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**From the Heart**—What did you expect?

For many of you, this is your first year to "home school." This message is geared for you new folks (although the same message will be an exhortation for veterans). Teaching academics is usually *not* what you expected. Has it been a struggle to *make* your child do math and spelling and writing and all the other subjects? Consider this paradox: How can a child be enthusiastic about learning, *except* what and when you try to teach him? Do you ever get the feeling that you're trying to put a square peg in a round hole? Although many professional educators were trained to overlook the individuality of children, pushing them through a one-size-fits-all curriculum, your mission is to teach and train your child in accordance with (not in spite of) his uniqueness, individuality, and personality. To be sure, children must be made to conform, for the Scripture says, "a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."<sup>1</sup> The question is, to what should they be conformed? To the model of a classroom?

Is your goal equivalence (keeping up with the public schools) or excellence? If your goal is mere coverage of material, then you can follow the curriculum at its pace. However, if your goal is wisdom and mastery, the order and timing of your studies will be restricted. It is exceedingly difficult to teach mastery and understanding of a curriculum designed to randomly scratch the surface of a broad variety of topics each year and then repeat the process for twelve years.

Does your course or method of education make a difference? In the academic diet of children, does it matter how supper is eaten? You could eat all your potatoes first, then all your dessert, then the meat, and finally the vegetables. Or you could take a *bite* of meat followed by a bite of vegetables followed by a bite of potatoes followed by a bite of dessert and then repeat the process (even ringing a bell so that all would know that it was time to eat potatoes). Or you could eat a tidbit of vegetables, then a morsel of meat, then a speck of potatoes, and then a smidgen of dessert and repeat. Or you could put the whole meal in a bowl (or even a blender), mix well, and eat the resultant slop. I'm seeking to illustrate the concept of confusion: mixed together indiscriminately. The problem is not that things are mixed, just a splendid casserole can be prepared. The problem is when things are mixed together randomly or pointlessly, without design. The remedy is order.

The concept of *order*. Parents naturally recognize the importance of natural order and sequence. Some areas, such as arithmetic, necessarily build step upon step. Arithmetic is all about patterns (which are symptoms of order). "Patterns possess utility as well as beauty. Once we have learned to recognize a background pattern, exceptions suddenly stand out. . . . Each of nature's patterns is a puzzle, nearly always a deep one. Mathematics is brilliant at helping us to solve puzzles. It is a more or less systematic way of digging out the rules and structures that lie behind some observed pattern or regularity, and then using

those rules to explain what's going on. Indeed, mathematics has developed alongside our understanding of nature, each reinforcing the other."<sup>iii</sup> Arithmetic should be built sequentially, and then applied to real life.

In areas like the sciences, specific sequence is not critical, but ideas must be built on other ideas. Parents naturally relate lessons to real life. They teach about lightning amidst a thunderstorm, about stars at night, and about rainbows after a rainstorm. As the pieces of life fit together, they show the incredible wisdom of God who designed and created each of the intricate parts of the universe to work together for his purposes. Showing your children the patterns and order in the world teaches them that life is not meaningless and vanity.

The principle of *life*. Lack of life makes education dead, unresponsive, devoid of spirit. Life is easily recognized, though difficult or impossible to adequately define. The living minds of children grow up in the *likeness* of the parent (whether the diet be exclusively green beans or math worksheets). Invigorate *your* mind by filling it with good ideas, with living truth. Then you will be a continual resource to teach your children. Parents could more effectively teach their children if they would spend a small fraction of their time learning themselves. Whatever you are trying to teach, search bookstores or libraries for real (interesting) books on the subject. (They may be rare, but not extinct.) What you know and are excited about you can teach to your children anytime. This discipleship or apprenticeship approach frees education from slavery to the curriculum. "The interest of the teacher is the . . . power that enkindles enthusiasm in the pupils."<sup>iiii</sup> Enthusiasm makes learning contagious.

The principle of *growth*. Principles are seeds. When provided a place to take root, a little water and a few nutrients, and light, they naturally grow to become a mature plant which will bear fruit itself. Similarly, much of education is developmental. Ideas build on previous ideas. Historically, scientific and mathematical advances awaited prerequisite strides. Likewise, in children, understanding of foundational ideas is essential for subsequent ideas. There is little point trying to teach multiplication of decimals to a student who does not understand the basic concept of multiplication. Teach the basics before the complex. As complex things are encountered, teach your children how to break them down into basics. Show students the pattern. Or even better, show examples and lead *them* to discover the rule. In phonics, make a list of words with "kn" as in knight to show the student that this is not an isolated instance. In math, show the student enough even numbers (e.g. house numbers) that they say "uncle" or "alright already" (depending on where you're from). Although building vocabulary is an important aspect of education, words and their definitions are not the ultimate goal. "There can be no potency in an education that does not give the learner vivid impressions from actual contact with things."<sup>iv</sup> The goal is understanding the *meanings* of the words and terms, and being able to use them as tools to convey ideas and concepts. Instead of teaching vocabulary for its own sake, use new words as examples to teach the meaning of

the component roots. "What big ideas are important to little kids? Well, the biggest idea I think they need is that what they are learning isn't *idiosyncratic*—that there is some system to it all and it's not just raining down on them as they helplessly absorb. That's the task, to understand, to make coherent."<sup>iv</sup>

One author ascribed a new mathematical discovery to "three separate developments: . . . The first provided *motivation*, the second provided *technique*, and the third provided *understanding*."<sup>vi</sup> Practical application can provide both motivation and understanding. Traditional academics have focused on technique, (e.g. how to multiply two fractions) almost to the exclusion of motivation and understanding. Maintaining a proper balance between these three factors can make education natural and enjoyable. In the discovery described above, understanding resulted from a "new mathematical viewpoint . . . a geometric rather than numerical viewpoint."<sup>vii</sup> The author described that "it is often better to think of shapes . . . because that makes use of our powerful and intuitive visual capabilities, whereas . . . lists of numbers are best reserved for our weaker and more laborious symbolic abilities."<sup>viii</sup>

The law of *building*. Arithmetic, reading, writing, and drawing and similar subjects necessarily build step-by-step. In order to build on something, it should be solid. Only an unwise builder begins construction on sand. If your curriculum says build skill K (e.g. long division) upon previous skills E and H (multiplication and subtraction), a wise builder should consider whether skills E and H were sound. Have you ever tried to build on previous lessons, only to discover that there was nothing left? The basics weren't solid, and seem to have evaporated—No matter how carefully you lay the ice blocks, it's difficult to build an igloo in the Sahara desert.

In phonics, teach one consonant, vowel, digraph or diphthong at a lesson. After it has been mastered, you can move on to another. In arithmetic, master one multiplication fact at a time. Don't try to teach the entire multiplication tables at once. In chemistry, don't try to teach all the chemical elements at once. Rather, take the time and learn all about Oxygen. (Think first of all the things you know about it.) Later study Carbon. Even in trigonometry, teach and apply that the tangent of an angle is the ratio of the side opposite the angle divided by the adjacent side. (Thus, in a 3, 4, 5 Pythagorean triangle the tangent of the smaller angle is  $\frac{3}{4}$ . An illustration can be worth a million words.) That's pretty simple. This important principle was refreshingly portrayed in an old textbook, "keep the discussion as simple as possible even at the risk of being quantitatively inaccurate, for 'except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?'"<sup>ix</sup> A goal of education is to give the student a mental picture. After the student has a mental picture, it can be refined over time to reflect the complexities of real life.

The law of *understanding*. A student may know something and yet not understand. Understanding involves things being considered from the right perspective. One textbook publisher said, "Time is the elixir that turns things

difficult into things familiar." (Time is also the elixir that supposedly turns primordial ooze into advanced forms of life.) That which makes difficult things familiar I call *understanding*. Understanding may come with the passage of time, but the relationship is not necessarily cause-and-effect. Neglecting natural order can delay or even prevent understanding. *Confusion*, the antithesis of understanding, should be avoided like the plague. Things which would be easily confused should be kept widely separated (in both time and place).

History can be an invaluable tool to teach understanding. "The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or high point of vantage, from which alone men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living." (C.K. Chesterson, 1933) "Why do we forget history? I believe one big reason is that most people today lack the tools to understand it. Without the background in law and economics . . . you would have no way to make sense of whatever history you study. It would be nothing but a collection of names and dates of presidents, kings and wars, with no lessons to teach. In other words, it would be all trivia, unrelated data, with no meaningful use."<sup>x</sup> "History, by apprizing them of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men." (Thomas Jefferson, 1781)

The most important thing to teach your children is that there is more to life than school. Abigail Adams wrote to her son, "Great learning and superior abilities, should you ever possess them, will be of little value and small estimation, unless virtue, honor, truth and integrity are added to them." You cannot postpone the moral and character education of a child until you have finished teaching academics. Upright morals and godly character are the fruit of godliness and piety. To produce the semblance of this fruit apart from relationship with God produces a form of Godliness, but denying the power thereof. Children need to be taught *compassion* by your words and by your actions. They need to be trained in how to *care*. More important than academics is teaching your children to discern human character. The ultimate goal of education is to teach your children to be *wise*: As the Scripture declares, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding."<sup>xi</sup> Wisdom includes internal consistency, seeing how things fit together. (If teaching doesn't explain part of life, what good is it?) Wisdom includes teaching your children to recognize cause and effect. Rapid or immediate consequences (e.g. gravity) are more easily observed than slow or delayed (such as laws of sowing and reaping).

All education is ultimately about imparting values. Christian education teaches values according to an absolute standard; it teaches right and wrong. Some works labeled as classics are saturated with moral filth and humanistic ideas. Christian education teaches the concept of antithesis: if it isn't the truth, it is a lie; if it isn't right, it's wrong. "Casting down imaginations and every high

thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."<sup>xii</sup> The goal is to value those things which are "true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report."<sup>xiii</sup> It is about making a right judgment. The opposite philosophy is called dialectic, that there are many possibilities and no absolutes. The modernist mentality says, "If history is contemporary thought about the past, then our understanding of it is continually being reshaped by school boards or textbooks that determine for us which parts of our past may be acceptable at any given period."<sup>xiv</sup> The bottom line? Is there an absolute standard of right and wrong?

*Discernment* is a fundamental law of life. A parent feeds excellent food to a child, but what is undigested passes out of the natural body. Not surprisingly, in nourishing the living mind what cannot be digested or broken down into elementary pieces, and cannot be assimilated, is discarded. The mind is not a *tabula rasa*, a blank tablet or slate, an empty bucket, which must be filled. Nor is it a dead instrument which needs to be sharpened before it can be used. Parents are the experts at education, recognizing by nature that the mind is hungry to know the truth and needs only to be fed. Most importantly, it must be fed good things. "How long halt ye between two opinions. If \_\_\_\_\_ be god follow him, but if Jesus Christ be God, follow and serve him. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."<sup>xv</sup> If you will not examine things for yourself, you can easily be deceived or led astray. Be a Berean. Search the Scripture daily to see whether these things be true. Those who lack discernment are gullible and will swallow anything. Discernment means sifting out what is valuable and storing it away.

The principle of *ownership*. A student will value that for which he has *willingly* labored, but despise that which has enslaved him. The willingness to learn comes from his natural curiosity, his relationship to the teacher, and his perception of applicability and usefulness to his life. One cannot make someone accept a gift, the gift of salvation or the gift of knowledge. Just as the goal of the preacher is that the hearer be convinced of the need for Jesus' free gift of salvation, the goal of the teacher is to make the student realize the value of knowledge. Although curriculum material may be expensive, knowledge itself is free. John Gatto said it well, "No power of intellect needs a tool to be purchased to develop it."<sup>xvi</sup> A student must have the *desire* to know. Mr. Escalante, in the movie "Stand and Deliver," called it *Ganza*. A student will value what he has longed for and finally attained. What a student has discovered himself, he will consider his own. "Let the main ideas which are introduced into a child's education be few and important, and let them be thrown into every combination possible. The child should make them his own, and should understand their application here and now in the circumstances of his actual life. From the very beginning of his education, the child should experience the joy of discovery."<sup>xvii</sup> The role of the teacher is to cultivate in the student the desire to know.

The law of *stewardship*. The purpose of education is to provide know-how, the ability to do practical things. "At any other time in American history but this one, the really radical thing would have been to force children into a condition of uselessness, and then claim, as if we were crazed, that this lunacy is in the best interest of the child. This potential laboratory of usefulness that school structures represent has been turned into a guarantee of employment for others, and a constant drain on taxpayers."<sup>xviii</sup> Private schools seldom prepare students to be useful and many home-educators consider a good classroom as the standard of excellence. The goal of education is not just knowledge, but the ability to *use* knowledge wisely. Are you discipling your children in how to *use* knowledge?

Parents have a God-given purpose. Loving parents want their children to have understanding. The reason parents are such good teachers of their own children is that they love and care about their children. This makes them want what's best for their children. It may be necessary to stop following the traditional ways of education in order to listen to the Lord and follow where he leads. Try applying principles of Scripture to education. For example, "Take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity."<sup>xix</sup> Do your children see the way you do education as a yoke? Do they perceive you as a harsh taskmaster or as an encouraging coach? Do your children see you as the accuser or as an advocate? Do your children consider the things you teach senseless, pointless, useless, and a waste of time—vanity?

The importance of *purpose*. Are you educating for the *status quo*, the way things are, or to make a difference. I don't think many would argue that our world is in a mess, and the media has played a leading role. Seventeenth & eighteenth century New England had a unique media. "As a channel of information, it combined religious, educational, and journalistic functions, and supplied all the key terms necessary to understand existence in this world and the next."<sup>xx</sup> This is what it means to go and make disciples of all nations. As Christians, practice this at home.

The general cynicism among people is a symptom of hopelessness from seeing the mess but having no answers. The 'humor' about political correctness shows that people know that government cannot save. In the final analysis, the conflict boils down to ideas. The crime problem shows that the current ideology doesn't work. Christian parents need to teach their children how swift justice would minimize crime. The Scripture says, "because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."<sup>xxi</sup> Ultimately, how to deal with wrongs begins in the home. Is the ultimate goal of discipline: a.) Therapy b.) Equality c.) Punishment d.) Restoration? "The doctrine of Christ's atonement is basic to the legal systems of what was once Christianity. This doctrine stresses the essential requirement of restitution. Christ makes restitution to God for us, and we make restitution for

one another.<sup>xxii</sup> If discipline in your household does not accomplish restoration and restitution, then you are training up young people who will contribute to the problems of our society. Parents, are you peacekeepers or peacemakers? One accepts a continuous conflict; the other resolves the conflict. One treats symptoms only, the other goes to the heart, the root of the problem. The Spirit of Christ deals with the heart of the problem; the spirit of Antichrist neglects this and deals only with symptoms. (e.g. gun control works by the latter.) Children desperately need parents who will interpret this confused, bewildering world to them.

The necessity of *ultimate meaning*. Of what use is superficial knowledge? Although we live in the "Information Age," few people know how to use the information they have. One can know all the latest news, and old news (called history) without understanding its lessons. When Jesus was told of a tower that collapsed, his response was, "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."<sup>xxiii</sup> What is the point of learning about plant growth, except to understand that "Except a corn of wheat falls into the ground and die, it abideth alone?"<sup>xxiv</sup> How much value is there in learning all about predators and prey, if only to be devoured by one as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour? Is it profitable to learn and study all about light and optics and then go to eternal darkness when Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world?"<sup>xxv</sup>

The principle of *illumination*. In workshops and seminars with parents, and in teaching my own children I've had the joy of seeing their lights come on. The satisfaction, the amazement, of seeing how the pieces all fit together shines like a golden spike. Things not illumined by the light of understanding may be retained long enough to score 100 on a test, but will soon be lost in darkness. The goal of this illumination is to have clear vision, to see with understanding. Get your children to see the natural order in God's creation; to see God's hand and his wisdom in all his handiwork.

The concept of *focus*. Concentrate your efforts; use singleness of purpose. Focus on one thing at a time. When light is focused, the rays converge at a given point. Similarly, studies of Inca Indians, Irish immigration, the geography and weather of Idaho, and the life of Luther Burbank would converge on God's use of a particular plant: potatoes. Don't try to teach the entirety of the multiplication tables at once. Instead, get the student to learn one multiplication fact and apply it. Learn specific facts as they apply. For example, a calendar can be used to show seven times tables—one week, two weeks, etc. Make your studies practical.

The law of *association*. Things tend to be remembered according to their *context*. A significant context makes things relevant. A bunch of words from a given lesson will tend to be remembered (or forgotten) together. Terminology from irrelevant lessons will be stored in the dust-collection section of the brain. Is it not strange that a student taught about planets would not recognize them in the night sky? "Killing two or three birds with one stone" is one way of making

education more effective. The student can read a biography about a famous historical figure, learn the geography of his life, recognize the importance of the scientific developments of the times, and consider the living God's evaluation of his life. This education makes sense.

Home education is self-correcting as parent and child spend much time together, providing opportunity to reveal and remedy academic deficiencies. To set things right, find the greatest deficiency, the biggest hindrance, and overcome one little thing at a time. Slow and steady gets it done. "To accomplish great things by imperceptible means, such is the law of God."<sup>xxvi</sup> Work his way in education. Teach your children, first by your example, then with instruction, and finally through counsel (as they pass you).

The law of *persistence*. Experience should teach that some things are better accomplished without the use of force. Persistence can accomplish what force cannot. Keep after one thing. Don't give up. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again. Don't write it off as a "learning disability," (even if you have written authentication from an expert). Stop and pray, asking the LORD for wisdom, for creative insight, for ways to accomplish necessary prerequisites. You can take a break, even for days, but come back to the same thing, though perhaps from a different angle. Try different approaches, varied teaching methods. Use as many examples as possible. If something is really valuable, it is worth pursuing. This requires perseverance. The Scripture instructs us to "Go to the ant, thou sluggard. Consider her ways, and be wise."<sup>xxvii</sup> I marvelled at an ant which struggled for at least 20 minutes to drag a caterpillar toward its nest, even though a rival continuously pulled in the opposite direction. (I can't tell you the end of the story, because the ant persisted longer than I.) In like manner, we will be blessed in the Godly education of our children, if we persist. "God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."<sup>xxviii</sup>

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- i Proverbs 29:15
- ii *Nature's Numbers: The Unreal Reality of Mathematics*, by Ian Stewart, 1995
- iii *The Study of Nature*, by Samuel Christian Schmucker, 1909
- iv *ibid*
- v *Dumbing Us Down*, by John Gatto, 1992
- vi *Nature's Numbers: The Unreal Reality of Mathematics*, by Ian Stewart, 1995
- vii *ibid*
- viii *ibid*
- ix *Chemistry of Organic Compounds*, by Carl R. Noller, 1951
- x *Ancient Rome: How it Affects You Today*, by Richard Maybury, 1995
- xi Proverbs 9:10
- xii I Corinthians 10:5
- xiii see Philippians 4:8
- xiv "Click On to Our Nation's History," by Larry Smith, Parade Magazine, Sept. 29, 1996
- xv Joshua 24:15
- xvi "Systematic Dumbing Down of School Curriculum," (Audio Tape) by John T. Gatto, 1994
- xvii *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, by Alfred North Whitehead, 1929
- xviii John Gatto
- xix Isaiah 58:9
- xx "The Sermon: Political Media Power," by John Lofton, Chalcedon Report, November 1996
- xxi Ecclesiastes 8:11
- xxii "Freedom under God's Law," by R.J. Rushdoony, Chalcedon Report, September 1996
- xxiii Luke 13:5
- xxiv John 12:24
- xxv John 8:12

xxvi *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, by J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, Hartland Publications, reprinted from the 1846 edition.

xxvii Proverbs 6:6

xxviii Hebrews 11:6