

How Unique Ideas on Education Can Change Our Culture

By J. Todd Hostetler

How did we get so far off the path?

My wife and I were driving back from Florida to Ohio many years ago. I was driving, and it was about 2 in the morning. Donna was asleep, and my mind was on other things. Suddenly I realized nothing looked familiar. I had gone about two hours in the wrong direction and was embarrassed, wondering how I had gone so far in the wrong direction. I also wondered what I could do to get back on the correct road.

I feel that same way when I look at our culture in America today. I find myself wondering how we have deviated so far from Godly principles. We are definitely going in the wrong direction, so how can we get back on the right path? It was not that long ago that almost everyone agreed on what we as a culture considered to be good and what was considered to be evil. That standard was almost universally the standards presented to us by the Word of our loving God. However, 400 years of traditional values have been reversed in only a few decades. Now we are left to question how this happened and how we can effect change and remove the insanity of our present course.

I think most would agree that, in large part, the power behind this swerve towards acceptable immorality came from a concerted and effective effort to win the hearts of our children away from traditional values and towards a perverted perspective of what is good and what is evil. Obviously, this observation is neither new nor unique. I believe within this observation lies the direction or pathway to winning back our culture toward Biblical standards and precepts. We have to understand what they understood a generation ago. The answer is in our ability to educate our children correctly. We cannot entrust others to undertake this because they have already

demonstrated their vision of our children's future. It is time for a rebirth in how we educate our children.

Where do we begin? History has already demonstrated ideas in education that changed a decaying culture and affected Western civilization for the next 500 years. This valuable lesson from the Renaissance can show us an effective way to educate, designed to make every child, Christian or not, a better citizen who learns to serve others before self.

Then I will share an even more dramatic example from the history of Israel. Their example reveals how we, as believers in Jesus, can educate our children to become what Jesus intends for them to be.

Is It Time For A Repeat Of The Renaissance?

First, let us examine the example given to us from the Renaissance. When we speak about the Renaissance, we refer to a period of European history that was a burst of illumination following a period of dark cultural largesse that lasted for hundreds of years. The very word Renaissance is a French word that means "rebirth." It truly was a period of cultural, scientific, artistic, economic, and political rebirth that lasted from the 14th to the 17th century. Countless advancements occurred during the Renaissance, which are still being built upon today.

What ignited the Renaissance? The answer to that reveals the education example that could benefit us today. Different historians have different explanations of what started the Renaissance. However, one argument can be made that it was launched as a result of a specific event that took place in Florence, Italy. This episode was a brush with a disaster that left the Republic's civic leaders realizing immediate changes had to

occur, or their future was in dire peril. Here is the key for our consideration today; they realized that to save their culture, change had to begin with the way they educated their children. To protect the future of their Republic, they rehabilitated the education system in Florence.

They had lived through a century of societal decay that preceded the near death of their beloved city-state. That is not dissimilar to what we have witnessed in our nation's last century. Even though most do not perceive it, our nation is also heaving with the desperate last gasps resulting from generations of moral decay. Our present societal philosophies in America are entirely opposed to our founding culture of Biblical standards and faith. Just as Florence realized they must change how they educate their children, it is time for us to recognize the time has come for us to ask the questions the Florentines were asking, "What are we teaching our children? And are we teaching them correctly?"

Rebirth in Florence

In the century leading up to the Renaissance, there was a general attitude of gloom and hopelessness throughout Florence, Italy, and most of Europe. Things had not gone well in Italian society for decades. It was as if bad things mounted up one on top of another. Ill tidings came one after another in waves of discouragement. They dealt with severe economic struggles, famines, never-ending political corruption, and of course, the ongoing horrors and fear that resulted from outbreaks of the plague. After so much time of hardship and setbacks, there was just very little sense that things could ever be right again. This ongoing prevalence of cultural depression and universal discouragement throughout the populace resulted in a growing lack of confidence in the Church. Church had been the source of hope and comfort for centuries and had been central to

everyday life for over a thousand years. It is evident from the writings of that period that Europe was choked in a miasma of gloom and despair for the future. With this worldview of hopelessness, there was a rash of apocalyptic predictions. People were so demoralized by life and anguished about their future that they seemed to just be hoping for an end to the age to escape their ongoing circumstances. We see many of these same perspectives today in our culture, making the example of Florence all the more poignant for us.

This is an overview of the spirit across Europe, and Florence was no different. So what led to Florence sparking the rebirth of culture in Europe? The 1300s had been a century of woes and agonies for the Republic of Florence. To cap things off, as they entered a new century in the 1400s, a military invasion seriously threatened them. Milan was to the north of Florence, and they were in the process of attempting to conquer all of northern Italy. In fact, they had done just that, with one singular exception. Florence remained free and independent of Milan's grip. By 1402, Florence was under siege from Milan. As the besiegement wore on, Florence ran out of food, hope, and time. It eventually became apparent to the leaders of Florence that their situation was beyond salvation. With shock, they realized their 300-year run as a Republic was over (As we compare the situation of our nation with that of Florence, it is interesting to note the similarities in longevity as well. Our nation is fast approaching its 250th anniversary).

Then something astonishing happened that no one could have imagined or even hoped for within those desperate walls of Florence. Deliverance came quickly, and it came quite unexpectedly when the leader of the Milanese army, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, fell victim to the bubonic plague. He was right outside the gates of Florence when he died.

His untimely demise led to a quick departure from Milan's now leaderless army. While the Florentines rejoiced at the stunning turn of events that led to their liberation, they also realized they retained their freedom only because of a freak historical occurrence that would never happen again. The leaders of Florence were snapped into the realization that their culture, their way of life, was on the precipice falling. As with our own nation and culture, the creep of decay and weakness happens so slowly that it is hard to recognize it while it is overtaking you. Florence's leaders asked themselves the same questions we are grappling with. What had led them to this stagnation, and how could they change things so they would never be in this situation again?

The Failure Of Education In Florence

Our situation and Florence's have so many similarities that we should also be snapped into immediate action. There is no longer time for us to sit back and hope for the best. Like Florence, we need to respond with alacrity. While the comparisons between Florence in 1402 and the United States of America in 2024 are disconcerting, they also bring to light some of the core issues that have led us to the edge of the abyss. Our situations are indeed similar, so what did Florence determine had to be at the center of change to re-establish the strength of the Republic? Where did their transformation begin? How did it actually spark the Renaissance throughout the whole of Europe?

They began by rethinking and redesigning how they educated their children. This decision to change their education system was the flashpoint that ignited the rebirth of Florence, Italy, and all of Europe. We should learn a valuable lesson from the past and consider how we educate our children today as we examine that question with a hopeful eye to the future.

The leaders of Florence concluded they had failed to raise their children to be effective and productive members of their society. This had to change immediately, which meant overhauling their educational system. The goal was to effectively prepare each child to be a valuable asset to the city-state. They had to be trained to be creative thinkers who could guide Florence through the troubled times that would certainly come. They sought to educate each child to be a good citizen responsible to themselves and their fellow citizens.

They had failed to prepare their children to lead in the future. If their Republic was to survive, they had to prepare people to lead as good citizens. It sounds like I am speaking about what our nation needs as I chronicle this history.

The leaders of Florence believed that if they could educate their children with these objectives, they would also promote a new patriotic zeal within them. How valuable would that be for our children today? They determined that each child had to be educated in two principal doctrines; morality or ethics and rhetoric. Ethics was vital because it would train children to learn how to address problems with a moral compass to guide their direction and decisions. Rhetoric is simply the means to communicate what you know. Expressing your ideas and beliefs in a way that others could understand them allowed you to be persuasive in your communications, be they verbal or written.

In America today, our education system has not only failed to teach ethics, they have actually fostered immorality instead. This cannot be the acceptable direction for our future. Just imagine how valuable it would be for our nation's future if we educated the next generations with these two doctrines; ethics based on the principles of the Bible and rhetorical skills enabling them to

effectively and persuasively communicate their Holy Spirit-inspired ideas and beliefs to others! Even if our school system refuses to teach this, it should still be the foundation of what our children receive in every Christian home. The responsibility for teaching these two disciplines to our children falls on us as the Church. If the world saw the results of children who were steeped in ethics with the rhetorical skills to communicate their beliefs, parents outside the Church would begin to crave the same advantages for their children. The teaching of ethics and morality to every child would be a giant step forward, as would the additional skill of rhetoric.

Education In Israel In Jesus' Day

The Renaissance was known as the "rebirth" Our nation was birthed in the Word of God by leaders who founded this nation on the very principles of God's Word. While we have learned a lot so far about that rebirth from the Renaissance, there is an even more powerful example for us of an educational system that we should probably give a great deal of credibility to. It is the very education system that produced Jesus. We are blessed to have ancient writings from Jewish leaders that laid out specifically how boys and girls were to be educated in the land of Israel.

Education was to begin in the local synagogue. This is where learning would take place for all Jewish people of all ages. In the synagogue, teaching from the Scripture was offered, and the expectation was that all would attend to learn the teaching of the Word. That is a great starting concept every Christian household should adopt if we hope to change our culture. It is noteworthy that children of every age sat with their parents in the synagogue to hear the Scriptures' teaching alongside their parents.

In Jewish culture, this was the beginning of education. Sadly, this is something people today do not consider as part of their children's education. Most people believe education begins in kindergarten when they send their children to the local school system. We need to adjust our thinking to realize that if we want a different kind of nation in the future based on Godly principles, we need to understand that a child's education begins in the local church every Sunday. I would also point out that the expectation in Jesus' day was that the children would sit with their parents to hear the same teaching. They were not shuttled off to listen to a children's version of the teaching from the Word. They were expected to hear and receive the same teaching of the Word as their parents. There was the expectation the Word given would not return void under any circumstances. Again, that is not the way we do things in churches today, but it is the way Jesus and His disciples were educated. There is value in critically considering the difference in the two approaches.

So, education of every child began in the Synagogue. We would do well to consider the beginning of every child's education, the Sunday after Sunday hearing the teaching of the Word of God from today's pulpits.

Bet Sepher

The next level of education for the Jewish child in Jesus' day was the first level of education away from their parents, somewhat like what we do today with Primary Education. This level of schooling also took place in the local synagogue. It was a level of education that included boys and girls from the age of 5 through 9. There was a specific name for this level of school and education. It was called Bet Sepher, which means "House of the Scroll."

This schooling was taken very seriously. They had much higher expectations for what was learned at that age than we would typically expect. The schooling focused on learning God's Word and learning to love God's Word. Oh, that were our expectation for our children today! Because they wanted the children to learn to love the Word of God, the Rabbi teaching at the Bet Sepher school would traditionally begin the first day of school with a novel way of fostering that love. He would take honey and either apply it to the slates the children would use to learn the Scriptures or apply it directly to the children's tongues. Then as the children began to lick the honey directly from the slate or taste the honey on their fingers and tongues, the Rabbi would speak Psalm 119:103 to them. They savored the sweetness and associated it the words in their ears, *"How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth!"*

They would also occasionally serve honey cakes or even boiled eggs inscribed with verses like Ezekiel 3:3. So the children would learn as they ate these delights, *"And He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your belly, and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you.' So, I ate, and it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness."* The imperative was to instill a love of God's Words in the mouths and then in the hearts of each child. How beautiful is that? They were training them to give priority to the scriptures above everything else in the world around them. The children were given a living example of this lifelong expectation from the Bible, *"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!"*, which was a truth from Psalm 34:8.

What is the future we hope for from this country's next generation? If we do not want them to live like the world, we must have different expectations for them. An expectation to love each word in the Bible

will create a culture based on Biblical principles. That does not just happen. It takes training from the earliest age and the ongoing example that comes from adults that show their love of the Word daily. The world and the world's system of education will not teach any appreciation for the Bible. We should expect quite the opposite. Part of the change of the education of our children comes from within the home and within the church experience. The Word of God needs to be spoken boldly and clearly in church, and each home should have the Word spoken audibly so we train our children in the Bible. Our children must witness how much we savor the sweetness of the Word ourselves. Then they will as well.

Let's get back to what was taught to the children in Bet Sepher. It may surprise you, considering that each child was there between the ages of 5 to 9. In the five years boys and girls were in this school, the "House of The Scroll," they were taught the Hebrew alphabet, they were taught from the stories of the first five books of the Torah, they learned to read books themselves in both Hebrew and in Aramaic. Also, they would memorize the books of the Bible. By the time they ended their education at this level, at the age of 9 or 10, they would have entirely memorized the first five books of the Torah. Imagine a 10-year-old having memorized line by line and verse by verse the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy!

If we are honest with ourselves, most believers today still struggle to recite even the Ten Commandments by memory. Only a select few could recite a chapter of the Bible by memory, let alone an entire book of the Bible, or five! Is it any wonder that we do not have a society that understands the first thing of morality based upon the Word of God. We need to change our individual levels of expectation for ourselves and for

our children. We achieve higher expectations, and so will they.

There is one final noteworthy point about this level of education for Jewish boys and girls in the days of Jesus. The rabbi's would teach these 5 to 9-year-olds not just the stories in the Bible, they would also teach the principles of the Bible reflected in those stories. In fact, they would even teach the young students about God's laws from the Leviticus book. When was the last time you found yourself seriously studying the laws laid out in Leviticus? Likely not recently. Well, 9-year-old boys and girls throughout Judah and Galilee understood the laws as well as the principles behind those laws.

That might sound odd to us today, but listen to the Rabbi's logic behind teaching the children these laws from Leviticus. We can learn something from their reasoning and expectations. They believed that those laws were all about purity, and who is more pure than a child? So, they believed that the "pure" ones should be allowed to analyze what was pure. And the children did learn those laws. They had a level of expectancy for their children that we have never had in this nation, which is to our shame. We do not give enough credit to young minds. We do not believe they can handle the Word, so we do not expect they will understand it either. The result is that we all get exactly what we expect, which it turns out is a Biblically illiterate youth generation after generation.

By contrast, because parents in Jesus' Israel believed their children were pure and had the ability to understand purity and even analyze it, they got what they expected. By the time those children ended their years of education at Bet Sepher, they had children who the loved the Word of God and treasured it. They had children that had studied purity from God's heart, and they had hearts that pursued purity. That is

diametrically different than the experience of the teens in our culture, who know more about carnality than purity. Sadly, this is even true for children in the Body of Christ today.

Bet Talmud

By the time children reached age 10 they had completed their education at the House of the Scroll. Now began the time of separation between the boys and girls. At this age, the girls would remain at home to be trained by their mothers in home and family-life matters and responsibilities. Judging this system harshly from our 21st-century perspective would be anachronistic. Things were much different back then. It made sense to train the girls in these domestic matters at this early age because most of them would be married by the time they reached the age of 13. So, training in those family matters was required by that age to prepare them for their role in life.

The boys, however, moved on to the next level of education called the Bet Talmud, which means the house of learning. This was the education for the boys between the ages of 10 to 14. The goal was for the young boys to continue to memorize the remainder of the Torah, or what we would consider the Old Testament. They also began to study to understand the oral laws of the Jewish faith that had been developed over the centuries based upon those laws of Scripture.

The Expectation Of Asking Good Questions

This brings us to another lesson we can learn from their system and benefit from it as we apply it to the way we educate children today. It was at this level of education that one of the main points of emphasis was on learning to ask good questions as a means of learning. Today we teach children by imparting information to them, and then we simply test them on that information later.

However, that is not the way children were taught in ancient Israel. Then children were taught to ask questions, good questions that would be designed to elicit more insight and understanding. They were teaching children to think about things on their own and formulate their own questions on matters. They were doing something splendid for their children, teaching them the skill of thinking for themselves. Today we teach children to have someone else think for them, which means other people then teach children what is valuable to them, not necessarily what is in the child's best interest or the culture they are growing into.

By teaching their children to think for themselves, they became active participants in their own education as opposed to simply being instructed by someone else. The system of teaching children to ask good questions taught them how. In our culture, when a child returns home from school, we ask them, "What did you learn today?" That would not be the question asked of the children returning home in Israel after a day at Bet Talmud, the house of learning. There the more likely query to them would be, "Did you ask good questions today?"

Teaching children to ask questions as a means of education has been an established part of Jewish culture through the centuries. This is understood by the words of Moses, who said:

"When your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which the LORD our God has commanded you?'" Deuteronomy 6:20 NKJV

Joshua also demonstrated this expectation: *"This may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?'"* Joshua 4:6 NKJV

This technique of teaching children to think for themselves by asking good questions not only worked well for thousands of years for the Jewish people, we actually see this demonstrated in the childhood of Jesus. The Bible does not give us much information about the young life of Jesus. God, however, made sure that we knew Jesus had been trained to ask good questions as means of learning. Remember when Jesus was 12 years old (the years He would have been in Bet Talmud, the house of learning)? Luke shares this moment when Jesus was asking good questions of the Priests at the temple.

⁴¹ His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴² And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. ⁴³ When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; ⁴⁴ but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. ⁴⁵ So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. ⁴⁶ Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers." Luke 2:41-47 NKJV

We might believe that because of our advanced society, we have developed superior means of educating our young people today. What do you think would the outcome be if we considered teaching our children by this same method? It worked well for thousands of years, and it worked well for the young boy, Jesus. That is a pretty good example set before us.

Bet Midrash

By the age of 14, the boys had been through two levels of education, and by this time, they had also memorized the rest of the scripture. That's right! They would have memorized the entire Word of God that they had. That meant that they had put to memory over 33,000 verses of scripture. That is both stunning and humbling.

By the time the boys reached this age, only the best students would continue their education. Those who did not prove good enough students were told to return home and apply themselves to the family trade. For example, if their father was a fisherman, they would begin to learn the skills of that trade, which would be their life's focus.

For those who had displayed the academic ability to go farther in their education, they would begin what was called Bet Midrash or the house of study. By this point, the student had memorized the entire Torah, learned all the oral laws, and now they would begin integrating, incorporating, and harmonizing these two disciplines together. It was during this time that they deepened their understanding of the Word and the law. This was vitally important to Jewish society in the days of Jesus.

If they were able to complete this level of education at Bet Midrash, they would be ready to take the final step of their education. Again, remember that this was only for the best of the best, the brightest and most gifted. Now they were to find a Rabbi, become a disciple of that Rabbi, and learn to become one themselves.

Becoming A Disciple Of The Rabbi

The student would seek out and find an established and respected Rabbi under whom they would desire to be a disciple. They would approach the Rabbi and say to him, "I want to become your disciple." Then the Rabbi would ask questions about the potential disciple because if the Rabbi said

yes, he would devote years of his life to teaching, training, and being a living example to this student. So intimate was the relationship that it often took on a more personal and complex interaction than the student would have with his own father. The Rabbi needed to know if this student was good enough, bright enough, and strong enough to endure all the way to the end.

Upon answering all of the Rabbi's questions, if the Rabbi was satisfied with the answers, the Rabbi would say, "Come and follow me." At that point, the student became a "talmid" or a disciple of the Rabbi. They followed the Rabbi, and did all that he did. He would not only learn the philosophies and teachings of the Rabbi, he would learn to become an image of the Rabbi himself. He would learn to walk like the Rabbi, eat as the Rabbi did, sleep when he slept, and even take on the very mannerisms of the Rabbi. So that to the eyes of others, he was the very image of the Rabbi.

Jesus Turned All Of This Around

With that understanding, notice that when Jesus surrounded Himself with His disciples, He did the exact opposite of all this. Yes, Jesus was also teaching His disciples to be like Him, to be an image of Him to the world. However, He did this by turning the Jewish traditions around. Traditionally the student would seek the Rabbi and ask to become his disciple. Jesus, the Rabbi of His own disciples, asked each of those twelve men to follow Him and become His disciples.

Under the system of Judaism, only the best and brightest would become disciples of the Rabbis. Remember, if they were not good enough with schooling, they were told to return to their families and apply themselves to their family trades. Think about the disciples that Jesus chose. They were all fishermen, tax collectors, and the like. That

meant that they had all been told by the religious leaders that they did not have the stuff to become disciples. Jesus did not call the ones that the world would have called to follow and become disciples. He called the average individuals the ones who are just like you and me.

Recall that when the student would ask the Rabbi if he could become his disciple, if the Rabbi agreed to this undertaking, his response would be, "Come follow me." Then the process of the Rabbi teaching the disciple his interpretations, insights, and philosophies would begin. This teaching of his interpretations and such was called his yoke. With that in mind, remember what Jesus said to us in Matthews Gospel,

²⁸"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30 NKJV

He has invited each of us to come to Him and be His disciples and take up His yoke as we learn from Him. What a beautiful invitation to be educated by Jesus. That is an invitation we should take seriously. He has invited you to become His disciples, and if we are willing and will take His invitation seriously, He will open up the Scriptures to you as you take His yoke. It will not be hard. It will be easy because He is the Good Teacher. He is the best teacher. Also, as we learn from Him, we are then able to become teachers ourselves.

Conclusion

We despair over the future of our nation and ponder how we can possibly reverse the trends that have led us so far from Biblical standards. We worry about what can be

done. I hope the illustrations I have shared have sparked hope for the future of our culture. I also hope it also challenges each of us to change our expectations of how we educate our children. If we do not begin to make changes now, both at school and at home, we will continue down the wrong path we have been traveling on.

Florence discovered a rebirth of their culture by changing the way they educated their children. And that led to a change that affected the rest of Europe, even spawning the Renaissance that led them out of the Middle Ages. And we all know how Jesus was educated, and there are lessons for us to learn by applying those Jewish education techniques to how we train our children. We would do well to learn from the past so that we can educate our children to become better citizens founded on the principles of God's Word. To emphasize this, let me share an appropriate quote concerning these things we have discussed.

"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is to never stop questioning." - Albert Einstein.

The brilliant mind of Albert Einstein also understood the importance of asking questions to learn. Additionally, consider this quote from William Wordsworth:

"Life is divided into three terms – That which was, which is, and which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit by the present, and from the present, to live better in the future."

If we truly hope to make a difference in how we educate our children and change it for the better, the starting point lies within each of us. We are expected to become students of the Word ourselves. We have been invited to come and follow the great Rabbi

Jesus, to learn from His easy yoke. When we take that role seriously, only then will we be able to become teachers of others and examples of goodness and love that will attract others to learn from the great Rabbi Jesus.

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