

Methods of Teaching and Tradition

THE other day, I watched a TED talk (Dan Meyer: *Math Curriculum Makeover*), where a Math teacher explains why students are not interested in Math the way it is currently taught.

I thought his ideas were definitely a step in the right direction because they involved the students in formulating the problem and then working out a solution. Not just memory and calculation were involved, but judgment and experimentation. But I think real education goes much further than that.

Recently I was re-reading some paragraphs in the chapter “Methods of Teaching” from the book *Education*, by Ellen White. These first few paragraphs expose the main reason why so many people follow *tradition* and *custom*. These principles are not recognized nor understood today!

Education, p. 230

For ages education has had to do chiefly with the memory. This faculty has been taxed to the utmost, while the other mental powers have not been correspondingly developed. Students have spent their time in laboriously crowding the mind with knowledge, very little of which could be utilized. The mind thus burdened with that which it cannot digest and assimilate is weakened; it becomes incapable of vigorous, self-reliant effort, and is content to depend on the judgment and perception of others.

The education that consists in the training of the memory, tending to discourage independent thought, has a moral bearing which is too little appreciated. As the student sacrifices the power to reason and judge for himself, he becomes incapable of discriminating between truth and error, and falls an easy prey to deception. He is easily led to follow tradition and custom.

Now follow this reasoning closely. Why do so many follow “tradition and custom”? Because their education was chiefly in the area of memory, and therefore they never developed the power to reason and judge between truth and error.

Just memorize this, and repeat it back, and you get an ‘A’!

OR

Here is the apostles creed and beliefs of our church. Memorize them, repeat them, and you are accepted as a good member of our church.

Any time we just accept the interpretation of another, without exercising our own judgment, we weaken our ability to reason and judge between truth and error. The mental muscles of judgment and reason are not exercised, so they become weak.

Now when people rely so much on just accepting what others say, and putting it in their memory, is it any wonder that it is so difficult to convince them of unpopular truth? Millions have difficulty understanding that the seventh day is the Sabbath, even though it is plainly stated in the Bible.

The Bible plainly states “you shall not kill,” yet men do not believe that it means that. When we go on to tell them that the Law of God is just an expression of God’s character and therefore God does not kill either (at least not like men do), then they just can’t grasp it. It does not fit in with all the other teachings that they have memorized and accepted, so it is rejected.

They feel justified in their rejection because the majority, or the leading men, agree with them. They simply repeat back what they are taught, and as it was in school, so they expect now that God will give them an “A” grade in religion!

But further! Not only were they taught primarily to memorize, but their minds were burdened with information that they could not digest.

What happens to the digestive organs when you take in more food than you can use? They become weakened. So also in the mental area, the mind becomes “incapable of vigorous, self-reliant effort.” And because it is too hard to think deeply with a weakened mind, they simply depend on the minister, or the ruler, or

the boss, or the family opinion, or the general consensus of society.

This is quite astounding. It shows that one of the main reasons why people do not accept truth is because of the methods of teaching used in schools.

So the modern schooling and religious systems, with their emphasis on memorization and repetition of traditional ideas, actually weaken minds so that they cannot make clear decisions between right and wrong.

But let's read now the next few paragraphs:

Education, p. 230, 231

It is a fact widely ignored, though never without danger, that error rarely appears for what it really is. It is by mingling with or attaching itself to truth that it gains acceptance. The eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil caused the ruin of our first parents, and the acceptance of a mingling of good and evil is the ruin of men and women today. The mind that depends upon the judgment of others is certain, sooner or later, to be misled.

So because my mind has been weakened by overburdening it with stuff it can't use, I rely upon others. And those others are people who mingle error with truth. Their thoughts may be quite grand, but there is some error mixed in, which I cannot discern because my mind is too weakened.

Now, back to the idea of "independent thought." We might think, aren't children taught in schools to think about solutions to world problems? And aren't university students taught to debate and argue about ideas and thoughts and issues? Isn't this "vigorous, self-reliant effort"?

Read the next paragraph:

The power to discriminate between right and wrong we can possess only through individual dependence upon God. Each for himself is to learn from Him through His word. Our reasoning powers were given us for use, and God desires them to be exer-

cised. “Come now, and let us reason together” (*Isaiah* 1:18), He invites us. In reliance upon Him we may have wisdom to “refuse the evil, and choose the good.”

Because these students have had their minds filled with things they could not use, and also the ideas of men (truth mingled with error), they have lost the ability to discriminate between right and wrong. This is made worse by the fact that they usually are not encouraged to learn from and rely upon God directly, therefore they do not have the Divine wisdom and moral power that they need to discern truth from error, and stand for right moral principles. Having the disadvantage of a sinful nature also, they are powerless to resist evil, even though they may outwardly restrain themselves for a time.

This is where the weakness shows. It is not that these students do not go on to become great musicians, artists, writers, builders, and organizers. Actually, they DO become great in all those things! And because of that greatness they look at their education as highly successful.

But they do not have the ability to discriminate between right and wrong. So their influence and talent, and great works, only serves to further deceive themselves, and to support Satan’s arguments against the government and ways of God.

It was Cain’s descendants who were the first to excel in agriculture, metalwork, and music.¹ Departure from right morals is often associated with grand enterprises in the world. But these grand enterprises are not an evidence of God’s blessing, because they inevitably lead to indulgence in sin, and eventual destruction of society.

This is where our society stands today with all our “marvelous inventions.” Each invention only increases the practice of sin and selfishness, thus increasing the curse upon the world, and bringing society one step closer to a terrible end.

¹ *Genesis* 4:20-22.

If God would send men and women who are able to discriminate between right and wrong, they would be derided as foolish, deceived, and narrow-minded. And because these people of God are usually not the “great ones of the earth”, their poverty would held up as evidence against the truths that they taught.

So I would gather a few things from these paragraphs. If we want to teach children after God’s methods, then we must cut off everything that is not practical, or that cannot be used by them, otherwise we weaken their mind by overburdening one area. Thus the reasoning powers become weak through lack of use.

Christ’s “yoke is easy and His burden is light.”² But the yoke of the modern schooling system is heavy, and causes many children to hate school, or to turn to self-indulgent pleasures to relieve the burden.

This is also the secret cause behind the almost irresistible temptation of modern music and video games upon children. Their wearied, overburdened minds seek something to unwind with, and they inevitably choose over-stimulation in other areas to try and balance out this over-stimulation in the mental area.

It reminds me of something a doctor once said about the way people misuse the modern practice of medicine:

1. First we put an undue stress on the body with unhealthy eating habits.
2. Then when we get sick, we try to balance it by putting another stress (drugs) on the other side. He likened it to a see-saw, with a heavy burden on one side, balanced with a heavy burden on the other.
3. This puts an incredible stress in the center, and eventually the system will break down.

When I wanted to teach my son at home, I was urged to put him through the *Homelinks* home-schooling course. *Homelinks* is a government-administered home-school program, so the courses

² *Matthew* 11:30.

and books are similar to public school books and courses, only they are done at home (and there is a bit more flexibility in the exercises and choice of reading, etc).

After I obtained the six or eight pages list of things that were supposed to be covered in the 4th grade, I was just amazed! How could we push so much stuff on the children at such a young age? I knew that it would not be possible to do this, and fit in my own curriculum. And I also knew that to push my son to learn all this stuff would take all of my time (I could forget about working at my job).

That's just how bad it was, and yet this is considered the "state of the art" today, and to take a child away from this is considered almost "madness" and "deprivation" of the child. But I see it as mercy.

I can't imagine any child who would not be almost thrilled to do practical education every day. Imagine that: learning a few things, and then immediately practicing them with hands-on work. And real work, not just imaginary problems! Real work that is a blessing to others and teaches us to serve with joy. This would have been a dream education for me as a child.

There is, for example, much practical math in cooking or building. There is much practical chemistry in washing and cleaning (and learning how to treat different stains). There is also math and physics in music. These fields also all have valuable health principles. There it is, simple, practical and non-stressful education! But almost wholly unappreciated by the world, and we are influenced also by the world to think that we do not have much, and must go to them to get something more.

So, in my life, the most formative twelve years were practically lost locked in a classroom, memorizing facts and figures. And the influence of the other students, who were also not trained to distinguish right from wrong, had a huge influence to drag me into temptation and sin.

As I look back on my childhood, I think the fact that my parents had a hobby farm, and that they were both a practical, hands-on people, these things were the greatest educational influence in my upbringing. And yet I was mostly deprived of that influence in my youth by being confined to a classroom. Later in life, when I was living on my own, I had to learn much of what they might have taught me, without the advantage of their experience.

But the influence of school was a silent lesson that these practical duties were to be despised. After all, didn't we go to school so that we could avoid this hard menial work? And so I did indeed try to avoid and shun that kind of work.

But when I was on my own, the chemical and math formulas I learned at school did not help me very much, and the history studies had no meaning, and the politics taught me nothing about real government (self-government). Instead, it was my parent's example of moral uprightness, and hard work, and care about their neighbors, that were actually the greatest influences on me (although, being raised a Catholic, I had no idea how to be free from sin's enslaving power).

When I was home-schooling my son for those eight months, my wife's father called and talked to us a bit. He is a minister in a traditional church, and was concerned that my son wouldn't get proper schooling. I mentioned the example of Jesus, who learned from his parents and from helping his father in the woodwork shop. He replied,

“Well that was back then when life was simple. Now we have to keep up with technology and the scientific advances.”

Thus he implied that an education like that of Jesus would turn out inferior people today. I don't believe it. The real inferior people of today are the ones who don't have moral power to distinguish between right and wrong because their minds were weak-

ened by the wrong methods of teaching practiced in the schools and churches of our day.

I should say though that I never discouraged my son from learning science. He was watching videos on physics “string theory” when he was about 7 years old! And I had got him many gadgets (lasers, infra-red heat gun, sound meter) to play with. But it was not the center of the education, and we tried to use them in practical ways (*i.e.*, using the heat gun to check the temperature of the oven or of our bread). So I think we can introduce children to these technologies, but try to keep them practical.

The technology is not the main problem, it is the use of that technology by minds that cannot discern between right and wrong.

We must learn no more than what we can practically apply. And we must learn how to practically apply it so that it supports goodness, mercy, and truth. Otherwise the excess knowledge becomes a burden on the mind, and weakens us. The weakness is seen in our inability to discern between right and wrong.

Knowledge is power, and knowledge misapplied is a destructive force.

Some might think that the math puzzles in text books are “practical.” But the real practical application of learning is more than just mere mental problem-solving, or imaginary scenarios. It involves using the knowledge to be a blessing to others. That is what discerning between right and wrong is all about.

This is the way Jesus learned: he learned just enough math to be able to work in the carpenter shop with his father. He never burdened his mind with things that he could not use. At the same time, he had a close connection and reliance upon His heavenly Father, from whom he received truth unmingled with error. Consequently he had the mental and spiritual strength to discern between right and wrong as no other one ever had.

*The yoke of Jesus
(even in education)
is easy and his burden is light.*

It is only ignorance or unbelief that imagines it to be an inadequate, crippling yoke.