

# The Attitude of the Early Christian Church Toward Education

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## I. A DEFINITION OF EDUCATION

Geraldine Hodgson defines education thus:

Education includes the development of the child's latent powers and the imparting of such portions of the experience of the race—generally called knowledge—as will help him to conduct successfully his journey 'through the wilderness of this world'; and it includes a method of so imparting this knowledge that the child really assimilates or mentally digests it, really makes it an integral part of himself.<sup>1</sup>

A rich variety of words is employed in the Bible to describe the teaching and the educational process. We find in the Old Testament such terms relating to education as these: "discipline," "law," "discernment," "wisdom," "knowledge," "illumination," "vision," "inspiration," and "nourishment." When we turn to the New Testament we discover more interesting terms which relate to the system of teaching and education. Here are some of these terms: "instruction," "acquisition," "presentation," "elucidation," "exposition," "authority," "care," and "supervision."

## II. A BACKGROUND SURVEY

In order to understand better the educational world into which Christianity came and thus to comprehend more truly the attitude of Early Christianity toward education, it will be well for us to consider briefly the outstanding types of pre-Christian education which had an influence upon Christianity. We begin with a study of Greek education.

Among the Greeks education was an affair of the state. Its purpose was to prepare the sons of free citizens for the duties awaiting them, first in the family, and then in the state. While among the Jews education was meant for all, without respect of rank or class, among the Greeks it was intended for the few—the wealthy and the well-born. Down to the Roman period at least, this educational exclusiveness was maintained. The rule was that women needed no more instruction than they were likely to receive at home.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgson, G., *Primitive Christian Education*, p. 2.

Being an affair of the state, education was under the control of officials appointed to superintend it. Gymnastics, for the training of the body, and music in the larger sense, including letters, for the training of the mind, were the subjects of instruction. These—athletics, literature, music—were regulated by a body of guardians of public instruction.

The following stages of education were to be noted among the Greeks:

1. *Home education.* This extended from birth to the end of the seventh year. Children were under parental supervision.
2. *School education.* This began with the eighth year and lasted to the sixteenth or eighteenth year.
3. *The Ephebi.* From the sixteenth or eighteenth year to the twenty-first year the young men were known as the Ephebi, and formed a sort of college under state control. Before the youth was enrolled among the Ephebi he had to undergo an examination to make sure that he was the son of a Greek citizen and that he had the physique for the duties now devolving upon him. This was really the university stage of his career. He was trained in both physical and intellectual pursuits. On the completion of this course he was ready to enter upon the exercise of his duties toward the state.

By the time of the Apostolic Age it had become the practice for promising Greek students to supplement their school education by seeking out and attending the lectures of eminent teachers in what we should call the great universities. In the second century A.D. there were four great philosophical schools in Athens—Academic (Platonic), Peripatetic, Epicurean, and Stoic.

Concerning the practical character of the Roman genius Monroe speaks thus:

The genius of the Romans was, in a word, wholly a practical one, the great merit of which was that it accomplished concrete results by adapting means to ends. On the other hand, the Greek genius, as will be recognized through a consideration of the fullest development of the Greek mind in their philosophies, possessed a peculiar power of defining proper aims in life, of determining the principles underlying conduct, of attaining to the ultimate analysis of reality. At least these are the things that the Greeks sought for: and we recognize that the Greeks defined for all time those things, that have been by all ages deemed the most worthy objects of the present life—esthetic enjoyment, intellectual power, moral personality, political freedom,

social excellence—called culture. The work of the Romans was the practical one of furnishing the means, the institutions, or the machinery for realizing these ideals. Hence they have ever been looked upon as a utilitarian people.<sup>2</sup>

The Romans also differed from the Greeks in their standard of judgment. Contrasted with the Greek tendency to measure all things by the standard of reasonableness, or harmony, or proportion, we have the Roman tendency to judge by the usefulness, the effectiveness of a thing. The Greek estimate was an intellectual or aesthetic one, resulting from the consideration of ultimate aims or values; the Roman estimate was the utilitarian one drawn from a consideration of the serviceableness of a thing as judged by its relation to institutional life.

Since it was true that religion never inspired the Romans to any exalted view of life, but was merely a means for expediting the practical affairs of life, education among the Romans never became more than a preparation for life's practical duties. Here again we note the words of Monroe:

Just as mildew was kept from the grain, or rust and accident from the hinges of the door by the worship of appropriate gods or spirits, so each specific duty on the farm—its plowing, reaping, preparing the grain—each duty in the household, each exercise in the martial camp or field, had its specific training, and education was but the sum of such preparations for the practical duties of life.<sup>3</sup>

The home was the center of early Roman education. The father was responsible for the moral and physical training of the boy. The mother held a position far superior to the place of women in Greece. She herself reared and cared for her own children instead of turning them over to a nurse.

The influence of the home was supplemented by that of concrete types of Roman manhood. The most important characteristic of the method of Roman education was imitation. The Roman youth was to become pious, grave, reverential, courageous, manly, prudent, honest, by the direct imitation of his father and of the old Roman heroes.

The period from the middle of the third century B.C. to the middle of the first century B.C. constituted a time of transition, during which Greek customs and ideas were introduced. During this time the elementary schools—schools of the "literators"—were

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<sup>2</sup> Monroe, P., *A Textbook in the History of Education*, pp. 176, 177.

<sup>3</sup> Monroe, P., *A Textbook in the History of Education*, p. 185.

quite numerous and soon came to be known as schools of the "grammatists" as well. During this transitional period, rhetoric by slow degrees made itself more and more manifest as a useful and honorable study.

During the Imperial Period (50 B.C. to 250 A.D.) the Romans adopted the educational institutions of Greece and perfected them into a system such as the Greeks never developed. This was the period of the full development of the School of the Literator (elementary education), the School of the Grammaticus (language education), and the School of the Rhetor (rhetorical and oratorical education). Libraries and universities were also developed.

The Jews from early times prized education in a measure beyond the nations around them. It was the key to the knowledge of their written Law. In the fourth century B.C. there was a synagogue in every town, and in the second century B.C. in every considerably sized village as well. To the synagogues there were in all probability attached schools, both elementary and higher. By the Apostolic Age there is abundant evidence of the general diffusion of education among the Jewish people.

Jewish education began with earliest infancy. At the age of six the Jewish boy would go to the elementary school (Beth ha-Sepher), but before this he would have received lessons in Scripture from his parents. From the sixth to the tenth years he would make a study of the Law, along with writing and arithmetic. At the age of ten he would be admitted to the higher school (Beth ha-Midrash), where he would make the acquaintance of the oral Law.

At the age of thirteen the Jewish boy would be acknowledged by a sort of rite of confirmation as a "Son of the Commandment," and from this point his further studies would depend upon the career he was to follow in life. If he was to become a Rabbi, he would continue his studies in the Law, and, as Saul of Tarsus did, betake himself to some famous teacher and "sit at his feet" as a disciple.

While the great subject of Hebrew school instruction was the Law, the work of the elementary school embraced reading, writing, and arithmetic. To make the Jewish boy familiar with the Hebrew characters in every jot and tittle, and to make him able to produce them himself, was the business of the Beth ha-Sepher, "the House of the Book." Reading thus came to be a universal accomplishment among the Jewish people. In the higher school, the Beth ha-

Midrash, "the House of Study," the contents of the Law and the Books of Scripture as a whole were expounded by the authorities.

In the school the children sat on the floor in a circle around the teacher, who occupied a chair or bench. Only married men were employed as teachers. One teacher was to be employed where there were twenty-five scholars (one assistant when the number exceeded twenty-five), and two teachers where they exceeded forty pupils. The method of instruction was oral and catechetical. In the schools attached to the synagogues of Eastern Judaism to this day, committing to memory and learning by rote are the chief methods of instruction. This kind of oral repetition and committing to memory undoubtedly occupied a large place in the earliest Christian teaching, and had an important influence in the composition of the Gospel narratives.

While the education of Jewish youth on the theoretical side centered in the Law and was calculated to instill piety toward God, no instruction was complete without the knowledge of some trade or handicraft. To circumcise him, to teach him the Law, to give him a trade, were the primary obligations of a Jewish father toward his son. Nor were the Jewish girls left without education, for the women of the household instructed them.

Knight has given the following summary of the contributions of Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans to modern educational philosophy and practice:

The Hebrews gave to the world lofty conceptions of God, of deep religious faith, and of moral responsibility. And in the high esteem in which they held their teachers there is also a very important lesson for modern education.

The contribution of Greece, 'wherein ancient civilization climbed and climbed until it reached its very zenith,' appeared in high standards of art and philosophy and literature and in advanced intellectual and aesthetic conceptions. The contribution of the Romans came through legal and organizing and administrative genius.<sup>4</sup>

### III. THE ATTITUDE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH TOWARD EDUCATION

The sentiment which caused education to be so prized among the Jews naturally caused it to be greatly desired among the followers of Christ. However, there has been much unfair criticism concerning the attitude of the early Christians toward education. Many

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<sup>4</sup> Knight, E. W., *Twenty Centuries of Education*, p. 87.

scholars have contended that the spirit of education was an alien and a hostile spirit in the life of the early Christians. Geraldine Hodgson gives the following translated passages from Compayre's *Histoire de la Pedagogie*:

1. At the outset, owing to its tendencies towards mysticism, Christianity could not be a good school of practical and human pedagogy. (p. 51)
2. When the pagan schools were once closed Christianity did not open new ones, and after the fourth century profound night wraps humanity. (p. 55).<sup>5</sup>

Again, Geraldine Hodgson points out the following chief points of attack against the Christian attitude toward education made by Hallam in his book on the *Middle Ages*:

1. That the literary character of the Church as a whole may not be measured by the attainments of its more illustrious members.
2. That the early Christians showed a disinclination for profane learning.
3. That a council prohibited bishops from reading secular books.
4. That Jerome condemns the study of classical authors save for pious ends.
5. That no canons in favour of learning were promulgated.
6. That illiterates might receive ordination.
7. That religious controversy tends to narrow rather than to extend learning.<sup>6</sup>

In like manner many critics of the Christian Church speak. However, it is most evident to the sincere student of the Early Christian Church that it is both unfair and untruthful for anyone to say that Early Christianity was hostile to and had a complete disregard for education. Concerning the attitude of Early Christianity toward pagan learning we shall have more to say in the second paper. In the remainder of this discussion we shall observe that the general attitude of Early Christianity was favorable to the spirit and purpose of education.

We note the following reasons in support of the proposition that the Early Christian Church had profound respect for, and made constant use of, the educational process:

1. Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, is the Great Teacher. During His ministry He constantly employed the teaching method.
2. The Apostolic Church was a teaching Church. The apostles

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<sup>5</sup> Hodgson, G., *Primitive Christian Education*, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hodgson, G., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

went everywhere teaching Christianity. Some of the apostles like Paul were educated men. The apostles gathered about them disciples to be trained for purposes of educating others. Polycarp was so trained by the Apostle John. The purpose of the Apostolic Epistles was to teach. It is interesting to note that the whole trend of Paul's counsel to the Ephesian Church favors education, in a wide sense of that word. It was always the contention of Paul, the scholar of Tarsus, that men do not and cannot resist false philosophy by the ever ready weapon of ignorance and stupidity, or by a rejection of the ordinary means of education. Teachers, together with apostles and prophets, had a prominent place and a definite task in the work of the Early Church.

3. There were no racial and class distinctions in Christianity. It was democratic and universal. Its purpose was for all to learn the truth. Thus the Early Church gives evidence of an educational democracy rather than an educational aristocracy.
4. In the Christian life itself the educational method was observed. To the early Christians the Christian life was a school. They were constant pupils in the school of moral and spiritual experience, and they were continually learning lessons in self discipline.
5. Time and space permit but the briefest mention of the fact that in the writings of many of the Apostolic Fathers the importance of education is emphasized. Such, for example, are found in Clement's Epistles, in the Epistle of Barnabas, and in the Ignatian Epistles. The Didache was a text-book of religious instruction during its particular period.
6. The interest of Early Christianity in education is seen further in the development of schools for definite Christian instruction. Such schools as the Catechumenal Schools, the Catechetical Schools, the Monastic Schools, and the Episcopal and Cathedral Schools developed in the early centuries.
7. The favorable attitude of the early Christians toward education may be summarized by noting Origen's attitude in this regard. Celsus sought to discredit the Christian system by aspersing the intellectual as well as the moral character

of its adherents. Origen in answer points to the passages in the Old Testament, especially in Psalms, which the Christians also use, which inculcate wisdom and understanding, and he declares that education, so far from being despised among the Christians, is the pathway to virtue and knowledge, the one stable and permanent reality (*Contra Celsus*, III, 49, 72).<sup>7</sup>

#### A STUDY OF EDUCATION AS CONDUCTED IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The private study which had been devoted to the Old Testament came in due course to be given to the Books which now comprise the New Testament. The feeling grew and spread that it was at once a privilege and duty thus to make acquaintance with the meaning and the teaching of the Scriptures. All this intellectual activity devoted to a study of the Scriptures implies throughout the Early Church a considerable level of educational attainment.

At first the children of the Christians were sent to the secular schools for their elementary education. Although the Fathers of the Church did not permit their youth to become instructors in pagan schools, they did not consider it wise to deny them the advantages of a liberal education, even though associated with falsehood and idolatry.

But though circumstances of the times rendered separate Christian elementary schools impossible and inadvisable in the Early Church, the Church was not indifferent to the Christian instruction of its members. Prominent among the leaders in the Early Church were "teachers." Teaching was considered as a divine gift (Rom. 12:6; I Cor. 12:10). Power to teach was a qualification which Timothy was charged to look for in the bishops whom he should appoint (I Tim. 3:2), and he was told that the servant of the Lord in any office must have aptness to teach (II Tim. 2:24). Teaching was one of the main features in the evangelistic work of the Early Church.

Teachers are spoken of in connection with apostles and prophets. Teaching is distinguished from preaching in the New Testament. Preaching was the proclamation of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ and the urging men to repentance and saving

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<sup>7</sup> Nicol, T., Article on *Education* in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (Hastings, J., ed.), Vol. I, p. 324.



faith. Teaching was the calmer and more systematic instruction in the details of Christian truth and duty which followed the answered summons to repentance and saving faith.

Teaching was also distinguished from prophecy. Prophecy was a specialized form of teaching, the utterance of a revelation received directly from God. Teaching was the utterance of that which one had gained by thought and reflection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Teachers, like apostles and prophets, traveled about from place to place. However, teachers were more likely than apostles to settle down in one place (Eph. 4:11). The teaching was oral, as a rule, but it might be conveyed by means of didactic epistles, such as those contained in the New Testament, or those of Clement of Rome and Ignatius, or works like the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Instruction was also conveyed in hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16).

The characteristics of Early Christian education are most interesting and deserve to be noted in this closing part of our discussion. A brief statement of these characteristics follows:

1. Compared with the varied literature of the ancient world Early Christian education was exclusively religious in character.
2. In contrast with the philosophic speculations of Greek and Hellenistic schools it claimed to be a body of revealed truth.
3. The Christian teacher did not so much unfold a philosophy of religion as expound and apply the truths embodied and revealed in Jesus Christ.
4. The content of Christian teaching came to be fixed and authoritative. Paul speaks of "the teaching" (II Tim. 6:1), "sound doctrine" (II Tim. 4:3), "good doctrine" (I Tim. 4:6). Knight speaks of the "uncompromising theology" which dominated Early Christian education.<sup>8</sup>
5. Knight also speaks of the spiritual aim and the other-worldly spirit of Christian education.<sup>9</sup> Christianity placed emphasis upon preparation for life in another world, and this preparation was through spiritual regeneration in this life.

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<sup>8</sup> Knight, E. W., *Twenty Centuries of Education*, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

6. Early Christian teaching is described in I. Cor. 12:8 as the “word of wisdom” and the “word of knowledge.” Fletcher explains the meaning of these terms thus:

In Christian wisdom (*Logos sophias*) the truth was arrived at by the teacher’s powers of observation and reasoning. In Christian gnosis (*Logos gnoseōs*) the truth was bestowed as an immediate gift of the spirit. The first enabled the teachers to explain the truth, the latter qualified him to interpret it.<sup>10</sup>

7. Early Christian teaching accepted as basic facts the commonly accepted truths of the Old Testament concerning God, the world, man, and the moral Law.
8. Early Christian teaching had definitely Christian elements which made it absolutely unique. Much of the doctrinal content of Early Christian teaching was unique in itself. It emphasized the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the experiences of salvation which come through faith in Christ, and Christian eschatology. Likewise, the ethical content of Christian teaching was unique. The Christian teachers taught that there was a distinctively Christian way of life. The authoritative norm of such teaching was the moral teaching of Jesus as Lord (I Cor. 4:17; Eph. 4:20). The Christian was taught to renounce the world, subdue the flesh, escape the devil, and serve God. The central idea in Christian ethics is love (Gal. 5:14; 6:2), and the supreme end of moral perfection is being perfect in Christ (Col. 1:28).
9. A final characteristic of Early Christian teaching is expressed in these words of Messenger:

The Early Christians have not been given enough credit for their educational theory and methods. They may have gone to extremes in some things but their pedagogical insight was marvelous.<sup>11</sup>

The following is a summary of the outstanding pedagogical principles observed in Early Christian teaching: (1) Thoughts control men—Phil. 4:8; Gal. 5:17, 25. (2) The power of motives, and the combination of the doctrine of service with the idea of reward—Rom. 8:18; I Cor. 2:9;

<sup>10</sup> Fletcher, M. S., Article on *Teaching* in the *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (Hastings, J., ed.), Vol. II, p. 551.

<sup>11</sup> Messenger, J. F., *An Interpretative History of Education*, p. 56.

I Peter 1:4. (3) Emphasis upon the direct and immediate application of what was learned—Phil. 4:9. (4) The importance of singleness of aim and concentrated effort—I Cor. 2:5; I Tim. 6:9-11; I John 2:15.

### CONCLUSION

This discussion leads us to conclude with the following words of Knight:

With Christianity, a new ideal and a new educational force entered the world.

The old Greek and Roman philosophies were limited to the few, largely on the basis of intellect and aristocracy. The teachings of Christ had no such limitations but applied to all, without distinction of race or rank or sex. Christianity appealed to the moral nature of man, which is common to all. It was democratic, and in time it was to join with political democracy as a foundation of modern education.<sup>12</sup>

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Knight, E. W., *Twenty Centuries of Education*, pp. 87, 88.