

An Examination Of Self Expression

by Miss Beverly Hoekstra

May we or must we have, encourage, or promote self-expression in our schools? To answer this weighty question, it is best to examine the educational concept that is referred to as self-expression. What is it? Does the self express? How does it express? Does it express in an acceptable way? Does it pass the test of Scripture?

The educational concept of self-expression has been a subject of consideration, debate, and even contention by world educators in various degrees for about as long as organized learning has existed. In an attempt to examine and somewhat explain the educational concept that is called self-expression, a comparison will be presented of mainly two select fairly common views or practices found in our society today.

In one modern extreme, educators with state and community approval have established schools which have no walls or partitions to separate age or ability levels and no active teaching instructors to promote the study of the attending subjects. Many and varied materials are made available to all students with equal opportunity to use them. Professional coordinating guides replace active teaching instructors. A so-called stimulating atmospheric situation is established which is supposed to influence or "turn on" a child into an intuitive desire to learn. The child, then, perhaps with some requested professional guidance will select and gather materials for study or for mastery according to his wishes. This method is seriously recommended by some to be the ideal method to produce or mold a well rounded creative individual with an extensive broad imagination who is very free to express himself. When this is attained, they think, the goal of the self-expression school is met.

How many of these pupils will feel the innate urge or necessity to master addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division facts? How many would feel the necessity to attempt to acquire or master a workable quantity of mechanics of the American language? Perhaps too few. How many of them would feel the innate urge to use a little, or maybe much, time to exercise their extensive imaginations freely pulling books or pencils apart? How many of them would feel the innate urge to make new and improved paper gliders or even airplanes for momentary purposes? Many of them.

Most modern schools, however, have not gone to the above extreme, but have accepted some modified form of self-expression methods. And the result? Lower educational standards, social chaos, and a cry for some constructiveness by conservatives who desire maintenance of literacy and order. Some have acted by establishing private schools. The aim of these newly established schools, then, is to restore a measure of so-called traditional constructiveness. In these schools one may be reasonably sure that the student body will learn to read and to know mathematics and language facts. The amount of free-thinking time will be greatly reduced. The child will have a little problem finding it. The number of paper gliders will be few. Time is officially devoted to constructive learning activities. Therefore, it has to be the social violator that disrupts the standard. Opportunities for self expression, idea and imagination growth, will be provided, but they will be constructively provided, so that learning will still take place. There will be limits and social law and order attempted and probably established. The goal to restore or maintain social literacy and order may be attained.

From the point of view of self-expression, one of the main differences in the two above schools is that the former attempts to establish ultimate self-expression by means of a stimulating atmospheric situation; the latter attempts to establish some moderated or relative constructive self-expression by means of established constructive learning activities. In the former situation a child might be given a blank piece of paper or maybe nothing at all and be expected to express. He might or might not know reading and writing; he may or may not know mathematical facts; so one could go down the curriculum list. But somehow the stimulating atmospheric situation together with whatever he was moved to do or learn was supposed to adequately give the background the child needed to express himself in some way. In

the private school, a child might also be given a blank piece of paper, and to be sure, it will be paper, not nothing, but real paper and be expected to express. In the latter case there might also be a previous real-subject discussion that really says something instructional to guide and to limit the child in his attempt to produce an expression.

The results of the expressions or productions, whatever they might be, would likely be quite different. In the average result, the ordered constructiveness of the child's background would produce the superior result. However, there was one constant. They were both asked to express themselves. This was a self-expression assignment. Each had to express within his own previous established limits, but nevertheless, himself. Each had to use his imagination.

Within the self exists an imagination. The imagination is the act or power to perceive mental images or ideas, sometimes of that which really does not exist, or an expansion or extension of a previous learning. It is the thinking or reasoning power of the self. In a sense one forms images or ideas with his imagination. Apart from this imagination, there is and can be no expression. What about this imagination? What does God say about this imagination of man? "...God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). If then, the imagination, the power or control of the self, is "...only evil continually..." (*ibid*), what can be said of the self? The self can only be evil, undone, corrupt, possessing no good thing or idea, and capable of producing no good expression. Ideas are expressed. The self expresses ideas. A thing produces or brings forth according to what it is. A "...corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit" (Matthew 7:17). A corrupt self will bring forth or produce or express evil expressions.

The children in the two schools had one constant. Each was required to express himself. Each had the license to speak, write, draw, or exercise according to his own evil, undone, corrupt self, or as in the former case, possibly the option to refrain from a productive expression altogether—ultimate moral-physical freedom, we observed, an abandoning of the limits. Nevertheless, they both were the slaves of their evil imaginations. The results or expressions could only be the products of themselves as they were held in bondage by their own evil imaginations.

The self expresses only on the basis of the nature of the imagination within. The imagination is "...only evil continually"

(Genesis 6:5). The self produces evil expressions. Self-expressions do not pass the test of Scripture. They are egotistic and man glorifying. They are a shame, abominable, before The Eyes of The Holy Author of Holy Writ, the standard for teaching and study in our school. So are even the expressions of little ones. For He caused Moses' hand to write, "...the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth..." (Genesis 8:21). Therefore, we cannot have self-expression in our schools. On the other hand, self-expression would be impossible for us anyway because we do not own and ultimately control ourselves, but we belong body and soul to Christ, Who bought us. Therefore, the nature of our imaginations is not our own either but owned by Christ. It is part of our body and soul. We are not held in bondage by our own evil imaginations. Christ has the ultimate control of that which He bought, including our imaginations. His beauty and perfection in Holiness would not permit Him to keep us as we are. But one thing will remain the same, we still will express on the basis of the nature of the imagination within.

Christ knew the peril of our hopeless helpless state. Yet He would not leave us to ourselves, but lovingly bought us body and soul, imagination and all, with the price of His cleansing blood. He could not have us as we were. He always had and had to have us spotless. He also renewed us by changing our innate abominably vile hateful selves into that which loves. Even then He did not leave us to ourselves, but sent His Spirit, His Comforter, to dwell in us, and continues to renew us day by day. Being cleansed and renewed and gifted with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our bodies and minds are no longer held in bondage, so that, they are bad temples or homes, more importantly producers of real self-expression, but are transformed by God Himself into fit temples of the Holy Ghost. We, then, cannot any longer express the natural innate self of sin, though in the body we still, especially in our weaker moments, reveal our innate nature, but we are made capable and must exercise that capability by making expressions of the wonderful works of God of and in creation, His handiwork and workings therein, and salvation, the wonderful work that He has done in and through us. We are loosed from the bondage of our own evil imaginations and possess a new freedom, not a slavish freedom possessing the option to refrain, but one that cannot refrain, a superior freedom that by duty has to express, to produce, to speak, to write, to draw, to see even the miracle of the unseen. The new freedom

principle, then, becomes: I believe, I see; therefore, can I, must I, and do I express. I have believed. I have seen. I know salvation, in part. I know creation, in part. Therefore, the renewed I is free. I can, I must, and I will so express. Cleansed, renewed, and gifted with the Holy Spirit, we express only on the basis of the nature of the imagination within.

In conclusion, our children with us are inherently filled with sin and by themselves can only produce that which is by nature unloving and corrupt. But our children with us are also born again and sanctified in Him so that they too look to God and do love and can speak of God's marvelous work of salvation and are also able to see and to know the hand of God in creation. They with us are "...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; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled" (II Corinthians 10:5, 6). Therefore, they must be encouraged to express the beautiful, the wonderful, the loving, by the Spirit of Christ Who lives in them. It is no longer they, the selves, that express, but the Spirit of Christ that dwells in them.

Instructors must then place many and varied constructive instructional opportunities before the child to give him ample opportunity to express his Spirit-filled heart. This is not done by writing or copying material one's self and leaving a few or maybe many blanks to be filled by the student. Nor is this done by writing one's self and allowing the student to respond with yes, no, true, or false, or even to choose one or two other words, phrases, or sentences. These may have some limited value or benefit on a rare occasion but do not allow a student to express his ideas. A person nurtured on filling blanks with yes, no, true, false, and other words, often thinks he is reaching or has reached some limit in learning and development, that his capacity is approaching a brim, while in reality, he feels no freedom or confidence of skill to express his spirit-filled heart and soul because of lack of opportunity to do so.

It is seldom, if ever, constructive or advisable to place before a child a blank piece of paper or maybe place nothing at all before him and say, "Go to it," unless he has asked for this for sound reasons. But usually a previous subject or idea discussion and appropriate materials must be provided to help open and enlighten his mind amply so he will be eager to express himself freely and artistically in drawing or writing the message of the

Holy Spirit in his heart. The child's experience will then be, "Thus saith the Spirit to me. He is mine, and I am His. This is in my heart." Thus he pours out his soul.

One wonderful opportunity to provide the child with the privilege is to give him a writing exercise or a test with many open ends or options. This material will have been discussed and worked out. He will know many relevant truths to record, but he may at times reveal that he has many important ideas to express about it too, maybe on the basis of something connected with it, maybe a spiritual implication, or maybe he recalls a similar situation and wants to present a parallel. He may feel quite inadequately prepared to expand or even to record on one point but bubbling over on another. This bubbling over gives him a feeling of much satisfaction after he found he was able to pour out his soul. This satisfaction is encouraging to him. It makes him happy and gives him the urge to look for the opportunity to do it again and compare himself with the last attempt. Still later he will remember that a month or two months ago he was short of what he can do now. Self encouragement is a real asset to the learning and developing mind. This open expression approach for tests also helps to make them viewed from a rather desirable aspect of learning, instead of a necessary evil to be tacked onto a completed unit of learning.

Many other approaches can be used as well. Reports can be very useful. Art and craft projects are very valuable. Color books are not art and, therefore, of little value. Free drawing is of much value. When little, free drawing aids in developing awareness of the simple, such as hands, fingers, ears, hair, feet, and toes. When older and even old, free drawing still aids in developing or maybe in restoring awareness. Older people are selective in observing things for themselves often for a pinpointed straight-jacketed purpose. The kitten in the flowers, the wild tree beginning to grow in the ditch beside the drive, the little boy who made the path in the weeds to go up the hill to get the violets, all bring us back to complete reality. Due to the limited time and the nature of labor that must be accomplished in the formal academic session, free drawing is a wonderful area for a relaxed hour of self-learning and exploring at home. Attempts at saying or writing rhymes, poetry, stories, and music, to mention a few, are also very useful. A child who does these things in his spare time at home will be at an advantage when the demands of the academic assignment are upon him.

Open-ended art exercises, whether they be in speaking,

writing, drawing, or some other media, not only provide a wonderful opportunity for expression, but also encourage thinking that is far more interesting and more valuable than to attempt to figure out just what the writer of the text or the instructor had in mind when he recorded a certain item. After a few or maybe many attempts, the child realizes his faulty organization and methods and challenges himself to better ones next time. Perhaps after some trial and error, and perhaps after some additional study in spelling and English and science and art, he becomes able to uncover for himself improved and acceptable methods of expressing himself. Further, it is not unusual that he uncovers new ideas for himself, and maybe for others. Occasionally, he may even find and establish new truths.

The result will be abundant mental and spiritual growth in the little ones through many expressions proceeding from renewed young hearts overflowing with thanksgiving and praise to and of their Maker and Savior for all His marvelous works. They will feel happy and free to speak and to write of salvation, and to speak and to write and to draw and to work and to play and to construct thankfully in and of creation. Their imaginations and abilities are loosed from evil bondage and free in Christ. Thanks be to God that they can express on the basis of the nature of their renewed imaginations within.

How marvellous are the works of God! His ways past finding out! May our instruction and learning abide in Him Who provides us with all things needful for body and soul and Who adds to us the things we may not ask, mention, or think before His throne. To Him be all thanksgiving and honor and blessing and glory forever!

"Bright as is the manifestation which God gives both of Himself and His immortal kingdom in the mirror of His works, so great is our stupidity, so dull are we in regard to these bright manifestations, that we derive no benefit from them. For in regard to the fabric and admirable arrangement of the universe, how few of us are there who, in lifting up our eyes to the heavens or looking abroad on the various regions of the earth, ever think of the Creator? Do we not rather overlook Him, and sluggishly content ourselves with a view of His works?"

John Calvin

Institutes of the Christian Religion

Book I, Chapter V, Section 11.