

# TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

## II. THE MAJOR PREMISE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

FRANK E. GAEBELEIN

The major premise of any Christian philosophy of education may be put in a single sentence: All truth is God's truth. But the problem is that of the application of this principle to every area of knowledge and every aspect of life. In the third chapter of his Gospel, John wrote, "He that doeth the truth cometh to the light."<sup>1</sup> Doing the truth, the application of the major premise of Christian education, is, therefore, the question before us in this lecture.

This is a subject that must be treated with humility, because of its wide dimensions and great depth. Yet, great though it is, we must in thinking further about the philosophy of Christian education, grapple with the problem of a thorough-going doing of the truth.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a new chapel of striking modern design stands within a water-filled moat. It is, as it were, an island. The design may be effective architecturally, but it could hardly be more inadequate spiritually. What the chapel stands for on any campus would be far better symbolized by a room for worship in the physics building, in the library, or even in the gymnasium, than by a church on an island.

It is, however, too little recognized that the isolationism of the spiritual is a major problem even in Christian education. What makes a campus really Christian? Is it Bible classes, worship services, revival meetings? These things play a significant part in making a campus Christian. Yet a school or college may have them all and others like them and still be deeply imbued with secularism. In a pungent comment, Prof. Gordon Clark speaks of schools where such good things as "giving out tracts ... holding fervent prayer meetings, going out on gospel teams, opening classes with prayer" are the accepted practice; "yet the actual instruction," he says, "is no more Christian than in a respectable secular school ... The program is merely a pagan education with a chocolate covering of Christianity. And the pill, not the coating, works ... Christianity, far from being a Bible department religion, has a right to control the instruction in all departments. The general principles of Scripture apply to all subjects, and in some subjects the Scriptures supply rather detailed principles, so that every course of instruction is altered by a conscious adoption of Christian principle."<sup>2</sup> These are strong words. They are not quoted with the implication that they apply totally to a college like this, any more than that they apply totally to the school which I serve. Yet honesty compels the statement that they relate in part to all of us, even to the best in Christian education. As was said in the preceding lecture, we should be able to declare in full reality that our evangelical institutions not only have a Christian program of education but that they are Christian education through and through, all the way.

The difference between being content with a partially Christian education, however good, and a completely Christian education, relates above all to the concept of the truth and to the application of this concept. Let us, then, endeavor to do two things in this lecture: first to determine more fully what we mean by the truth; and second, to consider how the truth may be integrated with the so-called secular, non-religious subjects and with all areas of school life.

First, then, the nature of truth. "What is truth?" The question is forever associated with Pontius Pilate, not because he was the first to ask it, but because he asked it face to face with the most important Person who ever walked on earth and because he asked it on the most crucial day in

human history there in the judgment hall in Jerusalem. And mark this: The Lord Jesus, who stood before Pilate when Pilate asked the great question, "What is truth?"<sup>3</sup> had already answered it when, in His high-priestly prayer, He said to His Father, "Thy Word is truth,"<sup>4</sup> and, when speaking to Thomas, He gave the great word of self-witness, "I am the truth."<sup>5</sup>

Observe in Pilate the classic example of the self-condemnation of secularism. Having asked the great question regarding truth, "he went out," the record says. It was Sir Francis Bacon who, in his Essay on Truth, remarked that Pilate "would not stay for an answer."<sup>6</sup> He got up and went out. Secularism knows truth only on the level that can be discovered and verified by human imagination, analysis, experiment, and thought. But when it comes to the higher level of truth in the root sense of the Greek word aletheia, which means, as Dr. Outler has pointed out, "without a veil,"<sup>7</sup> thus implying revelation, secularism with its truncated, incomplete concept of truth is utterly impatient. Like Pilate, it just will not stay for an answer. It will not listen to truth by way of revelation.

But Christian education in contrast with secular education deals with truth in its deepest and widest and most Christological sense. So Spencer Leeson in his Bampton Lectures at Oxford significantly prefaces his chapter on "The Content of Christian Education" with Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."<sup>8</sup>

Correctly understood, the Biblical concept of truth is neither narrow nor provincial, as is often charged. St. Paul's words, "Whatsoever things are true ... honest ... just ... pure ... lovely and of good report,"<sup>9</sup> are magnificently comprehensive. The Scriptural idea of truth, although obviously not spelled out in the vocabulary of modern science, philosophy, and art yet gives room for every aspect of truth in every possible realm. Within the revelation given in Christ and in Scripture there stands in principle the whole universe of truth. For Christ is God, and Scripture is the Word of God, and God is the God of truth.

Now Christian education, if it is faithful to its deepest commitment, must renounce once and for all the false separation between sacred and secular truth. It must see that truth in science, and history, in mathematics, art, literature, and music belongs just as much to God as truth in religion. While it recognizes the primacy of the spiritual truth revealed in the Bible and incarnate in Christ, it acknowledges that all truth, wherever it is found, is of God. For Christian education there can be no discontinuity in truth, but every aspect of truth must find its unity in the God of all truth.

That is to say that Christian education stands on no lower ground than that defined by Jonathan Edwards in these words, inscribed on the bronze tablet in his niche in the Hall of Fame at New York University: "God is the head of the universal system of existence, from whom all is perfectly derived and on whom all is most absolutely dependent, whose Being and Beauty is the sum and comprehension of all existence and excellence."

Such is the God of truth. And because His Son is One with Him, Jesus Christ is the Lord of truth. And because the Bible is inspired by the Spirit of truth, Scripture, uniquely among books, is the Word of truth. And because creation is the work of God, called into being by the Word of God, the whole vast book of nature as well as the written Word shows forth God's truth.<sup>10</sup>

It follows that this emphasis upon truth as the clue to Christian education, and indeed its very heart and center, carries with it the inescapable obligation of integrating truth in Christian education. What do we mean by integrating truth in Christian education? Well, we mean the wholeness of Christian education, all of it a unity in truth, all of it related to the truth of God, what we know as truth in Christ and through the Scriptures. Or to put it philosophically, we mean by integration having in our teaching a completely Christian rather than a secular world view and then carrying that world view over into everything we teach and do.

Consider now a very vital point. How does truth as we go on in learning come to us? According to Emile Cailliet, "The world in which we live may be likened to a great signaling station. Our task in life is to try to make out its meaning, proceeding at all times upon what we have learned."<sup>11</sup> In other words, truth is already here. The question is really one of epistemology -- how does truth reach us and how do we reach it? Our human tendency is to think that we come to the truth all by ourselves. And at times we may even assume, perish the thought, that we "make it up" out of our minds. But that is a great impiety. As a corrective, we need to go back to the New Testament word for truth, *aletheia*, meaning, as has already been said, "without a veil," and therefore implying revelation. We do not, in a deeper sense, by ourselves discover or find out truth. Truth is something that "happens" to us, if we are patient and believing. Asked Pilate, "What is truth?" But he never found out, because he would not stay and wait in faith to see the answer.

Not so the Christian teacher. Because he is a Christian, he is in the way to knowing the truth in a living manner. One of the great spiritual insights, an insight with which theologians only now are catching up, is that expressed by Anselm of Canterbury in the three words, "Credo ut intelligam" (I believe so that I may know). The pathway to God's truth is not through the unaided human reason. It is through the believing heart and mind. There are those who tell us that faith is a leap in the dark. But that is not so. Actually, faith is, as David Read says,<sup>12</sup> a leap out of the dark into the light. You are a Christian teacher. You are therefore a believing teacher. Take heart, then, for you are in the way of knowing the truth.

But what about integrating with Christian truth the subjects we teach. "How can I do it?" asks the history or English or science or mathematics teacher. It will help us at this point to consider what might be called the theology of the problem of the integration of truth in Christian education. So we think back to the fall of man. Many these days would call it a myth. Conservative Christians believe and know on the authority of God's Word and Christ's authentication of the Word that it was an historical event. The fall and sin brought a radical human and cosmic displacement. The world of nature and of man has become, in the words of Gerald Manley Hopkins's fine sonnet, "The Bent World."<sup>13</sup> And the bent, the distortion, that sin brought affects the thinking of man. Emil Brunner (and let us not permit dissent from much of his theology to close our ears to everything he said) has a most useful insight here, suggesting that the areas of knowledge may be arranged in relation to their distortion because of sin somewhat in this way:

Theology  
 Philosophy  
 Literature and History  
 Science  
 Mathematics 14

At the top are those subjects where there must be the greatest integration, or re-integration, with God's truth. Being the most personal subjects in relation to God and man, in them the distortion through the fall and through sin is greatest. As the subjects become less personal and humanistic, the distortion lessens, until in mathematics, the most objective subject, it is almost nil. So it may be that Christian teachers may try too hard to integrate science and mathematics with Biblical truth. The very nature of these subjects -- precise, comparatively unaffected by sin (two times two is four for the villain and the saint alike) is its own testimony, so plain that, like the basic postulate of the Bible -- "In the beginning God" -- it is self-evidently true.

That being the case, it follows that, in mathematics and science, integration must come through the person of the Christian teacher. There is no such thing as Christian mathematics, or Christian chemistry, or Christian physics. But there are Christian teachers of mathematics, or of chemistry, or of physics. And with them the atmosphere and feeling tones of the classroom are different. No one teaches out of a vacuum. Christian love, understanding, patience, and other personal qualities shine through the committed teacher of even the most objective subjects.

This leads to a word regarding false integration of Christian doctrine and subject matter. When a correlation between Christianity and a particular study is lugged in, when it does not arise naturally, when it is labored or forced, this is false integration. Let us beware of being like the eighteenth century poet, James Beattie, who was so eager to impress his son with the argument from design that he planted cress in his garden so that it would grow up in the pattern of the boy's initials!<sup>15</sup> All truth is of God. All truth is unified under Him. Truth is living because it belongs to the living God. Therefore the unity of truth is organic. And when teachers presume to manufacture correlations of Christian doctrine with subject matter, then they violate that organic unity. It is far better through faith and the patient exercise of faith to let truth be revealed to us, to let it "happen" to us. Perhaps, therefore, Christian teachers should be more relaxed in respect to this matter of integration.

This is not to say that in some subjects integration is not very plain. To go back to Emil Brunner's insight, in the humane subjects, such as history, and literature, there are many opportunities where it is also mandatory, if the full story is to be told. Take for example, certain major American writers. As Professor Randall Stewart shows,<sup>16</sup> Hawthorne and Melville are in the authentic Christian tradition, because they deal seriously with sin and the problems of evil, whereas Emerson and Whitman with their presupposition of the perfectibility of man are in the naturalistic, non-Christian tradition.

As for literature today, Lewis Bliss Whittemore is right in saying, "Our people are reading books which are fit only for the ash can, and they do so without batting an eyelash. They seem to have no inward monitor, no standard of judgment which tells them that a certain book is trash." Do you and I have such an "inward monitor?"<sup>17</sup> Of course we do; we have our Christian conscience. Modern literature is completely of this earth, earthy. What should we do? Should we ignore it? I do not think so. On the contrary, we should unmask it against a Biblical perspective. We should show how incomplete and unrealistic it is, dealing, as it does, with the great personal and ethical questions as if there were no moral absolutes and as if the Ten Commandments had never been given men.

So we return to the centrality of the Bible in Christian education. The greatest asset for effective integration of the truth in teaching is a profound knowledge of the Bible. If the mind of the teacher of literature, of language, of history, or of science is formed by this Book, there is bound to be in his classes some real measure of integration with God's truth.

Another avenue to the problem of the integration of truth in teaching the so-called secular subjects is the continuing obligation to excellence in Christian education. Truth is excellence. God is most excellent. In the words quoted earlier in this lecture, Jonathan Edwards speaks of God as the One "Whose Being and Beauty is the sum and comprehension of all existence and excellence." So it follows that, when we are demanding of our students excellence, then in a very real sense we are integrating truth with the curriculum and with the extra-curriculum too. Doing well whatever is to be done is integration. As Paul says, "Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him."<sup>18</sup>

Now this principle cuts two ways. Students will not seek excellence unless we who teach are seeking it. There are two main attitudes toward the relation of culture to Christian education. One is that expressed in the famous question of Tertullian, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"<sup>19</sup> It is the attitude of distrust of culture and a studied avoidance of art and literature and the wide range of human thought. But this will not do. Better is another attitude -- namely, that Christian education should maintain a conversation with culture. This means that Christian teachers should seek cultural excellence to the glory of God. It is the attitude that acknowledges the fact that God in His common grace has given genius and talents to men and that He has used some non-Christians to bring forth enduring works of truth, beauty, and excellence. "All that has been well said," declared Justin Martyr, "belongs to us Christians."<sup>20</sup> But at this point there must be a caution. While Christians must seek and recognize excellence wherever it is, they must not be submerged by it. As Phillips's brilliant translation of Romans 12:2 puts it, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold."

Always bearing this caution in mind, let us recognize several things. For example, excellent music may be a powerful factor in integration of truth in Christian education, a fact to which the next lecture will be devoted. There is indeed a peculiarly intimate relationship between music and Christian life and worship. Likewise art may be a vital force in the integration of truth with Christian education. If I may be personal, at Stony Brook we are gradually building a collection of fine original paintings, mostly begged from or given by artists and friends. Our boys may hardly realize it, but there is an unconscious influence toward truth through living with beauty. Just to be day-by-day in the presence of good art is an offset to the cheap, sentimental pictures, the vulgar, department store kind of thing, that is too often on the walls of Christian schools as well as homes.

Finally, let us look briefly but discerningly at the rest of Christian education apart from the classroom -- athletics, the other extra-curricular activities, all the manifold, interpersonal activities of campus life. As Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not an inch of secular life so-called of which Christ does not say, 'It belongs to me.'"<sup>21</sup> Or in the words of Dr. A. N. Tsrintanes of Athens University, "If Christ is all and in all," all expressions of life, from prayer to football, must be "holy to the Lord."<sup>22</sup> And let me add that for a thing to be holy (h-o-l-y) the Lord's is, as someone has said, for it to be wholly (w-h-o-l-l-y) the Lord's.

One of our major and sometimes neglected concerns in our Christian education must be the doing of God's truth in all of our personal relationships. There is the continuing and urgent obligation in this day of cheapened values and shoddy morality for us to express the ethical dimensions of the truth so constantly stressed by our Lord and so fully taught in the Bible. With all our high doctrine about Christ and salvation by grace alone, let us be wary of any descent into antinomianism.

This is a time of radical moral slippage. Edward Weeks, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly and no fundamentalist, in a recent article in Look magazine<sup>23</sup> spoke of the four retreats in American life -- the retreat from courage, the retreat from sexual decency, the retreat from conserving natural resources, and the retreat from civic responsibility. No Christian should ever retreat in any of these ways. And Sir Richard Livingstone of Oxford in his book, Education for a World Adrift, says that ours is a time that may be characterized as "the age without standards."<sup>24</sup> The fact is that, unless we are careful, the world's lack of standards will seep into our Christian life and practice through television, through the press, and through the moral climate of our times.

Therefore, we on the Christian campuses of America must be very careful to maintain our moral sensitivity in all of our relationships. Let us never devalue Christian ethics by looking down on morality. Ethics and morality do not save; only Christ saves. But ethics and morality are the outward proof of the inward change wrought by Christ. As Oscar Cullman has said, while other religions tell us, "Love your brother," only Christianity says with Paul, "Love your brother for whom Christ died."<sup>25</sup> So ethics go back to Christ and Him Crucified.

We may do wonderfully well in the integration of truth in the classroom, we may work out an ever more comprehensive Christian philosophy; but what shall it profit us if the truth, even the truth that Christ died for our brother whom we should therefore love, fails to be expressed in our day-by-day relationships--teacher with teacher, administrator with teacher, student with teacher, teacher with student, and all of us with the world around us.

In the trio of the scherzo of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, the great composer quotes an old Austrian pilgrim hymn. Over an organ point, which is a tone long sustained, the hymn is heard. The organ point is on "A," the note to which all the instruments of the orchestra are tuned. First, it sounds softly; then, as the pilgrim hymn continues, it grows in volume until the brasses come in and the "A" sounds forth in a "quivering flame of tone." So it is with a Christian. The "A," the essential point of reference, the spiritual organ point, is the truth -- the truth as it is in Christ, the Bible, and in all of life.<sup>26</sup>

And the question of questions for us, Christian teachers and students is this: "What will you do with the truth?" Paul declared, "To me to live is Christ."<sup>27</sup> May we reverently paraphrase these noble words to bring out their application to Christian education and also say for ourselves, "To me to live is truth."<sup>28</sup>

## DOCUMENTATION

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4. John 17:17.
5. John 14:6.
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7. "Quid Est Veritas?" Albert C. Outler, Christian Century, 4 March, 1959.
8. Christian Education, Spencer Leeson, London, 1947, p. 114.
9. Philippians 4:8.
10. Cf. "Portrait of a Christian College," Frank E. Gaebelein, Eternity, Feb., 1956.
11. The Recovery of Purpose, Emile Cailliet, New York, 1959, p. 105.
12. The Christian Faith, David H. C. Read, New York, 1956, p. 22.
13. Quoted in The Bent World, J. V. Langmead Casserly, New York, 1955, p. ii.
14. Cf. Cailliet, op. cit. p., 101.
15. The Mind's Adventure, Howard C. Lowry, Philadelphia, 1950, p. 103.
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17. The Church and Secular Education, Lewis Bliss Whittemore, Greenwich, 1960, p. 86.
18. Colossians 3:17.
19. On the Prescription against Heretics, Quoted by Cailliet, op. cit. p. 144.
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23. "A Quarter Century: Its Retreats," Edward Weeks. Look Magazine, 18 July, 1962.
24. Cf. The second part of On Education, Sir Richard Livingston, New York, 1945, p. 10.
25. Christ and Time, Oscar Cullman, Philadelphia, p. 28.
26. Cf. "Religion and the Independent School," Frank E. Gaebelein, Independent School Bulletin, April, 1962.
27. Philippians 1:21.
28. The Intellectual Life, A. P. Sertillanges, Westminster, 1952, p. 151.