Christian Schooling

A spiritual act of worship

By Dr. Doug Blomberg

For many years, Romans 12:1–2 has been for me one of the key texts of scripture. So it surprised me when I learned just a few weeks ago how radical a text it really is. When Paul says, "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship," he takes terms that had their natural place in the rituals of the Jewish Temple or the Hellenistic mystery religions out of doors into the wide world of everyday life. In a flash, another phrase that had been a mantra for me was newly illuminated: H. Evan Runner's "Human life in its entirety is religion." Christian faith is not something to be expressed most fully within the walls of a sacred building, but in the fullness of the sacred space that is God's creation—"creation" being not just the "natural world," but also all things personal, social and cultural.

This revelation happened as I was reading an article about the early Christians' view of pagan schooling (Judge 1983). The author pointed out that there is only one mention in the New Testament of an act of worship occurring in a place where Christians were gathered (that is, as "church")—and this worship is offered by a hypothetical non-Christian who has wandered in and presumably knew no other response, given his experience of Jewish or pagan religious gatherings. Christians gathered primarily to share a fellowship meal, to sing psalms and spiritual songs to one another, to learn from one another of the Lord's purposes, and to stir one another up to love and good works—to spiritual acts of worship in the world.

Note that it is indeed *acts* that are in view: that which "pleased God [was] the commitment of one's practical life" (Judge 1983, 31). My habitual reading of the Romans text had focused on our calling to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. As a teacher, these verses were a clarion reminder that the disciplines we study at university and the subjects we teach in schools are not neutral, but require an inner biblical reformation. I still believe this to be the case, of course; the way we think about the world is too often shaped by the spirits of our age rather than by the Holy Spirit, too often distorted by idolatries that would find the source of order and meaning in something created instead of the Creator.

But more than our thoughts are at stake: sacrificing our whole selves concerns our way of being, not only our way of seeing. It has been observed that while we most often speak of "practicing Jews," we are more likely to talk of "believing Christians," which points to the emphasis placed (at least by Protestants) on holding correct doctrines. But many voices remind us that we need to be concerned with orthopraxy (faithful practice) as much—if not more—than orthodoxy, which bears out Paul's emphasis.

It is in fact a "practicing Jew" who brought home to me the significance of this for our choice of schooling for our children. Svi Shapiro (Shapiro 1998) is an outspoken advocate of public schooling and particularly of the need to ensure that all children—poor and rich, of all races—have access to education of high quality. When it comes to choosing a school for his own daughter when she graduates from her Jewish elementary school, however, he finds himself facing a serious dilemma. He knows that being Jewish is a way of life; he also knows that the daily routine of schooling itself inculcates a way of life, and that there is much in it that is contrary to the ethos of Judaism.

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Most parents know the importance of schooling for their children, and they naturally want them to attend a "good" school. But what do we understand by "good"? There is another text that jumps out at us when we ask this question, for it is inscribed on our hearts: "He has showed you ... what is good.... To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). We are to become certain kinds of people: under the new covenant, we are to become like Christ. No longer may we conform to the pattern of the world – in which worship is defined in terms of cultic practices – for a new mindset directs us to subject ourselves more and more, day by day, to God's perfect purposes.

The seedbed in which we learn the biblical virtues of justice, fidelity and humility (and the most excellent virtue that binds all the others together, the virtue of love) is the environment in which we are nurtured. The first essential for a school seeking to promote such values is that it must itself *be* such a community. "Mere rationality" is powerless to change how we act and who we are: a person must engage wholeheartedly in learning. C. S. Lewis (1967, 20) summed this up in typically pithy fashion when he said that he would rather play cards with someone who was "quite sceptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat,' than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers." Virtuous behavior—by no means limited to personal morality—requires more than intellectual justification. What girds a person in the face of life's varied challenges is not logical argument but integrity of character. Not mere rationality, but mere Christianity, is required.

Schools are commonly thought to have the goals of developing students as unique individuals,

productive workers, and conscientious citizens, in part by giving them access to valued cultural resources; they might also well be charged with preparing them for the vocations of spouse and parent, in an era when too many homes fail in this function. What is insufficiently acknowledged in schools is that each of these callings (and others besides) entails not just the mastery of skills and the acquisition of knowledge but becoming certain kinds of people—individuals who look not only to their own interests but the interests of others, workers who are industrious when no one is watching, citizens who value the common good more than their own particular needs, and spouses who covenant rather than merely contract with one another.

Critics point to the debilitating polarity between the meritocratic values of the market economy and the republican virtues of the democratic vision that frames the structure of North American schools (and to some extent schooling in any society with a capitalist economy). Is the mission of schools to educate students to be cooperative contributors to the democratic community or competitive individuals concerned primarily with their own achievement? The rhetoric advocates both; the reality has been too often that the "freedom" of individuals trumps the "equality" of all. Schools are more extensions of the marketplace than of the home; they are more standardized factory production lines than hospitable spaces where all are welcomed as unique bearers of God's image.

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Jesus challenges us to ask which sovereign reigns over our hearts—mammon or God? There can only be one. Yet Jesus elsewhere seems to give us an escape clause, one which centers (ironically, when money is the issue) on a coin. It is of course a characteristic form of response on his part to those who try to entrap him with a trick question, this time to do with taxes. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matt. 22:21). Either Jesus here is dividing the temporal from the spiritual, the secular from the sacred, to suggest that these realms legitimately operate according to different sets of principles—or he is tacitly rebuking his interrogators for being willing even to contemplate that the fullness of the earth could belong to anyone else but God. Jesus is no dualist, for he knows all authority has been vested in him (Matt. 28:18); his name is above every name and ultimately, every knee will bow before the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:9–11). The holistic vision that is so precious to the Reformed tradition is no hallucination. Schools, too, must ask which sovereign they serve.

If the coin bearing Caesar's head is a source of confusion, so too are the coins identified as "talents" in the parable of that name (Matt. 25:14–30). For these "talents" are not a person's "abilities," despite the conflation of these terms that has occurred since early Bible translations; rather, they are the opportunities provided so that the servants may develop their abilities in the master's service. We might rename the tale "The Parable of Opportunities Afforded." In the context of schooling, we should ask what kind of "talented environment" or "environmental affordances" are provided to enable students to develop their abilities in service of God (Barab and Plucker 2002).

But what indeed is it to serve God? The English language is a wonderfully complex but often perplexing inheritance. The word "service," though its ultimate origin is the Latin for "slave," entered English via French in the phrase "worship service"—a ritual celebrated in a sacred space under the jurisdiction of a "priest" in "holy orders." How different

this conception of both "worship" and "service" is from that taught by Paul, and how detrimental it is to the understanding that Christ's redemption touches the whole of life.

The parable of the talents (as our Bibles relate it) does not indicate what the coins are meant to represent, or what kind of service we are to render; I think it safe to assume that the primary lesson is not that we should try to make as much money as we can, though others may disagree. The parable is informed by and informs its companions, those parables that come before— the faithful and wicked servants, the ten virgins, the need to be always busy about the Lord's work— and the one that comes after, that of the sheep and the goats, which is explicit about what the Lord's work is. The last of Jesus' parables, just two days before his final Passover, tells us, as shocking as it sounds, that the suffering and oppressed are the "talents" presented to us; that acting justly and lovingly toward the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unprotected, the prisoner, is the Lord's work, our humble sacrifice of service—our worship. "He has showed you ... what is good."

Nicholas Wolterstorff has suggested that doing justice and struggling against injustice ought to be at the heart of the Christian college curriculum (Wolterstorff 2004). If worship is properly understood as an offering of one's whole self as a living sacrifice in service of God's reign of justice, I am certainly willing to argue that Christian schools ought to be animated by worship. Christian schools would then be readily distinguishable from those charter schools that offer character formation or an education in values at no cost to parents. Some parents have asked why they should choose a Christian school if a charter school is nearby. Only parents who hold to the sovereignty of Christ over every square inch of creation will consider the sacrifices entailed in funding Christian schooling worthwhile. But then, it is beholden on Christian schools to actually demonstrate in their practices that they honor God's sovereignty as absolute.

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