

Towards a Future of Care

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Contemporary Western society has been shaped by a false kind of spirituality; a spirituality which is dynamistic and sometimes nationalistic, and therefore different from the spirit of Christ. The strength of these processes may even become stronger in the years to come. So how do we defend Christian schools, and their sovereignty in the sphere of education? What is the source of our hope? How can Christian educational institutions develop distinctive programs that do more than serve to extend our present economic priorities?

To find an answer, we first need to obtain a more precise picture of the future society. What will it look like? Most people today are aware of the impact of processes like globalisation and increasing information, but there is of course more at hand. This is the case especially in relation to what may happen to our children, to their culture, to the environment in which they live, and to their neighbours in other parts of the world. We need to understand our world and the forces acting on it before we can articulate what kind of education is needed.

Looking more precisely to the kind of society which is now under construction, one rich in potential and full of positive opportunities, it is necessary to draw our attention to two remarkable developments which will gain momentum in the near future. These two trends may influence our future to a great extent, and may also change our impression concerning the great inner strength and power of the coming society. I have called these trends respectively, *dispersion* and *erosion*.

Dispersion stands for the astonishing fact that in the world wide process of globalisation, new economic poles emerge (for example China), while at the same time a high degree of dispersion away from such poles takes place. This process can be likened to a magnet which disperses particles between its poles:

attracting some particles, but pushing others to the margin or even out of the scene. In a world where competition becomes increasingly global, you can no longer expect that all countries will get a fair and equal share. Even now, less than one percent of the freely floating capital in the world flows towards the poorest countries, which need it most and where forty percent of the world population is living. In terms of world income distribution, official reports of the United Nations tell us that the inequality between rich and poor nations has doubled since 1960, and may still further increase.¹ More recently, dispersion is being experienced within the rich countries themselves. For example, at least one in five children living in the United States of America will have had direct experience of hunger.

It is important to mention these facts to remind us that a world with such growing disparities will probably not be a stable world. If we compare humankind as a whole with a living body — and there are good reasons for that — you cannot cut off one of the limbs without creating a handicap for the body as a whole. If one or more of our poor limbs perish, it is the whole of mankind which suffers. A stream of economic migrants are currently moving from the poor to the rich areas, from Asia to Australia, from South America to North America, from Africa to Europe, which results in growing social tensions. Increasingly our world is becoming socially and economically unstable.

The second trend is *erosion*. It stands for the erosion of the quality of our environment, as well as for the erosion of care. Concerning the environment, we all have become increasingly aware of the great risks of an unrestrained expansion of economy and technology, particularly in relation to the future preservation of natural species and of the depletion of the ozone layer. But there is more than that. The world's eco-system, which we have for so long seen as something outside ourselves is, in fact, deeply interwoven with our personal life-systems, a factor of which West-

1. The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) tells us in its latest annual reports, that while in 1960 the average income in the richest one-fifth of the world was 'only' 30 times as high as the average income in the poorest one-fifth, this figure in 1990 had climbed to 60 times as high. The UNDP report of 1996 informs us, moreover, that the poorest 20 percent of the world population receives now only three percent of the world's total income, which is also less than ever before.

emers are becoming increasingly aware. Its condition influences the physical wellbeing of humans. In addition to the erosion of the natural world, a corresponding erosion of public care has been taking place; and it is remarkable that it is growing even in the midst of rich societies. Diminishing amounts of money and time are available for the adequate care for nature, for older people, for the handicapped and for the weak. It is correctly called a paradox, because one should expect just the opposite when incomes and wealth are rising!

Given world-wide dispersion at the price of the poor and the weak, and a world-wide erosion at the cost of what is vulnerable — where and how will these processes end? We don't know, but one thing is sure: if nature is threatened to such an extent that the evidence of the threat is seen in increasing rates of skin-cancer; if personal isolation escalates in the very midst of materially rich countries and crime is rising rapidly; and if the poor countries are excluded increasingly from the supply of capital which they badly need because their children are dying, then we can no longer speak of the rise of a more responsible, stable and sustain-able society. It looks as if an invisible hand has written on the wall of Western society, 'You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.'²

Is the implication of all this that we have to tell our students that they should live in fear for the future? Fred Polak, a Dutch philosopher, once wrote that the citizens of the West have turned from God-fearing beings into time-fearing beings.³ Should that trend be followed in Christian education?

My reaction is entirely the opposite. These signs an emerging future imply that the time has come for the human race to turn away from its fears, and to learn to obey God's rules again:

to obey his rules of justice, care and love. We are being called to make a similar overall choice as the one which Moses once asked from the people of Israel before they could enter the land of Canaan: 'This day ... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live'. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Daniel 5:27

Fred L Polak, *De toekomst is verleden tyd* (The future is past tense), Zeist 1958, part II, par. 5

That is a choice which is still possible. For it is the Lord's world which is increasingly threatened, and it is his children who are not treated with justice. So it is no wonder that his own good earth, his own good creation, has begun to react sharply against all the misuse and exploitation. It is groaning under the fantastic plans to expand our economies and technologies to the highest possible limits, while there is no care for good and solid foundations. Clearly we are experiencing a kind of revenge from creation because we refuse to follow God's laws of justice and care.

And here, we inevitably touch again the place and role of education in our modern societies. It is crucial that Christian education should learn to defend itself in the present, especially against the overruling claims of a modern, self-centered society;

claims which can destroy its character and identity. Looking to the future, though, a different element appears to be emerging in the form of rising doubt. Our modern society may be far less strong than it looks. What seems so weak to so many — Christian education — may be far stronger and far more important than we sometimes suppose. For our modern society is extremely busy risking its very future by its own recklessness, and there are signs of a deep inherent weakness in its course. Our postmodern society needs help. The roles may be reversed. A proud, but at the same time sick, unstable and unsustainable society is on the brink of losing its very soul and future, but for that very reason it needs urgently the strength of responsible Christian education for its healing and recovery.

Is such a proposition so unbelievable? Usually, Christian educators are seen by others as pure idealists. This group of critics includes people who want to maintain soft values within a society which has to think and act realistically, and therefore needs realistically educated people. But more and more signs are showing evidence, that the opposite is true. It is the striving towards a maximum dynamistic expansion of economy and technology which is ultimately *idealistic*, because the earth cannot take it; because people cannot carry it; because the poor cannot sustain it. In this present time, there is a growing urgency for the invasion of a clear and outspoken biblical *realism* within our modern society, and for Christian education, which creates the platform for that — by valuing and honouring what is dispersed, and by actively choosing preservation instead of erosion.

What type of education does that imply? It is an education which, starting from our primary schools, proclaims through its whole curriculum that the earth is the Lord's, and not just ours;

that people simply cannot live by bread alone, and that they will perish if they try to do so. We need schools to affirm the view that all people are created in the image of God, that the weak and not the strong are and should be the first in the Kingdom of God, that only cultures which have an awareness of 'enough' will see abundance. Simple truths, no doubt, but strong and crucial at the same time and capable to reorientate a whole culture and a society.

I would like to remind you of the choice made by two Dutch church leaders, Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. The society in which they lived — the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — was (in their opinion) increasingly dominated by a non-Christian spirituality. For them, the prevailing spirit was the spirit of the Enlightenment and of its violent child, the French Revolution. They did not believe that public education was sufficient to combat such a deeply nihilistic enemy. A spiritual battle demands more than that, it demands a choice of the heart, a choice for a fully renewed Christian world view and life view. The challenge is this — if a Christian education is no more than a good climate in which to study, the training of good behaviour, careful attention to the needs of children, then it is deprived of its main function. This balance changes if the core of society is at stake. Society may be at risk of succumbing to harmful developments, and it therefore needs the critical input of separate Christian schools.

Many people, indeed teachers like you and me, are not so good in armoured struggle, and certainly not in the armour of the Goliaths professed by our present modern society. Let me therefore stress that you and I do not need aggressive weapons of warfare in this struggle. It is the warm and gentle spirit of Jesus Christ, more than anything or anyone else, which we need as armour in the crisis of our times.

To illustrate this point we need to note some signposts, taken from the gospel, which show us how Jesus behaved in relation to other people. In listening to these examples, the way in which we have to go becomes clearer, a way which is needed to find or to re-find socially-healing forms of educational practice.

Healing is the central word. For Christian education has in one way or another to stand against the powers of dispersion and erosion which are leading our society astray. It has to be prepared to help a wounded and sick society, even if that society does not acknowledge its sickness — and is initially even reluctant to receive this type of healing.

The first signpost is the way in which Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. In this educational meeting he was not only breaking the traditional laws that one should not speak with a wife, he also spoke with a stranger of another belief. Further, he took the lead in a very patient and careful dialogue, which brought her to voluntarily confess in her own words, in her own language, that he was the source of living water. (John 4) Education is always a question of taking others, particularly young people, by the hand to discern together a way forward. It is built on a kind of trust or even promise, that, via the process of careful listening and responding on both sides, both parties present facts and situations that can be understood in a new coherent way, and hence find their place in the context of a growing personal wisdom. Indeed, Jesus is our hope and joy. If children are to find in him a guide, helper and leader in their personal lives as well as when they confront complex societal questions, then what is needed is an educational process in which they are welcome to come with all their questions to the classroom — questions and impressions which are born out of their own experiences in a bewildering and chaotic society. Let all their questions be welcome if you want to take them by the hand — and guide them to the source of living water.

The second signpost is found in the meeting of Jesus with Zacchaeus, the tax-collector. Zacchaeus lived in the hard world. He played it hard, seeking for the highest reward per unit of capital. However, this man of money and hard-nosed efficiency was not loved by his neighbours. He was even ridiculed by them because of his small physical stature, and he tried to fight back in his own way by continuous self-affirmation. But Jesus saw him behind the branches of the tree, and simply said 'I will have dinner at your house this evening'.

Possibly for the first time in his life, Zacchaeus was affirmed by another person, hearing that he was of value without any previous achievement. He opened his distorted life to a new future:

'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' (Luke 19:8)

Good education always has to turn around wrong thinking and behaviour. In the example of Zacchaeus, Jesus replaced self affirmation with godly affirmation. In the future, children in school will increasingly need to be affirmed in their own authenticity. An affirmation may well become the most precious thing which can be given to them. More broadly, society itself is in a similar need. All that dynamic unrest of our day to achieve more and create new technologies for ourselves is related to the continuous strive for self-affirmation. Is it not a substitute for affirmative love which is never offered to most of our citizens? Nicholas Wolterstorff has noted that if natures and cultures are not affirmed in what they are, then they may begin to react from their wounds, enforcing recognition from others. The roots of the deepest social and economic problems of our time are not a lack of knowledge, but a lack of loving affirmation. Such love can be given and should be given not only in families, but also in classrooms and schools.

These are simple signposts, but in combination with each other they teach us a very valuable lesson and indeed open up a new way forward. Together they say to us: within the one kingdom of God, where Jesus is our coming Lord, education is a service with its own specific colour and power. It is a power different from the power of the state, and a colour different from the service of the church. In the struggle of our time, churches have to fulfil a primarily prophetic role. They should preach the gospel and unmask the idols. The governments of our days are summoned by him as their coming Lord to return to the ways of justice, protecting the poor against all forms of exploitation. Schools, therefore, have to reflect the priesthood of our coming Messiah. That is their specific way to be involved in the spiritual struggle of our time and age. It must fulfil the function of guiding compassion the first signpost — combined with a deep personal affirmation — the second signpost. Teachers must consciously reflect a mirror image of Christ as the priest who heals broken memories.

Never underestimate the enormous power and responsibility which is hidden in the task of serving the children of a hard-headed, but at the same time, wounded society. The hard ice of winter does not give under the blows of many axes, no matter how sharp-edged they may be. The power of the winter, only gives in under the soft, warm breeze of spring. We are called as teachers and educators in the midst of a turbulent society not primarily to be militant like kings or soldiers. First and foremost we have to be the messengers of the gentle spirit of Christ, choosing the side of who or what needs care, and nurturing what is so easily left behind.

Hopefully, it is possible to discern a glimpse of the contours of the kind of Christian education of tomorrow. Its characteristics can be summarised in the 'three Ls' of listening, leading and loving:

1. *Listening* comes first. Teachers must begin every day conscious of the impressions and experiences which pupils bring to the school. Teachers must discuss with students what they perceive, see and hear: from the music of contemporary rockbands to the beautiful butterflies which they saw on their way to school; from the bad or interesting news which they heard on the television, to examples of good or bad behaviour in their own street or city.
2. The second L is that of *leading*. It stands for the dialogue that comes from the heart and a sharp mind, as evidenced in the examples of Jesus in his talk with Zacchaeus and the Samaritan wife, leading them to insights of wisdom. Wisdom, for Jesus, always stood in the realistic context of everyday events.
3. The third L is *love*, affirmative love. It honours deeply the hidden specific gifts in each person, but also in each race or culture.

Armed with these 'three Ls', Christian education will in my opinion be able to stand in all the storms which are coming and will also be able to reach out to a deeply wounded, increasingly unstable society. Why am I so sure about that? That is related to the third and last signpost which I want to mention. That signpost consists of the last words which were spoken by Jesus, and which you can find on the very last page of the New Testament.

Conclusion: I am the morning-star

In the 1970s, I was travelling by plane over Africa in the darkest hour of the night, on my way to Soweto, I was looking in despair out of *my* window. I could not sleep. The darkness was overwhelming. I saw only one tiny star — not twinkling, so I presumed it was the planet, Venus. Venus, was that not the same planet as the morning star in the Bible? In the minutes thereafter I began gradually to realise what I really saw. Superficially, I saw just one tiny light spot in the midst of an overwhelming darkness. But in reality, by second sight, I saw this black night as it really was — a reign of darkness which was already beaten and now in retreat. For we know that as the morning star shines, even if the darkness still seems to reign, that the night is ending. For this is the only star which draws the morning behind herself, in her course — just as the groom follows the bride.

Christian education is therefore always education filled with a firm and irresistible hope, even in the midst of extreme darkness. For it lives out of the morning, out of the future, instead of out of the past. It is related to facts which do not lie, and to a future which will not betray us. Because it is his future, the future which he reclaims.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Concerning Christian education in general and separate Christian schools in particular, reference is made to the vision of Abraham Kuyper. Can you share that vision, or do you think that it is outmoded?
2. To what extent are distinctively Christian schools needed in present and future Australia?
3. What do you think of the notion that our present society desperately needs the input of an articulate Christian type of education?
4. What is your opinion concerning the view that the dual trends of dispersion and erosion may become more urgent in the years to come?
5. Do the 'three Ls' (listening, loving and leading) say anything new? Do you see a possible link between these 'three Ls' and

the ongoing discussion about what Christian schools should look like in the future?

Do the three Ls relate to the climate and structure of schooling, as well as the curriculum?

6. Is it possible or beneficial to promote a future perspective in your school and classroom?

RECOMMENDED READING

- Lyon, D., 1988, *The information society, issues and illusions*, Cambridge: Polity Press/ Basil Blackwell.
- Goudzwaard, B., & de Lange, H., 1995, *Beyond poverty and affluence: Toward an economy of care*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Geneva: WCC.
- Seerveld, C., 1980, *Rainbows for a fallen world: Aesthetic, life and artistic task*, Downsview, Ont.: Toronto Tuppence Press.