

Politics According to the Bible

Education

Deuteronomy 6:6-7

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Education

Scripture

We are approaching the end of summer. Soon, students will go back to school, and some will tell about their summer.

In the classroom setting of one *Peanuts* comic strip, on the first day of the new school year, the students were told to write an essay about returning to school.

In her essay Lucy wrote, “Vacations are nice, but it’s good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education, and I look forward to a year of expanding knowledge.”

Needless to say, the teacher was pleased with Lucy and complimented her fine essay.

In the final frame, Lucy leans over and whispers to Charlie Brown, “After a while, you learn what sells.”¹

The temptation to say “what sells,” what others want to hear, whether it is true or not, is always with us. Education, however, is not only satisfying and challenging, it is also very important.

We are currently in a series titled, “Politics According to the Bible.” We are examining key political issues that confront us today and learning what the Bible teaches us about each issue.

Today, as we continue in our series on “Politics According to the Bible” I want to examine “Education.” What does the Bible have to say about education? How should we think regarding the issue of education?

I would like to draw your attention to Deuteronomy 6:6-7. Moses has given the Law of God to the people of God. He has given them instructions with respect to keeping God’s Law. And it is in that context that we come across the instruction in our text.

Let us read Deuteronomy 6:6-7:

¹ William M. Nieporte, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books).

⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

Introduction

Every election has critical issues that dominate our attention. In this coming election the hot political issue is the economy.

Although education is not getting much attention in this election, it is nevertheless still an important issue.

For the first 200 years of our nation's history, education in this country was explicitly Christian, and it produced amazing results.

For example, with respect to literacy, in the late 1700s, John Adams observed that to find an illiterate man in New England was as rare as a comet.² In the era of the Founding Fathers, where education was explicitly Christian, there was widespread literacy.

However, with the rise of the modern education system, which removed Christianity and introduced secularism, has come a sharp rise in illiteracy. In 1994 the U.S. Department of Education, which has every reason *not* to reveal how bad the situation is, said that more than 90 million Americans lacked simple literacy.³

One education historian examined the scores of many students over many years. He discovered that American education had lost, on average, almost one year of academic achievement per decade throughout the 20th century. What does that mean? If you graduated from college, you have about the same education that a 6th grader had about 100 years ago. Don't believe me? Test yourself against a sampling of questions asked of 6th graders in 1905. (This is Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church's own version of "Are

² Cited in John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution: The Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 22.

³ Benjamin R. Barber, *Sunshine*, March 13, 1994.

You Smarter than a 1905 6th Grader?") So, here goes:

- “The orthography quiz asked us to spell 20 words, including *elucidation* and *animosity*.”
- “An arithmetic question asked us to find the interest on an 8% note for \$900 running 2 years, 2 months, and 6 days.”
- “In reading we were required . . . to give the meanings of words such as *panegyric* and *eyrie* [sometimes spelled *aerie*].”
- “Among geography’s 10 questions was, ‘Name 2 countries producing large quantities of wheat, 2 of cotton, 2 of coal.’”
- “In history we were to name the principal political questions which have been advocated since the Civil War and the party which advocated each.”⁴

Perhaps someone might think that other countries are having similar problems. Actually, they are not. In comparison with the 17 leading industrialized nations of the world, the United States came out last in 2 categories and first in none.

But, we can be glad that our students do have a good self-esteem! In one international test of 13-year-olds, Korean students ranked first in math and American students ranked last. It was revealed that 68% of the American students believed that they were “good at mathematics” compared to only 23% of the Korean students who thought so.⁵ Therefore, American students ranked first in self-esteem but last in actual skills.

About 20 years ago, the *Miami Herald* printed an article which told us how well our students are actually doing:

- 95% of college students could not find Vietnam on a map.
- 45% of high school students in Baltimore could not find the United States on a map.
- Many college students in North Carolina said Russia was

⁴ Quoted in Dennis L. Cuddy, “A Chronology of Education with Quotable Quotes,” *Florida Forum*, May 1993, 3-4.

⁵ Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1993), 3.

somewhere near the Panama Canal.⁶

These statistics alarm us. Could it be that American students are falling behind because they are learning the new ABCs?

One political cartoon showed a father looking down at his young son who is reading a paper. The father says, “New Math I’ve heard of, but what are the new ABCs?”

Somewhat exasperated, the boy responds, “AIDS, Birth control, and Condoms. Don’t you know anything, Dad?”

Our educational system is not doing well, and our politicians would do well to pay closer attention to it.

Lesson

So, as we consider politics according to the Bible, let us examine what the Bible says about education.

Let me use the following outline to guide us:

1. What do we learn about education in the Old Testament?
2. What do we learn about education in the New Testament?
3. What do we learn about education in history?
4. What do we learn about education in America?

I. What Do We Learn about Education in the Old Testament?

First, then, what do we learn about education in the Old Testament?

The original purpose of Jewish education was “to teach children to know and understand their special relationship with God, to teach them to serve him, and to educate them in ‘holiness.’ Later Jewish education included character development and the history of God’s people (through rehearsing his acts of deliverance).”⁷

That is why Moses told the people of God in Deuteronomy

⁶ *Tropic*, a publication of the *Miami Herald*, September 27, 1987.

⁷ W. A. Elwell Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 657.

6:6-7, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

Jewish education included reading, writing, and some arithmetic. But the emphasis in education was acquiring an intimate knowledge of the Law of God.

On my way to this country in 1983 I visited Israel for 8 days. It was a wonderful visit, and I was able to see many historic and biblical sites. However, I will never forget wandering into a Jewish seminary. I suppose I looked like a student myself, and so no-one asked what I wanted. So, I just walked about the facility. In several rooms I saw a number of students pouring over what I assumed to be Old Testament texts. I was fascinated to observe them all memorizing the texts. Either by themselves or in pairs they were deeply engaged in memorizing the Law of God. Thus, an ancient educational practice was still alive in the modern era.

II. What Do We Learn about Education in the New Testament?

Second, what do we learn about education in the New Testament?

No formal education is described in the New Testament. However, Jesus is portrayed as teaching large crowds (Mark 4:1-2; 14:29) as well as his disciples (Matthew 5:1-2). Interestingly, for Jesus the purpose of education is to glorify God through obedience, as he commands his disciples to obey all that he has taught. This is how Jesus put it in Matthew 28:18-20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (emphasis mine).

The apostle Paul was educated in the law by the famous

teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Later, when he was on his third missionary journey, he established a daily lecture in the hall of Tyrannus, which continued for 2 years. Paul's teaching was so effective that all of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:9-10).

Elwell and Beitzel, in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, tell us that by the time of the New Testament the entire Jewish community was expected to establish and maintain elementary schools. Teachers were highly esteemed by the Jewish people. Teachers were expected to demonstrate exceptional character along with their academic qualifications. A teacher was warned not to jeopardize the dignity of his position by familiarity with students, such as joking, eating, or drinking in their presence.⁸

The purpose of Jewish education contrasted sharply with the purpose of education in Greece and Rome.

In Sparta the purpose of education was to develop men to be fighters who would subject themselves to the welfare of the state.

In Athens the purpose of education was to produce good citizens. Students were taught letters, music, morals and manners, mathematics, and gymnastics (the development of a healthy body).

In Rome the purpose of education was to prepare a student mentally and physically for the farm, battlefield, or wherever his service was required by the state.⁹

III. What Do We Learn about Education in History?

Third, what do we learn about education in history?

The idea of education for everyone grew directly out of the Reformation, even though there were sporadic attempts at education reform before the 16th century.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 15th century helped pave the way. Yale Church historian Philip Schaff said, "The art of printing, which was one of the providential preparations for the Reformation, became the mightiest lever of Protes-

⁸ W. A. Elwell & Barry J. Beitzel, 659.

⁹ W. A. Elwell & Barry J. Beitzel, 661.

tantism and modern culture.”¹⁰

The Reformers, and John Calvin in particular, believed that the only way for the Protestant Reformation to be successful was for laypeople to read the Bible for themselves. You may recall that up until that time only Roman Catholic priests were allowed to read the Bible, which was in Latin. And so, Samuel Blumenfeld, a prominent American educator, wrote:

The modern idea of popular education—that is, education for everyone—first arose in Europe during the Protestant Reformation when papal authority was replaced by biblical authority. Since the Protestant rebellion against Rome had arisen in part as a result of biblical study and interpretation, it became obvious to Protestant leaders that if the reform movement were to survive and flourish, widespread biblical literacy, at all levels of society, would be absolutely necessary.¹¹

Interestingly, as a side note, when Blumenfeld was researching the origin of public education, he found that when it came to the concept of education for everyone, all roads led to John Calvin. So, being a good scholar, he read the primary documents and thus read Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He was so profoundly affected by Calvin that he actually became a Christian!

IV. What Do We Learn about Education in America?

And finally, what do we learn about education in America?

As early as 1642 the Pilgrims passed a law requiring education for all children. Then, in 1647 they passed the “Old Deluder Satan Act,” which was a reference to Satan who deludes people because of their ignorance of Scripture. The Act said:

It being one chief project of the old deluder, Satan, to keep

¹⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B., Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910/1980), 560.

¹¹ Samuel L. Blumenfeld, *Is Public Education Necessary?* (Boise, ID: The Paradigm Co., 1985), 10.

men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times, keeping them in an unknown tongue. . . . It is therefore ordered by this Court and authority thereof, that every township within this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him, to write and read.¹²

With regard to higher education, almost every one of the first 123 colleges and universities in the United States had Christian origins. Their purpose was to train ministers.

In 1837, modern public education was born in Massachusetts under the influence of Horace Mann. He was a Unitarian who did not believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he denied the Trinity and deity of Christ. He deplored the fact that the entire educational system for all children in America was in the hands of the Christian Church. He wanted to remedy the situation, and so he did. He came up with a solution: state education. And so the modern public education system was begun in an effort to deliver children from the Christian religion! And, I might add, they have been very effective in doing so.

However, the seeds that Mann planted did not come to fruition until the 20th century, under the leadership of John Dewey. Dewey was a professor at New York's Columbia University, and he was also the first president of the American Humanist Association. He did not believe in Christianity. In fact, he felt that Christianity was the principle problem that needed to be solved by a system of public education.

It is fascinating to note that in the early days of the modern public education movement, A. A. Hodge, professor at Princeton Seminary and one of America's greatest theologians, made this prescient statement in 1887:

I am as sure as I am of Christ's reign that a comprehensive and centralized system of national education, separated from reli-

¹² Samuel L. Blumenfeld, 17.

gion, as is now commonly proposed, will prove the most appalling enginery for the propagation of anti-Christian and atheistic unbelief, and of anti-social ethics, individual, social and political, which this sin-rent world has ever seen.¹³

Hodge was saying that a public education system, divorced from biblical Christianity, will become the most atheistic, anti-Christian, and nihilistic system this world has ever seen. Friends, it is hard to argue that what Hodge wrote 120 years ago is wrong.

So, what is the purpose of education? If I were to ask you what the purpose of education is, how would you answer?

Some say that the purpose of education is to produce *good citizens*, just like the ancient Athenians. But then the ultimate purpose of education is really for the benefit of the state.

Others say the purpose of education is *self-actualization*, that is, to produce the potential within each student. That is good, but it still begs the question: what is the purpose of the potential?

Pastor and author John Piper tells the story of when his family was deciding where to send their 13-year-old to school. He visited a Christian school. At one point during the meeting, Piper asked two faculty members this question, “What is the ultimate purpose of our education?”

He thought that he had tipped his hand by using the word “ultimate.”

They smiled as though they had been waiting for that question. They said, “Our purpose in this institution is to train the minds of young people so that they will think critically and become fully human.”

Piper said that they wondered why he did not respond more energetically, and their faces looked puzzled.

Piper said, “I thought that maybe the mission statement of a Christian school would be different than an atheistic school.”

They were shocked.

¹³ A. A. Hodge, *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1887), 283.

Piper said, “I just thought you’d say, ‘To glorify God and enjoy him forever,’ or something like that.”

The teachers said, “Oh, we assume that.”

Piper wanted to say, but did not say, “God doesn’t like to be assumed.”¹⁴

John Piper is right when he said that the purpose of education was to glorify God. Whether in mathematics, history, engineering, medicine, art, music, homemaking, the purpose of all education is to produce people who glorify God.

The Bible says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do *all* to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Everything we do in life, including education, is to be for the purpose of glorifying God.

Conclusion

So, how should a Christian vote regarding the issue of education?

Since it is God’s will that we glorify him by obeying everything that he has commanded, we should vote in ways that promote a godly education. We cannot impose a godly education on a system that is anti-Christian, but we can provide a godly education for our own children.

I recognize that many of you have children in the public schools, and some of you teach in the public schools where you are seeking to be salt and light. However, as long as God is barred from public schools, our public education system will continue to falter and decline.

Ultimately, I think that the fairest outcome would be to allow people’s tax dollars to go to the school of their own choice.

Come back next week as we learn how Jesus would vote on the economy. Amen.

¹⁴ John Piper, “God Is an Important Person,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 125.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

O God, thank you for your Word. Thank you for what we learn about politics according to the Bible.

As we think about the upcoming general election and our responsibility (and privilege) as citizens to vote, help us to understand politics according to the Bible.

O God, your Word teaches us about education. We know that the purpose of education is to glorify you. Education is to raise men and women who engage in engineering, medicine, teaching, science, the arts, architecture, homemaking, and so on for the glory of God.

Would you raise up political candidates who understand the purpose of education?

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.