



Education: Literacy and Liberty

It has been said that an ignorant people cannot be a free people. For thousands of years everyday people throughout the world were oppressed by tyranny and had virtually no opportunity for education. An elite group of tyrants knew that knowledge was power, therefore, they kept it to themselves. Education was the sole property of the government, including the class-conscience elite of Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

With the coming of Christ, the stronghold of tyranny was finally broken. The cause of literacy was spearheaded by the Christians from the time of the early Church through the Middle Ages. Monasteries and schools were established and eventually the first universities were started throughout Europe for the purpose of Christian and classical training.

The everyday person, even within Christendom, was limited in his educational opportunity until the invention of the printing press. The printing press made knowledge accessible to virtually everyone. But it was the unleashing of the Bible, specifically into homes, that caused a paradigm shift in education. The Bible, for the first time in history, could be purchased and read by the average family in their own language. This newly found biblical literacy inspired books by Shakespeare and Milton, and books on science and civil government. These books could be found in

thousands of homes for the first time, being read by candlelight.

Our earliest American settlers learned from the mighty brain trust in Europe and brought this love of learning with them. Harvard historian Perry Miller said, “In contrast to all other pioneers, they made no concession to the forest, but in the midst of frontier conditions, in the very throes of clearing the land and erecting shelters, they maintained schools and a college.” From this fertile intellectual soil came the world’s foremost political documents and cultural prosperity.



The Bible was the fundamental textbook throughout American history, from the time of the Pilgrims. To receive a degree from a colonial college in the 17th and 18th centuries was, in essence to receive a seminary

education. Early childhood education was accomplished for the most part in the home and prepared every citizen to read and think at an early age. Award-winning teacher John Gatto says,

“There is abundant evidence that less than one hundred hours is sufficient for a person to become totally literate and a self-teacher.”

This self-education is what took place in early America.

“Education” from the Forefather’s Monument in Plymouth, Massachusetts

AN EMPLOYMENT OF CONSEQUENCE

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THE BIBLE READING

JEAN-BAPTISTE GREUZE, 1755

Early Americans had far less time and money invested in institutionalized education than we do, yet, they were prepared to think for themselves and created the greatest civilization the world had ever known.

In 1800 under President Thomas Jefferson, Dupont de Nemours conducted a study on education in America. He said, “Most young Americans ...can read, write, and cipher. Not more than four in a thousand are unable to write legibly – even neatly.” He compared the low rate of literacy throughout the world to the high literacy rate in the United States, England, Holland, and Switzerland. He said that “in those countries the Bible is read; it is considered a duty to

read it to the children; and in that form of religion the sermons and liturgies in the language of the people tend to increase and formulate ideas of responsibility.” He said that education in America was accomplished largely in the home through fathers reading the Bible and newspapers for nearly an hour a day to their families.

The Father of American Education, Noah Webster, published his Blue-Backed Speller in 1783. It sold one million copies a year for 100 years! This book taught our nation not only to read but taught a biblical worldview to Americans into the twentieth century. Christian education was synonymous with becoming civilized. As Webster himself said:

All government originates in families, and if neglected there, it will hardly exist in society... The foundation of all free government and of all social order must be laid in families and in the discipline of youth... The education of youth, an employment of more consequence than making laws and preaching the gospel, because it lays the foundation on which both law and gospel rest for success.

- Noah Webster

BY WHAT STANDARD?

“In my view, the Christian religion is the most important and one of the first things in which all children, under a free government ought to be instructed...No truth is more evident to my mind than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people.”

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many Christians were persuaded to withdraw from the “secular” world and two hundred years of educational leadership. This left a vacuum that was quickly filled by a new breed of secular intellectuals. Historian Paul Johnson explained:

“With the decline of clerical power in the eighteenth century, a new kind of mentor emerged to fill the vacuum and capture the ear of society. The secular individual might be deist, skeptic, or atheist. But he was just as ready as a pontiff [priest] or presbyter [pastor/teacher] to tell mankind how to conduct its affairs.”

How did this change come about? An insight comes from attorney and founder of Rutherford Institute, John Whitehead. He quotes humanist John Dunphy speaking at a teacher’s convention:

“I am convinced that the battle for humankind’s future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as the proselytizers of a new faith...utilizing a classroom instead of a pulpit to convey humanist values in whatever subject they teach, regardless of the educational level – preschool day care or large statue university. The classroom must and will become an

arena of conflict between the old and new – the rotting corpse of Christianity together with all its adjacent evils and misery, and the new faith of humanism [man is God], resplendent in its promise of a world in which the never-realized Christian ideal of “love thy neighbor” will be finally achieved.”



Beginning in the nineteenth century, Horace Mann, John Dewey, and others promoted a philosophy of education that was totally opposed to that of the founding generation. Mann supported taxation for state schools, which undermined parental control and was detrimental to private

school. He, and those who followed him, deemphasized the biblical doctrine of salvation as the basis of character development, replacing it with humanism. He encouraged group thinking and study rather than independent thinking and creativity.

As Christian families forge a new millennium, we can learn so much from the study of the history of education in America. No nation on earth has the legacy of godly education that we enjoy in America. But we must confess that entire generations of our youth have suffered from the failure of a dream of education without God’s Word as its foundation. We must be able to offer the biblical alternative to secular indoctrination. The good news is that millions of adult believers are rebooting their own self-education and they are training their children in home schools and Christian schools. Here is the lasting hope of restoring true liberty under God.

- Dr. Marshall Foster
1945-2022

A Dame’s School
Thomas Webster, 1846

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