
Pro Rege

Volume 9 | Number 2

Article 2

December 1980

Implications of a Reformed Biblical View of Life for Education: A Restatement

Larry Reynolds
Dordt College

Jack Fennema

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Larry and Fennema, Jack (1980) "Implications of a Reformed Biblical View of Life for Education: A Restatement," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 9: No. 2, 2 - 6.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol9/iss2/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

The Implications of a Reformed Biblical View of Life for Education: A Restatement

Larry Reynolds
Professor of Education

Jack Fennema

Dr. Larry Reynolds, Professor of Education at Dordt College, has conducted numerous inservice programs for teachers and contributed articles to Christian education journals.

Dr. Jack Fennema, Headmaster at Bellevue Christian School, Bellevue, Washington, has held a wide variety of administration positions in Christian education and is the author of Nurturing Children in the Lord. (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, N.J.)

At an inservice workshop on communication for teachers, one of the participants complained that while the principles being demonstrated were certainly valid, they were all too similar to material covered in his undergraduate program. Another teacher asked, "Well, is your communication today based on those principles and are you using those techniques?" When the response was silence, he continued, "I appreciate this workshop because it is a restatement of principles and techniques which I have allowed to become cold storage in my day-to-day dialogue with others. I need a refresher course." In this article we do not intend to state something new about Christian education; rather we attempt to state again the implications for education of

a reformed, Biblical view of life. We hope those readers who are products of a reformed tradition will find the material familiar and will once again realize the significance of our reformed birthright and the distinctive vision of education it has to offer to the broader Christian community and the world. With the pressures that Christian education is facing as it moves into the twenty-first century, it is a birthright too easily lost.

Basic to working out the implications for education of a reformed view of life is the Bible. Scripture is the starting point for approaching any educational issue, for it provides the context in which any issue should be considered. This does not mean that the Bible is a textbook on classroom

discipline, curriculum design, or instructional methodology, but the Bible does tell us what obedient discipleship is, does give us insight into the meaning of creation, and does reveal what true knowledge is.

Christians, in their attempts to work out an approach to education, often fall into one of two traps. The first is the “back door” use of scripture. Proponents of this method take a predetermined position (usually based on an educational trend which has developed a following in the public marketplace of education) and attempt to establish a Biblical basis for that position. There is not only a tendency to quote scripture out of context, but also there is often an awkward synthesis between two incompatible views of life, two alien faiths. Although one cannot ignore the practices and the theories that are being considered in the public marketplace of education, the Christian has to be careful lest his adoption of such a practice or theory carry with it an unbiblical view of man or God’s creation. For example, many Christians who cite the Biblical importance of obedience and respect for authority embrace a behaviorist methodology that fails to recognize that the child is more than a biological specimen subject to stimulus and response.

The second trap is the “textbook” use of the scripture to which we have already alluded. Proponents of this method also tend to quote scripture (especially those verses which contain educational words like “train” and “teach”) out of context and often use the behavior of Jesus or one of the heroes of faith in scripture as the ideal pedagogical model for the teacher to adopt. This method ignores the educational insights that the non-Christian might have discovered. Although the non-Christian has not confronted or accepted the truth of the

scripture, he might stumble in his spiritual blindness on something valid in God’s creation. Scriptures, however, when allowed to speak in their entirety, provide a framework for testing the spirits of the work of the non-Christian and a context for seeing and using his discoveries.

The basic historical framework that is outlined in the scriptures is that of creation, fall, and redemption. Unfortunately, that framework has almost become a cliché in reformed circles, a cliché to which we pay lip service. Yet we have failed to work out its implications for our tasks as teachers and students and in selecting and organizing the curriculum in our schools. Understanding our redemption in terms of the way God originally intended us to carry out our tasks in that creation which God said was good provides both context and purpose for learning that should be unique for both the Christian teacher and student. The very acceptance of this framework should insure a curriculum which gives adequate attention to the historical dimension in which we exist.²

The sovereignty of God is another cornerstone of our reformed, Biblical heritage which often has been reduced to a cliché in education. God is sovereign over all of life and no area remains neutral and secularly free of his rule and authority. God commands a religious response of total love and obedience. All our work—including our school work—is done in obedience or disobedience to Him. To walk in obedience requires the confessional stance that Jesus Christ is the Lord of one’s person in all educational tasks and the Lord of the cosmos which is explored and studied in our schools (Col. 1:20). If we take redemption seriously, we will never surrender part of our curriculum to the area of secular neutrality; neither will we, as some of

our evangelical brothers and sisters in Christ have done, surrender part of the curriculum to the dominion of Satan.

Our reformed, Biblical perspective also provides some important answers to those questions that are traditionally treated by philosophers of education. They are concerned with anthropological questions (What is man? What is a child?) in order to define the role and the task of the teacher and student. In order to describe the basic rationale for the very existence of schools, they are forced to ask what is the ultimate purpose of life.³ To establish criteria for the selection and organization of a curriculum, the educational philosophers find it necessary to ask questions about the nature and structure of reality. Trying to determine the goals and the methods of instruction in education leads to epistemological questions on intellectual development and how something is known to be true. An area of renewed interest to the philosophers of education is axiology. How does one derive the values on which are based decision making, standards, and judgments in education? All of these questions for us touch on issues which are integral to our reformed, Biblical view of life.

A Biblical anthropology recognizes that man is an image bearer of God (Gen. 1:26, 27) and exists at all times in relationship (either whole or broken) with his Creator. That relationship involves the totality of man, not merely his rational or emotional or physiological functions. As a unity of all his functions he responds either in obedience or disobedience to the rest of creation. Man's response to God's creation is not an optional function for man but a part of his very createdness. He continually seeks to investigate and to understand the world in which he lives and to engage in meaningful activities in that world. The student, in

spite of the basic distortion (because of sin) which afflicts even his best efforts, has a curiosity about creation and a desire to be actively involved in working in that creation. When the educator recognizes that his students are image bearers of God, he cannot view them as objects to be manipulated toward educational success. He will teach with an awareness that he is never dealing solely with an isolated function of the learner (e.g. his thinking) but is dealing with a total integral being. Nor will he deny the legitimacy of any of the functions (e.g. the physiological function of stimulus and response) of the learner.⁴

Our view of our responsibility as covenant parents to our covenant children has been the basis for our establishment of Christian day schools, but we have often neglected to work out the instructional implications of the baptism of our children into the body of Christ. Our children as students should see themselves as members of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12), each with his own unique gifts to develop. To view the student as an individual academically working in competition with other individuals is inimical to a reformed, Biblical view of the child. Also inimical is the view of the covenant child as an *object* of evangelism; the covenant child *is* a kingdom citizen until he, at the age of understanding, rejects that citizenship. (Such rejection is often manifested by an individual's indifference to making confession of faith⁵).

The task God assigned to man in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:28) establishes not only the ultimate purpose for man's existence but also the purpose for Christian education. Man's task is to work in and develop God's creation in faithful obedience to his Word, and the school's function is to nurture and equip the student for that task. The great commission given by Christ (Matt. 28:18-20) calls man back to

that task through the reconciling power of Christ's redemption. The Bible directs the Christian toward action in God's creation—he is to be a doer of God's word (James 1:22). Christian education will be careful not to reduce students to mere hearers of God's word but will provide opportunities for students to perform meaningful kingdom tasks.

The reformation gave us a better understanding of how both Christ and man function in the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. Helping children to understand and refine their roles as prophets, priests, and kings in God's creation is our basic task as Christian educators. We must help students become prophets who, as well as bringing the good news of the gospel, speak the truth to the issues of the day. We must help students become part of the royal priesthood (I Peter 2:9), bringing reconciliation in the name of Jesus between man and God, man and self, man and others, and man and creation. We must help students become kings, ruling in the name of Jesus as caretakers in God's creation and exercising responsible stewardship of time, resources, and opportunities for God's glory and man's welfare (Ps. 8:6).

For the Christian all questions about the nature and structure of reality (questions whose answers are significant for establishing a curriculum) are rooted in the confessional response that all of reality is created by God and held together by Christ (Col. 1:17). Not only does the creation declare the glory of God (Ps. 19) but also it reveals God's law (Ps. 119:97-99 and Rom. 1:20). Especially from the Psalms do we become aware that there is an order and a normativity in reality. The world that the school's curriculum explores is not one of relativism (pragmatism) or chaos and uncertainty (existentialism), and all Christian educators must be concerned

that their students recognize God's sustaining hand in creation. Creation, however, is not a static reality of fixed laws (realism) or a reflection of fixed eternal and divine absolutes (idealism); creation exists in historical context in which God and man as God's caretaker actively participate. There should be a sense of excitement for the student in confronting this dynamic yet orderly unfolding dimension of creation.⁶

God's command to walk before Him in truth (I Kings 2:4) provides the basis for epistemology. Truth is not empirically established knowledge, and knowledge is not the mastery of facts or concepts. Truth is obediently and faithfully responding to God and his creation, and knowledge is that understanding and insight which leads man in that response. Knowledge is always contextual. First, it exists in the context of one's personal commitment, for knowing is a matter of one's heart direction. Second, knowledge exists in the context of personal significance. The significance is determined by the effect knowledge has on one's relationship to God, himself, others, and creation. Third, knowledge exists in the context of all of the rest of creation. Although one might focus his investigation of God's creation on a particular, minute aspect of reality, he must be careful that the results of his investigation account for the interrelationship of all parts of creation. A Biblical view of knowledge will never accept the idea that knowledge in and of itself liberates or frees man. The truth that sets men free comes from being faithful disciples of Christ (John 8:31-32). One is to *do* the truth.

Values in education have been a much discussed topic among educators during the past five years. Christian educators have also participated in that discussion and, unfortunately, have sometimes adopted the assumptions of

an axiology that is not biblically based.⁷ A Biblical view of values starts with God's command to love Him and keep his commandments (John 14:23). A Biblical axiology recognizes that there are norms in God's creation and consequences for breaking those norms. Scripture provides insights and principles concerning what is normative in God's creation, and in so doing it provides a basis for decision making and the setting of standards in education. Because of sin, God's laws for his creation have been broken and one witnesses that brokenness in himself, in others, and in all of creation. A Christian value system not only recognizes the brokenness in the world but also recognizes that man through the power of Christ's redemption can bring healing by acting on those values which conform to God's law for his creation.

In conclusion, in all areas of education our reformed, Biblical view of life has significance, and the Christian educator's task is to lead his students into a better understanding and awareness of the implication of that view of life for their own discipleship. The Christian educator accepts the vital role of the Holy Spirit in that task and embraces the promise given in Ezekiel for himself and for his students:

And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances . . . so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel 36:27-28
(New American Standard Bible)

Notes

¹We are not contending, however, that exploring what scripture means contextually when education-related words occur is not a meaningful and necessary task in formulating a Christian per-

spective on education. A careful exegetical study of scripture in such cases can perhaps offer greater insight into a particular educational issue than any other investigative science can. Jack Fennema's book on discipline, *Nurturing Children in the Lord*, is based on this very approach.

²Many social studies curriculums have become so thematically or topically oriented that the student gains little awareness that he exists in a historical time line. We wonder whether the curriculum in many of our Christian schools adequately makes our students aware that they are part of the history of God's chosen people and that they do not serve the Lord as isolated individuals isolated in time.

³The modern philosopher of education has often attempted to ask this question in a non-metaphysical context. Unfortunately his answers have directly and indirectly dictated the direction our schools have gone in the areas of instructional practices and curricula.

⁴Because behavioralism totally reduces man to the physiological function of stimulus and response, many Christian educators have failed to recognize that this function is in fact a legitimate part of the total student and that instruction and discipline which focus on behavior do not necessarily reflect a reductionistic view of the student. Ironically many Christian educators have reflected a reductionistic view of man in their isolated focus on the rational (and sometime moral) function of their students.

⁵Ironically our historical (and, we are convinced, unbiblical) practice of excluding children from participation in the Lord's Supper until they have made confession of faith has caused many adolescents in the reformed community to view themselves as less than kingdom citizens. They assume a false sense of security in that they believe they are somehow covered by some sort of "covenant insurance policy" their parents purchase through Christian school tuition premiums. Unfortunately, some parents operate under the same false assumption.

⁶It is sad that many Christians have responded negatively to new discoveries about God's creation (the first classic case was the church's opposition to Galileo) and subscribe to a philosophy of realism which has a very limiting, unbiblical view of creation.

⁷Responses to Larry Reynolds' article in the *Christian Educators Journal* (May, 1976) on values clarification revealed that many Christian educators were accepting the assumptions as well as using the strategies of values clarification—a movement based on humanistic axiology that embraces the goodness of man and the relativism of good and bad values.