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A Biblical Theology of Education¹

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The topic assigned me is like an oversized, under-inflated beach ball: you can't miss it, and it's easy to swat around, but it's very difficult to control.

Nevertheless, let me try to impose at least a little order on the topic. Begin with the expression "biblical theology." Although there are many variations, today's use of the expression commonly conjures up one of two ideas. *First:* Whereas "systematic theology" tends to order its treatment of the theology of the Bible along logical and hierarchical lines (see, for example, a standard systematic theology like that of Bavinck or a more popular one like that of Grudem), biblical theology tends to order its treatment of the theology of the Bible along temporal lines, focusing on the contribution of each book and corpus along the path of the Bible's storyline. The distinction between systematic theology and biblical theology is never absolute, of course, but it is strong enough to warrant recognition. Thus a biblical theology of, say, the temple, traces out temple themes in the early chapters of Genesis and follows their trajectories all the way to the Apocalypse, and observes how these trajectories are not random but interrelated, constituting the warp and woof of interwoven themes, unfolding across time. Similarly, one can speak of the biblical theology of creation/new creation, of priesthood, of exile, and of much more. But in this sense of "biblical theology," can one legitimately speak of the biblical theology of education?

I don't think so. It's not as if there is a theological development of the theme of education from one end of the canon to the other. Of course, one could cheat a little and insist that all of God's self-disclosure across human history constitutes an education of those humans. In that sense, education *is* biblical theology. But no one uses the term "education" today in precisely that way. Consider the definition of education advanced by Wikipedia ("Education is the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, morals, beliefs, and habits."). This static vision of education is not following the storyline of redemptive history. To put it another way, it is

¹ This is a very slightly revised version of a paper delivered at IACE, tweaked in light of questions and comments at the conference.

difficult to discern that the canon provides developing reflection on education.

The *second* common contemporary meaning of “biblical theology” is theology that is found in or based upon the Bible – a way of referring to systematic theology that is biblically faithful. On this view, our title makes education a subset, in effect, of systematic theology. This is conceptually less problematic. To talk of the biblical theology of education, in this sense of biblical theology, is akin to talking about the biblical theology of ecology or the biblical theology of angels. Ecology, angels, and, I would say, education, are not central biblical themes akin to Christology, atonement, and theology proper, but enough is said about each of them that if we assemble these bits carefully and inquire as to how they fit into the Bible as a whole, it is surprising how much can be learned. So let us assemble some of the bits and pieces of what the Bible says about education.

Observations on Some Biblical Bits and Pieces

One of the first passages cited by writers who survey what the Bible says about education is Deuteronomy 6:6-9: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of our houses and on our gates.” Indeed, in the future when a new generation asks what this is all about, the older generation is to fill them in on the entire exodus history, the history of the redemption of God’s covenant people and the bedrock that warrants the call to obedience (6:20-25). The concern is to educate each new generation. Three details stand out: (1) The primary responsibility lies with the parents who are called to shape their children. (2) The focus is not on education broadly conceived, but on knowing their own God-shaped history and the covenantal structure and stipulations that rest on that history. (3) The context in which this theological formation takes place is not a formal educational institution but family life – sitting at home, walking along the road, answering questions in the intimacy of the family. A millennium and a half later, the same family structure is presupposed in the Olivet Discourse: “Two men will be in a field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left” (Matt 24:40-41). In the economic culture of the time, the two men were likely to be two brothers, or a father and a son; the two

women were likely to be two sisters, or a mother and a daughter. That is why the separation brought about by the Lord's return is so shocking. But that is also where education takes place.

Of course, some training takes place outside family lines: Eli mentors Samuel, Elijah mentors Elisha, to cite two obvious instances. Nevertheless, recall the importance of the family in the wisdom literature: "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years, and bring you peace and prosperity. . . . Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. For I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother. Then he taught me, and he said to me, 'Take hold of my word with all your heart; keep my commands, and you will live.' . . . My son, keep your father's command and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Prov 3:1-2; 4:1-4; 6:20; cf. 1:8). Family instruction lays emphasis on conduct: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Prov 22:6). The role of the mother in educating her son in the faith surfaces unforgettably in the influence of Lois and Eunice on Timothy (2 Tim 1:5), and, sometimes regrettably, in the influence of Rebekah on her son Jacob. All of such trans-generational education is, of course, informal.

The importance of the written materials that make up what we today call the Bible surfaces in both personal and institutional contexts. When an Israelite came to regal power, his first responsibility was not to audit the books of his predecessor, nor to appoint a full slate of cabinet officers, but to copy out, by hand, "this law" (scholars continue to debate how much is included in the expression), then read it every day for the rest of his life (Deut 17:14-20) – a stipulation more commonly observed in the breach than in the performance, or all of Israel's history would have been different. Psalm 119 is a sustained meditation on the law of the Lord and its shaping power. Times of reformation and revival are driven by the rediscovery of the written Word (Josiah) or by the exposition of that Word (Nehemiah). Although the exact referents are disputed, Paul's desire to be reunited with the books and the parchments disclose a similar priority (2 Tim 4:13), as do affirmations of the unyielding importance of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19-20). In recent years, scholars have shown how during the patristic period Christians stood out from their pagan peers, not least by being people of a book: their teaching, evangelism, catechizing, and worship were all shaped by written documents, by Scripture. All of this presupposes a sustained interest in

learning what texts say, that is, in theological education. Whether early Christians read, say, 1 Corinthians for themselves, or accessed it primarily by hearing it read at length in the congregation, they stood out for their desire to become educated in their sacred texts.

The roots of such priorities lie deep within Old Testament soil. Unlike the other tribes, the Levites did not settle in one tribal area, but were scattered among the tribes, not least because their responsibilities included teaching the Word of God to their fellow Israelites. In other words, there was an *institutional* pattern of educating the people in holy Scripture. This side of the exile, that pattern morphed into the synagogue system, with its heavy emphasis on memory and recitation. In the New Testament, under the new covenant, assemblies were to be led by pastors/teachers/overseers, and one of the qualifications demanded of such leaders was that they be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). The Pastoral Epistles devote quite a lot of space to spelling out what the teachers must aim to accomplish: they must ground the believers in sound doctrine, warn divisive people, provide encouragement, and so forth. More broadly, Christians are to admonish one another. All of these are forms of education – Christian education. And, after all, even Christian proclamation of the gospel is a form of education.

The Bible also lays some stress on the lessons to be learned from history – or, more precisely, the lessons to be learned from history as interpreted by God. The entire book of Judges overflows with the point: when the covenant people slide into idolatry, God sends judgment until there is repentance and a desperate call for help. The book as a whole teaches that the people are incapable of long-term faithfulness without a godly king to keep them in line. The juxtaposed blessings and curses of Deuteronomy are designed to educate the people along similar lines. The seven churches of Revelation 2-3 are threatened with the dire consequences of prolonged sin: the candlestick is removed, the church is destroyed.

Although there is very little reflection in the Bible on how each new generation was educated in the broader knowledge and science of the day, there are adequate glimpses of the range of expertise. Genesis 4 identifies nomadic herders, musicians, and technical folk with rising mastery of tools made from bronze and iron. David was a poet; Solomon set himself to master proverbs; scribes collected and compiled them; and all of these skills require training of some sort or other – education, if you will. The word “wisdom” covers a wide range of competencies, of course, but in some

contexts it refers to something like a technical skill. Bezalel and Oholiab are “wise” men because they are endowed “with knowledge and with all kinds of skills – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts” (Exod 31:3-5). When David reflects on the sky, he declares, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge” (Ps 19:1-2; cf. vv. 1-6). Like Paul in his reflection on what can be learned about God from the natural order (Rom 1:19-20), David runs quickly to theological implications, but we cannot fail to note that these theological structures are anchored in observations of the natural order. Job knows about constellations such as Pleiades and Orion: presumably someone educated him in elementary astronomy. Once again, there is little reflection on the processes, structures, and methods of education, but quite regularly the biblical writers spell out nature’s theological implications.

I cannot abandon this survey without saying something about the Lord Jesus. One of the dominant ways by which his disciples referred to him is as “the Teacher.” After Jesus and Martha have finished their quiet exchange in John 11, Martha, we are told, “went back [to her house] and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you’” (11:28). Jesus himself ratifies the appropriateness of the designation when he instructs his disciples how to prepare for the Passover: “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near’” (Matt 26:18). Or again, in John’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am” (13:13). In Matthew’s Gospel, the apostle provides five large teaching blocks, the first of which is the sermon on the mount, which begins with the comment, “His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them” (5:1-2), and ends with the observation that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (7:28-29). Mark’s Gospel reports much less teaching, but the evangelist has a predilection for referring to Jesus as the Teacher. Certainly the canonical gospels depict Jesus teaching in a variety of modes: lecturing, mentoring those closest to him, coining one-liners, interacting with opponents, illustrating some element of his teaching with parables or with symbol-laden miracles, unpacking grace, faith, obedience, and more. None of this is presented as a disquisition on education. The focus, rather, is on the content – Jesus himself, the kingdom, his path to the cross and resurrection, eternal life – and that content is presented by a master-teacher. One may

legitimately learn some things about education by watching Jesus, but it would rather miss the point to come away and say, “After studying Jesus in Luke’s gospel, I see how copying Jesus’ teaching styles will improve my performance in my classes teaching students the challenges of how nuclear fusion might one day contribute to the electrical grid.”

A Miscellany of Historical Observations

Before trying to pull some of these strands together to see what kind of biblical theology of education we might weave, it might be worth our while to offer a potted miscellany of historical observations. The reason is that when we talk about education, we unwittingly smuggle into our discussion such categories as colleges and universities, private Christian institutions versus public options, K-12 schools, private tutoring, the value or otherwise of SAT exams, two-year associates degrees, technical colleges, distance learning, digital courses, universal access to libraries (hardcopy or digital), or, more broadly, access to the internet – and not one of these categories, not one, had any place in the mind of Solomon, of Hezekiah, of Dr Luke, or of Thomas Aquinas. To think about some of these categories for a moment enables us to ponder what we may and may not legitimately infer about education from the biblical texts.

In the first century, there was no ideal of government-supported, universal education. Some governments trained some of their employees or slaves: we catch glimpses of this as early as the time of Daniel and his three friends. Most Jewish lads in the time of Paul learned how to read, but most would not have owned any of their own books. There was nothing akin to a modern Western university. Lecturers/preachers often wandered from town to town, giving addresses in the public market place. If they were good enough, local nobility might pay them to educate their sons – and this could lead to the establishment of a one-man local academy, such as the school of Tyrannus. In relatively rare cases, a learned scholar attracted other would-be scholars who gathered around their master. The focus could be as broad as all philosophy, or much more narrow (e.g., mathematics). One of the results of this diversity is that although these so-called schools could argue amongst themselves, there was no government-mandated curriculum. Of course, government pressure came in other ways: read the Apocalypse, or 1 Peter. But it was not usually exerted through the rather slender first-century institutions of education. There were no trade schools. People who learned a trade did so in a master/apprentice relationship, in some cases controlled by

the guilds (the ancient version of trade unions). Not infrequently the son learned his father's trade from his father. That is why Jesus was labeled "the carpenter's son," and, in one remarkable passage, simply "the carpenter" (Mark 6:3) – probably because Joseph had died, and Jesus had taken over the family business before embarking on his public ministry. Thus the moral and theological education envisaged in Deuteronomy 6 took place on the same platform, in the same fields and shops, as the formation needed to become a farmer or a carpenter.

In the early Middle Ages, because clergy were the citizens most likely to be able to read, and because collections of books (which were very expensive) could usually be accumulated only by institutions substantial enough to pay for them, cathedrals and monasteries became the preserve of learning, and often ran their own schools. In his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*,² what Thomas Cahill really means is "how the Irish monasteries saved civilization." Certainly there were other monasteries than Irish ones. The first three European universities – at Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge – were first of all monkish enclaves, and the trappings of Christendom, to say no more, continue in them from the 12th century to the present day. Eventually these institutions became quite powerful. You can still visit the room in Queen's College, Cambridge, where Erasmus did much of his work. John Owen (1616-83) was an administrator at the University of Oxford, and an advisor to Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector. By and large, however, Oxford sided with the Catholics, and Cambridge with the Protestants – no College more so than Emmanuel College ("Emma"), Cambridge, whose support of the Puritans meant that Cromwell wanted to replace the Masters of the other colleges by Emma men. Meanwhile the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims (1453) sent many scholars and their manuscripts to the West, strengthening the Renaissance by the recovery of ancient learning.

At this period in history, a university was indeed a *university*: it was *one* body, an organization given to research and teaching, with something approaching a unified vision, with God at the center. In the late medieval period, even the university libraries were organized in such a way as to demonstrate that theology is the unifying queen of the sciences. Today, for many reasons, there is little that is conceptually and vibrantly unifying in most universities.

² New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Where did the students come from who were admitted to Oxbridge (as Oxford and Cambridge together have come to be called) and other universities? Parents with means often paid for a part-time or even a live-in tutor to prepare their sons (and at this historical juncture, only sons went to university) for the leap to Oxbridge. But meanwhile another movement had sprung up. Eton College, a boarding school for boys ages 13 to 18, was founded in 1440 as a sister “feeder school” for King’s College, Cambridge, and other colleges with similar purposes followed in its train. They were called “public schools” because they were open to any young man with the money and the gifts to get in – unlike students who made their way by relying on private tutors. Transparently they were not public in the sense that they were sustained and controlled by public funds. As measured by those standards, England’s “public schools” were, and are, not public but private and elitist.

Five more steps completed the transformation to something akin to what we have today. *First*, in 1751 William King, followed very closely by Robert Raikes, started the first Sunday School. This was designed to provide basic education for children in the workforce who had had no educational opportunities at all. Sunday schools grew very rapidly. They taught reading, writing, cyphering (arithmetic), and a basic knowledge of the Bible. This was Christian education organized by Christians and some others to provide basic content to the disadvantaged. *Second*, the Education Act of 1870 provided elementary education to everyone at government expense. Eventually this cut out the need for most Sunday schools as they had operated, and gradually transformed them into what we mean by Sunday schools today. At the same time, the same move brought the powerful force of government into play. The reach of government soon extended through secondary schools, technical colleges, and universities. The power of the purse is often velvet-gloved, but it can be formidably coercive. *Third*, Britain’s demographics changed, especially after WWII. The polite but anemic Judeo-Christian perspective that had dominated the culture for centuries gave way to massive multi-culturalism. London currently boasts somewhat more than 460 languages spoken on its streets. Some of us love the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity; others are frightened by it. Meanwhile, in such a population, where is the consensus on history, social studies, culture, religion, ethics, sexuality and gender identity, controlling literature, sense of humor, courtesy, justice, economics? How will the disagreements that undergird such diversity play out in government and in education at every level? What is clear is that the widespread attempts in

government and the media to advocate a neutral ground called secularism is simultaneously naïve and dangerous. *Fourth*, we cannot ignore the impact on education of the Industrial Revolution. New skills were needed, and many of them could not be acquired at home. Gradually the knowledge and skills needed in a scientific and technological society were taught by colleges and universities. The benefits were many, but the pattern of sending large numbers of 18-year-olds away from home to acquire an “education” tended with time to weaken the influence of the home and to modify what we mean by education. *Fifth*, James Tunstead Burtchaell’s book *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*³ carefully traces (in almost 900 pages) the common steps taken by colleges and universities as they departed from the confessional convictions and organizational control of the denominations that founded them. One of these common steps is a change in the kind of leadership. Very often these educational institutions were founded by visionary pastor/theologians. As the institutions grew in numbers, however, boards sought out leaders with administrative, financial, and legal skills. The controlling pursuit of secularism was the result. The administrative skills are necessary, of course, but the question is whether they should be allowed to displace or domesticate the founding vision.

Obviously, with the exception of the last couple of points, I’ve slanted my potted history toward Britain, but with remarkably little modification I might have told the story of the US, of France, of Germany, of Canada, and so forth. The bearing of such historical realities on the topic of this paper will become obvious in a few moments. It is time to try to draw some of these reflections together:

Towards a Biblical Theology of Education: Some Synthetic Perspectives

First: The center of what the Bible intimates about education is that nothing is more important than the knowledge of God mediated by the Lord Jesus Christ. That is as true for the diesel mechanic, the window washer, and the neurosurgeon as it is for the pastor/theologian. What shall it profit anyone to gain the whole world, including a Nobel prize or two, and lose their own soul? For those of us laboring in the fields of education, that axiomatic truth ought to shape not only our curriculum but our relationships with one

³ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

another and with our students, our adorning of the gospel as well as our articulation of it.

There are many implications. For a start, it means we could not possibly be satisfied with a return to broad Judeo-Christian values, even if we could arrange their return (and of course, we cannot). A Dickensian Christmas, complete with a turn-over-a-new-leaf Scrooge, doesn't bring us any closer to "the real meaning of Christmas" than a bacchanalian frenzy. In fact, Dickens may be more dangerous, since his sentimentality tends to swamp our discernment. Attempts to adhere to the second greatest command become thin when the first of the two greatest commands is ignored. The first thing to hold on to is that nothing is more important than the knowledge of God, mediated by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second: It follows that, owing to the very nature of what it means in Scripture to know God, our educational priorities can never be merely curricular. It is not enough to train students to recite the Nicene Creed and identify who the left-handed judge is: they must learn to integrate their knowledge of the Bible and theology with personal faith, ethics (including personal, sexual, and social ethics), with goals, use of time and money, and relationships with fellow believers in the life of the church. They must learn how to conduct themselves with those of different faith, and with unbelievers whose carefree abandonment of all religious claims is utterly alien to us. All these things, and more, flow out of what Scripture and theology *teach*, that is, how Scripture *educates* us.

Third: This does not mean that all of our relationships with the unconverted world must be adversarial. Those in the Reformed tradition often appeal to "common grace" – the grace that God distributes commonly, to the redeemed and the unredeemed alike. It is not for nothing that Jeremiah tells us to seek the good of the pagan city in which we reside. At the end, according to Revelation, the kingdoms of this world are depicted as bringing their treasures into the new Jerusalem. The summary exhortation of the apostle Paul is striking: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things" (Phil 4:8). The implication is obvious: there are many fields of study where we may, and sometimes ought to, share the educational endeavors of our lives with others. That this will demand wisdom and discernment should drive us to James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you

should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” If we are not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed (Rom 12:2), it will be by the renewal of our *mind*, by what and how we think, which presupposes sound formation, sound education.

Fourth: It follows further that if we are to interact with the culture in which God has placed us, we must try hard to understand the culture, and be discerning. One of the most striking features of Western culture is how fast it is changing. It is hard to keep up; indeed, there is a danger that some of us will try so hard to keep up with the changing face of the culture that we spend too little time in the Bible, leaving ourselves with little more than a Sunday School grasp of what the Bible actually says. So at the risk of considerable presumption, permit me to list a handful of authors whose insight has helped me. By their own self-description, most of them are not Christians: here, too, is a sign of common grace.

Thomas Sowell: Sowell has written many shrewd books over the past several decades, all of them graced with clear thinking and exceptionally clear writing. The volume I mention here is his *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*.⁴ Sowell claims that the demand for a perfect solution on every known inequity soon coughs up doctrinaire “solutions” that are not only simplistic but they also damn anyone who disagrees. Worse, to qualify for the benefits of the “solution,” it is necessary to be a victim, which results in long-term dependence on those claiming to have the “solution.” “On issue after issue, the morally self-anointed visionaries have for centuries argued as if no honest disagreement were possible, as if those who opposed them were not only in error but in sin. This has long been a hallmark of those with a cosmic vision of the world and of themselves as saviors of the world, whether they are saving it from war, overpopulation, capitalism, genetic degradation, environmental destruction, or whatever the crisis du jour might be.”⁵ The number and intensity of such movements are escalating, along with the corresponding arrogance. The demand for perfect justice turns out to be impossible in this broken world, and turns out to disenfranchise and belittle those who successfully make merely ameliorating improvements. Genuine modest improvements are sacrificed on the altar of reductionistic but absolutist visions to which all must bow. By contrast, in the name of King Jesus, Christians are educated to do good to all people, to confront

⁴ New York: Touchstone, 1999.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

wickedness and injustice, while knowing full well that perfection awaits the return of the King.

Charles Taylor: Of his many books, doubtless the most important for our purposes is *A Secular Age*.⁶ His cultural analysis cascades onto his readers in prose that is sometimes dense but invariably enlightening. *One* of his most insightful notions is that our age has, for a number of complex reasons, elevated the notion of “authenticity.” A person is to be held in high regard and celebrated if he or she is *authentic* – that is, living in conformity with what he or she claims to value. It matters little what that siren vision is; what matters is the authenticity of the pursuit. Traditional voices of authority against which we measured ourselves in the past – family traditions, religious commitments, social and governmental demands, sexual conformity – now have no intrinsic authority unless for some strange reason I choose to adopt them as mine. What makes me an admirable person is not the vision I choose to pursue, but that my pursuit, in whatever direction, is authentic. It is difficult to imagine a stance more calculated to baptize my opinions with public approval. It is equally difficult to imagine a stance more antithetical to what Jesus teaches us: he wants us to follow Jesus, die to self-interest, and take up our cross and die daily, not in a pique of self-flagellation but because we have been educated to recognize that it is in dying that we live, in giving that we receive, that the plaudits of a passing world are not to be compared with the glory to come and with the “Well done!” of the Teacher. A *second* insightful contribution is his exposition of what he calls the modern social imaginary. By this expression he refers to the web of values, morals, direction, institutions, laws and symbols by which a society imagines itself and even realizes itself. The social imaginary of the Western world of five hundred years ago included belief in a (more or less) Christian God; the social imaginary of today’s Western world is functionally atheistic, even while many espouse belief in some kind of God (not uncommonly the moralistic, therapeutic, deistic god described by sociologist Christian Smith). That fundamental shift in the social imaginary of talking about God and educating people in the Christian way.

Douglas Murray: A provocative essayist with many contributions to his credit, Douglas Murray came to prominence with the publication of his previous book, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*.⁷

⁶ Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1997.

⁷ London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2017.

His more recent volume, and the one about which I wish to say a few words here, is *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*.⁸ Some of it could have been written only by someone self-described as gay. What he brings to the table are two things: a remarkable degree of clarity as he discusses four of our culture's most disputed terms (viz., gay, women, race, and trans), and, above all, a passionate plea for sane discourse over against the carefully engineered mass hysteria of our time, "the madness of crowds." To illustrate: It is a remarkable fact that when Hillary Clinton ran against Barack Obama, both of them declared that marriage should be between one man and one woman – and that declaration was just over a dozen years ago. How short is the time it took to make homosexual marriage the law of the land, with penalties for those who dared to disagree. Once again: "the madness of crowds." Millennia of convictions as to what marriage *is* were jettisoned. Precisely how should an informed and compassionate, yes, and dispassionate confessional stance educate the culture? How shall we recapture clarity, reason, sanity, in order to declare the logic and coherence of the gospel, when we are competing with the madness of crowds?

Christopher Caldwell: His book *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties*⁹ offers a reading of the past half-century that is thought-provoking and must be at least partially right. In brief, he argues that the attempt to resolve all of our cultural disputes by legislation has generated a citizenry characterized by a deep sense of entitlement, complete with whining and a knee-jerk reliance on the courts to right all wrongs.

Mary Eberstadt: She has become one of the most insightful cultural commentators that we have. Among other contributions, she wrote *It's Dangerous to Believe: Religious Freedom and Its Enemies*.¹⁰ More recently she wrote *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics*.¹¹ In some ways this book is akin to Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, first published in 2000.¹² She argues that with the arrival of the pill and the sexual revolution it helped to spawn, personal identity was no longer tied to family and community. Individualism was tied to freedom, not least sexual freedom, and if there was community, it was arbitrary community incapable of sustaining well-being.

⁸ London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019.

⁹ New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020.

¹⁰ New York: Harper, 2016.

¹¹ West Conshohocken: Templeton, 2019.

¹² Now in a revised edition: New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020.

In the wake of what Eberhardt calls “the great scattering,” small wonder that teenage psychological problems are on the rise, along with loneliness studies, a loss of social learning, and “the infantilized vernacular of identity politics itself.”¹³ The “primal scream” of the title is the desperate cry, “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong in the world?”

Constraints of space forbid that I comment on other contributions, including those of Jordan Peterson and Rod Dreher. Perhaps the most comprehensive and convincing analysis is the very recent book by Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*.¹⁴ If you have time to read only one of the books I have mentioned, let that be the one.

The point of this survey is to remind ourselves that if we are to interact with the culture in which God has placed us, we must try hard to understand it, and be discerning. The challenge is captured in the well-known and strangely prescient lines of T. S. Eliot, drawn from the opening stanza of his *Choruses from the Rock*, now a century old:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Three Concluding Reflections

First, although the focus of this address has been on education, and especially how education surfaces in the theology of holy Scripture, we must never fall into the trap of thinking that provided we educate people aright, all will be well. I have said too little, except implicitly, about the moral dimensions of education, or teased out the profound assumptions embedded in the words, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10) and “of knowledge” (Prov 1:7), nor have I considered the work of the Spirit and of regeneration, and the place of the life of the church in any truly Christian education.

Second, a responsible strategy of education must be shaped by the place where God has placed us. I recently read a book by John and Bonnie

¹³ P.7 of the Kindle edition.

¹⁴ Wheaton: Crossway, 2020.

Nystrom with the title *Sleeping Coconuts*,¹⁵ relating their work of overseeing the translation of the Bible into Arop and nine other languages in Papua New Guinea. Part of their task of education entails the formation of tribal translators, teaching people what an alphabet is, teaching people how to read. All of that is Christian education, even though it is very different from the courses taught by a Christian university. Closer to home, in the US when heavy-handed opposition tries to shut down Christian groups on campus, students appeal to freedom of religion and to constitutional rights. They cast their meetings as worship, which is constitutionally protected. That argument won't fly in France, where students, to preserve a hearing, insist that their meetings are *not* religious, but academic, educational: the French Revolution had a different shape to the American Revolution. My point is that the Bible does not provide a detailed protocol for how education should properly and appropriately engage each culture, whether in PNG, France, the US, or anywhere else. That is why in trying to outline the fundamentals of a biblical theology of education, and applying them to the Western cultures I know best, I have avoided universalizing the practical outworkings. While we debate whether (for instance) it is wiser to stay in the public schools and exercise influence there, or to withdraw and build independent Christian schools, the shape of this debate is very different in, say, Hungary, or China, or Bahrain, or first-century Athens. A faithful biblical theology of education will provide us with the framework for thinking through such questions, but will not give us formulaic universals.

Third, in one of his recent books,¹⁶ Tim Keller outlines what the Bible teaches Christians to observe and practice in the way they treat others. Christians must: (1) be multi-racial and multi-ethnic; (2) care for the poor and marginalized; (3) choose to forgive and not retaliate; (4) stand strongly against abortion and infanticide; (5) insist on and practice what is today considered a revolutionary sexual ethic. At the risk of generalization, political liberals typically support ##1 and 2, political conservatives typically support ##4 and 5, and neither practices #3. That means the thoughtful Christian cannot totally align with political parties other than the kingdom of God. That does not mean there is no place for working with some such entities, as Daniel worked for the government of Babylon.

¹⁵ Wycliffe Bible Translators USA, 2012.

¹⁶ *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020). The material to which I refer is found on pp.26-29 (pdf 27-31). I am grateful to my pastor, Steve Mathewson, for tracking down this reference.

Similarly in the field of education: doubtless there is a place for working with others, but we are called to do so in such a posture of faithfulness that we risk being cast into a den of lions.