Christian Primary School Curriculum and its Biblical Basis

by Dr. Bruce McLennan

This article was part of a group of materials made available to me by Charles and Kathleen Webster. The contents of this article makes a fitting contribution to the continuing dialogue we need in the pursuit of excellence in Christian education. It also helps us to understand the sincerity of those in Scotland and other parts of the British Isles who seek to uncover a sound basis for the founding and development of Christian schools. The notes were added by the editor.

In the present day, far from heeding the challenging command of the apostle Paul, to "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. xii:2), the sad truth is that the Christian church has, by refusing to put into practice the admonition "that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), allowed her ranks to be infiltrated by the false views of the scientist and the philosopher (against which we are warned in Scripture, I Tim. vi:20; Col. ii:8; Acts xvii:18, 21, 32, 33). At a time when our modern world is sick unto death for want of a dependable authority, the church also is now deeply divided over the question of the authority of Scripture. For, as well as having to contend with the Relativist thinking of men such as John Dewey (John Dewey, pioneer of American educational theory, and one of the founders of the false philosophy of Pragmatism, which says something is true if it works, said "absolutely no absolutes," and everything today is being regarded as relative, and nothing as absolute), the church has also within its ranks today many exponents of Rationalism, which makes reason the ultimate test or norm of truth, and of Mysticism, which regards feelings, intuitions, mysterious experiences, conscience, etc. as the test of truth. Both Rationalism and Mysticism are *subjective* in the concept of authority. A further danger to the church, and a growing one, is the increasing acceptance, particularly in Reformed

circles, of a school of thought known as the Amsterdam Philosophy, which not only has four forms of the Word of God, but also goes outside of Scripture to science and philosophy to get a key for understanding the Bible.

In the face of the welter of conflicting opinion both in the world and in the church over such questions as "what is truth?", "what is dependable authority?", we make bold to affirm our adherence to a God-given, fully inspired, wholly reliable, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Bible for all matters of faith and practice. The historic Christian view of the authority of the Bible is: it is *objective.* Its authority does not come from inside of us, it is outside of us. We are subject to it, we are the recipients of it, but we do not contribute anything toward making it what it is. Scripture is authoritative because it is God-breathed, inspired of God. The first chapter of the Westminster Confession deals with questions such as these: what is true, what is right, what should we believe and how should we live? All the answers to these questions relate to the Bible as supreme authority. Later in the Confession, there is a section on the Bible as a means of grace. But only because the Bible is authority, and is true, can it be effective as a means of grace, in converting, in building up, and so on.

The Christian believer who holds to the sole authority of Scripture will most readily see the need to hold to, over against the false systems of men, a Biblical world-and-life view. And this is the basis upon which all education, whether in the home or in the school, should be founded. Three broad themes form the basis for the Biblical doctrine of education: 1) All things, as originally created by God were good, and were ideally and completely organized for their intended purpose, in perfect harmony with all the rest of God's creation (Gen. i:31). A primary aim of true education, therefore, must be the instruction of children in the knowledge of the true world God created, and wisdom to comprehend and apply that knowledge. 2) All things are now under the divine curse as a result of the Fall, so that there is a universal law of decay and death operating throughout the world (Rom. v:12; viii:22). 3) All things are yet the objects of Christ's redemptive work. Christ became man in order to redeem men and the entire creation (Col. i:21; Eph. i:10; Rom. viii:21; 2 Pet. iii:7; Heb. i:3; Acts xvii:28). Thus we find the Trinity involved in the realm of truth — God as Creator of all Truth, Christ as Sustainer and Redeemer of all Truth, and the Holy Spirit as the Revealer of all Truth.

With the above three principles as the foundation of all true education, the following observations will naturally meet with agreement: we must first erase from our minds the prevalent dichotomy that we tend to entertain between physical truth and religious truth; it is now possible to proceed with a curriculum of integrated studies, in which various matters and subjects not only bear relation to each other, but also to a central focal point; that centre of focus is, and must be, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all true knowledge and true wisdom dwell (John xiv:6; Col. ii:3). And with such wonderful passages as Colossians i:16-20 and Romans xi:33-36, showing Christ as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of all things, and the inexhaustible greatness and variety of God's knowledge and wisdom, to encourage us, the challenge is before us to structure the educational curriculum of our children that they may truly learn to understand and appreciate the world about them, and come to love and adore their Creator. It is interesting that in the first reference to teaching in Scripture (Gen. xviii:19), God's commendation to Abraham indicates that the primary purpose of his instruction to his son was moral and spiritual, rather than vocational or cultural. (This is emphasized repeatedly throughout Scripture, e.g., Deuteronomy vi:6, 7; II Timothy iii:15; Ephesians vi:4.) In a day in which there is no true understanding of what truth is in educational circles, and where situation ethics has become the ruling moral philosophy, Christian parents ought the more to appreciate that the foundation of education must lie in the recognition of God and His purposes, as revealed in the Scriptures of Truth.

How are we then to begin upon such an enterprise? The most sensible place to begin with children of early primary school age, whether they are to be taught at home, or in a Christian school, is with a study of origins; for the foundation of a Christian world-view must necessarily be its concept of origins. Here we may refer to one of the principles which should guide the Christian teacher in seeking to lead the pupils into the truth of any subject – the principle of carefully selecting material and facts which stand the test of Scripture. For while the children certainly ought to be aware of the errors of evolutionary teaching, etc., only sufficient should be taught them to show how erroneous the whole evolutionary system is. Let it be clearly understood that our approach is a positive one, in that we are seeking to instruct our children in that which is in accord with the revealed Work of God. But the problem of selecting materials is a major one, less so

perhaps in the realm of the natural sciences, more so with the social sciences, and increasingly so in the realm of fine arts. And since Christian wisdom is necessary here, it follows of necessity that only a mature Christian teacher could perform such a task, assisted by other willing helpers.

How does this work out in practice? By taking the first three chapters of Genesis, and breaking it down into its natural divisions, it is possible to present a learning programme, such as Mr. W.R. Mohan[1] has recently prepared, in which there would be lessons with titles such as "The Beginning," "Let there be Light," "Day and Night," "The Air," "Water," "Lights in the Sky," "Light-bearers," "Animal Life," "What is Man?" "Sabbath," "The Fall," etc. These lessons would take several hours to complete. If we take "Water" as an illustration of how things could be done – we would start by looking at what the Genesis account has to say about water, and establish a main theme, such, for example, as used in the *Joy in Learning* integrated curriculum, p. 100[2].

> God created the water for the benefit of all the living creatures. All the water in the creation works together in a continuous pattern that cannot be broken (water cycle). On the earth, water is found in many different places (bodies of water). Water is one of the essential things man needs with which to live. Part of man's task is to have dominion over the water: to enjoy, to care for, to use, and to develop water for the benefit of all people.

It would then be possible to proceed with the following topics: God's Plan for Water – the water cycle, division of water, water bodies. The Flood – before the Flood an even temperature on the earth; the changes after the Flood. Using Water for Living – for drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.; reservoirs. Food from Water – fishing, the work of fishermen. Minerals from Oceans – the riches to be found in the sea. Sailors – a brief history of sailing through the ages; a look at some of the famous lives here. Conserving and Misusing – the growing problem of pollution. Water for Pleasure – swimming, pleasure sailing, etc.

Interwoven into such a learning pack on water, and here is where some spade work must be done, would be sufficient Biblical references for pupils to establish from our sole authority, whatever Scripture has to say on the matter. (While the Bible is not a scientific textbook, we

ought to follow its teaching wherever God has been pleased to speak, e.g., Ecclesiastes i:7, on water.) And since we wish pupils to "experience" the truths, a vital part of such a course would nessarily involve some, if not all, of the following – visits to local rivers, reservoirs, experiments and calculations with water, the use of poetry, songs and stories dealing with aspects of water (here good use could be made of relevant Bible stories as well as other sources). A natural conclusion to such a core of work would then be to observe how in the Old Testament water is often used as a symbol of God's blessing and spiritual refreshment, and in the New Testament as a symbol for eternal life, God's supreme blessing.

The advantage of beginning a learning curriculum with a strong creationist emphasis lies in the fact that we will be providing a core of truth which can not only be interpreted in a way consistent with the Scriptures, but around which material relating to the very necessary skills of reading, writing, and numeracy can be arranged. The most important advantage of such a curriculum, however, is that it will set certain definite goals or objectives for the pupil, viz., that they may learn to appreciate the wonderful earth as part of God's divine creation, grasp something of the perfections of God as displayed in that creation, and learn to see the earth in relation to the different parts of the universe. Further, that they may understand that the present chaos and disorder in the world is the result of the Fall and the Flood (everything was once "very good"), and that they may learn how to conduct themselves in a still wonderful, though now marred society and environment.

Such an introductory curriculum would serve as a springboard from which to launch into further areas of study, such as a more detailed study of the earth-man's home, plant and animal life, the history of man, and human relationships and government.

NOTES BY EDITOR:

1) W.R. Mohan (A.I.B., M. Inst. A.M.), is a graduate of the University of Manchester with a teacher's certificate. He has prepared *A Primary Curriculum* and a Biblically based learning pack (called "In the Beginning") relating ourselves and the world around us to our glorious creator.

2) *Joy In Learning* is described as an integrated curriculum for the elementary school by the editors Arnold H. DeGraff and Jean Otthuis. This was produced in 1973 and 1975 by the Curriculum Development

Center associated with the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ontario Canada. The expressed viewpoint of the work is stated in the Preface. ". . .we have attempted to rewrite the textbooks themselves, or to put it plainly, to describe the facts from a Biblical point of view. It is our conviction that facts do not exist by themselves but are always humanly known facts, revealing our view of life. As Christians, therefore, we are bound to look ever at the common things of life like butterflies and flowers, leaves and snow, fire engines and subways, quite differently. In keeping with this view, our aim has been to reformulate the contents of children's learning experiences themselves so that they might learn to look at life from a Biblical perspective."

My Philosophy of Education

by Deane Wassink

Mr. Deane Wassink is now teaching at Covenant Christian School of Newtownabbey, North Ireland. (Cf. article about "Protestant Reformed Teacher Goes to Ulster,") p. 9.)

(This paper was written for a senior class at Hope College just before I did student teaching under supervising teacher John Kalsbeek. I must admit that I have learned much since I wrote this paper. Nevertheless, I still believe what I wrote here and have implemented most of my ideas in the classroom. The paper is divided according to the answers I was required to give to three questions given by the professors.)

I. Personal Commitment

My commitment to education stems from a more basic commitment, my love of God and desire to serve Him. Because of the wonder of grace that God has accomplished in me, in thankfulness I seek to live my whole life in such a way that it brings glory and honor to Him. All my wants, all my hopes, all my conduct is subservient to that one purpose. Out of that basic commitment arises my desire to serve the cause of God in this world, His church. All my talents and abilities are His to command. I purpose to use them in ways that will build up