

Wholeness of God's World (1)



In Session One John Shortt quoted from an article by Neil Plantinga that identified the concepts of flourishing, wholeness and delight in relation to Shalom. Plantinga derived some of his thinking on this from Nick Wolterstorff, author of 'Educating for Life' and it was with a quotation from Wolterstorff that John commenced this session.

Wolterstorff writes, "Shalom is present when a person dwells at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature. To dwell at peace in one's relationships, it is not enough, however, that hostility be absent. ..."

He says that letting live is not yet shalom.

"Shalom is enjoyment in one's relationships. ... To dwell in shalom is to *enjoy* living before God, to *enjoy* living in one's physical surroundings, to *enjoy* living with one's fellows, to *enjoy* life with oneself."

This sums it up well: shalom is enjoyment of these four kinds of relationship. Wolterstorff points out that a nation may be at peace with all its neighbours (in the sense of absence of hostility) and yet be miserable in its poverty and injustices.

"Shalom is enjoyment in one's relationships"

Nor is this enjoyment to be considered a self-centred and selfish matter. It is upward and outwards in its orientations.

Shalom is not just a tranquil inner feeling, it is rooted in our relatedness with the world around us, with other people and with God Himself. Now how do we relate all this to our classrooms in all kinds of school in 21st century secularised Britain?!

Three dimensions to teaching for wholeness

In this session and the following two, I will suggest that there are at least three dimensions of wholeness that we should be teaching for.

1. **Teaching for a whole perspective on God's world**
2. **Teaching for the development of the whole person**
3. **Teaching for the whole of life**

The first of these is our subject for this present session: the wholeness of our perspective on the wonderful world that God has made. Too easily in education, we emphasise particular aspects of God's world and we make them all-important. I am going to plead that we aim at wholeness in how our students view the world.

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But first, let us remind ourselves again of one of the passages of scripture that we had last evening Colossians 1: 15 - 20.

All things hold together

Verse 17 of this passage tells us that in Christ, "all things hold together".

I suggest that this is a basic belief that should underlie all that we do. I am not suggesting that this is a statement that we should always be making explicitly in the classroom. It is the kind of belief that should be energising and motivating us. Motivating us to help children and young people to see and to experience how things hold together. Teaching can be *truly* Christian without being *explicitly* so. If we insist that we must always and everywhere make explicit reference to God, then I think we would exclude the Book of Esther from the canon of scripture. Why? Yes, Esther does not mention God explicitly ... and yet God is everywhere on the pages of this book for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, in some ways more present because of His invisibility! God can be present in your classroom without being mentioned by name!

So I am putting this forward as a basic underlying belief that should motivate us in our teaching.



Wholeness of God's World (2)



Teaching for a whole perspective on God's world: Curriculum subjects are windows on God's wonderful world

And so we come to consider the wholeness of our perspective on God's world. In the different subjects that we teach in school, we focus on different aspects of the world that God has made. I think of the different subjects as windows on God's wonderful world. We are not simply teaching subjects in school, we are opening windows on God's world and helping our students to focus on the world through them.

Each window shows a different aspect. Through one window, we see the world in terms of shapes and numbers, we see the world mathematically. Through another window, we see the world historically, we see it in terms of the sequence of events in space and time. Through another window, we see it psychologically or biologically or chemically or morally.

For example, look at a wedding ring:

Think about the *mathematical* aspects of a ring

Think about its mathematical aspects, what mathematical shape or shapes we see, what its dimensions are. This is looking at the ring through the mathematical window.

Think about the *chemical and physical* aspects of a ring

Then think about its physical aspect through the world of the science of physics. Look at it in terms of the atoms of which it is composed and how they interact. Look at it in terms of its chemical components, the elements which combine in the molecules of which it is made.

Think about the *historical and cultural* aspects of a ring

We can also think about the history of rings and the cultural customs that surround the wearing of rings, wedding rings, for example. Why do we wear rings, on which fingers? How have the customs changed and developed through time and how do they differ from one culture to another?

Think about the *artistic* aspects of a ring

We can also think about the artistic aspects of the ring, the beauty of its design and shape. Or the work of the craftsman who made it.

Think about the *economic* aspects of a ring

A jeweller will be interested in the economic aspects of the ring. How much is it worth? How much can he get for selling it? He may look at my ring and offer me some money for it but I may say that it is worth far more to me.

Think about the *legal and moral* aspects of a ring

This is the ring that symbolises my marriage to the woman that I love. We exchanged rings when we were married so this ring has legal and moral significance to me.

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Think about the *theological* aspects of a ring

More than that, as a Christian, it is for me linked to the day when my wife and I promised before God to love another as long as we live so it has theological significance for me too.

I have taken this example from a helpful book by John Peck and Charles Strohmer, *Uncommon Sense*. It is not explicitly about education but I found it helpful for thinking generally about the world of people and things from a Christian perspective.

However, there are two problems with the way we develop our perspective on the world:

The problem of compartmentalism and problem of reductionism.



Wholeness of God's World (3)



The Problem of Compartmentalism

The first is that we compartmentalise aspects of the world and lose sight of the whole.

One of the weaknesses with our education systems is that we do not generally help our students to see the connections between the subjects that we teach them. Especially at secondary level and increasingly at primary level, students find the curriculum divided into separate compartments with no connections between them. Nobody helps them to see that everything holds together (as our Bible reading from Colossians says).

Our approach to education is biased towards the skill of analysis rather than that of synthesis. Analysis is very important. We need to know how to take things apart and discern their separate components. Our naïve experience of the world and objects in the world as young children is of undifferentiated wholes. We have to learn to think things apart. But I would suggest that we also need to learn to think things together again.

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As subject teachers, we should be looking for ways to make links across the curriculum. It requires a lot of work but it can be well worth the effort and time.

The Problem of Reductionism

The second problem is that we make certain aspects important at the expense of others, the problem of reductionism. We tend to have a hierarchy of subjects in our schools or in our education systems as wholes. Mathematics and science tend to be placed high up in the hierarchy of subjects while art and music are placed low down. That is illustrated in the scientific naturalism of such as Max Planck who wrote this over a hundred years ago:

'Experiments are the only means of knowledge at our disposal. The rest is poetry, imagination.' It is also found in the contemporary influential writings of Richard Dawkins.

As Christian teachers, we have a responsibility under God to help our students to appreciate all the aspects of reality. Even though they will specialise in some aspects, they need to have an appreciation of the importance of others.

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The scientist who has no appreciation at all of art or music or literature is missing so much of the rich and varied world into which God has put us. The artist who has no appreciation of the mathematical, logical and scientific aspects of the world is also missing so much richness in God's world.

The problem is that we can be content with our strengths and say 'That is how we are made!'. I am a mathematician and I cannot do art. It is a bit like the response we sometimes make to learning about different learning styles: I am a visual learner or I am an audial learner. But we need to develop our areas of weakness, as well as our strengths.

I want to close this session with something of the writings of Harro Van Brummelen . . . on multidisciplinary topics and themes, where we make use of several aspects of reality, several school subjects, in working on a particular topic or theme. Van Brummelen distinguishes between ways in which we can do this. He talks about foods as an analogy.



Wholeness of God's World (4)



There are three forms of integration:

'steak dinner' type where the separate ingredients are separately prepared, clearly identifiable and put together on the plate. For example, Egypt could be a topic for a group of teachers to deal with at the same time, history, geography, mathematics, biology of deserts and Nile, etc.

'pizza' type where there is a subject discipline 'crust' with different types of 'topping'. For example, a science teacher takes a group of students to look after somebody's garden. They learned a lot about gardening but also practiced their mathematics (quantities of materials), ethics (respect for property, art (pictures of the garden) etc. Science but with toppings of other aspects of reality.

'casserole' type where all the ingredients are so mixed in together that you cannot distinguish them but you enjoy the taste of the whole thing. For example, a teacher taught about a small village near her school. The children looked at the village found out about the village in the past and made a picture of what it was like 100 years ago. The focus is on the village as a whole without being so aware of taking different perspectives.

How can we help those we teach to develop a whole perspective on God's world?

Session ends.

