

Christian Education: Soul Formation

Dear children of God,

A 2019 Barna Poll found that 99% of Protestant pastors believed that the responsibility to educate their children belongs with the parents first, and the church second. The broader Christian community third, the public school fourth, and the government last – indicating also the public schooling and the government are seen as negative influences in the lives of children.

And yet, despite the fact that 99% of Protestant pastors thought parents bore the chief responsibility to educate their children, 86% of Protestant Christians send their children to public school.

Of the 86% of public schooled Christian children, 63% end up leaving the faith and the church. That is almost 2/3rds.

“He who walks with the wise will become wise, but a companion of fools will suffer harm.” ([Proverbs 13:20](#)) Paul echoed these words in Philippians saying, “Do not be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals.” ([1 Corinthians 15:33](#))

In 2019, the CREC conducted their own internal poll, consisting of 1063 adult children of members.

Astonishingly, 949–89%—remained Christians as adults.

Compare that to Barna's 64% dropout rate. What's the difference? The CREC's commitment to Christian education, is a key factor.

The CREC has a Memorial Statement on Christian Education, which declares:

“God has explicitly commanded parents to bring up their children in the education and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Given the impossibility of neutrality in education, we do heartily affirm the necessity of educating our children in a manner that is explicitly Christian in content and rigor. While parents who do not fully understand the indispensability of Christian education should be warmly received into membership, we nevertheless encourage Christian parents to seek alternative to the government school system. In cases, where Christian education is an impossibility, parents must be active and diligent in overseeing the education of their children.”

The Goal of Education:

So one of the things we expect for you parents, is that you will give your children a Christian Education.

But what exactly is a “Christian Education?”

Or, maybe a more basic question is, “What is education?” and “What is an education for?”

Many people today think that education is:

Information Transfer

Many see education as the process of learning facts, memorizing data, and receiving instruction from teachers. It's about “getting the right answers” and passing tests.

Skill Development

Others view it as training for life and work—learning how to read, write, solve problems, use tools, and communicate effectively.

Education as Socialization

Education is also seen as the way people learn to live in society—how to follow rules, respect authority, work with others, and understand cultural norms.

Education as a Means to an End

For many, it's simply a stepping-stone to something else—college, career, financial security, or success in life.

But none of these actually gets at the heart of what true education is.

The word ‘education’ comes from the Latin *ēducātiō*, meaning "a rearing, training, or bringing up." It derives from the verb *ēducāre*, which means "to lead forth, bring up, or rear"

At the heart of education, according to the etymology of the word, is the idea of maturation and growth. Many think that the mind is the primary object of education. But Southern Presbyterian Minister R.L. Dabney, in his masterful essay “On Secularized Education,” spoke about education as Soul Formation:

“It is properly the whole man or person that is educated; but the main subject of the work is the spirit. Education is the nurture and development of the whole man for his proper end. The end must be conceived aright in order to understand the process. Even man's earthly end is predominantly moral.”

Do you hear that? “Education is the nurture and development of the whole man for his proper end. The end must be conceived aright in order to understand the process.” In other words, knowing the true purpose, or goal, of education is necessary to know how one is to go about giving an education.

At its heart, education is not about getting high test scores or is it merely to get college admissions, nor is it job

placement, or career. Education is about **soul development**, the training of a person toward the development of virtue, and **maturity in Christ**.

What is the chief end of Man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

What is the chief end of education? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

The purpose of education should not be separated in our minds from the purpose of Christian discipleship. When talking about education, we are talking about raising up our children to become godly believers in the Lord Jesus.

Ephesians 4 likewise teaches the purpose of education and Christian discipleship is to grow up into Christ. It says that God gave “teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which

it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

The Necessity of Religious Education

So, if education is about growing up, soul formation—and if God gave teachers to help us to grow up into Christ, as Ephesians 4 says, then that means that kind of education that we must give our children is a fundamentally Christian education.

Now when I said you must give your children a Christian education, I am afraid you heard me say that you ought sprinkle a little bible in to your Math, English, Science, or History. But what I actually mean is that the primary core subject that Christian children are to learn is religion.

Again, let me clarify myself. I did not say that religion ought to be one of the subjects included in with Math, English, Science, and History. That kind of mindset is the result of us being catechized by secularism.

Remember what secularism is. **Secularism** is the belief that religion should be kept separate from government, laws, and public institutions like schools. It says that society should be run by human reason and democratic values,

like pluralism, not religious rules or teachings. In effect, secularism is the public religion that says that no other religions ought be the public religion except secularism.

And in order to accommodate that, the secular school systems made the teaching of Math, Science, Social Studies (not even history), English, the core curriculum. It was the intentional undoing and repudiation of distinctly Christian and religious education.

R.L. Dabney, again, writes:

"First, No people of any age, religion, or civilization, before ours, has ever thought (secular education was possible). Against the present attempt, right or wrong, stands the whole common sense of mankind. Pagan, Papist, Mohammedan, Greek, Protestant, have all hitherto rejected any other education than one grounded in religion, as absurd and wicked..."

Dabney goes on to quote 19th Century Lawyer and U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, Daniel Webster to same effect:

"In what age, by what sect, where, when, by whom, has religious truth been excluded from the education of youth? Nowhere. Never! Everywhere, and at all times, it has been regarded as essential. It is of the essence, the vitality of useful instruction?"

Dabney continues and adds the testimony of Horace Binney, another 19th century lawyer and US Representative from Pennsylvania, who was even more adamant than Webster:

"Let another witness be heard, of equal learning and superior character: "It must be acknowledged to be one of the most remarkable phenomena of our perverted humanity, that among a Christian people, and in a Protestant land, such a discussion" (whether the education of youth may not be secularized) "should not seem as absurd as to inquire whether school- rooms should be located under water or in darksome caverns! The Jew, the Mohammedan, the follower of Confucius, and of Brahma, each and all are careful to instruct the youth of their people in the tenets of the religions they profess, and are not content until, by direct and reiterated teaching, they have been made acquainted with at least the outline of the books which contain, as they believe, the revealed will of Deity. Whence comes it that Christians are so indifferent to a duty so obvious, and so obviously recognized by Jew and Pagan?""

People of God, what I am saying to you is this: Christian Children are to receive a thoroughly Christian Religious Education. And that means that the Bible ought to be the chief text book of our children's education. The Bible ought not to be merely sprinkled on top of a secular education.

A Christian child ought to be taught the basics of their faith. The general story line of the bible, a summary of its parts, how Christ is the fulfillment of major OT types and prophecies, the doctrine of God, Christ, salvation, the church, the sacraments, and the last things. Children ought also to be catechized, and even be taught the rudiments of church history. Be even more basic than any of that would be to know the 10 commandments, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, Apostles Creed.

Now what the Church provides you with in terms of the teaching we give you on the Lord's Day in worship and Sunday School, and even Wednesday nights, that cannot be the whole of your child's religious education. What we provide is a supplement to help you improve upon the religious teaching that is happening at home.

If the whole goal of education is to grow up into Christ, that is, to be sanctified, then the only source of knowledge that we have to achieve such an end is a proper and full education in the Word of God.

John 17:17 Jesus prays: *Father sanctify them in the truth. Thy Word is Truth.*

Parents, before you worry about whether your child has enough "credits" to satisfy the graduation standards of the

secular state—or whether they'll land a well-paying job—you must first concern yourselves with something far more important: the religious formation of their souls. The chief end of education is spiritual. It is to raise your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, and therefore, the Bible must be the central textbook in your curriculum.

In our home, no matter what subject my children were studying, the ultimate concern was never merely the subject itself. The deeper question was always about character. When my son was learning math, the lesson wasn't mainly about numbers—it was about developing the virtue of perseverance, of learning to do hard things without giving up.

When the children fought over chores like who would wash the dishes or clean the bathroom, the issue was never really about dishes or bathrooms. It was about cultivating brotherly love.

This is true education: the shaping of the soul through the pursuit of virtue. It is moral formation aimed at glorification—at becoming like God.

In 2 Peter 1:3–11, we are given a model Christian curriculum. There, Peter lays out eight virtues that belong to life in the school of Christ. Christ Himself is the chief

teacher, forming your children into fruitful and forgiven followers—grounding them in the knowledge of God, training them in holiness, and delivering them from the corruption of the world. And if this education is pursued, Peter says, “there will be richly provided for them an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there

will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Education Trains the Soul in Virtue (v. 5–7)

Peter lays out a curriculum of the soul—faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. And if a Christian increases in these virtues this will help him to make his calling and election sure, and will provide for him or her an entrance into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Which is what we all desire most of all.

Faith

The first thing that must continually be taught your children over and over again, is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Find every opportunity to give thanks to God, to show your faith in Him. And let us recall the Heidelberg catechism briefly to help us remember what True Faith is.

True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word. At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.

Faith is accepting as true all that God has revealed about himself in his word, and especially faith is knowing you are forgiven of your sins, are justified, and have everlasting righteousness in Christ, and salvation out of the sheer grace of God. That is what faith is.

Virtue (Arete)

Virtue means moral excellence—strength, courage, and manliness. Peter calls us to reflect the glory and excellence of God Himself (v. 3). Virtue is the excellence praised even in pagan epics, now fulfilled and surpassed in Christ. It is the glory of man as Man. And Jesus is the True Man, the highest form of humanity, and we are called to be like Him. Thus Paul commands: “Act like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13). Virtue is the bold pursuit of holiness with spiritual energy and courage, united in manly glory.

Knowledge (Gnosis)

To our virtue, we must add knowledge. We must always be learning truth about God and His word. But intellectual knowledge is meant to lead to true, deep, personal knowledge of God through divine revelation. We move from knowing about God to truly knowing Him, as we submit our minds to Scripture, and as the Spirit gives us enlightenment and revelation of the knowledge of God in the Scriptures. And by faith, such knowledge blossoms into intimacy with Christ.

Self-Control (Temperance)

Knowing God in this way should lead us to Self-control, which is mastery over sinful desires. The greatest threats to our souls lie within us—lust, anger, covetousness. These inner traitors wage war on our souls. We must learn to say "no" to ourselves and mortify our flesh. Without this inner warfare, we invite defeat. By the Spirit, we discipline our bodies and passions, learning to love God more than our lusts.

Steadfastness (Perseverance)

But in order to have self-control you also need to learn Steadfastness or perseverance. Perseverance is self-control over a long period of time. It is faith's endurance under trial. True believers need to learn to hold fast with patience, trusting God's promises to deliver them even when suffering under the attacks of the flesh or some other enemy. The greatest threats we face aren't outward torture but impatience and apostasy. Yet the hope of resurrection gives us strength to stand fast. Remember, Jesus said that it is those who persevere to the end that will be saved (Matt. 24:13). Endurance shapes character, and character produces hope—a hope that will never shame us (Rom. 5).

Godliness (Eusebeia)

We ought also add to steadfastness Godliness. Godliness is not just internal piety, but visible devotion. It means “good

worship”—a life of reverent action. It is both internal faith and external expression: church attendance, prayer, praise, receiving the sacraments, hearing the Scriptures, and living according to a Christian culture. We honor Christ not only in spirit but in body. Jesus’ incarnation sanctifies both the spiritual and physical, so our faith must be lived outwardly as well as inwardly.

Brotherly Love (Philadelphia)

One of the best ways to be godly is to love the brothers. For 1 John 4:21 says: “*whoever loves God must also love his brother.*” Brotherly love is Christian friendship—deep affection and loyalty among fellow believers. Brotherly love is expressed in kindness, generosity, and meaningful friendships. We are impoverished without close friends. Godly friendship sanctifies us. We need a band of brothers (or sisters)—not just spouses and families, but companions in the faith who know and sharpen us.

Love (Agape)

Agape is sacrificial love—the self-giving love of God. It is the love of the cross, the love within the Trinity, and the love that defines our salvation. Early Christians practiced this love tangibly through generosity and care. Agape gives without expecting return. It pours itself out for others, as God did for us. This love binds all the other virtues together and is the mark of Christian maturity.

Conclusion

So as you are go about teaching your children this year, I want you to use the Bible and educate your children in the faith of Abraham, the virtue of Joshua, the knowledge of God like Samuel, the self-control of Joseph, the perseverance of Job, the godliness of Ezra, the brotherly affection of David and Jonathan, and the love of Jesus.

Let the stories of the saints, and sinners in the Bible form our moral imagination, and give your children a true education, one that is chiefly concerned with the formation of the soul of your children.

To aid you in this work, created a sample curriculum of how to teach the bible and virtue together. It is not at all perfect, and in it could use some improving. But I didn't want the perfect to be the enemy of the good, so I have presented what I have. Feel free to modify it for something you might think is helpful. If it is not helpful, disregard it. But I wanted to put something into your hands to help you think about how training in the virtues might look in as a formal, rather than an informal way. I sent it to your email this morning.

So, see to it that you remember to teach and learn these eight virtues, for by the cultivation of them, there will be richly provided for you and your children entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For that is truly the goal of all Christian Education. May God grant you the grace to help in the formation of the soul of your children this school year. Amen.