

Developing Christian Character

A fundamental question for those involved in Christian Education must surely be: "What sort of person do I hope and pray will emerge from our school?" Properly understood, education entails the formation and development of our students as persons. Unfortunately, the demands of examinations, the need for qualifications, the pressure to be seen to be a 'successful' school in a competitive market and the requirement placed on teachers by governments around the world 'to raise standards' can easily cause schools to lose sight of that and focus on just conveying academic information. The What If Learning approach is, however, fundamentally concerned with the sort of people that will emerge from the experience of learning that Christian teachers create in their classrooms. It focuses on how academic information contributes to personal formation by giving attention to the learning that students experience.

Christian education should offer a distinctive vision of what it means to be a person made in God's image. Theologians write on this subject at length and a website such as What If Learning can only scratch the surface. In designing the website, we have decided to take the three Christian virtues of faith, hope and love as a practical way for classroom teachers to develop this Christian vision. During his ministry on earth, Jesus had plenty to say about the Kingdom of God. Again, much has been written on this subject, but one essential element is that the Kingdom offers a vision of the new heaven and the new earth that will be established when Christ returns and God's rule is finally established. In the meantime, we live in the period between Christ's first and second comings and, as such, we experience a foretaste of life in God's Kingdom, even though we also experience the reality of fallen human nature. Growing into Christ entails learning to live more in the experience of New Creation and less in the experience of the Fall; it's about maturing in the practice of faith, hope and love.

One of the prime functions of Christian education is, then, to introduce students to what it means to belong to God as part of His Kingdom. This entails inspiring them to live life now in the light of God's assured future. An important aspect of the Christian life is therefore to seek to be more loving, more faithful, more hopeful now as an expression of obedience to God and in the knowledge that to love, hope and be faithful in a perfect way is the ultimate destiny of God's followers. Christian education should encourage this, supporting pupils in developing towards being the persons that God wants them to be. It is, therefore, concerned with the formation of Christian character and the development of Christian wisdom and Christian virtues.

Character is formed by the year-in, year-out development of patterns of thought, response and behaviour that become part of who we are. Following Christ is not, in the final analysis, about keeping rules, nor even about following Christian principles and values, as important as rules, values and principles are. Rather it is being a particular type of person, one who is shaped by Jesus' teaching; someone whose life is an embodied anticipation of the Kingdom yet to come. Christian

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character results from years of wise choices becoming second nature, whereby dispositions to think and act in Christian ways are nurtured as the Holy Spirit works in us. Sometimes it is thought, wrongly, that character is only a moral dimension when, in fact, it manifests itself in the spiritual, social, intellectual and other dimensions of life. A person of Christian character is someone then who foreshadows God's wise rule in all these dimensions in the sort of person they are.

What If Learning offers a Christian approach to learning that is fundamentally concerned with developing Christian character through the design and management of learning experiences in classrooms. The [three steps](#) facilitate this. In seeing anew the teacher is essentially setting the learning of subject knowledge in the wider context of its meaning and significance in God's Kingdom. It is in this step that the teacher considers how the lesson to be taught can contribute to the students' understanding of a Christian worldview and how that shapes character through the development of faith, hope and love. In choosing engagement and reshaping practice, the teacher then designs learning experiences that serve to promote this new way of 'seeing'. The aim is that the students have an embodied experience of seeing their academic work anew through the activities and practices that they experience in the classroom.

Christian character, of course, arises out of a relationship with God through Christ. However this does not mean that the development of Christian character is not an appropriate teaching goal for students who may not themselves be Christians. One of the functions of education is for pupils to be offered a vision of being human even if they themselves do not, in the end, embrace it. It therefore makes complete sense in a Christian school for all students to be offered a Christian vision of personhood. After all, God's vision of what it is to be human applies to all people, irrespective of whether they are Christian or not, although the decision to follow Christ is, of course, the student's.

In a Christian school it is extremely important that all the students should feel valued and significant members of the school community. As in a Christian family, it would be quite wrong for children to be treated as less significant because they were not themselves Christians, either because they had not yet made a personal commitment or even if they had for some reason turned away from God. So just as in a Christian family the parents will nurture Christian virtues in all their children irrespective of whether they are Christians, so should a Christian school. To do this for all the children in our school is to express God's love for them.

In our experience, many people who are not themselves Christians are attracted to this distinctively Christian approach with its emphasis on quality of relationships, the development of virtues, the promotion of wisdom and the setting of the academic in the context of meaningful beliefs and values. This should not be a surprise since everyone, Christian or not, reflects God's image and is therefore usually inherently attracted to behaviour reflecting His Kingdom.

Christian schools should be distinctively Christian institutions. Ultimately this is all about nurturing faithfulness to Christ and His teaching in all members of the school community. It is about being a community where learning to see and act in the light of a Gospel vision is a core task. It is about developing a community where learning to be co-workers with God in the foreshadowing of his

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Kingdom is central. A Christian school is then a distinctively Christian community through being a signpost to the Kingdom of God for the wider world; a community where Christian virtues and Christian wisdom are treasured and practised in the classroom experience of teaching and learning.

Further reading

Michael W. Austin & R. Douglas Geivett (eds), *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012)

Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: weaving together belief and behaviour* (Downers Grove: IVP books, 1996)

Michael Jensen, "The Creature who Learns: A Theological Anthropology for Christian Education" in Trevor Cairney, Bryan Cowling & Michael Jensen, *New Perspectives on Anglican Education: Reconsidering Purpose and Plotting for a Future Direction* (Sydney: Anglican Education Commission, 2011)

Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007)

Tom Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010)