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Christian Views of the Student

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Abstract

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Christian Views of the Student

Steve Holtrop

Teachers often get asked, "What do you teach?" That question is often answered with a focus on curriculum (e.g., reading, math, or nuclear physics). But many teachers answer, "I teach students" (e.g., 3rd grade, middle school, or college). I think there's been a shift in the field of education toward an increasing focus on the student over the last few generations. This is good, but the underlying philosophies associated with this shift can have decidedly unbiblical assumptions.[1] On the other hand, some of the *curriculum*-centered -isms aren't all that biblically-based either[2]. Because we are very influenced by the philosophies of our age, we need to critically examine these –isms through a biblical lens and decide with the Spirit's leading what our view of the student should be.

Christians don't all agree on the best way to frame a specifically Christian view of the student that doesn't just blindly accept some of these cultural assumptions. Drawing on Niebuhr's idea that there are various ways Christians have conceptualized the relationship between Christ and culture, let me outline three biblically-informed ways Christians have come to view the young humans sitting in our classrooms.

First, there's the *Christianity-against-Culture* frame. This framework may view the student primarily as a sinner in need of correction. This framework also views the wider culture as mostly dangerous and fraught with sin. So educational things like adolescent literature, school dances, self-esteem teaching, and even block scheduling may all pose problems for people using this frame. This tendency shows up in early Puritan education in the colonies and puts a large emphasis on the total depravity of humans. Rules and punishments back then were pretty harsh by today's standards because they were seen as ways to put a needed box around students' natural depravity.

More recently, Christian parents using this kind of framework might ask their children to excuse themselves from reading certain novels in class or they may opt to homeschool their children in order to avoid the cultural depravity they perceive in the schools. Teachers thinking in this frame may see their primary role as an enforcer of needed rules. Some Christian parenting and teaching experts in recent generations (e.g., James Dobson) have emphasized the need for adults to stand quite firm when children and adolescents go through their flailing-around stages. Others have labeled this more authoritarian approach "the brick wall" approach.[3]

On the other side of the spectrum is a kind of *Christianity-Embracing-Culture* framework. This perspective may start with the concept of the student as made in the image of God and therefore full of creativity and potential. For example, since the wider culture offers so much inspiration and opportunity to kids today – "the world's your oyster" — the school should be doing whatever it can to expose kids to wonderful new areas of knowledge and creative expression. This perspective may emphasize sweeping away any impediments to creativity and awakening in each child the wonder of creation and the various opportunities available to young people today. Some recent innovations in curriculum and teaching methods, school schedules, and assessment of student learning seem to fit tidily with this framework. However, this embracing-culture approach may tend toward a permissiveness in teachers, or what Coloroso calls the "jelly-fish" approach.

Finally, a third framework can be generated from a *Christ-Transforming-Culture* framework. This frame may acknowledge *both* the sinful nature and the boundless God-given potential of the young student and

seek ways to design the curriculum in ways that provide structure to maximize growth.[4] This frame focuses on providing positive motivation and opportunity for application (a type of "higher level thinking" on Bloom's Taxonomy). By providing such structure and motivation (through an authoritative stance that Coloroso calls "backbone"), this kind of learning design can help move a student toward freedom from the bondage of sinful tendencies (such as lack of self-discipline) and provide an opportunity to work toward personal responsibility-building and cultural Shalom-building.[5]

The Christian teacher does not know exactly what the Lord has in store for each student, but a teacher with this third frame of reference views each student as someone with a God-planned transformative purpose, still to be realized, but awesome and important in the kingdom. Goals such as teaching for justice, teaching for Shalom, responsibility teaching, citizenship training, vocational training, even self-actualization – these can all be *aspects* of the educational task when it's ramed this way. As James K.A. Smith says, we're not just informing students, we're helping to form them.[6] So the main point, it seems to me, is to focus on each student as a divine work in progress and to help all students unleash their God-ordained calling through thorough preparation of their minds, hearts, and hands (in fact, all aspects of their selfhood, including the intellectual, moral, and creative[7]).

This final frame, in my mind, provides the most thoroughly biblical framework for helping the student discover, hone, and use the Spirit's gifts and callings. This view acknowledges the diversity of persons and callings in God's world and points the way toward the freeing of the mind and spirit to be what God has created each student to be. What we're describing here is really part of the process of sanctification, which is a life-long process. But if we can see students as God's team players embarking on the process, then we'll also help them see themselves that way too.

Footnotes

1. I'm thinking of humanism, existentialism, progressivism, behaviorism, and other results of Western Enlightenment cosmology. ↩

2. For example, perennialism and essentialism; see G. Knight, *Philosophy and education: An introduction in Christian perspective.* Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2006. ↩

3. B. Coloroso, *Winning at teaching without beating your kids* (videotape). Littleton, CO: Kids Are Worth It, 1990. ↩

4. Constructivists would talk about this as "scaffolding"; see Vygotsky, *Thought and language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). ↩

5. As Nicolas Wolterstorff discusses at length in *Educating for responsible action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), and *Educating for shalom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). ↩

6. Smith, *Desiring the kingdom: Worship, worldview, and cultural formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). ↩

7. See N. Beversluis, *Christian philosophy of education* (Grand Rapids, MI: National Union of Christian Schools, 1971). ↩