The Surrender and Recovery of the Unbearable Tension

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Faithful Christian engagement in education means both being at home and at odds with dominant culture. This stance of critical participation should produce an unbearable tension: can one both live in solidarity and dissent? Yet this unbearable tension is often not present in Christian experience—why? This article suggests four reasons: the fragmentation of the Scriptural story, a comfortable co-habitation in a seemingly neutral culture, a Christendom mindset that accepts a privatized role, and an eclipse of the antithesis by an emphasis on creation. The articles closes suggesting that seeing education in terms of witness to God's kingdom may help us recover this tension.

Living as Critical Participants

If the Christian educational community is to be faithful to the gospel in its educational endeavours it must take a proper stance toward its cultural context. This may be described as *critical participation*. This phrase brings out the two sides that characterize the church's engagement and encounter with its culture. On the one hand, the church's relationship to its culture is positive: it is part of and lives in solidarity with that culture. The Christian community lives *at home* in its context identifying itself with it. As members, fellow citizens and participants in the cultural task they learns to cherish all of its culture's created goodness. Christians are residents of the culture. On the other hand, the church also takes a negative stance against its culture living in opposition to it. The believing community finds itself *at odds* with its culture, rejecting and challenging the idolatry that twists and distorts its development. Christians are also dissidents within the culture. Thus, there are two sides to a faithful engagement—affirmation and rejection, participation and opposition, solidarity and separation, involvement and dissent.

This twofold posture is mandated by the Biblical story. A positive stance is founded, first of all, on the creation mandate (Gen.1:26-28). In this foundational command God calls human beings to the delightful task of developing the creation from a garden to a city, from an unformed creation to a complex civilization. This is the creational foundation and impetus for culture. But an affirmative posture toward culture is also based on Christ's Lordship in redemption. Abraham Kuyper has stated this forcefully: 'There is not a square inch [thumb's breadth] of the entire domain of human life of which Christ the Sovereign does not say 'Mine!' '[1] C.S. Lewis comments similarly: 'There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.'[2] If Christ is Lord of every human culture, its development and all areas of that culture, his followers may not withdraw but must press his rightful claims.

A positive stance alone would lead to an unfaithful accommodation and domestication to the idolatry of a culture; instead of faithful witness, the word of the gospel would be muffled by absorption. Thus, the Biblical story also mandates a negative stand. Perhaps this is most clear in

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[1] Kuyper, Abraham, *Souvereinteit in Eigen Kring* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880), 32. This famous statement by Kuyper has been paraphrased in many ways. His comment in Dutch reads: 'Geen duimbreed is er op heel 't erf van ons menschelijk leven, waarvan de Christus, die àller Souverein is, niet roept: 'Mijn!'
[2] Lewis, C.S. *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 33.

Paul's charges, which come in various places in his letters and in various words, to 'not be conformed to this world' (Rom.12:2). World here is the realm of human culture polluted by sin. The hands of humanity are dirty, and it soils everything they touch. Human rebellion stamps itself on every cultural product, relationship, and institution. Sin is structural, built, as it were, right into the very constitution of cultural development by a sinful humanity. The whole of culture has been corrupted by human rebellion against the Creator. The church, therefore, must oppose what the disobedience of humanity has done to cultural unfolding.

This twofold positioning within culture has often been expressed in terms of being 'in the world but not of it.'[3] The language is based on Jesus' prayer where, just before Jesus leaves to return to the Father, he intercedes on behalf of his disciples' mission in the world:

> I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18 TNIV).

The cross—the centre and supreme witness of the Christian faith—wonderfully illustrates the two-sided responsibility of Christian participation in culture. On the one hand, the cross was the ultimate expression of God's love for the world. It was an act of solidarity with the sin and suffering of the world. It was an act of identification with creation he loved and came to save. On the other hand, the cross was the ultimate expression of God's judgment on the sin and idolatry of the world. It was an act of separation from the sin and idolatry that shaped culture. It was an act of rejection and opposition to that which destroys his creation. 'The Cross is in one sense an act of total identification with the world. But in another sense it is an act of radical separation. It is both of these at the same time.'[4] Believers called to take up the cross and follow Jesus must assume this same relation to the world: a faithful witness will involve both sides of the cross. As Lesslie Newbigin puts it:

> We must always, it seems to me, in every situation, be wrestling with both sides of this reality: that the Church is for the world against the world. The Church is against the world for the world. The Church is for the human community in that place, that village, that city, that nation, in the sense that Christ is for the world. And that must be the determining criterion at every point.[5]

An Unbearable Tension

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[3] It has been said that Christians are too much of the world but not in it—a direct contradiction of Christ's demand.
[4] Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 98.
[5] Newbigin, Lesslie, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 54. Elsewhere he says: 'A society which accepts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as its ultimate standards of reference will have to be a society whose whole style of life, and not only its words, conveys something of that radical dissent from the world which is manifested in the Cross, and at the same time something of that affirmation of the world which is made possible by the resurrection.' *Stewardship, Mission and Development,* Unpublished address given at the Annual Stewardship Conference of the British Council of Churches, Stanwick, June 1970, 6.

Yet there is a priority to the affirmative side of our commitment to our culture. It is precisely because the church stands in loving solidarity with its culture that it takes a stand against the sin and idolatry that oppose the abundant life of good creation. God loves the creation and the cross of Christ is an expression of his judgment on the sin that has corrupted the creation. The church follows Jesus. As the fundamental faith commitments of its cultural community have a detrimental impact on the life of its people the church opposes its unjust structures. As the religious idolatry inhibits the fullness of life God intended for his children, the people of God counter its deformity. The starting point for the church's relation to culture is God's love for his world.

This positive affirmation does not, however, lessen the deep sense of tension the believing community will feel in relationship to the various institutions and structures of its culture, including its educational structures. Indeed, the Christian community will feel something of what Newbigin calls an 'unbearable tension.'[6] This unbearable tension is the result of being members of two communities anchored in two different stories. On the one hand, the believer is a member of the cultural community that shares and is shaped by the cultural story. On the other hand, that same believer is a member of the Christian community, a citizen in the kingdom of God, a people formed by the story of the Bible. The Biblical and cultural stories are two different stories, and incompatible to some degree. Newbigin expresses this:

> In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of the species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery of nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God's election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. *These are two different and incompatible stories*.[7]

The nature of conflicting and competing stories can be illustrated with the image of living at the crossroads. The one road is the story of western culture and the other is the story of the Bible. They intersect in the Christian community as the church lives as part of two communities that embody these two stories. The question is: How can the church live faithfully in the Biblical story and at the same time be members of a community who share a different story? These two competing stories will shape the academic enterprise in different ways at every point—purpose of education, institutional forms, leadership structures, curriculum, pedagogy, theory formation, and so on. How can we be faithful to the Bible without withdrawing from or being absorbed into the story that shapes our culture? These are always the two dangers for a minority community living in a different story than the dominant story: withdrawal or compromise, isolation or absorption, irrelevance or syncretism, ghettoization or domestication.

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[6] Newbigin, Lesslie, *Unfaith and Other Faiths* (Unpublished lecture given as one in a series of three to the Twelfth Annual Assembly of the Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1962.

[7] Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15-16. Emphasis mine.

The faithful posture of a church in its culture can be described in terms of a missionary encounter. A missionary encounter is about a clash of ultimate and comprehensive stories—the Biblical story and the cultural story. It requires a church that believes the gospel and is committed to shaping its entire life by the Biblical story. When this happens the foundational religious beliefs shared by the cultural community are challenged. As the church lives fully in the biblical story, it encounters the reigning idolatrous assumptions that shape its culture. The church offers the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its contemporaries. There is a call for a radical conversion, an invitation to turn from the idolatrous beliefs of its cultural story and to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel.

It is precisely in the tension at the crossroads between two stories that the Christian community finds the way of faithfulness in its missionary encounter. Hendrik Kraemer urges the church in its mission in the world to take upon itself this tension. Moreover, he warns of the danger of losing this tension; it results, he cautions, in a tepid witness.

> The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the Church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in this world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that has lost its savour.[8]

Yet it is often the case that the church in Western culture has lost this sense of tension necessary for faithfulness. What has led to this comfortable feeling of being at home in culture without the necessary accompaniment of being at odds? How can the church regain its salty savour?

Perhaps there is a need to emphasize the antithetical side of our cultural engagement. Konrad Raiser, former general secretary of the World Council of Churches, distinguishes between the missionary witness in Europe and North America, on the one hand, and Africa and Asia on the other. The central missionary problem of the 'younger churches' of the third world is the experience of cultural estrangement—the gospel is felt to be a foreign element that disturbs cultural traditions. The problem is for the gospel to be at home in culture. Thus it is the affirmative side of the cultural task that needs to be affirmed in those settings. The central missionary problem of the 'older churches' of the West is the cultural captivity of the gospel. In this situation it must be stressed that the gospel is at odds with culture; it is antithetical opposition is what needs emphasis.[9]

Likewise, Newbigin's conviction that the church in Western culture is 'an advanced case of syncretism'[10] has led him to emphasize the antithetical side of our missionary encounter with culture. In his influential book on models of contextualization, Stephen Bevans has termed this model of relating gospel to culture as 'The Countercultural Model.'[11] He believes it 'takes its origin from the realization that Christianity in the West exists in a context that is very un-Christian in its basic spirit.' The danger of accommodation calls 'for a clear witness to the

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[8] Kraemer, Hendrik, *The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 36.
[9] Raiser, Konrad, Gospel and Cultures. *International Review of Mission.* Vol.LXXXIII, No.331, October 1994. 1994, 628.
[10] Newbigin, Lesslie, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67; *The Other Side of 1984* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), 23.
[11]Bevans, Stephen B., *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, Revised and Expanded Edition, 2002), 117-137.

transforming power of the Christian story.'[12] In response to the advanced state of syncretism in which he found the church in western culture Newbigin increasingly emphasized the antithetical side of cultural engagement. Western culture is a neo-pagan society and the western church has 'in general failed to realize how radical is the contradiction between the Christian vision and the assumptions that we breathe in from every part of our shared existence.'[13]

To be faithful in public life, including in the educational arena, we need to reinvigorate a sense of the unbearable tension. After teaching graduate courses for educators on worldview and education for more than ten years I have found that by their own admission few educators feel this tension as unbearable. And this leaves them open to the blowing winds of education shaped by a story other than the Biblical one. A good starting point is to ask 'why do we not experience this unbearable tension living at the crossroads between two stories?' [14]

A Fragmented Bible

The first reason we do not experience an unbearable tension is that we do not have a firm grip on the understanding of Scripture as *one* unfolding story. The Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and humanity's fall into sin. As N. T. Wright has put it, the divine drama told in Scripture 'offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'[15]

To speak of the biblical story as a narrative I am making an *ontological* claim. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is. It is in the language of postmodernity a 'metanarrative', or in the language of Kant and Hegel 'universal history.' Thus, the biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about a certain ethnic group or religion. This is also a *comprehensive* claim about the world: it is public truth. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. It, therefore, makes a comprehensive claim; our stories, our reality must find a place in this story.

Erich Auerbach's striking contrast between Homer's *Odyssey* and the Old Testament story in his famous *Mimesis* makes this point forcefully. Speaking of the Old Testament story he says:

> Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history . . . Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.[16]

The Biblical story functions in a very different way than other stories. When we read most stories we suspend our disbelief and step into an imaginatively constructed world for a while,

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[12]Ibid, 122. This emphasis on antithesis must not be understood in terms of an anti-cultural stance. See my Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?, *Mission Studies*, 19, 2, 38, (October 2002), 136-158.

[13] Newbigin, Lesslie, Evangelism in the City. *Reformed Review.* 41 (Autumn): 4.

[14] A prominent American educational leader asked me to speak to this question in a keynote address to Christian school principals in North America. It is my reflection on this question that produced the following answers.

[15] Wright, N.T., *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 41-42.

[16] Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 15.

only to leave that world behind when the story has ended. If the story is a good one our lives may well be enriched. It is not like that with the Biblical story. The Bible claims to be the true story of the world; one may not exit this story if its claim is accepted. Rather we remain in that story and fit all of our endeavours, including those we call educational, into it. Auerbach found the claim of the Old Testament 'tyrannical' because it claimed to be 'the only real world.' The Christian will agree that it is the only real world but will part company with Auerbach on his accusation of tyranny.

And yet it is the case that often Christians do not see the Bible as one story. A Hindu scholar of the world's religions once said:

> I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion–and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.[17]

We have fragmented the Bible into bits—moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way there is no comprehensive grand narrative to withstand the power of the comprehensive humanist narrative that shapes our culture. The Bible bits are accommodated to the more all-embracive cultural story, and it becomes *that* story—i.e. the humanist story—that shapes our lives including our educational endeavours.

Captive to the Myth of a Neutral Culture

A second reason we may not experience an unbearable tension is that we don≠t have a deep sense of the religious and idolatrous roots of our cultural story. We need what may be called a missionary consciousness. The illustration of the experience of a cross-cultural missionary is helpful. When a missionary goes to a culture where the controlling faith assumptions are rooted in a religion hostile to the Christian faith she is very careful to analyse that culture with a view to understanding its controlling assumptions and foundational religious beliefs. She is aware that in a Hindu culture, say, the cultural plausibility structure or story will to some degree be incompatible with the gospel. It is shaped by religious idolatry so there will be a conflict between the gospel and Hindu cultural assumptions. She will be very aware of the antithesis. But at the same time she will seek to embody the gospel in a faithful way by looking for currents in that culture that affirm creation. Since she is aware of her task to witness to the gospel in a culture that is at odds with the gospel she will be careful not to be absorbed into its controlling assumptions. But since she desires to be good news to that people she will want the gospel to be at home there as well. She lives with the tension of the gospel being at home and at odds with the cultural story. This constant awareness will produce in her an inner dialogue between the Scriptural story and the cultural story that will ever guard against the twin dangers of irrelevance or syncretism, withdrawal or absorption. She learns to live so fully within both traditions that the

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[17] Newbigin, Lesslie, *A Walk Through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 1999), 4.

debate between them is internalized. As a Christian she is committed to live fully in the Biblical story making that story, its language and models her language and models and the clue to her story so she can see her host culture through the lens of the Bible. This inner dialogue becomes a way of life, a state of mind, a constant approach in her relating to culture.

With this missionary consciousness her antennas are up, sensitive to deep rooted idolatry that shapes her host culture. This missionary consciousness has been blunted in western culture. And it is hard to see because we do not have critical distance from our culture. As the old proverb puts it: if you want to know about water don≠ ask a fish. But a more evident reason is the unconscious assimilation of one of two myths: the myth of a Christian culture or the myth of secular or pluralistic neutrality. In other words, our culture does not pose a threat to the gospel since it is either somewhat Christian or is neutral. The idols of our culture are then hidden. The antithesis is blunted and we are much more easily absorbed into the cultural story.

This notion of a neutral secular or pluralistic culture was articulated clearly over forty years ago by the Oxford economist Denys Munby.[18] According to Munby three of the essential marks of a secular society are: it is uncommitted to any view of the universe and man's place in it; it is pluralist in principle; it is tolerant to all competing truth claims. His ideal secular society was neutral with respect to differing beliefs, competing truth claims, and diverse religious commitments. A secular society was pluralistic, a neutral zone void of ultimate commitments or foundational assumptions in which all these truth claims had equal and fair opportunity to express themselves in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.

It is this ideology that has shaped the educational enterprise—in fact, the whole of our public life—in western culture. Indeed, public schools are the primary institutional carriers and transmitters of this belief. The secular and pluralistic worldview has been concretely embodied in all western institutions but, perhaps, none more so than the school and university.

This belief in a secular society is an illusion. The claim to religious neutrality is a myth—and a dangerous one at that because it masks its own ultimate commitments. In fact, all human societies embody all encompassing truth claims about the world that are based on faith commitments. These faith commitments are often below the level of conscious understanding yet they shape and form the whole of our social life. Western culture is not a secular society but a society that from the time of the Enlightenment has been shaped and formed by a deep religious faith in progress, human autonomy, scientific reason, technology, and social planning. Today these idols are, on the one hand, being transfigured and transported around the world in the process of globalization, and on the other hand, being challenged in a postmodern critique. Faith in these idols, along with some new postmodern ones, lies at the foundation of our shared social life and shape every part of it. In contrast to Munby, all human societies including secular and pluralistic societies are shaped in their entirety by a shared understanding of the universe and humanity's place in it. Christian educators who want to be faithful need to sensitize themselves to the religious core of the public doctrine of Western culture because it is this that shapes educational practice.

Christendom Legacy

Expansion on this last point opens up the third reason we have lost an unbearable tension: this

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[18] Munby, Denys, *The Idea of a Secular Society and Its Significance for Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963)

is the Christendom mindset. Note the word mindset. Historical Christendom was shattered by the emergence of the modern world. The Enlightenment dealt the final blow to the partnership of church and state. However, the stale aroma of Christendom lingers on in the church.

This also may be referred to as 'functional Christendom.' The original import of the term Christendom refers to 'an official ecclesiastical status through legal establishment' that has been characteristic of European churches for centuries. A number of historical factors have converged to break down historical or official Christendom; the church no longer holds an official or established place. However, many assumptions about the church and mission that were forged during this era continue to shape the church's life to the present. The Christendom that is present in North America and Europe is not 'official' but 'functional':

> 'Christendom' also describes the functional reality of what took place specifically in the North American setting. Various churches contributed to the formation of a dominant culture that bore the deep imprint of Christian values, language, and expectations regarding moral behaviors. Other terms like 'Christian culture' or 'churched culture' might be used to describe this Christian influence on the shape of the broader culture. [19]

The problem with the post-Christendom church is that it continues to live off the Christendom legacy and assume many of the characteristics and attitudes of the Christendom church even when at the same time it has lost its place of formative power within culture.

The thesis of H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Church Against the World* is quite insightful in this regard.[20] In this little book with two other authors, he describes what takes place when the gospel and church are part of a culture for a long period of time. When a church is young and a minority its identity is defined by mission and a critical engagement with culture. This missional understanding issues in a community with a distinctive identity and a rigorous evangelization of the culture. Gradually, in a Christendom setting a working arrangement with the powers and institutions of society develops as the gospel permeates more and more of culture. There is a lessening tension between church and culture since the culture is not as pagan as it once was. The final state is one of corruption where the church is domesticated by and absorbed into the culture. This end result is one of cultural captivity.

In Christendom the church is an established church. The redemptive tension, the prophetic-critical stance of the church in relation to culture diminishes. The church becomes part of the constellation of established power within the state, part of the status quo. It takes its place alongside of the political, economic, military, social, and intellectual powers within the empire. The church≡s identity is shaped by cultural story rather than the Scriptural story. The church becomes an arm and instrument of state policy rather than an instrument for God≡s redemptive purposes. Its task is to contribute to the maintenance of the existing political and social order. It is to uphold and support the status quo rather than prophetically critique it. An established church is domesticated by the culture. The stories or worldviews of the church and the broader society merge or at least blur together. There is the assumption that the gospel and church are at home in

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[19]Guder, Darrel, et. al. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 48.

[20] Niebuhr, H. Richard, Wilhelm Pauck, and Francis Miller, *The Church Against the World* (Chicago and New York: Willet, Clark and Co., 1935)

a Christian culture. Critical engagement and Christian distinctiveness is obscured. Kraemer points out that the 'symphonia, to use the official orthodox theological term, of faith and empire, of Church and State . . . when put in the light of the prophetic message of Biblical revelation, is a surrender of the tension inherent and necessary in the relation of the Christian faith and world . . .'[21]

Paradoxically the Christendom mentality remains operative in the modern or secular society. It is our Christendom heritage that has led us down this path of privatization. The church has been established as part of the status quo, as part of the constellation of powers for so long it knows of no other relationship to culture. As an arm of the state the church still has its role to play. However, it has been greatly reduced, since the Enlightenment, to a privatized institution that cares for the religious needs of its members and perhaps influences the individual morality of the nation. It may market its religious wares to religious consumers but the public life of the nation—politics, economics, education, media—is shaped by an accepted framework of shared public doctrine. Its acceptance of banishment to the private realm constitutes an absorption into and capitulation to the dominant cultural story. This privatised role is part of the Christendom legacy because the post-Enlightenment church, like the church in Christendom, takes its limited place within the culture rather than challenging it. Oliver Donovan explains the problem with historical Christendom and its post-Christendom legacy:

> The ambiguities of Christendom, meanwhile, arose from a loss of focus on the missionary context. Once the two societies of Church and nation came to be seen as a single society, it was more difficult to frame the Church-state partnership in terms of the coming kingdom. It could seem, by a kind of optical illusion, that there was no more mission to be done. The peril of the Christendom idea–precisely the same peril that attends upon the post-Christendom idea of the religiously neutral state–was that of negative collusion: the pretense that there was now no further challenge to be issued to the rulers in the name of the ruling Christ.[22]

For educators who unconsciously adopt this Christendom mindset there is no recognition of the need to challenge the powers that shape the educational enterprise. The result is educational captivity. [23]

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[21] Kraemer, Hendrik, *The Communication of the Christian Faith*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 36, 43.

[22] O'Donovan, Oliver, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of the Political Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 212-213.

23 I acknowledge my debt in this section to a growing group of scholars who are emphasising the danger of Christendom on the mission of the church. Prominent among them is John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hawerwas, William Willimon, Douglas John Hall, and Wilbert Shenk. A recent book that has taken up this refrain seeking to revise H. Richard Niebuhr's categories in his book *Christ and Culture* from an Anabaptist perspective is Craig Carter's *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006). While appreciative, I am unwilling, however, to ultimately embrace their Anabaptist perspective for a number of reasons that cannot be pursued here. I view their voice as a loud protest against the accommodation of the western church to its cultural idols and a necessary emphasis on a neglected side of cultural engagement. Therefore, their insight is exceedingly important and timely. See my 'The Missional Church: Ecclesiological Discussion in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America', *Missiology* (30, 4, October 2002), 479-490 where I have offered a sympathetic critique of their anti-Christendom stance.

Creation Without Antithesis

A final reason that the tension between the Scriptural and cultural story has been slackened is closely related to what has just been said; however, it more specifically relates to the neo-Kuyperian tradition that has shaped CSI Christian schools in North America for years.[24] In other words, it is one way the Christendom mindset been operative in this tradition. I am referring to the eclipse of the antithesis by an emphasis on creation. This is especially curious since the antithesis has been so central to the writings of reformational scholars.

Two poles have governed the articulation of the reformational worldview. The first is creation—creation order, creational mandate, the goodness of creation , and so forth. The second pole has been the antithesis—that is, the struggle between two regimes for the realm of creation, two dominions for the domain of creation. John Calvin referred to these poles with his kingdom of creation and the kingdoms of sin and redemption. Al Wolters refers to these two poles with the words structure and direction.[25] It is the former of these two poles—creation—that often has dominated and even eclipsed the second. Participation in the cultural task or creational mandate has not been sufficiently placed in the context of a life and death struggle for the direction of that cultural development.

While the danger of some Christian traditions has been to withdraw from cultural engagement, the Kuyperian tradition has been at the forefront in urging Christians to take up their task in the public sphere. Thus a robust reflection on the creational foundations for this calling has developed. However, when Scripture's teaching is not placed in the context of the Biblical narrative which tells the story of a battle for the creation, it is misunderstood. For example, the creation mandate is called on to justify studying business so one can make a lot of money, not so one can enter that area of cultural engagement to bear witness to the gospel. In the arena of education the loss of an antithetical consciousness has been devastating, leading to domestication hidden behind Biblical rhetoric.

Education as Witness

It is a combination of these factors—the fragmentation of the Scriptural story, a comfortable co-habitation in a seemingly neutral and harmless culture, a Christendom mindset that accepts a privatized role, and an eclipse of the antithesis by an emphasis on creation and cultural involvement—that has led to a loss of the unbearable tension between the Scriptural and cultural story. If we are to be faithful to the gospel in the educational sphere, it will require a reinvigoration of the unbearable tension, a deepening experience and understanding of the incompatibility between the two stories, and the recognition of the impossibility of fully embodying both of them. One cannot serve both Christ and the idols of western culture. As Jesus says: >No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon=(Matthew

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[24] CSI refers to Christian Schools International based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. There are two main umbrella organizations in North America for Christian schools: ACSI (Association of Christian Schools International) and CSI. The former is a much bigger and looser organization of various kinds of Christian schools in the evangelical tradition. CSI is an older society of Christian schools indebted to the Dutch Kuyperian (also called reformational and neo-Calvinist) tradition.

[25] Wolters, Albert M., *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edition with a Postscript co-authored by Michael W. Goheen, 2005)

6:24).

The capitulation of Christian education to an alien story is captured in the title of John Hull's article *Aiming for Christian Education, Settling for Christians Educating*.[26] What Christians are aiming at when they establish Christian schools is to carry out their educational endeavours as Christian educa*tion*.[27] Christian education is an alternative kind of education to the public school system that rejects the cultural idolatry, which shapes these schools. Christian education is based on a distinctive and comprehensive philosophy of education which transforms the entire enterprise—purpose, goals, curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, evaluation, structure, content of disciplines, and so forth. However, in fact, Hull suggests we are settling for Christian*s* educat*ing*. That is, the reality is a Christianity-enhanced public school education that adds moral integrity, devotional piety, and Biblical insight to select topics, like, say, Genesis one and the earth's origins. In fact, then, this maintains the humanist status quo in education. We don't have Christian education but simply Christians in the process of educating.

Another slightly older book out of Australia offers in its title a different metaphor to get at the same problem—*No Icing on the Cake*.[28] The comment on the back of the book explains the metaphor and again speaks to the problem of a loss of the unbearable tension:

> Relating the gospel to education is not simply a matter of putting religious icing on an otherwise secular educational cake. Those who confess the Name of Christ are called to develop learning and teaching which is based on the Word of God. Recognising Christ's creation-wide redemption, Christians will produce fresh and new approaches in education: a brand new cake!

Large questions arise at this point of what a faithful approach to Christian education would look like. For example, perhaps too much emphasis has been put on being different rather than faithful. But these cannot be pursued here. The main point is this: to pursue education in a way that is faithful to the gospel it is necessary to sense an unbearable tension between the gospel and the powers of our culture that shape the educational enterprise.

One of the ways I have attempted to foster this consciousness among educators is to speak of 'education for witness.' There are a number of good proposals for Christian education: education for responsive discipleship,[29] for freedom,[30] for responsible action,[31] for shalom,[32] for

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[26] Hull, John E, Aiming for Christian Education, Settling for Christians Educating: The Christian School's Replication of the Public School Paradigm, *Christian Scholar's Review*, Volume XXXII, Number 2,, 2003, 203-223.

[27] For the moment we are speaking of Christian schools that have been established as such apart from public schools. This is not to suggest that this is the only way that Christians should carry out their educational calling in faithfulness to God's kingdom. Both home-schooling and involvement in the public school system among other options are legitimate ways Christians can pursue their God-given educational callings.

[28] Mechielsen, Jack, ed., *No Icing on the Cake: Christian Foundations for Education* (Melbourne: Brookes-Hall Publishing Foundation, 1979).

[29] Stronks, Gloria and Doug Blomberg, *A Vision with a Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993).

[30] Fowler, Stuart, Harro Van Brummelen, John Van Dyk, eds. *Christian Schooling: Education For Freedom* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Higher Education, 1990).

[31] Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Christian Schools International Publication, 1980)

[32] Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

commitment,[33] among others. All these are helpful as they point to Scripture's teaching. The word 'witness' points to our place in the story; as God's people we are called to witness in the whole of our lives to the coming rule of God in the time between the times.[34] Education is for the purpose of equipping students to faithfully witness to the gospel in all their lives.

One important thing the word 'witness' is intended to highlight perhaps better than other proposals is the antithetical posture of the Christian in culture. Too often Christian education unwittingly trains students, not to lovingly challenge the existing culture, but to accommodate themselves to it, to fit into it. Too often our goal as Christian educational institutions is to establish ourselves and gain recognition according to prevailing standards—even when those standards are derived from an alternative worldview. Witness makes clear that in all areas of life, including education, there will be a clash of fundamental faith assumptions. Witness means a missionary encounter. And this witness is as wide as human life; we witness to Christ in the whole public arena including education. Our education is *for* witness.

Do Not Be Conformed to this World

Paul urges us to offer the whole of our bodily lives up to God as living sacrifices. He articulates a three step process. The first is to 'not be conformed to the world.' For Paul, world is human culture corrupted by sin. The second is to 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds.' As we immerse ourselves in the Biblical story we are renewed to see the world aright. When we say 'no' to cultural idolatry and 'yes' to the gospel, we are in a place to take step three: 'Then you will be able to discern what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.' If we offer an educational paraphrase it might look like this: 'In your educational work do not be conformed to the idolatrous spirits that shape the educational systems of Western culture. Rather renew your whole being with the gospel, and its story. As you do you will be equipped to discern God's will in the purpose for education, curriculum, pedagogy, indeed the whole enterprise.'

When there is a fat man sitting on one side of the teeter-totter it necessary to jump very hard on the other side.[35] The 'participation' side of Christian cultural involvement is well established, the 'critical' not so much. This article has attempted to jump very hard on the side of critical dissent, on Paul's exhortation to not be conformed to the world. When we analyse our surrender of the unbearable tension, we are in a better position to see both the necessity and the way it might be recovered for faithful educational practice.

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[33] Thiessen, Elmer J. *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (McGill's-Queens University Press, 1993).
[34] See Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 196-201; and (London: SPCK, 2006), 151-155.
[35] With this metaphor I want to make clear that this paper is not meant to offer a full treatment of what is involved in Christian cultural engagement. I have not developed the participation side of our calling to any great degree. My main task is to highlight a neglected side of our cultural task and to answer a question I have been asked many times by educators: 'Why do we not feel an unbearable tension in our culture?'