

What Once Was Can Be Again: Christian Education and the Reformation

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“Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working’” (John 5:17).

INTRODUCTION

Now in the year 2017, the Church worldwide is commemorating the 500th anniversary of the epochal and world-changing Reformation of 1517. By revisiting that era, a renewed hope may strengthen today’s evangelical Church, the rightful heir to that rich theology and history.

In 1517, the Roman Catholic Church needed a Reformation, but in 2017, the evangelical Church stands in need of a Reformation. Although the five *solas* of the Reformation can and should be studied in our time and evangelical churches need to renew these teachings, another ideal of that same time, now forgotten, needs to be addressed under the theme: ***What once was can be again: Christian Education and the Reformation.*** For over twenty years, I have traveled across the country promoting the mission of the Exodus Mandate: encouraging and assisting Christian families and churches to leave the state-sponsored public school system for the promised land of K-12 Christian schools or home schooling with the hope and prayer that a fresh obedience by churches and families in the education of their children according to biblical commands will prove to be a key for the revival and reformation of our families, churches and culture. Neither the state nor government has any God-ordained role in the education and discipleship of children, which belongs to the family and the Church.

I am indebted to Dr. Paul Kienel, founding president of Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) and his seminal book, *A History of Christian School Education*, Volume I, which was used for much of the research for this article. Some forerunners in Christian education should be noted before discussing “Christian Education and the Reformation.”

APOSTOLIC ERA TO MEDIEVAL PERIOD

From the apostolic era until the medieval era, an integral aspect of the mission of the Church included the Christian education of children and youth. Because the early Church itself had no buildings for church assemblies or schools until after 250 AD, that education was largely informal and took place in small home-based schools not unlike home-school co-ops today. Christians had small schools, and under persecution, some of them met in the catacombs. This era teaches, “Christian school education is the second oldest form of continuous education in the

Western world, second only to Jewish schools” (Kienel 7). Kienel rightly concludes that what is called K-12 Christian education today was a universal practice and an integral part of the early church experience until the era of Constantine.

After Constantine and the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, the Roman Catholic Church began to assert itself over all the churches, but the Church continued the same model of Christian education for children and youth (Kienel 47).

During the period called the Middle Ages, the Waldensians and other proto-Reformation church groups that operated outside the Roman Catholic Church maintained a series of small Christian schools for their youth, as did many in the Roman Catholic Church.

PRE-REFORMATION CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

During the period one hundred years before the Reformation, examples of Christian schools existed. The 14th and 15th centuries were much like today, an era in which immorality and darkness permeated the culture.

The Church may well ask, “What is to be done in such a cultural climate?” Gerhard Groote, a wealthy and educated man from Holland, saw a need and founded the **Brethren of the Common Life** schools. These schools stressed piety and Christian living, and unlike Catholic schools at that time, sought to educate the common people and children. They used the Bible; taught the classics, Latin, and Greek; and were concerned about the intellectual, as well as the social and physical, lives of their students. These schools, existing primarily in Holland and Germany, maintained, as do Christian schools today, “Learning without piety was rather a curse than a blessing” (Kienel 189). They taught the Scriptures in the vernacular, thus living outside Catholic law, which did not permit the Scriptures to be in the hands of common men. These schools were foundational to the Reformation inasmuch as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and other reformers were trained in Brethren of Common Life schools or ones inspired by them (Kienel 188-189).

Similarly, John Huss, also considered a forerunner to the Reformation and who was burned at the stake at Council of Constance in 1415 AD, founded three hundred Christian schools in Bohemia one hundred years before the Reformation (Kienel 142).

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND THE REFORMATION

Indeed, the pattern of K-12 Christian education that existed before the Reformation continued during the time of Martin Luther, John Knox, John Calvin, and all the reformers. The education that these reformers and their colleagues promoted is the central theme of this work.

Martin Luther above all the other reformers excelled as a Christian educator. He wrote about his own youthful experiences at a Brethren of Common Life School in Eisenach (Kienel 190). His emphasis on Christian schooling was partially due to his own school experience in a Brethren of

Common Life school and due to two firm beliefs: the Word of God was his only authority, and all people must be educated in order to read and study the Scriptures. Furthermore, he published a sermon entitled, “Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School,” by which he meant a Christian school (Painter 210).

In November 2003, my wife and I traveled to Germany for the wedding of our son Richard to the daughter of a German theologian. During the two weeks we were there, we visited many Reformation sites. One of the great moments was our visit to Wartburg Castle on the mountain overlooking the old city of Eisenach. This was where Luther resided under the protective custody of Frederick Elector of Saxony to foil the death warrant imposed on him by Emperor Charles V. This warrant had been issued after Luther’s trial, during which he uttered those famous words in defense of *sola Scriptura*, which have sounded across the centuries: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. God help me. Amen....Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise” (Bainton 185). We entered his apartment where he translated the New Testament into German and wrote other books, some commentaries. Here he changed his identity from the monk Luther to Squire George, and in the city itself is a Brethren of Common Life school where Luther had studied for three years as a boy. If I had the authority to do so, I would have the site of that school listed as a Reformation site. The Church should know that there would not have been a prophet or theologian on the mountain at Wartburg Castle, or a mother in Israel, as was said of the Old Testament judge Deborah, without first the boy and the girl in a Christian school at the foot of the mountain in Eisenach.

Luther sought to change elementary, secondary, and higher education in Germany, and he largely succeeded. He expressed the sentiment in his work entitled “To Magistrates and Councilmen,” “For, it is my serious opinion, prayer, and desire that these hog-pens and Satan’s schools either be sunk into the abyss or changed into Christian schools” (Kienel 192). He first reformed the faculty and curriculum at Wittenberg University and then moved on to elementary and secondary education (Kienel 194-196).

He used the Bible as the central text and set up schools for the common people, unlike the Catholic educational system which was only for clergy or the elite. Luther educated boys and girls as well and instituted music, discipline, natural sciences, languages, and a rigorous catechism into every aspect of the curriculum. The catechism was central to his educational model and became so popular that it was eventually translated into seventeen languages and used throughout the Western world. The scope of that same catechism was for regular teaching at home as well as for the church. When Luther tried to get the common people to study Greek and Hebrew, many of them resisted. Because they finally had the New Testament in German, which Luther had translated for them, they did not feel the need to study the original languages (Kienel 192-202).

Although Luther is regarded as the man of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*, his work for Christian school education deserves a separate semester of study along with the other reformers. Luther

warned, “Above all in schools of all kinds the chief and most common lesson should be the Scriptures....but where the Holy Scriptures are not the rule, I advise no one to send his child. Everything must perish where God’s Word is not studied unceasingly” (Painter 147).

John Calvin and John Knox, two major reformers, also contributed significant work to Christian education. Like Luther they were both aggressive educational reformers committed to Bible-based Christian schools. Their schools more closely associated with the church than Luther’s schools, which he reluctantly and sadly turned over to civil government along with the churches and universities (Kienel 211).

Calvin, as a Christian educator, was mentored by Johannes Sturm in Strasbourg, himself a graduate of a Brethren of Common Life School. For three years after he was banished from Geneva in 1538, Calvin was a teacher at Sturm’s Christian school and served as a pastor in Strasbourg. He carried that model back to Geneva in 1541 and set up the Geneva Academy in 1558-1559, reformed in theology unlike Sturm’s school. Geneva Academy was a secondary Christian school and also a seminary. Himself a noted theologian and reformer, Theodore Beza became the first rector of this world-changing institution. Calvin presided over it and was a professor. After five years, Geneva had an enrollment of fifteen hundred students, the majority from abroad. Thousands of the school’s alumni served as missionaries and pastors throughout Western Europe. Geneva Academy serves as the pre-eminent model for higher Christian education and seminary education in the Protestant world today. John Knox had been in Geneva long enough to be influenced by what he had observed there. Calvin did not have the same interest in elementary Christian education as did Luther and Knox, and his Geneva Academy was much more rigorous than schools started by Luther and Knox (Kienel 220-221).

Calvin was an early Christian worldview thinker who saw the church and Christian school as united. He taught the principle that all truth is God’s truth, meaning that all information and knowledge must be informed by theology and Scripture and that all disciplines, sciences and mathematics included, must be governed by Scripture (Kienel 222).

A principal reason for the durability of the Reformation was the thorough integration of Christian education into elementary, secondary, and seminary schools and, thereby, into all aspects of Church and family life. A reformation of the Church without a corresponding reformation in Christian education would have been unthinkable to Calvin, Luther, Knox, and the other reformers (Kienel 222). Within the Great Commission, the education component sounds forth in Matthew 28:20 when Jesus says, “**teaching** them...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” No permanent impact from discipleship and evangelism can occur without the bond between integrated Christian education in family, schooling, and church life.

John Knox returned to Scotland from exile in 1559, where the Reformation had its fullest expression and most complete success. In 1560, Scotland declared itself a Protestant nation and

accepted a Confession of Faith drawn up by Knox and others (Kienel 226). The nation thoroughly Christian and Reformed as well, gave birth to the Presbyterian Church movement.

Knox instituted Christian schools at all levels of society for boys and girls and covered the country with schools from the small town and hamlet to the major universities. These Christian schools required the catechism and were prevalent throughout Scotland, making Scots among the most educated and Christian in the Western world. As a result of Christian schools in Scotland, the Reformation was more thorough there than in any other nation (Kienel 228-230). Even today Scottish universities rank among the best in the world. Knox wrote in his famous “Book of Discipline” to Parliament on “The Necessity of Schools,” saying, “Therefore, we judge it necessary that every...church have a schoolmaster appointed” (Kienel 238).

This limited text does not allow for discussion of the contributions of Zwingli, Melancthon, and Bucer, some of whom in their time did as much to advance Christian education as Luther, Calvin, and Knox. Over two thousand elementary Christian schools also flourished among the Reformed or Huguenot churches in France, an extraordinary phenomenon given the violent persecution of the Reformed churches in France (Kienel 282).

These reformers were among those men of whom the world was not worthy, but God in His mercy gave them to the building of His Church on earth. Paul Kienel summarizes the Reformation period by saying, “The great church reformers—Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli, and others—gave as much energy to establishing Christian schools as they gave to reforming the church. To them Christian school education and church reform were inseparable allies. Neither, they believed, could succeed without the other” (Kienel xvii).

WHERE THEN IS THE CHURCH IN THE US TODAY?

The US Church does not support K-12 Christian education very well. A survey of Church history and especially the Reformation reveals the modern American evangelical Church is an anomaly, perhaps barely qualifying as a fully practicing Christian enterprise.

On March 9, 2017, I visited the Global Headquarters of ACSI, in Colorado Springs and met with a senior official who gave me a sad report on the state of Christian schools in the evangelical church in the US. The Barna Group prepared an analysis for ACSI on the situation entitled “Multiple Choice: How Parents Sort Education Options in a Changing Market.” The ACSI official reported to me that in the last decade fifteen hundred small ACSI schools had closed in US, with some families choosing home schooling or charter schools and some returning to public schooling due to financial pressures. This reflected a twenty percent decline in student population from their four thousand member schools over a ten year period. During the same period, however, ACSI Christian schools grew rapidly in Africa, Asia, South America, and this was mostly in areas of great poverty.

The Barna study includes a section on the support of conservative pastors for Christian school education. This is the most troubling part of the analysis. Only nine percent of conservative pastors very strongly support K-12 Christian education with an additional twenty-one percent giving moderate support. Twenty-eight percent of conservative pastors, however, are unlikely ever to recommend or support K-12 Christian school education. The ACSI official described this to me as pastoral “opposition to Christian education.” The lack of support among conservative pastors for K-12 Christian schools has been known for years, but the gravity of situation now has a number.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The disaster in America’s Christian education is much like the worst single sports disaster in US history that occurred near Huntington, West Virginia, in November 1970 when the charter plane carrying the Marshall University football team, coaches, parents, and booster club members crashed on a mountain with a complete loss of life. The tragedy and its aftermath are retold in the classic movie *We Are Marshall*.

Matthew McConaghy and Matthew Fox played the role of two coaches, Head Coach Jack Lenygel and Coach Red Dawson, who picked up the pieces and tried to rebuild the fortunes of the Marshall football program. Needless to say, it was almost impossible with only one coach and several players who had not been killed, only because they had not been on the flight. Marshall procured a special dispensation from the NCAA that allowed them to play freshmen as they sought to rebuild their program. For years they lost almost every game and most by lopsided scores. In the pivotal scene in the movie, Coach Dawson complained bitterly that he could not continue while the Marshall football program defied the main rule of sports, that winning is everything and nothing else matters. He felt that to do so would be to disgrace the members of the team who had died.

The head coach said he agreed with that sports axiom that says winning is everything. “But for us now,” he said, “it doesn’t matter if we win or lose. But what matters is that we simply take the field, that we suit up on Saturdays and keep this program alive, that we play the game. One day, not today, not this season, not next season, we will be like every other team....and when that day comes is when we will honor them [the teammates who perished]” (Iwanyk)

It’s as if the evangelical leadership plane with most of the pastors has crashed, and the Church is now left to rebuild the commitment to K-12 Christian education in all the churches. The American Church is not like its forefathers in the apostolic age or the reformers and not like our poor brethren in South America, Africa, Asia, or even China where Christian education is growing. For them K-12 Christian education is part of the normal Christian life.

Like the Marshall University football team, those committed to Christian education must simply take the field and keep this program alive. In the 1970’s, Marshall had the worst record of any major college football program in the US. In 1984, they posted their first winning season in

twenty years. This was followed by eight conference titles, five Bowl games, and two national championships. From the ashes, they rose and continued.

“Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.’” The Lord is working for His Church. We have His sure promise. Those who believe in the clear commands of Scripture concerning the education of children must remain faithful and do the hard work because *what once was can be again*.

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