

# WHAT IS CHRISTIAN EDUCATION?

By J. G. Vos

“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 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.

By Christian education is meant education of which the basis and unifying principle is the historic Christian view of God, man and the universe in their mutual relations. This historic Christian philosophy finds its most comprehensive and consistent expression in Calvinism, or the Reformed Faith; therefore the most comprehensive and consistent Christian education must be based on, and unified by, the Reformed or Calvinistic view of God, man and the universe and their mutual relations.

## Why is Christian Education Needed?

Why must there be not merely education, but definitely Christian education? It is not primar-

ily a matter of training up young people for Christian service as ministers and missionaries, or for other specialized vocations in what is called "full time Christian service." That is the task, rather, of Bible institutes and theological seminaries, not of ordinary Christian schools and colleges.

First of all, there must be Christian education for God's sake. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God. . . with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37). This command implies that God must be recognized, honored and served in every field in which the human intellect operates. Above and prior to all considerations of human and social needs, there stands the primary obligation for man to love the Lord God with all his mind. This cannot be done through an education which regards God as irrelevant; it requires a frank and explicit recognition of the God of the Bible as the first premise of education. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7).

In the second place, Christian education is required to give expression, in the educational field, to the radical difference which exists between the two classes of human beings in this world, namely, the regenerate and the unregenerate. The sin of the human race has had an adverse effect not only on man's spiritual and moral nature, but also on his intellect, his mind. The apostle Paul by inspiration of the Holy Spirit tells us what sin has done to the intellect of man. He states that although men knew God, "they

glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. . . ." (Rom. 1:21, 22). Sin, then, has darkened man's mind and has made man foolish, however much he may profess to be wise. Only by the miracle of regeneration or the new birth can this damage to man's intellect be removed.

The Holy Spirit's work in regeneration has an effect not only on man's spiritual and moral nature, but also on his intellect; it opens the eyes of his understanding (Eph. 1:18). He begins to see facts in the light of God (Psalm 36: 9); that is, he begins to see the true meaning of facts. The unregenerate person, on the other hand, continues to maintain that facts can be understood and explained in the light of man; he recognizes no higher category than the human mind, and he will never admit that his mind has been darkened by sin.

This radical divergence or cleavage in the human race results in two radically different, irreconcilable philosophies of life. These two philosophies of life may be broadly termed the secular and the Christian philosophies of life. The former is man-centered and holds that man as he exists today is normal; the latter is God-centered and holds that man as he exists today is abnormal (his life having been blighted by sin). These two philosophies of life are as far apart as east is from west. Between them there is an un-

bridgeable chasm. There can be no compromise or harmony between them, for in the one God is regarded as irrelevant, while in the other God is regarded as all-important.

These two radically different philosophies of life, in turn, must inevitably find expression in two radically different types of education. Unregenerate humanity expresses its own inner principle in secular education; regenerate or Christian humanity must express its own inner principle in Christian education.

The unregenerate person always takes for granted that the God of the Bible does not exist. He may have some idea of a reduced, limited, finite God; but he takes for granted that the God of the Bible and of historic Christianity is not real. He also assumes that man and the universe are self-explanatory — that they can be understood without reference to the God of the Bible. The Christian, on the other hand, must always take for granted that the God of the Bible does exist, and that He is absolutely meaningful for every fact in the universe.

The secular and Christian philosophies of life cannot be harmonized; both in their starting points and in their conclusions, they are irreconcilable. The one starts with man and the universe, and ends with man and the universe misunderstood; the other starts with the God of the Bible, and attains a genuine insight into the true meaning of reality. There is no area of life in which the difference between the regenerate and

the unregenerate does not count. The three great doctrines of God, Creation and Providence must be accepted as the major premise of all study by the regenerate; these doctrines are rejected or regarded as irrelevant by the unregenerate.

There can be no real neutrality as to these three doctrines. The unregenerate person walks around in a dream world. He thinks that facts exist of themselves, and can be adequately explained by human reason alone, without reference to the God of the Bible. The Christian, on the other hand, knows that facts do not exist of themselves, and that they cannot be adequately explained on the basis of human reason alone. The Christian does not believe in what has been called the "just-thereness" of facts. They are created facts, not self-existent facts; therefore they can be really understood only by assuming the doctrines of God, Creation and Providence. God is the reason why facts exist; Creation is the source whence facts exist; Providence is the manner how facts exist.

The unregenerate person also assumes that the human mind is an uncreated mind which exists of itself and is competent to be the absolute and final interpreter of facts. The regenerate person, on the other hand, realizes that the human mind does not exist of itself; it is a created mind and is not competent to be the absolute and final interpreter of facts. The regenerate person recognizes that he is dependent on divine revela-

tion for the ultimate interpretation of the meaning of facts.

Education, then, must be either on a secular, non-Christian basis, or on a Christian, God-centered basis. To obscure this distinction amounts virtually to abandoning the field to the non-Christian philosophy of life. For the non-Christian philosophy of life is uncritically held — even automatically and unconsciously held — by the great majority of the human race.

The Christian philosophy of life, on the other hand, requires a revolution in a person's thinking — a revolution resulting from the miracle of the new birth. This comes only by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the deep personality of a human being. The tragedy is that even many who no doubt are born-again Christians fail to see the implications of Christianity for life as a whole, and continue to look at man and the universe (including the field of education) from the point of view of the secular or non-Christian philosophy of life. Many Christians, it would seem, have had their souls saved, but their minds remain tangled in the non-Christian view of life.

### Mistaken Views of Christian Education

1. **Christian education does not mean education limited to the field of religion.** The idea that Christian education means education limited to the field of religion is held by many people, but it is too narrow an idea of Christian education. Such people seem to think that God is connected

only with the salvation of people's souls, and has nothing to do with the world and life as a whole.

We must not limit Christian education to religion. For if we do that we will fail to glorify God in all of life and knowledge. There must be a Christian view of history and economics and politics and physics, as well as a Christian view of salvation and the religious life. God is God everywhere, or He is God nowhere.

2. **Nor does Christian education mean secular education with some religious features externally added.** This is a very common misconception of Christian education, even among earnest Christian people. The common idea of a Christian college, for example, is that a Christian college is just like any other college so far as the study of mathematics, chemistry or English literature is concerned, but that in addition to the regular curriculum the Christian college will have courses in Bible study, daily chapel services, seasons of evangelism, a religious emphasis week, prayer groups, Christian service organizations, and so forth.

These specifically religious features are certainly of great value and importance, but they do not of themselves make an educational institution truly Christian, any more than merely attending church and carrying a pocket Testament makes a man a Christian. By Christian education we do not mean secular education with Christian features added on externally; Christian education means education that is Christian in its es-

sence or inner character all along the line, not only in the chapel and Bible classroom, but in every classroom and every laboratory, as well as in the life and thinking of every teacher.

## The Essence of Christian Education

In order to show how radically Christian education differs from that education which proceeds from the non-Christian philosophy of life, let us consider the essence of Christian education with respect to its source, its standard and its purpose.

1. **The Source of Christian Education.** The source of Christian education is not society as such, but Christian people, people to whom God means everything. Society being predominantly unregenerate and having a non-Christian philosophy of life, cannot produce truly Christian education. A stream cannot rise any higher than its source. Education which originates from the impulse of society, or the public in general, will not consent to take the God of the Bible seriously. It will not agree to the assumptions of God, Creation and Providence on which genuine Christian education must be based. For "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14).

Nor will education which originates from society as such assent to the truth of the damage done by sin to the human intellect, and the re-

sultant need for regeneration, the recognition of which is absolutely basic to any truly Christian view of education. We must conclude, therefore, that the source of Christian education must be Christian people — the regenerate portion of society, who have received the new life-principle of regeneration by the special work of the Holy Spirit in their personality.

2. **The Standard of Christian Education.** A standard is a recognized authority by which something is measured, regulated or directed. The non-Christian philosophy of life finds this standard in society. It speaks of the needs of society, social pressure, social demand, and the like, as the standard by which the character and content of education shall be determined.

The true standard, on the other hand, is the Bible as the revelation of the mind and the will of God. This is the standard recognized by the Christian philosophy of life. To affirm that the true standard of education is the Bible as the revelation of the mind and will of God, does not, of course, mean that the Bible is to be regarded as a textbook on chemistry, mathematics or psychology. But it does mean that the relevant principles of the Bible are normative for every field of study. The Bible has a relationship to every field of life and knowledge, just because God is the real source of all life and knowledge.

The facts of science must never be treated as existing of themselves "in the nature of things;" they must always be regarded as created facts,

existing only by the creation and providence of the God of the Bible. The laws of nature must never be regarded as existing of themselves "in the nature of things;" they must always be regarded as created laws, existing by the creation of God and functioning by the providence of God. The human mind must never be regarded as competent to be the absolute and ultimate interpreter of facts; it must always be recognized that in the end it is God who determines what facts mean and how they are related to each other.

God must be the major premise of every textbook. God must be the great assumption in every classroom. God must be the Person whose handiwork is investigated in every laboratory. This means, of course, not some vague or distorted idea of God, but the living and true God, the God of the Bible. "In the beginning God" must be the watchword of all truly Christian education. In textbook, classroom and laboratory the student will learn to think God's thoughts after Him. Unlike the student in a non-Christian institution, he will learn that human thought is never really creative in the strict sense, but always derived from the prior thought of God — that human "creative" thought is really the unfolding, in man's intellect, of God's eternal decree by which He has, from all eternity, foreordained all that comes to pass in time. What is new to the mind of man is as old as eternity to the mind of God.

This function of the Bible as the standard for truly Christian education further implies two

things: (1) Education is more than mere training; it is essentially a matter of enabling the student to attain a grasp of the real meaning of everything — the real meaning of God, man and the universe. (2) Truly Christian education will not be a miscellaneous assortment or hodgepodge of diverse principles and viewpoints, as non-Christian education usually is, but will have a single unifying principle, namely, that the God of the Bible is the sovereign, active Lord over all reality.

To this unifying principle, everything will be related. Around this principle, everything will be arranged. The result of this unifying principle will be that the students will not merely acquire a mass of miscellaneous information and insights into various detailed fields, but will gain a consistent, unified view of God, man and the universe, a true and valid philosophy of life — a real insight into what everything is really about.

Secular education is continually groping around for such a unifying principle, but is never able to attain one; truly Christian education has the only really valid unifying principle; while its students may sometimes not acquire as much detailed information as those receiving secular education, at least they will know what it is all about. They will come to realize that it is only in the light of God that man can really see light (Psalm 36:9); that it is only when related to the God of the Bible that anything really means anything. As a well-known Christian philoso-

pher has said, "He who has physics without God will finally have religion without God." If God is not God in the laboratory, then He is not really God in the Church, nor anywhere.

**3. The Purpose of Christian Education.** The purpose of Christian education is the glory of God, and the true welfare of man in subordination to the glory of God. Thus its purpose transcends human society; it is something above and beyond the human race. Only when the glory of God is made the great aim can the true welfare and happiness of man be attained. Where merely human aims such as "social welfare" or "the development of the resources of personality" are substituted for the glory of God, human benefit and happiness will prove illusory.

This transcendent purpose of glorifying God means that the utilitarian demands of society for training in skills by which to earn a living will never be allowed to monopolize the character and content of the curriculum of a truly Christian college or university. The emphasis will always be on giving the student a valid, God-centered view of life as a whole. Courses of a utilitarian character may properly be included, of course. But a truly Christian college or university will not allow courses on such subjects as salesmanship, bookkeeping and radio broadcasting to crowd out history, philosophy, literature, pure science and religion. In other words, the main emphasis will always be on education rather than on training; the attainment of a unified

view of life will be given priority over the acquisition of practical skills.

The purpose of Christian education thus consists in the mandate to glorify God in every sphere of life; every thought is to be brought into captivity to Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). This means consciously and intentionally to glorify God in every sphere of life, not merely to glorify God unconsciously and involuntarily as a bird or a blade of grass glorifies God. We are to aim at glorifying God in education, as in all other matters. This means that the God of the Bible must be frankly and explicitly recognized as the major premise and end of every educational function.

### **The Religious Features of Christian Education**

Religious features such as Bible study and chapel exercises do not of themselves make education truly Christian. However they are essential to truly Christian education and they are of very great importance.

### **Religious Features Must be Integrated**

In truly Christian education the religious features will be related to the rest of the curriculum and life of the institution not in an external but in an organic way. That is, they will not be merely something extra tacked on, but will be the crowning expression of the entire curriculum and life of the institution. In the history classroom and the chemical laboratory the student will learn to think God's thoughts after Him

— those thoughts of God which have constituted history and chemistry what they are. In the Bible classroom the student will learn to think the same God's thoughts after Him, as those thoughts are revealed in His Word, the Bible. Here he will learn the relevancy of God's Truth for his own personal life, as well as for the human race and the world of nature. In the chapel services the student will worship the same God whose thoughts have been unfolded to him in the classroom and the laboratory.

### Religious Features Must be Orthodox

The religious features of truly Christian education must always be orthodox. That is, they must be in harmony with the truth of God. In many traditionally Christian colleges today the teaching of the Bible has moved so far from orthodoxy that it is actually worse than useless; it is downright harmful, and would better be omitted altogether. Better not teach young people the Bible at all, than to teach them that the Bible is full of contradictions, forgeries and errors, a collection of ancient myths and legends, and so forth. Better leave the Bible out entirely than to teach it in the distorted form required by a non-Christian, evolutionary philosophy.

Orthodoxy, of course, implies a standard of orthodoxy. This is properly the standard held as valid by the denomination or group that controls the institution. This does not necessarily imply that all faculty members must be members of a

particular denomination, but it does imply that the confessional standards of the denomination are to be regarded as normative in determining what is orthodox in religious teaching, worship and service in a Christian college or university.

### Faculty Must be Active Christians

It should be needless to observe that what has been said in this article should not be regarded as a body of abstract ideas. For education to be truly Christian, these ideas must be embodied in the living personalities of teachers and students. The teachers, especially, should be living examples of what real Christian education means. No stream rises higher than its source, and it is not to be expected that an educational institution will rise higher than the life and loyalty manifested by its faculty and administration. Every teacher and administrative officer of a Christian college or university should be, not merely a professing Christian or church member, but a spiritual, active Christian, a person to whom Christ is the object of faith and to whom the Triune God is all-important.

The writer once knew a medical missionary in Korea who had an immense influence. This doctor was the head of a hospital with a staff of doctors and nurses. Besides these there were other employees, including a Korean mechanic-chauffeur for the doctor's car and an old man who opened and closed the compound gate. The missionary doctor insisted that every person em-



ployed by the hospital, from the medical and nursing staff down to the chauffeur and gateman, must be a serious, active Christian, able to witness for Christ whenever opportunity might offer. The influence of this hospital was tremendous. Only eternity will tell the whole story. But what might not be accomplished by the Christian colleges of America and the world if their teaching and administrative staffs were composed entirely of people whose great aim in life is to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness? What might not be accomplished if every teacher, of whatever department or subject, were convinced that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge? And what establishment and stability in the faith might not be produced in the students if every teacher could be depended upon to give any student faithful, sympathetic counsel based upon the Christian view of life?

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