

Training too hard? The use and abuse of the Bible in educational theory

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Douglas Wilson's book *The Paideia of God* derives its title from one word within Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 6 Paul addresses the relationship and authority patterns between parents and children, particularly writing to fathers:

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

Wilson uses this verse as the launching pad for his ideas on education. He begins by examining the Greek word *paideia* from which the NIV translators derive "training" in Ephesians 6:4 (and 2 Timothy 3:16). Wilson explains that the notion of "paideia" was central to classical understanding and conveyed much more than our modern day sense of "formal education" or schooling. He argues (using Werner Jaeger's work as justification) that for the ancient Greek father this would have meant nothing less than the shaping of the ideal man to take their place in the ideal culture (pp 9-11). It was a word he argues that meant the enculturation of the future citizen. Biblical scholars and historians might want to add to Wilson's arguments. For example some would perhaps want to stress also that "paideia" had a strong element of discipline embedded within it; indeed, the notion of the correction of the young¹. Some might even want to contest Wilson's views, but my purpose in writing this paper is not to exegete Ephesians 6:4. Rather, my aim is to review Wilson's book and its educational arguments based on his biblical interpretations.

The book is not the first, but it is certainly one of the more broad ranging, attempts to challenge Christians about their responsibilities to 'train' or educate their children from school to university. The book contains chapters on learning disabilities, a discussion of potential voucher systems to fund school education, the place of school uniforms, the relationship between reformed theology and Christian schooling, the importance of classical logic, ministerial training, the problems of university colleges, and the importance of Christian colleges or universities. The large range of topics covered results in a rather polemical, almost 'armchair' style discussion of disparate topics that, when taken together, allow the author to make some points about what Christians should and should not do in the name of education. As is often the case with books published from a collection of previous works and addresses, the genre and analytical framework changes from chapter to chapter with some being characterised by

¹ Paideia is used in Hebrews 12:5-11 in this strong sense, and hence is translated in the NIV as "discipline" in these verses.

detailed theological argument and others having no reference to the Bible or to the work of others.

The very style of the book and the failure to apply consistent forms of analysis and argument proved quite frustrating and disappointing for me as a reader. This inconsistency also bears a relationship to my view that the book suffers from three significant errors that others have also made in recent decades when grappling with the important issue of how the Christian faith should inform choices in relation to education, and especially formal schooling.

First, Wilson misuses or ‘overstretches’ biblical argument to justify his position. Second, while initially seeking to be guided by God’s teachings on this important topic he ends up being influenced more significantly by a narrow subset of Christian cultural beliefs, and becomes dismissive of other views with little justification.

Third, he makes a range of claims with little reference to a vast body of educational theory and research that is of relevance.

The ‘overstretching’ of biblical argument

While not seeking to attempt a theological analysis of Wilson’s book (I will leave that to others), one cannot read this book without reaching the conclusion that the biblical analysis leaves many questions unanswered. As with many topics that impact on the Christian life, there is little direct reference to education in the Bible, certainly not to formal institutional education of the type we know in the twentieth century as schooling. The Bible² does of course talk often of being able to teach (there are 123 words translated as teach), particularly to teach God’s law and his word (Deut 4:14; Ps 25:4; Ps 119:12), to teach how to live (1 King 8:36; 2 Chron 6:27; Mic 4:2; Tit 2:2,3), to teach knowledge and good judgement (Ps 34:11; Ps 119:66) and the act itself (Matt 5:2; John 7:4; 1 Cor 17; 1 Tim 4:11). The word teaching is also used often, in most cases to refer to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles and the act of teaching about God and his law.

Wilson uses the word “paidea” to build an argument that Paul was invoking first century Greek fathers to accept their responsibilities to educate and develop the whole child. This he suggests involved far more than formal education, it also required a process of enculturation into the Christian faith. He argues that Paul’s words are relevant to us as we grapple as parents with decisions concerning children’s education:

“The establishment of Christian schooling necessarily entails the establishment of a Christian culture. Culture is not possible apart from a paidea, and paidea (in

² For the purposes of this discussion the NIV translation is being used.

the fullest sense) is not possible apart from an established culture” (Wilson, 1999, p. 12).

There is much good sense in Wilson’s suggestion that parents should see education and training as a concern for the whole child grounded in the Christian faith, but his conclusion that Christian schools are an essential part of how Christian parents should provide a complete education is not supported by his biblical analysis, nor are most of his arguments concerning the particular form that Christian education should take. While Wilson acknowledges that the complete education of the Christian child is not dependent solely on formal education, he does argue that it has a strong part to play and must be experienced through a separate Christian school rather than through participation in secular schooling. While there is a biblical argument that can be made for the importance of Christian schools, there are also good arguments supporting the decision of some Christian parents to send their children to secular schools. In essence, Wilson displays a form of exegetical error that is far too common: he builds an argument with selective use of the Scriptures then extrapolates from that discussion views that have no clear support within the scriptures cited. In doing so, he also overlooks the fact that there are other possible arguments based on biblical analysis.

But there is an equally worrying second type of error in Wilson’s work. This error is to outline a position or argument that suggests the conclusions are drawn from biblical analysis but when in fact, they draw primarily on cultural rather than biblical justification.

Using cultural arguments under the guise of biblical justification

In arguing for the essential importance of Christian schools Wilson also argues for a specific form of Christian education characterised by specific cultural practices. While there is nothing fundamentally wrong with arguing that effective Christian education should be characterised by particular ways of doing things based on biblical understanding, Wilson fails to justify his claims biblically. Space does not permit a complete analysis of the various topics but reference to just one will illustrate how cultural rather than biblical argument informs Wilson’s thinking.

The fourth chapter of the book is titled “The Biblical meaning of school clothes” and is essentially a justification for his view that good Christian education requires all students to wear school uniforms. To arrive at this position Wilson first uses a number of biblical passages rather loosely to discuss various references to clothing in the Bible. For example, he argues that Rebekah’s actions in taking the best clothes off Esau to place them on Jacob suggests that “nice clothes exist” and that God is concerned about our choices in this area (Gen 27:15). He also uses the story of Achan’s sin in being tempted to keep silver, gold and a beautiful robe (Josh 7:21) to argue that clothing can be a

temptation. As well, he cites Naomi's efforts to help Ruth gain the attention of Boaz by putting on "her best" clothes (Ruth 3:3) as justification for his position that we should be prepared to put on our best; which in this case he sees as the trusty school uniform. What is clear from the use of Scripture in this way is that biblical texts are being selected to support a cultural perspective³. This type of exegetical error leads inevitably to arguments that are difficult to sustain purely on Scriptural grounds. His conclusion in this chapter is that "some clothes are nicer than others", hence "relativism on the clothing issue is impossible" (Wilson, 1999, p.43), clothing is an expression of honour and the school uniform is the clothing option that all Christian parents should embrace. Wearing T-shirts rather than a shirt with a collar and a tie he argues is selling out to "ease and pleasure" rather than "duty". Wilson presents a cultural preference and labels it a biblical deduction, arguing the case using the Bible selectively (and sometimes erroneously) to support the claims.

Ignoring educational theory and research

A third fundamental error in Wilson's work is his almost complete lack of reference to educational research and theory. Is education the only field of study (or profession) where lay people can publish a book outlining their ideas with little reference to research about that field? While any field of study has good and bad research and theories that are contested, the body of evidence that informs debates in any field is essential reading for the professional or scholar seeking to argue one's position. Just as the Bible cannot be expected to supply the doctor or engineer with all the practical guidance that they need to make good professional decisions, so too the teacher cannot ignore educational research and scholarship. This is particularly the case in the field of education when it comes to learning and pedagogy.

While the Bible talks often about teaching as something that is important to helping the Christian acquire an understanding of God's word and of God himself, there is far less reference to how this is to be done, and little about how humans learn best. In terms of the things that are valuable, the Bible does suggest that humans do and should learn about God (Deut 14:23) and the righteousness he expects (Is 26:9), and that they should learn from and about Jesus (Matt 11:29). While we can be sure that the Bible speaks loudly and clearly about the creator and his purposes for creating us as problem solving, analytical and creative beings, we will struggle to find direct revelation concerning how the brain works, how children learn and how we might best teach them. This is where research and scholarship produced by God's creation can be of use and indeed, should not be ignored.

Wilson fails to make good use of sound educational research to inform his work and arguments. For example, in his chapter titled "Teaching Disadilities (sic):

³ Again let me reinforce that I am not trying to build a counter argument that uniforms are unimportant, I actually see them as a practical solution to the need for durable, modest and safe clothing.

Why Johnny doesn't learn much anymore", he argues that schools have failed society. In his words, it is our schools that are 'teaching disabled' (Wilson, 1999, p. 17). In the same chapter he discusses the rise of conditions such as Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD), the need for discipline, and the importance of phonics as the preferred method of literacy instruction, all without a single reference to any medical or educational research study (or reference for that matter). While there has been much questioning of current educational theory informed by philosophies that Christians might find problematical, one cannot simply dismiss all research and writing on educational topics and make up one's own.

My main point in this short essay has not been to dismantle the arguments that Wilson proposes in relation to education (although I find many of them troubling) but rather to question the nature of the scholarship that has led him to his conclusions. To be sure, there are views that Wilson expresses that reflect a degree of wisdom and on which theologians and educators might well agree, but there are also many errors and views that would be challenged by Christian educators drawing on their understanding of the Bible as well as educational research. One of the great challenges I face as a Christian and an educator is to be able to engage in the reading, analysis and critique of educational writing and theoretical work with full consideration of how my world view centred on the gospel of Christ makes a difference to how I respond.⁴ This is one of the key apologetic tools I have at my disposal—the ability to bring a knowledge of the Bible as well as educational research to bear when presenting a Christian perspective to education. My view is that while it is possible to use the Bible to draw conclusions about some issues of relevance to education without educational research⁴, that to ignore good scholarship in any field is to leave oneself open to the criticism of simply providing uninformed comment.

There has not been the opportunity within this review to discuss Wilson's views on many other topics that he sees as of importance, including classical subjects such as the teaching of logic and Latin, nor is there time even to challenge his views on university "evangelical colleges". But I would encourage readers of Wilson's book to consider these issues by testing the extent to which the views expressed reflect both sound biblical exegesis and knowledge derived from educational research.

I find it ironic that the one chapter with which I find little disagreement is Wilson's discussion of Reformed Theology. How does one Calvinist have such different views on education from another Calvinist like Wilson? At issue here is whether there is a single view on what constitutes sound educational policy and practice and the manner in which such views are derived. I have no doubt that a careful

⁴ The Bible in one sense provides every direction that we need for a fulfilled life. This includes how we should raise our children, how we should encourage them in the faith, how we should nurture, protect and teach etc. But if one wants to explore approaches to curriculum, specific methodologies, learning disabilities, the optimum class size etc, educational research and writing should be considered.

reading of the Scriptures should allow us to establish much concerning the priorities of education, the importance of teaching (and teachers), the need of discipline, love, care and so on. What I'm less convinced of is that the particular set of cultural practices which Wilson sees as essential for sound Christian education can be justified either from Wilson's biblical analysis or from sound educational research and theory.

Reference

Wilson, D. (1999). *The paidea of God and other essays on education*. Moscow (ID): Canon Press.