

COVENANT HIGH SCHOOL Evening Service
“The *Telos* of Christian Education”
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
November 12, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

In explaining what we are about at Covenant High School we use terminology that has now become commonplace in the promotional literature of Christian education. We talk about inculcating a “Christian worldview.” We speak of our education being offered from “a biblical perspective.” We speak of Holy Scripture as the lenses through which we view the world and everything in it. These are now stock phrases that you will find in the literature produced by countless Christian high schools nowadays and, as well, by almost every Christian institution of higher learning.

The problem with this now so common way of speaking is that these are phrases with no generally accepted meaning. A “Christian worldview,” it turns out, is a wax nose that, in many cases, means little more than that those teaching the classes are Christians themselves. To teach from a “biblical perspective” it is now clear means different things to different people, depending upon how they understand the Bible and how they understand the material of their own discipline. The biblical perspective of an evangelical neo-Darwinian obviously is not the biblical perspective of an evangelical who does not believe that Darwinism is compatible with the Christian faith. But it is hardly only in biology that Christian convictions diverge in substantial ways.

Take, for example, how much Christians differ from one another in their view of how Christian faith ought to shape one’s understanding of history. There is a popular school of evangelical Christian writers of American history, for example, for whom the intervention of God in history is readily detectable and ought to be the chief theme of Christian historiography. These writers, for example, give us an account of the American Revolution in which God, in various ways, delivers the army of George Washington from disaster time and time again. It is obvious to these writers that God was on the side of the colonists and fought against the British army in just the way in which God aided Israel against the Philistines in the days of Samuel and David. God used thunder against the Philistines at Mizpah and he used a storm and fog to rescue Washington from the British on Long Island. Not only is history the story of God’s working in the world, the historian is able to detect the divine hand and interpret the divine purpose in the events that occur.

Evangelical Christian academic historians, almost without exception, dismiss this interpretation of history as irresponsible and indefensible. Who can say what the divine purposes may be in any particular instance? What is more, who can say whom God is “for” and whom he is “against” in such a case as the American revolution, when there were as many Christians on one side as the other, when the question of the morality of the revolution is such a difficult and complex question of Christian ethics, and when the results of subsequent history cannot be used to prove one position or the other. For example, more British missionaries than American gave their lives to the evangelization

of the world in the 19th century. And Britain ended slavery in its imperial dominions well before the Americans did!

What is more, they point out that this assumption that we can interpret the ways of God is not only unbiblical, indeed contrary to the Bible's plain-speaking about the mystery of God's ways, but it leads inevitably to the unattractive spectacle of Christians claiming divine approval for contrary positions. Both Christians of the North and the South were convinced that God was on their side, as Abraham Lincoln famously reminded us in his Second Inaugural Address. And still today the same counter-claims are made. Some writers of what is sometimes called "Christian history" see the civil war as God's instrument by which he punished the South for the iniquitous institution of slavery. But others of the same school, see the civil war as God's judgment on the United States, on that northern culture already moving at full speed away from its Christian roots. The cruel destruction of the Christian civilization of the American South was, according to this theory, in fact, divine judgment on the North, leaving it as it did without the sanctifying influence of Southern Christianity. One thing is clear. In the matter of writing and teaching history, people mean very different things when they speak of studying history from a "Christian perspective."

Or, to provide another example of the elasticity of this terminology now so prevalent in Christian education, there is the dispute about whether there is or can be a distinctly Christian education in what are nowadays often referred to as the *hard* sciences. How, it is asked by Christians themselves will a Christian teach differently than a non-Christian the interior world of the cell or the periodic table or the laws governing the combination of atoms. Facts are facts and they are the same for an unbeliever as for a believer. All truth is God's truth, as we often hear, and so there is no such thing as an unbelieving periodic table. This argument is made even more forcefully with regard to mathematics. What difference does it make if the formulas of algebra or calculus are taught by a believer or an unbeliever? There seems to be nothing closer to a brute fact, a fact that neither requires nor is subject to interpretation, than the Pythagorean Theorem. I read some years ago Simon Singh's fascinating book, *Fermat's Enigma: the Epic Quest to Solve the World's Greatest Mathematical Problem*, the story of the centuries' long search for a solution to an age-old mathematical puzzle. Few of the figures in that story of remarkable intellectual achievement were followers of Jesus Christ, so far as I could tell, but there is no doubt that the understanding of mathematics was advanced in pursuit of the solution to that problem. Facts are facts whether Christians discover them or teach them or not. So how can we speak of teaching math *from a Christian perspective*?

Now, there is much to be said about all of this. I see very clearly the problems with the sort of historiography that purports to know the mind of God in the events of the past. It is obvious how susceptible that way of thinking is to the temptation to invoke God on behalf of the outcomes we approve. On the other hand, I am not sure, for example, that the Bible permits us to believe that a nation or a civilization has ever been catastrophically destroyed – such as the South in the American Civil War or Germany at the end of the Second World War – without that destruction being the judgment of God and an anticipation of the final judgment of the wicked. There are Christian academic

historians who would decline to assert that the rubble that was Berlin at the end of the Second World War was the aftermath of divine judgment. But the Bible provides us with a great many examples of nations – pagan nations and nations in covenant with God – suffering catastrophic military defeat, and in every single case it was an instance of divine judgment. Contrarily, the Bible provides us with no instance of a nation devastated by war that was, in fact, not suffering the wrath of God. Job may suffer appalling affliction for no sin of his own, but the Bible does not teach us to suppose the same is true of nations that have no covenantal relationship to God.

The Bible does not teach us to imagine that we know the mind of God or can tell his purposes, but it certainly does provide a framework in which we are to analyze and seek to understand the meaning of events. Intellectual modesty that respects the very definite limits of our knowledge is not to be confused with a skepticism that imagines that we know nothing of what God is about in our world.

And even in mathematics there are questions of religion and theology that bear on the subject. Mathematicians in the higher echelon of the science will tell you that the question is still very much debated whether mathematics is the imposition of an order upon nature or the discovery of an order that already exists and is intrinsic to nature. That is, at last, a theological question: in math are we thinking God's thoughts after him; are we, as it were, detecting his genius in the discovery of mathematical principles, or are we performing an act of creative sovereignty, in imitation of God, when we bring order to nature by imposing upon it a structure of our own. Is mathematics an instance of naming the world, as man named the animals and so expressed his sovereignty over them, or is it rather a species of listening to God and learning to obey his commands? It is not hard to see how mathematics, understood in either way, can be fit into a Christian worldview, and made the more important because it does so, with respect even to its deepest nature.

One could go on and on with questions of this type. I only want to say at this point that merely to claim that instruction or education comes from a biblical perspective or that it inculcates a Christian worldview tells us very little. What is meant by such terms? How is the Bible's teaching applied to the various disciplines in a particular school? Those are the questions to ask and, frankly, answering them wisely and well is no easy task; nor is executing the vision when once a school believes to have found it. That is what we are about at Covenant High School. I believe a great beginning has been made but I'm equally sure that both Mr. Hannula and Mr. Miller believe that the full integration of the truth of Holy Scripture into a school curriculum and into any teacher's instruction is a life-long enterprise and, like sanctification itself, must always remain a work in progress.

But there is a component to authentic Christian education, indeed to any true education, that is much more simple to identify and much easier to teach. This is a part of a Christian worldview, of a Christian perspective on life and learning that is hugely important and more immediately accessible in all the disciplines. I refer to what philosophers call *teleology*, the purpose of things. *Telos* is the Greek word for "end" or "goal" or "purpose" and so *teleology* is the investigation of the purpose of things. The Bible teaches us in all of its parts, repeatedly and emphatically, that there is a purpose for

everything under heaven and that the fulfillment of that purpose is the real measure of a thing and whether something is truly good or worthy or important. In general we are told that all things are *from* God, *to* God, and *for* God. We are told that no matter what we do, whether in word or in deed, we are to do it all *to the glory of God*. Our Lord Jesus made a point of constantly bringing us back to the *motive* or the *purpose* with which we spoke or thought or acted. He was always evaluating human life *teleologically*, always going down to the bottom of things, because human beings, alone among God's creatures have motives. *And motives are the measure of everything*. Don't suppose that this is not an issue today. "Why" is the question that virtually no one is asking in American public education from elementary school to the university!

We are reminded of this in the text we read this evening. Paul, in his famous "love chapter," in a passage with immediate implications for education – notice Paul's reference to knowledge and the understanding of all mysteries – I say, Paul makes motive the key, the essential measure of life. If I become a highly competent man or woman, if I become a learned man or woman, if I become a wealthy man or woman – the very goals of most modern education – even if I become a man or woman who acts in some ways to the benefit of others, if I do not act for love and from love – and Paul means, of course, Christian love, the love of God and Christ in us and through us – then I am a zero, a nothing, a failure, and at last have squandered my life. Paul, of course, as he always does, is considering a human life and, all the more, a Christian life *eschatologically*. He is thinking of life as God judges it and *will* judge it. The chapter concludes in vv. 11 and 12 with two analogies that confirm and illustrate the point of vv. 8-10, viz. the contrast between the present with the future and the imperfect with the perfect. Our lives must be judged *now* as they will someday be judged *forever*.

The reason he says in v. 13 that love is the greatest thing, greater even than faith and hope is precisely because love will remain in the next world when faith has become sight and hope has become fruition and fulfillment. The Christian life is precisely that life lived *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the vantage point, from the perspective, with a view to eternity. We live by faith, Paul says several times in other places, because we live in view of a world we cannot yet see, a judgment that has not yet become visible to men.

Now *at this point* there can be no question of the immense difference a Christian education should make. Here it is surely obvious that a Christian school should be a very different place and should take a very different approach and should educate according to very different principles and standards than schools that are not founded on the teaching of Holy Scripture and do not intend to educate their students from the perspective of the truth found in Holy Scripture. It is precisely this perspective of faith and of the looming future that should transform everything that is said and done in the pursuit of an education.

As we said, someone may well ask, what difference does it make whether algebra is taught by a Christian or a non-Christian? The formulas are the same, what must be learned is the same in both cases. Surely there are teachers in public schools who understand trigonometry better than some Christian school teachers do and can teach the

principles more effectively. Well, as I said, fundamental perspectives apply to algebra also and those only a Christian can teach accurately; only a Christian teacher can invest mathematical formulas with eternal meaning as an expression of the creative genius of God, both in making nature and in making the human mind. But, moreover, there is another question: to what purpose is mathematics or biology or history or any other academic discipline taught? *Why* should a student learn this material? To what purpose would he or she use it in later life? This is the *why* of algebra, or, for that matter, chemistry, or history, or English literature. But Christians who know the truth about time and eternity *are the only ones who can answer that question accurately* and, in the final analysis, this is far and away the most important question to ask about anything. Why? For what purpose? What is the point?

If a young man or woman is taught to navigate this world, to make a worldly success of himself or herself, to get a job and make a living apart from God, utterly unmindful of the purpose for which he was given life, utterly uncaring of those motives by which God will judge her life, what has a school done? It has taught him to be a zero, a nothing, a failure. *He has been taught to do things for the wrong reason, to do them without the motive that makes the doing of them a good thing, a valuable thing, an honorable thing.* We have Paul's word for that. Even the best schools, for all their apparent success, have become, in fact, engines of human catastrophe, preparing people to live in that way in this world that guarantees them misery in the next! Are we not seeing the evidence of this on every hand? Of course we are!

Christians are often too complacent about these things. Under the pressure of the world's relentless propaganda, they are often seduced into thinking that there is some objective virtue in knowledge. But it is not so; no more than there is in money or power or fame or pleasure. Knowledge is as likely to ruin the soul as to save it and the Bible is full of illustrations of this danger. How is man described in the Bible? "Ever learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth." [2 Tim. 3:7] With his characteristic wit and insight, Malcolm Muggeridge observed in 1978,

"The most highly educated society in Western Europe elected Hitler and the highest density of universities per acre and per person is to be found in California. Need I say more?" [Cited in *Touchstone* (Dec. 2003) 27]

This world is God's world and any so-called knowledge that is not profoundly mindful of God, of God's purposes, and of God's glory; any knowledge that is not employed in his service is ignorance pure and simple, and it is the deeper ignorance for it being the studied betrayal and misuse of the truth. Much of what passes for education today prepares men and women for nothing else but a succession of days spent, in Wordsworth's phrase, "in a round of strenuous idleness." Much effort, even impressive effort, to be sure, much material mastered, but nothing accomplished, nothing that is good or right, nothing that will last, nothing that will adorn and dignify life once that life is subjected to the light of God's judgment.

Any true education – this is Paul’s point – must be theological and eschatological. If it does not take its point of departure from God as creator and its purpose from the soon coming last day, the consummation of all things, and the eternity that follows, education – however intellectually impressive – does not make a human life better, it makes it worse; it does not improve human life, it ruins it. Or we might say it improves it in order to ruin it, improves it temporarily in order to ruin it forever. We are not better off if we have modern conveniences and can send space probes to Mars and can penetrate the inner workings of the atom; we are not better off if we can land jobs that pay better – all the things that the world imagines to be the blessings of education – we are not better off if we use those things to the displeasure of God. We have increased human guilt for eternity. If modern conveniences only make us comfortable without God and without faith, then they are a ball and chain in every way that matters to the welfare and happiness of human beings. No one advertises an education by saying, “Come study with us; we know the tuition is high, but when you earn our diploma, you will be a slave to the deepest and darkest ignorance and well on your way to eternal misery and woe.” But that is what countless educators ought to say and would say if they had any real understanding of human life.

The craftsmen, the builders, the engineers that created that mighty temple to Amun at Karnak in Egypt were masters of many different kinds of knowledge. They were highly educated people. They built a sanctuary fully 300 acres in size. You could put the great cathedrals of Europe into a corner of it. It takes eleven adult men holding hands to get around one of its columns. It is a feat of engineering that still today takes the breath away. But no one worships Amun anymore and what of those men now, who used their genius to make idolatry more fashionable and impressive? Who is impressed with their engineering in hell? Yet how is the education that produced that magnificent temple to Amun different that the education so widely being offered today? No one advertises an education by saying “Come study with us, work hard in our classes, and when you have graduated you will be capable of devoting yourself to a variety of utterly pointless enterprises that will waste your life and leave you bereft of any hope for eternity.” But can any Christian deny that this is the actual effect of much of American education?

No, the *reason why* something is learned, the *reason why* something is done is finally the essential thing! The purpose for which something is learned, the purpose for which it is achieved, the purpose for which we devote our powers to anything is everything. Absolutely everything. It is everything to the one who alone will judge our lives and punish or reward us accordingly. So said the Lord Christ and so said the Apostle Paul after him.

Suppose a teacher were actually to say to his or her students: “Now I don’t want you to think about God or your life before him at all in this class. We are going to talk about the subject of this class, about reality, as if God did not exist. I want you to learn the material without reference to God. In this way I will make it more likely that later in your life you will employ this knowledge without a thought to God or his interests in your life. In this way you will learn to become successful in this world and live a comfortable life and never think about God or the future or the purpose for which you were given life.” Even

secularists might be offended to hear a teacher speak in such a fashion, but, of course, that is precisely the tendency of most education in the world today, including a good bit of what passes for Christian education.

We might be aghast to hear a teacher say such a thing, but would we fully realize that what would result in that class would not be education; it would not be learning at all? It would not deserve the name. If you mix some truth together with massive error you are not educating the mind, you are darkening it, and the presence of some truth only makes the distortion more convincing. *The purpose of a thing is the main thing* and any education that omits or distorts the purpose of knowledge is false, inauthentic, deceitful, and destructive.

John Newton once spoke of an acquaintance of his who was, as we would say, very learned. He knew the biblical languages intimately. He could read the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek. But, said Newton, he couldn't see in the Bible the glorious truth that any unlearned Christian can see. He was blind. No one advertises an education by saying, "Study with us and by the time you earn your diploma, you won't *really* understand a blooming thing!" Newton's sophisticated acquaintance was a dolt, despite all his learning; the simple Christian knew the fabulously important things he did not. Newton went on, "A man may be able to call a broom by twenty names, in Latin, Spanish, Dutch, Greek, and so on. But my maid, who knows the way to *use* a broom, but knows it by only one name," is the better educated and the more learned. [Cited in Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, 166] Look at life from the vantage point of eternity, see the judgment day looming above you, and to have mastered Greek or chemistry or calculus or English literature with no thought of God or interest in his will looks like a very bad bargain.

We are hearing a great deal nowadays about the crisis in American education. American young people are graduating from high school and college and too many of them still do not have the skills that our economy requires. We worry about losing our competitive edge in the world economy. Well, perhaps so. But no Christian with a Bible in his hands should be overmuch worried about that. He should be a great deal more concerned about multitudes of young people graduating from school who have been very successfully taught to think and to live without regard to God or eternity. The simple, punishing facts are these: you can be relatively ignorant about many things, about most things, and, as a result, never acquire much power or comfort in this world, but if you know God and Christ and seek to live for the glory of God and the good of your neighbor, you will go from this world to a world of endless joy where you will become everything a human being should be, in mind, in heart, in spirit, and in body. Contrarily, you can know all sorts of things and exploit your knowledge to obtain a comfortable, even an important life in this world and, for all your pains, a few years later fall helpless into a world of endless woe which you must endure in a disintegrated human personality, all of your former powers only serving to mock your present pointlessness. As John Bunyan bluntly put it: "One hour in hell will burn up all the pleasure of a sinful life in this world."

Any education that fails to do justice to this appalling truth is no education at all. Anyone, Paul says, who has not learned to love God and man with what he knows is a zero, a failure, a pretense of human life. Therefore, in addition to the specific perspectives that Christian faith and biblical truth will invest in the various disciplines taught in a modern school, a theological vision of learning if you will, there is this fundamental integration of motive into every part and parcel of learning. And it takes a school, along with so much else – the nurture of parents and church supremely – to inculcate this fundamental purpose and principle of living.

Sight has a terrible power to weaken faith. It is hard, very hard to keep the unseen future in full view, vivid and real. Sight overwhelms our faith every day. So faith must be asserted countless times and in regard to everything, always. The young mind, the mind that is being formed, must find the future as God has revealed it – and the motives that derive from that future – must find that future everywhere: in chemistry class, in the study of literature, in interactions with teachers, in everything. Only in that way is a young Christian mind invested with a Christian worldview. Christian education, true education, is not unlike filling a bucket with holes. Sin ensures that much leaks out, but if enough is poured in the bucket will finally be full.

Near the end of the Middle Ages Latin had fallen on hard times. The elegant classical tongue had been debauched and the universities – nothing ever changes does it – had filled the language with so much technical jargon that no one could understand what was being said who hadn't read the same books or attended the same lectures as the speaker or writer. Latin had become the language of specialists rather than of poets and popular philosophers. It had come to lack any connection to real life. Ordinary people couldn't understand it anymore. *Oxoniensis loquendi mos*, the Oxford way of speaking, became a term of reproach to describe this fallen standard of Latin; the once great language now the opaque and ugly speech of the singularly boring. Much like what the academy has done to poetry in our time!

Well there is an unbelieving way of speaking also. *Incredulorum loquendi mos*. A way of speaking about everything, about every aspect of reality, that leaves out everything that makes that reality important, grand and thrilling; that leaves out God and the eternal future. Christians must be taught – and it is a lesson hard to teach – to find that way of speaking boring, crabbed, dull, lifeless, insipid, and dangerous for the false, the utterly false impression it conveys. They must learn a Christian way of speaking about everything, about all reality. A way of speaking that is full of God, of Christ, of the origin and purpose of all things, and of the future that determines the meaning of everything in the present; *a way of speaking that sizzles with ultimate reality! A Christian way of thinking and of speaking*: that is the goal of true education. And if you have God's purpose shot through the thinking and the speaking, you will get the hard work, the application, the learning of chemistry and calculus and all the rest as well. *No one will be less well prepared for life with such an education!* After all, as Paul says here, what we are after is *a way of life*, a true way of life that is glorifying to God and useful to others, wonderfully useful. An education ought to create such a way of life but only a Christian education can. Only that education can explain why love lies at the root of everything!