

Equipping Kingdom Citizens: Why History Matters in Mennonite Schools

by Patrick Heatwole

I learned something from several of my history classmates in college—history *doesn't* matter. It's true, no one actually said it, but the news was often suggested by my colleagues' choice of back seats. Although they attended class, historical understanding wasn't the focus. Their true passions, however, surfaced during class introductions or in casual conversations. My classmates cared about coaching; becoming a history teacher was simply the most convenient way to the game.

Please do not misunderstand me. I respect those who aim to build students' character in the gym. Yet getting a history or social studies degree just to coach conveys a rather nonchalant attitude toward studying history—an attitude Christians, and especially Anabaptists, ought to reject robustly.

Unfortunately, it's not merely a few prospective football coaches who share historical apathy. Our culture's indifference regarding history is implied by the headlines we often read—"American Students Lag in Math and Science Achievement." Rarely do we see similar stories about the lack of student achievement in history or geography. This focus on math and science at the exclusion of history shouldn't surprise. It simply reflects the goals of a society and educational system primarily focused on preparing students for the workforce. Of course, schools are concerned with developing good citizens, but this too is largely defined as faithfully contributing to economic uplift. Since jobs and money are the target, and technology and science offer the best path to the goal, studying the past becomes a second-class priority.

But Mennonite schools must exist for reasons more substantial than raising responsible, wealth-building citizens. This goal is far too trivial for followers of the Lord of the universe. In fact, the sacrifices we make to fund our own schools are squandered if our graduates' impact is only felt within the narrow confines of time and geo-political boundaries. Instead, we desire students who live lives of eternal purpose, capturing a vision for what God is doing, and participating in His global strategy. As Anabaptists, who pledge primary allegiance to a heavenly rather than an earthly kingdom, our educational objective should be the development of young men and women prepared for effective service in the kingdom of God in either local or cross-cultural settings. We must equip kingdom citizens.

If this is our purpose, Mennonite schools will offer a distinctive education, but it will not happen automatically. Only as school boards, administrators, and teachers purposefully plan curriculum and activities to prepare students for kingdom responsibilities will our objective be met.

Vital to a distinctive, equipping education is a renewed focus on teaching history. While our students should excel in all academic disciplines, studying history from a Christian point of view has the powerful potential to shape attitudes, create understandings, and develop skills that prepare our students for successful, twenty-first-century, kingdom citizenship. Properly taught, history is not just a tedious recitation of past events but an essential part of the curriculum to develop God's servants for service today and tomorrow. But what does this look like? How can history class help students not only develop historical knowledge, but also proper heart-attitudes and skills? And how does one teach history from a Christian/Anabaptist perspective?

I suggest four ways the history classroom (beginning in first grade) can be a significant force in equipping kingdom citizens. Describing these four purposes of historical understanding will also provide us with some direction in thinking Christianly about history and help teachers explore practical ways to make the study of history transformational in their students' lives.

EQUIPPING CITIZENS WITH A KINGDOM PERSPECTIVE

Stephen Mansfield, a teacher and popular author, thinks he knows why many students hate studying history—their teachers only focus on “dates and dead people.”¹ Whatever the reasons some dislike history class, it’s true that students are too often stuffed with historical trivia with little chance to engage larger historical questions of cause and effect, change across time, and the effects of the past on their lives. In short, they are cheated out of asking the big question—what is our world about and where do I fit in? Helping our students get out of the trees to see the forest is our first job as history teachers.

Our task is to introduce students to history as the study of God’s unfolding plan for time. We understand that God created time, and history is guided by His hand to a designated end. God even raises up and puts down powerful rulers (Dan. 2:21). When students gain an appreciation for the ways God has acted throughout history to achieve His goals, they begin to develop a God-centered perspective (His priorities and desires) on their world. This perspective has practical significance in equipping kingdom citizens.

First, knowing God has a plan for history develops confidence in troubled times. As students learn that our sovereign God has the ultimate control and is moving history toward a victorious completion, they gain confidence knowing they are on the winning side. We can have peace even when our earthly country faces Muslim extremists and a crumbling economy.

Secondly, learning to view earthly events from God’s point of view helps our students resist entanglement in earthly contests. Whether it is Obama vs. McCain, Democrats vs. Republicans, or China vs. the United States, teachers should train students to watch and wonder how God might be directing history for the advancement of His kingdom. As Joshua learned while preparing to battle Jericho, we dare not try to put God on the side of an earthly, partisan contest (Josh. 5:13-14). Our job is to make sure we are on God’s side. Instead of becoming the cheerleaders in national or international controversies, an understanding of God’s perspective on the world will cause our student to begin to ask how they may best accomplish God’s will in their time.

Thirdly, with an understanding of God’s eternal plan for history, students begin to develop vision for what God wants to do in the future. As God’s plan for the world becomes clearer, our students should grow more passionate about God’s desire that the entire world should know Him. Kingdom citizens who understand that God is at work in history will be more excited to get involved in the Great Commission.

EQUIPPING CITIZENS WITH A KINGDOM IDENTITY

Preparing students to be good citizens is almost universally considered a central purpose of a history education. The stories students learn in history are a society’s collective memory. This memory develops a sense of citizenship—the responsibilities and privileges of living in that particular society. The largest association in the United States devoted to social studies education explicitly states that “social studies educators teach students [what is] necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy.”² As Christian teachers, however, we understand our primary citizenship to be heavenly. Therefore, contrary to the goals of the National Council for the Social Studies, we want our students to identify themselves first as citizens of God’s kingdom before assuming citizenship in a “participatory democracy.” Historical understanding in our Mennonite schools should develop within students a global, Christian identity with God’s people across time and geography.

One important way to develop this identity is to include in our collective memory some of the stories left out of many history texts. Too often students read history books that glorify warriors and political leaders while excluding those who lived for God’s kingdom. Mennonite schools’ history programs will be distinctive and

¹Mansfield, Stephen. *More Than Dates & Dead People*. Nashville: Cumberland House Pub., 2000.

²From: “About NCSS”: accessed at www.socialstudies.org/about.

effective as they choose to highlight not just the exploits of national heroes but also the heroes of the kingdom of heaven. Our students should hear of those who overcame evil with good, who chose to follow God against the odds, and who advanced the kingdom of heaven. A history not only of Hannibal, George Washington, and Dwight Eisenhower, but of Felix Manz, Elizabeth Elliot, and John Troyer.

Another way to help students develop their primary identity as citizens of the kingdom is to integrate the historical record in the Bible and church history into the history curriculum. As students see God's people working on His plan throughout history, they begin to see themselves as one link in God's overarching plan of history. Our classrooms will want to join in solidarity with the distinguished kingdom citizens past and present who are advancing God's work. Like Queen Esther, they can view themselves as first a child of God and understand that they have been placed in history "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

EQUIPPING CITIZENS WITH KINGDOM UNDERSTANDINGS AND ATTITUDES

A challenge I face teaching in a school with little ethnic diversity is helping students develop understanding attitudes toward those who are different or less privileged. And I'm not the only one teaching in an overwhelmingly white, rural Mennonite school in a community becoming more diverse in our globalizing world. In such relatively sheltered environments, how do we help students understand the struggles many around us face? How do our students respond to new Latino or Asian immigrants in their neighborhoods or the struggles of many urban, African-American communities? Do our students look compassionately on those hurting in the world and desire to share Christ's love?

History class offers an ideal environment to help our students learn about themselves and those around them. Whether or not we admit it, the past strongly influences the realities of our lives; therefore, studying history enlightens present conditions. As we explore how people's pasts affect their current situations, decisions, and weaknesses and strengths, we can guide our students in developing caring attitudes. In our history classes we ought to teach the injustices inflicted on Native American populations, the terrible history of slavery in the United States, and the historical and economic reasons giving rise to immigration. An awareness of history equips kingdom citizens to minister more effectively by developing understanding and compassion for those they will touch.

Historical understanding not only leads to empathy, history also develops humility. As students study history they learn we are not the only ones through whom God has worked. In different cultures and religious traditions, men and women have done mighty works for the Lord. Studying history teaches us to appreciate those different from us; we will be less ready to criticize and more ready to listen to counsel from brothers and sisters, both living and dead.

EQUIPPING CITIZENS WITH SKILLS FOR KINGDOM ADVANCEMENT

We live in the information age. As a teacher, I notice the change in the classroom; my students enter class each morning with more information than ever before about events and ideas around the world. Through blogs, radio talk-show hosts, YouTube, and Facebook, our students receive a stream of data each day needing to be filtered and sorted. Especially troubling with the spread of non-traditional news media is students' ability to get all their news from increasingly subjective and opinionated sources. In a world filled with information, it is vital that kingdom citizens learn to analyze and weigh all they hear and read. We need followers of Jesus who are discerning when they study for topical presentations, prepare for Sunday school, or listen to news that shapes their worldview. As educators we face a challenge—how to teach students to be wise consumers in an age of cheap information. History class is a place we can engage our students in careful research about the past to develop thinking skills essential to navigate the vast trove of information at their fingertips.

A central task of historians is to uncover the past based on source material. Historians carefully look at evidence from the past and analyze each source for bias, both intentional and unintentional. In history class, we should teach our students these same skills. History teachers should require their students to research, analyze historical documents, and discuss the validity of the sources. Students should learn to ask questions of what they read. What was the motive behind writing this? Who wrote this document? What biases might this writer have? As students learn to wrestle with these questions, we can then teach them to transfer these skills to their current information usage. Effective kingdom citizens dare not be naïve about the power of false information to take their eyes off truth. Studying history equips students to use the blessings and advantages of the information age to build God’s kingdom.

Implementing these historical principles and practices in our schools is not easy. Few history curriculums on the market share our distinctive vision for educating kingdom citizens. In addition, many textbooks—even from Christian companies—too strongly emphasize earthly citizenship and fail to engage students in historical analysis. To communicate these four purposes of history effectively, we teachers must put effort into learning to think and teach Christianly about history. Quality classroom materials designed to teach history from a Christian/Anabaptist point of view will help. Yet to be equipped, students ultimately need teachers who personally embrace a vision for why history matters and act to implement this vision in the classroom.

It will take work, but the opportunity to see students prepared for effective service is an exciting calling. In addition, students will be happy for a purposeful history class. Considering its potential for our communities, let us renew our commitment to the history classroom as a vital tool in equipping a generation of world Christians, students interested in God’s global work. May we equip kingdom citizens who like the sons of Issachar “understood the times” and wisely directed their lives (I Chron. 12:32).



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