

# **Christian Education - a whole life experience**

## **Looking back**

We must be getting old or at least looking old these days, because people keep asking us retrospective questions about home ed. such as “If you could have your time over again, would you do the same thing?”

“Yes, most certainly,” we reply. We would maybe do things slightly differently next time, but we have absolutely no regrets about our involvement with Christian education for over 20 years. In fact we are really grateful to God for awakening us at the time He did to the various choices we could make educationally. Right now our six children range in age from 27 to 10, and it was when the eldest was 3 or 4 that we became aware of Christian education. To cut a long story short, our eldest three spent their “school” years at Covenant Christian School in Stockport, while we as parents received as much education during that time as they did.

Prior to that it felt as if most of our Bible knowledge was on one side of a coin and all our other knowledge and information about the world around us was on the other side, and there was very little meshing of the two. Being exposed to a situation where there was a real attempt to find out what God has to say about any topic being taught was such a good experience. We were encouraged to look through Christian glasses at the world around us, and to try and communicate to the children that they live in a world whose Maker and Sustainer is God, which gives Him control over history, the affairs of men, the future and indeed everything. This was no superficial Christian paint on top of a secular education – it was different from the inside out.

As the years went on, we knew it was His will that we should move into teaching the younger three at home, but have still adhered to many of the same principles. In fact, it seems to us now that the most important issue is whether or not a child is receiving a thoroughly Christian education. Whether that is delivered in a home setting or a Christian school is ultimately of less significance, although we lean towards the home/family environment as the first option to be seriously considered.

From time to time we come across people who have taken children out of school because the “one size fits all” education which was on offer did not suit their child for whatever reason. Great – those children will surely do better and feel more positive when their particular needs are understood and met by a committed adult in an almost one to one ratio. But home education per se is no guarantee of Christian content; we really have to look to The LORD to provide us with, or inspire us to create, cohesive Christian content in our plan of work if we want to make a lasting difference to our children's lives.

## **With all our mind**

Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It gradually dawned on us that having received a secular education ourselves, loving God with all our mind was a serious process of change. Yes, we sat in school assemblies before multi-faith came along; yes, we got good reports from the Scripture teacher and even learned one or two Bible passages off by heart. But we never connected these with the rest of life in such a way as to develop a Christian mindset, so Romans 12, v2 was a real challenge to us in our early adult years as young believers. It tells us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we may prove what is the will of God. We have had to unlearn the mind-set of having Scripture in a separate compartment from all other knowledge, and relearn how to teach from a God-centred starting place.

## **World-views – what are they?**

What we discovered is that the real difference between educational approaches is to be found not in style of delivery or methodology, but in the underlying world-views or philosophies of life. The majority of

people think education is about passing on facts and skills to others so that they can be equipped to live. However, that is only the shop front, and behind it lie the deeper issues, our understanding of life and how the world works. Like most parents of young children, we didn't understand "back then" that one of the perils of exposure to secular schooling is due to the fact that world-view is one of those things which is "caught" as well as "taught" – teachers inevitably communicate their own values and attitudes for better or for worse, and children under their tutelage will absorb them.

With many years of our own "re-education" behind us, we now appreciate that our concerns should be first of all to know what world-view our children are being exposed to, and secondly, what criteria they are collecting to themselves so that in time they are able to refine their own world-view in the best way possible. Even Christian curricula need assessing for their ability to foster a Biblical world-view, for unless they do, they are not truly Christian. This is much needed, for too many adult Christians continue for years after their conversion with a non-Christian world-view. Now, with the hindsight of over twenty years' experience of Christian education, we are more convinced than ever that our first calling as parents is to impart a world-view to our children, which has The LORD as the beginning and the end in all things. Equipped with this foundation they will have good ground in their hearts to build with Him in the future wherever He leads them.

We began to investigate Christian education as a result of The LORD prompting us to do so. At that stage we had a basic but rather uninformed desire to put our children on a good foundation to know The LORD and be "good all-rounders", coping well with life in this world. It was only later we came to realise that whatever our own world-view was, our children were going to assimilate it. Therefore we had a lot of catching up to do! We doubt if any of us has escaped totally from the world-view we ourselves were fed as children, and the residue is one of the things we should be inviting the Holy Spirit to refine out of us. Hence we have only been a step or two in front of them for much of the journey! First we had to grasp the scope of the Bible for ourselves, see its application to issues, then communicate it in a relevant way - and the process is ongoing.

### **What is ordinary?**

Over the years we have come to realise that in Britain, ordinary education is secular. And secular understanding of life considers The LORD irrelevant to everything except the residue of religious superstitions that some people fail to shake off. This is most obvious in the science of origins, but it pervades the whole of the curriculum, right through to the things we perceive as "neutral". Christian education places the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as central to everything past, present and future. There is no area where God is not relevant. We came to realise that if Christian parents do nothing in the area of educational choice, the default position will be to impart a secular education, just because ordinary education here is secular, and the ways we all think and behave have been absorbed by osmosis from our forebears (1 Peter 1:18). If as parents we want something different for our children, it will require a definite decision, plus courage and perseverance to implement it.

Now to move on to more practical considerations....

### **Long-term work – beware discouragement!**

One area where we easily fell prey to discouragement was over the matter of not seeing the finished work for so long. It is so easy to lose heart or to fail to be content because the work is still in progress, rather than being thankful for small stages completed along the way and continuing on in faith. We needed to believe that if we sow to the spirit, we will (in due time) from the spirit reap eternal life. Another aspect we forgot was that building sites are always messy places whilst work is on-going – sometimes we condemn ourselves because things are not just as we would like them to be, or drive ourselves with unrealistic agendas. The important thing is that the project continues under The LORD's direction until the end – as children reach adulthood, they will assume responsibility for themselves, and we will have less input. Until then, we are to be obedient servants, not guilt-ridden perfectionists.

I (Mary) once took a hard hat and a set of architect's drawings along to a talk I gave, to make the point that there are usually several different people involved in the work on a building site. However, when it comes to home education, most of the tasks rest on the parents alone and this produces its own stresses. We are both the visionary and the implementer who turns the vision into reality. It is hard to keep the overall vision in focus as well as deal with the day to day demands. Many times we could not see the wood for the trees, and we found ourselves too absorbed with the details. It helped to make time to stand back, deliberately review what had been achieved and redefine the next set of goals.

Do we have to wait until the end of the road before seeing any reward for our investment? Yes and no is the answer to that question. We will not know the final outcome for many years, but along the way we saw indications of the way our children were turning out, and how their thinking was developing. We have helped them to deal with their weaknesses of character as they arose. We have become better equipped to help them make decisions about work and subject choices in later life, as we came to know their abilities better. We have evaluated things with them as life unfolds. We have exposed them to the more unpleasant aspects of life at our own discretion, and discussed things with them when we felt they were ready. No-one has imposed things upon us - we are the potter, they are the clay, in one sense. All these are aspects of the freedom we opted for by choosing Christian home education and not submitting to the world's values and system. This freedom is to be valued, but it has also cost us in an ongoing way. We have invested ourselves, we have cried and our hearts have ached for our own failings as much as for theirs, but in the end we will be able to look Jesus in the eye and tell Him that we didn't leave the little ones in Egypt, even though Pharaoh pressed us to do so. Condemning ourselves instead of valuing what we have got

I sometimes find myself stumbled by the sheer professionalism and jargon of all things school, particularly with National Curriculum phraseology. "How can I be achieving anything," I ask myself, "if I can't understand the teaching materials?" Or sometimes we feel that our attempts are very homespun and we always lack resources, because we can't afford them or we can't get hold of the proper equipment. At times like this we need The LORD to remind us that what He wants is a faithful people, not a sophisticated one. As long as we teach the children to the best of our ability and are not lazy in our efforts to make the material as interesting and informative as possible, then God will undertake for the rest.

We have come to realise that by comparison with the surrounding nations, Israel was a very simple and unsophisticated group. (In fact they were expressly instructed to erect only basic altars, not elaborate temples which could easily become objects of idolatry in themselves). The difference between them and the other nations was that they were free to do what God wanted, to choose to obey Him and to walk by faith. Sometimes we want to have the cake and eat it - that is, we want to have the resources and the security of being within the system, along with the spiritual freedom of being outside it. He has to remind us which we really value - we might find it difficult to be different from other people, but if we really subscribed to the system which would make us fit in and be the same, then our children would come out of the educational sausage machine with the mindset of Egypt imprinted on them. Do we really want that? The answer is "No", but if we want the product, then we have to pay for it.

### **How much does it cost?**

"What's the price?" you may ask. Well it has included some element of financial sacrifice, as local authorities were unable (?unwilling) to help home learning families with resources, despite the fact that their resources were saved by our children learning at home. Of course a home learning family is also more likely to be living on one income rather than two, to free up one of the parents for child care and teaching duties.

We also felt the stigma of being non-mainstream, mentioned earlier (Hebrews 11:13-16, 24-27, 36-37 spring to mind here), and possibly unfavourable reactions from grandparents and other family members,

although these can be short-lived and may often be resolved as objectors see good fruit being borne. In some cases, members of the extended family can actually make a real and very valuable contribution to the whole home-learning process.

There is also the element of the extra workload – we’ve been much busier and have had less free time to call our own. There are people in the house most of the time, so we needed to consciously allow more time for our own relationship, so it didn’t get swallowed up in the general activity in the home. (Home learning is for the benefit of the children, but a home can sometimes slip into being “child-centred” as a result, rather than God-centred; if this occurs, it tends to produce selfish children). We also found the need to put a barrier round certain times or individual activities of our own, where possible, so as to maintain perspective. Because of the choices we made, we became aware that contemporaries and friends seemed to have a very different lifestyle. Our house got fuller as we collected resources and things that might be useful one day. It also has shown signs of wear and tear more quickly, as people are at home all day and lots of activity has taken place there. (However, you potentially have more people to keep it in a good state of repair)!

The children did not go out of the door for several hours each day for someone else to be responsible for them. We had the oversight of the whole of their lives - their learning, their leisure activities and free time, their friendships and so on. Great! - in one sense, and God has been more than willing to provide the resources for us to cope with that responsibility, but we believe that many a parent has felt daunted and overwhelmed by this, particularly in an age when children assume independence younger and younger, and responsibility for more and more aspects of a child’s life is delegated away from the parents at an earlier and earlier age.

## **Conclusion**

So to sum up; Christian home education is great. It provided us with many opportunities to fulfil our responsibilities as parents and communicate The LORD's ways to our children, as well as giving us the freedom to choose what they learn, when, how and who with. But it is also costly, and not for the faint-hearted or the double-minded. You don't have to be financially well off, because it can be carried out on a low budget. It's like Christian discipleship - the cost is not primarily in the area of money. It costs our time, the overhaul of our world-view, a major lifestyle change and it requires us to make a long term investment by faith into a vision that we will only see realised much further down the road. The cost cannot be known or categorised completely before embarking on the venture, but it's wise to make sure before The LORD that we understand something of it before we set out. If He has put it in your heart, go for it! As Peter said to Jesus, “Where else shall we go, Lord? You have the words of eternal life”. Having once seen that Christian education is ordinary education from The LORD's point of view, we could not revert to the secular version until we felt relatively sure that each of our children were at an age and stage where they were mature enough to evaluate it for themselves and to stand firm.

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N.B. This article originally appeared as a chapter in the book “Making the Right Impression: The Experiences of 21 British Christian Home Educating Families” published in 2007 by Home Service (now [Christian Home Education Support Service](#)).

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