

Religion in Our Schools

Tragedies in our schools are making the international news. Disruptive classrooms are lowering the quality of education. Neither morals nor discipline can be taught or demanded. Our educational systems are accused of corrupting our society.

What is the cause of all of these problems? Prohibition of prayer and Bible reading in the schools? Removal of posters of the Ten Commandments? Schools no longer teaching religion? Non-concerned teachers? That is a superficial assessment.

My home town of Rochester, Texas was established in 1906, just twelve years before I was born. In those days most of the school teachers were unmarried women. Their contract with the school board included these stipulations:

1. You will not marry during the term of your contract.
2. You are not to keep company with men.
3. You must be home between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., unless attending a school function.
4. You may not loiter downtown in ice cream stores.
5. You may not travel beyond the city limits, unless you have permission of the chairman of the board.
6. You may not ride in a carriage or automobile with any man, unless he is your father or brother.
7. You may not smoke cigarettes.
8. You may not dress in bright colors.
9. You may under no circumstance dye your hair.
10. You must wear at least two petticoats.
11. Your dresses must not be any shorter than two inches above the ankle.
12. To keep the school room neat and clean, you must: sweep the floor once a day; scrub the floor once a week with hot soapy water; clean the blackboards once a day; start the fire at 7:00 a.m. so the room will be warm by 8:00 a.m.

Perhaps, you noticed the absence of something in those rules. Where does it mention religion, prayer, Ten Commandments, or Bible reading, much less mention Christmas or Easter programs?

It has never been the aim of public schools to teach religion. They are not qualified to teach it. When specific schools have taken the liberty to teach matters of religion, it has usually been religious people who have objected because their particular sectarian beliefs were not the ones being taught. I think *my people* would have objected to having the Ten Commandments posted lest kids be taught to keep the Sabbath!

The only times I recall prayer or Bible reading in the Rochester school was in our rare assemblies and graduation exercises. So we were always having school shootings and attacks on teachers. Well, more like blowing hackberry seed through a test tube pea-shooter, or firing a paper wad by a rubber band while the teacher's head was turned.

It takes a village to raise and educate a child, we hear. We have plenty of villages, many being metropolitan. It takes more than that, we are proving disastrously. *It takes a village that has morals and character!* Our schools reflect the social, moral, and religious character of our communities, which in turn, reflect the social, moral, and religious character of the individuals and homes making up the communities. That is the simple diagnosis, but the corrective cure is so complex as to make it seem unattainable.

One of these influences, however, is repressed by law. Since the Christian religion predominates in our society, it is stupid to disallow any influence of it in schools. The non-Christian minorities should have enough grace to tolerate the majority for the common good rather than selfishly demand a godless school system. Our founding fathers certainly did not have the current concept of "separation of church and State" in mind. They established our nation on the concept of God's sovereignty. Now, all manner of non-religious and anti-religious things are allowed in school, but not belief in God.

We are not campaigning for a reinstatement of the rules for teachers listed above. Yet that list reflects the strictness of the cultural code of the community which produced law-abiding, goal-oriented children on through World War II. It was a village of strong families whose parents knew with whom their children associated, who gave them work to do, and gave them purpose and direction in life. There was religious life, strong work ethic, and basic morality almost enforced by the watchful eye of neighbors who knew and cared about each other. No, there was no perfection, but there certainly was restraint. Growing up there, I knew of very few divorces or extra-marital affairs. To have become pregnant or to bear a child out of wedlock would have been a tragic disgrace for the mother and two families. I never saw a person drinking liquor or a woman smoking or wearing shorts. Yes, some crimes were committed, but under the watchful eye of family, kin, and neighbors, they were uncommon and, to spare the family from additional shame and avoid making criminality look heroic, the misdemeanors were not reported in the local paper.

You probably felt a condescending amusement when you read the list of rules for teachers four generations ago. That is to be expected, for each generation feels that way about the standards of the previous one. So each generation has liberated itself from the restrictions of the previous one in a steady decline and lack of definition of ethics, morality, and character. Not one of those rules would be acceptable today, and very few rules of conduct are made for the citizens of our communities. Every limitation is tested by those demanding personal freedom for any and all forms of licentious conduct. Our society defends the "rights" of all persons to be as immoral and irresponsible as they wish to be. About the only rule left is against your speaking out against the lifestyle of anyone else. So, what can we expect of our schools in such a society? The fruit cannot be better than the tree that bears it, and the school, rather than bearing all the blame, only reflects the society that supports it.

In the middle of this century millions of tracts were distributed which exhorted, "A Better World Begins With Me!" There is the key. The very title carries the answer. Don't expect the legislators, universities, television, and movie producers to create the moral village. They could be a tremendous influence, but too many of them are social activists to bring change, and they respond to the popular demands of a licentious society. So we must start back at square one.

Why not have a big demonstration in Washington? That might be noticeable but of little substance. Change must begin with you and me!

Do you pray and read the Bible at home? Do you involve your children in it? Are you fully involved in their activities with peers, at school, at home, at church? Do you supervise their television and video games? Do you teach them responsibility and industry? If you don't, how can you ask or expect the school or social programs to do it?

It is your responsibility. Just as you inoculate your children against prevalent diseases, you can nurture them to stand among their peers in their society. They, like Daniel, can walk among the lions without fear. They can be role models for other students who have less caring parents.

Your children may still pray at school any time they wish. I doubt if schools would forbid them having a Bible in their possession or reading it in study hall. Don't many schools still permit before-school activities of Christian student groups? Schools should not be expected to sponsor private religious activities any more that our government does.

From the home you can then expand your activity and influence. You may work to influence individuals, churches, schools, community projects, elected officials, and the media. There are many other persons in all these components of our society who are eager to improve our society. They need your support and leadership rather than government sponsorship.

Let us work positively for good rather than just being critical and pointing the finger of blame toward others. A better world begins with me! Better schools begin with me! []