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## EurECA Conference 2004

### God's Purposes for Education in Different Contexts

#### Hotel Szépalma, Zirc, Hungary

##### 1. The Conference

Forty one Christian educators from across Europe met together for three days (29 April – 2 May) in the lovely venue of Hotel Szépalma set among rolling wooded hills near Zirc in western Hungary.

We came from fifteen different countries: Austria (2), Bulgaria (2), Croatia (1), England (6), France (5), Finland (1), Germany (8), Hungary (4), Norway (3), Poland (2), Portugal (2), Romania (1), Slovakia (1), Switzerland (1) and Ukraine (2). We came from a range of different educational contexts: church education, church schools, colleges and universities, home education, independent Christian schools, informal education and public (state) schools.

We met for a working conference to study together the theme of God's purposes for education in these and other different contexts. Dr Pierre Berthoud of Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée in Aix en Provence, France presented three lectures on the conference theme. Six context-based groups worked both as separate groups and together in plenary discussions to identify both what they share with Christians working in other educational contexts and what is distinctive to their own contexts.

Each day opened with worship and prayer together. One evening session was a more informal occasion when each country-group introduced us to an aspect of their country's culture, sometimes hilariously as when the group from Poland mimed the achievements of their greatest sporting stars and sometimes movingly as when the delegate from Romania sang a Christian song written in prison under Communist repression, having first told us something of the life of its author. This was followed by a prayer walk in groups around the hotel's inner courtyard where prayer requests were on display from each of the fifteen countries.

One afternoon was free for excursions to either the famous Herend Porcelain Factory or the beautiful town of Tihany on the shore of Lake Balaton. Some of us opted instead for a hike among the hills near the hotel. We all marvelled at the handiwork of the Lord and of that which He enables human beings to create.

The conference ended with Sunday morning worship together when Pierre Berthoud led us in a study of how Jesus taught the disciples he met on the road to Emmaus. We then celebrated communion together in thankfulness for the death and resurrection of our Saviour and in anticipation of the day when He will come again.

##### 2. Seven biblical principles (Pierre Berthoud)

Pierre Berthoud identified the following as biblical and central principles:

1. The infinite and personal God is the fountain of truth, knowledge and education.
2. The fall has far-reaching consequences within creation and specifically on human understanding. Human understanding is not only limited but also distorted and prone to error as the creature bows before the idol rather than before the Creator-Redeemer.
3. The anthropological foundation of the knowledge of truth and of education is that we are created in the image of God.

4. The covenant is the sphere of revelation, knowledge and education.
5. The fear of God is an essential factor of human wisdom as it deals with the multiple aspects of reality, life and society.
6. Jesus-Christ is both the exegete and educator of God and his Word within the Church and society (cf. Jn 1.17 “has made known” = “has exegeted”).
7. The Holy Spirit, power and wisdom of God, enlightens the human mind and initiates a new individual and communal life style that is honouring to the Father.

As he expounded these themes, Dr Berthoud reminded us that the whole of the reality that God created is the sphere of His revealing activity. Limited by our creatureliness and with the image of God within us distorted by our sinfulness, we need the light of His written word in the scriptures and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit to restore us to a right relationship with Him, with one another and with all that he has made. Knowing is not the detached-spectator intellectualist knowing of the Greeks but the relational whole-person knowing of the Bible. The right attitude for all our learning and teaching is therefore a humility that is aware of both our finiteness and our forgiveness.

### 3. Outcomes of group and plenary discussion

#### 3.1 Responsibilities in education

1. We were agreed both that God is the ultimate source of all true learning, teaching and knowing and that, under God, the primary responsibility for the education of children and young people is located within the family and is, specifically, that of parents.
2. Education is wider than formal schooling. Much education takes place informally (but not necessarily less intentionally) outside schools, colleges and universities. Education within the home is enormously influential for all children. The media also have a role in the formation of the beliefs, values and attitudes of children and young people. This is also true of peer groups, local communities and the wider society. All of these educative influences can be for both good and bad. We should therefore not accord an exaggerated role to schools and professional schoolteachers, whether they are Christian or not. The greatest teacher of all was the Lord Jesus: he taught in informal contexts and his teaching changed the world. Christians have a responsibility to educate in informal contexts through their words and the influence of their lives and to pray for all who do.
3. Churches, and particularly those members who have teaching gifts, have a responsibility for teaching the members of their church communities. This includes a responsibility for giving teaching about family responsibilities in upbringing and education.
4. The relationship between family responsibility and church responsibility is at issue in the different approaches we take to the governance of Christian schools: some are parent-controlled and some are controlled by a local church, a denomination or by a governing body of interdenominational Christians.
5. The relationship between family and church responsibility for education, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that of the state is also a matter on which we were not agreed. Some saw the role of the state in a minimalist way with its main responsibility largely confined to the maintenance of law and order. Others saw education as part of the proper provision by the state for the well-being of its citizens and the general good of all.
6. In some countries, denominational schools and more recently established Christian schools receive some financial support from the state. Some of us see this as a legitimate use of a portion of the taxes paid by Christians to the state while others see it as giving the state too much influence over such schools, particularly influence over the content of the curriculum.
7. Whether or not it is right for the state to have a substantial role in education, it has de facto responsibility by maintaining state schools and exercising some controls over independent schools. Christians therefore have a responsibility to pray for their country's education system and for children in all schools and for their teachers.
8. Some schools see it as important that students should also take a share of the responsibility not only for their own learning but also for what happens in their schools.

#### 3.2 Aims in education

1. Christian educators share the same ultimate aim: to glorify God by promoting the development of students

as whole persons (spiritual, moral, intellectual, social, physical) in knowing and loving relation with God, other people and the created reality. This aim is the same in whatever context we work, whether Christian school or state school, whether at school, college or university, whether in formal contexts or in the informal ones of home, church or the wider community.

2. Christian educators share a view of education as being for the whole of life, both in this world and in the world to come.
3. Christian educators see the development of true knowing and true wisdom as being closely related to each other.
4. Christian educators share the aim of helping students to come to know for themselves what is true about God and about his world. Whether truth comes through God's general revelation in everything He has made or the special revelation of the scriptures, it is all His truth.
5. Although we share the same ultimate aims as Christian educators, our objectives and strategies may differ in different educational and cultural contexts. For example, teachers of children from Christian homes may have an objective of assisting the parents in bringing up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Christian teachers in a state university may have an objective of being a Christian influence in the development of the theory of their discipline.
6. The aims of Christian and non-Christian educators may overlap and even look similar but they are viewed differently from within different overall perspectives. For example, both Christians and non-Christians may talk of 'education for citizenship' or 'education for life' but the Christian view of citizenship includes citizenship of the 'city of God' and the Christian view of life includes life in the world to come. This is not only a matter of having additional aims but of having different views of all our aims, of seeing them in a different light. All may aim at helping students to use their giftedness to the full potential and at their being successful but what counts as potential and as success may be viewed very differently.
7. Discussion of the relation between education and evangelism brought to light some differences of opinion among us. Some saw evangelism as being a part of the responsibility under God of the Christian educator as such. Others saw evangelism to be a distinctly different activity from teaching and therefore not a part of the role of the Christian educator or educational institution as such. This difference is not simply a matter of the context in which we work but of our whole view of our role as educators whether in Christian school or state school or informal context. It does not mean that we will not earnestly desire the salvation of our students and their growth in the image of God but it is a difference in what we see to be our proper role as Christian educators.
8. Christian educators should not accept uncritically over-riding government aims for education such as the promotion of the economic well-being of the country or the transmission of the dominant culture of the country.

### **3.3 Approaches and methods in education**

1. Christian pedagogical approaches and methods, regardless of differing contexts, should be rooted in a Christian view of the nature of human beings as unique individuals created in the image of God for relationships of love with Him, with one another and with the world He has made.
2. This will mean that some teaching methods will be unacceptable to Christian educators in whatever context they teach, e.g., those which are rooted in a behaviourist view of human beings, those which manipulate rather than persuade the student or those which do not treat all students fairly.
3. It will also mean that some teaching methods will be more acceptable to Christian educators, e.g. those which are more relational, more whole-person oriented, more careful to provide for different learning styles and different intelligences and those which, following the example of Jesus, make much use of questioning, story-telling and metaphor.
4. Christian educators should value truth highly in all contexts. Without showing any lack of respect for other people, they should be prepared to state their own beliefs as what they believe to be true rather than as mere opinions. This does not place their beliefs beyond question by their students.
  - v. Humility should characterize the Christian educator's approach in all contexts for we are learners as well as teachers. In all contexts, we should ask forgiveness of our students when we are at fault.
5. Christian educators see sin as the root problem for all so, while we should be aware of and deal appropriately with all the factors in students' upbringing and environment, we should not remove from them their personal responsibility for themselves and their learning.
6. Christian educators recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in witnessing to what is true, good and beautiful



through, or even in spite of, the methods that we use in our teaching.

7. Whether or not Christian educators are allowed to pray openly for, and with, their students depends on the kind of context in which they work and on what the law of their country requires or permits. In some countries but not in others, teachers in state schools are permitted to pray for and with their students.

### 3.4 Content in education

1. What is to be taught (rather than who should teach it, why it should be taught or how it should be taught) is the area of greatest variation between contexts. Apart from the obvious differences related to age and ability of students, subject-areas, degree of specialization, culture, etc, it is in the area of content that Christian belief is most readily seen to make a difference.
2. We were agreed that our underlying world-and-life-views are of fundamental importance in all our teaching and learning, whatever the subject-area or the level at which we are studying or teaching. Nothing is neutral or independent of our world-and-life-views. There is no value-free zone in knowing. Everything is seen differently when viewed from a Christian perspective.
3. There were differences of opinion among us concerning the strategy that we should adopt in the light of this for the integration of faith and learning. Some of us favoured a more transformational approach which sees much good in what is generally accepted as knowledge and seeks to transform it into something better by setting it in the light of a Christian perspective and bringing out the deeper dimensions that are already present. Some of us favoured a more reconstructionist strategy which is more focused on the antithesis between Christian thinking and non-Christian thinking and seeks to develop Christian mathematics, Christian science, Christian history etc from the outset on distinctively Christian foundations. This seems to reflect a theological difference between those who emphasise God's creation and God's common grace to all and those who emphasise the effects of sin and the need of redemption and His special saving grace. We seem to find it difficult to hold these biblical themes in balance!
4. Here, as with responsibilities, aims and methods, those of us teaching in schools and colleges were challenged by those teaching in informal contexts to consider the possibility of exaggerating the importance of professional teachers and educational institutions. Many of us have come to see the importance of world-and-life-view issues for the whole of life and thought without ever hearing about them in a formal educational context, e.g. through reading on our own the writings of Francis Schaeffer. This again brings out the importance of home and church in the upbringing and education of our children and young people.
5. Christian educators believe in the connectedness of everything under God and they should help students to make connections across subjects and with everyday life and they should bring out the moral, social and spiritual aspects of all subjects. Students should be challenged by cognitive dissonance among their beliefs and encouraged to look for meaning, for the 'Why?' and the 'What for?'
6. The Bible is of central importance. It can be referred to more explicitly in Christian and church school contexts but we should not underestimate the opportunities to use it in other contexts too because of its importance for understanding our histories and our cultures. For example, in three days recently in state schools across Portugal, 50,000 people including students, teachers and others took part in a project to write out the whole Bible.
7. Content is everything that students encounter in a teaching situation whether formal or informal. This means that it is particularly important that we incarnate our faith in our whole lives as teachers.
8. Some of us would like to develop an ideal European Christian curriculum which would fit in all Christian schools in Europe. Some of us thought it should find different cultural expressions in different countries.

### 3.5 Other outcomes from discussions

1. We need a glossary of terms used in discussions like these (education, upbringing, nurture, training, teaching, instructing, etc) even within a single language, e.g. English which was the language used in our discussions. There were times in our discussions when it was evident that we were using the same words but with different meanings. The situation is more complicated because the same distinctions are not made in all languages. For example, there are two words in German which could be used for 'education' but neither corresponds precisely to the English term: Bildung (more like formal education, lifelong learning) and Erziehung (education in practical living including manners and how to live in society).
2. Related to this are the differences between countries and national histories and cultures. We found that it was easy to assume that other countries had education systems similar to our own and that the situation

- for Christian educators was the same in all countries. Because of this, we tend to project into other national situations the approaches that work in our own countries without first taking into account these deep differences, e.g. on the relation between church and state or the degree to which Christianity is still influential in wider national culture or how detailed are the requirements of national curricula for schools.
3. We need much more teaching than we usually have in church contexts on the importance of worldview issues to counter the widespread acceptance of a dualism between sacred and secular, public and private. This is of particular importance in the training of church leaders. We also need more and better teaching on these issues for Christian teachers.
  4. The power of prayer is available to all Christian educators whatever their context.

John Shortt