



McKinney, S. (2017) Martin Luther: A Christian vision of school education. *Pastoral Review*, 13(6), pp. 45-50.

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Deposited on: 10 October 2017

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Martin Luther: A Christian Vision of School Education

By

Stephen J. McKinney

Abstract

This year marks the five hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation and there is a renewed interest in the life and work of Martin Luther. This article explores Martin Luther's vision of school education. Martin Luther considered school education as essential in the preservation of the spiritual and temporal estates. A number of important themes emerge: the universal nature of this school education and the inclusion of girls, albeit at the more elementary stages, and the focus on a wide range of studies including the languages required to read and understand the scriptures. The article provides a critique of Luther's ideas on school education and concludes by arguing that Luther has contributed to the history of ideas in education and the long and slow progress to mass compulsory state-funded school education.

Introduction

On the 31st of October 1517 Martin Luther sent the *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. These are usually referred to as the *Ninety-Five Theses*.¹ The purpose of the *Ninety-Five Theses* was to challenge the sale of indulgences that were being used to help fund the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Archbishop Albrecht had secured an agreement that he could keep half of the income from the indulgences sold in the German territories. He was using this money to pay off loans that he had used to acquire dispensations for a number of ecclesial positions.² It is possible that Luther may also have posted the *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg.³ The *Ninety-Five theses* were to be the catalyst for the Reformation and this year commemorates the five hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. Martin Luther's position in Church history and his contribution to Christian thought are very well documented. This article seeks to explore the less well-known contribution of Luther to history of school education as articulated in two key works: *The Letter to the Councilmen of all Cities of Germany that they establish and maintain Christian Schools* (1524) and *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530).⁴

The Letter to the Councilmen of all Cities of Germany that they establish and maintain Christian Schools (1524)

The Letter to the Councilmen of all Cities of Germany that they establish and maintain Christian Schools (1524) sets out a series of arguments for an increase in schooling to ensure that the cities have a properly educated population. Luther explains that it is a divine command to educate the youth and, as might be expected from a biblical scholar, he draws on the scriptures to substantiate this point.

He refers to Psalm 78:5:

He established a testimony in Jacob, and he appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children.

Similarly he refers to Deuteronomy 32:7:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you; your elders and they will tell you.

He explains that schooling should be understood as an important investment for the future. Luther recognises that it is the parents who have the responsibility for educating their children but he proposes a number of reasons why parents are negligent in their duty in regards to this matter. He states that some of the parents lack ‘piety and decency’ and are unsuitable to educate their children. He cautions that if these children are left untrained, they could poison and pollute other children and this will have a highly detrimental effect on the city. Other parents have only learned how ‘to provide for the belly’ and do not possess the knowledge and skills to train and teach their children. Luther is very concerned that even when parents are willing and able to teach their children, they have neither the opportunity nor the time to devote to education. The school education of the young, he argues, becomes the concern of the councilmen and magistrates. Luther states that the welfare of a city depends not only on material things such as treasures, solid walls, beautiful buildings and supplies of arms but also on a well-educated body of citizens and the city should invest in education:

If it is necessary, dear sirs, to expend annually such great sums for firearms, roads, bridges, dams and countless similar items, in order that a city might enjoy temporal peace and prosperity, why should not at least much be devoted to the poor, needy youth, so that we might engage one or two competent men to teach school?

He extols the advantages of children being:

...instructed and trained in schools or elsewhere where there were learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses to teach the languages, the other arts and history...

Luther constructs his vision of education as an integral part of the preservation of the spiritual and temporal estates. The spiritual estate is described in *A Sermon* (1530) as ‘that which has the office and preaching and the service of the Word and Sacrament, which gives the Spirit and all blessedness...’ The temporal is concerned with matters such as commerce and governance. He envisages a school system where both boys and girls will be educated at the elementary level. Luther is conscious of the demands of household work and chores and proposes a balance between school work and other duties and responsibilities. The boys will be educated for one or two hours a day:

My idea is to let boys go to such a school for one or two hours a day, and spend the remainder of the time working at home, learning a trade or doing whatever their parents desired; so that both study and work might go hand in hand while they were young and able to do both.

The girls will be schooled for one hour a day:

In like manner, a girl can surely find time enough to go to school one hour a day and still attend to all her duties at home...

Luther adds that the exceptional pupils will remain at school for a longer period and be more devoted to study. Some of these pupils will become the pastors, preachers and teachers that are required to support the preservation of the spiritual estate or be educated to take on the roles of rulers and members of civil government. Luther was eager that this level of education should be a broad general education and include the Arts, history and mathematics.⁵ The focus on sola scriptura in his theological thinking influenced his views on the subjects to be studied in schools and, understandably, he was very committed to the study of the scriptures and the languages that were required to read and interpret scripture. The study of languages also included German and the classical languages - the Humanist emphasis on ancient languages were very influential on Luther's educational vision.⁶ He called upon the Councilmen to establish good libraries in the cities, especially for the larger cities. These libraries would preserve the writings of the bible and the Arts. The education of the young was thought to be hugely beneficial for the temporal estate, as it will provide 'good and skilled men and women'. The men will take up duties such as ruling the land and the women 'may keep house and train children and servants aright'.

A Sermon on Keeping Children in School (1530).

The second work *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530) was written for preachers to assist them with arguments they could use to persuade people to keep their children at school. There was evidence that children were being kept out of school and, rather than be educated, were being prepared to make a living. Similar to the *Letter*, Luther is concerned that the ultimate goal of schooling is the creation of an educated population that will maintain the spiritual and temporal estates. He is anxious about children not remaining in school or not being kept in school and that they will lack a proper education. He argues that the parents have been given their children by God and they have been commanded to raise them for God's service. If this does not happen then both the spiritual and temporal estates will be badly affected. It is important to note that the title of the *Sermon* is on 'keeping children in school', yet the focus is quite steadfastly on boys and young men and the importance of educating them for God's service. He makes an important distinction between the learned Doctors and Masters of Holy Scripture and the ordinary pastors but continues to argue that both require education, though the education would be to different levels of advancement:

...for it is not only highly learned Doctors and Masters of Holy Scripture, that we need. We must also have ordinary pastors, who will teach the Gospel and the Catechism to the young and the ignorant, and baptise, and administer the Sacrament.

Luther states that not every man can become a pastor, preacher or school-master. In a very colourful set of arguments, Luther explains that just as the office of preaching makes sinners saints and damned men saved, the role of the worldly government is to make men out of wild beasts and prevent them from becoming wild beasts. To this

end, schooling is also required to educate those who will become leaders and members of the legal profession and other posts of civic responsibility.

Inclusion and Universal Education

Martin Luther's vision of school education has some very interesting features and appears to resonate with some contemporary themes in school education. The vision appears to propose a universal education that is compulsory at an elementary stage. Luther's vision is very inclusive in terms of gender and social status: he advocates the education of both boys and girls (albeit at the elementary level) and the children from poor and wealthy families. He earnestly desired an educated, literate populace that would help to create a better world. The emphasis on education in different languages can arguably be interpreted in contemporary terms as a commitment to literacy. He understood that effective schools would require appropriately qualified teachers and so he sought well-trained schoolmasters and mistresses for schools.

It is important to understand the nature of school education of that time and the provision that was available. There was a variety of schooling: monastic schools; cathedral schools; chantry schools and guild schools. However, schooling was usually for the boys of the more wealthy families and was ultimately elitist. The inclusion of girls in the vision of education is very noteworthy and does represent quite radical thinking for that social and historical context but this is still heavily influenced by the thinking of that era. The girls are to be educated and this education is to be balanced with their domestic duties in the home. Luther refers to 'learned and well-trained school mistresses' though it is very unlikely that he imagined the progress of girls to higher education.⁷ As has been seen, the *Sermon* is very concerned with the education of pastors and preachers and schoolmasters, all male occupations. Luther certainly honoured the role of wife and mother and highlighted the importance of women in the Old and New Testaments.⁸ However, according to Karant-Nunn and Weisner-Hanks, Luther 'preserved and transmitted' high and late medieval thought on women. He considered women to be less rational than men and lower in the hierarchy of the universe. He perceived the woman as a housewife running the house, and the children and servants. Therefore, schooling for girls should be focused on training them in the skills they required for housekeeping and motherhood and also to foster their Christian piety.

The final points concern Luther's vision of universal education. In the two works examined, it can be readily discerned that Luther aspires for elementary education for all boys and girls and more advanced education for the boys. This is in contrast to the school education that existed at his time, which was elitist and educated the children of the wealthy.⁹ Luther has contributed to history of ideas in school education and the long and slow progress that will eventually lead to the introduction of universal education in most parts of the world.¹⁰ These comments do need to be qualified by recalling that his aspiration is very localised: his *Letter* is addressed to the councilmen of the cities of Germany and the *Sermon* concentrates on Germany. It is not clear that his aspiration extended beyond his intended audience. It is equally important to understand the theological and historical context of this vision. Luther argues about the benefits of school education for the spiritual and temporal estates (it is not clear that these are completely distinct entities). Luther's vision of school education for all is rooted in a concept of Christian education. This is characterised by the emphasis on

the study of scripture and the languages of scripture. He is anxious that everybody can read the bible. Arguably, this can be understood as a form of indoctrination in the non-pejorative sense of the word.¹¹ The concept of Christian education is also characterised by Luther's understanding of the role of the schoolmaster in preserving the spiritual estate. He frequently groups pastors, preachers and schoolmasters together in the two works on education, especially in a *Sermon* (1530), because he perceives these three roles as high and exalted offices in the spiritual estate. They are God's stewards and servants. The schoolmaster, then, is a learned and educated man who is God's steward and servant and who has a high and exalted office in the spiritual estate.

Concluding Points

Luther has made a significant contribution to the history of ideas in education and the long and slow progress to mass compulsory state-funded school education. He was not the only reformer to highlight the importance of school education. Huldrych Zwingli, Philip Melancthon and John Calvin, among others, also recognised the key role of school education for religious, social and cultural advancement.¹² The Reformation did not resolve all of the issues surrounding the provision of schooling: many of the ideas on school education would take considerable time to be fully implemented. There were very complex reasons for the move towards compulsory universal state-funded education that arose throughout most of Europe and the English-speaking world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some historians cite the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, evolution, the rise of Social Sciences and Psychology as some of the forces that began to change society and influence thinking on school education.¹³ Others cite the rise of capitalism, urbanisation and the changing nature of the state.¹⁴ Perhaps most interestingly, there is an increased awareness and acknowledgement of the importance and influence of figures like Martin Luther and the Christian Churches in the evolution of school education.

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¹ Appold, K.G. (2011) *The Reformation. A Brief History*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

² Kolb, R. (2009) *Martin Luther. Confessor of the Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Wengert, T. J. (2015) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: the Roots of Reformation*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

⁴ Both texts are available at: http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-8/LIBRARY/LUT_WRK4.PDF

⁵ Robinson-Hammerstein, H. (1999) Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and Reformation through University Education. *Paedagogica Historica. International Journal of the History of Education*. 35:sup 1 15-28.

⁶ Robinson-Hammerstein, H. (1999).

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- ⁷ Schulte, A. (2002) Martin Luther and Female Education. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29 (6). 437-439.
- ⁸ Karant-Nunn, S. C. and Wiesner-Hanks, M.E. (2003) *Luther on Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁹ Harran, M.J. (2004) Reflections on Martin Luther and Childhood Education. *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. 4 (1).
- ¹⁰ Lawton, D. and Gordon, P. (2002) *A History of Western Educational Ideas*. London: Woburn Press.
- ¹¹ Strauss, G. (1978) *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Revolution*. Baltimore-London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- ¹² Androne, M. (2014) The influence of the protestant reformation on education. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences* 137. 80-87.
- ¹³ Lawton and Gordon (2002).
- ¹⁴ Miller, P. (2000) Historiography of compulsory Schooling. What is the Problem? In Lowe, R. (ed.) *History of Education. Volume 1. Education in its social context*. London: Routledge.