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A CHRISTIAN ETHOS SCHOOL

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“A Levels Not Worth the Paper They’re Written On”, “Grade A for 47%”, “Cut Price GCSE Results”, “Cake-Decorating Earns Four GCSEs”. Teachers learn to dread the late August headlines!

It seems that a steady rise in GCSE and A Level results over fifteen years has done little to reassure a sceptical public that schools are now turning out better educated young people. A massive hike in state funding for education over the same period is regarded by the man in the street as a lavishing of tax payer’s money with little to show for it.

Although as a head teacher I regret the damage the headline writers do to the morale of those young people that do pick up well-deserved top grades, I have to agree that education today is in crisis. Undoubtedly school discipline is at an all-time low. As long ago as 1989 a government report found that in one week just over a thousand secondary school teachers experienced physical aggression ‘of a clearly violent nature’ from pupils. The subsequent trend has been steeply downhill. The prevailing climate is one of moral relativism, with the family- fundamental as the building block in any society- now redefined as “any domestic arrangement whatsoever of any single adult, or any number of consenting adults, living together and taking some responsibility for children”. The emotional deprivation for growing numbers of victims of divorce, domestic violence or neglect cannot but find outlet in the classroom.

Pounded by a constant subliminal message from all-pervasive media, the generation gap has widened to a yawning gulf, and the young and strong reject any notion of an inherent authority vested in parents and teachers. “If they want my respect they’ll earn it!”

With the notion of absolute values abolished, a society shaped by post-modernism redefines morality with reference to the promotion of tolerance and diversity. Absolute truth is given similarly short thrift, and, with the religious education curriculum loaded with competing philosophies, the one clear message children receive is that god is whom you want him to be.

Meanwhile a hopelessly naïve view of the child dictates classroom practice. Inner creativity has only to be harnessed- the true innocence of the child has only to be protected from the corrupting effect of domineering adults- for the learning revolution to take effect and children to be transformed into confident, knowledgeable young adults! Schools will thrive if Heads harness the power of ‘student voice’, if Student Councils determine policy, if rules are negotiated, and leadership is firmly exercised- by everyone.

Ideas have consequences, as any good history lesson teaches, and the ferment in which education finds itself at the dawn of the third millennium AD has arisen slowly and terribly as the consequence of an atheism which has only relatively recently been given intellectual credibility with the establishment of humanistic Darwinism as the prevailing scientific paradigm. This atheism may take the form of an outright rejection of God or simply content itself with declaring the existence of the divine an irrelevance; either way, the effect is the same. Man achieves autonomy, but at a price. The cry of triumph as man sheds the ‘shackles’ of religion becomes a howl of despair as he turns to see what he

has declared himself to be- a brute beast; as to history, the product of purposeless, random mutations in the primordial slime; as to geography, located on an insignificant speck orbiting a tiny star which is but one grain in the mighty and terrible sandstorm of an impersonal universe; as to purpose, ‘beyond freedom and dignity’. Gone are the ennobling concepts of justice, truth, right and beauty, which our forefathers understood to be a reflection of the divine character; in their place we have at best a consensus as to what is convenient for the moment, at worst, a destructive individualism, even nihilism. As a man sows, so shall he reap.

My purpose in painting this somewhat bleak analysis of the British education system is not to discourage but to point to an alternative- and deeply exciting- foundation for education. It is my personal experience that historic, biblical Christianity with its ‘creation, fall, redemption’ framework, provides a solid rock on which learning can take place. And I am not alone. This summer forty six of the nation’s one hundred top achieving comprehensives were faith schools, the vast majority Christian. A historical survey of the British education system shows that churches were active in the field of schooling long before the state took over. Why might this be?

The doctrine of creation asserts that the child is the image bearer of the Almighty. Formed to reflect his creator, he has the capacity to know right from wrong, to create in music, literature or art, to communicate with clarity and meaning, to experience awe and wonder and ascribe meaning to existence, to seek meaningful and sustaining relationships. Every child is equally precious and possesses a body, mind and spirit with more innate potential than he himself has dared to dream. Moreover, every child is differently talented and must be developed as an individual.

The universe “declares the glory of God,” and the ultimate object of the study of the sciences or mathematics is a fuller discovery of that glory as seen in the majestic splendour of what He has made. To teach one of the fine arts is to nurture a God-given talent and spark, to open up the eyes, ears, and heart of the learner to the beauty they possess, and enable them to use that beauty to enhance the lives of others. The study of language- our own and others’- reveals more clearly those qualities of intellect and spirit that make us human. We touch and transform one another through words and ideas, and the ability to reason and communicate with strength and subtlety is but another imprint of the Creator.

Moreover, only with reference to a Creator can absolute truth, absolute values and absolute beauty be understood- and without these, education is ultimately absolutely pointless! How can right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, true and false be distinguished if there is no ultimate arbiter; no standard against which our values can be measured?

The doctrine of the fall of all mankind in Adam explains what is otherwise incomprehensible- the problem of evil. The teacher is rescued from a hopelessly naïve optimism as to a child’s motives, and set free to exercise discipline as an expression of love. Not that all our actions are as bad as they possibly could be, but that the best of our actions are tainted by the effects of sin- a rebellion against our maker. The moral law acts both to restrain the law-breaker, protecting others in the school community, and to shed light upon the true nature of one’s heart, thus preparing it for the gospel. A school which has properly grasped that “foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him” is strongly placed to promote learning alongside long-term personal development.

The disciplinary code of the school which is founded upon God’s revealed Word is not arbitrary; neither is it defined in relation to the shifting sand of human opinion. Values underpin its rules- values such as faithfulness, loyalty, integrity, perseverance, humility. These values are directly derived from

the character of God himself, and as such are stamped upon, and resonate with, the conscience of every child, no matter how seared that conscience may be. Discipline in a school with a Christian ethos carries a moral force which is hard to resist.

Education alone cannot deal with the disastrous effects of man's fall from innocence. **The doctrine of redemption** rescues us from despair when the moral law has done its work. The daily act of worship-still mandatory under the terms of the 1988 Education Act- can provide a daily reminder to students that a loving God stands ready and willing to extend mercy to repentant sinners. If the essence of true wisdom is arriving at a right view of oneself and of one's Maker, then an understanding of redemption is essential in that it demonstrates most majestically both the love and the holiness of God in that act of rescue planned in eternity and executed in time by the Holy Trinity.

It was John Milton who wrote, "*The end, then, of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to be like him, as we may the nearest, by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection.*"

May God raise up a body of men and women who are willing and able to engage in the awesome and yet deeply satisfying task of promoting this kind of learning!

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