

April 1997

From the Heart – The Right Time for Teaching

Home-educators want the best for their children, but what is the best? What mark should parents seek in educating their children? The Scripture does not say that mathematics is the principal thing, nor is English, nor science, nor history. At the outset, home education seems to have similar goals to traditional schooling, but as the Christian continues the paths diverge. Recently, I read excerpts of the diary of Robert F. Scott's fateful expedition to the south pole. Before I read this account to my children, I had them write Philippians 3:13 &14 from dictation.

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are ahead, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."ⁱⁱ

Then I read from Commander Scott's diary. The story moved from the breakfast table, to the kitchen while the dishes were being done, to the sofa in the living room. As we read, we learned new vocabulary, reviewed a calendar of applicable dates, and considered the seasons in the southern hemisphere. Afterward, we studied Antarctic geography with a globe and a detailed map. The children drew (or traced, depending on ability) and labeled a map of Antarctica. Later we reviewed National Geographic articles about polar areas (and even penguins). The contrasts between the polar north and polar south were quite interesting. (For example, the group that trekked northward from Canada passed the pole, pitched their tent, and, as they slept, their camp moved back across the pole. How was this possible?) A casual traveller might expect to navigate using a compass, but near the poles the compass tries to point down. Polar exploration requires celestial sightings and corresponding course adjustment. Adjusting your educational course by the world's compass (achievement tests) leads toward the world's goals.

What is the purpose of reading and knowing? Is it just to pass the time? Is it to score well on achievement tests? Is it to be able to escape to a dream world? Is it to be intelligent? Our lesson was not about history, nor about geography, nor science, nor spelling, though all these were a part of our studies. The goal was to become wise, to comprehend the world in which we live, knowing the ways of God and the ways of men. Ideas and knowledge are not to be squirreled away in the dusty recesses of the brain in case of a test some day. The facts of education are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The goal is not to *keep* them, but to comprehend how they fit together to give understanding of life so that it can be lived for the right purpose. Education is giving instruction on how to work this puzzle: some pieces seem to be missing, new pieces are being continually added, no edge pieces can be found, and the pieces have different printing on each side, and of course, there's no picture on the box. In this puzzle

of life, the secret is recognizing that the key pieces are invisible for they are spiritually discerned. Learning *about* the puzzle is no substitute for working it.

Ultimately, education is about *doing*. The relationship between knowledge and actions is similar to the Scriptural connection between faith and works. "The notion today is that morality has to do with taking a position on some contested issue, whether it's the environment or nuclear war or racism. . . . It's the idea that morality is all in the head, that once the child knows the ethical thing to do. . . he'll just do it. Whereas the ancients felt that knowing was only a very small part of it. That the hard part of it was doing it, and for this you needed training and discipline and practice."ⁱⁱⁱ Many things *look* easy – until attempted. In academics, let your children try – and fail. This will prepare them to receive help. Much is learned by trial and error – with consequences. The child tested on spelling from preassigned word lists often gets a false notion that he can spell. The real test of spelling is what can be spelled without prior coaching. This spring as our family drove around town, I asked the children to spell orally the flowers and trees which were blossoming. We studied the difference between petals and sepals of a dogwood, and counted forsythias. In our lesson I taught the incredible order of God's creation *through* words and details relating to it. The lesson: God's faithfulness is displayed by the progressive unfolding of the seasons, each and every thing in its time.

Traditional schooling often neglects proper seasons and practical application. Math is commonly presented as a random collection of stray procedures which are not applied or combined. Is a workman commendable who knows *how* to read a measuring tape, *how* to saw a board, *how* to use a pry bar, *how* to pound a nail, and *how* to drive a screw, but cannot apply this knowledge to build even a bookcase. Is it called progress when algebra is taught in the fifth grade to students who can scarcely multiply? Consider a child-development "curriculum" which taught crawling before a child could roll over; or instruction in walking backward as soon as a child took his first steps. Maturity assumes mastery of steps and focuses on going places – using steps to accomplish things. A toddler who can walk from the sofa to mom's waiting arms is transformed into a boy who can hike in the woods by an assortment of everyday experiences. Success and confidence in previous abilities, together with understanding of new concepts, provide motivation and insight for mastery of subsequent skills. Step by step, it's a process. Parents naturally teach a child to understand counting by numerous examples and then to *use* this skill by counting things aloud. The same method can be used to teach addition by demonstrating addition facts with manipulatives (or actual objects) while describing the reasoning process with words (e.g. eight needs two to make ten so eight plus three makes eleven). Printed addition problems should be delayed until the student has mastered and practiced basic addition facts. After proficiency at multi-digit addition, subtraction is easily taught. Likewise, multiplication can be taught orally (and later followed by division). Teach written arithmetic skills by *teaching your child*

how to write down a language he already knows. (This applies from counting to calculus—and from spelling to composition.) Understanding and proficiency should come first and the symbols to record it on paper should *follow*, (just as parents wouldn't begin to teach reading to a child who did not understand and speak the English language). "Galileo speaks of mathematics as the language in which God wrote the great book—the universe—and unless one knows this language, it is impossible to comprehend a single word."ⁱⁱⁱ "Strange as it may sound, the power of mathematics rests on its evasion of all unnecessary thought and on its wonderful saving of mental operations."^{iv} Without such streamlining, further studies tend to be a burden.

In contrast to burdensome traditional methods, education can be easy. ". . . Miss Minnie had gone away to a teacher's college and prepared herself to teach by learning many cunning methods that she never afterward used. For Miss Minnie loved children and she loved books, and she taught merely by introducing the one to the other."^v If you try to make your child learn something you dislike, in a way that you hated, you will find it difficult to put your heart into doing it. Apply the do-unto-others principle to education—and teaching what you love will become spontaneous. If you want children to learn something, make it *memorable*. Collect and organize your thoughts; consider the things that you remember. Curiosity is like the spark that kindles a fire and understanding like the flame that devours. Interest creates the desire for understanding—both are functions of the spirit. Neglect of the spiritual dimension eliminates both interest and understanding from the equation of education whereas proper consideration of these factors comes by the spirit of wisdom.

Wisdom involves learning things in the right context and at the right time. "Wisdom: the knowing, not of facts, but of truths about human nature and the process of life. . . . Electronic communication, in eliminating space and time as significant aspects of communication, also eliminates the subjective experience of depth. My core fear is that we are, as a culture. . . becoming shallower, that we have turned from depth, from the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery, and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness, that we are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has, for millennia, been central to culture, and that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web."^{vi} Wisdom necessitates gatekeepers, limiting further access to knowledge according to character and previous experience. Only personal relationship can judge character. Electronic or bureaucratic means are inadequate. Instead of all knowledge being available to whomsoever, parents (or other wise persons) should serve as gatekeepers. Open the door to your children only for those things which are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable.

Godly character is nurtured by fellowship with those who are wise. Because understanding level usually exceeds reading level, children (and parents) can

benefit from *listening* to persons who are wiser. Faith is not promised by reading, but by hearing. Once heard, the truth resonates within the human spirit. Do you love the truth? Learning requires questions—intelligent, piercing, thought-provoking questions—along with diligence and perseverance to find answers. Create some suspense. Cultivate in your children the desire to know. Answer their questions, but don't tell all you know. "Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people's curiosity. It is enough to open people's minds; do not overload them."^{vii}

You don't have to teach *everything* if you create learners. Put the pieces together. Teach your children the geography that goes with the history, and the related literature, and the scientific struggles and errors of the times. Seek to give your children understanding of the "rest of the story"—to understand the whole story. Knowledge of the origin and roots of words provides tools for the understanding of other words. (I was amazed to learn that the root of the word doctor is *docere*, Latin for "to teach." Once upon a time, apparently, medical doctors taught people the principles of health.) Seek to understand the precise meanings of words. Such discernment is the antidote for advertisement and propaganda. (Propaganda is the use of language to convey the *appearance* of truth.) Alexis deTocqueville's insightful collection of essays about America included "The effect of Democracy on Language," describing the rule of the people on "the chief instrument of thought." Train your children by experience to sort out, sift, and pan for truth in the sluice of life. Typically our world has no desire to "know the truth and the truth shall make you free."^{viii} Film-maker Steven Spielberg said, "I came to realize the reason I came to make the movie [Schindler's List] is that I have never in my life told the truth in a movie. My effort as a movie maker has been to create something that couldn't possibly happen so people could leave their lives and have an adventure and then come back to earth and drive home."^{ix} The modern world has come (or gone) so far. Our society has become so accustomed to influences whose effects we do not realize. Can you fill in the blank:

" 'if one were searching for the best means to efface and kill in a whole nation the discipline of self-respect, the feeling of what is elevated, he could do no better than take the American ____ . . .' Is this why, two hundred years before, a governor of Virginia had thanked God, to the scandal of succeeding generations, that there was not a ____ . . . in the colony?"^x

Rare is the insightful man who discerns the great hindrance of things that others take for granted. Can you guess who is the subject of the following passage?

"Because he saw how most scholars accepted as authoritative all that they read, he distrusted the men who took their learning only from books and professed their knowledge so dogmatically. He describes them as puffed up and pompous, strutting about, and adorned only by the labors of others whom they

merely repeated. They were only the reciters and trumpeters of other peoples learning. [He] determined to learn for himself and made exhaustive studies of plants, animals, the human body, light, and the principles of mechanical devices, rocks, the flight of birds, and hundreds of other subjects."^{xi}

At our house, we include unit studies based on both interest and life. After reading an interesting piece about George Washington Carver in a newsletter for home educators, we read a biography about him. Recalling a definition of resourcefulness: "wise use of that which others would normally overlook or discard," my wife asked what might be done with the pulp from carrots she had juiced. Using a procedure for recycling newspaper, we made paper from the carrot pulp and later built molecular models of cellulose and B-Carotene. Curiosity and relevance are the appetite for learning and nothing is more relevant than the real thing. (Looking at Comet Hale-Bopp in the Northwestern sky in the evening, particularly from a rural location, is a fitting time to teach that "the heavens declare the glory of God . . ." "^{xii})

Study of the background of phrases, terms, places, or people can be enlightening. "A bird in the hand . . ." probably brings to your mind the rest of the phrase. When Jesus said to the Pharisees, "If ye had known what this meaneth, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice'," "^{xiii} he was telling them that they had failed to know the "rest of the story". "Analogical thinking, as it is used in the *mashal* [proverbs], presents life as a picture. It deals with things in their real settings. It is narrative rather than scientific. It treats the whole of things as they actually appear to us, and reveals their inner nature by comparison with something in which that inner aspect is more evident."^{xiv} The parable method of teaching used by Jesus cultivated a learner with a hunger and thirst to know. The student is challenged to recognize significant aspects of stories and situations by relation to things already understood. Through practical lessons and examples, this method teaches just the right thing at the right time. Wisdom considers how something fits into the larger scheme of things, for, in the wisdom of God, all things work *together* . . . "The wise man studies not only the works of redemption but the works of creation as well. Every natural phenomenon, every human ability, the course of the stars, and the course of history are under the scrutiny of the wise. . . . Wisdom must pursue the fingerprints of God in every creature of His making."^{xv} Learn to recognize and collect treasures, gems, precious stones, jewels, mysteries, and secrets of knowledge and truth as you plow through life.

Don't be satisfied with tidbits and scraps of knowledge which are merely circumstantial evidence for the real issues of life. Proverbs 18:17 says "He that is first in his own cause seemeth just, but his neighbor cometh and searcheth him." Another translation says "the first to present his case seems right until another comes forward and examines him." Try this by cross-examining history and current events in light of Scripture. "Introduce fewer topics and examine them more thoroughly."^{xvi} The truth will bear up under scrutiny. How can history be

understood without considering "the ways of man [which] are before the eyes of the LORD and he pondereth all his goings."^{xvii} History is "the autobiography of Him who 'works out all things after the counsel of His will' and who is graciously timing all events after the counsel of His Christ, and the Kingdom of God on earth. It is His-Story. . . . The more thoroughly a nation deals with its history, the more decidedly will it recognize and own an over-ruling Providence therein, and the more religious a nation it will become; while the more superficially it deals with its history, seeing only secondary causes and human agencies, the more irreligious will it be."^{xviii}

Knowledge is a danger in the hands of the fool; a blessing in the hands of the wise. Knowledge must be kept in its rightful place. Is science to be studied for its own sake? If knowledge is power, is it to be harnessed in the service of the appetite? Is technological "progress" like a mountain, to be conquered just because it's there? Ethical or moral use must control knowledge, as the Scripture says "giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge . . ."^{xix} How is it possible to make this wisdom the focus of education?

Consider your *purpose* in education. My purpose? To proclaim the Truth. My position and my rock: Jesus Christ is Lord and "all things were created by him and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."^{xx} "The wisdom of Jesus is demonstrated in His ability to make the TRUTH stand out in brilliant clarity from all error and confusion."^{xxi} Learn to recognize these two great enemies of truth. Let me try to illustrate the difference between them. Two students were given a spelling test. The first student spelled his word "e-d-u-k-a-s-h-u-n." The second spelled, "o-n-a-u-t-i-c-e-d." When the teacher (named Wisdom) announced that the correct answer was *e-d-u-c-a-t-i-o-n*, the first student (named Error) argued that he had spelled all the sounds; the second student (named Confusion) argued that he had all the correct letters, only in the wrong order.

The power of confusion has warred against truth throughout history. "Why did it take more than a hundred years of experimentation, demonstration, and hard work to learn about the simple oxidation of metals in air? Because chemists were still fighting against the old *plogiston* theory; and when you are working against a faulty basic theory, your experimental results tend to complicate matters, rather than explain them."^{xxii} In teaching children, one can *cover* all the academic facts in typical jumbled order, producing "knowledgeable" students who cannot connect ideas (and often cannot remember a year later what they learned). Effective use of information necessitates context. Disconnected ideas are as useless as chisel without a hammer, or a socket without a ratchet drive.

Ideas have consequences. Accepting one idea as a given leads to other ideas. For example, "If we do not expect parents to pay for their own children's education . . . what credible argument can we then make that they should pay for

their food, clothing, shelter or medicine? Government schooling reduces parents to the role of assistants who insure the completion of homework, help with occasional projects, and get the kids to soccer practice on time. Government schooling is the very linchpin of the welfare state, the foundational tyranny that led to more than a century of servile laws to follow.^{11xxiii} The growth of home education comes as no surprise when public education has tragically abandoned parental input with layers of bureaucracy keeping the voice of parents from reaching policy-makers. When all else fails, parents care about their children, and they are proving it. The independence of home educators is diametrically opposed to a statist plan of salvation which attempts to use external agents like public schools to solve the moral problems of our day. The problems of our day are spiritual. People must either control themselves from the inside or be controlled externally. "He that ruleth his spirit [is better] than he that taketh a city."^{11xxiv}

We need to be saved from the idea that political government can solve all the problems of this present mess. School histories portraying state and federal governments as deliverers from monopolies, from slavery, from depressions, etc. tend toward the statism rampant in our day. "Statists . . . cannot understand how it is possible to work for social change without first harnessing the centralized political machine."^{11xxv} The "goal of politics is to make possible the living of good lives, to make room for higher pursuits such as the leisure to reflect thoughtfully on what things mean."^{11xxvi} Home-education provides the time to wake up to this *reflection* on the truly important things in life. When you realize the crisis, remember that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds."^{11xxvii}

Recently, the governor of Tennessee accepted \$28,200,000 of federal money to implement School-to-Work in Tennessee. The premise of school-to-work is that education's purpose is to produce workers. The business community, given the reins of education, may well produce better workers, but note that the most efficient worker is a robot. Something is desperately wrong when public education courts business but turns a deaf ear to the people. (Contact your state senator and representative and ask questions about School-to-Work.) "There is no difficulty in securing enough agreement for action on the point that education should serve the needs of the people. But all hinges on the interpretation of needs; if the primary need of man is to perfect his spiritual being and prepare for immortality, then education of the mind and the passions will take precedence over all else. The growth of materialism, however, has made this a consideration remote and even incomprehensible to the majority."^{11xxviii} But the bottom line remains: *all education is inherently religious.*

God has put into the heart of man the desire to understand. Why are things as they are? Our technological world is like a carnival ride whose lights and movement give the appearance of going somewhere, but when you get off, you're right where you started, though probably a little dizzier (and poorer as

well). But if you will "stand still and see," your perspective will come to rest. Needed is the perspective which comes from distance, looking beyond the details and stepping back to see how things fit together. The world begins to make sense as you begin to see how things are related. Life is simplified by understanding cause-and-effect relationships (including those that are spiritual).

God's special approach to education? The Scripture says, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her."^{xxxix} "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."^{xxx} "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."^{xxxi}

Teaching your children should be natural and subtle. Oblique efforts are often much more effective than head-on. "Scripture sometimes teaches us in an offhand way, . . . through assumptions that are clearly made in a passage which is primarily addressing something else."^{xxxii} The Scripture, amid a discourse on Ephraim's pride, mentions a method of education, "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, and there a little . . . this is the rest wherewith ye shall cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing"^{xxxiii} This method works little by little. It consists of teaching small bits and pieces built upon previous experiences. It is, in fact, discipleship. As you learn and then teach your children those things which you know (or look up those things which you don't) in the course of everyday life, you will find the simplicity and effectiveness of the right lesson at the right time.

Fellow Member of the Flock

Greg Stablein

Final Exam: In the education of his children, the steps of a righteous man are ordered by: A.) the state B.) the children C.) the textbook publishers D.) the business community E.) the LORD or F.) the achievement tests?

- i Philippians 3:13-14
- ii Interview with William Kilpatrick, Mars Hill audio tapes March/ April 1993
- iii Mathematics for the Nonmathematician, By Morris Kline, 1967
- iv Men of Mathematics, by E. T. Bell, 1986
- v Watch with Me, by Wendell Berry, 1994
- vi Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic age, by Sven Birkerts
- vii Lies My Teacher Told Me, by James W. Loewen, 1995 (Quote of Anatole France)
- viii John 8:32
- ix Critique of Schindler's List, by Drew Trotter, Mars Hill audio tapes January/February 1994
- x Ideas have Consequences, by Richard M. Weaver, 1948
- xi Citation available upon request
- xii Psalm 19:1
- xiii Matthew 12:7 c.f Matt. 9:13, Hosea 6:6
- xiv Far Above Rubies: Wisdom in the Christian Community, by David Mulligan, 1994
- xv Far Above Rubies: Wisdom in the Christian Community, by David Mulligan, 1994
- xvi Lies My Teacher Told Me, by James W. Loewen, 1995
- xvii Proverbs 5:21
- xviii The Christian History of the American Revolution, Consider and Ponder, Quote of S.W. Foljambe, compiled by Verna M. Hall, 1976
- xix II Peter 1:5
- xx Colossians 1:16-18
- xxi Far Above Rubies: Wisdom in the Christian Community, by David Mulligan, 1994
- xxii Exploring Chemical Elements and their Compounds, by David L. Heiserman, 1992
- xxiii "Who Should Teach?", The New American, December 9, 1996.
- xxiv Proverbs 16:32
- xxv "Christian Libertarianism," by Andrew Sandlin, Chalcedon Report, September 1996.
- xxvi Mars Hill audio tapes, March/ April 1993

XXVIII Corinthians 10:4

XXVIII Ideas have Consequences, by Richard M. Weaver, 1948

XXIX Proverbs 4:7,8

XXX Proverbs 1:7

XXXI James 1:5

XXXII "The Three Responsibilities," by Douglas Wilson, *Credenda Agenda*, Volume 8, Number 5.

XXXIII Isaiah 28:10, 12