The Protestant Reformation: Educational Ideas and Approaches Cultivated by Luther and Other Reformers

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During the Protestant Reformation Era

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College students preparing to teach in elementary and secondary schools may be surprised to find that Martin Luther and John Calvin are often topics in their teacher education curriculum, especially in their Foundations of Education courses. Although the attention given to these transformational leaders may only be cursory, their ideas are cited as having impacted the development of literacy and common schools in the West, especially in colonial New England. To increase appreciate of the Protestant Reformation’s impact on the field of education, however, teacher candidates should be provided a more thorough examination of various reformers, their thoughts on education, and the impact their thoughts and actions have had on the field. For example, a reader of Luther’s *Three Treatises* will notice references he made to education, schooling, and the role of church and government in society. In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther wrote, “I would advise no one to send his child where the Holy Scriptures are not supreme. . . . 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.”¹ David Barton also quoted that statement in his video entitled *Four Centuries of American Education* (2004), and it is such references for which this paper will provide context and deeper understanding of how doctrinal and educational beliefs, cultivated during the Protestant Reformation, served as underpinnings for the development of universal publicly-funded education in the West.

**Luther’s Ideas and Influence on Education**

In addition to pointing out corruption in the Roman Catholic Church and issues he had with papal authority, Luther voiced concerns he had about the curriculum in universities,

monasteries, and convents. Before they became corrupted, Luther noted, the convents and monasteries, in particular, were more inclusive and were, in essence, “Christian schools where Scripture and the Christian life were taught, and where people were trained to rule and to preach.”² He was critical of universities and called them to a “thorough reformation,” noting that they had become a means of spreading sin and false teaching, just as “everything the papacy has instituted and ordered” had done.³ Other nuances, such as Luther’s dislike for Aristotle, must also be understood, especially to appreciate his counter-cultural thinking in contrast to the predominance of Aristotle’s influence in the prevailing scholastic thought. For example, Luther held such disdain for Aristotle’s books that he urged that they all be discarded from the university curriculum. In his forthright language, Luther referred to Aristotle as a “damned, conceited, rascally heathen” whose teachings misled Christians and should therefore be censored.⁴ Such reaction should be considered in the context that Europe was just beginning to experience increased exposure to classical literature, including the works of Aristotle and a number of other Greek philosophers. Luther did concede, however, that the curriculum might benefit from abridged versions of Aristotle’s *Logic, Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*. These works would help students learn to speak and preach well, but Aristotle’s notes would have to go.⁵ Luther also did not hold much regard for the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. Throughout Luther’s works, there are several reverent mentions of Augustine, whose philosophy was much more Platonic, but not any admiring comments about Aquinas.

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² Luther, *Three Treatises*, 63.
³ Ibid., 92.
⁴ Ibid., 93.
⁵ Ibid., 94.
In his discussion of the church versus the commonwealth, Diarmaid MacCulloch observed that, even prior to Luther’s prominence, some communities—such as Nuremberg—were beginning to take action to shift the control and funding of schools from the church to local governments. With the advent of more affordable and available paper and printing, schools began to grow even more, especially in more densely populated areas. With increased curiosity about ancient writings, a heightened emphasis was being placed on the classics, which resulted in “The New Learning,” which was essentially humanism, nominalism, and natural philosophy. MacCulloch also explained the medieval development of scholasticism. He defined it as “the formal university method of academic investigation, by a logical system of questioning and listing data from the authorities.” The forthcoming Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Scientific Revolution would all play a role in challenging this instructional system. Arguments would begin to intensify over the best way to come to truth. The scholastics would continue to maintain that logical analysis and propositional arguments were the best learning methods, while humanists would embrace the rhetorical skills of persuasion.

Printing and the Dissemination of Ideas

Gutenberg’s introduction of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century was a significant development. Although it was certainly a tool to disseminate ideas, it served more to transform a culture that was not as interested in the written text to one that valued it greatly—especially among those who, until the invention of the press, had little hope of accessing much

7. Ibid., 75.
8. Ibid., 76.
9. Ibid., 25.
10. Ibid., 85.
printed material in their lifetimes. Luther’s ninety-five theses and millions of copies of Luther’s other works were distributed throughout Europe because of the printing press. Without the press, these ideas would have been discussed in class the next day without much fanfare throughout the rest of Europe. There is no question that the press made the dissemination of ideas much easier, rapid, and more affordable. This accessibility opened the common person’s awareness to the wealth of knowledge. Oral and written cultures fused to the point where, in the late Middle Ages, the population was becoming increasingly literate, especially in the cities—explaining why the Reformation spread more rapidly in the cities than in the rural areas.\(^\text{12}\) With this accessibility came a democratization of learning. Not only were printed materials more available but they were also more frequently being printed in the language of the home rather than in classical languages, such as Latin. This was liberating to the common person. As Reformers were liberating individuals from abuses of the Church, they were also liberating them to possibilities through the printed word.

Reformers were humanists who cared about text and how truth could be discovered and conveyed through text. There were many different ideas being disseminated in this era beyond the ideas of reformers: nominalism, natural science, natural philosophy, and many other ideas were disseminated by this growing medium. MacCulloch described how Protestantism was “good business for printers. . . . The increase in Bibles created the Reformation rather than being created by it.”\(^\text{13}\) There was even concern that the laity might begin spending more time reading than listening to the Church’s preaching.\(^\text{14}\) In preaching, the Church could continue to propagate

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 72-73.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 73.
its tradition, while reading the original Word of God would weaken it. MacCulloch went on to
describe how printing transformed Europe’s perceptions of learning altogether and made literary
skills more desirable. This growing individual empowerment through reading was quite
compatible with the empowering doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Priesthood of Believers: Literacy and Vocation

Luther believed that a works-based salvation placed far too much power in the Church
and, in essence, manipulated the laity to become subservient to a bureaucratic structure that was
driven by greed and corruption. He wrote in To the Christian Nobility of a German Nation that
there were three walls that needed to be torn down in order to bring about this reform. These
walls were ideas and practices: (1) the government, “temporal power,” has no jurisdiction over
the Church; (2) the pope is the ultimate interpreter of the Bible; and (3) only the pope can
summon a council. For Luther, to tear down these walls was to build dignity and independence
into the individual believer. In reference to Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12, Luther stated,
“There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between
religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work . . . . They are all of the spiritual
estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.”
It is this doctrine of the priesthood of the believers—justified by faith alone—that drove Luther,
Calvin, and others to bring about reform. Steinheuser, in his introduction to Luther’s “To the
Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools”

15. Ibid., 73-74.
17. Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” 14.
(1524), noted, “With his conception of the spiritual priesthood of all believers, Luther could not but regard the educational system of the church as antiquated and insufficient.”18

The rise of modern education, especially for common people, can be attributed to the Reformation belief that all individuals should be able to read the Bible in their own language. MacCulloch provided an illustration of this by starkly contrasting southern Italy in the early seventeenth century with the British Isles and northern Europe. He indicated that, in southern Italy during that time, there were no Bibles available to laypeople in their common language.19 Pope Paul V had observed that “so much reading of the Scripture ruins the Catholic religion.”20 Bibles were banned and burned, and for over 200 years not a single Bible was printed in the common language on the Italian peninsula.21 Over a century earlier in England, however, John Wycliffe taught that the Bible superseded the tradition of the high Church and of papal authority, and his followers translated the Latin Vulgate into English.22 These translations found their way into the homes of common English folks,23 and not just for males to read but also for females. Having begun in Germany, this trend of common people reading the Bible in their own language continued to spread throughout other parts of Europe, especially in the north.

Gerald L. Gutek noted that, although Luther’s perspectives on the education of females reflected the limitations of his time, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was extremely liberating for girls and women. Though Luther continued to perceive women in traditional roles

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
of wife, mother, and housekeeper, he extended to females the same basic primary school education that he proposed for boys, and this primary education should be in the language of the home rather than in Latin, as had been customary.\(^{24}\) Gutek’s qualifications regarding Luther’s influence on the role of women in society is an anachronistic view through the lens of modern-day feminist perspectives, applying twentieth century sensibilities and notions about what equality for women means. Considering how women had been treated practically as property in monastic and medieval society, their role under Lutheranism was far more liberating than Gutek acknowledged.

In addition to influencing the spread of literacy education for both boys and girls, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers began to deconstruct the dichotomy between sacred and secular. The dividing wall between the holy monastic life of devotion and the secular common life of servanthood was gradually being chipped away as Luther placed a great deal of weight on the concepts of calling and vocation. In her book *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey pointed out that Martin Luther referred to vocations as “God’s masks.”\(^{25}\) She went on to discuss how Lutheran writer Gene Edward Veith explained that, although God might sometimes intervene supernaturally apart from human participation—such as the time He provided manna from heaven—he ordinarily provides through the work of humans. Most people, for instance, are fed not by the miracle of manna but by the processes of “agriculture, transportation, food processing,


and retailing.” 26 For these human processes, Pearcey used the term “cultural mandate,” 27 which refers to the original calling in Genesis for all humans to be fruitful and to subdue the earth. The concept of “cultural mandate” illustrates one of the Reformation legacies as being the Protestant work ethic and the perspective that work is worship—a holy calling.

The elevated view of productive labor and its resulting accumulation of wealth are often credited with the later rise of capitalism. This theory was made popular by German sociologist Max Weber in his 1904 book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and was affirmed two decades later by English Christian socialist R. H. Tawney’s Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (1926). MacCulloch, however, warned against making such a direct connection, believing that the Reformation may not have been a required condition for the development of capitalism but that it certainly was an enabler of it. 28 Nevertheless, Luther was more concerned with educating for values and spiritual development than for building economic wealth. He recognized three categories of vocations: (1) religious, (2) political, and (3) economic/domestic—each with “its own dignity, required training, and function.” 29

Two of Luther’s manuscripts convey clearly his thoughts on education: To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524) and A Sermon on Keeping Children in School (1530). The first reveals that, although he gave priority to religious teaching, Luther promoted liberal arts as being of value in and of itself. He addressed education for the poor and hinted at making school attendance compulsory.

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 47.
Although the curriculum would be Christian, the responsibility of these schools is that of secular governments. The second work provided talking point to preachers to encourage parishioners to keep their children enrolled in school even after they acquired the ability to “do sums and read.”

Earning money may be a priority, but it becomes idolatry if it is valued beyond preparing to be preachers and rulers.

Intersection of Luther’s Theology and Educational Philosophy

Throughout Luther’s *Three Treatises*, it is evident that he was an Augustinian and leaned toward a Platonic framework. Allusions to Augustine’s fifth century work, *City of God*—in which he describes two cities, one of God and one of man—can be seen throughout Luther’s writings, as can references to idealist abstractions. Luther gave preference to words over signs, to testament over sacrament, to spiritual over physical, to promises over commandments, and to faith over works. As Luther discussed both spiritual and temporal issues, he revealed democratic sensibilities, and at times appeared to introduce a measure of contradiction by seemingly preferring the power of man’s government over God’s Church. This, however, may not be so much a contradiction as it was Luther’s sense that all institutions and individuals need accountability.

As noted earlier, Luther held contempt for Aristotelian and Thomistic ideas. He was appalled that theologians used Aristotle to rationalize the doctrine of transubstantiation. He


31. Luther, *Three Treatises*, 162
32. Ibid., 278.
33. Ibid., 282-3.
34. Ibid., 297.
35. Ibid., 147.
declared the influence that Aristotle had on theology and said that Thomas Aquinas “is to be pitied not only for attempting to draw his opinions in matters of faith from Aristotle, but also for attempting to base them upon a man he did not understand.” The Holy Spirit, he declared, was greater than Aristotle, and even the very theologians who integrated realism into their teachings admitted that the philosophy eventually broke down. For all of Luther’s railing against Aquinas, he had much in common with him. They both embraced faith as a legitimate means to explain concepts such as the trinity or the deity of Christ.

**Other Reformers and Their Influence on Educational Developments**

As noted earlier, Luther and Calvin are the two reformers typically highlighted in the curriculum of teacher education programs, though given only superficial attention. There is even less consideration given to other reformers, though sometimes the names of Melanchthon and Erasmus are mentioned. It is also common for the name John Amos Comenius, a Czech Moravian, to be credited as having authored the first illustrated children’s book, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658), which in English means “The Visible World in Pictures.” Unfortunately, his other contributions are generally ignored, such as his theories of pansophism, that both natural and supernatural truths should be studied to develop universal wisdom, and his vision of *omnes omnia omnino*, the teaching of “all things to all people with reference to the whole.”

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36. Ibid., 129.
37. Ibid., 145.
38. Luther, *Three Treatises*, 151
as an example of the many Reformation-era ideas that are overlooked in teacher education programs. Before turning now to Calvin, consideration is given to Melanchthon and to Erasmus.

Philipp Melanchthon

Philipp Melanchthon, the “Teacher of Germany,” was a professor at Wittenberg University and a supporter of Luther. For over four decades, Melanchthon served instrumentally to construct a system of education in Germany. He authored a number of student textbooks and handbooks on the development of schools. Despite all of these contributions, he is much less known in the field of education than other popularly studied German educators, such as Friedrich Froebel and Johann Herbart.

In his *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, Melanchthon presented a thoroughly systematic and comprehensive philosophy of education. He addressed topics including the order of learning and the role of schools and dedicated entire chapters to the educational philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Erasmus, and Luther. Believing that schools were ordained by God, he traced teachers and centers of learning throughout the Bible, including Moses, the Old Testament school of the prophets, Jesus, Paul, etc. As Riemer Faber observed, Melanchthon perceived the primary purpose of schools “to inculcate, preserve, and pass on the true teachings of the Bible.” However, unlike Luther, Melanchthon also valued learning as an end in and of itself. The two also differed in their perspective of the purpose of language. While Luther chiefly saw language as a means to spread the gospel, Melanchthon understood it a means to discover what it means to

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42. Faber, “Philipp Melanchthon,” 428.
43. Ibid., 431.
They agreed, however, on the importance of teaching classical languages in upper levels of education, especially for the purpose of ensuring that posterity would rightly interpret the doctrines of Scripture. Melanchthon’s philosophy of education might be summed up in the following quote from his *Orations*:

Then even more difficult is the defense of religion, in which it is necessary to bear in mind the quarrels of all ages, to reveal the snares, to refute sophisms, to remove the disguise of false convictions and to make clear and fortify the true opinions. No one can do these things without a great variety of skills and without erudition.

Desiderius Erasmus

A comparison of Luther to Desiderius Erasmus provides further insight into Luther’s educational ideas. Both men were northern Christian humanists who shared in common a concern that the church had harmed the gospel by distorting Scripture. They were also similar in that they followed the “tradition of internal and communal reformation used earlier by the medieval Cluniac Benedictines and the Franciscans.” They both sought to distribute the Bible in its most accurate translation from the original languages, to rescue the church from legalism by humanizing it more, and to diminish papal authority.

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44. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 138.
In *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Erasmus shared a philosophy and practical approach to education, including the role of the prince’s tutor, the importance of Christian dogma in the teaching of philosophy, and the necessity of the prince to serve as an ethical role model to his subjects.\(^5\) Like reformers Luther and Calvin and common school proponents Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, Erasmus believed that “the main hope of a state lies in the proper education of its youth.”\(^5\) In the chapter entitled “The Qualities, Education, and Significance of a Christian Prince,” he covered topics such as selecting a proper tutor, early childhood education, learning outcomes, primacy of the state’s purposes over that of the parents, and curriculum content, i.e., fables, myths, analogies, Christian dogma:

> The teacher should enter at once upon his duties, so as to implant the seeds of good moral conduct while the sense of the prince are still in the tenderness of youth. . . . The teacher’s task is always the same, but he must employ one method in one case, and another in another. . . . Therefore, the tutor should first see that his pupil loves and honors virtue as the finest quality of all . . . \(^5\)

As the selection above indicates, the Erasmus ideas were very much in line with the reformers who stressed the teaching of children from a young age and a curricular emphasis on values education based on biblical and classical literature. Erasmus’ concepts that are countercultural for his time include an acknowledgment of childhood stages, developmentally appropriate practice in pedagogy, and differentiated instruction.

Calvin

A valuable work revealing the educational theories of John Calvin is his “Catechism of

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., 35

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 146-148, 212-213.
the Church of Geneva: That Is a Plan for Instructing Children in the Doctrine of Christ.” It conveys Calvin’s concerns about how the corrupted Church had neglected examining children in Christian doctrine and outlines the purpose and importance of Catechisms, also known as Institutes, in order to accomplish this task:

It has always been a practice and diligent core of the church that children be rightly brought up in Christian doctrine. To do this more conveniently not only were schools formerly opened and individuals enjoined to teach their families properly, but also it was accepted public custom and practice to examine children in the Churches concerning the specific points which should be common and familiar to all Christians. That this be done in order, a formula was written out, called a Catechism or Institute.  

Calvin continued on to express his anxiety about the threat of barbarism to posterity without intervention from God. This intervention, he concluded, may be in the preservation of the Church’s written texts. What better record of the Church’s teachings, he declared, “cannot be observed with clearer evidence than from the Catechisms.”

The educational implications of Calvinism were much greater than simply the use of catechisms as an instructional method. With its “highly intellectual theology,” Calvinism required not only its ministers to be literate but also its laity. Thus literacy—primarily for the purpose of reading, understanding, and interpreting the Bible—was a priority in Calvinist communities, such as in parts of the Netherlands, Switzerland, England, Scotland, and North America. This literacy, combined with the notion that an outward sign was needed as evidence of one’s predestination, contributed both to spiritual and economic development. Therefore, education for the masses became highly valued for eternal and temporal reasons. According to

54. Ibid., 90.  
Calvin’s doctrine of total human depravity, the nature of students was basically sinful and should be taken into account by teachers as they develop classroom discipline systems. Formal schools then would serve to inculcate disciplined self-control. One means of doing so was by corporal punishment.56

Like Luther, Calvin encouraged a school system of two tracks: one for common people and another for the upper classes. Common schools would implement the catechisms, basic academic skills, and literacy in the vernacular language. Whereas, Latin grammar schools for the upper class would focus on the classics to prepare students as leaders in the church, government, or community.57 Puritans brought this system of education with them to New England in 1620 and by 1647 passed the “Old Deluder Satan Act,” the first compulsory education law in the New World.58 This law required towns of fifty families or more to provide a teacher for basic academic skills. Towns of one hundred were required to establish a Latin grammar school to prepare boys to attend Harvard College, which had been established just over a decade prior.59

**Conclusion**

As far as college students in teacher preparation programs are concerned, the story of the Common School Movement began with Horace Mann. Yet, individuals and doctrinal beliefs of the Protestant Reformation served as impetus for mass education long before Mann. In an effort to represent the Common School Movement more fully, this manuscript has focused specifically

57. Ibid., 146.
58. Ibid., 147.
59. Ibid.
on the contributions of a few select Reformation leaders and the ideas they espoused. Most likely, the name Horace Mann will continue to be the most recognized, especially in the United States, for contributing to the idea that all children should be taught in publicly-funded schools. However, the primary and secondary sources reviewed for this paper support the notion that the Reformation leaders and their beliefs were just as influential, if not more so, than Mann’s efforts. Because of this, I intend to do my small part to expose future teachers to the transformational impact that Luther, Calvin, and others had on the philosophy and practice of education in the Western world.
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