Building Strong Foundations: The Biblical Basis for Individualization and Mastery Learning in Education

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By

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BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS:
THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION
AND MASTERY LEARNING IN EDUCATION

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To all the students who have been deprived of an individualized education
and the teachers and administrators who are willing to endure criticism
as they bring mastery learning back to the classroom
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ABSTRACT

Education in America is at risk more than at any other time in our history. With the abandonment of the long-proven principles of individualization and mastery learning, our students are being forced into one-size-fits-all academic programs to satisfy national standards without regard to a child’s specific needs. The author engaged in extensive research combined with years of personal experience in the field as a student, teacher and administrator in multiple settings. The goal was not only to produce irrefutable evidence to support the premise but also to ignite an unquenchable fire for true educational reform.

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FOREWORD

Almost twenty-four years had passed between the day I was awarded my Bachelor’s Degree and when I resumed my journey toward achieving a long desired Masters Degree. On one hand, I was disappointed it had taken me so long to pursue my dream of continued higher education. On the other hand, I marvel at the societal expectations for a young twenty-something to have “mastered” anything. At such an undeveloped age, knowledge can definitely be accumulated but the unmatched perspective of life experience is much more difficult to attain.

In hindsight, after years of subsequent educational experiences, both as a teacher and an administrator, I am grateful for the sizeable time lapse between college enrollments. I’ve found it’s one thing to glean information from the writings of others – which has been enormously helpful to me over the years – but quite another to learn from the trial and error of personal involvement in the academic process. There is simply no substitute for decades of being “in the trenches” with fellow educators, applying theory to the classroom setting and then watching as various results unfold.

Having been trained from second grade through undergrad in an individualized system of learning, I thought perhaps I had been “brainwashed” into falsely believing this largely uncommon approach to be superior. Now, after many years of teaching in both individualized and conventional schools, I am convinced more than ever there is no academic method or educational philosophy that outperforms the properly administered, Biblically-based, individualistic approach to education. “Building Strong Foundations” is the culmination of what I’ve been privileged to experience so far, and an attempt to share that
experience with others in hope that parents and educators everywhere will realize the unique treasures given to us by God in the form of children.

Since God created us all according to His one-of-a-kind, carefully planned design, our obligation is to approach each child as such, doing everything we possibly can to assist them in establishing a solid base from which to launch a lifetime of continual learning and exploration. The task is daunting and the obstacles are many, but as educators and more importantly, Christian fathers and mothers, it is a responsibility we accept with humility. We willingly concede our needed reliance upon the Holy Spirit to help us accomplish our Divine directive. The future of our children depends on it.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On a late afternoon in the early winter of 1976, a young couple was summoned to their son’s first grade classroom. Since their child had never experienced any difficulty in school, neither academically nor behaviorally, they were intrigued and even a bit nervous at the requested meeting. Certainly he was timid and lacked social confidence, but they assumed he would grow out of it over time. What could the problem be?

Mrs. Carlson was an experienced teacher. By all accounts she was a patient person who loved her students and would often go beyond what was required to help each of them become successful students. That’s why it surprised the young couple all the more to see tears in her eyes as she asked them to sit down. The carefully chosen words she spoke, sitting there in Room 13 of Sycamore Elementary, would forever change their future. Over the next few months, they would mentally process what they were about to hear. She said simply, “I love your son, but please get him out of our school before we ruin him.”

Her insistent recommendation wasn’t a personal commentary on her skill as a teacher or even about that particular school, but on the public education system as a whole. She recognized that a structure designed for the generic education of the masses didn’t have the desperately needed capability of recognizing and nurturing the unique qualities and abilities found within an individual child, regardless of particular learning styles. So, with limited
options available, she did the only thing she knew she could do – implore the parents to seek a better educational alternative.

That single event set those parents on a journey of discovery that would ultimately cause them to start a Christian school as a ministry of their local church. It would not be just another school, however, but one focused on diagnosing and developing the individual abilities of each child based upon his or her current academic condition, regardless of conventional expectations. It was in this context their son began to realize the invaluable importance of individualized education and mastery learning. It would not only bring an immeasurable benefit to him as a student, but also chart a life-long course of pursuing ministry development based on seeing people from God’s point of view – as inimitable individuals.

Those people were my parents, and I was that child. What follows in these pages is a direct result of a lifetime of personal experience coupled with direct observation from within the scholastic sphere as well as various church ministries. As much as the idea of separation of church and state is clearly not what our forefathers intended (nor is that phrase mentioned in our Constitution), so also grossly misguided is the relatively recent idea of disconnecting educational methods from Biblical principles. The former simply can’t be truly effective without the latter.

When we divorce God’s idea of approaching each of us as a unique, divinely inspired creation from the systematic process of education, we lose so much more than the best way to administer education. We squander the amazing opportunity to observe each child’s native gifts and talents bloom into their full potential. We force them to conform to a limited system
rather than helping them transform into fully prepared, distinctive individuals, ready to be used in God’s kingdom.

“Building Strong Foundations” will propose the idea that all education is at its best when it follows the guidelines clearly articulated in Scripture, and models the perfect example of history’s greatest teacher, Jesus Christ. Since the Bible was most often the first and sometimes only textbook used in schools across our nation for hundreds of years, perhaps our ancestors knew something that modern academic thought has clearly forgotten or ignored. Upon these foundational ideas, let’s begin our examination.
CHAPTER 2
DEFINING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION
(Knowing Why We’re Called to Train Children)

Education should bring to light the ideal of the individual. ~ J.P. Richter

There's a good reason the Bible often refers to people as sheep. Unfortunately, we have a long history as humans of following along blindly without a real sense of direction. True understanding seems to frequently take a backseat to conformity in the arena of public thought, especially in the area of childhood education. Simply stated, we generally believe what we are told, whether it has been proven accurate or not.

Jesus himself said, "And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch."\textsuperscript{1} For years, this has described our educational system in America. We are told, “Test scores are rapidly declining,” so we immediately call for vast improvement in test preparation and administration. We hear continually “America is behind other developed nations in education” so we quickly agree to new proposals such as Common Core State Standards, trusting them to be the long sought after elusive solution.\textsuperscript{2}

Perhaps somewhere in the fog of desperately trying to match the supposed academic output of other countries we have lost the original impetus for educating our own children. Surely to improve something one must first understand its original purpose. What is the

\textsuperscript{1} Matthew 15:13, Holy Bible, King James Version
reason we send our students to school? Are we emphasizing education in our culture to make certain we produce the world’s best mathematicians and scientists? Is our concentrated focus designed to increase our long-term scholastic quality, making sure we stay on the very top of the global educational mountain? Maybe our ambition is to continue leading the way in medical and technological advancement to bring about a better quality of life?

It is inarguable that our goals must include producing students who are the best in their fields. For decades, the United States has led the way in educational advancement. From our innovative space program, which produced the first astronauts to land on the moon in July, 1969, to the rapid advancement of medicine including the development of new “wonder” drugs, America has a reputation of leading the way, and rightfully so. From the outset, God has consistently blessed our country with inventive minds and proactive solutions to the world’s problems. None of these achievements could have occurred without the strong foundation of a Biblically based, comprehensive education.

While all of these outcomes are indeed desirable, and even deeply rewarding, it would also seem inarguable that we have drawn increasingly narrow educational goals at the expense of many of our adolescents who do not fit within the stereotypical conventional mold. The old adage of forcing square pegs into round holes definitely seems appropriate when discussing the largely disappointing results of modern educational methods, especially in the 21st century. While on one hand we marvel at our nation’s ingenuity, the other hand is filled with gross poverty and overwhelming underachievement.

The simple questions are these. “Are we certain we’re measuring the right things? Are we satisfied we have accurately defined the true purpose of education?” Mark Twain said famously over a century ago, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my
education.” Though humorous, his statement drives home an increasingly uncomfortable truth. School and education can actually be two separate things, especially when the goals of the academic establishment drift further and further away from addressing the individual needs of each child. Twain was, in fact, stating that all too often the formal process of education interferes with learning in real world activities.

What should be the primary focus of teaching? Author Lois Lebar said, “Teaching may be a chore if it is regarded as the discharging of a lesson, or it may be a thrill and a science if it is regarded as working with God to produce eternal change in young lives.”

When a teacher’s primary goal is to be fulfilled rather than help a child learn, that focus may grow fuzzy. Lebar continues, “What a person becomes is largely conditioned by early successes and failures.”

In the book of Proverbs, King Solomon shares his wisdom about training children. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Parents are clearly instructed to be teachers to their children, which is actually how education was accomplished effectively for millennia. It is a fairly modern construct to group students together, away from the home, and entrust their education to a third party. It was, in fact, an early tenant of Marxism.

Looking at this proverb a little deeper, we find an interesting insight. The emphasis is not on mathematics, language or history, though these subjects certainly existed at the time. No, the directive given focuses specifically on teaching children how to live. While this may refer exclusively to qualities of personal faith and moral character, it most likely also

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3 Lois Lebar, *Children in the Bible School*, Fleming H. Revell Company, pg. 93 (1952)
4 Ibid. pg. 99
5 Proverbs 22:6, Holy Bible, King James Version
includes elements of individual ability and active pursuit of a life-skill or trade. In more modern colloquialisms, parents were directed to teach their children how to “enjoy life” and how to “make a living.”

In current educational circles, such a statement is easily considered academic heresy. Surely the reason we spend billions of dollars each year on education is to allow our students to achieve increasingly higher grade point averages, gaining additional honors through advanced placement classes. Consequently, they will be admitted to the best colleges and universities. Excessive debt becomes a minor consideration as we drive undergraduates to spend multiplied thousands so they can have a “better life” one day. As more college loans are encouraged, stress levels rise as a generation struggles to keep up with the mounting debt.7

Would it be worth considering the possibility that deep in the heart and spirit of every child is a God-given aptitude for certain skills and abilities? Could it be, that when pursued with God’s Kingdom in mind, these talents would bring tremendous joy and fulfillment like nothing else in life? Is it conceivable that some individuals were designed by God to enjoy working with their hands in manual labor jobs, building everything from simple sheds to expansive bridges? Is it imaginable that someone may actually find great pleasure making a customer’s favorite cup of coffee or preparing meals for a patron’s enjoyment?

As long as the definition for education is limited to the misguided concept of graded classes for the masses, producing automatons that will fit easily into the prevailing culture, we have probably found a winning formula. If we dare, however, to reimagine the purpose of education to be helping students realize their God-given gifts, then we might be able to

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change a nation. If we assisted them in developing their natural abilities into a marketable skill perhaps it would, in turn, bring them long-lasting personal gratification. If we could accomplish such a feat, then possibly we could teach a generation to live fully and entirely as God intended rather than by a fallen society’s re-engineered value system.

When we find a way to return to our Biblical roots, we may just find the true purpose of education is to develop godly men and women who are secure in their unique talents and prepare them to contribute significantly to God’s Kingdom and society at large. The alternative is to continue down our present course, throwing more money at an obviously failed system that often produces graduates without direction or purpose, even though they’ve played by the cultural rules. If we are willing to choose the former, acknowledging the great disparity in educational definition and purpose, then the first step of our proverbial mission, if we choose to accept it, is not to redefine mass education. If we are successful, that will come automatically over time. Our initial objective must be to purposefully help students rediscover the divine origins of their undeniable individuality. That is when lasting education will truly begin.
It is a greater work to educate a child, in the true and larger sense of the word, than to rule a state. ~ William Ellery Channing

From the earliest memories of childhood, it seems most adults can recall feelings of inferiority and peer competition. It appears as if it’s built into our very DNA to continuously struggle with thoughts of inadequacy and a lack of confidence. Though we all learn to process these emotions in different ways by adulthood (though many of them are not healthy) the reality is that our responsive pathways to these substantial concerns are mentally formed during our adolescent and even pre-adolescent years.\(^1\) Whatever unresolved issues remain, long after high school and college have faded into the past, can often be traced to our formative years.

At the heart of the matter is the strong tendency of human nature to create life-altering comparisons to other people, usually with complete disregard to the concept of divinely ordained uniqueness. We compare other people to ourselves at an almost unconscious level. Common conversation revolves around who are the best athletes, actors, politicians, authors and so forth. Due to our sin nature it seems to be completely natural, but

it’s also totally devastating to our self-worth because the comparisons don’t stop at the national popularity level. They continue right into our own homes.

Those familiar with Scripture know that God said to Samuel, “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature…for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”\(^2\) This is amazingly true. We tend to see ourselves through the eyes of humanity rather than the lens of Deity. This is not surprising since the concepts of Creationism and Intelligent Design have been completely removed from the majority of educational institutions in our country as well as many of our discussions at home. If there is in fact no God, then all that is left, if we are going to meet or exceed society’s expectations, is perpetually striving to be better than everyone else, regardless of the personal cost.

Christians, however, are certain there is a deeper reality that supersedes all past, current or future thought about the oft-discussed purpose of life. In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, we find these extremely comforting words spoken directly by God. “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you…thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”\(^3\) If we believe there is indeed a God we can also believe a greater plan for His creation exists. If we believe a greater plan for His creation exists, we can further believe there has been a unique role designed for each of us to play.

Why is this important? How is this significant to the educational process? If we were designed and crafted as distinctive individuals by a Supreme Deity then it stands to reason we will each achieve our best results when we are approached and treated as one-of-a-kind creations. Though it’s been suggested that everyone has a look-alike, a “doppelganger”

\(^2\) 1 Samuel 16:7, Holy Bible, King James Version  
\(^3\) Jeremiah 29:11, Holy Bible, King James Version
somewhere on this planet, the reality is that no two duplicate individuals have ever been found. Even identical twins possess obvious differences in their fingerprints, personalities and abilities. The profound realization that God fashioned us all deliberately and uniquely is foundational to our long-term success in life.

King David, a Biblical and historical figure known as much for his failures as his successes, penned these famous words somewhere around 1000 B.C.

Psalm 139:13-17, Holy Bible, King James Version

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them. How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them!

For the Christian these words bring enormous security and contentment as it pertains to personal identity. It assures us of our eternal significance and current worth. For the educator, however, these timeless truths must transcend far beyond our private benefit. They must completely reshape how we see every student whom God has called us to serve. Since our Creator has intentionally crafted each of us so distinctively, He has unquestionably done the same for our students. Our first and highest responsibility must not be to teach them academics but to help them become secure in the knowledge of Who created them and why. It is vital that the importance of these truths become part of every child’s mental DNA, for it rigidly frames absolutely everything that follows.

This is one of many reasons public schools are failing our families. By stripping away the spiritual aspect of education, all our students are left with is a performance-based system that pits “smart” students against even “smarter” ones while leaving the “average” or “slow”
child farther and farther behind. No redeeming quality is assigned to individuality if a student fails to meet arbitrary minimum standards. Educator Edward Rowe offers this valuable insight: “By omitting the spiritual and moral dimension, the architects of modern government education are ignoring the necessary foundation of true education.”\(^5\) He writes further, “In contrast to what the government school systems are offering, true education is God-centered. It is education that assists a child in the development of a Biblical spiritual life and moral character.”\(^6\)

Much more than a value system that can be chosen from among many options, much like cereal in the supermarket aisle, Christians believe there is only one choice available that will impact their families positively for life. If that is true, then those principles must translate consistently into the daily training of our children. The Apostle Paul said clearly, “…bring [your children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”\(^7\) That training must begin with helping the child establish, beyond any doubt, their identity in Christ and the unique design with which God brought them into existence. Their individuality must not only be encouraged but also celebrated as a gift from their Creator.

In summary, it is the parents’ responsibility, greatly assisted (or also potentially harmed) by their teachers and mentors, to speak life into a child’s thought process. The indisputable goal must be to immerse them in the soul-satisfying knowledge of not just what they can become physically, but more importantly who they are spiritually. The words spoken to Old Testament parents as a command from God have just as much importance today as they did when they were first penned.

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ephesians 6:3, Holy Bible, King James Version
… Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.\(^8\)

We must be willing to commit ourselves, as parents and teachers, to firmly establishing these undeniable truths in the minds and hearts of our children. We must remind them constantly of their God-ordained individuality and irreplaceable worth. If we do, then perhaps we can effectively change the course of a generation that, in turn, may affect the destiny of a nation and beyond.

\(^8\) Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Holy Bible, King James Version
CHAPTER 4
PRECEPT UPON PRECEPT
(The Individual Advantage of Mastery Learning)

Whatever is good to know is difficult to learn. ~ Greek Proverb

As a child I was drawn to the television show, “Little House on the Prairie.” To this day I’m not exactly certain what peaked my interest, but I’m thankful for the unpretentious lessons it taught me about education. Educators in recent decades have commonly derided the historically accurate one-room schoolhouse concept featured in the series as overly simplistic and academically underwhelming. They claim it failed to address the obvious need of a more comprehensive and college-preparatory curriculum, especially as society developed. It’s an interesting observation, because it was that one-room schoolhouse model that educated students who would later develop great inventions and innovations. We owe the origin of the Industrial Revolution and the dramatic advances in technology of the early 20th century to these “inadequate” educational methods.¹

What critics often refer to as modern “assembly-line education” differs dramatically from the “Little House Schoolhouse” style of teaching, which has arguably produced more highly-educated graduates than any other period of American history.² If that statement is true, then we must determine why we consistently turned out relatively better-educated

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graduates earlier in our history than we do now. One enormous factor is that, for many years, education wasn’t based upon chronological age, but rather on a particular student’s current academic level and God-given scholastic ability. Albert Shanker, former President of the American Federation of Teachers, expounds upon this concept:

Teachers in one-room schoolhouses almost never lectured. These teachers knew there wasn’t much they could say simultaneously to a roomful of kids of different ages and stages of learning. So teachers moved from one group of two or three students to another. Because they couldn’t spend much time with any group, they usually assigned some work to each, making sure that the group had a pretty good idea of how to proceed. Periodically, the teacher would return to each group to make sure the work was being done correctly and to offer help where it was needed. And teachers frequently asked students who had mastered a particular task to help those still struggling to learn it.

Teachers in one-room schools managed to teach kids with an eight-year age range, and we should be able to manage classrooms with a similar range of differences. Nor should we view this way of doing things as inferior to our current system. What one-room school teachers did out of necessity—avoid teacher talk and get kids to do work on their own or in small groups—is actually a superior way of getting them to learn.  

Mr. Shanker is describing the process of individualization and mastery learning upon which our country was built. Students were introduced to one concept at a time in various subjects, based upon their current ability and knowledge level. Concepts were pursued until mastery was attained. Upon that strong foundation the next concept was introduced. It was foolhardy then, as it is now, to introduce children to a new skill until the underlying information had been successfully understood. Unfortunately, this is precisely the model of supposed learning willingly embraced by modern educational thought, commonly called spiral method learning.  

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3 Albert Shanker, “SALT Newsletter, Spring 1990” (Warrenton, VA)
Teacher and author, Penny Ann Armstrong, notes the following about removing mastery learning from the classroom:

The effects of these changes on student mastery of material are considerable. Teachers explain how assessment schedules define when instruction is done and testing begins. They see students’ understanding of content compromised as they shift from teaching for mastery to teaching to the common or “passing” level required on state tests. Equally troubling is the reality of differences in students’ capabilities. Pre-established pacing can be too slow for high-ability students and too fast for others.  

Consider the illustration of mathematical instruction. Most people would agree it would be impossible to teach a child long division without a thorough understanding of addition, subtraction and multiplication. Yet, in a plethora of recent curriculums the spiral method of teaching, first widely suggested by Jerome Bruner, has been is embraced. It asserts that a student, repeatedly exposed to the same concepts over time, will master them all.

Educator Bethany Ruth Barnosky describes spiral learning in this fashion: “Spiral learning in its purist form touches on a topic briefly and then moves on. The assumption is made that if a fact or skill is not learned ‘this time around’ a student will understand it better on the next pass. Each pass asks the student to learn more about a particular area of study, expand on a skill, or build new knowledge.” Unfortunately, what may sound good in theory has failed miserably in practicality. Test scores over the past several decades have declined as spiral methods have replaced mastery learning in the majority of our educational institutions.  

Barnosky goes on to describe a general understanding of mastery learning methods. “Mastery learning is the idea that learning is sequential, and that each area of knowledge or

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skill must be mastered before a student moves on...much more time is given to instruction and practice on each topic. Students are asked to master a certain objective before moving on, because that objective will not be taught again."⁸ According to Barnosky, Singapore, an island country off the Malay Peninsula, recently topped the TIMSS charts in three consecutive testing cycles with their mastery-learning curriculum.

Christians need to look no further than Scripture to find the idea of mastery learning promoted. “…precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little…”⁹ A modern translation says it this way, “…Spell out [the] message for them again, repeating it over and over, a line at a time, in very simple words.”¹⁰ It seems obvious that we, as human beings, need to repeat lessons to eventually master them. Moving on without true understanding makes continued learning more difficult later. Jesus himself promoted the idea of beginning with the basics before being given greater opportunity: “Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things…”¹¹

As we consider the endless individuality educators face in the classroom, it is inarguable that people learn in different ways. Some prefer to read precisely written instructions and attempt new skills on their own. Others resist instructional reading and greatly prefer being taught by a hands-on example from a Master Teacher. Still others are more adventurous, preferring the “trial and error” method of self-exploration. Regardless of our personal inclinations, one common principle seems evident: new concepts must be

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⁹ Isaiah 28:13, Holy Bible, King James Version
¹¹ Matthew 25:23, Holy Bible, King James Version
mastered one at a time, advancing from simple to complex, if a student is to understand not only “how” to do something but also “why.”

Those of us with multiple children will most likely readily agree that, at the same comparable age, our kids were almost certainly completely different in many ways, and needed to be treated differently than their siblings. If we translate those differences into the classroom, we must conclude that modern educators, utilizing currently advocated teaching methods, face a seemingly impossible task of educating all students equally. When desires are thwarted by ineffective methods, frustration settles in quickly. Perhaps that is why educators are leaving their chosen profession in record numbers, up to 50% in their first five years of teaching.¹²

Dr. Anthony Lease, a former superintendent of a Northern Virginia Public School District, sheds some additional light on the issue.

We as educators have fallen into a trap. If we are to have quality in our schools, we must begin by organizing our schools around the way students learn. We know, for example, that students learn at different rates. But we organize our schools around what is administratively convenient, forcing students with varying skills and levels of readiness into fixed predetermined blocks of time, age levels and grade levels. We do not routinely organize instruction based on student success in reaching specific goals.¹³

In other words, when individualization is removed from education for the sake of administrative convenience, the results will probably be far less desirable than if the current interest and abilities of the specific child are allowed to drive the course of study and rate of academic instruction. According to Mr. Shanker, “The student who is required to proceed in ‘lock-step’ with an entire class of 25 to 40 other students and age-graded textbooks may

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¹³ Dr. Anthony Lease, “Newsletter of the Society for Applied Learning Technology” (Spring 1990)
encounter severe problems. The high achiever and rapid learner may become bored—and the slower learner may become overwhelmed, confused, and depressed."

When considering this volatile issue from all angles, it seems logical to conclude that the best educational methods must unquestionably be those that focus on the specific abilities of the student. If God purposely designed us as unique individuals (and we certainly believe He did), we must tailor the educational process toward meeting a child where he or she is, rather than where some arbitrary, graded educational process would dictate. As we move forward in our examination, this simple but inarguable, transformational truth will be the cornerstone upon which our educational construct is built.

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14 Albert Shanker, “SALT Newsletter, Spring 1990” (Warrenton, VA)
CHAPTER 5

THE MASTER TEACHER

(Learning from Jesus’ Example)

*The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates.*

*The great teacher inspires.* ~ William Arthur Ward

Anyone who regularly frequents a local Starbucks probably knows the significance of the highly coveted black apron. It may be worn only by those who have achieved the prominent level of Coffee Master, a title reserved for those baristas whose knowledge and experience has vaulted them to the highest pinnacle of employee success. After months of specialized classes and focused hands-on-training, graduates are awarded the aforementioned apron as a symbol of their personal dedication to and mastery of their craft. For this higher degree of learning to take place, there must obviously be someone who not only possesses the required information but also is able to successfully transfer it to the willing student.

Knowingly or unknowingly, we’ve been taught constantly throughout our life. Whether by intentional or unintentional example, our worldview and involuntary responses to personal conditions have been framed by scores of people. Our parents, siblings, extended family, pastors, teachers, employers, subordinates, mentors, friends, heroes and even enemies have had a dramatic influence on us in at least one collective way – by how they have responded to the changing events of life. We have been greatly shaped by the things they have said but so much more by the things they have done.
Benjamin Franklin believed, "Experience keeps a dear school, yet fools learn in no other." We might summarize today by saying that experience is the best teacher. There certainly is an element of truth to be found here. But if our previous premise is true, then perhaps it’s also the experiences of others, especially in our formative years, which have a great effect on the way we learn to observe, interpret and respond. Experience, then, is arguably the most needed element in the ongoing process of education. With the absolutely necessity of individualization and mastery learning in education firmly established in previous chapters, we can now discuss the role experience plays in our learning methods.

In our modern educational culture, the term “Master Teacher” is often used to describe someone who has exceeded expectations in not only knowledge but also in the ability to produce successful students. It has become the new “holy grail” of education to many because ineffective teachers are seen as the greatest problem in a troubled educational system. In 2001, five million dollars was granted to launch the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence by the US Department of Education. Its purpose is to certify subject experts and experienced professionals as “Master Teachers” in their fields.

Yet, for all of the increased efforts, academic scores still struggle to keep up with societal expectations. So perhaps the issue is not only in making sure teachers have mastered the necessary subject material but also in helping them understand the individuality of each student and then adjusting their teaching methods accordingly. Why? So they can better connect with each student in their classroom. Unfortunately, it seems our modern educational system chooses not to place a high priority on individuality but rather largely uniform results.

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1 Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, Nov. 1743
3 George Archibald, "Paige Backs Reform in Certification of Teachers” Washington Times (March 19, 2003)
Regardless, if we are to construct a Biblically-based educational system, an intentional focus on individuals must be the driving consideration for the godly teacher. For the best real life illustration of a Master Teacher who approached each person as unique, we need to look no further than the amazing example of Jesus. Author William H. Russell stated, “[Jesus] belongs in the classroom…even in the secular university for the sheer brilliance of His methods when such methods are considered only from the point of view of His instruction. Immense profit is to be had by teachers who analyze and practice what might be termed the pedagogical technique of Jesus.”

Upon examining the four books of the Bible known as the Gospels, we find that Jesus had an incredible knack, beyond His obviously Divine capabilities, of distilling a complex concept down to an engaging, personal application. He would often tell simple stories to capture the audience’s attention but then privately take time to make sure His disciples understood what He had been illustrating. Author Wayne Jackson observes, “Jesus was more of a conversationalist than an orator. He walked with people and talked with them. He sat and spoke of soul matters. He was interested in individuals, recognizing the value of each soul.”

This is not to say Jesus wasn’t a competent and highly skilled teacher and orator. As Jackson further notes, “Christ’s teaching was informative, logical, buttressed by Old Testament evidence, well-illustrated, documented by divine power, original, and uniquely authoritative.” He was the epitome of what a Master Teacher should be – someone who possesses highly-developed knowledge of a subject but yet can present that information in a simple, easily understandable way. He proved his skill over and over in His few years of

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6 Ibid.
earthly ministry both with His disciples and with complete strangers. This was clearly evidenced by the response of the soldiers who were sent to arrest Him. “Never [a] man spake like this man!”

Consider this example from one of Jesus’ many interactions with His disciples. “And it came to pass, as he was alone praying, his disciples were with him: and he asked them, saying, Whom say the people that I am? They answering said, John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others say, that one of the old prophets is risen again.” Jesus began the lesson with a question asking for society’s collective opinion. In other words, He was asking, “What does culture say about me?” He was interested in the disciples’ understanding of the prevailing belief.

Jesus quickly changed the context of the question, though, because He knew innately that an understanding of someone else’s opinion is never enough. He wanted the disciples to process their own feelings and come to a personal conclusion based upon their own experience. When He asked the question asking the disciples to share their own insights, Peter was the first to respond. “Peter answering said, The Christ of God!”

This was first-hand revelation based upon personal experience rather than someone else’s words. Jesus confirms this by replying to Peter, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” The individual spirit that resides within each of us, breathed into us by God Himself, has the ability to be taught by experience rather than by only being spoon-fed lifeless information.

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7 John 7:46, Holy Bible, King James Version
9 Luke 9:20, Holy Bible, King James Version
10 Matthew 16:17; Holy Bible, King James Version
Jesus knew this and constantly created situations for the disciples to personally observe, interpret through their set of experiential filters and then formulate responses.

Jesus also realized the tendency of people to compare themselves with others, and then frequently derive a sense of security (or insecurity) from their observations. Following His resurrection from the dead He seized an opportunity, which is what good teachers do, to address this issue directly. After being told by Jesus that he will ultimately die for his faith, Peter finds, as he is walking along the beach with Jesus, that another disciple is following him closely. “Then Peter, turning about, seeth [John] following…saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, ‘If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.’”

Jesus was very insistent that person-to-person comparisons yield very little positive results. He was far more concerned that Peter should choose to look inward rather than on the seeming drastic inequities between himself and John. Accepting this philosophy as foundational to quality education, an effective teacher must constantly be aware of the deep insecurities in his or her students, no matter how well they may be hidden, and help them learn to focus upon their own progress rather than the supposedly superior abilities of others.

Another significant lesson to be learned from the examination of Jesus’ teaching methods is His frequent use of interrogative statements. He expertly proved that the only way to truly ascertain someone’s understanding of a particular concept was by directly asking the student to illustrate their level of comprehension through conversation and demonstration. Consider this slightly paraphrased, brief sample of questions Jesus curiously asked of people:

“Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

“Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say ‘Get up and walk?’”

11 John 21:20-22, Holy Bible, King James Version
“Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil?”

“What did you go out into the desert to see?”

“Where is your faith?”

“Who touched me?”

“Were not all ten cleansed?”

“John’s baptism – was it from heaven?”

“Whose portrait and inscription are on it?” (referring to a coin)

“Judas, are you betraying the son of man with a kiss?”

While it would take multiple volumes to examine each of these specific occurrences thoroughly, they all have at least one thing in common: they reveal Jesus wanted to know what people thought based upon their own experiences rather than acceptance of group thought. It didn’t matter to Him what the status quo appeared to be – He wanted a personal response because He knew information had to be processed internally if real transformation was going to occur.

Another tool in Jesus’ instructional arsenal was His keen ability to paint a vivid picture with simple words. Writer Darvin Raddatz says, a “characteristic element of Jesus’ teaching [was] His use of symbols, imagery, and parabolic statements.”\(^{12}\) From Jesus’ story of the shrewd manager who knew how to react to financial crisis to the tale of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Hell, they all had specific moral implications. His stories are commonly called parables because they were designed to be not only entertaining but also to teach spiritual truths.

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\(^{12}\) Darvin Raddatz, “Jesus the Master Teacher” (School Visitors’ Workshop, DMLC, New Ulm, Minnesota August 1-3, 1978)
As is characteristic of all great orators, Jesus’ style of communication easily conjured up mental images that brought the story to life. More than just great storytelling, however, it is still obvious that the “artistry of the parable stimulates inquiry.” A charming anecdote that is simply entertaining has little or no educational value. When a story engages the student’s mind and causes them to begin asking questions, however, that is when a lasting impression has truly been made.

Jesus also employed what has been called practical symbolism. Consider that He washed His disciples’ feet and referred to his followers as the “salt of the earth.” He famously said, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.” That must have caused great thought amongst His disciples because it seemed as if Jesus had just described a practical impossibility! As has been accurately noted by Radatz, “Jesus placed the language and the literary arts in the service of instruction.”

So how does all of this relate to modern instructional methods? It reveals that becoming a Master Teacher may not relate directly, if at all, to the level of a person’s formal education. In fact, according to Dr. Dan Schinzel, “There exists no positive correlation between the level of education of teachers and academic success of students.” While all of our modern focus seems to be on testing and additional education for teachers, perhaps the basis for the lasting solution lies elsewhere.

This thesis posits that the teacher who aims to become a “master” must first focus on the God-created individuality of each child, with an eager emphasis upon helping children

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13 Darvin Raddatz, “Jesus the Master Teacher” (School Visitors’ Workshop, DMLC, New Ulm, Minnesota August 1-3, 1978)
14 Ibid.
become secure in their own abilities without sustaining the potentially irreparable damage of comparing themselves to others. In addition, the teacher must concentrate on helping shape a student’s understanding of their personal experiences rather than having them simply regurgitate memorized facts to pass standardized tests. Educators can help students accomplish this by simply asking questions rather than “telling” them what to think.

In summary, teachers must seek to avoid mundane education by endeavoring to keep things interesting in the classroom. Telling stories, using examples and imagery, as well as emphasizing learning through practical application are all key to keeping a student interested in learning. If we are going to at least attempt to achieve the results Jesus regularly obtained, we need to enthusiastically adopt His methods as if they were our very own. We must follow His incredible example that succeeded not only in transferring knowledge, but also and more importantly in producing life-long disciples. He was certainly the ultimate Master Teacher, and we can do no better than to pattern our educational model after the flawless standard He established.
CHAPTER 6
ANALYZING OUR PAST

( Rediscovering the Key to Our Academic Future)

The biggest challenge facing the great teachers and communicators of history is not to teach history itself, nor even the lessons of history, but why history matters. ~ Stephen Fry

The legendary speaker and author Zig Ziglar relates the classic story of winning a prized country ham in a local sales contest in his younger days. Upon arriving home, he handed it to his wife who immediately cut the end off the ham and placed it in a pan to cook. Zig asked her why she had done that. "That's how my mama taught me to bake a ham," she responded. "Why did your mama do it that way?" Not entirely sure, they decided to call her mother and ask the same question. Her response? “My mama always did it that way.” This required a phone call to Grandma. "Granny," Zig’s wife asked, "why do we always cut the end off the ham before we cook it? "Well," she responded, "I don't know why you all do it, but I do it because my pan is too short!"

It’s much too easy to learn about history without ever actually understanding history. Before delving deeper into the background of individualized education in America (Chapter 7) and it’s modern function, it’s necessary to briefly discuss the concept of learning (and not learning) from our past. God said through the prophet Jeremiah, “…they will diligently learn [my] ways…”1 He was literally saying He wanted us to learn our lessons well. This is the

1 Jeremiah 12:16, Holy Bible, King James Version
heart’s cry of any good parent. We want our children to learn from the past so they don’t have to make the same mistakes we did. Perhaps this was part of American philosopher George Santayana’s motivation when he famously wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

History clearly shows that humanity continues to repeat the same lessons again and again that should have been learned millennia ago. The Old Testament book of Exodus is filled with stories of the Children of Israel spending 40 years in the wilderness, literally retracing their steps over and over again because their stubbornness prevented them from truly learning from their previous errors. In fact, throughout Scripture we find the repeated theme of people refusing to learn from history, to the point God says “[they] slideth back as a backsliding heifer…”2 Or, as another translation states, “[They] are as stubborn as mules.”3

The word “stubborn” would also seem to be the perfect term to describe many modern educators’ approach toward studying the past. Rather than searching for potential keys for unlocking secrets to future academic success, it seems as if a complete disregard exists for previous successes. Old “traditions” are dismissed as primitive and unsophisticated, even though earlier generations educated in supposedly “outdated” academic systems managed to invent manned flight, telecommunications, the combustion engine, place men in space and so many more significant contributions to our societal development.

Perhaps, then, there are academic lessons we can learn from the pioneers of our country who literally and figuratively laid our foundation for education. As we will see in Chapter 7, the humble beginnings of the one-room schoolhouse in America actually brought much more value than we see at first glance. It was this type of school system that produced

2 Hosea 4:16, Holy Bible, King James Version
3 Hosea 4:16, Holy Bible, New Century Version (Scripture taken from the New Century Version®. Copyright 2005 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.)
the majority of the men who authored the Declaration of Independence as well as the Constitution of the United States. Clark our founders were well educated with a firm grasp on not only basic scholastic concepts, but also the theological and philosophical understanding required to develop such long-enduring and respected documents.

Still, it seems the critical mistakes being made in education today are not all that dissimilar to our past. According to author Jerry Wartgow, “A review of the education policy in America to date reveals that the primary influence of the public schools has come from outside events that were considered matters of national interest.” In other words, outside pressures have trumped student interests. In recent years, President George W. Bush launched an educational initiative called, “No Child Left Behind.” Regardless of widespread and differing opinions, it was replaced before its effectiveness could truly be evaluated over time. After inauguration, President Barack Obama launched “Race to the Top”, a somewhat comparable plan that, to date, has yielded similar results. Both plans significantly increased spending, placed higher emphasis on teacher qualifications and raised the stakes in student testing and subsequent school accountability.

According to Kenneth Wong, the Education Chair at Brown University and the Director of its Urban Education Policy Program, Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan also mobilized the nation behind their respective educational visions. “Johnson passionately promoted federal involvement in equal educational opportunity while Reagan

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5 Jerry Wartgow, Why School Reform is Failing and What We Need To Do About It. Rowman & Littlefield. pg. 24 (2008)
elevated the importance of school performance.”7 Steven Mintz, Director of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center at Columbia University, firmly insists that, although President Jimmy Carter established the U.S. Department of Education and President Bill Clinton spent millions of dollars shutting down or redesigning failing schools, it was actually Dwight Eisenhower who was the real education president. “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided aid to schools to fund compensatory education programs designed to equalize educational opportunity. In 1968, the Johnson administration began to provide aid for bilingual programs to assist non-English speaking students.”8

Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, a Levy Institute Research Professor at Bard College and a Distinguished Fellow at the Bard Prison Initiative, has a differing opinion. “We have had presidents who would like to be considered [a] great ‘education president,’ but I do not think we have yet had one who deserves the title. From Truman to Obama, presidents have worked hard to open greater access to education, promote equity, and raise student achievement. But none has mobilized a national conversation about all that is necessary to ensure academic achievement for all American youth.”9

What are we to make of these conflicting views? While a consensus is hard to come by, maybe everyone could agree that, over the long-term, it definitely seems as if nothing in our relatively recent history has truly worked for everyone. While there have been isolated successes and moderate improvements, education continues to be a highly volatile and political subject while many students continue to struggle. To say that most people are not happy with the quality of schools in America would be a vast understatement. A simple

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Google search on “dissatisfaction with education in America” produces over 4,500,000 relevant results.

A 2012 nationwide Gallup poll would seem to support this conclusion. Of the over 1,000 adults surveyed, only 37% indicated their belief that public schools provide a “good” education.\footnote{Gallup, Aug. 9-12, 2012} According to Dr. Susan Berry, a Ph.D. educational author, “Homeschooling is growing seven times faster than public school enrollments.”\footnote{Dr. Susan Berry, “Growth in Homeschooling is Outpacing Public Schools” (June 8, 2013) \url{http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Government/2013/06/07/Report-Growth-in-Homeschooling-Outpacing-Public-Schools} (Accessed Nov. 24, 2013)} What is the primary reason? Homeschooling allows the parents to easily customize their child’s education based on individual interests and abilities.

Until we are willing to admit that modern academic theories may actually be our fundamental flaw, we might be destined to keep repeating our past. Only an honest, unbiased examination of past educational successes will provide the answers we need to assess our failures and chart a course to a bright tomorrow. More money is not necessarily the answer because it obviously hasn’t been to date. More test preparation and subsequent testing may not produce better results because that has clearly not been substantiated. But, as we will see in our next chapter, a true evaluation of the benefits of individualization and mastery learning, as was used so effectively for hundreds of years in our country, may just provide the solid foundation we need for rebuilding an effective school system and once again graduating students who are prepared for an ever-changing future.

If we want to repeat the recent past then we certainly should continue to ignore its results. However, if true education is our goal, we must learn from these failures and be willing to admit, regardless of the cost, that we have abandoned what works in favor of what
has been politically expedient. A return to individualization and mastery learning is the
much-needed prescription for our failing school systems. There is simply no other viable
solution.
CHAPTER 7

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

(Changing Methods vs. Unchanging Principles)

*The fundamental purpose of school is learning, not teaching.* ~ Richard DuFour

“Some things never change.” We have all probably said this phrase from time to time, most likely in a negative context as it relates to some aspect of our lives we find disappointing. Even King Solomon said famously, “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.”\(^1\) However, if we adopt that attitude, especially in the context of educational improvement, it leaves us with no impetus for effective change.

The purpose of this chapter is not to be an exhaustive review of the plethora of educational styles available today. As of this writing, the concept of the “flipped classroom” is the latest rage, but certainly won’t be the last. Countless volumes have been written on the advantages of one method over another. An endless supply of opinions is readily available to those eager to study the subject more deeply. Our specific goal in the next few pages is to discuss how educational approaches can easily change over time without changing unalterable educational principles. While methods may evolve (think about the fairly recent introduction of computers into the classroom) Biblical educational principles are eternal.

\(^1\) Ecclesiastes 1:9, Holy Bible, King James Version
In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul states, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning…”\(^2\) He was helping us understand that everything written in the past was recorded to teach us. Clearly, Paul is talking about the value of learning from the previous experiences of other people. Perhaps, though, there is a deeper lesson to be learned here; one not just of national history but also of educational philosophy. Arguably, what matters is not only “what” we learn but also “how” we learn it.

American history records the first Colonial schools opening during the 17th century. Early colonists were educated by traditional methods of family, church, community, and apprenticeship.\(^3\) At first, the rudiments of literacy and arithmetic were taught inside the family. However, by the mid-19th century, the role of the schools had expanded to such an extent that many of the educational tasks traditionally handled by parents became the responsibility of the schools.\(^4\)

The long-standing and effective philosophy of American education was to place the textbook in the hands of the student based upon their current level of academic ability. It was only centuries later that the primary role of the teacher changed to being the primary source of information. As an example, the "Blue Backed Speller" of Noah Webster was by far the most common textbook from the 1790s until 1836 when the McGuffey Readers appeared. Both series emphasized civic duty and morality, and sold tens of millions of copies nationwide.\(^5\) All were ability-based because there was, as of yet, no widely accepted concept of “graded” education.

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\(^2\) Romans 15:4, Holy Bible, King James Version


In 1837, however, the face of education would begin to dramatically change as Horace Mann (1796-1859) introduced the concept of a controlled “system” of education. Upon becoming the secretary of education in Massachusetts that same year, he worked to create a statewide system of professional teachers, based on the Prussian model of "common schools." He focused primarily on elementary education and preparing teachers. It is interesting to note that it was Mann who first introduced the concept of age grading to America, where students were assigned to different grades by their age, not by their academic level or scholastic ability. With the introduction of [Mann’s] age grading, multi-aged classrooms all but disappeared.

Mann argued successfully that universal public education was best for the nation. He won widespread approval from people known as “modernizers” who supported the construction of public schools. Slowly but surely education was changing dramatically across the nation. Many would argue those changes were for the worse. Although it would take decades, an evaporation of individualization began as students were being forced into age-based graded classrooms regardless of their ability.

Next came John Dewey (1859-1952), a University of Chicago professor and leading educational theorist of his day, who insisted uniform education was instrumental in creating social change and reform. He believed that "education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction." Notice the emphasis here about “adjustment of individual activity” which was an academic

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8 John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897) pp. 6, 16
way of saying that a child’s unique gifting and abilities must take a backseat in the educational process so that society could be effectively reconstructed.

From a Biblical point of view this is nothing short of alarming. In fact, Dewey met large resistance at the time. It would take years before his ideas would take an unrelenting foothold in American education. Nevertheless, his influence is still felt strongly in the American school system. It’s easy to wonder if Mann and Dewey would still embrace their own ideas if they were able to see the sheer failure of public schools today.

In 1983 a report was released titled *A Nation at Risk* that caused conservatives to call for an increase in academic rigor including more school days per year and higher standards of testing. During this time, educator E.D. Hirsch called for a return to "cultural literacy"—and emphasis on the facts, phrases, and texts that, according to Hirsch, every American had once known. Many Americans would probably agree that the average citizen no longer possesses the basic academic skills of our predecessors from even fifty years ago.

The point here is that by changing the inherent scholastic philosophy that had been used successfully for decades, our public educational system was greatly, and possibly permanently, damaged. Mann and Dewey did not just introduce new methods; they altered the entire trajectory of childhood learning. By no longer advocating for the individuality of the student but rather their assimilation into a graded system, the deterioration of student confidence had begun. While there are certainly many other factors that contribute to educational quality, such as parental involvement, economics, teacher ability and national morality, it can be viably argued that graded education may have been one of the worst implementations in American scholastic history.

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One cannot simply abandon the time-tested Biblical principles of individuality and still blindly hope for a quality educational result. It is not dissimilar to attempting to travel in a sailboat without a sail. The wind may blow but if the sail isn’t fully deployed then the wind is rendered useless. Comparably, unless a student is intentionally and actively engaged at his or her current academic level, the attempt to transfer knowledge and understanding will be useless and frustrating for both teacher and student.

To be clear, this is not an argument against implementing new educational tools into the classroom. Exactly the opposite is true. With the constant development of new computer technology such as the Internet, SMARTBoards, WiFi, smart phones, tablets, interactive academic software, online curriculum delivery systems and so much more, teachers are better equipped to customize courses to the needs of the individual more than any other time in history. Remarkably, technology is natively built to cater specifically to the single student.

Companies such as Alpha Omega Publications and their Ignitia© web-based curriculum are literally changing the face of education. It is, in fact, a great time in American history to be a teacher if one is truly interested in educating the individual according to his or her specific abilities. The difficulty, as we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 16, is that there are too many parties financially vested in America’s current educational system for true change, which is inseparably coupled with a return to original academic values, to be actually considered or implemented.

Though it is highly doubtful public schools will ever become the institutions our children require, there is great hope for private schools and homeschooling parents. If individualization and mastery learning (to be discussed further in chapters 8 and 11) are once again seen as absolutely essential to the learning process of all students, and Biblical
principles are not only regarded but also faithfully implemented, we can produce students who will have enjoyed their school years, developed a thirst for knowledge and established habits of becoming lifelong learners. As we look at our history, we must conclude that this truly is our only chance for a bright educational future.
CHAPTER 8
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND LEARNING
(How to Assess Educational Success)

*I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions
in which they can learn.* ~ Albert Einstein

In the initial interview process at Fairfield Christian School, Fairfield, CA, teachers are always given this simple statement to test their professional motivation: “If you like to teach you will probably dislike our school, but if you love to help students learn, you will most likely love our school.” The reaction is predictably mixed. Some come alive at the thought of actually assisting children in learning new concepts and ideas, but most respond with confusion because they truly do not understand the difference between teaching and learning. It’s conceivable that this distinction is not clearly taught in America’s higher education institutions, possibly because many professors never actually learned it themselves.

Many sincere collegians fall in love with the idea of being able to command the attention of young pupils with their charm and wit, becoming the proverbial “favorite” teacher to be remembered for years to come. The reality, however, is that educators are frequently overwhelmed, having been under-prepared to face the growing challenges of education in the 21st century. They are taught to replicate the best of their own educational experience, which is often a repetitive assortment of tedious reading assignments,
inadequately written tests, volumes of homework and a severe lack of opportunities to actually apply what they are attempting to learn.

In their collaborative work, “From Teaching to Learning,” authors Robert B. Barr and John Tagg discuss the dramatic difference between “instructional” paradigms and “learning” paradigms. “To say that the purpose of [schools] is to provide instruction is like saying that General Motors’ business is to operate assembly lines or that the purpose of medical care is to fill hospital beds.”¹ The analysis is completely on point. They continue, “The shift to a ‘Learning Paradigm’ liberates institutions from a set of difficult constraints. Today it is virtually impossible for them to respond effectively…while meeting the increasing demand for…education from increasingly diverse students.”²

The authors explain that the instructional paradigm is built around the preferences of the teacher while the learning paradigm is constructed around the needs of the student. They contend that these two opposing paradigms exist within the overall institutional paradigm. They also acknowledge that the task of shifting from one educational paradigm to the other is daunting and nearly impossible for various reasons. Still, they determinedly advocate for change. “For decades the response to calls for reform from national commissions and task forces generally has been an attempt to address the issue from within the framework of the institutional paradigm… The instructional paradigm rests on conceptions of teaching that are increasingly recognized as ineffective… To say a restructuring is needed is beyond question.”³

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
It’s been said that average teachers simply convey knowledge and give information to their students while true educators support that knowledge by helping students understand the processes behind the knowledge and facts. This level of instruction can only happen individually and must be ascertained student by student. It simply can’t be accomplished in a “group think” situation. While collective methods may be good for conveying information, it is grossly inadequate for determining if actual learning has taken place. D. Cohen describes the inaccurate yet widely accepted understanding of the educational method. “Teaching is telling, knowledge is facts and learning is recall.”

In other words, if a child can repeat the answer, then they must surely understand the concept in question.

It is at this point that the idea of mastery learning must come into play. This concept will be discussed in detail in Chapter 11 but will be briefly mentioned here. It stands to reason that if a child is to be taught a particular academic concept then all previous foundational information must be mastered before advancing. As stated in a previous example, how can a student successfully learn multiplication until the concepts of addition and subtraction have been clearly understood and demonstrated?

In our current climate of performance-based testing, teachers are frequently forced to “push” pupils ahead before mastery occurs. There is a complete disregard for effective instruction as described by Armstrong. “Teachers [reject] the current “test-driven” approach to learning [in favor of] a “student-driven” approach based on the developmental and cognitive readiness of the students who are actually in the classroom.”

Introducing new concepts for which the child may not yet be ready contributes significantly to the academic frustration of the child and potentially harms his or her overall

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attitude about education. The drive for higher test scores becomes paramount in the minds of teachers, especially if they desire to remain employed in the public school system. Specific to California, “STAR” testing (Standardized Testing and Reporting Program) measures performance on the California Achievement Test. Interestingly, according to their own website, the number of students who receive accommodations (and are therefore excluded from normal test results) continues to grow. The difficulty is that this falsely inflates test averages and makes it appear as if the current educational methods are succeeding in producing the desired improvement.

If learning is to truly replace teaching in the classroom, using these terms as previously defined, it must happen first at the philosophical level. Returning to our Biblical foundation, we find that Jesus wasn’t simply content with delivering information and hoping for understanding. It was vital to Him that the disciples not only understood His words, but also were able to process it internally by adopting the truths being taught as their own.

Though Chapter 5 discussed in detail the example of Jesus as the Master Teacher, an additional illustration, as it relates to the stark contrast between teaching and learning, is warranted here. Jesus told a classic story now commonly referred to as the Parable of the Sower. After giving the illustration to the masses that were following Him, He pulled the disciples aside for deeper discussion. “Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.” A deeper word study reveals Jesus was basically saying, “Now here is the explanation of the story I told about the farmer sowing grain.” He intentionally created an opportunity with His chosen twelve to make sure they understood the meaning behind the story.

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7 Matthew 13:18, Holy Bible, King James Version
While Jesus could have patted Himself on the back for another outstanding oratory delivery, He chose instead to go beyond regular expectations to make certain His words had not been spoken in vain. His goal was not to engage in teaching for the purpose of self-fulfillment but to facilitate individual learning for the lifelong benefit of the student. Interestingly, in His pursuit of instruction that would literally transform lives, He became widely accepted as the greatest teacher in history. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ explains, “Many view Jesus as the greatest teacher in history. No other man has been quoted as often or has inspired as many books and articles. His teachings have given us clear, profound insights into the deepest questions of life. People flocked to hear Him speak. The disciples left everything to follow Him. What kind of teacher could inspire such loyalty?”

What kind of teacher indeed.

Setting debate aside for the moment, the real issue at hand is determining whether or not a student has actually learned. When we’ve finished wading through the countless methods of teaching and endless educational philosophies, the only thing that really matters is whether or not a child’s educational confidence has grown and academic understanding has increased. Perhaps our focus moving forward should be much less on evaluating teachers against an arbitrary definition of “standards” and much more on assessing the progress of the individual students in their classes (more on this in Chapter 12.)

Unfortunately, prevailing educational philosophy would seem to disagree. Consider this summary by Armstrong of President George W. Bush’s recent national educational initiative, “No Child Left Behind.” Notice that the greatest emphasis is placed upon teachers and forcing their compliance rather than addressing the needs of the individual.

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Achievement is defined (by No Child Left Behind) as learning a set curriculum based on predetermined state standards followed by measurement of that learning though standardized, regularly scheduled assessments. Controls are in place to define, regulate and monitor the work of classroom teachers on all grade levels. Fiscal incentives, structured government supports and clearly defined consequences are in place to support district cooperation and teacher compliance.⁹

Ultimately, the lesson to be learned here is that our educational system is in dramatic, even desperate need of educators who are not in love with the sound of their own voice. It is far too easy to desire students who will simply conform to a teacher’s preferred methods of academic instruction than joyfully choosing to take the time and effort needed to adjust teaching techniques to the actual needs and styles of the students. Lecturers don’t change lives; genuine teachers do. When methods become intentionally focused upon individual students rather than personal preferences or sweeping standards, genuine learning may once again become the central focus of our schools.

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CHAPTER 9

THE FALLACY OF CONSTANT HOMEWORK

(The Reality of Educational Fatigue)

*Homework strongly indicates that the teachers are not doing their jobs well enough during the school day.* ~ Jim Benton

Attempting to ascertain the historical origins of homework is much like trying to discover the final resting place of Moses. Scripture says God personally buried Moses in a valley somewhere in the land of Moab. While plenteous theories abound, the reality is the world will most likely never locate his burial site. So it is with homework. While educational trends can certainly be documented over the past 100 years or so, no real consensus has ever existed over any aspect of assigning students work to complete away from school.

A common theory holds that homework was dramatically increased in the World War II era. As fathers were deployed overseas and mothers were reluctantly forced into the workplace, there was no one left at home to watch the children. In an effort to keep them occupied and out of trouble, mothers asked teachers to provide students additional work to do at home. If this is even partially true, then a significant crack exists in the foundational philosophy of homework’s purpose.

Factually, we know that homework was greatly frowned upon in American culture. In fact, the California legislature passed an act in 1901 that effectively abolished homework.
from kindergarten through eighth grade. That decision would be reversed in the 1950s. As the United States faced great pressure to stay ahead of Russia in the Cold War, homework made a strong resurgence. Educators began to highly encourage students to keep up with their Russian counterparts.

Over time, the virtues of homework have ridden a wild roller coaster of parental emotion, and a plethora of approaches have been tested with limited success. Every presidential educational plan over the past several decades has featured some element of homework improvement. It is interesting then, that in a 2006 study, Professor Curt Dudley-Marling of Boston College Lynch School of Education concluded that, “Homework [has been] the focus of many versions of educational reform; yet research on the efficacy of homework as a means of raising student achievement is mixed at best.”

Dudley-Marling goes on to reveal that parents who were interviewed for this study indicated that “homework was a significant presence in their homes” and that “overall, the demands of homework disrupted their lives, frequently upsetting family relationships and denying parents and children many pleasures of family life.” Many modern parents remember what is was like in their childhood to just “be a kid.” They increasingly regret and even resent the educational demands being placed upon their children. It seems the proverbial train has left the station and no one knows how to stop it. Alfie Kohn, a critic of homework, recently wrote in summary of a Center for Public Education study. "There was no consistent

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
linear or curvilinear relation between the amount of time spent on homework and the child's level of academic achievement.”

In short, there is no reliable proof that consistent homework has a positive effect. According to Harris Cooper, Chairman of the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University, the evidence is even more overwhelming. “It is well established that after a certain amount of homework the positive effect on achievement disappears, and might even turn negative.” He summarizes what parents have known instinctively for years: too much homework produces negative results. Students demonstrate this on an almost daily basis as their emotional resistance to homework continues to mount.

Cooper, author of "The Battle Over Homework" continues to explain. “[Homework] can also have negative effects, like increasing boredom with schoolwork and reducing the time students have to spend on leisure activities that teach important life skills. Parents can get too involved in homework — pressuring their child and confusing him by using different instructional techniques from those used by the teacher.” You can almost here the silent “Amen” from any parent who has felt the burden of their child’s nightly schoolwork ritual. In a final caution on too much homework, Cooper summarizes,

The effects of homework depends on how well, or poorly, it is used...All children can benefit from homework but it is a very rare child who will benefit from hours and hours of homework. The fact is, too much homework not only crowds out time for other activities and increases stress on kids but there is no evidence that those last

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7 Ibid.

The discussion, then, begs the question, “If so much negative evidence exists which clearly undermines the efficacy of large amounts of homework, why do modern educational reforms continue to put forward the notion that more time spent at home on schoolwork is an integral part of the solution to our academic crisis?” Parents, administrators, teachers and politicians alike should strongly consider the fact that these are “children”, even if they are in high school, who are expected to commit 8-12 hours each weekday, on average, to their studies. The time required is more than the average American adult, who benefits from greater emotional maturity, spends at work on a daily basis.

Another critical issue to consider is the real possibility that teachers have come to rely on daily homework to make certain an actual attempt at instruction takes place. Perhaps it’s a convenient tool to employ because they are too busy during the day maintaining control in their classrooms, preparing for and administering tests, or maybe they are clinging to an easy educational crutch that requires less personal time for academic preparation. Even when used by the best teachers for altruistic purposes, the countless hours of homework grading steals from their own family time. This obviously affects the teacher personally and will most likely cause issues that will creep into the classroom over the long term.

Regardless of the reason for its utilization, it’s a completely valid possibility that the homework epidemic in America is producing significant educational fatigue in our students. We wonder why many students choose not to pursue collegiate careers. Could it be that they
are simply worn out after high school? Maybe they are just mentally exhausted and need a break from the pressures of scholastic life.

The National Education Association has issued a useful parent guide that gives suggested homework guidelines. They use what is commonly referred to as the “10 Minute Rule,” which suggests teachers simply multiply a child’s grade by 10 to produce a rough guide for how many minutes of homework a student should have per night. Using this formula, a senior in high school should have no more than 2 hours of homework per night on average. It is clear that many if not most of our schools, both public and private, are grossly exceeding these guidelines.

If a teacher is not able to successfully communicate the vast majority of what needs to be learned in the course of the school day, then a thorough evaluation of our instructional methods and expectations must take place. The answer cannot be a continual call for more and more homework in an effort to make sure our children do well on tests. Surely it is obvious by now the problem must be much deeper. Educational fatigue is real. Student frustration is growing. Parental concern is increasing. National test scores are declining. Teachers are leaving their chosen profession. There is an abundance of unhappiness to go around. We are at such a crucial time in our history that wholesale change cannot be regarded as just a possibility; it must be seen as an absolute necessity. Only a clarion call for a full and systematic return to academic individualization and mastery learning methods will repair our rapidly deteriorating educational system. More homework is not the answer.

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CHAPTER 10

ADMINISTRATING INDIVIDUALIZATION
(Balancing Student Need and Teacher Satisfaction)

*Teachers have three loves: love of learning, love of learners, and the love of bringing the first two loves together.* – Scott Hayden

The role of the administrator is comprised of many simultaneous hats. There is daily interaction with students, parents, teachers, staff, community leaders, committees, board directors or district officials, vendors, advertisers and much more. The load is quite enormous and the pressure can be extremely taxing. If an administrator is to lead the charge in reintroducing individualization and mastery learning to the culture of a school, then he must carefully handle the previously listed responsibilities with an overall focus of balancing student need with teacher satisfaction. Let’s discuss each of those terms in order.

Once a clear need has been established in the minds of the decision makers that a comprehensive return to the educational roots of individualization and mastery learning is desperately needed, the pressing task turns to convincing the teaching staff that much of what they were taught in college concerning educational methods was at best seriously incomplete and at worst completely false. This can be taken as a personal affront to their intellectual security as well as their emotional stability. Great care must be used to help the teacher separate their personal teaching ability from their level of philosophical understanding. As it
has been said, “old habits die hard” or, perhaps even more appropriately, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

While we would completely disagree that an educator cannot “unlearn” flawed educational theories, we must acknowledge that the longer one has been in the field of education the more difficult it becomes to significantly alter comfortable and familiar patterns. This is especially true if the teacher has experienced moderate or pronounced success in his or her classroom. How then does an ambitious administrator successfully convince an established faculty to drastically change their approach to students in the classroom?

What holds true for the student in learning holds true for the educator as well. While we internalize very little of what we’re told, we understand much more easily what we are able to “see.” After reading this thesis, hopefully the reader will be intellectually convinced of its accuracy, but far better would be to see effective individualization and mastery learning in action. Consider why television advertising costs so much more than radio spots?¹ Most would agree it’s because the value of visual stimuli is perceived to be higher and therefore worth considerably more. Administrators must seek out opportunities for the staff to actively observe individualization in action. They must see test scores, talk to students and parents, analyze their interactions and evaluate the results. Convinced teachers make much better educational partners.

In our research, the most common objection given by teachers, or perhaps a better word is concern, revolves around a potential loss of opportunities to “really” teach. Somehow they’ve been innately conditioned to view skewing the classroom toward more one-on-one instruction as not truly teaching. To accept this premise, however, forces us to conclude that

a homeschooling parent also never actually teaches. While we know that to be erroneous, it does prompt us to ascertain a valid definition or description for the word “teach.” A simple dictionary search provides this explanation: “to cause or help [a person] to learn how to do something by giving lessons, showing how it is done.”\(^2\) Note the emphasis on the individual and not a collective group of people.

Further, there seems to be a real misunderstanding of the term individualization. Blackburn and Powell offer this insight.

“Individualized instruction does not necessarily mean that students work alone all the time; nor does it mean that the teacher works with only one student at a time. Individualized instruction can occur when one student works alone or with other students and when a teacher works with one student or a group of students. It usually includes some combination or all of these.”\(^3\)

The incorporation of individualization into a school setting rarely causes lasting concern from students or parents. Most families are desperately seeking more attention for their children and are grateful for any promising change that will result in greater amounts of time spent in one-on-one instruction. Consistently, the hardest part is overcoming the faculty’s emotional resistance to giving up their perceived control of the academic outcomes of his or her classroom’s educational product. Author Dave Cullen says, “You can't really teach a kid anything: you can only show him the way and motivate him to learn it himself.”\(^4\) Parents instinctively know this to be correct.

We are led to believe that students can’t learn without a teacher orally explaining the concepts to them. Could that possibly be right? Think about the countless activities we have


\(^3\) Jack E. Blackburn and W. Conrad Powell, One at a Time All at Once: the Creative Teacher’s Guide to Individualized Instruction without Anarchy, Goodyear Publishing, pg. 3 (1976)

learned from simple observation or self-instruction. From childhood through adulthood, there is so much knowledge we gain just by noticing the world around us. We unconsciously learn something every day either about someone, a specific subject or a personal concern. We intuitively accept this truth as inarguable so why is it so difficult to include it in our improving model for education? While money is a large factor (we will discuss this in Chapter 16) perhaps the biggest obstacle needing to be overcome is the basic fear of change.

When a desired outcome is anything but certain human nature tends to stay where we can most likely predict the results, even if we yearn for something greater. Fear can hold us captive in many areas of life, not the least of which is change. If we are to attain considerably more than we currently have, we may need to do something entirely different than we’ve always done. Scripture tells us, “God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”^5 When we are afraid of change we are not operating in the power of the Holy Spirit.

After years of personal involvement in an educational paradigm that features a strong commitment to individualization and mastery learning, it is this author’s firm belief there is no greater satisfaction for a teacher than actively participating in the learning process of a child. This does not require becoming the proverbial “sage on the stage” and being the fountain of all knowledge. True education is about helping a child move from “Point A” to “Point B”, regardless of where his or her “Point A” may originate.

A final thought is necessary. Our conclusion is far from stating there is no benefit to the group lecture type of method or class discussion. There is much to be learned from an experienced teacher who successfully weaves current events, entertaining stories and personal applications into the dialogue of a predetermined lesson. For example, many

^5 2 Timothy 1:7; Holy Bible, King James Version
children who are avid readers actually grow up pronouncing complex words incorrectly because they never heard the word audibly and no one ever taught them the correct way to pronounce it. Students can also develop distorted views of history if they have only read from one source, especially if it’s historically inaccurate.

Self-guided instruction will never completely replace the benefits of a quality teacher, but many believe the teaching methods currently employed in the majority of our schools are not easily conducive to the individual, nor are they Biblically based in their approach. The act of teaching must be redefined if teachers are to be fulfilled in their roles and if students are to be encouraged in becoming life-long learners (more in Chapter 17). Therefore, the sensitive administrator must paint a proper picture of the benefits of moving to an individualization and mastery learning philosophy of education. He must be sure to include sufficient evidence of the sheer joy an educator will experience as the “light” comes on in a child’s mind, knowing that the true goal of being a teacher is not to hear one’s own voice but to intentionally provoke inquiry in the mind of a child.

The goal must be to see students learning, not teachers teaching. Perhaps, at some point, a book will be effectively written on “Administrating Individualization” that will delve into much greater detail, in a step-by-step fashion, to assist administrators in turning their giant ship of education (which some would caustically refer to as the “Titanic” because it’s currently doomed for disaster) toward a different horizon. In the end, however, we easily conclude that the balance between student need and teacher satisfaction can successfully be maintained when the teaching staff has a properly developed educational perspective. Keeping this principle foremost in the hearts and minds of the faculty and staff must be an administrator’s primary role if he is to be effective in leading educational transformation. The
only other possibility is to continue “doing what we’re doing” and hoping for different results which, as the old saying goes, is the definition of insanity. Since we are quite certain of where the current direction of education is heading, it’s critical that we immediately change course.
CHAPTER 11
REORIENTING THE TEACHER’S APPROACH
(The Reward of Individual Student Progress)

When you want to teach children to think, you begin by treating them seriously when they are little, giving them responsibilities, talking to them candidly, providing privacy and solitude for them, and making them readers and thinkers of significant thoughts from the beginning. That’s if you want to teach them to think. ~ Bertrand Russell

Children have long played a game called “Pin the Tail on the Donkey.” As most adults understand, the child’s goal is to successfully walk several steps while blindfolded and attach the donkey’s “tail” to the appropriate part of the animal’s anatomy. The adult’s goal, however, is to spin the child around so many times that they lose their sense of balance, pin said “tail” in a comical place, assuming of course that the child stays upright. This provides laughter and enjoyment to those watching the game. Clearly there are two fundamentally different desires at play.

Though we have already discussed individualization from a Biblical worldview, it is critical here that we mention an aspect of education not yet mentioned. Scripture clearly states we have an “enemy of our souls” who greatly desires to see our lives end in total failure.¹ It stands to reason that he would do everything possible to frustrate both students and teachers alike in the incredibly vital process of education. Why? Because if a child isn’t

¹ Psalm 143:3, Holy Bible, King James Version
successfully taught to be a life-long learner and lover of God, they will most likely be unwilling or unable to continue learning at all – and this includes studying the Bible. Education is not a game. It is a fierce battle for the heart and soul of the student. If godly philosophies are not effectively communicated and instilled in our children, we face a steep uphill battle to reclaim that child’s mind in the future. Christians must be determined, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to win this war by a wide margin.

Why include these thoughts when discussing the reorientation of the teacher’s approach in the classroom? It’s because the underlying truth of our educational methods must be based upon the truth of Scripture, not just as it relates to “how” to individualize but more importantly “why” to individualize. If teachers are to fully “buy in” to this scholastic approach they must be completely convinced not only of its merits but also of its unmatched results in the classroom setting. A teacher must personally believe in the supremacy of individualization for it to produce quality results.

In our previous chapter on administration, we laid the prerequisite foundation for further discussion of the teacher’s role in the individualized classroom. It is our strong belief that life-changing mastery learning can only be truly achieved in the nurturing climate of academic individualization. What many students fail to receive in a group they gain in abundance when the curriculum is individualized to their current level of academic aptitude. In vivid support of that statement, a somewhat lengthy but true story is applicable here.

His name was Thomas and he was failing the same algebra course for the third consecutive year. As with many students who struggle in school, Thomas had resorted to acting out in class. This, of course, garnered him no favor with his teacher. He sought attention through his comical antics, doing anything he could to avoid the academic reality he
was facing. Though he has been at his previous school for several years, his mother knew that something had to change.

By the time he enrolled in a school that utilized an individualized educational method, his level of frustration had grown quite high. In the initial interview with his new academic counselor, an interesting thing happened. After reviewing his math scores, which were basically “F’s” for the past five semesters, the counselor directly addressed the issue. “Thomas, we’re going to give you an academic evaluation test. What we’re going to find is that you struggle with fractions, decimals and percentages, right?”

Up until that moment, Thomas had maintained respectable eye contact but immediately dropped his head out of embarrassment. He simply nodded. The counselor continued. “It’s all right, Thomas. Your experience isn’t abnormal. Many students who struggle in algebra do so because they lack a proper academic foundation in fundamental math skills. It’s not your fault. It just means no one took time to make sure you had mastered the concepts you needed to know.”

Sadly, Thomas’s experience is incredibly commonplace. Thousands upon thousands of students are given passing grades every year without having properly mastered the needed concepts to ensure their success in subsequent classes. While the reasons for this debacle are arguable – large class sizes, inadequate teachers, faulty educational methods, lack of funding and many more – the reality is that parents and their children are left to face the real world consequences of our school systems blindly promoting and graduating grossly undereducated students.

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students. Additionally, our culture continues to pay the price as a maturing generation takes the reigns of a society they are ill-equipped to maintain.

Thomas’ school designed an individualized remedial math course for him. In effect, they pressed “pause” on algebra and focused for the next 90 days on improving his rudimentary math abilities. While Thomas will never be a math genius (it simply isn’t his gifting) he did vastly improve in the area of fractions, decimals and percentages. Once his remedial course was completed, he took a placement examination to determine specifically what algebraic concepts were the most difficult for him to comprehend. To everyone’s great surprise, Thomas tested out of algebra, revealing that his struggles were never really about the “x’s and y’s” but about the underlying lack of basic math proficiency.

It would be wonderful if the conclusion to Thomas’ story was common, but sadly it is not. For this reason, it is incredibly important that teachers learn to love watching a singular student excel rather than judging their effectiveness by the overall grade average of the class.

We find in Scripture that Jesus clearly illustrated this important distinction:

…if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.⁴

Of course, this verse in context is talking about spiritual salvation, but the implication is clear. God cares about the “one” more than the “many.” He throws a party when one is rescued and cared for deliberately. Should education be any different? Are we not called to serve the child as an individual? Should his or her

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⁴ Matthew 18:12-13, Holy Bible, King James Version
success not be our singular focus? Should we not rejoice greatly when we see them making academic progress? Certainly a teacher is responsible for every student in the classroom, but inarguably as individuals not just an indistinct crowd.

When educators learn to find their reward in the growth of the student instead of the collective advancement of the class, the process of education in America will begin to change. When parents realize that the way they were educated is not historically how education has taken place in America, nor was it changed because the modern way is “better”, their cry for educational reform will not be easily silenced. It is far too easy, especially in the climate of an academia driven to test results hysteria, for a teacher to be pacified with overall class progress rather than being forced to address each child’s needs individually.

The modern educational system can no longer be allowed to label struggling students as “behind” or “disadvantaged” and continue to add them to “special needs” classes when all they really require is a greater amount of one-on-one attention. “Needing” a teacher is not abnormal. In fact, any teacher who is satisfied with the majority of their class doing well at the expense of one or two students’ inadequate progress should seriously rethink whether they’ve chosen the right profession. A teacher’s primary concern cannot be how parents or administrators perceive him or her, but rather how well each child in his or her care is learning.

In the end, the key to successfully reorienting a teacher’s approach toward the individualization of education in the classroom is not by selling them on test results. Data can easily be manipulated to say almost anything desired, as any student in a college-level statistics class is familiar. No, the secret is helping them remember why
they most likely entered the teaching profession in the first place. They enjoy helping children learn. To paraphrase the Apostle John, there is no greater joy for a teacher than to see a student learn and then apply their knowledge.\textsuperscript{5} This is best accomplished through seeing students as unique vessels created by God, requiring individualized attention in order to reach their full potential. Once we help teachers “see” the difference, true educational reform will gain an irrevocable momentum in our society.

\textsuperscript{5} 3 John 1:4, Holy Bible, King James Version
CHAPTER 12
EVALUATING STANDARDIZED TESTING
(The Importance of Relevant Interpretation)

Believing we can improve schooling with more tests is like believing you can make yourself grow taller by measuring your height. ~ Robert Schaeffer

As we begin the discussion of utilizing standardized testing as an educational tool, we must acknowledge that one chapter in a single thesis cannot begin to scratch the surface of data available nor can it exhaust every argument on the subject. Discussing the relevance of testing for improving educational systems in America is a virtual powder keg. There are strong feelings on multiple sides of the debate with no easy resolution in sight. It’s a complex issue that encompasses multiple motivations and schools of thought.

Those involved in the high stakes of public education and standardized testing are concerned for good cause. As author Richard Elmore puts it, “Past efforts at school reform give little cause for optimism…”¹ Yet, more testing is continually advocated even though the results of those tests leave administrators without solid solutions. Phillip Schlehty, author of Inventing Better Schools and apparent advocate for testing, also recognizes the problem. “Measuring results is important precisely because it is only through measurement that we can know when processes are out of

control or when the system is not performing as well as it should. But these measurements provide little assistance in figuring out what to do when this happens.”

Evidently, testing proves that problems exist and that restructuring is needed but provides no real solutions. Elmore summarizes the issue. “Behind the idea of restructured schools is a fragile consensus that public schools, as they are presently constituted, are not capable of meeting society’s expectations for the education of young people.”

Nevertheless, the volume of academic testing in America remains at record high levels. Renowned author and poet, Peter Sacks, states, "Americans are taking as many as 600 million standardized tests each year in schools, colleges, and universities, and the workplace." With the rise of testing comes a corresponding rise in student anxiety. According to Dawson Hancock, in the 2001 Journal of Educational Research, “Statistically significant interactions revealed that all the students, particularly the test-anxious students, performed poorly and were less motivated when exposed to highly evaluative classrooms.” That finding is astonishing as it reveals clearly that all students performed poorly, not just those who tended to display text anxiety. It appears that increased testing may not be the answer after all.

Still, when parents are investigating possible new schools for their children, one of the most common questions asked revolves around testing results. People want

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4 Peter Sacks, Standardized Minds: The High Price Of America's Testing Culture And What We Can Do To Change It, Da Capo Press (2001), pg. 12
to know how a school fares when compared to its competitors. It seems the only method actively presented as a reliable means of evaluation by many educational leaders is the close analysis of standardized test scores. Although parents are often not equipped with the tools to properly understand the answers given, they nevertheless have been socially trained to ask the “right” questions.

Dr. Paul D. Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, is recognized as a leading spokesperson for education. Using a pop culture reference, he said of testing, "Only on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' can people rise to the top by rote memorization and answers to multiple-choice questions. The final answer to improving education is more than memorizing facts for a multiple-choice test. Children today need critical thinking skills, creativity, perseverance, and integrity – qualities not measured on a standardized test."6

It’s an interesting and apt analogy. It has been argued for years that testing merely disciplines children to memorize answers without making sure the needed understanding has occurred. While some things undoubtedly need to be memorized (such as speeches, dates, and names of famous figures with their accomplishments), they become useless facts if not adequately paired with their context and importance in history. For example, determine which is more important: knowing that the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, or understanding the plethora of social and spiritual reasons the document was originally penned?

Standardized testing can assuredly measure the former but many would agree that true education is much more about communicating the latter.

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We are not arguing that testing serves no purpose. There is simply no way to measure effectiveness unless some kind of standard is set and then examined intentionally and consistently. One must surely concede the point that “learning outcomes assessment is a critical part of a program’s success. It can affect a program’s reputation, enrollment, funding, and even its continued existence.”\(^7\) The reality for the school administrator, especially one who embraces the educational method of individualization and mastery learning, is that standardized testing results do have a very strong impact that dramatically affects how the public views a school’s overall effectiveness.

The contention here is that there is a fundamental flaw in standardized testing and its interpretation. It can only measure certain aspects of learning, and regrettably compares students against other students to determine what is supposedly above or below average. Notice the following summary from a 2009 study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics. “Graduates with stronger academic records earned higher NAEP scores. For example, graduates who completed a rigorous curriculum, completed a higher level mathematics or science course in ninth grade, or who completed an Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) mathematics or science course, had NAEP scores at the Proficient level in both mathematics and science.”\(^8\)

While it definitely sounds convincing, the study did no analysis of students prior to their enrollment, neglecting to ascertain if they had already reached the level

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\(^8\) National Center for Education Statistics, “America’s High School Graduates: Results of the 2009 NAEP High School Transcript Study” (2009)
of “proficient.” There was no pretesting. It also didn’t take into account that students who enroll in these more difficult classes most likely already have an underlying ability and interest in math and/or science. Further, and perhaps most importantly, it seems to firmly establish an oversimplification in the mind of many students. They can easily believe, “If I’m not good at math or science, I must not be normal. I’m below average.” The damage that inaccurate interpretation can do to a child’s feeling of self-worth may well be incalculable.

Understandably, there is widespread disparity about the proper method of interpreting test results, and even agreeing on which data is considered most important. This is apparently true not just of parents but also of supposedly trained educators. Kurt Landgraf, President and CEO of Educational Testing Service, declares, “Too often…hasty judgments about test scores result in superficial responses to real educational issues.” ⁹ While educational officials intently focus on national stanines, which are basically national averages to determine how a student compares to same-aged students across the nation, the conversation is slowly beginning to turn more toward comparing a student’s current scores against their previous scores to determine the rate of individual progress.

We must carefully consider which approach is more valuable. The accepted standard is to compare a child against thousands of others near the same age and decide if he or she is above or below national averages. Alternately, we could bravely embrace the philosophy of measuring individual progress to guarantee consistent academic growth is taking place. Stated simply, is it more important to ascertain

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whether students are above or below average by comparison to others or if they are growing as unique individuals? If we choose the latter then perhaps we should follow the advice of author and political activist, Ralph Nader, when he said, "It is time to end the obsession in Washington and elsewhere with standardized tests."\(^{10}\)

Jean Piaget, a well-respected Swiss psychologist and philosopher who was mostly known for his emphasis on the importance of childhood education, interestingly remarked, "Anyone can confirm how little the grading that results from examinations corresponds to the final useful work of people in life."\(^{11}\) His comments were based upon his life experience, and it seems most adults would readily agree with his findings. It has long been known that success in high school and college doesn’t necessarily translate into real world success. There are countless effective people (some famous but most not) who have become successful in life without the benefit of good grades, a college education or sometimes even a high school diploma.

Some educational voices are, in fact, diametrically opposed to testing in education. Educational author Alfie Kohn believes, "Every hour spent on such exam preparation is an hour not spent helping students to become critical, creative, curious learners."\(^{12}\) Bill Goodling, as chair of the House Education Committee, said, "If testing is the answer to our education problems, it would have solved them a long time ago."\(^{13}\) Point taken. Why then is our current political culture so adamant that testing be the ultimate measuring tool for grading student and teacher performance?

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Some would argue that accountability is absolutely necessary, since it is
certainly a spiritual principle. The issue is not whether to hold teachers and
administrators accountable. The problem is agreeing upon the method. Author Peter
Sacks wrote, “If social engineers had set out to invent a virtually perfect inequality
machine, designed to perpetuate class and race divisions, and that appeared to abide
by all requisite state and federal laws and regulations, those engineers could do no
better than the present-day accountability systems already put to use in American
schools.”\textsuperscript{14} Strong words to be sure, but they unfortunately ring resoundingly true.

Before we conclude this discussion we must introduce one last potentially
uncomfortable yet relevant concern. In our rush to use collective data to quantify
educational progress, we are ignoring the fact that not all students are capable of
achieving the same level of academic progress. Just as it is commonly accepted that
some people are better athletes while others are better writers or orators, it must be
accepted that not all students are created with the skill sets necessary to succeed
according to illogical pre-determined standards.

Notice Jesus’ parable about the talents. “And unto one he gave five talents, to
another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability.”\textsuperscript{15}
Jesus easily acknowledges that different people have different levels of God-given
ability. If we are to provide a Biblically-based education for our students, we must
actively incorporate the knowledge we gain from testing into improving each child’s
academic program. We must not use the same data to pigeonhole pupils into a pre-
determined category or give them an unnecessary, often detrimental label.

\textsuperscript{14} Carolyn S. Carr (Editor), Connie L. Fulmer (Editor), \textit{Educational Leadership: Knowing the Way, Showing the Way, Going the Way}, R&L Education (2004) pg. 126
\textsuperscript{15} Matthew 25:15, Holy Bible, King James Version
As George Bernard Shaw, co-founder of the London School of Economics, stated, "What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge and not knowledge in pursuit of the child." In the end, if we are to continue using standardized testing as a measuring tool, it is absolutely critical that we not underestimate the importance of relevant test interpretation. More importantly, we must correctly utilize that data to help every child become a life-long learner. We can no longer afford to allow national “norms” to drive our scholastic methods. It is way beyond time that we reclaim education in favor of the individual child rather than the supposed collective good of the classroom. We must do all we can to eliminate the emotional distress our current use of standardized testing provides. More testing is not the answer to the fundamental educational questions being asked. We must be courageous enough to say it, and then possess the internal resolve to stand by our convictions.

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CHAPTER 13

RESETTING PARENT’S EXPECTATIONS

(Helping Moms & Dads Value Individual Success)

*Education is a shared commitment between dedicated teachers, motivated students and enthusiastic parents with unrealistic expectations.* ~ Bob Beauprez

There’s a family story told of a father bringing his first child home from the hospital. After walking into the immaculately prepared nursery, with a newborn lying in a crib, he remarked loudly, “Oh my God, what have I done?” Though humorous in context, because he was reflecting upon the responsibility he had assumed for a nurturing a young life, it brings into stark reality the duty and accountability parents have before God for properly raising their children.

For those privileged to be parents, there is a shared common feeling of anticipation. There are many things expected from children, and rightfully so. They are expected to be polite and respectful to adults. They are expected to finish their dinner and clean their rooms. They are expected to complete their homework and get good grades. They are expected to go to college and become productive adults. There are unquestionably a lot of expectations, but are they all realistic? Most students would probably argue an emphatic, “No!”

The problem comes when Christian parents are encouraged to accept society’s definition of success rather than seeking God’s heart to understand His plan for their children. We again refer to the book of Jeremiah where God emphatically states He has good
plans for everyone who chooses to place their hope in Him. If Almighty God has plans for our children, does it not stand to reason that we should align our expectations with His definition of success for their lives? Though it may sound like academic heresy, is it possible God didn’t intend for every child to attend college? Is it possible He has given some people skills to work with their hands that would be best developed in a trade school or under the individualized instruction of a patient mentor?

The danger, if we continue to allow our culture to determine the definition of success, is that children will be deterred from accepting and following God’s best for their lives in favor of yielding to the prevailing pressure of society. Well-meaning parents can easily add to this burden by failing to discover the gifts and abilities God has placed within their children, thereby adding to their stress and anxiety by insisting they become “good” at something for which they were never intended to excel.

In the modern era of standardized testing, it seems every educational initiative “expands the purpose of testing from simply providing feedback to parents on student progress to also being the principal definer of teacher…competency.” This provides great basis for parents to blame their child’s lack of “proper” educational advancement on the teacher. If the child is not “succeeding” it can’t be his or her fault so we blame the instructor. No other plausible reasons are seriously considered.

Our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, who was largely self-educated and never attended college, is reported to have said, “Whatever you are, be a good one.” If there were ever a national figure perfectly positioned to exert their influence upon the youth of America, arguably it would be the President. Mr. Lincoln could have suggested students pursue higher

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1 Jeremiah 29:11, Holy Bible, King James Version
levels of math and science, study to be doctors or attorneys, or even become members of the clergy. Instead, he chose to promote individuality, encouraging people to purposefully develop the skills that peaked their interest to the best of their ability. Clearly Mr. Lincoln knew the value of pursuing the dreams God places in our hearts. One of his personal life-long ambitions, which he achieved profoundly, was to end slavery in the United States. It doesn’t appear as if anyone believes he was unsuccessful in life because he didn’t receive a collegiate degree.

We are not saying there is no value in higher education, but rather quite the opposite. In an increasingly competitive job market that greatly values academic degrees, it is highly suggested that students strongly consider college as a necessary step toward realizing a productive professional life. There is much to be said for the benefit of advanced education in one’s chosen field of study. The argument to be made, however, is that collectively assuming the best path for every child includes college or university is incredibly presumptuous.

Diane Ravitch, a nationally known educator and former member of President George W. Bush’s educational council, has said, “In my professional life, everyone I interact with has one or several degrees. In my real life, where things break down and someone has to do work that is essential to my daily life, many—most—do not have a diploma. Should they? That should be their choice, not my compulsion.”4 It’s an incredibly interesting opinion that has provoked strong response from all sides of the argument. Peter Cunningham, Arne Duncan’s (Secretary of Education) former Assistant Director for Communications and Outreach, suggested this idea to be racially motivated by stating, “Whom exactly is she referring to?

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It’s certainly not rich white kids. It’s definitely not the children of middle class parents, who view college for the kids as one of the core pillars of the American Dream.\textsuperscript{5}

Individuality is not a racist idea. It is a God idea. If we are to help children fully develop their God-intended potential, we must carefully reset our expectations without caring whether or not our culture grants approval. Parents cannot allow society to determine a parenting plan, especially when it will likely place unnecessary and excessive pressure on children to “keep up” with everyone else to be considered a “normal” student.

Returning our discussion to pre-collegiate academics, and faithfully applying these principles of individuality to the subject of parental expectations, let us determine, then, how to set achievable yet challenging goals for students. How does a parent (or even educators for that matter) recognize and respect the individuality of children and yet compel them to achieve their potential? This is especially difficult when a child so rarely sees or acknowledges his or her own capabilities, much less possess a clear picture of how they see the outcome of their educational career. Parents must find creative ways to overcome these obstacles and strongly encourage students to go beyond any perceived limitations, pushing themselves to achieve all of which they’re capable.

According to a 1994 study commissioned by the National Committee for Citizens in Education, “Parental involvement is critical to the success of students... A significant body of research indicates that when parents participate in their children’s education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students’ attitudes.”\textsuperscript{6} While our response might be to readily agree with a dismissive attitude of “we already knew that,” we


must then ask ourselves why so many students have attitudes toward school that are perceived as poor? Could it possibly be because the vast amount of parental participation comes in the form of negative pressure and unfair comparisons rather than positive reinforcement and crucial understanding?

Let’s approach this subject from another angle. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, most parents have more than one child.⁷ As any experienced mother or father knows, all children are unique. While there will certainly be striking similarities in some areas, there will also be a great many things that are vastly different. If comparisons are made of those children at approximately the same age, a long list of dissimilarities will most likely be found. Differences in personalities, aptitudes, interests, physical abilities, tastes, styles and so much more are not only observable, but also accepted as completely normal.

Somehow, though, when these same two children enter the classroom, albeit at different times due to age differences, they are suddenly expected to be the same, learn the same, act the same, behave the same – in effect, be the same. It seems utterly ridiculous, yet that exact scenario plays out every single day in our schools and is considered the “proper” way to educate children. If anyone speaks up in opposition to these indefensible methods, they are quickly labeled “old-fashioned” or “narrow-minded” to effectively obscure their voices.

Again, we are not arguing that progress shouldn’t be evaluated. Scripture clearly implies and even directly addresses the need to set goals and then work diligently to achieve them. However, as Lois Lebar states, “Progress should be measured, not by the place where a

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child is at the present moment…but by the distance we have helped him come.\textsuperscript{8} Within that simple yet revelatory statement lays the educational hopes and dreams of every student.

If individuality is to ever truly achieve a foothold in our schools, it will only begin with parents calling loudly and consistently for comprehensive reform. A return to an educational process that is intentionally focused on the distinctive abilities of the child and not the expectations of society is the only plausible hope. This one-size-fits-all approach to education has never proven largely successful and it never will because it is fatally flawed. Unfortunately, it is difficult to imagine these dramatic changes would ever be considered much less implemented in a society that denounces the authority of the Bible as the basis of individualized education. What Christians consider to be an imperative must be logically denied lest Scripture ever be re-established as an empirical standard for how to live life.

Regardless, parents are faced with a Divine mandate to purposely align their expectations with God’s design. If that results in a Doctorate in Philosophy and a lifetime achievement award for their child, so be it. If it instead produces a fulfilled adult who works with his hands and provides a benefit to society, can that be considered any less successful? Society might say, “Yes,” but if that child is fulfilling their God-ordained destiny we must say, “No.” When we truly learn to value individual successes without injecting unnecessary comparisons into the equation, perhaps our students will find the confidence to be the person they were created to become. We must successfully reset parental expectations to completely align with God’s intent that He carefully crafted for our children before the world began.

\textsuperscript{8} Lois Lebar, \textit{Children in the Bible School}, Fleming H. Revell Company, pg. 92 (1952)
CHAPTER 14
PARADIGMS AND PROCESSES
(Combining Modern Methods with Timeless Truths)

I am afraid that the schools will prove the very gates of hell, unless they
diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures and engraving
them in the heart of the youth. ~ Martin Luther

From very early in their lives, Hebrew children were taught the truth of Deuteronomy
Chapter 6. Jesus summarized this teaching when the Pharisees asked Him a question.
“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love
the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the
first and great commandment.”¹ According to Jesus, this verse was the foundation of all
moral truth. It was an undeniable summation of what God considered to be the most
important principle of all education. It wasn’t mathematics, language arts, biology or history.
It was the irrefutable fact that the most important thing a parent could infuse into the mind of
a child was their decision to firmly place God at the very top of his or her priority list.

In some Christian schools across our nation, especially in those sponsored by
churches, a strong difference of opinion has persisted for years. Somehow the thought of
embracing new methods and technology is often seen as requiring the abandonment of
Biblical fundamentals. When the personal computer first made a widespread entrance into

¹ Matthew 22:36-38, Holy Bible, King James Version
our world, Dr. Donald Howard, president of Accelerated Christian Education and an early proponent and developer of individualized Christian curriculum, began to urge his technological team to find beneficial ways to integrate this new technology with the tried and true educational methods of individualization and mastery learning.  

Unfortunately, Dr. Howard’s ahead-of-the-curve thinking was met with much resistance from some fundamentalists who somehow saw the inclusion of computer technology as a rejection of sound, Biblical principles. While most educators would find this concept laughable today, resistance to change still seems to plague the advancement of Christian education. While many schools emphatically list defined priorities in their Expected School-wide Learning Results (ESLR’s), they knowingly or unknowingly sacrifice those very principles to maintain standards of quality perceived necessary for academic accreditation, parental support and community approval.

It is certainly not our intention to have a doctrinal discussion here about altering methods and changing church priorities. However, it is nevertheless crucial to draw a clear distinction between changeable methods and unchangeable truths. One, we contend, is our obligation to modify over time as may be needed while the other is our obligation to maintain in purity with all determination.

It has long been posited that Jesus utilized the relevant methods of His day to communicate eternal truths of Scripture. Since stories were in vogue as a preferred method of speaking, He chose to speak in parables, using pertinent examples with which people could easily relate to understand Biblical values. That same logic would seem to suggest that if Jesus walked the earth today He would probably drive a vehicle, use high-quality video

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2 Author’s personal conversation with Dr. Donald Howard  
3 Ibid.  
illustrations and harness the power of the Internet to broadcast the Gospel. The point is, that regardless of the methods used, the message would never be altered.

Why is this issue appropriate in the discussion of individualization and mastery learning? Surely it’s apparent that the academic tools available today are dramatically altering the entire landscape of education. The benefits are simply too pronounced to continue to be ignored. We energetically advocate for the adoption of modern innovations to better facilitate the process of mastery learning. In our eagerness, however, we must never sacrifice foundational truths in the name of advancement or modernization.

Thomas Henry Huxley, who ironically advocated for Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, famously said, “People may talk about intellectual teaching, but what we principally want is the moral teaching.”5 Though he was certainly wrong about his theory of the origin of man, he was absolutely correct to place morality above academics. With that said, however, Christian educators must not allow old paradigms to trump modern processes.

As the effects of the combustion engine’s development made its way slowly across America, it was met with strong resistance. While people shouted, “Get a horse,” Henry Ford continued to advocate for the horseless carriage, which eventually revolutionized transportation around the world forever.6 Was Ford wrong to embrace new methods to accomplish old tasks? Presumably everyone would now support his previously doubted genius. In the same way, it would be foolish to deny the incredible advantage of newly developed educational tools and technological discoveries in the name of staying true to traditional values. They are obviously not mutually exclusive.

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5 Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2006)
Since we will discuss technology in more detail in Chapter 15, our goal here is to encourage Christian educators to be willing to explore new paradigms without feeling they must sacrifice cherished values. Continued education through conferences, publications, research and other sources are critical if we are to keep Christian education relevant to the modern educational discussion. Ecclesiastes tell us, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might…” Decidedly, the implication here is to do the best we can at whatever task God places before us.

If someone were seriously ill surely he or she would not choose a doctor who graduated medical school 40 years ago but had not engaged in any form of continuing education. Most likely a physician would be selected that not only had a strong academic background, but also had intentionally kept abreast of modern advances in medicine, thereby providing the best medical care available. Similarly, parents will be looking for schools that not only have a track record of pedagogic success but also are enthusiastically embracing new instructional tools, seeking to provide the most cutting edge, individualized education available today.

President Lincoln, upon being shot at point blank range by John Wilkes Booth, was medically treated by the archaic practice of phlebotomy, commonly called bloodletting. Though it appears impossible that Lincoln would have survived regardless, it serves as a reminder that our scientific knowledge has progressed significantly. Bloodletting today would be cause for a malpractice suit, and possibly, imprisonment. To continue to use outdated methods when better, proven academic processes are available simply doesn’t make sense. Effective educators today must boldly embrace new innovations, exploring their

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7 Ecclesiastes 9:10, Holy Bible, King James Version
potential benefit as an instrument of learning in the classroom, knowing that while our academic tools may change continually, our foundational, Biblical values must always remain the same. Our paradigms and processes may be challenged and improved, but Biblical truth can never be altered.
CHAPTER 15

UTILIZING MODERN TECHNOLOGY
(Embracing the 21st Century Classroom)

There can be infinite uses of the computer and of new age technology,
but if teachers themselves are not able to bring it into the classroom
and make it work, then it fails. ~ Senator Nancy Kassebaum

It has been suggested that nothing has changed education more since the invention of
the pen and paper than the dawn of the Internet age. Teachers who have watched the rapid
transition from within the walls of their classroom readily agree. Students who once were
forced to make repetitive trips to the local library can now complete their “research” without
ever leaving the comforts of their bedroom by using a laptop and a WiFi connection. Words
like “Google” and “Wikipedia” have entered the modern vocabulary when neither would
have been understood by the masses just several short years ago.

Children can now gain access to accurate (and inaccurate) information from the
simplicity of a web browser on many devices that can be easily held in the palm of a hand.
Innovations such as “Khan Academy” provide free lessons across a plethora of subjects that
are not only modern in presentation but also extremely beneficial in helping a student master
concepts that are currently a struggle.¹ Interestingly, Sal Khan, the founder of Khan

¹ Tung Lai Cheng, “Towards a New Era in Open Education: from the “Classical” to the “Inventive” World of
(November, 2013)
Academy, has recently promoted an initiative that resulted in establishing an academic entry point for all students coming to the website. Its purpose is to test every child and determine where he or she places academically – what they have mastered and what they have not – and then automatically customize a course of instruction for that specific student. It’s a wonderful example of innovation and individualization working together to provide a beneficial education for every student.

Innovations such as these makes it all the more ironic that we still observe the same methods commonly used decades ago in the majority of American classrooms today. A teacher, a textbook and a whiteboard are still the primary tools in the average teacher’s toolbox. Even in schools where some technology has been introduced, it is still largely limited in scope and purpose. Some schools now proudly advertise that all of their students use iPads, but deeper research reveals it is usually limited to being a digital replacement for traditional textbooks, employing no interactive learning and providing no real academic benefit.

A common reason given for the apparent lack of technological integration is the unavailability of funding. This would seem to be a true statement. Since we have previously established that inordinate amounts of money are spent on standardized testing and other debatable uses, there is no surplus of funds marked “technology” for expansion. Further, even if the money did exist, there seems to be no real clear plan for meaningful integration into the classroom setting. Curriculum publishers are grossly behind the technological curve.

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2 Sal Khan, “Khan Academy”, www.khanacademy.org
While the idea of interactive learning is dominating the retail market of preschool handheld devices (think Leapfrog, etc.), that method of instruction is seen as supplemental at best in our current constructs of academic thought.

Returning again to our test subject, Fairfield Christian School (FCS), we find the use of technology to be quite impressive. Every student in grades 4-12 has a computer at their desk. The entire core curriculum is presented digitally, often with interactive media, and then expounded upon by an instructor. Students are not left to simply read paragraphs and answer questions, but are guided by a teacher who creates an interactive atmosphere in the classroom, making time to work with students requiring individual assistance. The result is that students more often than not have no regular homework (the fallacy of which was previously discussed in Chapter 8). The school is averaging in the top 20% nationally using the McGraw-Hill Terra Nova Test, and even more importantly, the average grade level advancement is 1.5 years in a single academic year.

FCS employs a curriculum produced by Alpha Omega Publications called Ignitia©, which is a web-based curriculum delivery system featuring a high quantity of relevant media, constant student interaction, progress monitoring, automated scoring and immediate feedback. It all serves the purpose of facilitating an individualized, mastery learning approach to education. Consider this excerpt taken from their promotional material:

Courses include text-based lessons, assignments, quizzes, and tests that engage students while they learn. Optional external web links, interactive learning games, audio and video clips, and off-computer assignments help students develop the skills necessary for academic success in a media-rich environment. Ignitia addresses both short and long-term challenges faced by Christian educators as they integrate technology into their school environment.

The intuitive, easy-to-use interface supports digital literacy with interactive lessons available online anytime. With unsurpassed administrative
controls, teachers can customize courses to accommodate differentiated learning, plan in advance with progressive scheduling and calendar options, and easily create data-rich reports with advanced filtering functions. With Ignitia, Christian schools benefit from the latest digital technology available in the Christian market while holding true to traditional values founded on faith.5

While this thesis is not intended to be an advertisement for a specific publisher or product, this example is used to illustrate what is possible when technology is incorporated into the classroom for a true academic purpose. It’s not the 20th century anymore and it’s high time our educational system took the desperately needed academic leap. There is an abundance of tools available as of this writing, including but certainly not limited to Moodle, Blackboard, Edmodo, Melody Street, OpenStudy, Animoto, Quizlet and so many more. Each of these serves a unique purpose and most are completely free.

Interactive white boards, sometimes called “SMARTBoards” have been around for quite some time, yet most schools consider them unnecessary expenditures when chalkboards have worked effectively for years.6 The argument here is not necessarily whether or not something works, but rather if there’s something now available that works better. The telegraph was certainly a fairly reliable form of communication but no one would argue that the evolution to cell phones hasn’t been a drastic improvement.

As previously discussed, the real obstacle to change is fear. With the rapid advancement of technology it’s incredibly easy to feel overwhelmed just trying to keep up, not only with general information but also the ability to use the new

technology successfully. Since teachers are commonly overworked and underpaid, many feel as if they have no time to implement the radical change required for modern approaches to classroom education. Unless administrators deliberately take the lead in helping their teachers become comfortable with change, especially as it relates to personal proficiency with computer-based curriculum delivery systems, it is likely that a greatly needed transformation to the 21st century classroom may take an extended period of time, if it actually ever happens.7

The high-tech classroom doesn’t come without its challenges, of course. As any Information Technology (IT) manager will tell you, managing multiple devices securely, especially if wireless access points are used, is becoming an increasingly difficult task. Students are incredibly bright and unbelievably resourceful when it comes to computers. Outside threats are also very real in the form of hackers, viruses and more. IT personnel must constantly apply a never-ending list of updates and upgrades while maintaining consistent “up-time” since interruptions to service of any kind would obviously disrupt the educational process.

In the end, however, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. If schools are to truly embrace the historically proven values of individualization and mastery learning, they must enthusiastically pursue the true integration of technology in the classroom. The cost of improvement is well worth the effort when evaluated by the academic progress of a child. Whatever financial resources are necessary, the price for not utilizing technology and stepping boldly into the future will be far greater.

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CHAPTER 16
FOR THE LOVE OF MONEY
(The Unseen Political Motivation)

As for money, the relationship between it and effective schools has been studied to death. The unanimous conclusion is that there is no connection between school funding and school performance. ~ John Chubb and Terry Moe

The Bible is often misquoted as saying, “Money is the root of all evil.” Though inaccurately convenient, a closer look reveals that it actually declares, “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”¹ The distinction of those three little words, “the love of,” makes a significant difference. Scripture makes it clear that money is unquestionably a useful tool, but the love of money can become a life-altering addiction.

When it comes to education, there is certainly no better illustration of the undeniable truth of this verse than in viewing the public school system. Over the past several years, literally billions upon billions of dollars have been spent in the name of improving our public schools with little or no effect.² District school buildings continue to deteriorate, teachers

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¹ 1 Timothy 6:10, Holy Bible, King James Version
continue to be underpaid and students continue to receive a subpar education.³ How can this be true when funding for schools has increased so dramatically?

To properly understand the motivation behind current state and national educational initiatives, one would be wise to consider a very old but accurate piece of advice: always follow the money. Though it may appear that modern reforms are strictly for the purpose of academic improvement, deeper investigation causes one to question otherwise.

Jerry Wartgow states emphatically, “[Legislation, Litigation and Labor Agreements] have mired our schools in bureaucracy and legal processes and undermined the abilities of those responsible for teaching the three R’s to use common sense, exercise professional judgment and retain control of their schools.” What do all three of the “L’s” have in common? The correct answer would be money, and lots of it. For example, it is well known that the structure of certain financial incentives in our school systems actually reward lack of student attendance. Let us illustrate the point.

A parent recently surveyed had gone to their child's school in a Northern California district to inform them that her daughter would miss the next two days of school due to a family emergency. Upon hearing the news, the office personnel strongly encouraged the parent to keep the child away for at least five days rather than just two. After further inquiry it was disclosed that several days’ absence could be attributed to sickness whereas just two days would be categorized as unexcused. The difference was that, according to district policy, the school would be penalized financially for the shorter absence but not the extended one.

Although one would hope this was an error or at least an isolated example, additional research reveals that occurrences such as this one are actually very commonplace. Schools are often allocated money according to what is called ADA, or average daily attendance.\(^4\) Budgets are frequently predicated upon this system of financial analysis. In this unbelievable method established by the California Department of Education, it is much more economically beneficial to have a child gone from school for a week than to only miss a couple of days. Is it any wonder our students are struggling when this typifies the logic that prevails?

As long as educational improvement is tied to financial stability, the proper motivation for educational transformation will never be effectively employed in our schools. When money is the bottom line, the bottom line will never be a student’s welfare. This is why, or at the very least one of the most substantial reasons, testing has become so significant in recent years. When the standard of achievement is reduced to a disassociated statistical result that so dramatically impacts a school’s precarious fiscal foundation, it becomes easily understandable why educators spend so much of their time “teaching to the test” rather than communicating truly useful knowledge and developing skills that are greatly needed for a lifetime of success.\(^5\)

Without contradicting previous comments, there is no known credible argument that denies appropriate funding is crucial to the effective educational process. It is universally accepted that it takes significant amounts of money to properly educate a child, especially in a 21st century classroom. However, when the accountability system set in place has sizeable


penalties that limit the availability of badly needed funds, one can be sure there is clearly a crisis in the making. Is it logical to reduce resources at a school that has tested low, when that same testing clearly reveals students are not progressing as expected or desired?

A modern reality is that education is a multibillion-dollar business. There are many parties with an extremely vested interest whose primary goal is to make a profit, not necessarily to do what is best in the interest of the students.⁶ We intuitively know this to be true because we see it in other American industries, such as health care and transportation. Oil companies have long been accused of inflating gasoline prices to pad their bottom line, knowing we have no other choice since we depend so heavily on automobiles, planes and other similar methods of travel. Healthcare companies are often accused of choosing treatment that is the most cost-effective rather than what may be best for the patient to improve their quality of life.

Likewise, there are many educational companies, such as publishers, test designers and others, who receive millions of dollars every year to produce products that satisfy questionable state standards and purposes.⁷ In fact, many educational voices say that by attempting to point out assumed academic disparities between races, ethnicities and socioeconomic groups in the drive to bring educational equality to the masses, it really ensures a political power base for future elections. If that is actually an end goal of current educational initiatives, people are being deceived and our country is paying the price. This is

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⁶ Nathan Harden, “The End of the University as We Know It”, The American Interest, January/February 2013 Issue
why so many student advocates would rather see the money currently spent on standardized testing and common core initiatives invested in developing more appropriate curriculum to meet the wide variety of student needs that exist in the modern classroom.

There is another area of sharp disagreement relating to school finances, commonly referred to as vouchers. This educational slang, denoting the idea of parents being able to receive a certificate they could then exchange for a child’s enrollment at a school of their choice, is heavily resisted by proponents of public schooling. They believe the legalization of a voucher system would decimate the public school system, and they are probably correct. If parents were given choices of where to send their student without significant additional cost, wouldn’t they logically choose a school that focuses on treating students as individuals, consistently produces a quality academic product and is the best fit for their child? A loss of money equals a loss of control. If parents had the right to choose, it would most likely quickly and effectively expose the complete inadequacy of current educational methods in schools using government-mandated approaches.⁹

At the very least, wouldn’t it make sense that parents who choose to send their children to private schools would not be required to support public schools with their tax dollars? They receive no benefit yet they are forced to contribute involuntarily. It’s remarkable to see parents who construct their budgets to pay for private school tuition by saying “no” to other conveniences. While most Christian schools do not seem to incorporate individualized methods, they do usually feature smaller class sizes that greatly contribute to the efficacy of a child's education.

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The school used in our research, Fairfield Christian School, charges approximately $4500 per year per student. The average public school in the same region receives almost $7000 per student.\textsuperscript{10} While the standardized test results of local schools are questionable at best, Fairfield Christian School has produced students who on average have improved 1.5 years every single year for the last three years in a row.\textsuperscript{11} What is the most probable reason? The staff and governing board attribute the success to better management of funds and an intentional individualized approach to education.

It would seem the answer to fixing our educational system is not more funding. That approach has been tried many times and failed broadly without great exception. Perhaps the answer begins with a better use of the funds previously allocated, which includes reducing the vast amount of money spent on standardized testing and other questionable educational ideas that have never proven beneficial over time. Maybe the millions of dollars spent on revising curriculum to be politically correct could be redirected to help create smaller class sizes and provide teachers with tools for better understanding and addressing the individual needs of their students.

In the end, we must recognize that money will always be a finite resource. As long as it is seen as a means to seize power and demonstrate control, it will never be a tool fully used to ensure that a quality education is secured for our children. If somehow, though, our educational leaders can bring true reform that no longer centers upon a comparison-based, data driven academic model, perhaps the financial resources can be appropriated differently toward purposes that will actually make a discernable difference in our society. Money can

\textsuperscript{11} Fairfield Christian School, “McGraw Hill Terra Nova Online Test (Standardized Testing Results)”, Fairfield Christian School, Fairfield CA; 2011-2013
and must be used for education, but it cannot be loved or seen as the end goal. If so, generations will be destined to repeat the same costly mistakes being made right now in America. The price is simply too high.
CHAPTER 17
LEARNING FOR A LIFETIME
(Teaching Students to Teach Themselves)

I read my eyes out and can't read half enough...the more one reads

the more one sees we have to read. ~ John Adams

Socrates famously said, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” His point, well taken, was that education should not and must not end when the last diploma is earned or the last degree is awarded. Symbols of achievement are certainly important. As we’ve previously demonstrated, however, many believe our instructional system in America is more focused on preparing students to pass tests than instilling in them a love for learning.

A 2004 National Endowment for the Arts report titled "Reading at Risk" found only 57% of American adults had read a book in 2002. That’s over 40% of Americans who didn’t read one book in an entire year.¹ Worse yet, the Jenkins Group, a Michigan-based publishing company, reports that “33% of high school graduates will never read another book after graduation, and 42% of college students will never read another book after the completion of their post-graduate degree.”² Can it be true that so many students have such a poor educational experience that they abandon reading forever? Notice that these figures make no

² “Have the Majority of Americans Abandoned Books Forever?” The Jenkins Group, Traverse City, MI (2013)
distinction between fiction and non-fiction books. Statistics suggest that of adults who actually do continue reading, only 1 in 4 include non-fiction books in their selections. In simpler language, only 25% of the 58% Americans who continue to read after college choose a book whose primary purpose is continued education. That’s only 14.5% of Americans who continue reading to learn after college.

To quote astronaut John Swigert on the famed Apollo 13 mission, “Houston, we have a problem.” If education is defined as helping students to memorize facts and be able to regurgitate information, then we have probably succeeded. However, if education is defined as helping students develop the skills and desires needed to continue learning for a lifetime, then we have most likely failed dramatically. If we are to stop the loss of another generation to academic disinterest, we must act quickly and decisively.

What then is the true role of a teacher? Is it to successfully impart knowledge, making sure that students possess in their cognitive database the necessary facts to pass proficiency exams and earn diplomas? Is it perhaps to prepare students for college and university, helping them to develop the necessary skills to graduate with honors? Or is it, as Socrates suggested, lighting an unquenchable fire inside the mind and heart of every student that causes them to continue self-educating long after they have completed formal schooling?

Marilyn Price-Mitchell, PhD, a developmental psychologist and founder of Roots of Action, says,

Becoming a seeker of lifelong learning is critical in today’s fast-changing world… All too often, we focus on how well children are taught rather than on how well they learn. Many young people have survived poor educations because they

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discovered what it meant to learn. They discovered that learning happens on the inside, that grades cannot measure true learning.4

Mitchell provides an interesting contrast in suggesting our evaluative focus is in the wrong place. She argues convincingly that measuring how well a child is taught is relatively unimportant because our true focus should be on measuring how well a child learns. If we spent much more time on the latter rather than the former perhaps more than 14.5% of Americans would continue reading to learn after college.

Learning for a lifetime is also an international issue. In the book, “Lifelong Learning: Education Across a Lifespan,” the authors strongly assert that, “Lifelong Learning is a hot issue for educators across the world, as societies everywhere are concerned with developing a literate, skilled and flexible workforce and to widen participation in education at all levels and for all age-groups.”5 Clearly, world leaders are engaging in the discussion. According to the G8 Charter for Learning, established in 1999,

“The challenge every country faces is how to become a learning society and ensure that its citizens are equipped with the knowledge, skills and qualification they will need in the next century. Economies and societies are increasingly knowledge-based … everyone should be encouraged and enabled to continue learning throughout their lives, not just in the years of compulsory schooling.”6

It is clear we have a crisis in modern education. Dr. Howard believed that the core issue revolved around the ill-advised transfer of responsibility from the home to the government. “The control of education [has] passed from families to government-funded bureaucracy.”7 He alleged that the results have “catapulted our society, including our system

7 Dr. Donald Howard, Crisis in Education, Accelerated Christian Education (1990)
of government-sponsored education, into times of unprecedented crisis.\textsuperscript{8} Based upon what can easily be quantified and would seem inarguable, it appears as if he was absolutely correct.

We have spent far too much time trying to attain useless state and federal standards instead of helping families address the individual needs of their children. By pushing students through a lifeless academic system instead of teaching them to love learning, we now have a society that is suffering under the tremendous weight of growing illiteracy.\textsuperscript{9} CBS news anchor, Katie Couric, reported that, “42 million Americans suffer functional illiteracy according to the National Right to Read Foundation. They cannot read, write or perform simple math. Another 50 million Americans cannot read past the 4th grade level.”\textsuperscript{10}

Gordon B. Hinckley said, “There are few things more pathetic than those who have lost their curiosity and sense of adventure, and who no longer care to learn.”\textsuperscript{11} If we are to properly educate our children and instill in them an insatiable desire to learn, it must begin with a return to individualization and mastery learning. The only other choice is continuing to graduate students whose experience will be seriously limited by their current scope of knowledge, possessing no fortified desire to create and innovate, and who will most likely be destined for a lifetime of monotony and boredom.

Educators who truly love students and desire to see them reach their full potential must be willing to move heaven and earth, changing their entire classroom structure if necessary, to do what is best for the child regardless of the criticism or the cost. This is the nonnegotiable price for producing minds that will choose to continue learning for a lifetime.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
CHAPTER 18
CONCLUSION

As we approach the end of our discussion on individualization and mastery learning in education, we are forced to conclude there are still volumes to be written on the subject. Nevertheless, we are confident that a solid and irrefutable case has been made for a sorely needed return to the methods and values that have historically produced superior academic results in our nation. Beginning with our initial thoughts on the Biblical foundation of individuality continuing through our dialogue about integrating modern technology to better facilitate the individualized classroom, we believe there is no better way for a child to be educated than to be treated wholly and completely as an individual.

Samuel Johnson, an eighteenth century English writer, summarized education in a single sentence. “The supreme end of education is expert discernment in all things – the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and genuine to the bad and the counterfeit.”¹ In other words, true education must instill in children the ability to make good choices as the result of a well-developed character. When we educate for the masses, the needed specifics required by individuality are easily overlooked. When we educate the individual child, teachers can much more easily identify and address what is needed for the student to not only be educationally successful, but also to become a contributing member of society. When an instructional system is intentionally built

¹ Dr. Donald Howard, Crisis in Education, Accelerated Christian Education (1990)
upon a firm footing of absolute moral truth found in Scripture, the possibilities would seem truly endless.

Dr. Howard noted, “Traditional American education was not a single large chalkboard at the front of the room, but individual slate boards – one for each child…not a lock-step approach with common age-graded textbooks [but] curriculum [that] included a variety of books and materials, geared to individual progress.” The focus of education in America, until relatively recent years, has clearly always been placed upon the pupil rather than the entire class…upon the prospective graduate rather than the grade in which he was placed. If we are to once again rise to the forefront of education, our focus must immediately return to those non-negotiable concerns.

We began our discussion with the story of a young boy who left the public school system in favor of an individualized education that was based upon mastery learning. The rest of the story is that I graduated eighth grade by age eleven and high school by age fifteen. After taking a year off due to my young age, I completed my bachelor’s degree by age nineteen, travelling around the nation three times and spending several months in South Africa to help start Christian schools. Being viewed and supported as an individual was not only the best choice for me, but also the only decision my parents could have made to help unlock the gifts and abilities placed inside me by my Creator.

As we endeavor to become better parents, educators and administrators, we only need to remember two critical standards that must become incontrovertible in our minds. First, the Bible must be kept as the unmovable epicenter around which our educational world revolves. If God’s Word is our basis for establishing a child’s identity then it stands to reason it must remain the focal point of everything the child will learn. Secondly, the educational process

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2 Dr. Donald Howard, *Crisis in Education*, Accelerated Christian Education (1990)
must never supersede the needs of the individual. The moment individuality is sacrificed in
the name of what is supposedly best for the group, true education as a whole will have ceased
to exist for all involved.

In the end, we can only conclude that our educational system teeters dangerously on
the precipice of permanent failure. Some would argue it has already fallen over the edge. We
can either mourn its loss or renew our efforts to restore educational quality for the sake of our
children, knowing that the only academic system that will ever be truly effective is one that is
intentionally designed with a child’s individuality in mind.
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PERSONAL DATA SHEET

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Worship & Youth Pastor: Bible Temple, Redding, CA, 1989-1994
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