

Nurturing Lovers and Does of Justice
a key goal of Christian education
elaine brouwer

There is intentionality inherent in the word 'education'. Although often used interchangeably, education and schooling are not synonymous. The current school improvement rhetoric of policy makers and corporate interests that tout such initiatives as an emphasis on STEM courses often at the expense of other disciplines, common standards coupled with high stakes testing, longer school days, and so on is talk of schooling not necessarily education.

Providing an education involves intentionally nurturing a moral and ethical framework within which young people are encouraged to learn and live. Education happens when the learning process and environment are focused on developing wise people who are committed to using their learning, their gifts, and their passions for the well-being of the world. Education is about shaping a way of living that is grounded in a particular time and place and is aimed toward a specific end. It is very possible to be well-schooled, but not well-educated.

For the work we do in Christian schools to be more than just schooling, we need to intentionally shape the whole endeavor according to the way God calls us to live – God's vision of the good life. While we cannot pretend to fully know the heart and intention of God, we can get glimpses of it when we seek a comprehensive understanding of the story God is telling in the Scriptures. This story begins with God's creative, loving act of bringing the cosmos into being, which is followed quickly by the infection of Evil. The story continues with the inauguration God's Great Reclamation Project through Israel and then the coming of God himself in Jesus to announce the establishment of His Kingdom and Kingship by defeating evil through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' pouring out of his Spirit and commissioning of his followers to continue his work in the now and not yet time is framed by the promise of the ultimate fulfillment when God comes down to dwell with his people and sets all things right. This story shows us what it means to be truly human images of God.

There is a persistent theme that runs like a river through this 'true story of the whole world'.

The Hebrew prophets used the word *shalom* to describe the original creation and the anticipated renewal of creation (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 45). This rich word describes a life of flourishing in all relationships – human beings with God and human beings with each other, with the nonhuman creation, and even with themselves. This universal flourishing is infused with delight and wonder.

Cornelius Plantinga (quoted in Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 45) says that shalom is

“... a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creation in whom he delights.”

Universal flourishing is the way things ought to be. However, it is not what the world experienced and experiences since Evil infected the world, an infection that somehow ‘stalled God’s creation project’. This infection was and is an offence against God and his creation. It is like a stain on pure fabric. But the good news is that the stain does not, cannot destroy God’s intent for his world. (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 45). Our understanding of the world and our place in it must begin, not with the infection or the stain but with the beginning of God’s story – God’s creative work which he declared good, very good. Evil is not an essential component of the world. The stain can and will be removed. God wins (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 47-50).

While this stain did not and cannot destroy God’s work, it did and does infiltrate every aspect of God’s creation, every aspect of human life. But the good news is that God’s restoration also works its way into every nook and cranny of his world. If we have the eyes to see, we can bear witness to this radical restoration happening all around us. Paul Hawken is one such witness. In his book *Blessed Unrest: how the largest movement in the world came into being and why no one saw it coming* he tells the story of what is going on right now in this world. He tells the story of how people (professed followers of Jesus or not) use imagination, conviction, and resilience to perform daily miracles of redefining our relationship to the environment and to one another. A reviewer calls it the “first full account of the real news of our time, and it is exactly opposite of the official account. The movers and shakers on our planet are not the billionaires and generals – they are the incredible numbers of people around the world filled with love for neighbor and for the earth that are resisting, remaking, restoring, renewing, revitalizing.” (back cover of book *Blessed Unrest*) This is God at work.

How are we helping young people develop the eyes to see God at work in the world?

Throughout the OT we are confronted with God’s love of justice and his anguish over injustice. Isaiah 61:8 “I, the LORD love justice! But I hate robbery and injustice. . .” Psalm 37: 28 “The LORD loves justice. . .” Is 24: 4-5 “The earth melts away: its mighty leaders melt to nothing. The earth is polluted because its people disobeyed the laws of God, breaking their agreement that was to last forever.” Passage after passage declares his concern for the ‘little ones’, the powerless, the weak. Isaiah 61:1 “. . . The LORD has chosen and sent me to tell the oppressed the good news, . . .” Psalm 68: 5-6 “Our God, from your sacred home you take care of orphans and protect widows . . .” Psalm 113:5-9 “No one can compare with the LORD our God . . .”

God lifts the poor and needy from the dust and ashes, and he lets them take part in ruling his people . . . “

Why does God seem to privilege the weak with his love of justice? Justice is present in a society when needs are met and natural gifts are fully employed. If we look primarily at those who have ample access to goods, services, and opportunities, we may not see injustice. Injustice is uncovered when we look at the powerless, the alienated, the weak, the dominated, the outcasts. This sector of society relies on justice being practiced by the whole of society in order for them to flourish. Their story reveals whether justice or injustice prevails. God’s special concern for the weak ones is the ground of his love of justice. Psalm 140:12 “Our LORD, I know that you defend the homeless and see that the poor are given justice.” Justice is “society’s charter of protection for the little ones” (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 97).

How do we give voice to the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, and the powerless in our learning spaces? Are they given the same prominence that God gives them?

With God justice is not an abstract idea. With him it is visceral and concrete. He delights. He anguishes. He suffers. He pleads. He celebrates. He calls people to account. In the opening verses of Micah, for instance, God brings an accusation against his people. They are, he says through Micah, unfaithful to him. They are grossly out of step with him, which has resulted in a perversion of justice that permeated the social structure of Judah and Samaria. You are, says God, supposed to be concerned about justice, but you hate what is good and love what is evil. God, the compassionate lover of his people, pleads his case, calling on his people to avoid disaster by repenting of their unfaithfulness and changing course. He calls on earth to be his witness as he enumerates the important events of the nation’s history in which God himself came to their rescue. And what did he want in return? Not sacrifices of animals or first-born children, but a way of life that is good (shaped by his design) – to do what is just, show constant love, and walk humbly with God. Enacting justice and pronouncing judgment on those who perpetrate injustice not only addresses the plight of the weak, but first and foremost relieves God’s suffering. (Amos 5: 21-24; Micah 6: 1-8) Beneath and behind the misery of our world is a suffering God. To undo injustice is to relieve God’s suffering. The cries of the victims of injustice are the very cry and lament of God (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 285). “. . . the demands of love and justice are grounded [according to Calvin] not first of all in the *will* of God . . . nor in the *reason* of God. They are grounded in the sorrow and in the joy of God, in God’s suffering and in God’s delight” (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 285).

God’s love of justice is an active love. God does justice. Isaiah 61:11 “The LORD will bring about justice and praise in every nation on earth, like flowers blooming in a garden.” Psalm 103:6 “For all who are mistreated, the LORD brings justice.” God’s love of justice is an active love that extends to the whole of his creation, human and nonhuman. “But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. He makes the sun rise on

both the good and the bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong” (Matt 5: 44-45). God called his people to mimic his doing of justice for the good of the whole. In so doing we image God; we become icons of God.

Following God’s lead, doing justice requires us to say yes to the grace and divine gift of God’s creation and a yes and no to human activity within it (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 277). We say yes to human activity when it demonstrates a way of life that gives everyone his or her rights and due regardless of who they are; when it displays a dogged, determined, unwilling-to-let-go, unable-to-wear-out, won’t say quit kind of love; and when it stays in step with God, following his lead in all of our dealings. (Seilhamer & Gifford, 1976, p. 126-128). We are commanded to say no to human activity that distorts God’s intention resulting in injustice. Learning when and how to say yes and no is key to a way of life that honors God’s desire for the universal flourishing of his world. Learning when and how to say yes and no is the way of wisdom which requires discovering God’s intent for human society and the rest of creation and committing to living in conformity with that order (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 38).

How are we providing real opportunities for young people to learn when to say yes and when to say no?

Jesus announced his ministry by quoting Isaiah 61 “The Lord’s Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, ‘This is the year the Lord has chosen.’ . . . What you have just heard me read has come true today.” Jesus taught that the radical in breaking of shalom, of God’s long awaited kingdom foretold by the prophets was already beginning in his work (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 104). The Four Gospels make it clear that Jesus understood his mission in these terms. Throughout his ministry he healed those blemishes that were incompatible with shalom – unjust economic structures, domination, violence, and exclusion from community (Stassen & Gushee, 2003, p.365). Jesus’ life, work, death, and resurrection announced mission accomplished. The King and his Kingdom have arrived and the forces of evil are defeated. Col 1: 15 – 20 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” Jesus’ ministry did not produce shalom in its fullness, but provided ‘samples’ of the promised reconciliation (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 106-107). His life, death, and resurrection gave witness to what will be when restoration is

fully accomplished. He provided the 'look fors', the 'sampling signs' that indicate the establishment of God's reign over the whole world.

In his farewell discourse to his disciples (John 14:12) Jesus said that those who profess to follow him ". . . will do the same things I am doing. You will do even greater things, now that I am going to the Father." The way of Jesus is not a doctrine or a set of ethical principles or inspiring stories. It is the way of God embodied in Jesus the human being in his particular historical context. Jesus embodies God's way by entering bodily into real human struggles and human needs and calls his followers to do the same, promising that the Spirit ". . . will show you what is true" (John 14:17) (Stassen, 2006, p. 195). God's strategy for dealing with Evil was not to act unilaterally, but within his world with real human beings even though it was and is messy and costly. Jesus' horrible death on the cross was an event within history in which God finally dealt with Evil. Jesus took the full weight of Evil on his shoulders, defeated it, and forgave those who did not know what they are doing. Even though Evil was ultimately defeated, God continues to act within his world through real human beings to implement what was accomplished on the cross. Our vocation is to heed Jesus' words to his disciples to work within the world with the problem of the lingering effects of Evil (Wright, 2005) 'Do what I have been doing so the world can experience the inbreaking of God's kingdom.'

How are we providing the space and the opportunities for young people to practice doing what Jesus did?

A concern for justice and universal flourishing flows through the Bible like a river. It underpins the laws of the Torah (Pentateuch), saturates the Hebrew wisdom writings, and resounds through the words of the prophets; it forms a core part of all that Jesus said and did and shapes the activities of those who follow him. Everywhere you go in [the Bible] God's love for the poor and desire for justice leap out at you" (Poverty and Justice Bible – the core, 2008, p. 5). The theme of justice flows through the Scripture like a river; it is what God is doing in his world; it is the work in which he invites us to partner. God invites his image bearers to 'daylight' his dream for his world. In many urban areas paved-over waterways are being daylighted and restored to their important functions of reducing pollution runoff, mitigating floods, and improving livability of the habitat. In doing justice, God's image bearers daylight God's intent for his world allowing more of his creation to live closer to their intended role in the whole.

To learn to live the Jesus way of promoting the good and opposing the bad is to live in tune with the way we were created (Stassen, 2006, p. 187). The very structure of creations tells us that the whole of creation, human and nonhuman, must function in radical interdependence in order to thrive. When one part is wounded the whole is affected. Humans exist in a special solidarity with each other because each is created in the image of God. When God beholds human creation he sees his own image, however distorted. There is no more profound kinship than this shared image of God and no matter what evil tries to do this kinship cannot be obliterated. "The

claim of the other on my love and justice is grounded in the fact that we are kinsfolk, in the deepest possible way, by virtue of jointly imaging God” (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 284). No one can be injurious to another without distorting God’s image, misrepresenting and wounding God.

Why is nurturing lovers and doers of justice a key goal of Christian education?

Because loving and doing justice is a key feature of what it means to be the human image bearers that we were created to be. It is the shape of the life we are called to live.

Educating young people to be lovers and doers of justice requires that we equip them to be a faithful presence in the world, producing the kind of ‘sampling signs’ that Jesus did. A “ . . . faithful presence means a constructive resistance that seeks new patterns of social organization that challenge, undermine, and otherwise diminish oppression, injustice, enmity, corruption and, in turn, encourage harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, security, and well being” (Hunter, 2010, p. 247-248). “The prophetic tradition insists that religion that does not manifest itself in action for justice is false religion. The Hebrew prophets boldly proclaimed that God rejected the worship and prayers of those that ignored social injustice. Jesus asked, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not what I say?” The New Testament epistles claimed that “So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead.”” (Wallis, 1994, p. 194). Could it be that doing justice and struggling against injustice are components of true Christian spirituality and that the failure to act justly and support the struggle to undo injustice are marks of a defective Christian piety? (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 95).

Could it be that educating lovers and doers of justice is a mark of a truly Christian education – an education that encourages young people to love what God loves, that creates space and opportunity to celebrate God’s work in the world, that equips them to see and grieve over injustice, and that nurtures in them with the will and courage to do justice?

What kind of ‘sampling signs’ are you and your students producing?

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