

Disenchantment, Diversity, and Disciplemaking: A Process for Christlike Schooling in Post-Christendom Times

TALK: <https://bit.ly/ECCEN-diversity> | SLIDES: <https://bit.ly/ECCEN-diversity-slides>

ECCEN Conference, Thursday 16th March, 9:50–10:30am

Dr Dave Benson | *London Institute for Contemporary Christianity* licc.org.uk



SYNOPSIS:

Educating in a distinctively Christian way, in this post-Christendom period, is becoming ever more challenging. Confronted by a cacophony of curricular voices and a plurality of ideological visions for the good life, our teachers are easily confused, overwhelmed, and then discouraged—ceasing to be salt and light in rotting and dark times. Added to this challenge, our students tend to deconstruct whatever filaments of faith remain. It's far easier to walk away than keep following Christ in these strange days.

What, then, is Christian education for? And how might a bigger story of God's mission reorient both the content we teach and our pedagogical approach in this cultural moment?

In this session, we'll learn from the Master Teacher, Jesus, a process of journeying with disenchanting disciples in our schools en route to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–36). Tackling the modern penchant for unbounded plurality, which dissipates passion for following Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, we will discover how to listen, imagine, create, and communicate in divine conversation. We'll reorient education around the twin goals of seeking shalom and extending salvation, forming 'wise peacemakers' in the whole of life, whatever a student's (or teacher's) particular identity and religious conviction.

Together, we'll find wisdom for Christian schooling that can be adapted for diverse national and educational contexts, as we walk toward shalom, a unity-in-diversity imaging our Creator God.

Dr Dave Benson / *Culture and Discipleship Director at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity*
(licc.org.uk)



Dave is a leading thinker and researcher on the role of faith in 21st-Century western culture. Formerly a high school teacher, then lecturer at Malyon Theological College in Brisbane, Australia, he now heads up the LICC's work for Culture & Discipleship. In part, this role includes consultation with theological education institutions toward forming whole-life disciplers (licc.org.uk/about/theological-education). His mission is to cultivate disciples with wisdom for the way of Christ in a post-Christendom culture. His 2016 Ph.D project entitled 'Schools, Scripture and Secularisation' considers the telos of competing curricular visions and the place of sacred texts in secular education. Dave is the lead editor of *Transforming Vocation: Connecting Theology, Church, and the Workplace for a Flourishing World* (Wipf & Stock 2021).

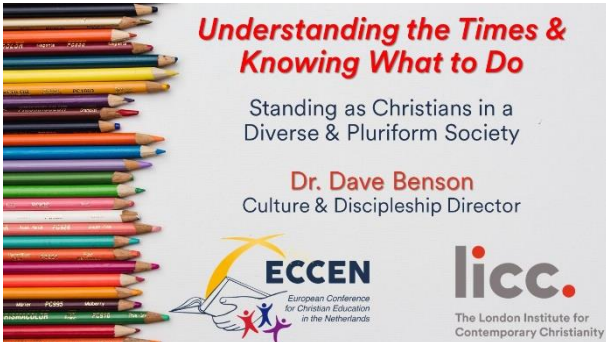
Questions to Discuss:

1. In what sense is, and isn't, your educational context 'post-Christendom' and pluralistic? What does this mean to you, and look like in practice? Tell a story of these cultural forces in action, as they impinge upon and challenge your school.
2. How has this growing cultural diversity impacted your teachers? And what about your students? What can you celebrate? What should you challenge? Where is there hope, moving forward?
3. Tell a story of a disenchanted student, losing their salt and light and starting to walk away from the faith they once held dear. What led to this disorientation? What form did their deconstruction take? How has your school gone, journeying with them? Pray for them now...
4. In your school, what is Christian education *for*? If it were reframed as about *shalom* and *salvation*, and the formation of 'wise peacemakers', what difference might this make for the disenchanted student above? Retell their story as a best-case scenario, with what *could* happen if engaged well.
5. Reflect on these four steps to walk together toward life. What does this look like in your school, even classroom, as you journey alongside those tempted to wander away? Try to reimagine and flesh out how a unit in your subject area might be taught, aligned with this four-step hermeneutical process:
 - a. LISTEN: What's going on and why?
 - b. IMAGINE: What should be going on?
 - c. CREATE: How will we respond?
 - d. COMMUNICATE: How to share the good news?

Disenchantment, Diversity, and Disciplemaking: A Process for Christlike Schooling in Post-Christendom Times

By Dr Dave Benson | LICC Director of Culture & Discipleship

Where are we headed in these ‘post-Christendom times’?



Goedemorgen! What a pleasure to join this wonderfully diverse group of educators, academics, and management boards from all around the world. It’s no small task trying to understand the times and know what to do! But I’m confident that facing these big questions – of how to stand as Christians in a diverse and pluriform society – I’m confident that *together*, in Christ’s Spirit, this is possible.

So, bedankt! Thank you for inviting me, a relative stranger from down under, to join you.

It’s truly a privilege.

So far, [Jan and Henk](#) have laid a biblical and theological foundation for the church as a unity in plurality – a body made of many members. And from this place, together – as a Pentecost community with diverse tongues but a common message of good news for a divided world – we can challenge the Tower of Babel that is modern education. We can provide a better way of being human in the present, teaching in the powerful hope that ultimately everything will submit to Christ; everything will find its rightful place under his Lordship.



So, this morning I want to continue the conversation by adding an apologetical perspective, drawing on a theology and philosophy of education. By the end, my hope is to outline *a process for Christlike schooling in post-Christendom times*. And we’ll get there by exploring three themes: *disenchantment, diversity, and disciplemaking*.

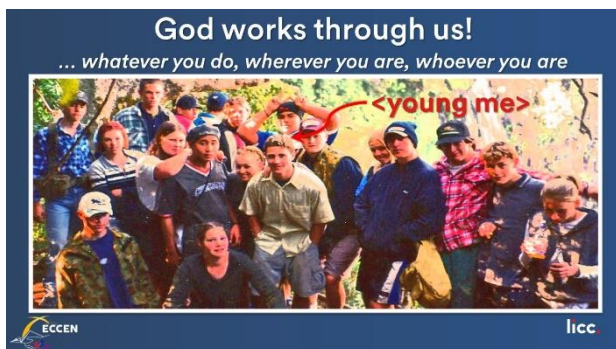
These themes are close to my heart and calling, and surround my current job in the UK, working for the

London Institute for Contemporary Christianity – LICC – where I am the director culture and discipleship.



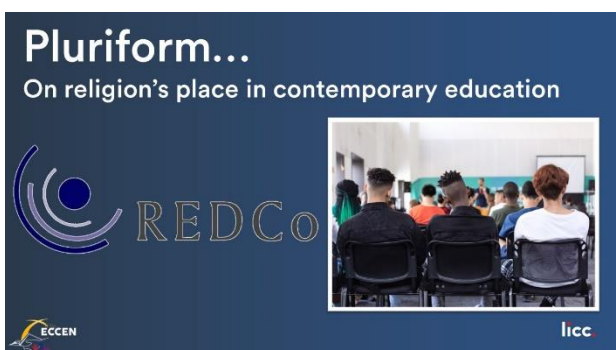
Just for an indication, who’s heard of [LICC](#)? Basically, John Stott set it up back in the 80s, recognizing that the UK had pretty good training for clergy, and good professional training in fields like education, but there wasn’t a lot of in-depth training to help everyday Christians integrate their faith and their work, to be whole-life disciples who look like Jesus in Monday to Saturday life, whatever you do, wherever you are, whoever you are.

So it wasn’t a hard sell to join the cause. For this message was revolutionary to me when I first started my career – that God works through us not just as cross-cultural missionaries, pastors, and parachurch workers ... but that we can join God at work as tailors, telemarketers, table-makers, and definitely as teachers.



I wish I'd encountered this life changing message way back then, that God cares about the *curriculum* I teach, the *character* I demonstrate when the students are going crazy, the creative *lessons* I plan, the *way* I confront staff-room gossip, the *care* I show a hurting kid or a confused parent or an exhausted colleague. Every aspect of education. God wants to work through us to make a difference where we already are.

And that's brilliant news. When I discovered this call to being a whole-life disciple through my work, it added a whole new intentionality to all I did, in my high school teaching, then [researching about the place of religion and sacred texts in secular schools](#), and finally lecturing in a theological college before coming over to London to help us make sense of this cultural moment and discern how to wisely follow Jesus in our particular time and place.



But how to characterise this time and place? As part of my doctoral studies, I read through all 6-volumes of the REDCo series and many of the 26 reports. Who's heard of [REDCo](#)? It was a multi-million dollar, 3-year, 8-country academic project exploring the place of *Religion in Education*. They asked, is religion a contribution to dialogue, or a factor of conflict, in transforming societies of European countries? The European Union commissioned this project, recognising that the diversity

across Europe was immense, and the 'common good' was under threat. So what role does religion in education play? And the series exposed, much like our conversations these few days with even wider diversity, that there is no single *role* of religion in education. Some countries like Greece privilege an orthodox curriculum, others like England practice religious diversity alongside state church, while still others like France mandate secularism, *laïcité*.

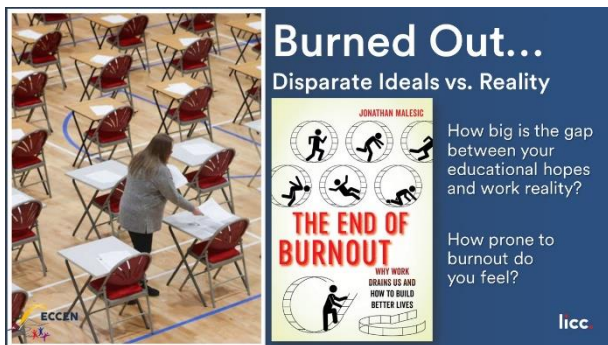


But across every context, it's fair to say that with the growth of diverse ways of believing, desiring, and living, every educational system has shifted *toward* being **post-Christendom**. In simplest terms, genuinely Christian beliefs, ways of life, and preferences aren't as dominant as they once were. Granted, in some places like Hungary, or Russia, there is a resurgent religious nationalism, seeking uniformity under the name of Christianity. But the genuine freedom to be formed in Christlike ways has become difficult, if not

implausible. The church doesn't call the shots, and whatever privileges we once had are being stripped away. So, whether you're in a Christian or a so-called 'secular' State school, you're typically required to frame all you do as part of a much larger conversation with a multitude of players and perspectives.

In our discussion later, we might weigh up how this is both a loss and a gain. As a missiologist, I'll put my cards on the table and say that I don't think Christendom – where the church pushed its weight around – was that Christlike, either. So I can welcome the refining of the church today on the margins of power, and celebrate a bigger conversation where we learn to be good neighbours however much power we possess. In part, diversity *is* the zeitgeist as it guards against yesteryear's domination by communists, fascists, and a hegemonic church. But for now, I just want to note that following Jesus as educators in our particular time and place means coming to grips with what it means to teach and learn in post-Christendom times.

And this is, frankly, *tough*. Teaching is tough enough, anyway.



I recently read that [teacher wellbeing is 'on a knife edge'](#) after the pandemic: 67 per cent of teachers say their workload is not manageable, the pay inadequate with rising cost of living, and only 38 per cent of school staff in the UK are confident in their roles. Half of staff don't feel adequately supported, and many feel like failures in their identity as teachers for they fall short of everyone's expectations, including their own, even as their families and lives are falling apart trying to keep up appearances

that they have it all together. No wonder so many are on strike.

Jonathan Malesic wrote a timely book, [The End of Burnout](#). In it, he said that burnout is primarily the result of a growing distance between our *ideals* and our *reality* – between, say, why we went into teaching, and what you're actually able to achieve in your day-to-day work.

So let's have a moment of silence to honestly ask ourselves this. What did we believe was possible when we first started teaching? What do we hope for in education, today, as a follower of Jesus? And how close is reality to this ideal goal?

How big is the gap? And how prone to burnout do you feel?

(PAUSE TO REFLECT.) You might want to share this with each other later.

But what I know is this: *disenchantment* is everywhere.

Disenchantment

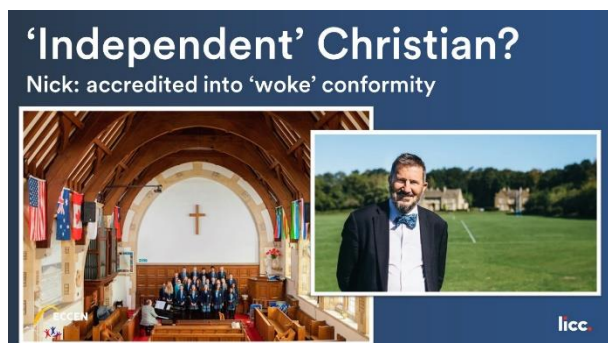


The reality is that educating in a distinctively Christian way, in this post-Christendom period, is becoming ever more challenging. We're confronted by a cacophony of curricular voices and a plurality of ideological visions for the good life. No wonder our teachers are easily confused, overwhelmed, and then discouraged. How can we be salt and light in rotting and dark times, when we have so little control over the purpose of our schools and the way we teach every day?

Added to this challenge, our students tend to deconstruct whatever filaments of faith remain. It's far easier to walk away than keep following Christ in these strange days.

Let me tell three stories, across a range of contexts, to get at this disenchantment.

Which resonates with you?



First, let's consider a prominent Christian institution in the UK. [Kingham Hill School](#) in Oxfordshire was a quintessentially Christian school, where parents and students paid hefty fees for the privilege. And yet, in 2021, the supposedly Independent Schools Inspectorate failed this otherwise exceptional school for failing to prove that they don't discriminate against pupils. The evidence? Well, they didn't meet provisions for teaching same-sex relationships in the curriculum, and had no visible signs of

LGBTQ+ affirmation in their primary places of gathering, such as the library where they study and chapel when sermons are delivered.

Now, the school is clear: they welcome pupils ‘from all faith backgrounds and none’, but believe their Christian ethos ‘provides the best possible basis for them to grow as public citizens and in personal character’. Chatting with the former Principal, Rev Nick Seward, he claimed they could acknowledge diversity and unconditionally include everyone without undermining their distinctive Christian ethos. But when the Chairman of Governors kowtowed to pressure in 2022, and displayed affirmative propaganda in the library and hung a rainbow flag on the chapel lectern, Nick understandably stepped down. Forget salt and light. They’d succumbed to the spirit of the times, and as one parent accused, were seemingly ‘embarrassed to be a Christian school’. Nick has now taken a head teacher role in a Christian school in Hong Kong, where he’s actually *more* free; in his words, he’s moved to China to escape a totalitarian state!

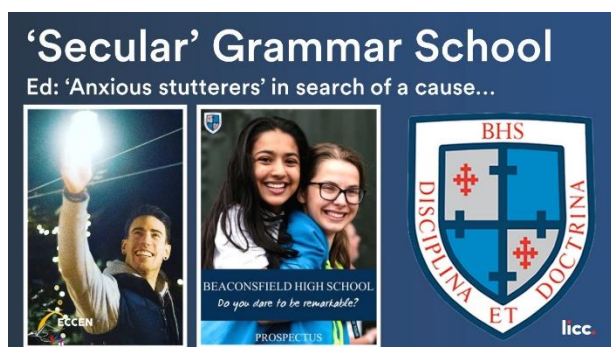


When we ran an LICC event on ‘thriving in teaching’, one of Kingham’s teachers, Sarah, shot me an email, saying that finding the intersection of meaningful work, connection with others, and bringing her whole self to work, was a world away from her experience. She was totally disenchanted. Hardly a culture warrior, she just wanted a safe place to aim at her ideals of Christian education. Perhaps you’ve read Rod Dreher’s book, [The Benedict Option](#), where he calls Christians in education to

form their own independent institutions like a monastic order, retreating in place for the eventual health of the wider society. Essentially, you leave our Christian institution alone, and we’ll leave your confused society alone. But in Sarah’s words: ‘Kingham was my Benedict Option. ... My conclusion is that there is nowhere to run for Christian teachers.’

This wasn’t simply about Queer activism, but feminist activism, Black Lives Matters activism, and now climate activism, even Ukraine activism. Many of these causes she supported, but ‘declining to [fully] participate in the activism has immediate professional costs’ – not being promoted, shut out of dinner parties, criticised for her faith. She emailed, ‘On the surface, the school presents itself as a place where plurality is welcome, but this is not true. Conformity is expected, and there are coercion tactics in place to enforce that conformity. I am ostracised for not conforming to the recent radical changes.’ After standing up for her beliefs, and politely opting out, she eventually resigned, labelled a dangerous dissident.

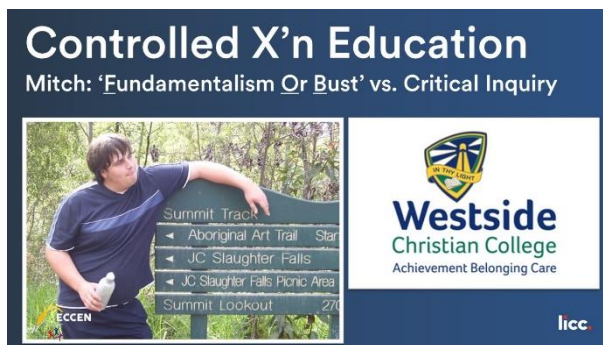
So, both the principal and many teachers are disenchanted in their Christian school.



Okay, story two. Let’s take Ed, in his secular grammar school, teaching English to 15-year-old girls. Every month is a different cause, championing some form of diversity to subvert what used to be the norm. In June it’s Pride month, in October it’s Black History month, and so on. Ed is an open-minded guy, and cares for all his students, whatever their beliefs and identification. But he feels conflicted as a Christian teacher being asked to espouse ideologies that often exclude or twist what he thinks is

true, good, and beautiful. And he can’t help but notice the escalating mental health issues of these impressionable girls, as whatever they feel or think or do is unconditionally embraced and celebrated as reality, when in actuality they’re more depressed than ever. Ed’s also disenchanted. He has no language or frame of reference to distinguish good diversity from bad diversity – for there is such a thing, despite what his school says. So he’s just disenchanted, and tempted to walk away from his job, for he doesn’t have a clear aim for why he’s teaching. And he has no process for walking alongside diverse young people with such divergent beliefs, to become fully-formed learners. In [Alasdair Macintyre’s words](#), these girls have no access to a bigger and better story of what it means to be human, so they end up as ‘anxious stutterers’, unsure what to do and how to live for they don’t know what story they are part of.

Do you have good news for Ed? What's a way forward, that makes sense as a Christian teacher in a post-Christendom context where neither the church nor he as a lone teacher call the shots?



One more story, with a twist, this time from the perspective of a student who was brought up in a Christian family, at an explicitly Christian school, where they *could* call the shots. Sometimes we speak as if things would be perfect if we got back to that golden Christendom period where we could discriminate against employing non-Christian teachers, and exclude all this diverse non-Christian content. Wouldn't that be so much better? But this story asks of us what we're really aiming at as

Christian educators. And whether it really is a good thing if we get our way in a mono-cultural school?

I've journeyed with Mitch over 20-years, now as a friend, but initially as a youth worker watching as this brilliant and inquisitive teen became increasingly disenchanted, and finally left Christian fundamentalism to become an agnostic in religious exile. He looks back at his Christian schooling experience largely with disdain, as akin to a cult that shielded him from critical inquiry, never offering honest answers to honest questions. Here's how Mitch describes it:

'I could no more regret that I am a product of a Christian education than I could sensibly regret my father being my father; for better or worse, my identity is both a product of and response to a Christian education. The education I received from dedicated, loving, and professional Christian teachers has formed the bedrock of my academic success and has been with modification the core of my value set.

... I must undoubtedly take the lion's share of responsibility for my own apostasy; but there were factors of my education and religious experience that contributed to the destruction of my faith.

The most significant aspect of my religious education with which I take issue is what I term an attitude of fundamentalism or bust (FOB). FOB was apparent in many aspects of how I was schooled: there was the biology paper on the theory of evolution that my biology class mandated was to be critical of evolution (and defensive of Young Earth Creationism); there was the canteen worker who advised me that anything but biblical literalism was "weak willed hypocrisy"; and there were the repeated calls to trust in the face of all doubt.

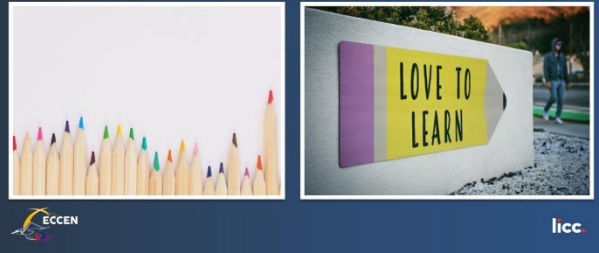
Christian educators are undoubtedly in an unenviable position; caught between curriculum and culture, pastoral care and parental expectations, the impulse to make the approved road for students not only narrow but heavily signposted must be overwhelming. ... The insistence, though, that there could be no breadth of opinion within faithful Christian discourse has made faith synonymous with fundamentalism for me.

Pushing me to the theological right made me feel that any faith other than unthinking fideism was shameful wavering on the path to salvation. Shame, doubt, and an inability to moderate the fundamentalism I had been brought up on eventually led to my agnosticism. Driving me to the theological right unintentionally drove me out of faith.'

Powerful, hey. I'm pretty sure this isn't our ideal as Christian educators. But what are we really aiming at? We don't want religious relativism, driven about by the latest fad and call for inclusive activism, where devout Christian faith is left out of the mix. But nor should we be comfortable with the power to indoctrinate, setting up our schools like the garden of Eden but bettering God by barring access to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We can't learn, grow, and love, without freedom to explore and truly follow what we believe is right. The [best studies](#) suggest around [70 percent](#) of our young people brought up in these controlled Christian environments end up junking their faith by university, just like Mitch – and the solution was never a more homogenous community and a less pluriform approach to pedagogy.

Squaring the Circle

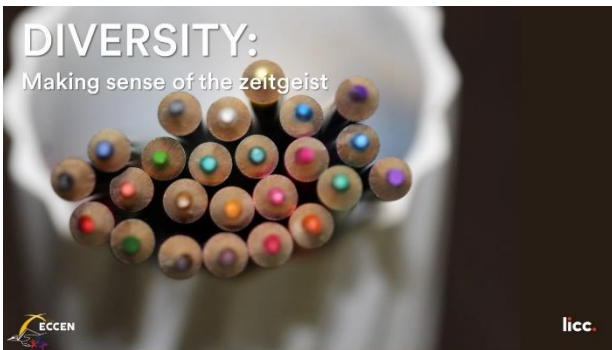
Disenchanted: indoctrination on top; indistinct otherwise



So how to square this circle? We sound like the apostle Paul in Romans 7 – paraphrasing: why do I do what I don't want to do, and yet don't do what I want to do? Why do we indoctrinate kids when we have control over our institutions, cultivating disenchantment so they eventually walk away? And why do we not educate in a distinctively Christian way when we're not in control, evidencing that following Jesus is the best way to be human amidst unlimited options? Who will align our ideals, and release us from this educational body of death? We need a better vision of education.

You see, in each story and each context we discover *disenchantment* – a loss of faith of sorts in these strange days. So what's going on, here? And is there a way forward, where our ideals and reality hang together rather than head opposite directions, sending us into burnout?

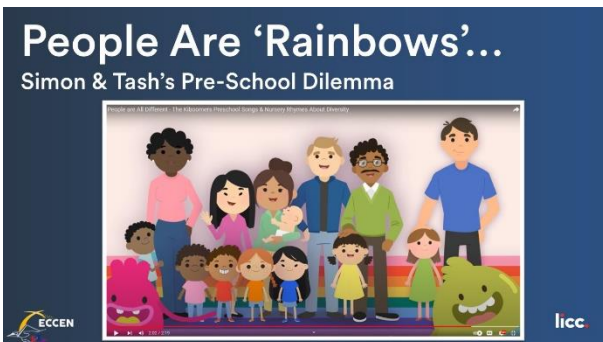
Diversity



I will suggest a better vision of education shortly. But first, we need a better handle on *diversity*. Biblically, how should we make sense of our calling when confronted by our culture's *zeitgeist*¹ in this post-Christendom age? For this prevailing spirit and moral vision is inculcated through education very early on.

Just last week our close friends asked for my advice on what to say to the pre-school of Joseph, their 3-year-old son. For they had this whole class singing along to a Gay

Pride song for kids about diversity, called '[People are Rainbows](#)'.



I won't inflict the tune on you, as the picture and lyrics are sufficient to get the gist:

*'Black and white and gold and brown /
People are colours too / We are just like rainbows /
Many rainbows / People are rainbows too*

*Look with your eyes / Look all around /
And sing everything you see /
People are like rainbows / Many rainbows /*

Sing along with me / Mom and Mommy or Daddy and Dad / They make parents too

We are just like rainbows / Many rainbows / People are rainbows too

*... Mom and Mommy or Daddy and Dad / One Mommy or one Daddy too!
We are just like rainbows / Many rainbows / People are rainbows too.'*

What a banger! It's a real ear worm, that Joseph bit into like the forbidden fruit in Eden.

So, what's going on here, and how to respond?

¹ According to [ChatGPT](#), *Zeitgeist* is a German word that refers to the prevailing spirit or cultural, intellectual, and moral climate of a particular period in history. It encompasses the collective beliefs, values, attitudes, and ideas that shape a society or culture at a particular time. The concept of *Zeitgeist* implies that a particular period in history is characterized by a dominant set of cultural, intellectual, and moral values that shape the way people think and act. It can be observed in various areas of society, such as art, literature, music, [education,] philosophy, politics, and social norms.



Pluralism's Many Forms...
 'Sing everything you see': Describing vs. Prescribing?



- (1) Pluralism as **Mere Plurality**
(the state of being >1)
- (2) Pluralism as **Preference**
(it's good there's >1)
- (3) Pluralism as **Relativism**
(everything's equal/'normal'
& people are rainbows)

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Theologian, John Stackhouse, in his book, [Humble Apologetics](#), helpfully distinguishes three types of *pluralism*. Joseph may not be able to tell the difference. But as Christian educators, we must.

First, '*pluralism as mere plurality ... means the state of being "more than one".' Christian educators are about leading learners into reality, not hiding the facts. And the fact is that in God's good but broken world, there is a diversity of people, cultures, ethnicities, sexual*

identification, and expressions. So, whatever school we're at, though in a developmentally appropriate way, we should affirm our students coming to grips with pluriform ways to believe, desire, and act. We're tasked to be culture makers way back in Eden, so naming reality and making sense of why things are the way they are, is part of our task as teachers. Shielding kids from diversity is no Christian virtue.

Second, then, '*pluralism as preference ... affirm[s] that "it is good" that there is more than one'.* Now this gets more controversial. In an important sense, the whole biblical story is one of a unity-in-diversity, as we've already touched on. Myriad diversity in creation, two creation accounts, freedom to name the creatures, God making himself known through Israel by all the nations as a conduit of blessing ... then this blessing focusing in on Jesus, with four Gospel accounts, extending salvation to all who come, uniting Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free, into one body, one community, for the glory of our triune God: Father, Son, Spirit. So... *we have every reason to expect and celebrate difference*, for it's reflective of God's nature and hardwired into his handiwork. I do prefer plurality. It's a good thing, and the tendency toward uniformity and control in Christian education acts against God's purposes. As [Miroslav Volf](#) puts it, 'To erase difference is to undo the creation, that intricate pattern of separations and interdependencies that God established when the universe was formed out of *no*-thing. Literally, *every*-thing depends on difference.'

Now, in a moment I'll challenge a simplistic affirmation of all diversity. But, for now, let me say that my friends, Simon and Tash as Jesus' disciples, are called to accept and love all people, whoever they are, and whatever they do. We should be united in standing against racism, sexism, homophobia, transgenderism. We should stand with people in their pain, and speak up for justice, especially when our neighbours and students have been abused for these particular ways of identifying and acting. This form of love sits within a larger story where God gave us freedom in the garden to move toward or away from him. While the fall is a tragedy, the deeper story is [felix culpa](#) – that this was a '[happy fault](#)', through which we discovered our need for God, the call to live together for a common good greater than any one sliver of society, and ultimately a path back into relationship that avoids uniformity but unites the one and the many. We can become a member of a body. But this requires protection of each group, seeing their gifts, and making for mutuality where all can flourish. So, even at this level, my friends and Christian educators alike can say, it's good that there's more than one in our schools. There is freedom to be, even when I wouldn't go that way.

What we need to guard against, though, is the third type: '*pluralism as relativism*', where we affirm the equality of all options, or perhaps question our ability to judge, or even nihilistically deny good and evil, truth and falsity. And this is where 'people are rainbows', the zeitgeist of the age, is insidious. Like we saw at Kingham, and Ed's grammar school, it's not simply a case of accepting diversity, extending freedom to be, and loving each person with their distinctive colours. The problem, as my friends pointed out to their son's pre-school teacher is two-fold.

First, they relativise every option, and call us to equally celebrate what was never neutral. Not all diversity is good diversity, from a biblical perspective. With our freedom to choose, we rebelled against the Creator and tried living against the grain of the universe. Under the banner of authenticity, we celebrated selfishness and going our own way, speaking our own truth, creating our own 'reality'. But this illusion fragments life and causes pain. Whether this rejection of creational forms is culpable or we are victims of a

confused culture, God can judge. But as Christian educators we need the freedom to raise the question and offer discernment as to what is true, good, and beautiful – and, conversely, what is false, evil, and ugly. Little Joseph, alongside most students today, is left confused, calling that which is wrong, right.

Which leads into the second critique. In their rush to celebrate diversity, there a glaring omission. They excluded a traditional family type. And religious diversity, too. This educational propaganda failed to be diverse and inclusive enough, with a narrow band spectrum comprising a rainbow missing the central colours.

So, the zeitgeist normalised and celebrated deep diversity aimed in the wrong direction (what the Scriptures challenge as sin), but silence good diversity which helps society as a whole and each individual therein to flourish. Descriptive plurality – simply naming differences that exist – has slipped past healthy pluralism into prescribing an incoherent blend of ethical relativism and intolerance of what was once a Christian norm in wider society.

Hopefully you can see that interpreting and unmasking the ‘zeitgeist’ of diversity is no simple thing.



Kuyperian Clarity...
Unmask non-neutrality & seek 'principled pluralism'

- (1) Support **Structural Plurality**
(spheres by design, so respect each school's role)
- (2) Acknowledge **Cultural Plurality**
(what we make of the world, in many forms)
- (3) Resist **Directional Plurality**
(confessional control for one privileged goal)

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Though if you're Reformed in your theology, I suspect I'm not telling you anything new, for as Jamie Smith points out in his book, [Awaiting the King](#) 'Kuyperians were pluralists before pluralism was cool. In the Netherlands the tradition has long argued for a pluralist society, with a multiplication of institutions and spheres to ward off the [control] of the sprawling state.' In these post-Christendom times, we must recognise the non-neutrality of every perspective, and join our neighbours, regardless of their religious

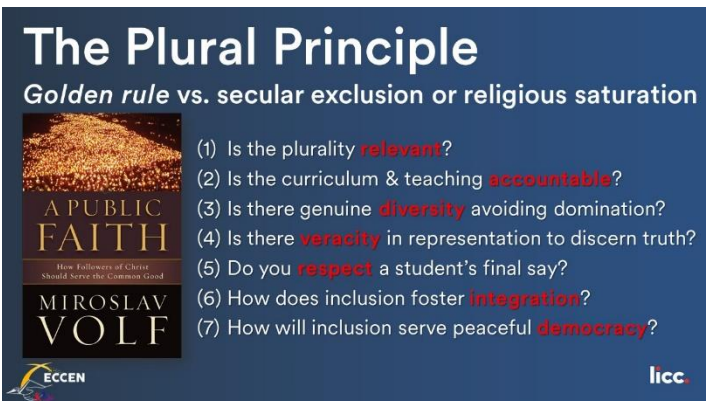
beliefs, in arguing for a 'principled pluralism'. Let's re-see those three-forms through a Reformed theological lens...

(1) We can support *structural plurality* as part of God's creational design; we must recognise that the sphere of education has an integrity and particular purpose of forming young people in head, heart, and hands – in right belief, right desire, and right action – for the common good, not just to advance a particular Christian cause. School isn't church, so differentiating the purpose of each institution is healthy.

(2) And we can give qualified support to *cultural plurality* where education takes on diverse expressions across our different countries, fit to our context to the degree we believe they genuinely align with the grain of God's universe and make for holistic flourishing. We're called to freely make culture, so it's wise to acknowledge 'what we make of the world' in myriad form and fashion.

(3) But we must question and resist *directional plurality*, where one comprehensive worldview dominates the rest, determining the good we pursue, 'what we value, and how we act in society'. Giving any single vision of life – including Christianity – total say, destroys any possibility of [forging a common good](#). So, it's a big 'no' to what political theologian, [Jonathan Chaplain](#), calls 'confessional plurality' in any public sphere. Individuals, families, and churches need freedom in their spheres to determine their own direction, without being co-opted into another's ideology or political project.

So, returning to 'People are Rainbows', educationally, we need to call this out as illiberal indoctrination. A progressive secularism is [no neutral sheriff](#) to keep at bay squabbling religious citizens with divergent ideologies. We need a better way forward.



- (1) Is the plurality **relevant**?
- (2) Is the curriculum & teaching **accountable**?
- (3) Is there genuine **diversity** avoiding domination?
- (4) Is there **veracity** in representation to discern truth?
- (5) Do you **respect** a student's final say?
- (6) How does inclusion foster **integration**?
- (7) How will inclusion serve peaceful **democracy**?

And in this, Mirosław is so helpful, with his book, [A Public Faith](#). Squaring the circle I raised earlier, Volf suggests that our challenge is avoiding *both* the secular *exclusion* of religious convictions which are displaced to the private realm, and the *saturation* of religion where one faith imposes its vision of the common good onto all others.

As I discovered in my doctoral work, this requires a commitment to reciprocity in education – committing to fair principles determining what we

cover as we help teachers and students alike come to grips with the pluralistic reality they face in post-Christendom times. Whether you're in a 'secular' or Christian school, Christian teachers should judge what they include and exclude by seven principles equally applied to every ideology, whether religious, faith-based, or this-worldly:

- Is the plurality you're including *relevant* to curricular aims?
- Are you and your curriculum *accountable* to professional educators?
- Is there genuine *diversity* in perspective, not simply privileging one view without another angle?
- Is there *veracity* in re-presenting the Other, making space to critically analyse truth claims?
- Do you make space to *respect* a student's right to have the final say in matters of belief and practice?
- How does this inclusion genuinely foster the *integration* of a student's life toward holistic flourishing?
- And how will this experience help form a robust, just, inclusive, and peaceful *democracy*?

I recognise this is a high bar. But this is precisely the kind of 'principled pluralism' Christian educators should seek, and exemplify, in this confused cultural moment. It's not relativism, but rather practising the golden rule: 'Doing to others, educationally, what we want them to do for us.' No privilege or special favours – fairness throughout.

'People are rainbows' totally failed these tests. But so, too, do many forms of Christian education, aimed not at the common good, but at conformity to Christian belief and practice. This disrespects our many students like my friend Mitch, and also sets our Christian teachers up for failure, leading to disenchantment and walking away.

Disciplemaking & Divine Conversation



It's fair to ask, though, what kind of *vision* of education would justify such even-handed treatment of diversity? Surely not many of the goals we espouse, like Christian education for the kingdom, or Christian belief, or explicitly making followers of Jesus out of non-Christian kids who never signed up for this indoctrination.

We as Christian educators are called to *be* whole-life disciples; and to teach our kids well, we need to first learn how to follow the way of Jesus in our particularly

pluralistic time and place. We're called in the Great Commission to 'disciple the nations', but can I suggest this doesn't mean a narrow focus where all we value is sneaking Jesus into every lesson plan and convincing students to pray the sinner's prayer while throwing the javelin in physical education. We need a biblical vision fitting for the pluralistic sphere of education.



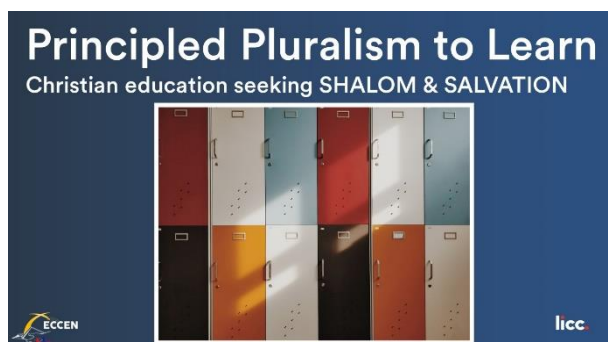
Now, I've spent about a decade fine-tuning what is a better way, through [academic](#) and [popular work](#). But time only permits me to *assert* what I normally *argue* for. Still, try this on for size, for why we're here as Christian educators...



As framed by theologian [John Stackhouse](#), our human mission in this world consists of two sets of commandments which direct our participation with God on his mission. The *Creation Commandments*—‘to love God and our neighbours as ourselves as we cultivate the world’—describe the original and ongoing purpose of life for all people and every culture. Broadly speaking, education should be aimed at this holistic flourishing, working with the grain of the universe. Now, not everyone will

choose to align with this purpose, but it aligns with who God created humans to be. The *Redemption Commandments*—particularly loving fellow believers as a model to the world, and cultivating Jesus-followers through evangelism and discipleship—are a restorative response to a world gone wrong. They represent God’s particular purpose for some people (‘the elect’), so that all people will return to, and fulfil, their creational intent.

In short form, then, Christian schools are here to serve the overarching human vocation of *shalom*, and advance the particular Christian calling of extending *salvation* that all may freely align with Christ as Lord of the cosmos he created and loves. Forming learners who love rightly is key, across these four mandates.



While this framework may seem obvious to many believers, the implications are important for how we conceptualise our task. We are not simply after a Christian theology of education *for Christians*. Over half of our students don't identify as 'Jesus' co-workers' and are not filled with the Spirit who empowers them for the particular call of evangelism and discipleship. So expecting students to act like Christians, [worshipping](#) Jesus with arms raised high, and then handing out grades accordingly, is unethical.

It cultivates hypocrisy and resentment, and in the long run may inoculate them against genuine faith.

Instead, we're to accompany every student as they become fully formed image bearers of their Creator who made them from and for love. Together, we pursue holistic maturation, growing in knowledge and understanding, character, and competence to participate in the work of shalom.



Bringing this together, I'm suggesting that we frame our Christian schools and work as Christian teachers, whatever our institutional location, as aimed at forming *wise peacemakers on the journey to shalom*.

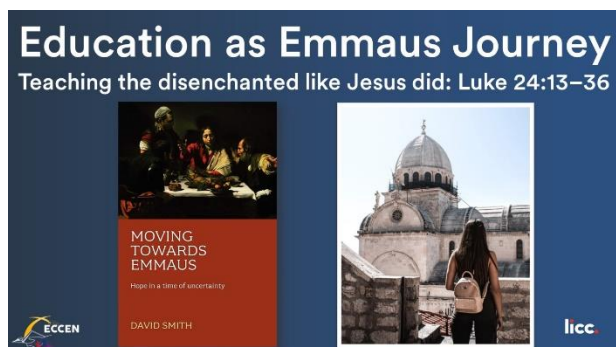
Through schooling as a whole, and each subject and lesson therein, we're aiming to progressively form students to develop the knowledge and understanding to *make sense of the world* (growing in wisdom), and develop the dispositions and skills to *work together for*

the common good in our pluralistic society. So, they learn to practice shalom (growing as peacemakers).

As Jesus taught, 'blessed are the peacemakers' (Matthew 5:9), but in our broken world this requires us to help every young person be as 'wise as a serpent, and innocent as a dove' (Matthew 10:16). '[Wise doves](#)' was one of the earliest names for disciples of Jesus.

In due time, through a gentle and consistent witness, they may see what *salvation* looks like in practice. They may choose to embrace Christ and his mission to redeem the world.

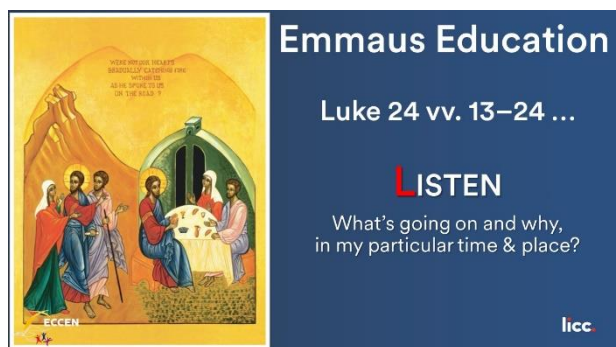
But this *telos* of shalom, this single educational vision of aiming at holistic peace and flourishing, includes every learner irrespective of age and developmental stage, ability, and religion or lack thereof. Focus on this goal, and we avoid the dangers of both the secular exclusion of religion, and the saturation of education with one belief system which is dangerous in the sphere of post-Christendom schooling.



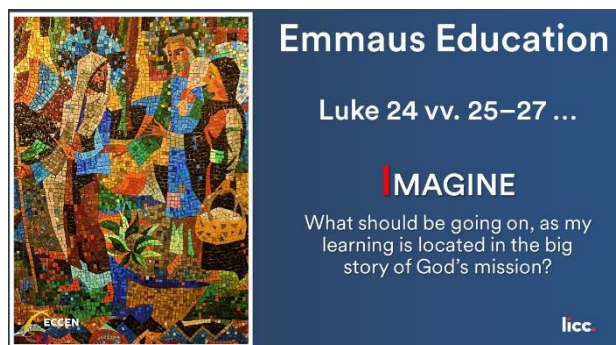
Okay, I recognise I've just dumped a whole heap of theory on you, that you may or may not go with. So let me drop into what this might look like in practice, by showing how Jesus taught two deeply disenchanted students on the road to Emmaus. Watching Jesus walk alongside them in their confusion, we can learn in our particular context how to make wise peacemakers on the journey to shalom in a Christlike way...

I wish we had time to read [Luke 24:13-36](#). It's one of my favourite passages. But I'm going to dangerously presume you're familiar with this passage, and instead [paint an Emmaus journey](#) alongside [disenchanted disciples](#) who were probably in their late teens, following our Lord's lead.

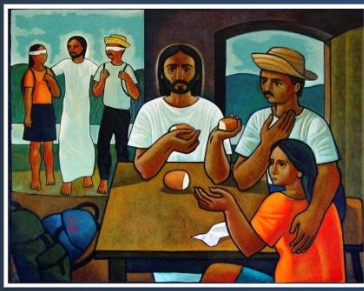
The story is set after all the disciples are scattered and their Saviour is smashed by Rome. They know Jesus was crucified and lived a good life, merciful and compassionate. But they missed the memo about conquering death, and resurrection life that starts now and wells up into eternity. So they were disenchanted, heads hung low and feet dragging the 7-miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus as they effectively left their faith, and headed back to a worldly life before discipleship got in the way. How does Jesus journey alongside these wounded young people?



Well, first, and unrecognised, he draws near and *listens* well, asking wise questions to unearth their personal story of pain, and confusing cultural tale of what they wanted their deliverer to do; they expected a warrior king, not a suffering servant, so they were understandably disoriented.



Second, and subtly, the Christ draws them into a larger story, retelling the mission of God, helping them *imagine* where God is at work. But this is only after first giving full voice to competing accounts in this conflictual moment that could be interpreted in a bunch of different ways.



Luke 24
vv. 28–32 ...

CREATE

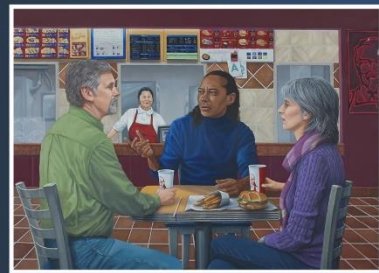
How will we respond, seeking shalom through life-giving habits and healing action?



Emmaus Education

lccc

Now, it's not until this disenchanted duo practise hospitality and life-giving habits in Jesus' presence that their eyes are opened, and their feet are redirected to head back to Jerusalem in healing action. That's the third step: *create* change.



Luke 24
vv. 28–32 ...

COMMUNICATE

What's good news worth sharing, which connects in our context?



Emmaus Education

lccc

Which sets them up, fourth and finally, to *communicate* what they've freely come to believe is genuinely good news, that Christ is risen, and nothing will ever be the same again! Jesus appears in their midst, offering peace, shalom, through the scars in his hands and the breath of his Spirit, making a difference so they can be in loving relationship with God, neighbour, nature, and themselves, flourishing as wise peacemakers.

Being a wise peacemaker

Listen: What's going on and why?

Imagine: What should be going on?

Create: How will we respond?

Communicate: How to share the good news?



lccc

Did you get that? *Listen, Imagine, Create, and Communicate.* Jesus walks humbly alongside, respecting diversity and never controlling the conversation. They're seen and heard. And brought into a community of practice, stumbling onward rejoicing as they aim at justice which will remake the whole world as a taste of heaven on earth.

Can I suggest, then, a better way to walk with and educate diverse students in these post-Christendom times, forming wise peacemakers on the journey to shalom?

Ed: Exploring Life's Meaning in English

How would Jesus educate if he were you?



It's life-long learning, but let's reimagine Ed's education. He's in his secular grammar school, teaching English to 15-year-old girls where the curriculum and political correctness preach plurality, multiculturalism, and making sense of the world toward the common good. But in reality, they confuse the girls with pluralism as relativism on one hand, and then privileging directional plurality often set dead-against his vision of the good emerging from his Christian faith. Must he simply resign, disenchanted?

Where else can he go, for the Christian school down the road is now required to acknowledge, even affirm, the same ideology to keep their accreditation. As Sarah said, there is nowhere to run now.

I'm suggesting that by aiming at shalom and salvation, and by journeying alongside students as we *listen, imagine, create, and communicate*, guided by four big questions grounded in their everyday life, we have a path forward amidst the overwhelming plurality. It's a way of forming reflective practitioners, even wise peacemakers, right where they are, revealing the total relevance of following Jesus in the here and now.

So, Ed is teaching a middle-school unit on classic texts, as a way of exploring the meaning of life. What might this process look like?



Ed's Education


LISTEN

What's going on around us and why, in our pluriform culture?

► 'Fracture' | Zelga Simone Miller **licc**

First, Ed *listens* to what's going on around us and why, helping his students place their experiences in a larger cultural story. He can ask great questions to help them truly observe their culture, see what they love, hate, and discern what they hope for, through principled exposure to cultural plurality and a diversity of classic texts. Use the plural principle, and practice reciprocity. No need to privilege the Bible, even if he could sneak it into the curriculum. Start with what actually is, acknowledging the

dizzying variety of ways of seeing and construing the world.



Ed's Education


IMAGINE

What should be going on, making sense of the world amidst directional plurality?

► 'Fracture' | Zelga Simone Miller **licc**

Second, Ed helps these girls *imagine* what should be going, facilitating a wider conversation between the directional plurality in these stories and how these students make sense of the world. God's big story in the Bible can be legitimately included as one classic text among many, that represents how a prominent minority across history have construed existence, and lived accordingly. Each student has the freedom to critique these visions, with Ed trusting that truth, goodness, and beauty commend the way of

Christ to those who are open, without needing to privilege his Christian perspective.




Ed's Education

CREATE

How will we respond, with a better story, life-giving habits, and healing action to get us from here to there?

► 'Fracture' | Zelga Simone Miller **licc**

Third, as the unit passes the midway mark, Ed encourages these learners to *create* a new story, with life-giving habits and healing action that bring justice and flourishing to their schooling community and wider society, starting with their own lives and actions. Having clarified where they each want to go, Ed helps them discern the way to get from here to there, demonstrating this with real-world assessment tasks.



Ed's Education

COMMUNICATE

What's the 'good news' you believe is wise and worth sharing, as we make sense of the world and work together for the common good?

► 'Fracture' | Zelga Simone Miller **licc**

Finally, as the semester draws to a close, Ed makes space in class for each girl to *communicate* what she believes to be wise and worth sharing, clarifying the virtuous habits needed to achieve this vision, expressed in peacemaking that leaves her, and the wider community, better off than when they started. How has each girl grown? Can they communicate why this is 'good news' not only for their learning in that subject, but in pursuit of *shalom* – seeking holistic flourishing in her particular time and place?

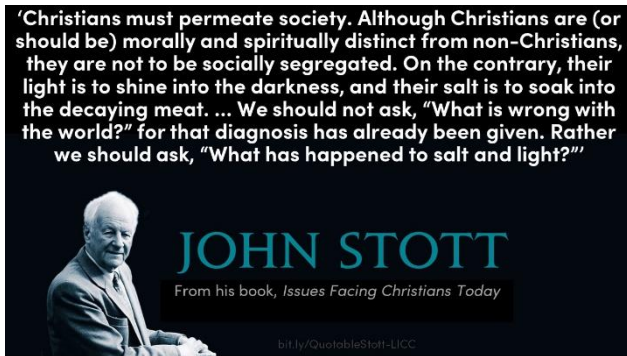
Throughout, Ed's approach to teaching and learning respects plurality, amplifying good diversity but giving space to critique bad diversity that destroys life. Students remain free to form their own vision of who they want to become and how they want to live, but are bound together in a community of practice with standards of excellence aligned with exemplary education that can be fairly assessed without coercing kids to believe and act as you do.

This is the kind of 'discipling of the nations' I believe followers of Jesus should seek in these complex times.

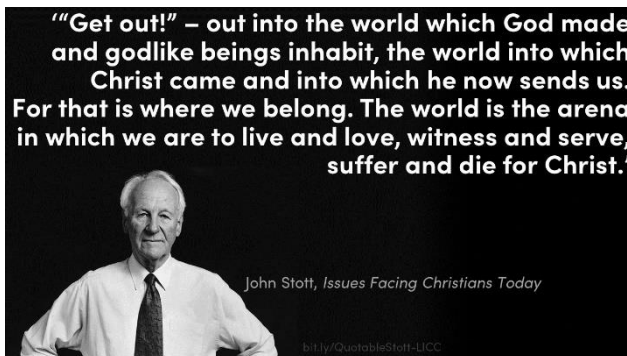
Do Likewise



As I draw this talk to a close, it's helpful to loop back to where I started. LICC was founded by John Stott, who for many in his day sounded the clarion call for disciples to at once *radically identify* with the world in which we live, and yet be *radically different* for the flourishing of that culture. In short, 'you're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world' (Matthew 5:14, MSG). What Stott [said of the church](#) as a whole in 1982 is still relevant for Christian educators today as we read the signs of the times:



'Christians must permeate society. Although Christians are (or should be) morally and spiritually distinct from non-Christians, they are not to be socially segregated. On the contrary, their light is to shine into the darkness, and their salt is to soak into the decaying meat. ... We should not ask, "What is wrong with the world?" for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather, we should ask, "What has happened to the salt and light?" ...



[So] "Get out" - out into the world which God made and godlike beings inhabit, the world into which Christ came and into which he now sends us. For that is where we belong. The world is the arena in which we are to live and love, witness and serve, suffer and die for Christ.'

And, yes, this includes schools, the arena in which we teach, in a Christlike way, for the glory of God.



But being re-enchanted as educators requires us to hold together our ideals and the reality in which we find ourselves, lest we as teachers, and our students like Mitch, burnout and walk away. My hope, today, is that I've given you both a vision, and a process, that does just that.


So whether you're Nigel or Sarah in a Christian school, Ed in a secular school, or Simon and Tash as parents seeking what's good and just in their local kindergarten,

may you aim at *shalom* and *salvation*, but in a way that is fitting for the sphere of education in our post-Christendom times. Sit under the Creator's sovereignty, secure though we no longer call the shots. And may you walk patiently alongside every young person, whether devout or disenchanting, that together as we listen, imagine, create, and communicate, you may learn to become wise peacemakers for the life of this diverse world for which Christ came.

Let's pray:


Rabbi Jesus, you are the perfect teacher who patiently walks alongside the disenchanted. Walk with us now, as a diverse group of educators from the ends of the earth. We need your wisdom as the one who leads us all into shalom, whatever our educational setting. Would you shape us through this divine conversation to listen, imagine, create, and communicate well in these strange days of unbounded plurality. May we learn to follow you in our particular time and place, journeying from Emmaus into the city of peace. For your glory and the flourishing of all things, Amen.

Bedankt.



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- 📖 Schools, Scripture & Secularisation
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- 📖 Locating Learners in God's Big Story
- 📖 Christian Studies Program Primer + Plan
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- 📖 Triple Listening + Reimagine + Be Wise



GOD'S CURRICULUM

Dr Dave Benson

licc.org.uk

'People are looking for an integrated world view which makes sense of their existence... Today's world needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture.'

John Stott

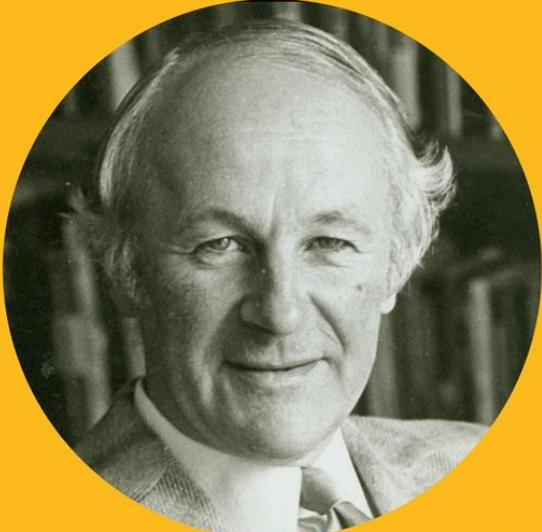


Photo courtesy of Langham

