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## **Biblical Truth for Today's Church**

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## **LATIMER COMMENT 26**

### **THE EDUCATION REFORM ACT – A CHRISTIAN VIEWPOINT**

One of the most controversial pieces of legislation of recent years, the *Education Reform Act 1988*,<sup>1</sup> was given the Royal Assent in July 1988. During its passage through Parliament it met with fierce opposition from many quarters, not least from the Labour Party and the Teachers' Unions as well as from the Bishops of London and Birmingham, who condemned it as socially divisive and unfair, but who nevertheless fought to have Religious Education made a part of the core curriculum and who argued that Christian moral values should be restored to schools via a morning assembly.

There has been a vague assumption that since the 1944 Education Act laid down that every day should begin with an act of worship and that R.E. should be the only compulsory subject on the curriculum, schools in England and Wales have been essentially Christian. Unfortunately nothing could be further from the truth. 90% of boys and girls in schools in England and Wales not only have no Christian foundation in their schooling but over the years what there was has gradually been eroded and secularised. As the General Synod's report *Children in the Way* observes, 'Many children today have no concept of what it means to be a Christian, and may never have known a committed Christian person or shared in Christian worship.'<sup>2</sup>

Several recent surveys have indicated that the majority of children have never heard of Jesus Christ, except as a swearword, let alone know who he is. There are a few exceptions. A majority of independent boarding/public schools still preserve the vestiges of a Christian ethos, with the chapel at the heart of school life. In addition there are between 30 and 40 Christian schools, usually associated with larger Charismatic churches. For the vast majority of children however, education is decidedly secular.

This Latimer Comment, therefore, will try to look at the background of the education debate, and highlight the main features of the Education Reform Act (ERA); to comment on the philosophy behind it, expressing doubts and anxieties where appropriate, and showing the opportunities available to Christian parents to influence what is happening in schools.

### Background to the Educational Debate

As Brother Andrew observed in his *Building in a Broken World*,<sup>3</sup> 'Basically, all the problems of the World are a result of our not keeping God's commandments'. That is a striking comment. It is the message running throughout the Bible, yet it is less and less a message heard in education. The earliest formal education in this country was provided by the churches through cathedral, parish and choir schools. Gradually the monarchy, city guilds and wealthy merchants and then Parliament began to step in. Nonetheless the major educational legislation — 1870, 1902, 1918, 1944, had strong church influence and involvement. More recent legislation, especially since 1976, has either had little church involvement or has faced church opposition (1980, 1986, 1988, in particular). With some justification. Schooling now generally lacks a clear

moral or religious purpose. It is officially regarded as utilitarian, a preparation for employment.<sup>4</sup>

Inevitably there has been an erosion of Christian values, not least within the curriculum. Man's creation, uniqueness, personal relationship with a creator God, and clear biblical guidelines relating to sexual relationships, are either not taught or are deliberately undermined.<sup>5</sup> There has, likewise, been a subtle change over the R.E. Agreed Syllabuses to be taught in schools. Since 1944 these have had to be approved by representatives of the Local Education Authority, the local churches and teachers unions through Standing Advisory Committees on R.E. (SACRES). In the 1940s and 1950s, even in the early 1960s, the agreed syllabuses were largely Christian. Gradually they have incorporated sizeable elements of comparative religion and even political philosophies like Marxism. This has come about partly because of the presence of large numbers of ethnic and religious minorities, and partly because local church leaders have not wished to antagonise these groups.

Also, although since 1944 every day was supposed to begin with an act of worship, which was assumed to be Christian, this was never spelled out as such and has gradually fallen into abeyance, especially in large secondary schools. Most comprehensive schools have house or form assemblies but these do not necessarily have a religious or worship element, while many primary school morning assemblies have reflected the growing multi-racial aspects of society, with assemblies on Diwali, Eid or Ramadan etc. It was these features that led many Christian parents to begin to opt out of the state system and to form their own schools.

In the Education Reform Bill Mr. Baker took a very relaxed attitude to both R.E. and assemblies. R.E. was not part of the core curriculum and there was to be no effort to stress a Christian dimension in assemblies. However, as a result of pressure in the House of Lords, led by the Bishop of London, the government finally agreed to incorporate R.E. as part of the core curriculum and to encourage a collective worship, both of them 'wholly or of a broadly Christian character', except in those schools or areas where the ethnic religious intake would make this inappropriate. For the first time, therefore, a Christian core has been incorporated by law into state education. The Standing Advisory Councils on R.E. remain at local level and the need for a Christian voice on these SACRES remains as strong as ever.

The government's attitude has been surprising, given the concern of ministers for morality, law and order, drugs, social issues etc., and given the arguments in favour of R.E. as a foundation subject,<sup>6</sup> e.g. Most parents want it; one cannot understand English history, society, laws and culture without acknowledging the part religion has played in our history; it offers answers to man's fundamental questions, etc. Moreover, given some of the social pressures facing children in schools, R.E. has a crucial part to play as a countervailing force against materialism/affluence, in view of the fact that children have greater choice than ever before; the impact of TV programmes, violent or otherwise; the growth of single parent families; easier divorce; casual sex and common law relationships; the increasing influence of the occult through TV and in children's literature.<sup>7</sup> The need for a Christian core in education, therefore, is now greater than ever before in our society. Unfortunately it is not central to the government's educational philosophy, as can be seen from the main proposals of the ERA.

### Education Reform Act

There are essentially five main areas of change; 1) The introduction of a national curriculum; 2) Changing the structure of school government; 3) Giving parents greater rights and choice; 4) Allowing schools to opt out from LEA control; 5) Restructuring higher education.

#### 1. The National Curriculum.

In principle this has been welcomed by all political parties and teachers' unions, though there is some concern at how prescriptive the curriculum might be. The government has appointed a National Curriculum Council and a schools

Examination and Assessment Council. The idea is that there will be core subjects (technology, history, geography, music and art etc.); and that children will be expected to cover certain areas of knowledge and will be examined at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. The belief is that there should be a broad base for all children and some of the more 'trendy' subjects will be eliminated from the curriculum. There are both historical and comparative precedents for this approach. There was a core curriculum from 1902 to 1944 and most countries of the world operate their school system on this principle. There is always fear of abuse by central government but this is as nothing compared with the licence shown by several extreme LEAs in recent years.

## 2. School management.

School management is also in the process of radical change. This is partly as a result of conflict between central and local government; it is partly concerned with managerial and financial efficiency and improved accountability; and it is partly an attempt to make schools more responsible to the local community, and parental needs and wishes.

At one level schools will become like business organizations. Any primary school with more than 300 on the roll and any secondary school or further education college with more than 200 students will be given financial responsibility for managing its own affairs, to a great extent independent of LEA control. The model is that of the independent school. The fears are that heads will be unable to cope with these additional responsibilities and educational issues will be sacrificed on the altar of efficiency. This may be particularly true in the case of special education needs. If parents seek to have their handicapped child placed in a normal school, the governing body and head may refuse on grounds of cost or efficiency.

All schools are now to have individual governing bodies with elected parental representation and the right of co-optation. They, and not LEA officials or professionals, will form the majority. Provision was made by the 1944 Act and the *1945 Memorandum on School Governance for governing bodies*, but as the *Taylor Report* of 1977<sup>8</sup> showed, many of the large city LEAs had never implemented these arrangements. As a result there was little, if any, oversight of the curriculum. The powers of the new governing bodies are considerable. They will be able to appoint and dismiss staff, set the goals and aims for the school, have financial oversight, oversee provision for sex education. They must make an annual report to parents and hold an annual public meeting. Already some LEAs have tried to 'pack' governing bodies with political nominees; in other areas Christians have been elected. The opportunities for Christians to become involved in school governance are greater now than ever before. These opportunities should be seized.

In addition, all teachers must undergo at least five days of in-service education/training per annum. They are to be appraised and evaluated on their performance and will be held more accountable to parents for their professional conduct.

## 3. Parental Rights/Choice.

As part of the philosophy of consumer choice, parents are to be allowed greater choice of school for their children, even if this means crossing catchment areas or LEA boundaries; or if some schools will decline and others increase in numbers. The belief is that market forces will operate and the standards of poor schools will rise in order to compete; but if a good school, which has earned its reputation because it is small, is well run and staff know the children well, now grows in size, will these same factors prevail? Likewise, if a poor school is so labelled because of serious economic factors, will morale fall if numbers drop and will it be forced to close? We do not yet know. What is clear is that schools are going to have to market themselves vigorously, while both they and LEAs are going to find accurate forward planning increasingly difficult. One good feature of recent legislation concerns parental rights. Parents now have rights of access, rights to information, especially in the case of handicapped children, the right to know the goals and purposes as well as the academic results of schools.

## 4. Opting Out.

As a result of parental concerns regarding certain extreme leftwing LEAs, the government decided that parents should

also have the right to press for a school to secede from LEA control and for it to become grant maintained from central government via the DES. This is a reverting to the old direct grant system, except that schools cannot change status from being a comprehensive, or grammar school, nor can they alter their funding arrangements for at least ten years once they have become grant maintained.

There has been a long history of voluntary schooling in this country, but the new system is based on parental power not on church control. A majority of parents supporting a governing body motion seeking grant maintained status will be sufficient to bring about change. Unfortunately there are already signs that some LEAs are prepared to sell school lands to developers, and close down schools, in order to prevent them from opting out. Many fear that if too many schools take this route it will lead to the break up of LEA structures. Others fear that there will be increasing divisions and polarisation in society between the affluent 'haves' and the weaker 'have nots', between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus and ethnic white British. This could have disastrous social consequences. On the other hand, some ethnic leaders believe that their children would benefit academically from separate schooling. What price a harmonious multi—cultural society? Precedents have already been set, because many Christians have already sought to opt out of the system completely, but is opting out a Christian option or should we be leaven in the lump (Matt. 13:33, Luke 13:21, 1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9), in local politics; on school governing bodies; at the annual school meeting; on pressure groups like the SACRES? Christians can argue both ways, depending on whether they view issues from a social or from an individual family perspective.

## 5. Higher Education.

As from 1 April 1989 all large FE (Further Education) colleges and polytechnics will cease to be administered by LEAS, but will receive funds and be coordinated by a new Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council(PCFC), while universities will be controlled by a new Universities Funding Council (UFC). Both councils will have considerable powers and there is concern not only over the autonomy and academic freedoms of higher education but also over whether the need to engage in entrepreneurship and commercial practices will undermine academic standards.

### Concerns and Opportunities

From both a Christian and a professional viewpoint there are a number of major reservations:

- i. There is a lack of any clear moral or ethical philosophy behind the new legislative proposals. Consumer choice, competition, market forces, employability are hardly the ideal bases for an educational system.
- ii. It is ironic that forty years after the signing of the Declaration of Human Rights, which recognised education as a basic human right, our national education system is going to disintegrate into different rival groupings. The quality of provision may depend more upon location and the quality of governance than on anything else. At higher education level many families may no longer be able to afford to let their sons or daughters go to college.
- iii. Too many decisions affecting schools may be made on financial grounds and not on, educational grounds.
- iv. There is a danger that children with special needs in the mainstream schools may suffer if finance becomes a major issue of management style.
- v. There will be a clear ranking of subjects on the curriculum, with a danger that some subjects will be marginalised.
- vi. The introduction of assessment tests could well distort what and how things are taught.
- vii. Choice, and opting out, could lead to even greater social inequalities and injustice and division in society. Choice for some is lack of choice for others. The Old Testament prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Joel clearly believed that rulers (i.e. government authorities) had a moral responsibility to fight against injustice and social division, not to encourage it.
- viii. In certain areas governing bodies have already become very political with or without parental representation.

- ix. On the other hand the introduction of Christian R.E., the restoration of assemblies and the opportunities for Christians either as parents or as governors, are all to be welcomed.
- x. There is a danger that a change of government could bring about a reversal of many of these policies or that certain grant maintained schools could easily be closed. Christians should respond to the challenge, and the opportunities, presented by the new governing bodies. They should seek to uphold Christian values and to stand against false teachings in our society wherever possible and by protesting at annual meetings if necessary. Christian teachers should be seen as being in a missionary role in many schools, and should be supported as such. They and our children should recognise that they are often in a spiritual, as well as an intellectual and emotional, battle and should be equipped accordingly (Eph. 6:10). Ironically, while the government's educational philosophy is essentially pragmatic and managerial, it has unwittingly provided opportunities for committed Christians to play a role in education hitherto unknown. These opportunities should be taken.

Keith Watson

#### FOOTNOTES

1. HMSO: *Education Reform Act 1988*.
2. National Society: *Children in the Way*. A report from the General Synod Board of Education (Church House Publishing, London, 1988).
3. Brother Andrew: **Building in a Broken World** (Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1982, p. 51).
4. See for example the government White Paper, *Better Schools* (1985) or the Conservative Party Manifesto, 1987.
5. Philip May's excellent little book, *Which Way in Teaching?* (IVP, 1981), highlights this very well.
6. An excellent justification for R.E. as a foundation subject by Nigel Scotland can be found in *Spectrum*, 20—2—1988, published by Paternoster Press for the Association of Christian Teachers.
7. So concerned was the Evangelical Alliance about the growth of the occult in children's literature that they produced a pamphlet in 1986 entitled *Danger — Children at Play*. It makes disturbing reading.
8. HMSO: *A New Partnership for our Schools*, 1977.