

# Martin Luther on Reformed Education - Dr. R. Faber

Taken with permission from Dr. Riemer Faber is professor of Classics at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

## Introduction



It is sometimes forgotten that the Reformation was as much concerned with school as it was with church and home. Appreciating the role of education in directing church and society back to the source of the Christian faith, the reformers were committed to the schooling of the young. One of Martin Luther's first acts as a reformer was to propose that monasteries be turned into schools, while one of his last was to establish a school in Eisleben, where he died in 1546. Not only Luther, but also Melancthon, Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger and Calvin

actively promoted reformed education in their writings and works. Accordingly, it is no exaggeration to state that as a result of the Reformation public education was much altered by the end of the sixteenth century.

The development of reformed education neither began nor ended with the first generation of reformers. Well before Luther and his contemporaries wrote about the necessity of reformed education, Christian humanists were publishing tracts promoting educational improvement. In fact, one of the hallmarks of the Renaissance movement that was reaching northern Europe was the rebirth of learning. The reformers not only read the writings of the humanists, but as graduates of universities they had witnessed the debates about the various principles and methods of learning. As a consequence, they were forced to consider the proper function of education in the life of the believer. While the strengths and weaknesses of the reformers' contribution to Christian education continue to be discussed, it is clear that the sixteenth century witnessed what is perhaps the most concerted effort to reform education according to norms of Scripture.

Whereas the first generation of reformers made considerable improvements to Christian education, important refinements and applications were made throughout and beyond the sixteenth century, especially in the erection of schools, the development of curricula, the publication of textbooks, and in the examination of philosophical ramifications. Nevertheless, the early reformers have earned an important

place in the history of education, as they were the first to express the principles of reformed education and to develop objectives and methods. In so doing, they provided an important basis upon which later educators were to build.

The need for educational reform was urgent at the beginning of the sixteenth century. At that time there existed no school system as such, and teaching was often limited to the children of wealthy merchants and city rulers. In many places the Roman Catholic church supervised the training of the youth in monasteries, cloisters, and other church-run institutions. But these were falling into disrepute and disrepair, as the populace reacted against the corruption and abuses among the clergy. Many parents simply stopped the training of their offspring, so that one of the first tasks of the reformers was to convince parents that the spiritual well-being of their children was more important than their physical comfort.

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Martin Luther was at the forefront of those who realized the need for change in education, and with characteristic zeal he sought to effect improvements in Wittenberg and throughout Germany. While he composed only a few works that treat education directly, his other writings often reveal an attempt to relate education to the doctrinal rediscoveries of the Reformation, and especially to subject learning to the "theology of the cross". The few treatises Luther did dedicate strictly to education had such impact that they may be deemed seminal for the development of reformed schooling in the sixteenth century. These works not only influenced teachers and preachers throughout Germany, but they also encouraged other theologians to consider the role of education in society. In this article we shall consider briefly two works by Luther on this subject. We shall examine especially the motivation for writing these tracts, the main arguments for schooling in them, and Luther's ideas about the basis and objectives of education.

### **Establishing and Maintaining Schools (1524)**

Of the two which will be treated here, one is the letter "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524).<sup>(1)</sup> The letter was written in response to the decline of the church-run schools, as well as to the anti-educational sentiments that arose in Wittenberg and elsewhere. One of the premises underlying the arguments in the letter is the doctrine concerning the duties of the temporal government to ensure decency and good order in society; for this reason the letter was addressed not to parents but civic leaders. More than the parents, the councilmen possessed the political and financial resources to erect the schools, and impressing upon them the moral duty to promote the kingdom of God strengthened Luther's cause. Luther therefore reminds the councillors that by their

authority from God they must promote a godly society, and he seeks to convince them that proper education would benefit the state as well as the church.



It should be noted, however, that Luther not only addresses the councilmen in this open letter; he also writes to the citizens, his "beloved Germans". For whereas the responsibility of the councilmen is to develop a community in which Christian education may flourish, citizens and especially parents are called by the priesthood of all believers to nurture their offspring. Luther founds the parental responsibility firmly on the Bible, citing several texts as proof. One is [Psalm 78:5-7](#), where we read how God "commanded our fathers to teach [His laws] to their children; that the next generation might know them ... and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God." Luther also refers to the commandment to honour one's father and mother; the parents' responsibility in enacting this commandment is evidenced by the injunction in [Deuteronomy 21:18-21](#) that rebellious youths be brought by them to the elders for corporal punishment. It is the duty of the parents to teach children obedience to all in authority over them. God, having established a covenant with us, "entrusted [children] to us ... and will hold us strictly accountable for them (353)." Luther also reminds parents that for proper training in the faith, Moses freely advises the young to "... ask your father and he will show you, your elders and they will tell you ([Deut. 32:7](#))"; for parents have the duty to instruct their children in these things.

And yet Luther writes mainly to the councilmen, for he realizes that there are citizens who neglect their parental duties. Some may not understand their God-given responsibility, others may not be suited for the duty, "...for they themselves have learned nothing but how to care for their bellies (355)." A third group of parents is one which does not have the opportunity or the means to educate its children. "Necessity compels us, therefore, to engage public-school teachers for the children (355)." While it may not appear unusual from the modern perspective, Luther's advocacy of a community-organized school was novel. Assuming that the state would be ruled by Christian leaders, Luther imposes upon the government the task of overseeing reformed education. Not anticipating the conflict between state and church that was to develop later, Luther proposes a system of education that would benefit all members of society, including boys and girls, wealthy and poor. Civic schools would belong to a system of institutions throughout the land and would operate in harmony with the church. In this manner, Luther thought, education could serve the reform of religion and society.

Having alerted both parents and civic leaders to their respective duties in the education of the youth, Luther next describes the benefits of schooling for state and church. The councilmen are enjoined to support education, for "a city's best and greatest welfare, safety and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens (356)" than in "mighty walls and magnificent buildings (355)". For the proper government of the earthly realm, education should be viewed as an important means in producing responsible citizens. In short, the councilmen have a vested interest in the training of the young, who will be the future civic leaders.

Influenced by the methods espoused by the Renaissance, Luther believed that the best model for preparing civic leaders was the classical one. For him, the writings of ancient Greece and Rome provided the most complete and exhaustive treatments of all aspects of civic life, including professions such as medicine, law, and the various tasks of temporal government. This time-bound, earthly government was a divinely ordained "estate", and should carry out its duties with utmost care. The best precedent for the proper conduct of the worldly estate, Luther writes, are the ancient Greeks and Romans, who "although they had no idea of whether this estate were pleasing to God or not, they were so earnest and diligent in educating and training their young boys and girls to fit them for the task, that when I call it to mind I am forced to blush for us Christians" (367). Enthused by the contemporary rediscovery of the classics, Luther acquired a view of antiquity so favourable that the modern must beg to differ; yet he and many peers felt that the methods - if not the cultural values - of antiquity provided the best model for educating future citizens in his own time.

Not only would the state benefit from a reformed education, but also - and especially - the church. Here, too, Luther advocated the study of ancient life and letters, for he was convinced that knowledge of antiquity would provide believers with a better understanding of the historical, social and linguistic context of the Bible. Whereas the recently published German translation would make the Bible accessible to all German people, Scripture in the original languages must be preserved and studied with diligence. "My beloved Germans," writes Luther in a personal and passionate vein, "let us get our eyes open, thank God for this precious treasure [of the Hebrew and Greek Bible], and guard it well, lest the devil vent his spite and take it away from us again (358)." The gospel must be preserved, the true doctrine must be taught, and the faith must be defended on the basis of God's Word alone. God, argues Luther, Who "desires His Bible to be an open book", desires that all know the Bible. Therefore Luther goes on at some length about the value of a classical curriculum for the reformed school, for he was convinced that knowledge of the liberal arts - history, languages and the like - provided the best context for the study of Scripture. Not only ministers, theologians, teachers and scholars educated in this manner would best serve the Church, but all believers as members of Christ's body would better know God and His work in this world by means of such learning.

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### **On Keeping Children in School (1530)**

Another treatise by Luther on education is the so-called "Sermon on Keeping Children in School" (1530), published in the form of an open letter.<sup>(2)</sup> Having received disappointing results of a survey regarding the improvement of life in church, home and school, Luther realised that his earlier call for educational reform had gone largely unheeded. Clearly, changing the thought and behaviour of people would not be so easy as Luther had hoped at first. Many parents still preferred to direct their children to the work force and the immediate material rewards it would afford, than to invest in spiritual development and moral reform. Luther's wish for them is that they "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well ([Matthew 6:31-33](#))." However, the Wittenberg disturbances, the Peasants' Revolt, and the common misunderstanding that Reformation meant an attack upon learning, caused many parents to halt the education of their children as soon as possible. Accordingly in this treatise Luther sets his sights lower, and he focusses more on producing solid reformed preachers and teachers through whom modest improvements may be made. Yet, unlike the letter of 1524, the gist of this letter is not the establishment of schools, but the proper development of them and their curriculum.

The main addressees of the Sermon are the reformed preachers throughout the land. Luther speaks especially to them, not because he confuses the jurisdictions of church and school, but because he wishes to impress upon ministers the advantages of education for Christian spiritual development. The relevance of education for both religious and civic realms, as described in the letter of 1524, remains a key argument for sending children to school. First Luther addresses the problem of the little concern parents show for the "spiritual well-being" of their children. "I see them," says Luther of some parents, "withdrawing their children from instruction and turning them to the making of a living (219)." Neglecting the role of Scripture in the life of their children, parents appear to underestimate the function of learning in the service of the Word, the sacraments, and "all which imparts the Spirit and salvation". It appears that parents do not encourage their children to learn more about God and His works in the created world and history. While admonishing his fellow Germans, Luther reminds parents of the dire warning of punishment "to the third and fourth generation" of those who do not love God, adding that "you are guilty of the harm that is done when the spiritual estate disappears and neither God nor God's word remains in the world (222)." In Luther's view education is crucial to the advancement of the gospel, and all should

see to it that their children live first and foremost for the proclamation of the Word in the lives of others and their own. It is also for this reason that he advises all to consider the importance of the preaching office and theology, and all learning that advances them.

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As for the Sermon's discussion of the relevance of education for the state, Luther herein attacks especially the increasing materialism of his fellow Germans. Seeking physical comforts, wealth and material prosperity, parents wish for their children not spiritual, but material well-being. Throughout the letter Luther opposes education to the pursuit of Mammon, knowing that many parents focus on this world rather than the next. Granting that the offices of the temporal realm concern this world, Luther nevertheless values the purpose of the worldly estate as more than the acquiring of material property, since it is "an ordinance and splendid gift from God, who has instituted and established it and will have it maintained (237)." The true function of the secular realm is "to make men out of wild beasts" (237), that is, to effect an orderly, fair, and peaceful society in which the spiritual estate may be fostered. Justice, social order, and the preservation of life fall under the jurisdiction of the temporal government, which must be exercised by people properly educated for such tasks. In this way the temporal realm promotes God's kingdom on earth, as it is subservient to His word and seeks to advance life according to His will. For this reason also, "is the duty of the temporal authority to compel its subjects to keep their children in school ... so that there will always be preachers, jurists, pastors, writers, physicians, schoolmasters, and the like... (256)." After all, in the temporal realm, "every occupation has its own honour before God, as well as its own requirements and duties (246)."

For Luther, knowledge of Scripture is both the basis and goal of education; humanistic methods may serve this objective, but they are not to be deemed an end in themselves. Unlike the humanist Erasmus, Luther did not consider education per se as contributing to the salvation and piety of the believer. The depravity of the human will, Luther argued, is so great that without the righteousness of God no-one can progress in piety, let alone be saved. Equally condemned before God, all believers are equally saved by God's grace through faith in the death of Christ - regardless of education. Without the gospel, then, education is meaningless. And it is only from the perspective of the gospel that education must be valued. On the basis of the Bible all youths should pursue education as a means to becoming responsible men and women who can govern churches, countries, people, and households.

## Conclusion

Within the scope of this article, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive assessment of Luther's proposals for educational reform as expressed in the "Letter to the Councilmen" and the "Sermon". Needless to say, critical questions have been posed, especially about Luther's distinction between the temporal and spiritual realms, the use of humanist methods and values "in the service" of Christianity, and the nationalism that appeared to result from the developed German educational system. Luther did not address various disciplines of study, nor the practicalities of training the young. It would be appropriate, however, to conclude by noting briefly the reasons for the basis, method and objectives of education as delineated in these works.

In writing these public letters, Luther sought to promote a reformed view of education which at the same time answered the criticism of opponents. For example, there were the Waldensians, who considered the classical languages as needless for the proper understanding of Scripture. To them Luther pointed out the value of knowing Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. And in advocating the study of antiquity (its history, culture and literature), Luther intended to silence those who mistakenly wished to abandon all learning on the grounds that it was irrelevant to the study of Scripture. There were also the "spiritualists", and those who believed in direct revelations from God; these parties placed too little value in the temporal, earthly realm. To these Luther responded by demonstrating the value of education for the understanding of God's working in this world. There was also the continuing influence of scholasticism, with its increasingly defunct view of education that appeared both irrelevant and impractical. In promoting his views of education, Luther wished to show that reformed schooling was relevant to both the current world and the future one. And finally, the movement against which Luther inveighs especially in the "Sermon" is the ubiquitous materialism, which sought to provide training in the acquisition of worldly goods while ignoring the eternal ones. In sum, whereas Luther's views would be much refined by pedagogues later in the sixteenth century and beyond, they did provide a substantial basis for the further reform of education.

## Footnotes

[1.](#) English translation by A. Steinhaeuser in *Luther's Works*. Vol. 45 (Philadelphia: 1962), 347-378.

[2.](#) An English translation is offered by C.M. Jacobs in *Luther's Works*. Vol. 46 (Philadelphia: 1967), 209-258.