

Does Christian Education Compromise Excellence?

By R. C. Sproul

Recently a Christian educator remarked to me, “The modern student faces the alternatives of a Christian education or a good education.”

Though on the surface the remark seems bathed in cynicism, it was actually delivered in a tone of profound alarm. The speaker is committed to the enterprise of Christian education, but is concerned that in an effort to maintain a spiritual purity unblemished by the world, much of Christian education may be compromising the goal of academic excellence.



In fact, some have recently announced that Christian education, to be authentically Christian, must be antithetical to secular education. The accent is on antithesis rather than synthesis. These people suggest that synthesis is a type of syncretism, by which secular perspectives are so blended in with Christianity that what is uniquely Christian is necessarily obscured, then eclipsed.

But the difference between synthesis and syncretism are actually quite vast. Synthesis rests on the premise that there are two sources of divine revelation: the special revelation of Scripture and the general revelation of nature. Though historic Protestantism emphatically rejects the dual source theory of the Roman Catholic Church, by which both Scripture and tradition provide special revelation, Protestantism has almost universally affirmed two sources of revelation, special and general.

That simply means not all of God’s revelation is confined to the Bible. We do not add the decrees of church councils to the Bible, but we recognize that the heavens as well as Scriptures display the glory of God.

Thomas Aquinas, though often maligned by contemporary evangelicals, is usually the one credited with defining the “classical synthesis” between nature and grace. Aquinas declared that there are certain truths we can find only in Scripture. We cannot discover the plan of redemption in a physics laboratory.

However, Aquinas maintained that there are other truths that can be discovered only outside the Bible. The Bible gives us no information about the circulatory system of the human body nor the details regarding photosynthesis. This information is gleaned from a study of nature. A full education includes both a study of the Bible and a study of nature—also affirmed by John Calvin, who called nature a “theater” of divine revelation.

Aquinas spoke of the *articulus mixtus*, or “mixed articles” of truth, which are revealed both by Scripture and by nature. For example, the existence of God. Far from separating nature and grace, Aquinas attempted to show their ultimate unity. He distinguished them, but he refused to separate them.

The concern of the classical synthesis was to uphold the thesis of the unity of truth. All truth is God's truth, and all genuine truth "meets at the top." That is why Augustine urged his students to "learn as much as possible about as many things as possible."

Of course, there does exist an undeniably severe antithesis between secularism and Christianity. But this antithesis should not provoke Christians to reject all knowledge acquired in the secular world, even if it's acquired and taught by atheists.

Right beliefs and scientific truth do not necessarily always go together. There is no such thing as a neutral education. Every education curriculum has a controlling worldview behind it and through it. We either interpret nature from a perspective of its being from God and under God, or we do not. This is an irresistible either/or proposition. Here the antithesis is real and crucial.

But just as there is a pivotal difference between synthesis and syncretism, so is there a crucial difference between antithesis and isolation. A valid synthesis exists when we integrate what can be known from Scripture with what can be known from nature, for both are of God. But the controlling perspective of how to view nature must be rooted in God-centeredness. As Newton said, in our study of nature we should seek to "think God's thoughts after him."

If Christianity is true it has nothing to fear from truth. Hence the danger of pushing antithesis too far: it could lead us to surrender the truths of nature to the pagans. But authentic Christian education should be the avant-garde of the scientific exploration. The task of science began with God's command to Adam and Eve to name the animals. In simple terms, this was the first example of biological taxonomy—the classification of the species. In this primitive procedure science began with discrimination. To discriminate requires noting both differences and similarities among things. It's the heart of scientific inquiry.

Authentic Christian education, indeed authentic education of any sort, is discriminatory. In this light it must be synthetic, because it draws from all sources that God provides for truth. We dare not accept a false dilemma between Christian education and good education. If it is not good it cannot be Christian in the fullest sense.

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