

## Principles regarding the provision of education

In a democratic society we recognize (on the basis of Romans 13:1-6) and affirm the respective roles and responsibilities of the individual, the family, the church, public and private educational institutions, and the state. We also recognize the opportunities and responsibilities we have with an increasingly globalised human community and through the means of modern communication technology to share our educational resources with others, particularly the less advantaged (Romans 12:13).

A Christian approach to education must be undergirded by biblical principles; it must also be responsive to the legislative environment in which it operates. The latter will change over time, whereas the fundamental biblical principles will not.

A biblically illuminated theory includes the following:

- The family (the parents and to some extent the siblings) constitutes the primary educational entity contributing to the religious and moral formation of the child by providing instruction, love, support, example and a sense of belonging, whose coherence and meaning are focussed on God as disclosed in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ.
- The congregation of God's people, as it meets weekly to hear God's word and to speak, sing and act together their beliefs and values, serves to strengthen the family by providing wider, non-familial expressions of community. At its heart is the transformative power of the gospel message to set people free from the enslaving power of sin to become, in Christ, those who joyfully submit to God's rule.
- Schools and other educational institutions, as a microcosm of society and in partnership with the family, serve to nurture personal growth in the context of an awareness of plurality, equipping their students to pursue truth and to appreciate the Christian and other heritages. This is so that each student can develop a sense of identity, self-confidence, ownership of their own value system, a critical openness in the face of the competing beliefs and values of the wider society, and sense of personal responsibility for their choices and actions.
- The state is ordained by God for our good and power is delegated by God to rulers to restrain evil and to promote the good (Romans 13). In the view of the Reformers this included the maintenance of true religion. This is contested in contemporary plural societies, however High Court judgments on the meaning of Section 116 of the Australian Constitution have upheld the principle that the state should not support one religion over others, but have allowed that it is a legitimate function of the state to support, financially or otherwise religious provision of services to the Australian community. (This differs from the American Second Amendment and Supreme Court rulings based on it.) Whereas the destiny of human society is to be transformed by the gospel and shaped in conformity with God's purpose; rulers are to disappear, renouncing their sovereignty in the face of his (Isaiah 60; Rev 7:9f). There is no biblically-mandated form of government, so Christians are forced to turn to general revelation for wisdom in political matters. As a consequence Christians differ in the role they are prepared to assign to the state. It can be argued on biblical grounds that the state has no right to interfere in the parental right to nurture their children in their own faith, whether in the family or in partnership with educational institutions such as pre-schools. On the other hand, where there is demonstrable family failure in the care and nurture of a child, the state does have an obligation to intervene. ??? However ???, the view that public funds should be applied only to public education cannot be justified on biblical grounds.

## Christian education

A Christian approach to education will differ from other religious or secular approaches at various points because of fundamental differences in the way the nature of the human person is understood and the way in which resultant teaching and learning theories are developed. This is not to say there is only one Christian philosophy of education and practice that is consistent with biblical principles. However, a Biblically illumined philosophy of education includes the following:

- Learning is built into the fabric of being human. From the moment we are born we begin to learn – to breathe, to see, to control our movements, and so on. As we mature, we learn how to think and feel, we learn what's right and wrong, we learn about the world we live in, and how to relate to people, and most importantly, who God is and what he has done for us in Christ, and how we are to glorify him. At its best, this learning continues throughout the whole of life. Much of this learning comes simply through the experiences and interactions of daily life. Education is a subset of learning, and is best understood as deliberate learning; that is, the attempt by the learner or someone else to guide, direct or influence a learning situation to bring about a desired learning outcome. It is clear from this definition that education is not limited to schooling, but that, like learning, it is a lifelong process that can take place in a large variety of contexts. A school, then, is one context in which education

takes place. Its nature is formal, where the student and teacher operate in a prescribed manner.

- Education, including school education, is a function of three factors: the nature of the learner, the role of the teacher, and the knowledge which the teacher seeks to bring to the learner.
- All people are learners. Much of that learning is influenced both by biological inheritance and the environment in which the person lives. However, a Christian approach will not be reductionist or deterministic, and will decline to characterise human beings solely in those terms. Most importantly, human beings are persons created in the image of God, for relationship with God, other people and the created order, and are to be understood holistically as physical, mental and spiritual beings. One particularly important feature of personhood is the self awareness we have, and therefore the potential for making choices. This presents two overarching goals for education from a Christian perspective: to enhance learners' God-given capacity for making choices by providing opportunities to perceive options, weigh alternatives and practice choosing. Correspondingly, for learners to accept responsibility for the choices they make, especially for the relationships into which they enter. Put this way, it becomes clear that the school cannot be regarded as the primary agent of education, since the school context itself, institutional by nature, has a limited capacity to encourage self-determination and a limited range of relationships.
- Teaching has a strong Biblical endorsement. In the Old Testament, it is particularly parents who are teachers (Deut 6.4–9), but the priests (Lev 10.11) and the prophets (Deut 13.1–5, 18.17–22) were also to teach. The primacy of parents in teaching is affirmed in the New Testament (Eph 6.4). In addition, the apostles were sent to teach (Matt 28.16–20) and God has appointed teachers (1 Cor 12.28). More broadly, we are all to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom (Col 3.16). This Biblical perspective is important to note, especially since we live in a context where a paid teaching profession has emerged, with specialist knowledge in fields and expertise in teaching as a discipline. This is appropriate, since we now live in a technological society of such complexity that children need a wide variety of educators with specialist knowledge and training, who give formal instruction in specified curricula. But again, it is important to avoid reductionism, and the variety of teachers contemplated by the Bible should not be undermined by a teaching profession. From a Christian perspective, all teaching, and the practice of all teachers (parental, professional or otherwise) should be shaped by the nature of the learner outlined above. In particular, the dual foci of self-conscious choices in learning, and accepting responsibility for those choices, which flow from human nature as created by God, will both require certain sorts of teaching practices (respect for students, a desire to invite students into the learning process, showing where this particular piece of work fits into the larger framework of learning); and will preclude other sorts of teaching practices (teaching by coercion or threat, indoctrination which hides things from students and makes over-reaching claims, presuming commitments in the form of teaching use). Parents, Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders, preachers and school teachers will teach Christianly within this framework.
- The third factor in education, the knowledge which the educator teaches the learner, is to be understood in its broadest terms, as including emotional, relational and spiritual learning, as much as intellectual. Our understanding of the nature and possibility of knowledge is a function of our convictions about the nature and accessibility of reality. A Biblical doctrine of creation includes the concepts that the universe is objective, in the sense that it has a reality given to it by God, which is good and bears the marks of God's own rational nature. As such, it is in principle able to be known by those who are themselves created in God's image. Likewise, a biblical doctrine of redemption includes the concepts that God has spoken truly to us in his Word, and that therefore language is capable of adequate communication of real knowledge. Both of these conclusions, regarding the objectivity and knowability of the universe, and the potential of human language, are vital underpinnings for a Christian approach to knowledge and therefore philosophy of education. In particular, they exclude an all-embracing constructivist view of knowledge, and therefore of education – fundamentally, we receive the world in knowledge, we don't create it. Of course, this does not imply that any area of human knowledge is either exhaustive or unchallengeable; rather, a stance of humility and openness to correction in the light of our created limits and fallen capacity for error and confusion is appropriate. Philip H Phenix attempts to categorise at the broadest level the different kinds of knowledge and inquiry in which humans engage, which he calls 'realms of meaning'. He distinguishes six such 'realms': symbolics (ordinary language, mathematics and the theoretical aspects of science); empirics (the experimental and human sciences); aesthetics (knowledge of the artistic, of beauty and form); synnoetics (personal knowledge, including relationships, and religious and moral commitment); ethics (knowledge of moral value and education); and synoptics (integrative studies such as

history). Although this list is not to be regarded as necessarily definitive, it helps to ensure breadth in understanding the knowledge that is involved in education.