

THE CHURCH MUST NOT BE DERELICT IN TEACHING YOUTH

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Ancient Eastern History

In 605 BC there occurred in the Middle East one of the great heart-rending scenes of history. A long line of prisoners of war snaked its way northward from Jerusalem to Babylon. Brutally they were strung together with lines attached to fishhooks which pierced the flesh of each prisoner. The prisoners were also carrying what little of their earthly goods they could bear.

This was the result of one of Nebuchadnezzar's earliest conquests following his brilliant defeat of Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish earlier that same year. It was also the fulfilling of God's sovereign purpose announced by Isaiah to the nation of Judah one hundred years before its occurrence, which message had been reinforced by prophets throughout the century before this pitiable disaster fell upon the Jews. The nation had abandoned the only true God and had forgotten his faithful revelations to them.

Most of those who were subjected to this cheerless march to the north were of the ruling and wealthy class of Israel. Among the struggling procession were four young men (probably 12-15 years of age): Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. Even to the young this was no adventure but rather a torturous affliction. However, these four carried with them more than a change of clothes or other personal items. Within their breasts were the treasures of true wisdom, placed there by means of a childhood education.

The education of the four Hebrew children may be summarized by Proverbs 1:7: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge' or by Proverbs 9:10: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.' They had received a God-centred training, focused on Scripture. Throughout the years of Babylonian captivity these four men would effectively declare the God

of all the earth to a heathen empire. In the book of Daniel, chapter four, you may read the most astounding press release ever issued by the most dominant ruler of his time, giving praise to the God of Israel because of Daniel's influence as his advisor.

The hope of every rising generation is the education of its youth. Even a few who are trained to fear God and to depart from evil may be instruments through whom God brings blessings to generations over whom dark storm clouds have gathered. Why is it, then, that churches of the twentieth and twenty-first century have largely abandoned the work of educating the young?

Fields White unto Harvest

As 'Jesus went throughout the cities and villages . . . proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom', he noted the 'crowds' and had 'compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'. He commented, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few' (*Matt. 9:35-38*). Similarly, American cities have large numbers of children and youth with no one to teach them. Government schools spend \$20-30,000 per year to educate each student. Yet a high percentage of those who pass through government-provided schools fail even to become literate, much less to receive a basic education beyond learning to read. Their circumstances are not far different from the tragic hopelessness of city children during the Industrial Revolution.

To a large extent evangelical churches have fled the inner cities. A few immigrant communities which have been formed there do have those who preach the gospel. However, very few national churches have developed any organized efforts to visit the families of poor, neglected, inner-city families, nor has there been a strategy to undertake giving a Christian education to their young. This is a huge mission project in our own back yards. In earlier times, most notably during the Reformation and the Great Awakening eras, the education of youth was not so overlooked.

A Flight to Isolation

Historians have said that, when the Puritan era began, the Puritans had a heart's desire to bring a thorough reformation to their nation. As

they came into conflict with Crown and Parliament persecution drove a few to relocate to other lands with the desire to build a thoroughly biblical society elsewhere. Following the Commonwealth period many of those who remained in Britain changed their goal to that of securing for themselves the personal right to worship according to their consciences. Engagement with the national culture and government thus receded.

Likewise in the United States historic circumstances have presented hardships which have blunted earlier Christian ideals. Some groups began well. In the 19th century, for example, Presbyterians considered national educational needs an important priority. They urged every congregation to operate a grammar school, every presbytery a high school, and every synod a college. Our landscape remains dotted by small colleges begun for Christian education but long since turned aside to secular humanism. Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic churches also made efforts to sustain parochial schools.

With the experience of the horrors of modern warfare which began with the American Civil War and continued through the two world wars (1860-1945), and with the assaults of the unbelief of liberal theology and materialistic science (1860-the present) came active political and legal opposition to biblical truth in government and educational institutions, both of which are now largely hostile to Christianity.

Today many Christians have fled the violence and incivility of American cities. They have used the automobile to remove their homes as far as possible from their places of employment and commerce. In doing so they have run even beyond the suburbs into rural areas which are far removed from any solid Christian church. As a result it is now difficult to assemble a truly 'local church'. Members often travel an hour or more by car from many different directions for an hour or two of worship. These flights into isolation have made it nearly impossible to keep up prayer meetings or evening worship services. The church is barely holding on to the definition of a 'community of saints'.

Some Christian schools bravely attempt to hold their ground. But they were never designed to reach out to unbelieving families and their children. They were conceived to provide Christian education for the children of middle-class believers who could afford to pay tuition fees.

Now even many Christians with higher incomes prefer not to spend their money on Christian schools.

Home-Schooling Movement

Currently in America the largest 'Christian school' movement is home schooling. Children are taught, each in his own home, each by his own mother. Christians are clinging to the personal right to educate their own children as they see fit. However, it must be said that not every mother is qualified to teach her children academic subjects. Still less is every parent qualified to make intelligent curriculum choices, as individual parents increasingly do.

After spending years in a home school many 'home-schooled' children are qualified (or even over-qualified) in some disciplines but seriously lacking in others. What is more, these children may not be prepared (because of having had no experience) to relate to any authority except that of their parents. Further, their social skills in forming relationships with other students may be quite lacking.

In the U.S. there is a growing trend among Christian families to dress strangely. A child was recently overheard to ask her mother in church about one such visiting family, 'Mommy, are they Amish?' An entire Christian underground movement (among home-schoolers) has adopted theological and/or educational fads which are certainly not biblical and are very off-putting. These new Christian isolationists are pressuring local churches to cancel Sunday Schools and other programmes for educating children in the faith. Their assertion is that children may be taught only by their own parents. A rigid patriarchalism is developing.

How far all of this is from being what Christ expected of his people! He said, 'You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world.'

A Way Forward

Conducting proper schools is expensive and labour intensive. Much sacrifice is called for to bring children properly to the grace and knowledge which should be made available to them. There are daunting obstacles – financial, cultural and preparational – for those who will answer the call, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' During the times of

the Reformation and the Great Awakening teaching children did not just happen mysteriously. It was brought about by sacrifice and discipline in those whose hearts were aflame to bring the children to Christ.

When Jesus noted the immense fields that were ripe and ready for harvest he gave us a starting point with which to address the task. Not unexpectedly he directed us to prayer: 'Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest' (*Matt. 9:38*). History places a strange footnote to obeying this directive – *those who pray most that the Lord would send are often the first to be sent.*

Training children in the knowledge of the Holy One is a leading priority for our nations and our churches. If our civilization is to survive it must have young, vigorous, well-raught men and women who fear God. Or if, as with Judah of old, and for the same reasons, our culture is to pass away, we must have a few bold servants of God who will carry the message of God's everlasting kingdom into even the very dismal empires which stamp out their freedom.

Give ear, O my people, to my teachings;

incline your ears to the words of my mouth!

I will open my mouth in a parable;

I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children,

but tell to the coming generation

the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,

and the wonders that he has done.

He established a testimony in Jacob

and appointed a law in Israel,

which he commanded our fathers

to teach to their children,

that the next generation might know them,

the children yet unborn,

and arise and tell them to their children,

so that they should set their hope in God

and not forget the works of God,

but keep his commandments;

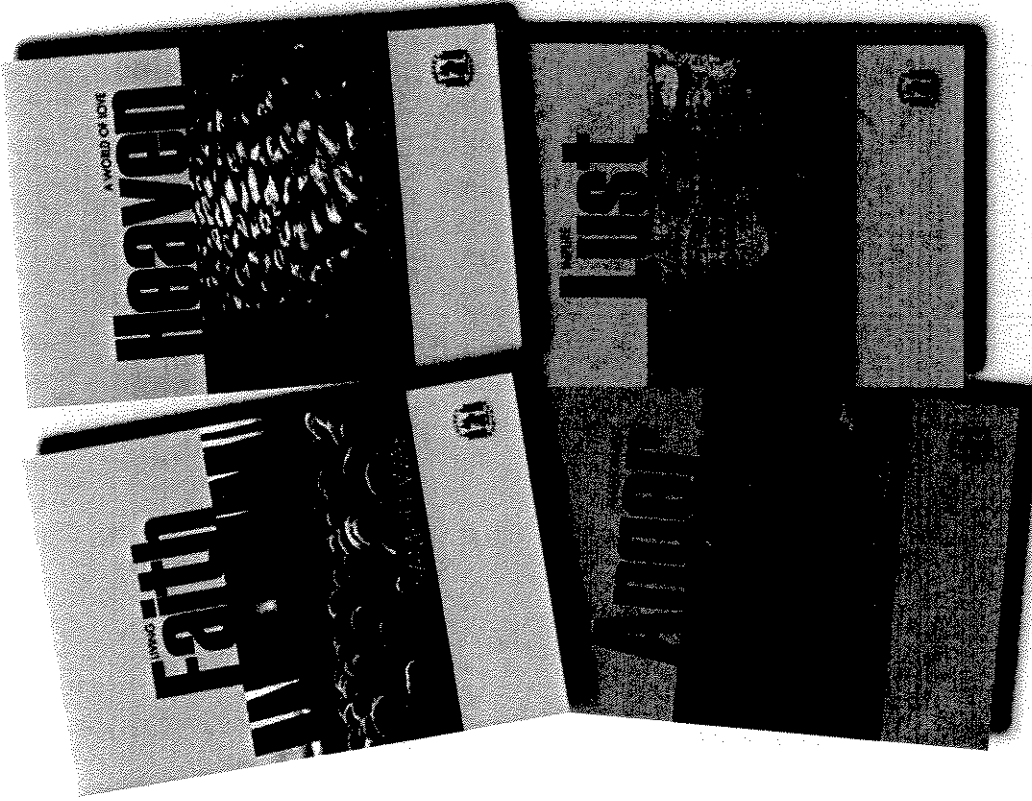
and that they should not be like their fathers,

a stubborn and rebellious generation,

a generation whose heart was not steadfast,

whose spirit was not faithful to God.

PSALM 78:1-8



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