

Of Widgets and Students

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Christian parents across this nation are in a massive exodus from the failed experiment in tax-funded public schools. Some choose Christian day schools sacrificing to pay tuition in addition to their “tax bill” for the public schools. Others opt to teach their children at home using the services of a number of educational organizations raised up to meet specific needs of home schoolers. Yet, like Israel, God’s people face wilderness wandering before education is reclaimed from secular “Philistines” now entrenched.

The Wilderness

Sadly, as Jay Adams noted, our movement “unintentionally has taken over humanistic goals from its secular counterpart” (1982:22). After all, many Christian educators and, indeed, most parents are “products” of the government schools. It may well take a full generation to repair the ruins and reestablish a godly education ministry. For example, evolutionary theory, despite its mortal wound from fossil facts, still pervades the “climate of opinion” in the intellectual community. Secular scientists and their fellow-traveling media spokesmen still portray man as the captain of his fate on some exciting trek through a star studded cosmos.

Meanwhile, parents pursuing alternatives to humanistic education would do well to be open to input regarding the methods and substance of elementary and secondary education from church leaders outside their particular educational programs. Much hard thinking and research remain to be done to root out the intellectual fads and foolishness that still condition our thinking about education. Accordingly, home schoolers as well as Christian school parents can profit from Douglas Wilson’s provocative monograph, entitled **RECOVERING THE LOST TOOLS OF LEARNING** (Crossway Books, 1991).

Lost Tools

Wilson’s style is lively and humorous. Thus, regarding perennial pleas of governmental educators for increased funding to avoid educational mediocrity, Wilson confides his frustration (p-24) with a bumper sticker which read, “‘ If you think education is expensive try ignorance.’ I have been tempted to print a bumper sticker in response that says, ‘We did try ignorance, and now it wants a raise.’”

Later, Wilson boldly confronts prayer-in-the-public-school advocates with the dilemma they face. As he observes (p-40, 41), “If we were successful in establishing Christian prayer in the schools, we would be violating the religious liberties of those who are not Christians. If we establish prayer that is not Christian, what have we gained? . . . Do we really want our children led in a daily vain repetition?”

Latin?

The author offers a most readable survey of current critiques and proposals (both Christian and secular) for reform of “public” education. Developing Sayers’ thesis (1947) regarding the “**Lost Tools of Learning**” (Appendix A) Wilson makes a strong case for the study of Latin in the lower grades which he illustrates by its successful implementation in Logos School. Logic and rhetoric are also stressed to foster future learning. Wilson argues that such a rigorous mix of classical and Christian education (141) is no fad, but a needful concomitant to “expansion of Christ’s Kingdom.”

Some Obstacles

Augmenting his stress upon Latin and logic, the author warns of obstacles to learning. Wilson reminds parents of Adam’s sin which comes to expression in children not from the environment, but from our

father Adam. Thus, one can see in children an “aversion to work, and natural curiosity is not sufficient to overcome that aversion. . . . If Laziness is tolerated in school, whether in the teachers or students then true education becomes impossible” (p-73). Further, Wilson focuses on T.V. noting that, “the problems caused by allowing the children to watch drivel will not be solved by allowing them to watch wholesome drivel. . . the Disney channel and reruns of ‘The Waltons’ are just as great a danger” (p-107).

Bureaucratic Dilemma

Douglas Wilson deplors the impact of the near monopoly of “public” schools in the politicization of education. But, he also has a good understanding of the intractability of the government schools. And, he calls attention to the fact that many critics of the education establishment “have begun their analysis with a mistaken assumption. . . they have made the mistake of assuming the education establishment is failing. They also assumed the goal of this establishment is the education of children. But, the definition of education varies according to the world view of the educator - - and besides, education bureaucracies, like all bureaucracies, tend to replace their original task with the goal of self-perpetuation. And in the achievement of that goal there has been tremendous success” (p-133). Very well said.

Neglect of Tithes

Politicized education, however, is but one high profile casualty that resulted as churches of America retreated from tithe-funded ministries collateral to their respective missions of evangelism. Church-related organizations serving the sick and the poor have been largely replaced by notorious tax-supported welfare programs also in dire need of reform. Further, God’s people are becoming a persecuted minority, having forsaken the tithe which formerly funded their successful, outreach ministries in this country.

Trouble With Widgets

Thus, many advocates of reform are actually coping with a funding crisis stemming from the stingy refusal of God’s people to tithe. They are receptive to Wilson’s call for privatization of education using the “mechanism” of the “free market” to force educational reform upon bureaucrats who mismanage “public” schools (p 134-135). As Wilson reminds the reader, government control of “a widget factory” is known to produce a “shortage of widgets” (135). But, widget is an empty, heuristic concept with utopian fallout for education. Students are not merely widgets to be fashioned by a cookie-cutter curriculum into a competitive educational “product.” Further, the routinization, required for cost-effectivity in manufacturing, is very adverse to learning. As Wilson warns, “More experienced teachers must guard against the seduction of routine. . . This type of thinking is destructive” (p-80).

Hostile Environment

Moreover, reform-minded educational entrepreneurs operate perforce in a menacing environment. The educational marketplace is now dominated by secular humanists who can sidestep Christian school administrators and influence their constituencies directly. Constituents then pressure administrators to seek accreditation which leads to secularizing goal displacement as documented in “**Small Colleges and Goal Displacement**” (Thompson 1978).

In addition, political “conservatives” are hawking schemes for school vouchers and tuition-tax credits with all due assurances regarding institutional autonomy. Yet, once vulnerable schools, lacking endowments, are thereby locked into inflated budgets, government control can be effected by changing the regulations. Such a power grab would be obscured, to be sure, by some plausible “fig leaf” to mollify constituents’ ire. Finally, government educators also have resources to challenge the

independence of home schoolers through mandated site visits, teacher certification, achievement testing, curriculum approval, etc. For additional perspective on distinctive hurdles encountered in home schooling, parents will do well to review Douglas Wilson's brief discussion of "The Home School Alternative."

Nevertheless, Christian pioneers in educational reform are experiencing some success thus far in varied ventures into the educational marketplace. Like Wilson, they have demonstrated some ability cope with harmful effects of the secular environment and bureaucratic regimen discussed above. Christian education will doubtless improve once Christian educators implement programs designed to recover the tools of learning. Indeed, with a revival of tithing, our children will be equipped, by God's grace, with the tools needed to reconstruct truly public education in America.

References:

Jay Adams, "**Back To the Blackboard,**" (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982).

Powell & Rushdoony, "**Tithing and Dominion,**" (Ross House Books, 1979).

Wilson Thompson, "**Small Colleges and Goal Displacement,**" (University of Oregon, 1978).