

Reimagining the Spiritual Development of our Students:  
The Critical Role of Integrity in Discipleship

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**Introduction:** Why does your school exist? And why have we gathered here? Some of us are members of other professional guilds that focus on other pursuits. One organization of which I am a member states its purpose as “a membership organization that develops programs, products, and services essential to the way educators learn, teach, and lead.” (ASCD website, September 13, 2010) Another administrative organization states that it “promotes excellence in middle level and high school leadership through research-based professional development, resources, and advocacy so that every student can be prepared for postsecondary learning opportunities and be workforce ready.” (NASSP website, September 13, 2010) So I ask us to pause for a moment and consider the question, “What’s Christian about Christian education?”

As soon as we grasp the significance of this question, we realize that Christian education has a uniquely *spiritual* component, and part of what makes Christian education distinct from modern education more generally is the fact that modern secular education has no seat at the table in any discussion of spiritual development. This paper focuses on the spiritual element of Christian education that sets what we as Christian educators do apart from what modern secular educators do. Notice that in framing the point this way I have made no mention of *what we as Christian educators teach*. While it is often the case that the Christian school present students with a body of knowledge distinct from that presented in non-Christian schools—i.e. Bible classes—the focus of my presentation centers upon the *way* in which we as Christian educators approach our responsibilities as teachers, with an eye toward exploring the fullness of instructional tools at the disposal of the Christian educator. Modern education is about purveying a belief set that is driven by empirical science: “Just the facts, Ma’am” as the Dragnet detective often said, a phrase that has found its way into the collective subconscious of modern culture. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that ‘facts’ are the enemy. But in the minds of our secular counterparts in the field of modern education, religious faith has no place in the realm of ‘facts’ and is therefore excluded from educative discourse. Secular educators are philosophically and methodologically committed to erasing from the realm of rational discourse questions of faith and spirituality.

We’re all aware of this problem—it is in large part why we find ourselves here. But I want to argue that we as Christian educators are both obligated and privileged to do more than simply re-introduce Christian spirituality into the manifold of our curriculum. The Christian educator is called not only to teach the truth, but to exemplify it; and in what follows I explore the significance of the Christian life itself as pedagogically efficacious. We as Christian educators

are about educating a part of the person that secularists don't recognize, and this consciousness should be reflected in our methodology—not only in *what* we teach, but *how* we teach.

I Peter 1:13-16 inspires us. “Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I AM Holy.” (NASV)

Now, I could have chosen any number of Scriptures to establish the importance of our project as Christian educators. But I've chosen this passage in particular because it highlights the importance of preparation for action. The term 'worldview' has enjoyed quite a bit of use among Christian educators in recent years, and I don't want to suggest that our emphasis on worldview is misplaced, though it is perhaps misunderstood. The term 'worldview', as you probably know, is a rough English translation of the German word '*weltanschauung*'. I've noticed a dangerous tendency among Christian educators toward the notion that Christian education is pitched at presenting students with a body of knowledge that constitutes one way of looking at the world, and this 'worldview', once in place, will somehow insulate our students from secularism. Whatever the merits of this position, it constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of what is meant by the term 'worldview'. This term denotes the fundamental outlook of the culture into which we are born, a way of looking at the world that is always already present before us and escapes our command. In our context, it's the way of looking at the world that says, “Just the scientific facts, ma'am.” For those who think the project of Christian education can circumvent this *weltanschauung*, I have grave news: It's in the groundwater; Dewey and the apostles of the Enlightenment will never quit their attempts to control our thinking.

So I would like to propose that we shift our focus to a way of thinking about our role as Christian educators that is nicely encapsulated in a different German word, the term '*bildung*'. This word has no equivalent in English; it denotes not only 'formal education', but everything involved in the process of cultural and spiritual formation. So I've chosen this passage from I Peter as our banner because it speaks to the situation in which we find ourselves as Christians who must prepare ourselves for a constant struggle toward holiness. I'll return to our specific cultural context in a moment; but first I want to emphasize the fact of our existence in a fallen world, in which the human condition in all places and times continually pulls us away from the holiness of God.

**The Moment of Crisis:** The minister stared dumbstruck at the lifeless bodies of his sons, burned nearly beyond recognition. Their cold eyes suggested their distance from the living, not unlike their coolness to spiritual truth in their final act that led to this moment. Was that a faint sneer still left at the corner of the mouth of his oldest son? He had heard the truth but had chosen to go his own way.

As the father stood motionless in this tragic moment, the minister recalled in his mind's eye the chaotic night some time ago when he led the entire community in a rebellious celebration that flew in the face of almighty God and all that he intended on passing on to his children.

Too late, too late...his foolishness that night had set an example for experimentation and dereliction of duty. And so this moment of unspeakable pain.

“Don't touch them. You are ordered not to touch them.” The voice of Moses' shook Aaron from his temporary paralysis. “Do not mourn. You must do your duty. Others will be instructed to take care of the bodies.” Thus, the worship of the Lord continued at the Tabernacle, but Aaron was left to wonder, “Did it have to be this way?”

On a night many months before the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40) and the consecration of Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 8), Aaron was left in charge. There was an uprising and great public pressure was placed on him to mollify the people's need for an idol—something to which they could bow. He succumbed to their pressure and fashioned a golden calf from the gold that they had brought with them from Egypt. “And the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.” (Ex 32:8)

As Moses and Joshua returned from Moses' meeting with the Lord, Joshua heard the cacophony coming from the Israelites and remarked, “There is a sound of war in the camp.”

Moses sadly corrected his young assistant, “It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; but the sound of singing I hear.” (32:17-18)

Upon their return, Aaron was confronted, and he told what has to be the biggest lie in all of Scripture: Aaron began his deception, “I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.” (32:24) And if the description couldn't have gotten worse, Scripture tells us, “Now when Moses saw that the people were *out of control*—for Aaron had let them get *out of control* to be a derision among their enemies...” (Literally in Hebrew, “let loose”)

Fast forward to the moment of his sons' deaths...in spite of their intimate contact with the top leaders of Israel, in spite of their being ushered almost into the presence of the Almighty, in spite of the special training that these young priests had received related to their Levitical

duties, and in spite of the significant ceremony of dedication—they did not take their responsibilities seriously and they did not believe the words of the One True God. **How could this be? It was because the leaders and the community consistently failed their stress tests.**

**Stress Tests:** I would like to pose the question, “*How does your school perform when it undergoes a stress test?*” As you consider your response, let’s illustrate this concern with a metaphor: a cardiac stress test. The patient is connected to a number of monitoring machines and computers by way of electrodes stuck to various parts of his upper body. As the patient’s work out progresses on a tread mill, the elevation of the conveyer belt increases to accentuate the stress on his heart. What the specialist is trying to accomplish is the revelation of any existing *blockages* of blood vessels or *hardening* of the walls of the heart.

What do stress tests at your school or ministry reveal? If there are *blockages* to the presence of the Lord or *hardening* of your hearts to His instructions, then I would suggest **this is detrimental to the spiritual development of your disciples. Students, especially those struggling with accountability to legalistic regulations, are the ones who suffer the most when they witness the lack of integrity in parents, teachers, or ministers.**

**Integrity:** If these tests reveal soundness, wholeness, the uninterrupted flow of the Holy Spirit, then I believe this reveals *integrity* in your school’s culture and leadership, ***the single biggest factor in the spiritual formation of your students.***

Do our administrators and faculty portray spiritual truth as ‘living curriculum’? Frank Gaebelien refers to this problem as he discusses the vital dimension of biblical instruction and the spiritual development of our students as he confronts the need to integrate God’s Truth into the curriculum:

The crux of the problem lies with the teacher. The fact is inescapable; the world view of the teacher, in so far as he is effective, gradually conditions the world view of the pupil. No man teaches out of a philosophical vacuum. In one way or another, every teacher expresses the convictions he lives by, whether they be spiritually positive or negative.  
(1954, p37)

The intersection of written curriculum and living curriculum took place in dramatic fashion one Saturday during my daughter’s senior year at our Christian school in Raleigh. The senior bible teacher invited his classes to help him move from a 3,000 sq ft house in the suburbs to a home of just 800 sq ft in an inner city neighborhood. The teacher’s church was challenging its members to have a real presence in sections of town that were known for prostitution and drug use. ***Sacrifice, service, ministry***—these were not just ‘fill in the blank’ words that day. In retrospect, I can tell you that the integrity of word and deed that day powerfully impacted this group of seniors.

**Another type of stress test: the triangle.** Switching metaphors at this point in the paper, we look at stress tests in another field. At the core of many types of architecture one finds a triangle that must be designed by the architect to withstand the predetermined load. This is particularly noticeable when one looks at the roof of a barn and follows the roof line. Each side of the triangle is designed to bare a specific load and the integrity of the material and construction will determine its effectiveness. I come from a region littered with dilapidated tobacco barns—many have a roof with a broken triangle and the result is the collapse of the entire structure. Perhaps the rafters have become loose where they connect to the joists, or they have lost their *integrity* because of rot or termites. ((Kesler, p9, 2005-06)

Home-church-school: in our extended learning communities the spiritual formation of our children often gives way under the stress of various events. Like the deterioration of a roof's triangle due to incompetent workmanship, the infestation of insects, the sudden weight of a large snowfall, *our communities face the impact of divorce, the lust for power, the collapse of relationships due to infidelity, the greed for athletic superiority, and sudden financial setbacks.* Glenn Schultz describes the union of this triangle of discipleship:

When biblical principles of teaching and learning are applied consistently at home, at church and at school, the child will have a firm foundation laid on which he can live a life pleasing to the Lord. It is essential that all three legs—home, church and school—follow god's prescription for training children and youth. If any one of the legs of the stool of education is not based on a biblical pattern, the education system will have a greater tendency to fail. (1998, p. 11)

**The culture of our learning community is constantly tested and how we respond *must* reveal the integrity of our Designer and Sustainer. To do anything less is to fail our children, the ones we are striving to disciple.**

**Where do we go from here?**

It is the aim of this symposium, however, to do more than just identify problems and issues, so how might we strengthen the integrity of each side and tighten the union at the joists?

**1. Have we clearly communicated the biblical perspective of integrity and teamwork to our partners in ministry?**

Christian Smith, author of two popular books that examine the spiritual commitments of young people in the US, has reached some compelling, though not surprising, conclusions:

The **most important teen year factors** sustaining strong religious faith and practice during emerging adulthood (that is the years 18-29) concern **important relationships** and **personal commitment/belief/practice**:

**Parents!**

**Non-parental adults** in congregations

**Personal beliefs, devotions, practices in younger years** (usually formed by parents) (Souls in Transition, 2009)

These findings are supported by the results of a survey conducted by LifeWay Research in 2007 of more than 1,000 adults ages 18-30: Teens who had at least one adult from church make a significant time investment in their lives were more likely to keep attending church. More of those who stayed in church—by a margin of 46% to 28%--said five or more adults at church had invested time with them personally and spiritually. (lifewayresearch.com)

These two very current and trustworthy sources point to the vital impact that authentic relationships with parents and other adults play in the spiritual formation of teenagers. Using all available occasions for communications, *school leaders must aggressively articulate the importance of genuine, dynamic faith at home and church.*

**2. Is there a spirit of teamwork and mutual respect that reveals harmony and integrity between and among these three major influences?**

What efforts have been made to solidify the relationships that are being discussed here? Granted, some schools have hundreds of families and dozens of churches participating in their ministry, but the leaders of the broader learning community must spend time discussing what effective teamwork looks like. Here are some examples:

The school honors the worship and ministry plans of both families and churches. (Sunday afternoon play practice at the school! Another example would be for the granting of permission i for extended absences from school for missions trips.)

Families honor the expectations of their church and school in regards to use of alcohol and drugs and make every effort to respect the authority of school leaders.

The church provides the learning community with ministers whose Christian walk reflects Christ and who make themselves available to assist in everything from vision casting to ministry activities.

**3. Are parents challenged/required to participate in activities that have potential for authentic spiritual development?**

**Proposal:** sometime during a student's high school career, at least one parent accompanies him/her as the family or group of students and parents participate in ministry.

This challenge comes from my own experience of going to Mexico with my daughter on a mission trip during her middle school years and with her on a World Changers trip to repair homes in Birmingham, Alabama. Exceptional growth took place in our relationship and personal spiritual experiences during these trips.

**4. Have your students experienced what it means to sacrifice for others while observing first-hand the extent to which they have been blessed?**

**Proposal:** Require that students participate in a missions trip to a community, local or international, that represents 'the least of these.'

Indian Rocks Christian School (Florida) has established "Ministry-mester", which takes place the week before Spring break. Normal high school classes for that week are suspended with the goal of involving all students in the area of missions or service. The projects consist of mission trips and local service opportunities. The results of this emphasis sense the creation of the project in 2002 has been a significant shift in the spiritual climate and peer pressure in the school. Students are demonstrating a genuine concern for their faith and the desire to serve the Lord.

## Conclusion:

Let's return to the premise that Nadab and Abihu's father in specific and their community in general influenced the young men by their demonstrations of a lack of integrity in crucial areas of life. Can we see something of ourselves in the Israelites that influenced Nadab and Abihu to have a cavalier attitude about the things of the Lord?

Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord... The rabble that were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna. (Numbers 1, 4-6 NASV)

A list that is unfortunately familiar to many 21<sup>st</sup> century American believers: whining about physical discomfort, driven by material greed, and displaying a general discontent with the Lord's provisions. The presence of the preceding behaviors and attitudes shout out 'no integrity' to our children. Let's consider how we can replace these disconnects between our stated beliefs and our words and deeds.

Perhaps the following pairs can be considered to be in a cyclical relationship, beginning with:

**Worship and brokenness:** coming humbly before the Lord individually and corporately.

Then we acknowledge our need for **redemption and restoration**. And as we are recipients of this divine work, we act this out before those we lead, especially in times of stress tests when students or parents rebel against community standards.

Our learning community is known for the highest standard of **ethics and morality**, not in a show of superiority, but is a humble consistency, staying faithful to the teachings of Christ.

Finally, our transformation to become like Jesus results in a lifestyle of **sacrifice and service** to others, both in our immediate community and those unknown to us.

The synergy of a community dedicated to reflecting an enduring conviction to these concepts will result in a testimony of integrity that will impact our students' spiritual development for their lifetime and eternity.