

The Christian Story and the Christian School (2): A Defense of the Narrative Approach in Reformed Christian Education

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In the first article on this topic we made a start in attempting to understand the narrative approach to Reformed Christian education proposed by Dr. Bolt.

We identified the narrative approach as one in which the Christian school, through its teachers, must tell a story. The story is about God and His children—a story that includes the Christian school because the school serves the mission of God and His people. It is the story of the triune God's mission—commissioned by the Father, accomplished by Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and still in process until the end comes when God is "all in all."

The review and discussion of the specifics of the narrative approach in Reformed Christian

education will be postponed till later articles. Dr. John Bolt, in the book *The Christian School and the Christian Story* (Christian Schools International, 1993), begins by exploring some critical questions respecting contemporary education and some critical questions about our culture. He then turns to the rediscovery of narrative and to a specific treatment of the Christian story and the Christian school. We continue in this installment a review of the discussion of some of the critical questions affecting contemporary education.

Symptoms and Solutions

Dr. Bolt continues his review of critical issues by identifying school choice as one of the largest of the proposed reforms in the 1990s. Those of us who have watched the educational scene have observed that this was truly one of the greatest changes in educational programs.

School choice has become such a significant movement because the major ailments of public education are the stagnation and the unresponsiveness of the system. This is true because public education is a self-protecting monopoly dedicated to its own self-perpetuation. Political control and a corrupt and self-serving bureaucracy have caused the public schools in many ways to fail to meet the present needs.

One of the important current issues concerns the very idea of public education. The public school system, controlled and financed by the government, is now being called into question. Bolt cites *Politics, Markets, and the American Schools* (the Brookings Institution, 1990), in which authors John Chubb and Terry Moe argue that the political institutions that govern America's schools "burden the schools with excessive bureaucracy, inhibit effective organization, and stifle student achievement." Promised discussions leading to educational reform have not occurred because these discussions were blocked by teachers' unions, associations of principals, school boards, superintendents, education schools, book publishers, testing services, and many others interested in the continuance of the institutional status quo.

The authors Chubb and Moe assert that the problems in public education are institutional. They propose a new system that relies on markets and choice and not on the current system in which schools are governed by a self-serving political bureaucracy.

Time magazine, "Tough Choice" (September 16, 1991), reported President George Bush to have said, "It's time parents were free to choose the schools that their children attend. This approach will create the competitive climate that stimulates excellence."

Bolt identifies a wide variety of specific proposals during the 1990s that can be included under the umbrella of school choice. They are the following:

1. Permitting parents to opt out of sending children to neighborhood public schools, so the children can attend other schools in their district or outside their district. Parents would be given the opportunity to walk away from bad schools, and this would provide incentive for these schools to upgrade or go out of business.

2. Creation of voucher plans that would enable parents to pay for tuition in private or parochial schools. Plans like this are under way or have been attempted in cities like Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland, Ohio.

3. Commission charter schools to operate as for-profit business enterprises and/or extensions of public universities.

The debate between the proponents and the opponents of school choice in the 1990s will continue for some time. Those who are proponents see school choice as a way to empower the poor and disadvantaged. Those who oppose school choice are concerned about improper funding for church-related schools. Others predict that parental choice will further segregate children along social and class lines.

Bolt asks the question how this issue affects Christian education. He notes that at first glance the drive toward genuine school choice is a step in the right direction as far as many supporters of Christian education are concerned. It is one that proponents of Christian education would applaud for the following reasons:

1. School choice makes it possible for parents to choose schools (perhaps Christian schools) that are consistent with the Christian commitment and belief of the parents.

2. School choice is in keeping with one of the fundamentals of belief that education is a parental responsibility and not the responsibility of the state.

Bolt asserts, however, that there are aspects of the present debate that should be disquieting for Christians. He writes as follows:

Is the model of a marketplace where schools compete for support and clients are free to go where they want really an appropriate model for education? Should the schools be run as a for-profit business? And is the school's primary task one of equipping today's students with marketable skills for the demands of a high-tech, intensely competitive global economy? Should the needs of the changing world economy dictate the goals of contemporary education? (Bolt, pp. 28-29).

After quoting at length from the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled "A Nation at Risk," Bolt argues that America's loss of economic and technological advantage became the real point of concern about education in general and about educational excellence in particular.

Citing the erosion of entrepreneurial creativity, Bolt argues that it is appropriate to consider proposals for excellence that include an emphasis on a core curriculum that concentrates on English, history, mathematics, and science. The emphasis should be on raising academic standards and shifting from process to content and outcome.

In his pursuit of an answer to the question whether the marketability of skills is the most important goal of the school, Dr. Bolt quotes approvingly from an article by Arnold DeGraaf. DeGraaf writes as follows in "Return to Basics: Temptation and Challenge," *Christian Educators Journal*, 17, No. 4, March/April, 1978.

In the face of social upheaval and massive criticism, public education has responded with a

reaffirmation of its trust in science, technology, and efficiency. Young people are indoctrinated in the belief that the good life consists of the production and consumption of more and more material goods, and that the road to greater economic progress is charted by science and technology in the service of business and industry (Bolt, p. 31).

Bolt also quotes from John VanDyk in *The Beginning of Wisdom: The Nature and Task of the Christian School*, Christian Schools International, 1985.

Wisdom is not merely collecting and amassing theoretical or factual knowledge; nor is it simply gaining technical skills. Wisdom is knowledge and understanding deepened into spiritual insight and expressed in loving service.

James 1:13 ^[1]

Wisdom originates in the fear of the Lord and is enhanced by faith, hope, love, knowledge, spiritual insight, and active discipleship....

Thus a Christian school is a place where Christian educators refuse to be satisfied with providing only factual knowledge and marketable skills. Rather, teachers in a Christian school seek to transform all activities and studies into an expression of biblical wisdom, training the students to walk as disciples of Jesus Christ (Bolt, p. 31).

Bolt correctly concludes that the current emphasis on excellence and the marketplace falls short of the Christian expectation for educational reform. Bolt asserts that

the working assumption of much current thinking on education seems to be something like this: When market pressures make our schools competitive and efficient, standards will improve, SAT scores will rebound, our graduates will be literate and employable, American supremacy in the international economic order will return, and life—particularly the pursuit of happiness, wealth and success—can go on as usual. What's really wrong with the system is that it isn't working at peak levels of maximum efficiency (Bolt, pp. 31, 32).

Bolt ends by saying that there is little acknowledgment in this diagnosis that beyond the declared crisis of efficiency and excellence is perhaps the real crisis—the crisis of the soul. He asserts that Christians must realize that we need to dig deeper for the cause of the crisis, to matters of the heart.

What's Really Wrong with Public Education?

In a concluding discussion of the critical questions about contemporary education, Bolt borrows the title of the book by Ronald Nash, *The Closing of the American Heart: What's Really Wrong with America's Schools*, Probe Books, Word Publishing, 1990.

Bolt begins this section by noting that, although work is a very important aspect of our true humanity, our humanity is not exhausted by the mere fact that we are workers. Christians must aspire to a life of service in our community with our neighbors and in fellowship with God.

In the area of public education we encounter a knotty problem of sharply conflicting opinions

concerning the community values that should be inculcated into students, as well as the radically opposing strategies by which such goals can be met. Bolt compares two major, diametrically opposite approaches to the question of preparation for community service. He sees these approaches as being correctly summarized under the umbrella terms of "critical literacy" and "cultural literacy."

Those committed to critical literacy believe the socializing of the children for life in the community means that children should become able to be social critics and to implement social transformation. According to those committed to critical literacy, all educated citizens must possess the skills of protest and revolt. Advocates of critical literacy view the present order of things as beset by unjust structures such as sexism, racism, class exploitation, and militarism. They assert that society needs radical transformation and structural change. Public schools in the past have prevented this from happening. Now schools must equip students to become agents of social change.

To illustrate the point that he makes concerning the impact of critical literacy on curricular change, Bolt cites attempts at peace education that proliferated in the 1980s. Units of instruction were developed to evoke terror of a nuclear holocaust. The purpose of the unit was to create feelings of guilt in students by pointing out repeatedly that the U.S. invented and dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that could have destroyed the world. Critical literacy advocates claim that the U.S. continues to spend money on bombs that can destroy the world rather than helping economically disadvantaged people.

Those contending for cultural literacy claim that, even though perfect social and political institutions do not exist in the U.S., the country is a force for good and its institutions protect a relatively free and open society. Cultural literacy proponents espouse the concept of preserving and transmitting an appreciation for our institutions. They claim there is an American mainstream culture. If children and adults are to thrive, they need to become literate in that culture. E.D. Hirsch insists that cultural literacy is neither reactionary nor closed. He observes that "conservatives who wish to preserve traditional values will find that these are necessarily inculcated by traditional education which can in fact be subversive of the status quo."

Bolt states that an emphasis on cultural literacy is another way of saying that the task of the school is to prepare students for citizenship in a specific community. Teachers are custodians of our civilization, and students are its heirs. The school is a specialized community where the larger community, the nation, preserves and passes on its cultural memory.

Neil Postman writes in *Teaching As a Conserving Activity*, pp. 26-27, as follows:

Our own culture is overdosing on change.... The plain fact is that too much change, too fast, for too long has the effect of making social institutions useless and individuals perpetually unfit to live amid the conditions of their own culture.... Without at least a reminiscence of continuity and tradition, without a place to stand from which to observe change, without a counter argument to the overwhelming theories of change, we can easily be swept away... In a

culture of high volatility and casual regard for its past such responsibility becomes the school's most essential service. The school stands as the only mass medium capable of putting forward the case for what is not happening in the culture (Bolt, p. 38).

Bolt concludes his comments on what's really wrong in public education by noting that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the advocates of critical literacy and cultural literacy. There is no agreement about the past, the present, and the future. Therefore, a commitment to make public schools vehicles for inculcating community values inevitably leads to a cultural war between the two visions. Bolt maintains that what is really wrong with public education is that it has lost its soul and there is no agreement concerning the public philosophy that ought to guide the public schools.

It has lost its soul. There is no longer a consensual and coherent public philosophy to guide it. As a consequence education has become one of the most highly politicized institutions in North American life. In an increasingly politicized climate the prospects for improvement of education seem dim (Bolt, p. 30).

(To be continued)

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