



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Schooling the Young into Goodness
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 35-45)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Schooling the Young into Goodness

Moral education should provide the young with an understanding of life worthy of themselves—a compelling account of goodness and how to achieve it. If we ask the young only to pursue their desires, should we be surprised if, instead of being uplifted by the freedom we hold out to them, they become bored and disenchanted?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Peter 1:3-11

Meditation[†]

When we teach our children to be good, to be gentle, to be forgiving (all these are attributes of God), to be generous, to love their fellow men, to regard this present age as nothing, we instill virtue in their souls, and reveal the image of God within them. This then is our task: to educate both our children and ourselves in godliness.

John Chrysostom (347-407)

Reflection

Moral education should initiate students in “habits and practices that will form them in the distinctive excellences of human beings,” Darin Davis and Paul Wadell write. It should cultivate “a resilient passion for justice, a costly compassion, and the abiding conviction that fulfillment comes not when our lives are guided by calculated self-interest, but when we expend ourselves for the sake of others.” Yet in a pluralist society we are “reluctant to take up these important tasks because they involve making normative judgments about different ways of life, the practices we should adopt, and the behavior we ought to embrace.” Often we commend freedom, authenticity, and tolerance, but give students “little idea of why what they choose might matter.”

When we reduce moral education to personal values clarification in this way, we foster acedia—the “crippling melancholy that dominates the lives of those who abandon aspirations to moral and spiritual excellence, and replace them with an endless series of stimulating and pleasant distractions.” Acedia is nurtured not only by relativism and individualism, but also by cynical suspicion of others’ motives. “When cynicism prevails, every saint is a stooge or collaborator, every hero a rascal in disguise.”

Davis and Wadell commend these five antidotes to acedia:

- ▶ *Affirm the fundamental appeal of goodness.* We are created “to hunger for what is true and good and beautiful,” they write, “because goodness completes and perfects us, particularly the unexcelled goodness that is God.” Goodness calls us out of ourselves to appreciate and love the “other,” whether it is a flower, a symphony, a poem, or a person.
- ▶ *Model zeal for goodness.* Students won’t “be enflamed in their love for the good and they will hardly appreciate its beauty or believe its power, if they see in us the same diffidence we are urging



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them to discard," they note. "The lure of goodness will captivate them when they see how it has deepened and transformed our own lives, and when they see the rich joy that can be found in steadfast love and costly commitments."

- ▶ *Encourage magnanimity, the virtue of "great soul."* As we develop our capacities for knowledge and love, we confidently "reject puny ambitions and middling hopes, and instead focus our lives on purposes, projects, and goals that demand that we expend ourselves for the sake of something noble."
- ▶ *Inculcate courage.* We face many obstacles—in ourselves, in others, and in society—to the pursuit of excellence. "With courage, we find the resolve necessary to appraise counterfeit narratives of human fulfillment as the illusions they truly are, and the resolve to continue our initiation into goodness with both hope and joy."
- ▶ *Encourage friendship.* Good friendships are schools of virtue, calling out "qualities such as thoughtfulness, generosity, compassion, patience, and forgiveness" and providing "the support, encouragement, counsel, and companionship... [we need to] pursue the quest for goodness."

"If acedia bedevils us, and if the young are especially vulnerable to it," Davis and Wadell conclude, "then helping to initiate students into a way of life that is truly worthy of them should be the central task of moral education in a pluralist culture."

Study Questions

1. No English word fully captures the phenomenon of acedia. How does the word "sloth" capture part of its meaning? What part of acedia's meaning is quite different from sloth?
2. Do you agree that acedia is widespread among young people today? What symptoms do you see?
3. According to Darin Davis and Paul Wadell, why is acedia so common? To what extent are older generations responsible for acedia among young people?
4. Discuss the five antidotes for acedia that Davis and Wadell recommend. How can you put these remedies into practice in your life? What practices of your congregation support each remedy?

Departing Hymn: "What Is Our Calling's Glorious Hope?" (vv. 9 and 14)

What is our calling's glorious hope,
but inward holiness?
For this to Jesus we look up;
we calmly wait for this.

Be it according to your Word;
redeem us from all sin;
our hearts would now receive you, Lord,
come in, O Lord, come in!

Charles Wesley (1742), alt.

Suggested Tunes: LLANDAFF or DUNDEE

† John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. by Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 44.

Schooling the Young into Goodness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize the widespread symptoms of the debilitating spiritual condition that early Christians called “acedia.”
2. To identify the central goal of moral education as forming character and changing hearts.
3. To consider what practices in our families, congregations, and schools can provide moral education and be antidotes to acedia.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Schools in a Pluralist Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “What Is Our Calling’s Glorious Hope?” locate one of the familiar tunes LLANDAFF or DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“No one is called to become rich or powerful or beautiful or famous. But they are called to become good,” Darin Davis and Paul Wadell observe. “We should want young persons to become excellent students, students who can dazzle us with their knowledge and expertise. But we should also want them to become excellent human beings, young men and women who dazzle us as well with their commitment to justice, their compassion for others, and their tireless devotion to something greater than their selves.... There is no more noble aim, and certainly nothing more urgent, than to encourage students to see that moral and spiritual excellence is not impossibly beyond their reach, but is the very thing for which they are made and through which they will be fulfilled” (*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, 44).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to be good and to inspire young persons to reach for moral goodness.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Peter 1:3-11 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion refocuses moral education on its “founding inspiration” of initiating young people into habits and practices that form them in the distinctive excellences of human beings. Darin Davis and Paul Wadell

identify the chief obstacle to moral education as a debilitating condition that early Christians called “acedia.” In a pluralist culture many people are tempted to reduce moral education to identifying and strengthening personal values that young people already hold. Ironically, this “values clarification” approach can make the problem worse by encouraging acedia. Davis and Wadell focus on five practices to break free from acedia, which are also fundamental practices of moral education. Encourage members to discuss how they can nurture these practices in their families, congregation, and schools.

Study Questions

1. Darin Davis and Paul Wadell explain that acedia “is ‘a morbid inertia’ that can totally shut down a person’s life because he or she long ago stopped believing that life might involve something more, something better, something of such consummate goodness that it demanded their utmost devotion. Dulled by the stupor of acedia, we renounce great hopes and grand ambitions for lives that move relentlessly from one activity, one distraction, one titillating triviality to the next. Moreover, because we are busy, stimulated, active, and entertained, we are hardly aware of how empty and meaningless our lives have become, or of the morally and spiritually dangerous predicament in which we have placed ourselves.”
Early Christians noted two opposing symptoms of acedia: (1) sadness and disinterested boredom with the good, and (2) frantic and distracting activity to fill the spiritual void. Both symptoms are forms of escape from disillusionment about and frustration in pursuing goodness. (Think of it this way, when a person wants to escape from a love relationship that has become tiring and sad, he or she might retreat into a stupor of sleep or drunkenness, or escape into busy activities.) “Sloth” seems to capture the idea of boredom and tiredness, but not the idea of distracting activity.
2. “Brian Hook and Rusty Reno...contend that ‘our age is allergic to heroic ambition and inured to the attractions of excellence.’ We witnessed this not long ago when one of our students remarked on a course evaluation that while the course material was mildly interesting, ‘I just want to live my life and not waste it questioning everything,’” Davis and Wadell write. Such “casual nihilism and calculated indifference” represents the first symptom of acedia. “The problem is not that [students] seek job security, professional certification, and economic survival, but that they often seek nothing more.” On the other hand, many students are adept at disguising this first symptom with its opposite, busyness and entertainment. “Like the adults who have formed them, these students, plugged into cell phones, iPods, and Facebook, ‘float on an ocean of pleasant distraction.’”
To what extent do young people suffer from acedia? Which of these symptoms seems to be more common? Encourage members to give specific examples of each symptom.
3. Davis and Wadell think adults have nurtured acedia in young people in two ways. On the one hand, their individualism and relativism quickly lead to nihilism. Adults have been “reluctant to judge one way of life better than another.” This sends a signal implicitly (and sometimes quite explicitly) that nothing matters beyond personal freedom and authenticity. “If there is nothing more than ‘one’s own truth’ and no meaning to be found in any experience other than the stultifying realization that it is one’s own, nothing finally matters.” On the other hand, acedia is reinforced by moral cynicism—the “distrust of anything that is noble, heroic, or magnanimous.” They continue, “No one would really prefer a life of disinterested service rather than a life of self-advancement, cynicism counsels. Thus, instead of emulating the good persons, we dismiss them as fools or frauds.”
4. You might create three to five smaller groups to brainstorm the five antidotes. One group might brainstorm how to practice the first two antidotes—affirming that human beings are created to love goodness and modeling this attraction to goodness—which are closely related. Another group could explore the related virtues, magnanimity and courage. And a third group could discuss how to nurture good friendships among young people and between them and adults. Consider not only what individual families can do, but also how congregations can practice these five remedies to the toxins of acedia.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.