

The Covenant School
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The Academy of Popular Culture and Christian Education
~ Cultivating Inquiry

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SimCity

"You're rewarded for creativity, experimentation, and understanding,
with a healthy, thriving universe to call your own."
— Maxis Catalog (advertising SimCity)

Have you heard of or perhaps even played the video or computer game called SimCity? In playing *SimCity*, where the prefix *Sim* is used as an abbreviation for "simulation" or "simulated," players act as city leaders and city planners who design, develop, and govern their own ideal town or city.

In *SimCity*, there are no specific goals or objectives to achieve. Rather, it is all about creating a world out of your own imagination.

As the Maxis catalog advertising *SimCity* states, "You're rewarded for creativity, experimentation, and understanding, with a healthy, thriving universe to call your own."¹

Since its release in the late 1980s, SimCity has spawned many derivatives, such as *SimEarth*, *SimFarm*, *SimCopter*, *SimAnt*, *SimIsle*, *SimThemePark*, *SimSafari*, and literally, *SimEverything*, the latter title describing what the creators of *SimCity* were apparently trying to accomplish overall.

SimUniversity

"Join a band, crash parties, find a part-time job, or get initiated into a secret society, print money, and cheat on your studies. How will your Sims enjoy their college years?"²

¹ Maxis Software Toys Catalog, p. 10, quoted in Ted Friedman, "Making Sense of Software: Computer Games and Interactive Textuality", available at <http://www.duke.edu/~tlove/simcity.htm>. Accessed March 15, 2006.

² A description of the SimUniversity computer game version of the college lifestyle at its website: http://thesims2.ea.com/about/ep1_index.php. Accessed March 21, 2006.

To me, all this is *simply* amazing (forgive the pun), and I was not surprised to learn that with the popularity of the “*sims*” overall, which is a vital part of this 20+ billion dollar video gaming industry, that there is also one that simulates the college or university, and the undergraduate experience at institutions of higher education called *SimUniversity* (technically it’s *The Sims 2: University*).

As the game is described at its own website, “Join a band, crash parties, find a part-time job, or get initiated into a secret society, print money, and cheat on your studies. How will your Sims enjoy their college years?”³

SimEducation

... the massive influx of impressions is so great; surprising, barbaric, and violent things press so overpoweringly — “balled up into hideous clumps” — win the youthful soul; that it can save itself only by taking recourse in premeditated stupidity. — Friedrich Nietzsche⁴

The prevalence and popularity of both SimCity and SimUniversity, and other sim-games overall, all of which transpire in the *simulated digital environment of virtual reality*, got me to thinking and asking a few questions:

- ❖ Could it be that our students are enrolled, more or less without their knowledge and albeit unofficially and informally, in another kind of simulated educational environment, in an imitation school or academy in which significant teaching and learning is taking place?
- ❖ Might these young people who sit in our classrooms be well ensconced in a classroom of another kind where they are being instructed by a *faculty* that they rarely, if ever, recognize as a faculty.
- ❖ Are they, in fact, studying under a *curriculum* that they rarely, if ever, recognize as a curriculum?

³ A description of the SimUniversity computer game version of the college lifestyle at its website: http://thesims2.ea.com/about/ep1_index.php. Accessed March 21, 2006.

⁴ Quoted in Thomas de Zengotita, “The Numbing of the American Mind,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2002. Available at <http://www.csub.edu/~mault/Numbing%20of%20american%20mind.htm>

- ❖ Could it be that they are being assessed by a *grading scale* that they rarely, if ever, recognize as a grading scale?
- ❖ Maybe there is a disguised faculty, curriculum, and grading scale that, in fact, are extraordinarily effective in capturing our students' interests and attention.
- ❖ Maybe there is a form of education that is much more powerful in shaping our students' minds, hearts, bodies and lives than are their real schools and colleges where they are officially enrolled and where we administrate and teach. In reflecting on these things, the conclusion I came to is yes, there is, indeed, another kind of alternative educational environment engaging our students in profound ways that presents very stiff competition to the cherished content and noble purposes of Christian education.

The point is this, that our students are students, and are, in fact, excellent students, in the *educational environment of contemporary culture*.

Contemporary culture, especially in its popular version, *constitutes a parallel educational or academic program* that is *very real* and not *virtually real*, The simulated educational environment of contemporary culture is *very real* in the sense that it actually occurs in space and time and has profound influence on our students. It is not cyber-make-believe, but is a powerful force of student-human formation to be reckoned with.

On the other hand, the *educational environment of our contemporary culture* is a simulated educational environment, indeed, a parody, of genuine education because of its exclusion of God and its thorough-going secularism.

As theologian Robert Jenson has pointed out, If God exists, if Trinitarian theism is true, this means that all knowledge is knowledge about God or the gifts of God.⁵ All genuine teaching and learning is teaching and learning about the Creator or some aspect of His creation, or His providential rule over it.

⁵ Jenson was quoted to this effect by Ken Myers in the Mars Hill Audio Journal, volume 78.

Thus, to exclude the Maker and Redeemer of all things from educational consciousness and practice is the greatest possible reductionism, and the most egregious interpretive or hermeneutic error. Denying the God who is there eliminates the single most significant component of reality and guarantees that nothing will be taught or understood completely or correctly without Him.

As the term “science fiction” was once defined in Wiley’s Dictionary in the comic strip “B.C.”, it is “any scientific acclaim that omits God.”⁶ If scientific claims leave God out of the picture, it is sim-scientific education!

This is why the educational environment of our culture is ultimately a simulation, an imitation, a parody, a diminishment, a distortion, and a corruption of real education, for if the biblical God exists, education to be genuine education must be Christian education.

We should not, of course, be surprised that contemporary culture seeks to educate, for that is what culture naturally does. Culture catechizes (“to teach by word of mouth”), and all of us are its catechumens. Culture instructs and we are all its students.

Contemporary culture, in other words, is one colossal classroom in which students are being taught and in which they are learning what the culture wants them to know about reality and what it wants them to be as persons. The classroom of contemporary culture is a place where significant spiritual, intellectual, moral, and physical formation is taking place day in and day out, yet without awareness.

Therefore, we must understand the powerful role of contemporary culture as Simeeducator in shaping the minds, hearts, bodies, and lives of our students, and yes, indeed, even our Christian ones!

What this means, of course, is that your students not only attend The Covenant School; they also attend the “APC” — the Academy of Popular Culture. My students not only attend Dallas Baptist University; they also students the “UPC” — the University of Popular Culture.

⁶ “B.C.” by Johnny Hart, Wednesday, April 5, 2006.

Furthermore, the academy or university of the culture is extraordinarily powerful because this parallel form of education through culture is administered and communicated so effectively by virtually omnipresent and omnipotent media outlets —

- ❖ especially through movies and films,
- ❖ the music industry,
- ❖ local and satellite radio systems,
- ❖ professional and collegiate sports programming,
- ❖ cable and network television,
- ❖ magazines, popular novels, and other print media,
- ❖ communications technology,
- ❖ the internet, and so on,
- ❖ all fueled, of course, by advertising and the *telos or summum bonum* of wealth and power.

In our media-saturated society — I've seen TV screens on self-serve gas pumps and on the front panels of new refrigerators — there is no escaping the culture's educative influence in either private domains or in the public square.

Given the economic fuel and the technological sophistication by which the culture's messages are delivered to our families at our doorsteps, it may be fair to say that no other generation of young people in history has been more susceptible to the mind and life-shaping forces of their surrounding culture than is the current generation of young people who are our students.

This, of course, is of great concern to teachers, but even more so to parents who are trying desperately to raise their children well in this challenging cultural climate. As essayist and mother Caitlin Flanagan wrote in the January 2006 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, "The 'it takes a village' philosophy is a joke, because the village is now so polluted and so desolate of commonly held, child-appropriate moral values that my job as a mother is not to rely on the village, but to protect my children from it."

- ❖ So, if contemporary culture is, indeed, a classroom for our kids, who are the faculty members who are teaching them?

- ❖ What are they being taught in terms of a curriculum? What's its content?
- ❖ And how are they being graded? What is the system of assessment used to determine whether they pass or fail?
- ❖ I'd like to introduce you to the faculty, the curriculum, and the grading scale of the "APC," that is, the "Academy of popular Culture."

First, the **faculty** is essentially a *faculty of celebrities* with celebrity cool, celebrity notoriety, and celebrity influence. Movie stars, rock stars, sports stars, television stars, entrepreneurial stars, fashion stars, and so on are very often our star-struck students' heroes, despite their frequent lack of genuine heroism.

Leading media figures and celebrities have incredible sway with our students as role models, and have incalculable influence in forming the dreams, shaping the attitudes, and motivating the pursuits and behaviors of our students.

Who can count the seemingly endless number of celebrity faculty with whom students have "para-social relationships of pseudo-intimacy and phony flattery"⁷ that are teaching them how to understand the world and their place in it?

As Amanda Parsons says, "'I sometimes think that these [celebrities] are our gods and goddesses, these are our icons, and their stories become kind of parables for how to lead our lives."⁸

Second, the **curriculum** of the academy of the culture or its actual substance or content, comes in many forms: through great texts like the seemingly limitless number of popular **magazines** that are read and gazed at diligently for information about and models of beauty, relationships, success, and other germane topics.

The culture's curriculum is, of course, conveyed through **television** — that possible "Trojan horse of Western civilization" (Quentin Schultze) — whose

⁷ As pointed out in a conversation between Ken Myers and Thomas de Zengotita in the Mars Hill Audio Journal, volume 78.

⁸ Quoted in Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 91.

programs contain stories with tacit assumptions and/or explicit content that shape students' moral imaginations, and directly or indirectly influence their inner attitudes and outward behavior.

Music, which today is our “aural wallpaper”⁹ is another powerful medium of cultural instruction and student formation. Plato said that music was the art that had the unique ability to work its way into the inner most parts of the soul with its deep influence, and either produces a field of weeds or flowers.

With its pleasing voices, appealing melodies, pulsating beat, and provocative lyrics, contemporary popular music in all its genres, especially through the rapid-fire images of their accompanying music videos, have deeply affected our students' minds and moods, and ways of viewing and living in the world.

Music's influence, however, is rivaled in our day by **films and movies** which today are our real preachers with new sermons for our eyes, as K. S. Hover has observed.¹⁰ Films and movies are one of the strongest sources and forces of influence in our culture today.

Who can calculate the story-telling power and global influence of today's leading directors, actors and producers?

Hollywood is the myth-making capital of America, and its narrative and commercial influence is felt around the world

There is no business like show business, when it comes forming the consciousness and actions of so many people everywhere, not the least of which are our students.

Finally, last but not least, we must briefly mention that the entire enterprise of contemporary popular culture as an simulated, educational delivery system is led and fed and supported by **commercial advertising** and the amazing wealth and power it secures for its advertisers by selling its products.

⁹ Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, p. 126.

¹⁰ K. S. Hover, quoted in Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, p. 180.

Advertising not only sells products, but it also forms identities through its “sim-gospels” (= “all messages that simulate the biblical gospel and narrative through advertising and popular media for the purpose of selling products and ideas”), as Sam van Eman has pointed out in his recent book, *On Earth as it is in Advertising? Moving From Commercial Hype to Gospel Hope*.¹¹ As the PBS Frontline documentary “Merchants of Cool” has shown so graphically, corporate America — using a surging stream of data about the tastes, attitudes, aspirations, identities and desires of teenagers who are wealthier and more independent than ever before — tells a version of teenage life that appeals to their deepest sensibilities, shapes their views of the world, themselves and their parents, and reaches deep into their pocket books to purchase the products and, along with them, the images necessary to thrive, or at least survive, in the overwhelming pressure-cooker of their social and personal lives.

Now if we were to **summarize the curriculum** being taught by the faculty of the academy of the culture in its *Goliath-like* educational stature, ferocity, and power, what might we say?

For the most part, it consists of the tyrannical triumvirate of sensualism, materialism, and egotism (1 John 2: 16). Lessons on sex, food, and fashion or the lusts of the flesh; teachings about money, wealth and possessions or the lusts of the eyes; and visions about achievement, prestige, and power, or the boastful pride of life, constitute its curriculum and system of instruction in a nutshell.

Augustine referred to these lusts collectively as the overweening “concupiscence of the world.”¹² They are, as we have been reminded recently

¹¹ Sam van Eman, *On Earth as it is in Advertising? Moving from Commercial Hype to Gospel Hope* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

¹² St. Augustine, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. H. Browne, revised, notes Joseph H. Myers, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 7 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), p. 475 (§2.14).

through the Narnia film, the “Turkish Delight” with which we are tempted by the White Witch.

How, might I ask in passing, can Christian education do battle against such a giant with its slingshot and a few round stones?

What deepens the impact of the teaching of this curriculum is found in the **assessment process** and how the students are graded. They are evaluated not only on the basis of how well they master this material, but primarily on how well this material masters them.

In this case, of course, the celebrity faculty do not give the grade, but the students do! It is mostly a matter of peer evaluation and is simply a pass/fail system:

- ❖ If you fit into the culture by which you are taught, you pass.
- ❖ If you don't fit into the culture by which you are taught, you fail.

To be sure, the system of awards and punishments for passing or failing are huge socially and personally. If you fit in, you are a success, a winner, a somebody, and above all, you are cool! If you don't fit in, then woe be unto you. You are a catastrophe, a loser, a nobody, and worst of all, hopelessly and helplessly uncool!

Since we all, whether younger or older, are very sensitive to what others think about us, and because our desires to belong are so great, the intellectual and social pressures to accept what is taught and to live as directed by contemporary culture is crushing and almost irresistible. It is central to the “disease” of contemporary adolescent life. Yet students are likely to respond defensively to this critique of their culture and say something like: I am a Christian and believe in the Bible. It's just a TV show, a film, a song, a magazine, etc.

Now as I have stepped back in order to reflect upon contemporary culture as SimEducator, and try to get a big picture, I have asked myself:

- ❖ How does it do its educating?
- ❖ What's its fundamental pedagogy?

❖ What kind of person, what kind of life does it produce?

I believe that the impact that this menacing *alma mater* has on people, our students in particular, comes in two basic ways and with a fundamental consequence or result.

The first way the educational environment of our culture influences our students is by language. ***The “academy” of the culture teaches students a certain non-transcendent vocabulary and way of naming the world that conveys a naturalistic understanding of reality and perverts the meaning and purposes of life.***

Through their immersion and fluency in the language of our contemporary media driven culture, our students are simultaneously immersed and become fluent in the larger cosmic meanings and implications that this language tacitly and/or explicitly expresses.

Even if students today are not readers, they are not sheltered from the linguistic deluge with which the media inundates them, nor are they capable of resisting their emotional or affective power of the words with which they are saturated. As Dorothy Sayers observed in her classic 1947 essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” “we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them [students] from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; *they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects*” (emphasis added).

The trouble is that by these words and by this language, all things are interpreted in terms of a metaphysical, or at least methodological, naturalism or materialism.

They are taught to “lean into life” (Mark Searle) and well trained to live in a world in which the reality of God is essentially excluded from the concrete business of daily life.¹³

It is a “conversation” of practical atheism that constitutes the “plausibility structures” and dominant “paradigms” of their lives.

How easy it is to adopt the taken-for-granted assumptions about reality conveyed by our leading cultural institutions such that we don’t realize either their falsehood or the power they have to disorder our loves and our lives!¹⁴

The second means by which the educational environment of contemporary culture impacts students is through *liturgy* (which I am using here in a non-technical way to refer to the regular rhythms, routines, rituals, etc. of daily life).

The “academy” of the culture, grounded in its own particular language and meanings, fosters various habits, practices, patterns of behavior or rituals of formation that confer a particular identity upon students and transforms them into certain kinds of persons.

Just as the formal or informal liturgies of a church at worship are designed to make disciples of Jesus Christ, so too the culture, in its role as SimEducator, generates liturgy-like activities of its own in order to shape its denizens into its own image and conform them to the non-transcendent spirit of a thoroughgoing secular age.

Liturgical formation is a fact of human experience, and the liturgical practices that our culture as educator fosters, though they are unconsciously performed and never named as such, are at work, shaping consciousness and behavior, and in particular, the outlook and actions of students about whom we are specifically concerned.

Third, our culture’s languages and liturgies leads to a very important outcome or consequence. Indeed, the disguised, education of contemporary, media-driven culture is a kind of *paideia* or training or formation **that will**

¹³ Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World; or, Why It’s Tempting to Live as If God Doesn’t Exist*, foreword J. I. Packer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 4.

¹⁴ A gloss on a line from an address given by Ken Myers, “Christian Education and Renewing of the Mind, and Counter-Cultural Discipleship,” Fort Worth, Texas, October 14, 2005, p. 4.

determine who students are and the kinds of lives they will live, and the legacies they will leave behind in the world for better or for worse.

The question, of course, is what kinds of students and what kinds of lives will such an imitation and parody of genuine education actually produce?

- ❖ If God is left out of our culture's educational vision, then the book of Proverbs would say its final products would be *fools* who fail to fear the Lord and consequently despise wisdom and instruction (Prov. 1: 7).
- ❖ St. Augustine would argue that the loves and lives of the graduates of a system of education that negates the love of God will be unhappily disordered.
- ❖ Søren Kierkegaard would place those whose mindset is shaped primarily by its cultural environment apart from religious influence in the aesthetic stage of sensual experience.
- ❖ C. S. Lewis referred to those deprived of an education in objective moral truth as people "without chests," "urban blockheads" and "trouserless apes."
- ❖ Today, we would say that our culture inculcates students into practical forms of naturalism, skepticism, relativism, individualism, narcissism, hedonism, psychologism, consumerism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and overall into a reigning, even if undetected, Nietzschean nihilism and despair (the specific character of despair being that it is unaware of itself, as Søren Kierkegaard pointed out in *The Sickness Unto Death*).
- ❖ Bono's reference to the fundamental disorientation of our lives in his song titled "Vertigo." In theological terms, we could say, along with Neal Plantinga, that such an education amounts to a *vandalism of shalom*, to a heartbreaking disturbance of the peace, soundness, wholeness, well-being, and delight of life.
- ❖ It's no wonder that Mark Twain (1835-1910) once quipped that education, though not as sudden as a massacre, in the long run can be more deadly!

If, then, The Covenant School wishes to *cultivate inquiry*, then I recommend that it give significant attention to contemporary culture,

especially in its popular version, as educator, as a Simeeducator, to expose and critique the power it has in shaping the lives of our students.

Christian education must, first of all, do some effective cultural and media criticism.

Such an inquiry could be a significant step toward a vision of Christian education. What, then, is to be done?

Towards a Christian Vision of Education

The first thing to be done is to offer a cultural caveat or qualification. Please don't get me wrong. I am not a Christian curmudgeon, or "nattering nabob of negativism," to use an old political phrase (said by Spiro T. Agnew to describe the news media), complaining smugly about bad people or whining dolefully about the sad state of affairs in our culture.

Instead, like Francis Schaeffer, I think our response should be one of tears and compassion, as well as an attempt to speak the truth in love into the culture.

Furthermore, because of God's underlying *covenant with creation*, because of *natural law*, and because of *common grace*, we must recognize and appreciate that many people with tremendous talents, regardless of their worldviews, make valuable contributions to our culture and world — past, present, and future.

All truth is God's common-grace truth; all goodness is God's common-grace goodness; all beauty is God's common-grace beauty.

In the matrix of its many meanings, along with Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, we must learn to look for and find God in contemporary culture, especially its popular version.¹⁵

Still, the gap between Christian and non-Christian culture and their respective systems of education is great. **Plus, the *cultural blasts of falsehood, evil, and ugliness* that are bewitching and beguiling our students are overwhelming and devastating.**

¹⁵ Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003)

As Paul writes famously in Romans 12: 2, “And do not be conformed to this [fallen] world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Consequently, we have both a felt need and a biblical mandate for Christian cognitive, affective, volitional, and physical *dissonance* as the peculiar people of God. There is a Christian call for the development of biblically-based, counter-cultural resistance identities.

Hence, to obey this injunction and fulfill our vocation as Christian educators in serving God and His church in this our generation and moment in history, I propose that we counter the languages, liturgies, and ways of life fostered in contemporary culture with robust biblically-founded, countercultural alternatives in all three of these crucial domains as central enterprises of Christian education. Let me summarize them briefly, and then we will talk about each with a bit of detail.

- ❖ ***Language***: A recovery of a classic Christian vocabulary and way of naming and explaining the world that is rooted in Scripture, and mediated through the diverse yet unified academic disciplines taught in a Christian perspective.
- ❖ ***Liturgy***: recognition of the liturgy-like character of education which consists of various academic rituals of formation that are intended to shape students as Christians in their intellectual, spiritual, moral, emotional, and physical lives.
- ❖ ***Life***: A vision that the language and liturgies of Christian education will “reconstitute” the lives of students in godly ways, fostering long-term faithfulness in their private and public callings, and enabling them to serve as agents of God’s kingdom and shalom in every area of thought and life.

Language

Studying a transforming Christian worldview
“has given me a vocabulary for the hunches previously held.”
— DBU student Lance Lormand

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1: 5 that believers in Christ are enriched in everything, especially their knowledge and speech.

In this magnificent phrase, the Apostle asserts that a chief Christian blessing consists in the transition from epistemic impoverishment to a wealthy understanding of the truth about reality. And not only this, but believers are also given a treasure trove of new words by which to articulate this knowledge.

This new form of consciousness and vocabulary are not incidental to the faith, but are central to it.

As Robert Wilkin points out in a recent article titled “The Church’s Way of Speaking,” Christianity, he says, is not just a set of doctrines, creeds, or moral codes, but is rather “a world of discourse that comes to us in language of a particular sort.”¹⁶

As of late, however, this linguistic enrichment at the heart of faith in Christ seems to have fallen on hard times. Not only do Christians struggle to *walk the talk* in terms of faithful behavior (as recent surveys and books have pointed out), but now it appears that we are also deficient in *talking the walk* in terms of our Christian vocabulary and patterns of speech (as other publications have noted).¹⁷

We don’t know our own biblical story very well, at least not in its fullness, and we don’t know the words and their meanings that are central to it.

If we hear it at all, we hear it in the form of fragmented plotlessness, in a religiously compartmentalized context with a primary concern for what is practical rather than what is true.

Perhaps we have assisted in the *logocide* of the Christian story and its enriching terms. As B. B. Warfield once lamented, “It is sad to witness the death of any worthy thing, — even of a worthy word. And worthy words do die, like any

¹⁶ Robert Louis Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking,” *First Things* 155 (Aug-Sept, 2005), pp. 27-31. Also available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0508/articles/wilken.html>. Accessed March 18, 2006.

¹⁷ Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004). See also, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience,” *Books and Culture* 11 (January/February 2005), Marva Dawn, *Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005). Robert Louis Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking.”

other worthy thing — if we do not take good care of them. ... The religious terrain is full of the graves of good words which have died from lack of care....”¹⁸

This is, indeed, a matter of grave concern, for as the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz once wrote, “What is pronounced strengthens itself,” and “What is not pronounced tends to non-existence.”¹⁹ Advertisers and politicians know this for sure.

It seems to me, therefore, that resurrecting Christian language from the dead ought to be one of the Church’s top catechetical priorities, and I am convinced that the Church’s agencies of education in the form Christian schools and colleges have more than a crucial and strategic role to play in this recovery process.

“Love makes language exact,” said Wendell Berry, and offering exact biblical language in love, or offering love in exact biblical language is a central calling of Christian schools which ought to be teaching its students to name and explain the world in godly rather than in pagan ways.²⁰

The Anglican biblical scholar Sir Edwyn Hoskyns (1884-1937) once asserted, “Rescue a word ... discover a universe.” Activist Marilyn Buck said that sacred words on the lam ought to be rescued and sung, shouted, taught, and worn around the neck as “amulets against amnesia.”²¹

¹⁸ B. B. Warfield, “Redeemer and Redemption,” in *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), p. 345.

¹⁹ Quoted in Wilken, “The Church’s Way of Speaking.”

²⁰ The Wendell Berry quote was found on the back cover of Eighth Day Books catalog #17, and the last idea in this sentence is owed to Myers, “Christian Education and the Renewing of the Mind,” p. 5.

²¹ The quote from Hoskyns is cited by Timothy George in a blurb on the back cover of Marva Dawn’s book, *Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005). Marilyn Buck’s words are from her poem “Rescue the Word,” available at http://www.freedomarchieves.org/wildpoppies/rescue_the_word.html. Accessed March 18, 2006.

This is the linguistic task of Christian educators, not only in theology, but in all disciplines, to enable students to discover the universe through biblical words and biblically informed words, and to help them remember its true meaning and their own, and not forget.

Indeed, if education is “a stewardship of the mind through words,” as Marion Montgomery has claimed,²² then I might modify his claim just slightly and suggest that genuine education is a stewardship of the Christian mind through biblical and biblically informed words.

As the foundation and the starting point, they form a framework of Christian thought that defines reality and gives context to its careful study through the academic disciplines.

Christian teachers of all subjects must know and love these words and their theological meanings and academic implications. Teachers cannot impart to students what they do not possess. If they wish to kindle their students with this biblical story, its language, and its educational power, they themselves must also burn.

It is the biblical story and its biblical and biblically-informed words that ignite this fire and impacts both teachers and students, for as God exclaims through the prophet Jeremiah, “Is not My word like fire,” declares the Lord, “and like a hammer that shatters a rock” (Jer. 23: 29).

The goal is to be absorbed in and by the words because they are the vehicles of Christian truth and meaning, They possess the power to inform, transform, and reform our minds and imaginations our loves and desires, and our actions and lives.

We want a Christian vocabulary and its meanings to adorn us, as the book of Proverbs says wisdom does, as a elegant wreath for the head, as ornaments about the neck, to be for us a garland of grace, and a crown of beauty (Prov. 1: 8-9; 4: 9).

²² Quoted in Myers, “Christian Education, the Renewing of the Mind,” p. 5.

If, then, The Covenant School wishes to *cultivate inquiry*, then I recommend that it give due attention to its language, to cultivating a classic Christian vocabulary and way of naming and explaining the world that is rooted in Scripture, and mediated through the diverse yet unified academic disciplines taught in a Christian perspective. Such an inquiry could be a significant step toward a vision of Christian education.

Liturgy

“Liturgical practices ... are not mere displays of ritualized behavior; rather they are acts that function to produce particular kinds of people.”
— Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms*, p. 105

Learning the language of faith as it seeks understanding of all things through Christian education is not automatic or magical, but is achieved through the rigorous rituals and rhythms of the regular academic process.

As I have suggested, if the church and contemporary culture are liturgical in character in the way they seek to mold their respective adherents, then I think it is wise to imagine the Christian educational endeavor in a similar liturgical way.

Primarily, I want to re-conceive ordinary educational activities as patterns, practices, rhythms, and rituals of academic formation that are designed to shape students holistically as Christian disciples with Christian minds.

We know and we become on the basis of what we do and how we act.²³

As a veteran carpet salesman explained to me recently about the quality of the flooring products he has sold and installed for some thirty years, “I have learned about all this by doing it.”

It should not surprise us, then, that students learn and become by what they do and how they act as well.

²³ Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), chapter 4.

So what is it at school that students do ritualistically, day after day, week after week, semester after semester, year after year that forms them into a particular kind of person? The answers are not hard to fathom.

- ❖ They attend class; they listen to lessons and lectures; they participate in discussions;
- ❖ they read books; they write papers; they do experiments; they prepare for exams; they take exams;
- ❖ they go to the library; they go online; they go to chapel; they work out in the gym; they eat meals in the cafeteria;
- ❖ they have relationships with teachers; they seek out mentors; they wear uniforms; they obey the rules; they disobey the rules; they are disciplined;
- ❖ they are involved in student government; they work for the student newspaper or school annual; they hear guest speakers;
- ❖ they sing in school choirs; they play instruments; they perform in plays and musicals; they attend school assemblies and convocations;
- ❖ they participate in student clubs; they hangout with their friends; they watch TV, movies, listen to music, and surf the internet; they go to concerts;
- ❖ they play sports; they attend pep rallies and sporting events. And the list goes on.

Furthermore, all these academic pursuits transpire within a well-ordered way of marking time through an academic calendar comprised of semesters or quarters, religious holidays, fall and spring breaks, summer vacation, and so on.

For people inside the educational community, and even beyond, time is understood and measured conscientiously by the ebb and flow of the school year, and often it has more jurisdiction in their lives than the church calendar or federally designated holidays.

So what? A little lateral thinking is good for the soul, and to look at ordinary, educational routines, from the least of them to the greatest, in this way

helps us to appreciate them for what they really are: life-shaping, liturgy-like activities or rituals of Christian academic formation.

- ❖ There is a rhyme, rhythm, and reason for *what* we do.
- ❖ There is a rhyme, rhythm, and reason for *why* we do what we do.
- ❖ There is a rhyme, rhythm, and reason for what we do and why we do it all so *repetitiously*.

It just seems to help to understand education as a kind of liturgical enterprise meant to shape the thinking and living of Christian students in distinctive ways.

An awareness of education as a ritually rich, liturgy-like developmental process deepens and clarifies our mission as Christian educators.

- ❖ Teachers may look upon the classroom experience, course content and pedagogy, and their roles as mentors in the lives of their impressionable students a bit differently with the notion of liturgy and ritual in mind.
- ❖ Administrators and staff members might carefully rethink the institutional culture they are fostering through its vision, goals, symbols and events since students will be molded to its image through the patterns and processes of their academic experience.
- ❖ Students might learn to appreciate more deeply what they are undergoing in their challenging lives and hard work as students when they understand it in this manner.

Such is the nature of liturgical or ritually performed activities: they shape people, often unconsciously and even against their will, burying things deep in their hearts and mind and bodies, and bearing fruit in the proper seasons of their lives.²⁴

By our educational rituals, we are planting seeds of knowledge, virtues and skills into the soil of students' hearts with a hopeful harvest to come. Our courses, so conceived, can keep on teaching long after the semester is over. As

²⁴ Inspired by Preston Jones, "The Value of Ritual," *Critique: Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment* 3 (2003): p. 5.

the read on the opening page of the Lexington Christian Academy's website, "Throughout their lives, our students will rely on lessons they never realized they actually learned here."

If, then, The Covenant School, wishes to *cultivate inquiry*, then I recommend that it consider education as a liturgically orchestrated endeavor, giving due attention to the various academic rituals of formation that are intended to shape students as Christians in their intellectual, spiritual, moral, emotional, and physical lives. Such an inquiry could be a significant step towards a vision of Christian education.

Life

"The goal for which Christian educators are to teach is that our students be agents and celebrators of shalom, petitioners and mourners."
— Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Teaching for Shalom,"
Essays on Christian Higher Education, p. 24

When all is said and done that can be said and done — especially through the languages and liturgies of education, the ultimately great question of concern is this:

What difference has this entire project of education made on students in terms of their minds and bodies, loves and desires, character, and conduct, callings and lives?

What thought-styles or mindsets will they have cultivated? What affections and visions will have been nurtured? What habits and virtues will they have acquired? What patterns of embodied behavior will they practice? The famous question, just slightly altered, is this: How shall these students then live?

The prayerful vision, of course, is that the content and experience of Christian education will enable students to connect their knowing and being and doing, their convictions, character and conduct, that what they learn, who they are and how they live will be of one piece.

This is a revolutionary epistemology. In a modernist sense, knowledge consists of scientifically derived facts about the world that are obtained in detachment and are unobligatory.

On the other hand, to know in a biblical way involves the whole person who is responsible to live obediently *Coram Deo* (before the face of God) in accordance with the things they have been taught and learned.

There is, therefore, no true knowing unless there is real obedience, and there is no true obedience unless there is real knowing. Knowledge according to the Bible is covenantal in character as both the Old and New Testaments bear out. As we read in Deuteronomy 10: 12-13,

And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, *to walk in all His ways* and love Him and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and *to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes* which I am commanding you today for your good? (emphasis added).

Jesus echoes this ideal in His famous conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount when He exhorts His disciples who hear His words to build the houses of their lives on the rock of obedience rather than on the sand of disregard (Matt 7: 24-27). In the Great Commission, He likewise says that the goal is to teach disciples *to observe* all that He commanded them, and that he would be with them even to the end of the age (Matt. 28: 20).

Now it is important to realize that faithful, obedient living as the chief goal of our educational endeavors towards which we point our students is not faithful living in general, but rather is calling and vocation specific.

Christian students should not be encouraged to be and do anything and everything they want to be and do, but they should be taught that they can be and do what God has gifted and called them to be and do.

The various spheres of life are the battlegrounds up for grabs, and it is in these significant domains — in the church, family, neighborhood, family, work or as butcher, baker, or candlestick maker — to which student-believers are called that faithfulness makes such a difference.

Discerning gifts and callings, of course, is a matter of time, experience, guidance, discernment, and prayer.

But Fredrick Buechner has one of the best words on the topic of figuring out one's pathway in life. He writes: "There are all different kinds of voices calling

you to all different kinds of work . . . (and) the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Certainly the world's deep hungers and its deep hurts are overwhelmingly plentiful and there is much room for glad, effective service.

All together, how great is the need for students and graduates from Christian schools who can bring their faith and education to bear on the sensitive nerve-endings of life, to the deep hungers and hurts of our world. Let us exhort them, as Wendell Berry has admonished, to "Go with your love into the fields."²⁵

N. T. Wright, in one of his best sermons when he was Dean of Lichfield Cathedral, in Staffordshire, England, called such people "healers."

Or as Henry Nouwen would say, "wounded healers" in order to keep us humble. Or as I would add, wounded yet being redeemed healers.

But "Why healers?" Wright asks. "We don't need people to yell at these situations or bully them. We don't need people to back off and pretend it's somebody else's problem" he says. Instead, what we need are healers:

We need Christian people to work ... as healing judges and prison staff, as healing teachers and administrators, as healing shopkeepers and bankers, as healing musicians and artists, as healing writers and scientists, as healing diplomats and politicians.

We need people who will hold on to Christ firmly with one hand and reach out the other, with wit and skill and cheerfulness, to the places where our world is in pain.

We need people who will use all their god-given skills ... to analyse where things have gone wrong, to come to the place of pain, and to hold over the wound the only medicine which will really heal, which is the love of Christ made incarnate once more, the strange love of God turned into your flesh

²⁵ Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front" quoted in "Wendell Berry Essays: Document Actions" at <http://thewell.mhc.edu/lifeworks/bookreviews/wendellberrinessays>. Accessed March 28, 2006.

and mine, your smile and mine, your tears and mine, your patient analysis and mine, your frustration and mine, your joy and mine.

This isn't a matter of having all the answers or taking control of the world. Indeed, it's just the opposite. When I am weak, then I am strong.²⁶

If Christian educators as wounded yet redeemed healers themselves, can contribute in some significant way to the healing of wounded students, and in turn making them "healers," then it will have done its job and done it well.

If, then, the Covenant School, wishes to *cultivate inquiry*, then I recommend that it consider carefully its methods and effectiveness in reconstituting the lives of students as Christians, and whether or not it is prompting them toward long-term faithfulness in their private and public callings, and inspiring them to be agents of God's kingdom and *shalom*, and serving as healers in all that they do. Such an inquiry could be a significant step towards a vision of Christian education.

Conclusion

In commenting on the bloodless overthrow of communism in the Czech Republic and its real effect and staying power, playwright president Vaclav Havel attributed its success to the language they used, to the liturgies they fostered, and to the new way of life that had to result:

"We had our parallel society," Havel notes. "And in that parallel society, we wrote our plays and sang our songs and read our poems [language] until we knew the truth so well [liturgy] that we could go out in the streets of Prague and say, 'We don't believe your lies anymore.' And communism had to fall" [life].²⁷

We are still dealing with the lies and their influence, not only of a residual communism in some parts of the world, but with the lies and influence of

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 101.

²⁷ Quoted in Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,) p. 334.

contemporary culture, as a profound source and force of simulated education in the lives of our students.

Christian schools and academies, therefore, as a countercultural societies, must write their plays and sing their songs and read their poems, over and over and over again, liturgy-like.

And they must do this until Christian students are renovated from the inside out, and from the outside in.

They must do this repeatedly until they so know and love the truth, so love and do the goodness, and so relish and promote the beautiful by heart that they, too, will take to the streets, to the highways and byways of life ... and something will bad will have to fall, and something good will arise and take its place, for the good of all and for God's greater glory unto the ages of ages.

Amen. *Soli Deo Gloria.*