

Being a *Christian* Educator

by

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ABSTRACT

Susan Hunt, author of the book Heirs of the Covenant, makes the statement that "We must think through an issue theologically, because our ministry is a reflection of our theology." The focus of this paper is how our theology impacts the task of education in a formal setting to pre-school and elementary age children. So often educators enter the classroom without ever evaluating their own theological position and what effect that has on their task. As will be shown a person's theological framework has very important implications on the entire process of education, because our ministry of education is indeed a reflection of our theology.

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CHAPTER 1

ENTERING THE CLASSROOM

Worldview Considerations

The teacher enters the classroom not as an unbiased participant ready to begin the task of education with neutral students and independent facts, but rather enters with a host of presuppositions of his/her role, the students, and the task at hand. Whether conscious of it or not each educator enters the task with a worldview - sometimes seriously examined other times not.

The topic of this paper is how do *my* theological beliefs matter in reference to *my* practice as an educator? What does it mean to be a *Christian* Educator? To begin to answer this question I must first examine my personal worldview. Albert Wolters defines a worldview simply as the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things.¹ Another way to consider worldview is the offered by David Dockery, which states that a worldview is the presuppositions which enable a person to think Christianly about things.² As a Christian, I combine these understandings and define a worldview as the comprehensive framework of a person's basic belief system that allows him/her to think Christianly about things. With this definition in mind, I begin to examine my worldview. Does my framework allow me to think Christianly about all things, including education?

¹ Wolters, Albert M. 1985. *Creation Regained: Biblical basics for a reformational worldview*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., p 2

² Dockery, David S and Gregory Thornbury, eds. 2002. *Shaping a Christian Worldview*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman., pp. 14-15

Reformed Theology

The theological basis for my worldview is Reformed theology. Classically there are several components to reformed theology; however I believe these are the most pertinent to our consideration of education:

Glory of God This is one of the fundamental characteristics of God. 1. God's goal is all that He does is His glory, in the sense of (a) displaying His moral excellence to His creatures and (b) evoking their praise for what they see and for the benefits that it brings them. 2. Human beings' goal in all of their actions must be God's glory in the sense of doxology by word and deed. 3. God so made us that we find the duty of doxology to be our supreme delight, and in that way the furthering of our own highest good.³

Sovereignty of God - The Biblical idea of God's sovereignty includes all that is involved in the divine kingship and this means at least three things: Ownership of all Creation, Authority over all Creation, and Control over all Creation.

Redemptive-historical Perspective - The Reformed approach to the Bible is to see it as the complete, unified counsel of God. Therefore, Reformed theologians interpret every small portion of God's Word in the context of the whole.

A God-ward Focus - As human beings encounter any biblical truth, it teaches us about God and ultimately elicits worship from us as we discover him to be sovereign Creator, Redeemer and King.

Christ centric - The subject of Scripture is God's unfolding story of salvation, and Jesus is its focus.

As I begin to make decisions concerning the educational process, these pertinent components will influence the direction that I take in regard to the goal of education, the nature and role of the teacher, the nature and role of the student, the content of the curricula, the methods used in the classroom, and the structures of education.⁴

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³ Ferguson, Sinclair B., David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer. 1988. *New Dictionary of Theology*. The master reference collection. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press., p 271-272

⁴ Notes from class lectures. Dr. Perry Downs, *DES 930 Theological Foundations of Education*, Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL, March 2003.

Thread of the Covenant

As I begin to shift through the theological concepts of my worldview it is an overwhelming task to apply it all to education, I would be better served by narrowing the focus with a dominant theme of my theological framework, noting the above components which are the most relevant. One could trace several different themes through the Scripture which would give a slightly different emphasis on educational practice, such as the Kingdom, Wisdom, Creation-Fall-Redemption, Grace, the Messiah, Love, or the Covenant. Which thread would be the best to follow in developing practical implications for education? For the purposes of education I believe that the thread of the Covenant is the better thread to follow because the Covenant involves relationships - and education takes place in the context of relationships. What is the Covenant? Simply stated, the Covenant theme is the Biblical thread that links the promise of God's sovereign outworking of His redemptive purposes in all creation for His glory. In understanding the implications of this theological thread for education it is helpful to consider three facets of the Covenant: *Content of the Covenant*, *Context of the Covenant*, and *the Culmination of the Covenant*.⁵

Content of the Covenant

What is the *Content of the Covenant*? In its most basic sense the content is the promise of God, and is contained in the summary verse of Exodus 6:7, I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. (NIV) The seed of this covenant is found in the

⁵ The basic formulation for the Content, Context, and Culmination came from the work by Susan Hunt in her book, Hunt, Susan. 1998. *Heirs of the Covenant: Leaving a legacy of faith for the next generation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

Covenant of Creation with Adam and Eve as we see God blessing humanity and giving them the task of multiplying and having dominion over all creation. In this sinless garden humanity was to reflect the character and activity of God Himself in all of creation for His glory.⁶ However, sin entered creation and no longer was humanity able to reflect accurately the image of God. In God's mercy, even after humanity disobeyed, He is faithful to His Word and promises to care for His people and to ultimately defeat the evil one. (Genesis 3:15) This promise of God and the task of dominion He gave humanity continues, and unfolds in the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Aaron, Moses, David, Jeremiah, coming to culmination in Christ. In Colossians 1:18-20, we read, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to *reconcile* to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (NIV emphasis added) From this passage we note the content of the covenant includes not only the redemption of that special relationship that humanity has with God so that we can reflect the character and activity of God in creation, but also God's relationship with all of creation. As these relationships are restored, humanity's role of reflecting the character and activity of God over creation is also restored and with it the ethical obligations and privileges of the covenant."⁷ Therefore, for the Christian, citizenship in the covenantal community is not optional; we are part of the family. However, some treasure this citizenship, while others are ignorant of it or indifferent about it. The value that a person places on their citizenship privileges and responsibilities is a strong indicator of the quality of our relationship with the King of this kingdom, and

⁶ Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. p 20

⁷ Alexander, T. Desmond and Brian S. Rosner. 2000. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Leicester, England Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press ; InterVarsity Press., pp 419-429.

the realization of this relationship will have tremendous effect on the practice of education.⁸

Therefore, it is simplest form the content of the Covenant is the promise of God and the task which He give humanity, which is contained in His Word and as Psalm 119:130 reminds us, The unfolding of your *words* gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. (NIV emphasis added).

Context of the Covenant

What is the *Context of the Covenant*? The sovereign outworking of God's plan normally occurs in the context of the four basic human relationships. What are these relationships? In the doctrine of the Creation we see God creating human beings with four basic relationships:

- Personal with God
- Personal with Personal (The Teacher)
- Personal with Others (The Student)
- Personal with Creation (Subject Matter)

Human beings in their original state were in a perfect relationship with God, themselves, others, and creation. In looking at this original design Edward Hills writes of the Creation mandate:

It was God's will that Adam and his posterity should erect upon earth a sinless civilization and culture the splendor of which we cannot now have the faintest conception. A civilization without sin and suffering, a civilization in which every gift of God would be used properly and to the fullest advantage, a civilization of perfect physical, mental, and spiritual health, a civilization and culture which would exist today if Adam had been obedient to the divine commandment.⁹

⁸ The basic formulation of this definition came from Susan Hunt at 2000 PCA Children's Ministry Conference. Atlanta, GA

⁹ Edward F Hills: Believing Bible Study, p. 101. Des Moines, Iowa: Christian Research Press, 1967. as quoted in Rushdoony, Rousas John. 1985. *The philosophy of the christian curriculum*. Vallecito,

However, human beings did not remain in this state but sinned against a holy God. This cosmic infraction not only destroyed human beings relationship with God, but all of the basic relationships were marred by the effects of sin. Therefore, not only does humanity yearn to have a relationship with God, but all of creation groans for that original relationship. (Romans 8) In relation to God we are no longer free in God's presence, but rather seek to hide from a Holy God. We find ourselves worshipping the creation, rather than the Creator.

However, the good news is that we are not left in this state without hope. The Sovereign God chooses in His holy council to redeem His creation through His only Son, Jesus Christ. The context of the Covenant is found in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18) of the four basic human relationships.

Culmination of the Covenant

What is the *culmination of the Covenant*? The culmination of the Covenant can be seen in several summation passages. However, each passage must be understood in terms of the Holy Spirit regenerating the individual to a genuine restored relationship with God; else our actions simply deteriorate in moralistic actions. The first summation found in the Old Testament comes from Micah 6:8 which reads, *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* (NIV)¹⁰ Here the attributes of justice, mercy and a humble relationship with God are applauded as evidence of a genuine relationship

Calif.: Ross House Books. (This document was written in the 1960 s and it is acknowledged that it does not conform to the TIU inclusive language policy.)

¹⁰ (It is acknowledged that the NIV translation does not conform to the TIU inclusive language policy.)

with God, because they involve a reflection of the image of God in humanity's relationships. In the New Testament we see Jesus' summation in Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (NIV) The culmination of the Covenant is found first in a restored relationship with God, and from there a proper relationship with all of creation flows according to God's original design.

From the basis of a Reformed theological perspective we drew out the thread of the Covenant as a useful Biblical theme to assist in formulating education practices. The three facets of the Covenant theme (Content, Context, and Culmination) gives us a framework on which to construct educational practices.

CHAPTER 2

CULMINATION OF THE COVENANT AS APPLIED TO GOAL OF EDUCATION

How is this thread of the Covenant applied to the area of education? What is the goal of education? In my opinion the goal of education is to glorify God by enabling individuals with the tools necessary to see all of life from the perspective of our relationship to God through Christ, and behave according to the rules of our relationship with Him.¹¹

First, this definition recognizes that ultimately all we do is an attempt to glorify God - not only in deed but also in word and thought. For an individual to glorify God is not to imply that we as humans can glorify Him, but rather we demonstrate His glory by bringing attention to *all* that He has done.

Second, the definition recognizes that our most basic relationship is with God, and that is only restored through Christ, by the Holy Spirit regenerating us. This aspect of the definition recognizes the culmination of the covenant in creating a proper heart orientation in the person.

Third, this definition asserts that from a proper relationship with God flow the other basic human relationships - self, others, creation - all of which are governed by God as we reflect the character and activity of God in Creation. In order to do this in a

¹¹ The basic formulation of this definition came from Dr. Allen Curry, Professor of Christian Education at Reformed Theological Seminary. Curry, Dr. Allen. 2002. *Covenant Education*. In *PCA Children's Ministry Conference*. Atlanta, GA.

way which glorifies God, we must properly inquire of ourselves, society, and all of creation.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEXT OF THE COVENANT AS APPLIED TO PRACTICE OF EDUCATION

How is this goal of education accomplished? How can the Covenant be applied to the educational process? It can be seen in the context of the Covenant, the restoration of the four basic relationships.

Personal with God

The first relationship is a person's relationship with God. It must be acknowledged that in all redemptive activity, it is God who must initiate and apply the atoning work of Christ. Perhaps, in the restoration of this relationship this unilateral action is seen most clearly. Sin alienated humanity from God, yet the promise of God that He would take us as His people, required that He send one who would redeem that relationship by paying the penalty of sin. From a deepening relationship with God, one goes through the process of sanctification, one is conformed more to the likeness of His Son, which in turns transforms one's heart that they would seek to reflect the character and activity of God in creation. As the Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden and were faithful servants and obedient children, so as I seek the face of God I too can be a faithful servant and obedient child.

Personal with Personal (The Teacher)

The second relationship, knowing myself, is applicable as I enter the classroom as teacher. What is the role and function of the teacher? How should we think about teachers? What methods would I use? How would I seek to enable learning in my students? Norman Harper, former professor of Christian Education at Reformed Theological Seminary, said, "The most important thing any teacher brings into the classroom is their own redeemed personality." The implication is that a restored relationship with God, through Christ, will have an effect on the process of education and my role as a redeemed teacher. My character as a redeemed teacher should reflect the following¹²:

Image of God –I recognize that I am made in the image of God and that implies that as I go through the process of education I seek to reflect the character and activity of God.

Finite, Fallen, and Redeemed –I recognize that although I reflect the image of God, I do not do so perfectly because that reflection is marred by sin. However, since I am redeemed the Holy Spirit gives me the power to act in a righteous manner as my relationship with Him grows.

Giftedness –I realize that God has gifted me with certain abilities for His glory. Part of my task is to seek to develop these gifts and maximize them in the education process.

Sanctification –From a Reformed perspective sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.¹³

¹² Part of the list of characterizations was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. p 106-107.

¹³ PCA, Stated Clerk of. 1983. *The confession of faith with larger and shorter catechism*. Brevard, NC: Committee for Christian Education and Publications of the Presbyterian Church in America., Question 35 (This document was written in the 1500 s and it is acknowledged that it does not conform to the TIU inclusive language policy.)

Prophet, Priest, and King The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains how Christ executes the offices, and in turn we should strive to reflect these same characteristics as we teach. Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation. Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.¹⁴

Shepherd This Biblical metaphor assists me as a teacher in caring for the sheep under my care by setting boundaries and providing for their needs. Depending upon the child's age and abilities, they will require more or less shepherding.

Justice & Mercy As I seek to discipline my students I need to be just in the administration of this discipline, and seek restoration of the relationship with myself and the other students as quickly as possible.

Humble walk with God As I seek to counsel with the students and act and react in different situations they need to see that there is a difference in my countenance—a redeemed personality.

These traits should influence my character, but they should also influence my practice of education. What is the role of the teacher? What methods should the teacher use?

In my role as teacher I acknowledge that students develop, following the model of Jesus who grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luke 2:52 NIV) As I ponder my role I realize that wisdom is required, because human beings are unique creations with different gifts and abilities that require me to be creative to reach my students. The Psalmist assists us when he writes, "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior" (Psalm 25:5 NIV) Here the Psalmist describes a progression in the teaching process. At first I may be a dispenser of knowledge to young children or as an introduction to a new

¹⁴ Ibid. Shorter Catechism Questions 24,25,26

subject area. However, as the child attains a knowledge base then my role as teacher shifts to that of a guide creating opportunities for the student to explore and experiment in a subject area, thus recognizing the developing image of God in the student. Then my desire would be that of the writer of Hebrews that the student would master the subject area and become teachers themselves, and in turn teaching me as I seek to grow in wisdom and stature. Therefore, there is not one role that I would assume, but rather being sensitive to the nature of the student my role will develop from a dispenser of knowledge, to a guide, to a co-learner with the student.

When I consider the various methods to employ I again recognize the diversity in the students, their giftedness and abilities. In a sense the methods are as varied as the children themselves. For those children with learning disabilities I will explore ways to teach that will reach them at their strengths and build skills for life-long learning. For students who are mentally or physically impaired, again I will seek to call upon the creative aspect of being made in the image of God to teach in an atmosphere requiring extensive modifications. For the regular education environment I again seek wisdom in the teaching process. Several general methods¹⁵ can be gleaned in all of these situations:

Lecture –This form of teaching can be useful for dispensing a knowledge base quickly in a logical manner on which the student can build later.

Discussion –This form is useful to pool information from the group and share experiences to gain a better grasp on the information.

Case Studies –This form of teaching is useful for allowing the students to use their knowledge base and apply it.

Small Group –Human Beings are created to be in social relationships, so in this method the students can take a project, or task and each contribute meaningfully to the solution.

¹⁵ Part of this list of methods was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College., pp 176-177

Hands-on Experience This method recognizes the need for students to apply the material they have learned.

Meaningful Tasks This idea recognize that the goal of education is to equip students with the tools necessary to have dominion; therefore tasks are not picked simply to fill time.

Worksheets/Testing This allows for students to think for themselves without the undue influence of others.

The restoration of the second relationship, to know myself, has a great effect on the educational process. As I conform more to the image of Christ this will have a measurable effect on my role as a teacher and on the methods that I employ in the classroom.

Personal with Others (The Student)

The third relationship, my relationship with others, is applicable as I enter the classroom and view the students. How do I understand the nature of students? What do I assume that the students are like? We see in the Covenant of Creation that human beings were created in the image of God, and that is my starting point for viewing my students and me. Part of my task as a teacher will be to assist them in redeeming that image that has been marred by sin so that they are equipped with the tools necessary for dominion reflecting the character and activity of God. I also recognize that this redeeming activity is progressive that the individual will develop morally, physically, spiritually, cognitively, affectively.¹⁶ From the image of God we see several characteristics¹⁷ of the students that affect my relationship with them:

¹⁶ Downs, Perry G. 1994. *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House., p 69.

Active and Purposeful Human Beings act in the world in a way as to make sense of things around them, to make connections, and see relationships to order to more effectively have dominion. As I enter the classroom I need to take advantage of this created tendency in my students as I develop learning strategies.

Rational Human Beings seek to perceive and understand the world around them they have the ability to reason.

Creative Human Beings form and make things and ideas from the world around.

Moral Human Beings act in a way that is according to standards of right or wrong and thus bring about justice or injustice.

Finite, Fallen, and Redeemed –I recognize that although I reflect the image of God, I do not do so perfectly because that reflection is marred by sin. However, since I am redeemed the Holy Spirit which gives me the power to act in a righteous manner as my relationship with Him grows.

Free and responsible Human Beings make judgments according to our purposes, acting within the bounds of our nature and are responsible for our behavior.

Exercise dominion Human Beings think, create, and act in purposeful ways to exercise control in the world around them.

Social Human Beings are created to live in relationship with God, with others, with myself, and with creation.

Merciful & Just –Out of God's love for them Human Beings are to extend mercy and justice to others.

Dependent Human Beings are created to live in dependence upon God for our very existence, and upon other and creation.

The third relationship, my relationship with others, affects how I see my students, and thus how I will engage in the educational process.

¹⁷ Part of the list of characterizations was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. p 71-72

Personal with Creation

The fourth relationship, my relationship with Creation, is applicable as I enter the classroom and prepare to teach the curricula. What realms of knowledge would be studied? What are the broad content concerns, given the nature of students? How would I organize curricula? From Psalm 19 and I Kings 4 we receive guidance:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
2 Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
3 There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
4 Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (NIV)

and

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt ...He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (NIV)

From these passages it would appear that all of creation is open to our investigation so that we may have dominion in a manner which is glorifying to God. Several guiding principles¹⁸ can be derived in regard to curricula:

Biblical Framework The Bible provides us the truth concerning reality (metaphysics) and guides our exploration in the creation (epistemology) by directing us to the Creator.

¹⁸ Part of the list of characterizations was taken from Graham, Donovan L. 2000. *Teaching Redemptively - course material from EDU 221*. Lookout Mountain, GA: Covenant College. pp. 156-157

Knowledge in diverse and unified From all that is found in creation we have a glimpse of the enormity and diversity of the creation, but because is all comes from God there is unity in Creation through Christ.

All truth is God's Truth As human beings explore creation and the Scripture we recognize there is no such thing as a sacred/secular distinction, but all truth is God's truth. The Bible assists us in interpreting the truth to point us to God so that we integrate truth.

Knowing carries responsibility True knowledge requires action. The content of the Covenant carries responsible and privileges.

The fourth relationship, my relationship with creation, is also effected by Christ's reconciliation. Therefore, as a Christian teacher I see all of creation open for investigation as I seek to educate my students to properly bear the character and activity of God in creation.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONTENT OF THE COVENANT AS APPLIED TO EDUCATION

Does a person's theological perspective affect their practice of education? I believe that it does have an enormous impact on the practice of education. Using the Covenantal framework gave us direction and purpose for educational practice through exploring the *Content*, *Context*, and the *Culmination* of the Covenant. For the teacher who does not take the time to examine their own worldview their teaching will take on a hap hazardous practice. This is a serious oversight on the part of the teacher, for the Bible tells us that the teacher will be held to a higher standard for the responsibility that they are assuming. Without carefully examining their worldview the teacher will have a uniformed and misguided view of themselves, their students, and the subject matter in which they invest their time. This could very well lead to their students becoming covenant-breakers, instead of covenant-keepers. However, for the Christian teacher who does take the time to examine their worldview and align their educational practices to it, they can be much more effective in leading, and learning from, their students as we together seek to reflect the character and activity of God in creation.

APPENDIX 1

KIRK OF THE HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH CHILDREN S'NURTURE STRUCTURE

APPENDIX 2

CHILDREN S'MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

APPENDIX 3

KIRK DAY SCHOOL CURRICULA GUIDE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

APPENDIX 4

KIRK DAY SCHOOL POSITION ON HISTORY/GEOGRAPHY PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

APPENDIX 5

PROMISE CHRISTIAN ACADEMY PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

[BIBLIOGRAPHY/REFERENCE LIST]