

Confessional Education

By William N. Blake

Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Culture, by Elmer John Thiessen (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993) ix. 332 pages.

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Thiessen defends Christian education over against the common charge against it that such training is nothing more than indoctrination, in the pejorative sense, which fails to provide in any way a humane liberal education, thus creating individuals who cannot think for themselves but are bound within the narrow confines of their training. Thiessen does a commendable job and concludes that Christians should continue to nurture their young and developing people with boldness but with care that Christian teaching does not oppress the immature and the learner. Christian nurture founded in a confession of faith is the kind of religious training the author defends. It must thus be training with definite teachings seeking the commitment of the learners.

Thiessen teaches at a small government college at Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada: Medicine Hat College. American readers may wonder how a government teacher can defend Christian views and teaching at a government school. Thiessen also received grants and sabbaticals from government sources to do research on this book and to write it. I taught for eight years at two major Canadian universities and understand how this can happen. One great credit to the Canadian universities is that there is considerable academic freedom for the professors. In the States, humanism is enshrined and guarded against all outside threats. Christians who teach at State universities and who challenge the idolatry of the university are seldom given tenure and position.

The author approaches the charge of indoctrination from the viewpoint of analytic philosophy. Much of the material he analyzes on this topic is written by those in analytic philosophy. This approach has dominated much of philosophy during the last half of this century. Its popularity and impact are waning while there is at the same time an increasingly felt need to inquire into the more substantive aspects of philosophy such as metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. This book reflects this broader and more substantive approach.

The book is well ordered and carefully and thoughtfully developed. Thiessen knows his material very well and is most careful in handling each author to whom he appeals. In fact he bends over backward to observe the value and worth of opposing views. This at times annoys me, but he never appears to capitulate to those with whom he differs. He crafts his analysis with great precision in order that all can determine for themselves the legitimacy of his polemic. In short, he practices what he preaches in this book.

The book is not easy reading largely because the author is very sensitive to support his thesis with the writings of those who have dealt with and levelled the negative charge of indoctrination against Christian training. The topic is narrow, but it is timely as we see Christian colleges and universities modify their teaching to conform to patterns of teaching at secular humanist institutions. For those schools which struggle with conforming more and more with “worldly” standards of teaching, this book provides sound arguments and encouragement to persevere in the task of Christian nurture. Thiessen appropriately warns Christian institutions not to violate the integrity of any student, for all are created in the image of God and must receive due respect when exposed to institutional training.

Thiessen is very sensitive to the charges of immoral indoctrination that have been hurled against religious teaching since the time of the Enlightenment. Considerable attention has been given to this charge of indoctrination during the past twenty to thirty years. Thiessen discovers that these contemporary writers founded their criticism of Christian training on the ideals of a liberal education advanced during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. This ideal is the canon by which religious teaching is evaluated and accordingly despised. Thiessen does us a great favor by demonstrating that this Enlightenment ideal of a liberal education is philosophically indefensible. His polemic depends much upon uncovering the presuppositions underlying this “ideal”. There is nothing to suggest that he has studied to any great extent Van Til's “presuppositional” philosophy. He cites Van Til's book on common grace with no reference to its bearing on the imperative of presuppositional analysis. He also quotes from Alvin Plantinga, but no hint of learning about a presuppositional way of thinking is indicated. Is it possible that Van Til's viewpoint has had a more pervasive influence among philosophers than we can account for? Thiessen identifies the use of presuppositional thinking among contemporary thinkers as a given. Wherever it comes from, we can be thankful that this kind of thinking is gaining some importance among philosophers.

Science is the paradigm for teaching according to the contemporary ideal of liberal education. Thiessen shows that there is as much or more bias in the content and methods of teaching science as there is in religious instruction. In fact, he argues that Christian instruction that follows the dictates of the Bible is far less oppressive than the content and method that marks the teaching of science in the public schools. If one grants the legitimacy of the Enlightenment ideal of liberal education, then the evidence shows that Christian training receives a higher mark for being humane.

Thiessen ably argues that the humanist ideal of a liberal education is not defensible as a

theory that has some meaningful tie with reality. He appreciates the main themes of this concept; he accordingly develops a reconstructed theory of liberal education that conforms, at least in outline form, to the Enlightenment ideal of a liberal education. His reconstructed concept fits the requirements of both public education and Christian schools. This model seeks to encourage students to achieve normal rational autonomy. His revised definition of indoctrination in the pejorative sense can be thought of as the curtailment of a person's growth toward normal rational autonomy.

In a very broad sense, Thiessen may have achieved a workable definition of a liberal education. The question of a liberal education will ultimately reduce itself to the world and life view held by the teacher and the school. What does it mean to be liberated? And what does it mean to educate? From a Christian viewpoint no teacher, parent, church, or rational scheme can liberate. Only Christ can liberate. Teachers may devise what they consider a liberal education, but until Christ who is the truth makes one free, there is no real freedom in this life or the life to come. Achieving normal rational autonomy does not liberate, for such an educational scheme assumes that there is some inherent power to liberate through one's achievement of independent thought. Teachers must accept with Augustine that man's teacher is Christ and only He can redeem the mind and whole being of the student in such a way that he is free under God to live a truly humane existence. Can any other religion or secular philosophy offer this kind of liberal education? The answer is obvious, since Jesus alone is the light of the world. All that a Christian teacher can do is point to the Christ who alone can liberate. These remarks may appear to turn Christian schools into evangelistic centers. Since the spoken (written) word of God constitutes the very ground of rationality, much more than simple evangelism is required. The very spring of man's existence is his communication with God. Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) God spoke and all things came into existence. God spoke and laid before man his cultural mandate to subdue all things. The first recorded act of man is a language act in which he named the animals. Man fulfills his role in life and subdues the earth through language since his every act must conform to God's spoken word. It is incumbent upon man to know the will of God and pursue it with great precision. Adam and Eve failed to heed one small command and accordingly plunged the whole human race into sin and God's curse.

The above remarks suggest that Christian nurture is more than simple evangelism whether such training occurs at home, church or school. We are people of the 'Book' and build our entire life on the Bible. Christians invented a curriculum during the Mediæval period called the Seven Liberal Arts which aimed at providing a liberal education much along the intention Thiessen had in mind with his reconstructed notion of a liberal education. The Mediæval Christians were very specific however in their proposal. They did not come forward with broad concepts hoping people would work out the details. The Trivium, the first three subjects of the Seven Liberal Arts, provided the tools of learning. The Quadrivium, the remaining four studies, identified the subjects that were to be learned following the mastery of the "tools". The tools developed skills in handling words and concepts. Once this mastery was achieved, then the learner could consider a body of

knowledge or subject. With these tools of learning the student is equipped to handle the volume of words and ideas presented to him in the subjects he studies at a later date. The potential for independent judgment under this curriculum is greatly enhanced. One can search far and wide, but no other more liberalizing curriculum can be discovered than this one invented by the Mediæval Christians. Their invention drew upon earlier efforts by the Romans, Greeks and Hebrews, but you can find no parallel in history that compares to this great invention. This scheme is what Christians must once again define and practice as good education. It far surpasses any humanist attempt to bring to learners the possibility of a truly liberal education. We have in our heritage the knowledge of Who liberates men, of Who only can teach men the true realities of life. We have the outline of the greatest curriculum for a liberal education ever brought on the human scene; namely the Seven Liberal Arts.

Thiessen's book deserves attention to help redirect and motivate our Christian schools and colleges to greater excellence in their training without compromise with humanistic philosophy. I have pointed out ways to improve his position, but he may in some way share these views. Our hope is that Christian education will be enlivened through the kind of scholarship and effort displayed by Thiessen in this book.