learning. It will understand that fear, not ignorance, is the enemy of learning, and that fear is what gives ignorance its power. It will try to root out our fear of having our ignorance exposed and our orthodoxies challenged – whether those orthodoxies are religious or secular. A spirituality of education will ground us in the confidence that **our search for truth**, and **truth’s search for us**, can lead to new life beyond the death of our half-truth and narrow concepts.”

### **Love overcomes fear**

The Apostle John reminds us of the power of love to release us from fear, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18 NIV). This helps us to understand what the writer means in Proverbs, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10 NIV). When we fear God we need know no other fear. As we know the living God who is love, then we begin to understand we need to fear nothing else. Any knowledge of God that does not lead to this trust in Him is a very imperfect knowledge.

## **FORMING A COMMUNITY OF TRUTH**

### ***The Community of Truth***

Palmer (1993, page xii) defines teaching as “**creating a space in which obedience to the truth is practiced**”. Let us take that as a mission for us as Christian teachers and

ask ourselves, “How can we create such space?” Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians (4:15), says people grow by “speaking the truth in love”. The words “speaking the truth” are a translation of ἀληθευοντες, the **present participle** of the Greek verb “to truth”. English does not have a verb “to truth” but the meaning is clear - we are to live surrounded by truth and in a relationship marked by love. We are to be a community guided by truth in word and action where love is the driving force. This is a central concept for growth or to put it another way it is central to the task of creating space in which obedience to the truth is practiced. If we would see our students grow, we need to see a “community of truth” being formed among them. The growth that occurs is “into Him” who is the Head of the Body even Christ, and it results in each part functioning effectively in the Body by fulfilling his or her role by using his or her particular gifts. Too often we hide behind our protective walls of pretence where we are afraid to say what we really think- this leads to what Crabb calls “surface community” which is no real community at all because there is no real connectedness. There is no real openness to each other and thus no real community.

## **EXPLORING TRUTH**

All of us have views about reality that we deep down believe to be true about the world. These views drive our actions. We sometimes refer to them as our worldview. There are four main questions we can ask that help us to understand our worldview. If we know our answers to these questions we can perhaps better understand how these answers relate to the “Truth that is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21) which implicitly involves community. The four questions are, “What is the nature of reality?” (Ontology) “How can we know reality?” (Epistemology) “How do we teach and learn?” (Pedagogy) and “How should we live?” (Axiology and Ethics).

### ***What Is The Nature Of Reality? (Ontology)***

#### **The World is NOT a meaningless void filled with particles**

Our understanding of reality has been deeply influenced by the so-called “modernist” thinking of the early twentieth century, which elevated science and the scientific method as the only way to find truth. Physics, at least in the popular mind, saw the world comprised of particles operating in a meaningless void without any underlying laws or direction patterning them. Biology was based on the belief that the world had evolved and nature “was red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson). The world was seen as a system of inanimate forces, and nature as competitive - the survival of the fittest involved competition at its heart. These two dominant areas of thought are non-communal if not anti-communal. Palmer asserts, “at the heart of science itself these images have been challenged and changed.

#### **Connections of community are visible at the core of reality**

However, community, not competition, is the metaphor that most deeply informs the work of many biologists today. Among physicists today, the atom is no longer seen as an independent and isolated entity, but in the words of Henry Stepp, as a ‘set of relationships reaching out to other things.’ So Palmer’s reference to ‘hidden wholeness’ turns out to be more than a spiritual fantasy – the connections of community are visible at reality’s core”. As our view of reality changes to be more in accord with the thinkers and philosophers who acknowledge this connectedness, the individualism and competitiveness that underlies so much of life may become more

mented and our approaches to education may be reformed as we acknowledge more the importance of what we sometimes refer to as the “hidden curriculum”. As Christian teachers we need to shape our schools around images of reality that are less individualistic and competitive and more cooperative and communal.

## ***How We know Reality (Epistemology)***

### **The myth of objectivity**

The thinker of the modernist period (early twentieth Century) understood knowing as a profoundly individual activity approaches and interpreted objects and knowledge that he believed was “out there” and sought **objective truth** or empirical knowledge. Despite the fact that scholars now perceive knowing as a profoundly communal act, the earlier thinking dominates our paradigms of learning. Palmer (1993, page xv) says, “Nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature. The myth of objectivity, which depends on a radical separation of the knower from the known, has been declared bankrupt. But it still influences most of our education.

### **To know is to have a living relationship**

Because the self has been created for community to truly know something is to have a living relationship with it – “influencing and being influenced by the object known”. This newer understanding of how we know reality fits closer to the biblical epistemology than the modernist view, which prevails as the most significant influence on the thinking among most people, including teachers in Christian schools, even today.

### **Truth revealed in community**

In the Bible knowledge is revealed “in community”, not objectively but through personal revelation and through story. Apart from the one isolated instance when the Ten Commandments were given, what has been revealed has been revealed through the mind of a person who is in relationship with God. In the earliest account we have the picture of Adam and Eve walking in the cool of the evening and meeting with God who apparently was revealing His truth to them in communication. The naming of the animals happened in a conversation between God and man in which the man has an active part. In this process he also learnt a most significant lesson - “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18 NIV). He is created for community.

### **Communities are “Story-Formed”**

The reality that we learn through the Bible is, characteristically, found in story form. Our western minds, trained to see truth empirically, find this somewhat offensive it is not neat and compartmentalised enough and there are paradoxes we cannot resolve and inconsistencies that we believe we must be able to explain away. God has chosen to reveal us His truth in story form with good reason. He made us to live in “story-formed” communities. Story is the most powerful way of revealing truth especially truth that is too large to fit into human categories and doctrine. Our efforts to theologise and create doctrinal categories are not wrong in themselves as they can aid our search for truth. However, when we absolutise that form of knowledge and insist that everything must fit into logically consistent categories and be stated in clear and unequivocal propositional form, we challenge the sovereignty of God by insisting on

seeking perfect knowledge now, instead of the incomplete knowledge He chooses to reveal. In His grace, He reveals that which we in our fallen state can understand. The awesome fullness of the knowledge of God is beyond us “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain”. (Psalm 139:6) We too easily over look the fact that while we seek truth, truth also seeks us.

## ***How We Teach And Learn? (Pedagogy)***

### **Current images are individualistic and competitive**

Our dominant images of teaching and learning are also individualistic and competitive rather than communal. They reflect the secular humanist view of the importance of the individual that arose out of the philosophic ideals of the **Enlightenment**. It is interesting to ask why we refer to one form of communal learning that regularly occurs in our classroom as “cheating”. Cheating is seen as wrong because of the competitive environment in which we place learning. When I “cheat” I steal a position in the pecking order that I am not entitled. This is not defending cheating which in the current context is wrong but it highlights that there might be other ways of looking at cooperative learning.

But real learning and growth of the individual occurs best in relationship, when students and teachers are in a learning/teaching relationship with each other and with the subject that is being learnt or taught. Such a relationship must be a two-way relationship in which teachers understand and recognise their own role - what Fowler (1990, page 103) calls “office” - and the role (or office) of their students. As they work together in a learning community, each is empowered to use their God-given gifts and to function in their God-given office. Palmer suggests that there is also a two-way relationship between the teacher and the subject matter. Truth seeks us as well as we seek the truth. If we approach our subject humbly we will go on being lifetime learners always open to new truth. Too many teachers simply are second hand dealers of information previously acquired. Jesus gave us a model for a 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).

If teaching is to be transformed it will happen because we are in the midst of a far reaching intellectual and spiritual re-visioning of reality and how we know it. Because reality is communal we learn best by interacting with it. Yet there is no certainty about the future of education. Modern education is facing a challenge from virtual reality. Students are likely to seek reality in cyber space in the relationships they form through the Internet. Such cyber relationships are based more on fantasy and imagination than on any true reality. However, they are often compulsive and even addictive relationships.

Good teaching will bring students into community not for the warm feelings it engenders but to do the difficult things that teaching and learning in community requires. Probably the most important of these is learning how to relate to other people and to learn from them.

## ***How We Live in the World (Ethics)***

### **As individuals or in community other people**

We will either live in the world as individuals or in community, isolated from or connected to other people. This raises the question of whether our classrooms are teaching students to compete for scarce rewards as isolated individuals or helping students to learn how to “create communities of abundance in their lives both as learners and as citizens”. This relates to the question of whether we are educating students in ways that make them responsive to the claims of community on their lives or do we educate as if reality is individualistic, and learning is a tool for distancing and disconnecting ourselves from the world? Do we teach students to compete for scarce grades or to work together for communal good?

### **A True Education**

We too often see ethics as a matter of helping students to develop standards of personal behaviour, which we personally fail often to live up to but nevertheless still, commend to our students. This stresses the personal at the expense of communal ethics. Communal ethics are based on a proper understanding of our interconnectedness and our accountability for others. Paul brings out the contrast between the desire for personal holiness as against our responsibility for communal relationships.

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2 1-5).*

If we claim that we are united with Christ we must also be living in unity with each other. If we experience the love of God it should be demonstrated in the fact that we love others and we put their interests above our own. *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2 NIV).*

### **A true education is one that “creates a capacity for connectedness” in students’ lives**

Ultimately an ethical education is one that creates a capacity for connectedness in students’ lives and a willingness to undertake responsibility for others as well as themselves. “Education has always been defined as the development of certain capacities (for example critical thinking and the tolerance of ambiguity) that allow the educated person to live more productively and more at peace in a complex and demanding world. But these vital capacities are sometimes taught in ways that break community rather than build it. Critical thinking becomes a tool for disengagement and tolerance of ambiguity becomes cheap relativism” (Palmer 1993, page xviii).

## **A true education is one that inculcates a willingness to take responsibility for others**

Education needs to lead students to an awareness that there is a “hidden wholeness” on which all of life depends. This is the proper ground for ethics. We are to love God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves. This sums up our total responsibilities to our creator God who created us to live in community. In an education based on a true communal ethic there is no division between intellect and spirit. Teachers and learners live in a vital community seeking to understand the reality that God has created. This reality is greater than any arbitrary division we might impose through our intellectual disciplines.

## **TEACHING THE TRUTH IN LOVE**

### ***Creating space for learning***

Palmer says, “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (1993, page 88).

### **Space for Learning**

Australian schools reflect Australian society in that there is little space for thinking. Our lives are full of busyness and thus we have little time or space to respond to the truth. Palmer suggest that the role of teaching is to create space for responding to the truth “To sit in a class where the teacher stuffs our minds with information, organizes it with finality, insists on having the answers while being utterly uninterested in our views, and forces us into a grim competition for grades - to sit in such a class is to experience a lack of space for learning. But to study with a teacher who not only speaks but listens, who not only gives answers but asks questions and welcomes our insights, who provides information and theories that do not close doors but open new ones, who encourages students to help each other learn - to study with such a teacher is to know the power of a learning space” (1993, page 70).

### **Openness – Boundaries - Hospitality**

Palmer claims that to develop space for learning there needs to be three characteristics –openness, boundaries and hospitality. Openness for Palmer means a willingness to create space so that our thinking is not cluttered and we are open to new ideas and different thought patterns - we clutter up our consciousness to protect ourselves. We may speak meaningless words to fill the space. But such openness needs boundaries to protect it. I recently read that one of the impacts of the electronic media has been to create an impatience for stimuli. Thus the time space for a message to be gotten across has been shortened. It is reported that the AFL is experimenting with reducing the time each quarter is played. School periods may be deemed as too long. What this does is to remove the boundaries that allow time for thinking. We need to create structures and boundaries to allow time and space for leaning. But this needs to be done in “love”, what Palmer calls *hospitality* - “receiving each other, our struggles, our new born ideas with openness and care. It means creating an ethos in which the community of troth can form, the pain of truth’s transformations be borne” (1993, page 74).



# Practicing Obedience to Truth

## A community of “TROTH”

Palmer (1993 PP 31-32) uses the phrase “community of troth” to refer to people who have pledged themselves to practice (or live) truth together in a relationship of love as part of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

## Practice more than Preparation

Education is characteristically more often seen in terms of *preparation* than *practice*. Conventional wisdom says that practice is what one does after leaving school. Preparation involves accumulating knowledge and developing skills and competencies. The reality of the present is ignored in education as children learn about the world “out there” or from earlier time in order to prepare for the future. To speak about practising the truth is to break down the barrier between the classroom and the world. It also assumes that the classroom is a community of truth. It is where people learn, or fail to learn, to work together and live together as a community. Reality is no longer “out there” but between us, as we bridge the gap between learning and living.

## Obedience to listen and respond

Palmer believes that there is a rule of truth “that can order our inquiries and bring us all, knowers and knowns, into mutually obedient relationships of troth”. (Palmer 1993, page 89) The key to this rule of truth may be found in the word *obedience* “which means to listen with a discerning ear and respond faithfully to the personal implications of what one has heard” (1993, page 89).

## Truthing in love

When Paul speaks of “truthing in love” as the basis of growth, he is referring to truth that is personal and relational, the truth that is in Jesus. (Eph 4:21) It is personal and relational because it is based on what Paul calls unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God as Jesus himself claimed to be “the way and the truth and the life”. The early Christians were called followers of the way because they adopted the life of Jesus. Paul tells us that as we live out or practise the truth that is in Jesus, so we grow to maturity. True maturity is not individual competency, skills, knowledge, wisdom or insight. It involves playing an effective role in the Body of Christ. It is obvious here that obedience to the truth is not a matter of legal correctness but an outward expression of an inward commitment formed in community, as we reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. “The truth we are seeking, the truth that seeks us, lies ultimately in the community of being where we not only know but are known” (Palmer 1993, page 90).

We need to discover the larger truth that we are not autonomous individuals, each in a private world and each maximising his or her own opportunity and optimising our individual experience, but we are an interconnected community. We cannot grow truly as individuals until we learn to grow in community.

## References

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