Spreading The Message: Education

Over the ages, people have recognized the most effective way to change the culture of a society is through the education of the next generation. History shows that Martin Luther understood this well. In fact, his life’s work was done in an educational setting, and some of his earliest proposals had to do with a thorough reformation of the educational system. Luther’s vision is what people in our time speak of as intergenerational. He recognized that education took place in the home as well as schools for children and universities for young adults. In fact, Luther was one of the first in Western culture to advocate that not only boys but also girls begin their schooling in kindergarten. In addition, he wrote several pamphlets and treatises about why parents should keep their children in school - a concept that was not well accepted at the time.

This emphasis on education had a twofold effect on the Reformation. First of all, the ability to read and write gave the next generation access to receiving and spreading the Gospel message themselves. The people sitting in the pews were not as dependent upon a clerical class to mediate their relationship with God.

Secondly, the educational movement empowered young and old, men and women, to think for themselves in matters of faith and institutional governance. Luther understood that an educated laity would shift the balance of power in the church so that the people sitting in the pews were not simply subject to the decisions and dictums of the clergy. In fact, they could hold their leaders to higher standards and expectations.

Luther’s focus on education extended from the home to the universities to the professional clergy. He wrote the Small Catechism as a way to teach entire families the basic doctrines of faith. He pushed government officials to support and fund educational institutions for all ages. He was instrumental in establishing an educational process that would revolutionize educational standards for pastors serving in congregations of all types and sizes. All of this work flowed out of Luther’s concern for the spiritual well being of his flock - and he now understood his flock to include a lot more people than he had ever anticipated.

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