

**Joy in the Journey:  
Education and the Victory of the Kingdom of God**

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1. There is the story told of a man who approached four stonecutters while they were at work. He asked the first what he was doing. The man replied: “I am cutting stones.” He asked the second the same question, and received an answer with a little more enthusiasm: “I am building a wall.” When he asked the third one, the man stopped, and with a sense of satisfaction said: “I am building a cathedral!” Finally he came to the last man and asked the same question. The man’s face beamed with radiance and joy as he surveyed his work and responded: “I am building a cathedral in which the glorious God of creation can be worshipped.” Each of the men were carrying out the same task; each cut stones and laid one upon the other. However, their interpretation of that task differed according to their understanding of the big picture. While the first simply interpreted his task in terms of the mechanics of cutting and laying stones, the last man saw the final goal and purpose of his stonecutting – a place for the worship of God. And it was precisely that understanding of the end of his work that sustained him in his work with deep joy.

2. How would you respond as an educator to the question, ‘what are you doing?’ No doubt you are all involved with the mechanics of teaching various subjects in the classroom. But what is the end of your work? What gives meaning and purpose to that work? Perhaps you may think such questions are really irrelevant; you would like something more ‘practical,’ like how can I put together Monday’s lesson plans. This past week I received an email from a vice-principal who, along with his staff, had attended a conference. Apparently they had heard a speech painting ‘the big picture’ and the teacher had complained that she wanted something more practical. ‘Forget about vision and perspective; tell me how to plan lessons.’ This vice-principal had taken my worldview course and had seen how different stories shape education differently. He also remembered I had mentioned postmodern pragmatism and how the very word ‘practical’ had

pagan roots. And so he sought advice. In fact, these so-called ‘big questions’ of worldview do have an enormous formative effect. They are extremely ‘practical’ if by that word we mean important for the task of teaching. John Maynard Keynes, one of the most influential economic philosophers in the last two centuries, said this:

The ideas of economist and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt, from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.

Put another way, practical people who believe they are exempt from thinking about bigger questions of context are in fact slaves to some worldview, probably the prevailing worldview formed and articulated in the history of the West. It is that worldview which shapes their work.

3. And this has implications for joy in our tasks. According to the Scriptures joy is a gift that comes from God as we are committed to and involved in His plan for the world. If we do not take the time to nurture and cultivate a vision for this world that is shaped by the Biblical story, and the end of history that is revealed there, the sad fact is that we will be enveloped in the prevailing story shaping our culture, and with that we forfeit the gift of joy. Let me put it in the terms of the theme of this conference – joy in the journey. The first question is *not* how can I find joy in my journey. That question sets us off on the wrong path; that is a question shaped first by our consumer society, enchanted by the consumption of experiences and pleasure. The fundamental question is not how can I find joy in my journey but rather ‘what journey am I on? What is the destination of my life including my educational endeavours?’ If we are on the right journey, if we are headed toward the right destination, then joy will be a gift that will often accompany us as a companion.

4. The *Contemporary Testimony* of the Christian Reformed Church entitled *Our World Belongs to God* puts it this way: “. . . pursuing pleasure we lose the gift of joy” (par. 15). I confess that almost every time I go to rent a movie at Blockbuster this phrase comes to mind: frantically or feverishly pursuing pleasure we lose the gift of joy. We live in a society that pursues pleasure with a passion unsurpassed in history; our society longs for joy. Perhaps the most popular ‘f-word’ in our vocabulary is ‘fun.’ But the irony here is that while new ways of finding pleasure, fun and entertainment abound, there is little true joy. Rather the result seems to be boredom, stress, apathy, pain, hurry, busyness, emptiness, all robbing us of our joy. When joy is pursued as an end in itself, it will finally elude us; it is like grasping smoke or finding the end of a rainbow. Joy is a gift of the kingdom of God that comes when our eyes are fixed on the proper goal of history – the kingdom of God. The real question, then, is ‘what journey are we on?’ Where are we going? Is it the same place as all of history is going? Is the story of our lives in keeping with the true story of the world? Put in Biblical language: do we seek first the kingdom of God?

5. And these kinds of questions are important for our educational endeavours. What journey are we on in the educational task to which we give ourselves daily? For a number of centuries Western culture has been on a journey that has significantly shaped the educational endeavour. That journey was the progressive building of the kingdom of man in which material prosperity, freedom, truth, and justice would reign and bring happiness. History was the movement toward this utopian goal and humanity stood as the primary player at the centre of this history. Human beings, if they could free themselves of all superstition, religion and tradition, if they could exercise their rational powers, then they would be able to build this kind of society which brought happiness here on earth.

6. In light of our theme of joy in the journey, it is significant to note that happiness or *bonheur* was hailed by 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers as a ‘new word in Europe.’ The goal of human life was happiness. The medieval person, influenced by Augustinian Platonic Christianity, looked forward to the joy of heaven achieved by the work of God. Enlightenment people now looked forward to ‘happiness’ on earth achieved by the cumulative effect of human effort. Alexander

Pope caught the mood of the day in his couplet: “Oh happiness, Our Being’s End and Aim,  
Good, Pleasure, Ease, Content, Whate’er thy Name.”

7. The primary tool given for this task of pursuing human happiness was science. Happiness was within the reach of Western humanity through the cumulative work of science, liberating society from bondage to religious dogma and superstition, and unlocking the secrets of nature. Science offered a sure path to true insight into the world. But scientific knowledge is not simply for the sake of understanding and insight; knowledge is power. [When I defended my doctoral dissertation in Utrecht I stood behind a lectern that had inscribed on the front the Latin phrase *scientia potestas est*, knowledge is power.] Knowledge is power because if we understand the laws of this world we can control them for our benefit. This has happened primarily in two ways in the history of Western culture. First, our scientific knowledge enables us to gain knowledge of the non-human creation and master it by technology. A science-based technology enables humanity to gain dominion over the forces of nature for our good. The second way science equips us is that as we gain understanding of the laws of society we can organize a more rational society in keeping with those rational laws. Then justice, truth, and freedom will become a reality. If we are able to discern economic laws we can construct a more rational economic system; if we are able to discern political laws we can construct a more rational political system; and so on. The creed that Western society has lived by for the last few centuries can be confessed in the following way (with apologies to the Apostles’ Creed):

I believe in Science Almighty. I believe in the power of human reason disciplined by the scientific method to understand, control, and change our world.

I believe in Technology and a Rational Society, its only begotten Sons which have the power to renew our world.

I believe in Progress. I believe that a science-based technology and a rationally organized society will enable me to realize my ultimate human goal—freedom, happiness, and the comforts of material abundance.

I believe in Consumerism. I believe that the abundance of consumer goods and experiences, and the leisure time to consume them will make me happy. To this I

commit myself with all my money, time, energy, and resources. Amen.

8. It is important for our purposes to note that modern education, as we now understand it, was born at this time, during the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when this view of the world reached maturity. It was this understanding of the world and the end of history that shaped the whole educational enterprise. The thinking of educational philosophers that shaped the modern education system was something like the following. The goal of the school is to pass on a unified body of universal scientific knowledge and so to equip a world of rational citizens. It is only as the power of religion and superstition is broken and the full light of human reason breaks through that we are able to construct a more rational world, a society of freedom, justice, truth, and material prosperity that will ultimately bring happiness. Education played an extremely important role in the building of the humanistic kingdom of man. Listen to the words of Richard Tarnas first about the modern Western worldview, and then about the place of education:

. . . the conviction that man was steadily and inevitably approaching entrance into a better world, that man himself was being progressively improved and perfected through his own efforts, constituted one of the most characteristic, deep-seated, and consequential principles of the modern sensibility. Christianity no longer seemed to be the driving force of the human enterprise. For the robust civilization of the West at the high noon of modernity, it was science and reason, not religion and belief, which propelled that progress. Man=s will, not God=s, was the acknowledged source of the world=s betterment and humanity=s advancing liberation (Tarnas 1991:322f.).

He speaks of education:

Proper education of the human mind in a well-designed environment would bring forth rational individuals, capable of understanding the world and themselves, able to act in the most intelligent fashion for the good of the whole. With the mind cleared of traditional prejudices and superstitions, man could grasp the self-

evident truth and thus establish for himself a rational world within which all could flourish. The dream of human freedom and fulfillment in this world could now be realized. Mankind had at last reached an enlightened age (Tarnas 1991:281).

This understanding of the world shaped the whole educational system: purpose, curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, institutional structures, and theoretical structure of the disciplines. Education would contribute to the happiness of Western society.

9. This vision of the world is fading fast in our day. Many of us have heard the most famous definition of postmodernity offered by Jean-Francois Lyotard: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” More simply put, today we no longer believe that science, technology, and a rational society can take us to a better world in which we will be happy. Instead of the wonderful world promised by the 18<sup>th</sup> century prophets, we have a world endangered by ecological, economic, military, and ideological forces and threats that we never dreamed of 200 years ago. With the failure of our vision of the goal of history we also see the failure of modern educational systems. Put in terms of our image of a journey, the modern journey is seen to be a dead-end street.

10. Now happiness is understood differently too. Hannah Arendt has shown that for the American founding fathers, the happiness that they sought was a *public happiness*. Their understanding of the world was deeply rooted in the Enlightenment. They believed that actively shared responsibility for public life, based on science and universal reason, would bring about a social happiness. However, there is a shift in understanding happiness today. She shows that the language of ‘the pursuit of happiness’ has become today in our postmodern world a matter of *individual happiness*, private hedonism, the pursuit of individual and selfish well-being. The world is a place where each person has the right to pursue their own privatized vision of happiness (*On Revolution*, 1963).

11. The question now arises among philosophers of education, if we no longer believe that we are moving toward a more rational world of justice, freedom, and public happiness, and if we no

longer believe there is a universal body of rational knowledge that will achieve that end, then what is the purpose of education? In his book *The End of Education*, Neil Postman speaks of the almighty trinity that increasingly shapes education today: economic utility, consumerism, and technology. Put in other terms: the purpose of the school today is to be a vendor of useful information (not truth) and marketable skills that enables the student to compete or survive in the jungle of the market. In our postmodern consumer society, the market increasingly controls all of life; education must serve that market. Only students equipped with the right kind of information and skills marketable in our global consumer world will be able to survive the intense competition and enjoy a bit of the material prosperity available in a world with an exploding population. Western society has hit a dead-end in the modern journey. The postmodern journey is now the selfish and privatized pursuit of happiness that comes through the consumption of goods and, even perhaps more importantly, through the consumption of experiences. Education must serve that end of privatized happiness.

12. As believers we confess that the story of modernity is built on the sand of idolatry. It is a view of the end of history – public happiness through a rational society – that is based on a false faith and hope. It is no wonder it has failed to deliver the happiness it promised. And surely the selfish pursuit of pleasure, private happiness, and economic advantage will fail to satisfy or bring joy. The end of history is neither a rational world constructed by science, technology, and Western economic, political, social, and educational institutions nor a pluralistic consumer utopia for the privileged few. This is where the Christian community, including the Christian school has good news. In the midst of failing dreams we are a community sent with a message that in Jesus Christ God has revealed to us and accomplished the true end and true goal of history – a kingdom where joy abounds. The *Contemporary Testimony* puts it this way:

As followers of Jesus Christ, living in this world – which some seek to control [modernists], but which others view with despair [postmodernists] – we declare with joy and trust: “Our world belongs to God!” (par. 1)

Following the apostles, the church is sent . . . to tell the news that our world

belongs to God. In a world estranged from God, where millions face confusing choices, this mission is central to our being, for we announce the one name that saves (par. 44).

13. I would like to articulate this by means of a story within my own recent experience. Just two weeks ago I was in the Crimea, in the Ukraine. I was invited to speak to a large group of law students in the influential University of Labour and Social Relations in Sevastopol on the shores of the Black Sea. My topic was ‘Marxism, Capitalism, and the Gospel: Three Visions for the Public Life of Society.’ It is quite difficult to communicate cross-culturally through a translator. About fifteen minutes into the lecture I noticed that a number of students really couldn’t care less about my lecture and weren’t really listening. I stopped and through my Russian translator, asked them how old they were and how old they were when the Communist Regime collapsed. They ranged from 18-20, and so were between 8-10 years during the fall of Communism. I asked them what they were studying; they told me law. I then asked them if it mattered whether or not they knew what I was talking about. I said something like this: ‘Marxism was the story that shaped the public life of the Ukraine for many decades. Yet Marxism turned out to be an empty dream. Many people gave their lives to Marxism and many lawyers fashioned their lives and law practice on the Communist story. Yet all of their efforts were for nought. They gave their lives for a lie and an empty illusion.’ I continued: ‘I noticed in your capital city of Kiev that capitalism is rushing in to fill the void created by the fall of Communism. I believe that this too is an empty dream that will also finally crumble. Those who give their lives to this vision of life will also be disappointed and dissatisfied. I am suggesting to you that the Christian faith is not a religion as most of you understand religion, but the true story about the world. It tells us where history is going. It is the only solid foundation for the public life of society, including law. These are matters of tremendous importance. Don’t you want to give your lives for something that is true?’ I now had the attention of almost all of them. Then began a back-and-forth banter with their challenge and my response, their questions and my answers. Finally, one young man asked me ‘Why do you come here and feed us this propaganda?’ I asked him what he meant by propaganda and he answered ‘this religious doctrine you are talking about.’ I reiterated that the gospel is not about religion, as he defined it, but is the public truth about the world. At that



moment the book of Daniel came flooding into my mind. I told the students of the dream of Nebuchanezzar, the great ruler of Babylon. Nebuchanezzar was one of the most magnificent figures in world history with a remarkable world kingdom. In his dream he sees an image made of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. A stone not cut by human hands rolls down from the mountain and smashes the image to bits. That stone begins to grow until it becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. I gave him Daniel's interpretation of the dream. The image is of four successive world empires – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The stone is the kingdom of God that will be ushered in by a world ruler from Israel. That stone will grow to fill the whole earth. God will rule over the entire earth and all of human life. That rule has begun in Jesus Christ. I said this is not propaganda; I believe this to be the public truth about the world. If I am correct – and one can certainly reject this – then the only lasting foundation upon which you can build your work in law or any other public sphere, is the kingdom of God. Communism has already been shattered; capitalistic liberalism will also one day be shattered. Only the kingdom of God will remain. That is why I share this with you. I ended by saying: 'That is what I believe to be the truth about the world. What do you believe to be true about the world? Upon what are you building your life and legal career?'

14. I want to pose those questions again to all of us here this morning: 'What do we believe to be true about the world? Upon what are we building our educational efforts?' Another book of the Bible picks up the same theme as Daniel; that is the book of Revelation. In chapter 5 God sits on the throne with a book sealed with seven seals. The book represents the kingdom of God at the end of history; the seals represent control over history to move it to that end. "But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll . . ." (v. 3). There was no one who could move history to its appointed end. It says that John wept and wept because no one was found who could open the scroll. Tears are the only response we can have if history is closed to God's renewing power. The sorrow, pain, death, oppression, cruelty, futility of the present era will remain; tears are the only proper response. But then, one of the elders says: "Don't weep! The Lion of Judah, the Root of David has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll . . ." A lion! A King! Impressive images! John looks up, and through tearful eyes sees, not a Lion-King, but a lamb looking as if it had been slain standing in the centre of the throne. The one who has taken

the reins of history is the One who was shamefully exposed, publicly humiliated, and executed on the cross. It was at the cross that the victory of the kingdom of God was gained. The source of the world's problems, human rebellion and sin, were defeated. Now we hear the words: "He came and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne" (v. 7). The remainder of the chapter shows us a swelling strain of praise first of the heavenly court, then of the thousands of angels, and then of the whole creation who sing: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain . . . Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!" The remainder of the book of Revelation works out this victory as one seal after another is opened. God rules history and the theme is sung in heaven: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

15. Here is a suffering little church in the midst the powerful Roman empire making the audacious claim that they follow a man who was crucified and now controls the reins of history. And throughout the book of Revelation that confidence continues to erupt in joyful songs of praise to the Lamb of God who has conquered by his blood. The end of history is God's rule over a renewed creation. And that end has flowed into the present.

16. And here is the amazing part: we have been made friends of God. Jesus says to his disciples: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). Friendship means we know where history is going, we know God's will and purpose for the creation. Friendship also means that we have begun to share in the victory of the end; we now have a foretaste of the full meal that is coming. Friendship means that we have been invited by Jesus to commit ourselves to and become involved in His plan for the world. His whole life was one of making the kingdom of God known in his words, deeds, and life. His whole life was one of sacrificial devotion, of self-giving. He says to his disciples: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." He calls us to participate in his mission to witness to the kingdom of God, to witness to the rule of God in Christ over all of human life. He calls us to give our lives away for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of others. Jesus says in John 15: "I

have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (v. 11). Joy comes by committing ourselves to and participating in God’s mission to make the kingdom known. Joy comes by giving our lives away for the sake of the kingdom.

17. The question that remains urgent for each of us is, how do our educational endeavours contribute to making the victory of the kingdom known. If we reject education *for* a rational society, or education *for* consumer training, but endorse education *for* witness, what does that mean? Are we training young people to bear witness to the victory of Christ in the whole of their lives? As educational institutions are we a witness to God’s rule over education as we bring our purpose, our curriculum, our pedagogy, our structures, each subject under the rule of God in Christ? If we are on the journey to the coming kingdom of God, we can share in Christ’s joy. And surely that is the heart of the matter; not my joy but sharing in Jesus’ joy. Joy comes to Jesus as he sees the fruit of his crucifixion in the renewal of human life. Paradoxically the joy of Jesus came as he gave his life away for the sake of others; in our acquisitive and self-centred society that seeks to grab and clutch happiness, we need to learn the secret that joy comes as we give ourselves away to others on behalf of the kingdom. Joy comes as we share in Jesus’ joy in seeing the fruit of his redemptive work.

18. And one final word in closing: this vision of the kingdom of God and self-giving love on behalf of Christ does not come naturally. It will not simply grow without being cultivated. In fact, left unattended this vision will be choked out by the vision of life that dominates our TVs, movies, music, the whole of our culture. Rather this vision of the kingdom must be nourished through soaking our minds in the Biblical story, by spending time in prayer, and by sitting at the feet of the crucified Christ. Only then can the vision of the kingdom of God be nourished; only then can we give ourselves away in sacrificial service; only then will we experience the joy of Jesus Christ. May God bless you with joy in your important calling.