

THE GOAL OF EDUCATION



War has become the dominant motif of our age. It seems that everywhere we turn there is this battle, that conflict, the other struggle. We are in the midst of a culture war, as left and right clash to define the broader culture. The federal government has declared war on terrorism, an elusive and difficult-to-define enemy. We are in the midst of an ongoing war on drugs, and before that, though Jesus told us the poor would always be with us, the federal government declared war on poverty. Even in the evangelical church, we have the worship wars—churches and denominations heatedly arguing over something indeed worthy of an argument, how to worship God.

Wars are never fought in a posture of indifference. Apathy is not something that inspires soldiers, not something you get a ration of on the front line. Wars are not often waged

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with cool detachment. When the warfare is more rhetorical than martial, however, we especially need clear thinking. There is one ongoing battle in the culture where cooler heads rarely prevail, and for good reason. We fight the culture war, the war on terrorism, the war on drugs, the war on poverty, the worship wars in large part for the sake of our children. We want them to live in a safe world, a clean world, a world wherein they can worship God aright. But no battle touches more immediately upon our children than the education wars. Here, perhaps more than in any other battles, our hearts are on the line and our passions run deep. So coming to the education issue with clear minds is particularly important.

The education battles are myriad: battles between this federal education bill and that one, battles between this method of teaching in government-run schools and that method. We have Principle Approach Christian schools, classical Christian schools, and Christian schools that are so far behind the times that all they are is Christian schools—which shall we choose? Within the homeschool movement there are similar internal battles. Parents used to the textbooks they had as children want curriculum A, while others want curriculum C to ensure that their children have well-trained minds. And we haven't even gotten to the wars between the three groups: the government-school people hating the homeschoolers and the Christian schoolers, who of course return the favor, and the Christian schoolers and government schoolers allying themselves against those fools who won't do school.

There are at least three major battlefields in this one great

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war, three theaters in which the fighting goes on. We fight over who is called to do the teaching. Is the education of children a function of the state, the church, or the family? We fight over what should be taught, the content of our curriculum. Should we be reading the Bible only, the Bible plus Homer, or should we be watching television and reading *Heather Has Two Mommies*? Finally, there is the method battle. Whole language or phonics? Classical or Montessori? School-in-a-box or Charlotte Mason? These are all important questions. But before we can even try to agree on the answers, we need to see if there is anything prior we can agree on. There are three prior questions that we usually skip right over, which helps explain why we have such disagreement.

The first question is, "Is education important and valuable?" Here we have universal agreement. At the century's turn, as a nation we were spending \$754 billion a year on education, including both voluntary expenditures and tax money.¹ That's more than three-quarters of a trillion dollars. To make sure you grasp the enormity of that number, let's see it in its fullness: \$754,000,000,000. That number ought to suffice to answer our first question. Everybody agrees that education is important.

The second question is, "By what standard?" The source for our answers as to how Johnny should be educated is not John Dewey or Thomas Mann. Nor is it the National Educa-

1. *Mini Digest of Education Statistics, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), 48.

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tional Association or the U. S. Department of Education (even when there is a Republican in the White House). Neither do we draw our standard from John Calvin or R. L. Dabney or Dorothy Sayers. As Christians we already know the answer to the question. However much God might have gifted any education theorists through the ages, he made none of them inerrant or smarter than himself. At least those combatants in the education wars who claim the name of Christ can all agree that whatever the Bible says, that is what we must believe.

The third question relates to the first two. “Just what exactly is the goal of education?” When Alice was walking through Wonderland, she found herself at a crossroads. She was confused over which way she should go. Startled by the Cheshire Cat up in a nearby tree, Alice asked the Cat which way she should go. “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. Alice replied, “I don’t much care where—” The Cat saucily answered, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.” How can you judge the failure or success of the \$754 billion, unless you have some goal?

I once spoke at a conference on welfare reform. I was asked to address the group twice. In my first lecture, “The Abysmal Failure of the Welfare State,” I argued that welfare has done nothing to help those in need—in fact, it has harmed the very people it purported to help, creating a dependency on the state. In my second lecture, “The Astounding Success of the Welfare State,” I argued that creating a dependency on the state was the true goal of those politicians who pushed welfare programs. Success or failure depends upon the goal.

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So what are we spending that \$754 billion for? If you asked the average man in the street, he would probably tell you that the purpose of education is to prepare children to get good jobs when they are grown. Some might add that education exists to help children learn to get along with each other. We bus children halfway across town because the end goal is an appreciation for diversity. We skew our admissions standards for the same reasons. What if, instead of asking the man on the street, you were to quiz the religious right? Why do they want to “take back our schools”? For essentially the same reasons. That is, the religious right want children to have good jobs and to embrace their moral vision. To put it another way, we have education wars because the Republicans want to raise little Republicans and the Democrats want to raise little Democrats. Meanwhile, both claim to be simply neutral. Yet both are inadvertently bumping into a hard reality: a education is inherently religious. Robert Louis Dabney rightly argued:

True education is, in one sense, a spiritual process. It is the nurture of the soul. Education is the nurture of a spirit that is rational and moral, in which conscience is the regulative and imperative faculty. The proper purpose of conscience, even in this world, is moral.

But God is the only Lord of the conscience; this soul is his miniature likeness. His will is the source of its obligations. Likeness to him is its perfection, and religion is the science of the soul’s relations to God. Let these statements be placed together, and the theo-

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logical and educational processes appear so related that they cannot be separated.

It is for this reason that the common sense of mankind has always invoked the guidance of the minister of religion in the education of youth. . . . Every line of true knowledge must find its completeness as it converges on God, just as every beam of daylight leads the eye to the sun.²

Puritan poet John Milton understood well not only that education cannot be “neutral,” but also what its purpose is: “The end of learning is to repair the ruin of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge, to love Him, to imitate Him, to be like Him.”³ How might the left howl if those on the religious right actually followed Milton’s lead? Understand also that when Milton said “God,” he did not mean the generic “to whom it may concern” god of our culture. He meant the God of the Bible. Instead the religious right is content to fight for cultural conservatism. Not long ago there was a public hullabaloo over an American history textbook approved by the New York State Board of Regents. It seems this text informed the students about the person and work of George Washington Carver, yet managed

2. R. L. Dabney, *On Secular Education*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996), 16–17.

3. John Milton, *Areopagitica* and *Of Education* (Northbrook, Ill.: AHM Publishing, 1951), 59.

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to cover American history with no mention of George Washington. As bad as that is, I am puzzled that those Christians who are a part of the religious right are more upset about the absence of the father of this country than they are about the absence of the King of the Universe, the Lord of all things.

The goal of education, biblically speaking, is the goal of everything. The biblical bottom line is easy enough to find. We simply have to look to the beginning, to go back before the ruins even needed to be repaired. It is not enough to go back to the days of Ozzie and Harriet. They are the ones who brought us where we are. Instead we have to go back to the garden. In the garden God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, to rule over the animals, to dress and keep the garden. They were to reflect the glory of their maker by “gardenizing” the rest of the creation, to rule under God. This is our goal—raising God-glorifying children, rather than raising responsible citizens who can manage to get along with the world around them. Consider what the psalmist wrote:

Give ear, O my people, to my law;
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,
Which we have heard and known,
And our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children,
Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,

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And His strength and His wonderful works that He
has done.

For He established a testimony in Jacob,
And appointed a law in Israel,
Which He commanded our fathers,
That they should make them known to their children;
That the generation to come might know them,
The children who would be born,
That they may arise and declare them to their children,
That they may set their hope in God,
And not forget the works of God,
But keep His commandments;
And may not be like their fathers,
A stubborn and rebellious generation,
A generation that did not set its heart aright,
And whose spirit was not faithful to God. (Ps. 78:1–8)

What might happen, if this were our model for education rather than the model put forth by the state? Too often we who serve Christ keep the world's goal, but use a different building. Or we keep the goal, but hire a different faculty. Those things matter, as we will see in coming chapters. But nothing matters more than determining where we are going.

Forget about education for a moment and try this little experiment. Suppose you are reasonably sanctified. And suppose that God appears to you as he did to Solomon before you. God says, "I want to give you a gift. I want to show forth

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my grace by granting you your heart's desire. But instead of giving the gift to you, I'm going to give it to your children." Think for a moment about what you would ask for. You wouldn't want to be rash, so consider your answer carefully. What do you want for them? What would be your request? Would you not reply, "O gracious Lord, this is my request, that my children would dwell in your house forever. Make them yours; redeem their souls; remake them into the image of your own dear Son." If such is not your wish, shouldn't it be?

We need to think through what we value, and how much. Most mornings I exercise using a video tape that features walking. Aerobic dancing is rather too complicated for my pair of left feet. I walk three miles, and every half mile along the way I am reminded of how far I have gone. I have memorized those places on the tape. I know simply by the sound of the background music when the woman on the tape will tell me I've crossed another marker along the way. However, at the end, just when I should be so pleased to be done, she says something that grates on my soul. She asks her audience, "Should I give you the best news in the world? You've done three miles." It is a good thing to walk three miles, but not the greatest news in the world.

Consider the wisdom of John. Though he was probably not speaking of his biological children, he says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4). He is abundantly clear here. He doesn't say, "The best news in the world is I've walked three miles. The great news is I just saved a bundle on my car insurance. And I'm

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reasonably pleased to report that my children walk in the truth.”

But if our great goal is to see our children embrace the gospel, what do we do once that has happened? If our child reports to us, “Daddy, while I was away at camp I threw my pinecone into the fire and invited Jesus into my heart,” does Daddy in turn reply, “I can die happy now; that’s all I need to know. I’m taking a nap now. Your mom and I are going to get in the RV and you’ll never see us again. We’re just going to run out the clock. Our work is through here.” Our goal for our lives includes not only doing the work he has given us to do, what we call the dominion mandate, not only exercising dominion over our children (that is, raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord), but seeing that they are about the business of doing the same. You want to see your children, now abiding in the true vine, bear forth much fruit. You want them to grow in grace, to become more sanctified, to become more and more like Jesus. You want them to be consumed with pursuing first the kingdom of God.

First, we want our children to embrace the work of Christ. Second, we want them to do the work of Christ, to pursue his kingdom. And we haven’t even gotten to learning to play nicely with others, or learning the periodic table. By now many of you are thinking: “I thought I was reading a book on education. This sounds more like Sunday school or youth-group material. When is this guy going to get to education?” Or: “If I tell anyone this, they’ll be sure to think, ‘When are we going to stop talking about Sunday school and youth group

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and start talking about education?’” This is simply more evidence of our fundamental confusion over education. Thinking that education is something different from discipling our children is a sure sign that we have been “educated” by the state. Education is discipleship.

Not only do we have a war between those who prefer the state or the church or the family as the locus of education, not only do we have a war over which curriculum to use, but we also disagree about the goal. Even within the homeschooling movement, there is a battle between those who are for academic excellence and those who are for moral excellence. What is confusing in this battle is that academic excellence and moral excellence are not necessarily at odds. Both sides recognize this, and before the battle begins, both sides insist with vigor that they are for both academic and moral excellence. Yet there is a real battle. How do we resolve this?

The truth is that both sides are saying, “Both academic and moral excellence, but . . .” And I am no different. We are not in favor of moral excellence because it makes you a more diligent student. Instead we are for academic excellence because we believe such is the fruit of character. To make it even clearer, consider this choice. Would you rather have your child graduate at the top of his class at Harvard, become a Rhodes Scholar, win the Nobel Prize, and serve on the board of the Council for Secular Humanists? Or would you rather have your child be unable to make it through the local high school, become a garbageman, and be a godly husband and father? I know, everyone wants both. We want our children to be godly

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geniuses. But if we had to choose, and praise God we don't, there really is no choice.

When God regenerates a heart, that heart bears spiritual fruit. And a vital part of that fruit is a renewed mind, the capacity to look at the world through God's eyes, to see all that we do in light of serving his kingdom. When, for instance, we teach our children physics, what is the end goal? Are we motivated to do so simply because studies show that those who master physics make, over the course of a lifetime, 33 percent more income than those who don't learn physics? Is it so our children can become structural engineers and make a grand living putting up skyscrapers? Is it so in old age we can brag to the neighbors about our children's work? Or is it instead because in building such buildings our children exercise dominion, turn dirt into shelter, and in so doing serve others?

Suppose also that we are focused on issues of the heart, that we are seeking to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our children. Even here we can take a wrong turn. What motivates us? The fruit of the Spirit doesn't exist so that our children can become heirs of Dale Carnegie, be hugely popular, or become prom queen or class treasurer. Rather, we teach our children these things so that they might, in obedience to God, live in peace with all men, as much as is possible. In short, as we make all our decisions and work them out, we must think through how our thoughts and actions relate to the commands of God. We need to excise from our thinking the merely normal or conventional. All we do for our children must be about raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

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Satan's pull is strong. We are all in the grip of an ideological and a practical inertia. We are prone to slip back into how we've always done things, unless we remain vigilant. In a coming chapter I will emphasize the Bible's importance not in but as our curriculum. It is an emphasis I bring every time I speak on the subject of education. And every time I find myself having an internal tug-of-war. On one shoulder I have a devil whispering in my ear. On the other side I have an angel. The question is (and I can't tell you which side is the devil and which the angel, or there would be no more tug-of-war), "Should I throw them a bone, or should I not throw them a bone?" When I am emphasizing the Bible, the Bible, the Bible, I see the terror rising in their eyes. If homeschooling is a radical departure from what we're used to educationally, how much more frightening is it to throw away the mountain of curriculum we've purchased, and sit down with a Bible?

But my fear works in the opposite direction. Why should I have this tension? Why, when I believe it is utterly appropriate to teach math and physics, when I believe that both can help us better understand God, and better obey his command to exercise dominion, would I have a reluctance to concede such? Math teaches us the order of God's universe. It manifests his glory, his beauty. It is likewise a part of being a good steward. When Jesus calls us to "consider the cost," we'd better be able to calculate the costs. But I know the temptation. As soon as I concede that math is perfectly legitimate, we'll fall right back into our old pattern, seeing the Bible as a sourcebook for stuff to sprinkle over the world's curriculum. The

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world has determined a curriculum, and we feel tremendous pressure to follow it, if only because it is normal. And because we are Christians, we want to do normal in a Christian way. Before we can even begin to consider math, we have to start with the Bible.

How then might we do math in our homeschools, in a way that is consistent with Psalm 78, in a way consistent with John Milton's wisdom on the purpose of education, in a way consistent with the injunction in Deuteronomy 6 to teach our children when they lie down and when they rise up? Is it sufficient to stop and say a prayer or two before getting down to brass tacks? It's perfectly appropriate to pray before we do our math. I'm certainly not against prayer. But how you teach math rightly is by always remembering why you teach math, and more important, by always reminding the children. We must first confess, then profess that two and two make four—not apart from Jesus, not beside Jesus, but because it is Jesus' two and Jesus' two and Jesus' four. It all belongs to him. We confess and we profess that he invented math and he rules over it. He is the reason for it. Math is always objective, never neutral. That is, it speaks truth because Jesus is the truth.

Let's look again at the psalm, and note first the beauty of it. This, remember, is not a mere lesson to be taught. Instead it is a song and a prayer of God's people. Asaph begins by encouraging the people to listen:

Give ear, O my people, to my law;
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

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I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,
Which we have heard and known,
And our fathers have told us. (Ps. 78:1–3)

Covenant theology wasn't invented at the Reformation. The notion of familial solidarity before God that is so central to the homeschool movement is trumpeted here in this psalm. What Asaph is saying is as simple as it is beautiful: "I'm going to tell you what my father told me, and his father told him, and his father told him, and his father before him told him to tell him." The promise is that he will tell God's wisdom, God's words, that have been passed down from one generation to the next. There is nothing new under this sun. Asaph doesn't draw the people's attention by promising to bring the latest research, the latest folly from the enemies of God.

Asaph's message not only passes down from one generation to the next, but is itself the message that must be passed down from one generation to the next. That is, Asaph isn't just telling multigenerational secrets, but the secret itself is, "Pass it on to the next generation." This is always a critical part of God's covenant. To simply fulfill the immediate demands of the law is never enough. It wasn't enough that Abraham should receive the mark of the covenant. Nor was it sufficient that he should place that mark on Isaac. Rather, Abraham was commanded to teach Isaac to teach his own sons the covenants of God. In simplest form, the covenant God has made with man is simply this: Love, trust, and obey God . . . and teach

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your children to do the same. And to take it one step further, we haven't taught our children to do the same unless or until we have taught them to teach their children.

Like Asaph, I try to teach my own children this same thing during family worship. (Family worship is neither a class in our homeschool nor set apart from our homeschool, but is rather part of the warp and woof of our family life, both life and school—more on that in a later chapter.) When I preach to the children, having read a portion of the Bible (my sermons during family worship generally last from thirty to forty-five . . . seconds), I remind them that it is not enough that they should know what the Bible is teaching. They must teach their own children these same truths. In like manner, if I fail to teach my children to teach their children, I have failed to keep covenant.

I'm convinced that failure to understand this multigenerational call of the Christian family is at the root of our failure to manifest the kingdom of God, that this is why we seem always to take two steps forward and one step back. We haven't taught enough levels of this. We must with sincerity and zeal teach our children to teach their children to teach their children to teach their children . . . to keep going until the King's return. Instead we produce the children of Ephraim, children who do not know who they are or whose they are.

Our vision for our homeschool, for the raising of our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, is not something we do just because we're supposed to. Rather, it is our very vision for making manifest the kingdom of God. And

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that vision of the kingdom of God isn't something only for today or off at a great distance. It is this generation's changing, through the Holy Spirit's power, the hearts of the next generation, and then their changing the next generation, and the next and the next. It is generation after generation after generation of building the kingdom, growing to be more like Christ, to love him, to imitate him, to know him aright.

Perhaps even before we ask, "What is education for?" we should ask a prior question, "What are children for?" The Westminster Catechism teaches us that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Of course, the Westminster Assembly met long before the advent of political correctness. When they spoke of "man's" end, they weren't suggesting that women were to serve some other goal. "Man," in this context (as in this book as well), refers not only to males but also to females. But it is broader still. "Man" covers not only the gamut of genders, but the gamut of ages. In short, children's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

This summary of man's end brings together the Bible's varying language on the same theme. That is, we are given several "bottom line" assessments of our calling. God begins with the dominion mandate, to exercise dominion over the creation. And since God doesn't change, that ultimate goal abides. The goal is restated in Ecclesiastes—the sum of the matter is this: to fear God and obey whatsoever he commands (Ecd. 12:13). And then Jesus reiterates the same theme in a slightly different key when he tells us that we ought to seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. Our children are

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made to seek God, as are we. Therefore, if we are to train our children rightly, we must expunge from our own hearts that overarching agenda of the culture around us, the pursuit of personal peace and affluence.

So I am sometimes troubled by how we homeschoolers measure our success. It seems that every few months the headlines tell us of another triumph, that this homeschooler got a perfect score on the SATs or the other won the national spelling bee, or a third the Young Inventors contest. And we present this as evidence that we are doing a good thing in homeschooling. Of course, there is nothing wrong with homeschoolers' achieving, nor is there anything particularly surprising about it. But these are not our successes.

Our headlines, instead, should be about stories such as this. Several years ago I took three of my children to the grocery store: Campbell, then six, Shannon, four, and Delaney, three. Not only do I have a pattern of taking our children with me, but we also have a pattern for how we go through the store. We begin with fruits and vegetables, and then finish at the bakery section. At our local store, the good folks behind the bakery counter give away cookies to little children. This too is a part of our pattern. Delaney, with a year's experience of going shopping with Daddy, hadn't quite learned all the habits. So every week she had to ask, "Can we get a cookie, Daddy?" She worries unduly, because her daddy is so cheap that it doesn't matter if we have stopped at the grocery on the way home from a tour of the candy factory. The cookies are free, so the answer is always "Yes."

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The lady behind the counter gave Campbell his cookie and Delaney hers. I did not get one for Shannon, for though she likes cookies, she isn't yet adept at eating them. (My daughter Shannon is mentally retarded, with the mental ability of an 18-month-old.) I realized at this point that I had forgotten piecrusts for my wife (who is probably socking me in the arm right now for letting you know she doesn't make her own crusts—though she does make our bread, oatmeal, granola, etc.), so I left the children and the buggy to fetch some. As I headed back, I caught my son. He did not know I was watching. As far as he knew, no one was watching him. But I saw him do it. He broke off a piece of his cookie and fed it to his little sister Shannon. He didn't do this so I would one day write about him. He didn't do this because Shannon would praise him. He did not do it for the applause of men. He did it because God has worked in his heart, because his mother is an outstanding homeschooling mom, teaching him well. That is the heart of the matter; that is what we ought to be celebrating.

I'm not arguing that it's a bad thing for children to be smart. Rather, I am suggesting that the issue of education is always the heart. Changed hearts is the goal, the function, the very purpose of education. Our goal is not multigenerational personal peace and affluence. Neither are we simply trying to raise clean-cut children. Homeschoolers are adept at doing that. And there certainly may be a parallel between being nice, and having the gentle and quiet spirit the Bible calls us to. But what we want is the changed heart.

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What is your goal? What are you shooting for? Even if you answer, “Building the kingdom of God,” you might still have it wrong. Be careful here. We are not training our children so one day they might build the kingdom. We must remember, as we continue to grow in grace and become more effective in our calling, to ditch this notion that school is something you do for a time, and then you work. We continue to learn, while we work. And our children continue to work, while they learn. Your children are not simply in training, but are even now about the business of building the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God? It is that place where the least of these, Jesus’ brethren, my daughter Shannon, gets a piece of cookie, because it was given to her.

As you continue to read, my hope is that our reformation is not just in our thinking. I pray we will not conclude, “Well, that was valuable and important, even interesting,” then go back to the status quo. If the heart is the heart of the matter, if our children not only are learning to be kingdom builders, but are also being kingdom builders now, if we are to train our children to train their children, then this is something we need to remind ourselves of daily. The devil, you understand, is craftier than the beasts of the field. He doesn’t simply whisper in our ears, “Betray your children. Raise them in the nurture and admonition of the state.” Instead he distracts us, pulls us off target, makes us forget our calling, piece by piece.

Our calling is to keep our eyes on the prize—not to long to be at ease in Babylon, but to long for the city whose builder

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and maker is God. We will not get education right until we get life right. Just as so many peasants of the thirteenth century sacrificed to build the great cathedrals of Europe (which they would not see finished in their own lives), so we must look to the future, seeing the fulfillment of the promise, the consummation of the kingdom. Praise God that in his grace we get a taste each week, as we enter the worship experience in our weekly rest, of our eternal rest.

May we remember as parents that we are his children, and that he is about the business of changing our hearts, of repairing our ruins, of remaking us. And though he has not finished with us, he has placed in our care his children. May he in his grace keep our hearts aflame for these children. May he give us minds like steel traps that we would never be distracted, that we would not forsake our calling. May he, the great Steward, make us faithful stewards of children, the most precious gifts, of which is the kingdom of God.