

A SERVANT EDUCATION

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The Challenge

In ancient Greece, the mothers of Sparta would send their sons off to battle with this stern bit of counsel, "Return with this shield or on it." The commitment of the Spartan society to military supremacy and heroism was such that every member of society learned to value victory above life itself. The Spartans raised their children in light of their goal to be the greatest warriors in the world. Children deemed unfit for a life of vigor were abandoned to die. The boys who were allowed to live entered a boot camp-like academy at the age of seven to toughen, strengthen, and train them in the skills of warfare. Fighting is what they learned to love. Their stories and their songs honored the men who had shown exceptional courage and strength on the battlefield. Military conquest was the air that they breathed and the bread that they ate. The Spartans' single-minded dedication to their military brought vision, energy, and crystal-clear purpose to the way they raised each generation.

We, too, have a cause. As followers of Jesus, our purpose requires as much and even more sacrifice than that of the Spartans, but it is poles apart in its aim and method. Our cause is not war, slaughter, and destruction. Instead, it is a life of active love that shares the Good News, heals the brokenhearted, brings freedom to captives, and offers liberty to the oppressed. Our cause is abundant life, not death; healing, not killing. Our goal is love for God and neighbor fleshed out in humble servanthood.

Jesus gave the rationale for this life of service in the greatest of all commandments: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." He continues with the natural implication of loving God above all else: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Modeled beautifully in the life of Jesus, the way of love inspires and empowers service. The north star of Christian teaching and training, the guiding light for all our decision-making and efforts in raising our children, is love for God and love for one's neighbor.

The efforts that go into the training and preparation of young people in Anabaptist communities need the energy, vision, and clarity that comes from a deep-seated commitment to the cause of loving

and serving God. Much effort has gone into developing a thoroughly Christian education in many of our communities, but the work is not finished. In order to maintain what has been accomplished and to build upon it, we must prayerfully continue to evaluate, to dream, and to plan. What would our schools look like if every component of education were dedicated to the task of preparing young people for a life of wholehearted love and service to God?

The task of training our children to love and serve God is often disconnected from the day-to-day operation of our schools. In spite of intentions to provide a Christian education, some of our schools and homeschools struggle to nurture students in invigorating and convincing ways. Too many students see school as an experience to endure until they can begin doing things that really matter. Some parents view school as another intrusive legal requirement and find serving on the staff or board a chore. Something is wrong when education, a key way that a people pass on their vision, values, and knowledge, is associated with apathy or burnout. Our schools and homeschools can and should be much more.

The Vision

We have a vision for a Christian education anchored in the greatest command and aligned with our values as Anabaptists. We envision education that:

- Inspires love for God, commitment to the church, obedience to the Scriptures, and compassion for the poor and needy of society.
- Is rigorous, preparing students for skillful service as mothers and fathers, farmers, healthcare workers, builders, researchers, and missionaries.
- Tells and retells the stories of faithful, godly servants, championing the qualities of humility, self-sacrifice, and love.

This would be a servant education, one that highlights our privilege to be servants of God who practice loving service to our neighbors. A servant education would call, inspire, and prepare young people to join God's mission in the world.

Rooted in the mandate that God gave to humans at creation and in the great commission that Christ gave to the church at the end of His ministry, the mission that God

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calls his people to carry out on the earth today includes three prongs: 1) the building of the church, 2) the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel of Jesus to the world, and 3) the stewardship of God's creation. Let's consider what it means to prepare our young people for effective service in these three areas.

Building the church. The focal point of God's mission on the earth is the church, the active presence of Christ in the world carrying forward Jesus' work of "reconciling all things unto [the Father](Col. 1:20)." Therefore, a priority of a servant education is to prepare and equip young people for "the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12)." Our schooling should cultivate in our young people the values and skills needed to strengthen and bless the church, particularly the local congregation, the functional unit of Christ's body, the place where His life and love are actually experienced.

We should partner with homes in teaching students how to lead singing, study the Bible, prepare and give devotionals and topics, read Scripture orally, pray in public, teach Sunday school, and lead group discussions. We should train our students in the interpersonal skills vital to church life. School provides unique opportunities for showing children how to work together and cooperate with other members, how to listen to other perspectives and be willing to share their own, how to watch out for the weaker or quieter members of a group, how to engage in meaningful conversation with people of different ages or interests, how to disagree in a respectful way, how to lead and how to follow, and how to stick with a group and persevere when it would be easier to quit. These are essential skills for healthy church life. Ultimately, a servant education seeks to inspire and enable a generation of people to commit themselves to and serve the people in the church to which they belong, using the gifts God has given them to bring the church body to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13):"

Proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel to the world. The church cannot rest until it has succeeded in taking the gospel of Jesus to all people. A servant education will also equip students to share the gospel compellingly and joyfully with those who are enslaved to sin, to give of their time and resources to help those who are sick, hungry, discouraged, and displaced, and to share friendship and hospitality to those God brings into their path. Our lives and our curriculum must echo the message of the good Samaritan which is that loving one's neighbor means caring for all people: the voiceless, the weak, the poor, the hungry, the widows, the children, the rich, and the educated. To do this, we must give our young people eyes to see past the typical cultural prejudices to the true value and the true needs of people.

Stewardship of God's creation. In addition to equipping students to carry out the church's mission, a servant education paints a vivid picture of God's intentions for human society on earth and equips students to contribute effectively to that component of God's mission. In the very beginning, God instructed Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Gen. 1:22)." Later we are told that God put humans in the garden to "dress and to keep it." The mandate here is that humans, as God's image-bearers, are to manage the earth and creatively develop its resources for the flourishing of human society and the glory of God. While sin

has deeply marred the world, this is still God's intention for His creation.

Godly training prepares children with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to enjoy and manage the created world in accordance with God's will for it. To effectively fulfill this calling, young people need the knowledge and skills to grow food, build houses, design bridges, and care for the sick, along with a host of other tasks that are necessary for life to flourish. Our education should give our students a vision for the significance of their work. It is not just a way "to make money so that I can contribute to God's work." It is God's work, and we were created to find pleasure and meaning in it. When done in a spirit of submission and service, planting cotton, preparing meals, and repairing computers are ways of responding to Jesus' desire to see the Father's will being "done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10)."

This is the vision toward which our schools should work: the church of Jesus Christ filled with people from all nations, tribes, tongues, and social and economic groups; people who are conformed to His image, obedient to His Word, submitted to each other, stewarding His earth, caring for the needy, and faithful in spreading the good news around the world. Ultimately, a servant education puts God and His mission at the center, not "me." Instead of asking, "What good is school going to do me?" students (and parents) should learn to ask "How will this enable me to help others?" A servant education is others-focused, not self-focused.

This sense of participating in something bigger than themselves invigorates students. They rally around the goal of preparing to be God's hands and feet to serve a world in need. English, math, and science classes are no longer educational hurdles over which to leap. Instead, school is preparation with real purpose.

The Method

Now we turn to the question of "How?" What are the methods of a servant education, the processes of forming Christ-like servants? If giving oneself to God's mission out of love for Him is to be the constant reference point for all of our decisions, then we periodically need to re-evaluate and reimagine each aspect of our schooling. We should think carefully about the structure, the classes, the procedures, the methods, the policies, and the activities of our schools, holding each of them up to the light of the great commandments and to the mission that God has given to us. Do they honestly contribute to our values and our mission or do they actually pull us in a different direction?

Schools that offer a servant education pay careful attention not only to what they teach, the content; but also to the atmosphere in which it is taught, the culture. Culture is the environment in which education happens; it is what students feel when they walk into their schools or classrooms. Schools and homeschools that offer a servant education make it their highest priority to foster a culture of love. This means hiring teachers who model a contagious love and commitment to Jesus and the church. Schools with a culture of love will be places where all students are accepted, places where prejudices of race, ethnicity, class, family, aptitude, and attractiveness are overcome with the love that God has for every human being. Respect for teachers and for fellow students, gratefulness, diligence, courtesy, and responsibility are also qualities of a God-centered school culture of love.

A spirit of worship should also characterize the school's culture and its activities. Singing, prayer, and Scripture reading foster habits of reverence, loyalty, and love for God and His ways and should be part of the daily rhythms of school life. Making connections between the subject matter of math, English, history, and science and God's character and revelation is critical as well. If we are to effectively proclaim that God is at the center of all, we must never relegate our interaction with Him to a particular corner of the day or building.

We learn best by doing, so a servant education will provide opportunities for students to engage in regular acts of authentic service. Sweeping the classroom floors, sacrificing leisure time to polish an essay, hosting an event for the parents, caroling for neighbors, and writing letters to believers in prison become opportunities to practice the grace of turning one's primary focus away from oneself and toward others and to cultivate the habit of serving others. Service will be a key part of the school's culture.

The relationship between the teacher and student is another critical component in the process of forming servants. This relationship is the soil in which godly education and formation take place—without the nutrients of trust, respect, decorum, and humility in the teacher's interactions with the student, a servant education cannot take root. The life of the teacher is the moral and spiritual curriculum of the school. No other single factor in the school will have a greater impact on the student. For this reason, the role of the teacher in the Christian school must have priority. It is essential that the teacher model the spirit of Christ and continually grow in His likeness. Christian training will be anchored in the engaged presence of godly, wise, and skilled persons.

Textbooks, lectures, writing assignments, tests... these methods, too, are important. English, math, science, and history hold no less significance in the context of a servant education; in fact, they hold more. Students learn to read, write, speak, compute, and experiment, not to build their own little kingdoms of financial security, comfort, and entertainment, but rather to give their lives in Christ-centered service to their churches, homes, workplaces, and communities. Mastering the traditional core of knowledge opens doors into many different fields of service. God calls some people to vocations that require college preparation. A servant education should be rigorous enough to prepare a student for those areas of service.

In addition to the traditional academic core, a servant education would make a special effort to develop knowledge and skills that are uniquely valuable for specific aspects of the church's mission. Christ-centered business training is one example. Many graduates of our schools will be involved in business as either owners or employees. This training would help prepare a people with business skills (e.g. marketing, financial analysis, management) and a vision for doing business as service for the glory of God. A course in homemaking is another example. Creating safe, vibrant, joy-filled, hospitable homes is one of the greatest opportunities for radical service in today's world. A multi-year curriculum that paints this vision while cultivating essential skills is part of the investment needed to push back on influences that militate against healthy homes. A well-developed church history with a focus on the story of the Anabaptists could anchor the identities and commitments of students in the story of God's continuing work in the church. A servant education should also develop

students' capacity to spread the gospel cross-culturally. This could mean including "tent-making" skills in the curriculum so as to prepare people to serve abroad with less need for financial support from home. These skills might include computer programming, graphic design, and TESOL. Other classes would train students in skills needed for the advance of the gospel, such as foreign languages or basic medical skills.

Cultivating servants with the desires and capacities to put God's mission at the center of their lives is countercultural and hard. Pursuing this dream means pushing back against the soul-sapping materialism and spiritual apathy of our culture and refusing to bow down to the gods of power and pleasure. A lukewarm commitment to these aims on the part of a few will not be enough. Raising an army of servants for God's work will require entire communities of believers to come together, forge a common vision based on common values, and all share the responsibility of training each generation.

The challenge of raising Christ-like servants in our day calls for parents to take their God-given responsibility seriously and band together in the context of the church, using the resources and gifts of the brotherhood to educate their children in traditional schools, communities of homeschoolers, or some hybrid of the two. The church body should provide corporate direction and support for families, extending and enriching the resources of individual families with facilities, materials, experiences, and personnel. Godly education draws on the gifts and wisdom of all of those in the community, integrating people of a wide variety of ages and abilities into a young person's formative experiences.

Effective preparation for participation in God's mission requires the formation of the whole person. In addition to developing the appropriate knowledge and skills, an effective servant education nurtures the desires, character, values, and commitments of a student. A godly education seeks not simply to impart knowledge about servanthood. Rather, it provides activities and practices that encourage becoming a servant.

Let us be clear: education cannot transform the heart of a person. God alone can do that. The best education in the world without the resurrection power of God is as useless as the world's most powerful electric motor during a blackout. Students must experience the cleansing, renewing, and empowering fire of the Holy Spirit in order to become true servants. As parents and teachers, we are co-laborers with Christ, avenues of His grace in preparing students to become His co-laborers as well.

The Call

As a people, we are at a moment of opportunity. We have a wealth of resources. We can squander our "talents" on larger homes and more toys for our children. Or we can choose an infinitely wiser route, one that will make an eternal difference in the world: to invest in teaching and training our children to be a powerful force for servanthood in the years to come.

This moment is also one of peril. The cultural forces vying for our children's allegiances and loves are great. No tepid response will effectively counter the allure of video games, the internet, movies, and the prevailing value system. We must act. Servant education is one way to make an extraordinary sacrificial investment in the character and capacity of our children.

In a world that sacrifices its youth on the altars of convenience and the happiness of parents, we as parents, school patrons, school board members, church leaders, teachers, and administrators have the opportunity to push back hard and work toward these goals:

- Communities dedicating some of their best people, greatest innovation, and focused intention toward developing youth to be compassionate, capable servants poised to do His will on earth as it is in heaven.
- Communities that generate an unyielding resistance to the trivial, the mind-numbing, and the amusing. • Communities of God-loving, Jesus-following, globally-aware, vibrant Christians equipped to participate in the creation mandate and the great commission.

In a time when many pursue wealth for selfish ends or play away their lives, young people yearn to make a difference. May our schools be vibrant, inspiring places that equip them to make this difference in fields, shops, kitchens, places of commerce, offices, and hospitals, in places close to home and in new cross-cultural settings. Filling myriad roles across the globe, they will be unified in their love and service of the King. May our school communities enable parents and assist churches to realize a common vision—the vision of a vibrant church serving her Lord and working for the day when the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of His glory (Ps. 72:19).