

## Teaching for Apostasy: How Educational Methods and Philosophies Work Against the Church

Dr. Thomas Korcok gave the presentation below at the 2018 Lutheran Concerns Association conference in Fort Wayne, IN, in January 2018. Since that time it has been slightly revised.

Currently in colleges of education across America, almost all future teachers learn from a standard canon of educational thinkers whose work forms the basis for the goals, methods, and structure of the modern American classroom. When students are introduced to these educationists, there is rarely, if ever, any consideration given to what they taught, believed, or confessed in their personal lives. Furthermore, their theories are presented as though they were all based purely on unbiased scientific research. Such an approach should be of concern for the Christian because it is radically different from how the church has traditionally measured teachers.

In the history of Western education until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, (which has always been inseparably linked with Christian education), theology has been the measuring stick for all areas of knowledge, including education. A teacher's confession of faith was always considered to be the first criterion in judging whether or not his or her teaching was acceptable. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the influential Lutheran educator, Valentin Trotzendorf, insisted that "Those who belong to our school, let the same also be members of our Church and those who agree with our faith, which is most sure and true; because of perhaps one godless person out of the whole body, some evil happens." <sup>1</sup> In this day and age, we are to believe that the contrary teaching is true: that what a researcher teaches, believes, and confesses has little or nothing to do with the methods he advocates. According to this principle, education can be structured purely according to a researcher's scientific theories and principles with little regard to what the researcher teaches, believes, and confesses.

This approach is a legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which presented the image of the dispassionate scientist in a white lab coat as the ideal model: one who carried out research without any consideration of personal biases or theological opinions. The assumption is that research (including educational research) is a matter of scientific discovery alone, of studying everything in an "atheological" way, as though a scientist's personal confession has no bearing on what he or she observes or teaches. But is it truly possible for a scientist to operate in this way? I would argue that it is not. A researcher's personal beliefs, to one degree or another, will affect his research and will color his observations and shape his conclusions. For example, if a scientist rejects the concept of the flood as described in Genesis 6-9, then he or she will never research the effects of that flood on nature or the development of civilization. <sup>2</sup>

If this is true for the so called "natural sciences," it is certainly also true for psychology and sociology, which, in the past century, have come to dominate educational studies. Research in these sciences, which deal with human behavior, will always be influenced by what the investigator believes, teaches, and confesses. Very often arguments for using the most "modern" methods of education begin with something like, "Research has shown..." These words often tend to silence debate and are regarded as normative by the educational community,

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implying that there can be no room for theological criticism. Such normative “research-based” education has dominated teacher formation for close to a century. Over that time, there have been countless studies about a particular pedagogical method over and against another pedagogical method. With each new study comes the promise that the newest method will increase student learning or improve student engagement. One would assume that, with all this research (and the billions of dollars that have funded it), education would have made enormous progress and students would be better educated than ever before. Surely, after a century of researching the optimal educational environments and ideal teaching methods, the educational establishment should be able to point to some measurable improvement. Students today, who have been the beneficiaries of such prodigious research, should be better read, more thoughtful in their discourse, wiser in their deliberations and more intent on pursuing the virtuous life. However, in considering the vulgarity of the mass entertainment media and popular culture, as well as the level of civic and political discourse exhibited in recent elections, one would be hard pressed to make the case that funding all this educational research has been money well spent.

So why has this approach failed? Perhaps it is because we have never asked the fundamental question, “What does the researcher teach, believe, and confess?” In response to the argument “Research has shown...,” I would argue that often the research reveals more about the researcher than the subject that has been researched. Indeed a researcher’s personal beliefs about such things as the nature of man, the nature of God, the reality of sin, how we know truth, and so on, influence how he approaches education. For example, if I reject that children are born as sinful people, then I will look for some other explanation to justify their bad behavior. I will probably be inclined to remove the blame and guilt from the child and place it on the family, society, or religion. Or, if I believe that God is not the author of truth and wisdom, then I will look elsewhere for the source. I might well be inclined to believe that children construct their own truth, and so my research will revolve around proving that belief.

The point is this: what an educational philosopher believes and confesses dictates not only the type of research questions he asks, but also the explanations that he proposes. As fundamental as this is, the beliefs of the educational thinkers are rarely, if ever, considered in educational circles. When future teachers study the work of educationists, they learn about the various theories and how to apply the methods that grow out of their theories to lesson plans and classroom environments. But they don’t learn about the origin of the theories. They will not be taught what the educationists believed and how their convictions shaped these theories and methods. While this may not be considered a big deal for government-run schools, for the church it should be of utmost concern.

Beliefs and practices are inextricably linked. The church and her schools cannot uncritically employ foreign educational models, theories of learning, and teaching practices without, at the same time, importing the belief systems upon which those models, theories, and practices are constructed. I do not wish to imply that everything that these educationists observed or advocated was wrong or should be rejected. Often one finds similar methods suggested by Christian pedagogues. However, without knowing the corresponding theological biases of these educational philosophers and theorists, Lutheran teachers cannot properly assess what is usable and what is detrimental to their task as Lutheran teachers.

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In the American educational community as a whole, it is widely accepted that Christian theology should have little to say about educational methods. In some cases, Christian educators may include Christian content, but the basic pedagogical theories and methods are generally taken from what is current practice in government-run education. It is also widely accepted that teachers should look first to child and adolescent psychology as the driving force of all pedagogy. These principles are relatively new to the

field of education and were imposed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century by those who wished to prevent the church from exercising her historic mission of teaching children. The result has been a complete paradigm shift. The church, which previously had over 1500 years of educational experience and had produced some of the most enduring and insightful educational thinkers of all time, now has no influence on pedagogy, while the very young (and relatively inexperienced) field of social sciences is given full authority to take its place as the driving force behind current teaching methods. How did this paradigm shift become so imbedded in our educational consciousness?

From the days of Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, education had been understood as the church's mission. It was seen as a natural connection because education was about understanding truth. For the church, truth was transcendent; that is, it came not from within the individual, but from the One who claimed to be "truth made flesh." Thus Augustine famously said, "Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master; and while he recognizes and acknowledges the truth, even in their religious literature, let him reject the figments of superstition, and let him grieve over and avoid men who, when they knew God, glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened."<sup>3</sup> For almost 1500 years, the church had entrusted the task of teaching to sound Christian pedagogues who recognized Christ as the author of all truth. In the 1500s the Reformers recognized that, in order to grasp Evangelical theology, a child's mind must be trained in a complementary way. While the changes made to education were dramatic and set the stage for modern public education, an indisputable union was maintained between the church and school. In speaking of university reform already in his day, Luther affirmed this principle:

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"I would advise no one to send his child where the Holy Scriptures are not supreme. Every institution that does not unceasingly pursue the study of God's word becomes corrupt.... I greatly fear that the universities, unless they teach the Holy Scriptures diligently and impress them on the young students, are wide gates to hell."<sup>4</sup>

The Enlightenment all but sundered the bond between the church and education. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were educators who believed that this bond was detrimental to a proper education. The famous educational reformer, Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827), argued that children should not look to the church for correct doctrine, but to themselves. He said, "Believe in yourself, O Man—believe in the inner meaning of your being. Then will you believe in God and immortality."<sup>5</sup> According to Pestalozzi, traditional catechetical teaching done by the pastor hindered healthy spiritual development. He argued, "Surely the best catechism is the one the children understand without their pastor."<sup>6</sup>

Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) took this one step further. He believed that Christian doctrine corrupted children, and so it was necessary for them to be removed from the influence of the church and their

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parents at an early age before they became "infected" with an unhealthy understanding of God. Until the time of Fröbel, children generally enrolled in school at age seven. Fröbel wanted to start them earlier so that they could be properly trained by "approved" teachers in a new "world religion" that would enable them to rise above confessional boundaries and see that all religions were the same. Fröbel stated, "Education guides man to understand himself, to be at peace with Nature and to be united with God." The name he gave to this new early childhood program of indoctrination was called "Kindergarten." The concept was rejected

by his countrymen in Germany, but some years later it would be warmly received in America. Having been freed from the guiding principles of Christian doctrine, education could now be molded according to any number of theological and world views.

The dominant worldview among 20<sup>th</sup>-century educationists was evolution – not just the evolution of species as taught by Charles Darwin, but also social evolution in which man and society progressed toward a perfect world. While today we most often associate evolution with Charles Darwin, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the writings of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) were perhaps more influential. Before Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*, Spencer wrote about evolution and coined the familiar phrase “survival of the fittest.” According to Spencer, social perfection was not just possible; it was inevitable. To prove it, he combined evolutionary concepts with the new “scientific” field of psychology to demonstrate that mankind was progressing or evolving toward a superior culture and that this evolutionary progress could be observed and directed through scientific experimentation. Spencer developed a child-centered model of education that was guided by the “new” science of psychology along with his evolutionary views in order to create a new pedagogy. What Spencer effectively did was to substitute psychology for theology as the standard by which all educational practice was to be measured. By this new measurement, the education of the past, which had been concerned chiefly with teaching truth and wisdom and which Spencer viewed as irrelevant in view of the great strides man had made in “modern” times, was deemed wicked because it was “most often conducted by forcing irrelevant information into the minds of reluctant children by methods that were patently barbarous.”<sup>8</sup> Spencer believed that

“...in education the process of self-development should be encouraged to the uttermost. Children should be led to make their own investigations, and to draw their own inferences. They should be told as little as possible and induced to discover as much as possible.”<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on his vision of social evolution, he wrote,

“Humanity has progressed solely by self-instruction; and that to achieve the best results, each mind must progress somewhat after the same fashion, is continually proved by the marked success of self-made men.”<sup>10</sup>

Spencer’s, Pestalozzi’s, and Fröbel’s ideas would inspire many of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century educationists. The church’s long history of educational thought and methods that had been honed for over a millennium and a half was discarded. Psychology was now king; and evolutionary theory, with its hope of perfection through continual improvement, was presented as the new savior of mankind.

The rejection of revelation as a basis for truth, the psychologizing of education, and the belief in social evolution has had a decisive influence on the educational thinkers who hold sway in today’s colleges of education, including those at virtually every Lutheran college.

Today every Lutheran teacher candidate is taught about Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner as though they were objective social scientists. A careful reading of these educationists reveals the opposite: they approached their task with strong convictions about theology, science, psychology, and evolution. They were “true believers” with regard to their personal convictions, and their goal was to use education to promote their beliefs. The secular educational community has been an active accomplice in this. The result is that we now have several generations of Americans who have had minds that have been shaped to be receptive to the theology of their pedagogical masters. Universalism, Marxism, Mysticism, and Gnosticism all find fertile ground in the minds of Americans because their minds have been thoroughly tilled by the philosophies and methods of Universalist, Marxist, Mystic, and Gnostic educational methods and philosophies. Educational philosophy is never without theology; it is only a question of which theology it is designed to promote.

This principle was understood by the early Missouri Lutheran fathers. In early pedagogical writings, there were frequent warnings to avoid educational thinkers who contradicted sound orthodox theology. For example, in the early years of *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Schulblatt*, the forerunner of *Lutheran*

*Education Journal/Lutheran Education*, almost every single edition had devoted space to a critique of a prominent 19<sup>th</sup>-century German pedagogy. The theological shortcomings of educational philosophers such as Johann Pestalozzi, Johann Herbart, Friedrich Fröbel, Wilhelm Humbolt were all highlighted by the editors of the journal so that orthodox Lutheran teachers would understand the dangers that these thinkers posed to orthodox Lutheran education. This all began to change in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The critiques and warnings against the philosophies of anti-Lutheran and anti-Christian educators were slowly replaced with a more accepting attitude toward the new American pedagogues in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Educational thinkers such as John Dewey and Horace Mann were entertained by Missouri Lutheran educators with scarcely a negative comment about their theology and the implications that their methods might have for Lutheran education.

This change in attitude occurred for several reasons. In part it happened because the educational views of the early Missouri Lutherans had not evolved and adapted to their new surroundings. These Lutherans continued to define themselves against the German educational system that they had left behind 50 or 60 years ago. Another reason it changed was that they were reacting to the persecutions of the ethnic German Lutherans during and immediately after World War One. Across America there was a wave of anti-German sentiment, and the Lutherans were prime targets. Laws were being passed by states like Nebraska that were designed to shut down German Lutheran schools. As a result, Missouri Lutheran educators were reluctant to criticize American educators for fear of being branded un-American. They looked for ways to adopt secular methods and philosophies of education in order to make themselves look acceptable to state educational authorities. Finally, attitudes changed simply because of the spirit of the age. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the age of progress, science, and new ways of understanding man. Psychology and sociology claimed new insights as to who people were, how they learned, and how education could employ these new insights for the good of man. It is hard to imagine that Lutheran educators could have resisted this pull and held that the old Lutheran ways were correct and the new ways were wrong.

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As the old voices of Lutheran education died away, the new normal in Lutheran teacher education was often to adopt the very practices and philosophies that our spiritual forefathers warned against. We began looking to the government for guidance on how to train our teachers, and we looked to anti-Christian educationists for direction on methods and curricula. Thus, in our LCMS Teachers Colleges (which have become Colleges of Education within universities), future Lutheran school teachers are now taught almost exactly the same as their secular counterparts, with the exception that they must take several required theology courses. They are taught the methods of Lev Vygotsky without hearing about his Marxism, Dewey without hearing about his Secular Humanism, Piaget without hearing about his Mysticism, and Montessori without hearing about her Gnosticism.

Like the dictum, *lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief), the way we teach is the way we believe. One cannot separate educational philosophies and methods from theology. Methods of teaching always grow out of theology, and theology will shape methods. In this world where society, in general, and secular education, in particular, are openly opposed to the teaching of the Christian faith, we, as Lutheran educators must rediscover our own ways, our own methods, and our own pedagogies, so that our own children may be taught according to the truth.

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- 1 Goldberg School Rules.
- 2 The work of scientist philosophers like that of Richard Dawkins and Steven Hawking should be sufficient to put an end to that argument, for in no way are they theologically neutral. Their theories are directly shaped by their confession that there is no god and that we are the masters of our own destiny.
- 3 *De Doctrina* 18.28
- 4 "To the Christian Nobility" *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 44, p. 207.
- 5 Pestalozzi, *The Education of Man*, 90.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Fröbel, *Education of Man*, 57.
- 8 Egan, Kieran, *Getting it Wrong From the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London (2002) p. 14.
- 9 Herbert Spencer, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* [1861] Editor: Charles W. Eliot  
<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/spencer-essays-on-education-and-kindred-subjects-1861-1911>.
- 10 *Ibid.*