

# Values Choices

by Johan D. Tangelder.

Let Children who would fear the Lord  
Hear what their teachers say;  
With reverence meet their parents' word,  
And with delight obey.

(The Irish National Series, The Second Book of Lessons, 1846)

When I read these lines of this school text, I began to reflect on the loss of Canada's rich Christian tradition and on our contemporary popular culture. Let me begin with the latter. Surveys in Canada show an incredible ignorance of the basics of the Christian faith. In 1990, for example, only 29% of Canadians were able to identify "Exodus" when asked if they could name the second book of the Bible. A large number of Canadians, both young and old, were unable to answer the simple question "Who denied Jesus?" Why are so many totally ignorant of Canada's Christian heritage? The answer lies with our educational system. In his essay *From Pilgrim's Progress to Sesame Street: 125 years of Colonial Readers*, Satu Repo puts the blame squarely on the failure of Canada's public schools to give children a sense of what it means to be a Canadian and the riches of their heritage: "Neither the Canadian landscape, nor the lives of the people who populate this country, nor the values they hold, are stressed in the first textbooks which are handed to children when they begin school."

## Our Christian Heritage

Let us now look at our Christian heritage. In the beginning of the twentieth century more than 95% of Canada's population had a church connection; and in Newfoundland it was nearly 100 percent. Protestant Christianity in British North America displayed a marked vigor, but it was sober in expression and conservative. The majority of 19th-century immigrants came from England and

Scotland. In the course of migration from the Old World, very few dropped their hereditary faith and some had it deepened. The Christian faith had a tremendous influence on education. Schools - from elementary to university - owed their existence directly to the church. As late as 1890, in most of the provinces of the Dominion of Canada, the majority of the schools were under the control of the various denominations and had religious instruction as part of their curriculum. Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette notes, "Even in Ontario, where the schools were undenominational, prayer and reading of the Bible were part of the procedure and the clergy were empowered to make arrangements for the teaching of religion."

Egerton Ryerson (1803-82), a prominent Methodist leader, editor, and educator became the Superintendent of Education in Upper Canada in 1844 and dominated the scene for over thirty years. He firmly believed that in the common school system it was both necessary and possible to teach basic Christian values and virtues that were common to all denominations. In 1846 he introduced the *Irish Readers* to the schools. These texts, which included a seven-volume series of primary readers, were imported from British-ruled Ireland. The Bible was a major reference point. For example, a geography lesson on the Middle East had a paragraph like this:

Arabia contains vast deserts, and some mountains, and fertile valleys between. Here is Mount Sinai, where God gave his laws to Moses, and here also the wilderness in which the Israelites wandered for forty years, after they came out of Egypt.

Christian virtues and a common Anglo-Saxon heritage were also stressed. The *Irish National Series* had a major influence on Canadian school readers until the end of 19th century. In 1909, the new five-volume *Ontario Readers* were published. The material used came mainly from Britain. Bible stories were no longer central in these readers, but the importance of a higher moral purpose in life was still emphasized. Classical Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott, were prominent. Repo comments that some of the ethics of the *Irish Readers* were incorporated but that a secular dimension was added: "a secular religion which looked at the British Empire with almost the same kind of reverence that had once been reserved for the Kingdom of God." In the early seventies, the six-

volume *Nelson Readers* for grades 4,5, and 6 were published by the Canadian owned Thomas Nelson & Sons (Canada) Ltd. These books focused on the doctrine of self-fulfillment, a faith in technique, skills like reading were no longer seen as special components within the overall goal of teaching children certain values and attitudes. They had changed from Protestant to secular. In the past few decades the public school system has become increasingly frank in its opposition to Christianity, especially its conservative branch. Religion is relegated to home and church, where Christians are told it should be kept. Repo scathingly notes that “in 125 years of public education in Ontario we have moved from the vision of Christian soldiers and empire builders to the goal of happy individualists in pursuit of excitement.”

### **Values Clarification**

What are the consequences of the removal of Christianity from the “common” school? Many young people are morally at sea. Newspapers report the surge of use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco by Ontario teens. Substance abuse has been rising since 1993 and has reached a level in Ontario last seen in the 1970s according to a survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. The public’s response is: “ Young people should know better. Aren’t they teaching values in the schools? What is happening?” The public school system has not been slack in values education. To the surprise of many, more attention has been paid to values in the public school system than in at any time in our history. But the attempt to teach values is a dismal failure. Students are taught the wrong method - a fad called “Values Clarification.” In 1966 three American professors wrote *Values and Teaching*. This book had an impact on education throughout North America. These professors theorized that students should not be taught values. Students had to question values they acquired at home and church. They had to “clarify” their own. For example, a paragraph in a booklet entitled *The Quest for Excellence*, an adolescent’s guide to sex AIDS, “self -esteem, “ and other such topics, says:

Early on in life, you will be exposed to different value systems from your family, church or synagogue, and friends. You may accept some of these values without questioning whether or

not they are the right values for you. But you may eventually realize that some of these values conflict with each other. It is up to you to decide upon your own values system to build your ethical code... You have to learn what is right for yourself through experience.

This values clarification approach suited the temperament of our age. It emphasized the students' own feelings, their own beliefs, and their own values systems, and promoted a totally nonjudgmental attitude. The values proponents claimed that students would be more committed to "self-discovered" values than to the ones simply handed down to them by adults. Clarification claims to be value neutral. But in reality it conditions youth to see all values as relative, as personal preferences. The very use of the term implies that it is really up to *the students* to choose whatever "values" they think appropriate to whichever vision of social order they want to build. They consider themselves then as the judges of what is right and wrong, and having the ability to predict and control human behavior.

The assumption is that children are basically morally good and thus can make responsible choices on their own. But the result is confusion for youth. Students learn that they have *the right* to create their own values but as American social historian Christopher Lasch notes, "they cannot explain what that means, aside from the right to do as they please. They cannot seem to grasp the idea that 'values' imply some principle of moral obligation." His observation of American youth is equally true for Canadian youth.

### **Are All Values Equal?**

Do we have to respect all values? Are there are no universal rules and principles for behavior? Is morality merely a product of culture? Can we never judge between right and wrong? Are all values equally good? I don't believe so. Some values are defective and inferior. Some are wholesome and better. What some people believe is moral, others may reject as immoral. Why should the values of the Ku Klux Klan or the Neo-Nazis deserve respect? When William Carey arrived in India in 1793, he was aghast by some of its cultural values. For example, he saw that tremendous pressure was exerted on a widow to submit to *Sati* or sacrifice - to be burned alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. And

what about cannibalism? Some argue today - in all seriousness - that cannibalism, the eating of human beings, is possibly based on the same love for one's neighbor as is known in Western cultures. They call it "the longing for a loving union with the deceased." When the British colonized India, widow burning became illegal. Western society does not accept cannibalism. In other words, society cannot live without moral judgments, although they may be seen by value clarification advocates as evidence of illiberalism, repression, and an imposition of outmoded Victorianism. The current liberal establishment is skeptical about any attempt to establish a widely agreed-on set of values to live by. On the one hand, the only approved value today is tolerance. Many say that a value judgement is a matter of taste. And there is no such thing as truth. There is only personal opinion. On the other hand, our society is becoming increasingly aware that we cannot tolerate and accept everything. We are forced to choose between good and evil, between what we ought to do and what we should not do. Every value requires a choice and every choice defines one's character. How can one choose between good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, wise and foolish without an objective moral standard? It is not up to us to choose whatever values we deem appropriate. The source of morality is found neither in our genes nor is it the product of human reason. Values cannot be determined by a 51 percent vote. The basic question is a moral one: How ought I to live before the face of God? Christians may not surrender to the distorted mind-set and humanistic worldview propagated in our society. I believe that they should not even use the weasel, morally relative, word "values." Why not speak about "moral order" or "divine ordinances?" Albert Wolters rightly commented:

"Because of the prevailing talk of 'values,' and all that this implies, it has become almost impossible for a Christian, especially in the academic setting, to believe that 'thou shalt not kill' is every bit as much a *fact* as water freezes at 32F."

## **Revealed Morality**

Christian morality is a specially revealed morality. The Word of God is our only sufficient rule for faith and practice. Dr.K. Schilder said that moral actions are bound to the law of God. The law must

be applied in concrete situations. We must obey God's commands with joy and spontaneity and have Biblically directed moral standards. No believer has a right to go beyond the clear requirements of Scripture in drawing up his own list of does and don'ts. And the very center of our moral decision making is located in that bloody cross whereon the Savior died for our sin. Through His total and self-denying submission to His Father's will He shows us how God intends us to live. Lord's Day 32:86 confesses that:

We do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.

## **Christian Education**

Why educate our children? Education is fundamental for passing on faith, moral standards, and traditions. Youth learn their faith from their parents and mirror their involvement in the traditions they are growing up. "Every community seeks to preserve and transmit its fundamental values through education," says the Jewish scholar Janet Aviad, "thereby ensuring its continuity." She uses her own religious heritage as an example of the passing on of moral and ritual obligations from generation to generation. She rightly points out that fathers were commanded to teach the law of God to their children (Deut. 6:7), and family and communal rituals were the occasion for instruction in sacred history (ex. 12: 26-27; Lev. 23:3). Following the destruction of the First Temple and the exile to Babylon in 586 BC, the Jewish exiles were forced to organize themselves as a religious community and to depend on *education for their very survival*.

And the Christian community also needs solid Biblically rooted education for its *very survival*. If we ever needed Christian schools, it is now. We need a real choice. Unfortunately, in most provinces parents who have their children taught in a Christian school are penalized financially. For example, the Ontario government insists on only funding the Roman Catholic and public schools. Proposals for school

choice are being tried in this province and elsewhere. A voucher system for funding all schools would provide true equity, pluralism and democracy. The public school has long ago cut off its Christian roots.

Many evangelical Protestants are leaving the public system. They have begun to realize that it has abandoned them. They don't want the dominant humanist secular view of life imposed on their children by the secular elite. They don't agree with "values clarification," having their children create their own values. Instead, they expect teachers to pass on to their children the principles for godly living taught by the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, many Christian parents have chosen to educate their children not only at home and through the church, but also in Christian schools. Christian schools are not perfect. But in these schools an attempt is made to reach for moral excellence.

True freedom in life is to live in fellowship with the Triune God in undying gratitude for delivering us from damnation. The 19th century Ontario *Irish National Series* with its Biblical focus was more in tune with our Lord's teaching than today's secular public school curriculum. Our Lord summed up God's moral order with this assertion:

If you keep my commandments,  
you shall abide in my love;  
even as I have kept my Father's commandments,  
and abide in his love. (John 15:10)