Wisdom, Knowledge and Teaching

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Goals of Christian education

Imparting Wisdom

When considering education within the context of life-giving teaching, it surely is a key specific purpose of teaching to give wisdom, such as the Bible, and now especially Proverbs, speaks of it. The imparting of wisdom is both a daily and long-range goal. It would take us too far afield to discuss Proverbs at length. However, it will be profitable to deal briefly with a highlight or two of Proverbs 1:2-7 (within the context of Proverbs) and draw some conclusions for the teaching task today. Proverbs has something to tell us.

The purpose and main point of Proverbs is:

That men may know wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight, receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice and equity, that prudence may be given to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth –
the wise man also may hear and increase in learning and the man of understanding acquire skill – to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and the riddles.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:2-7)

I am not going to give a detailed exegesis of this passage. The meaning is clear. However, a key word that demands our attention is “wisdom”. This word is rich in nuance and meaning in Proverbs and in the Old Testament generally. It means in the first place wisdom as we generally understand it, good sense, insight and prudence. (See, e.g. 2 Samuel 20:22, 1 Kings 2:6, 3:28). It is also an attribute of those who understand the worth of time and use it wisely (Psalm 90:12).

This wisdom comes from god, especially in fearing Him (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, Psalm 90:12, 1 Kings 3:28).

In the second place, the Hebrew term for wisdom also means technical ability, for example, in working with different fabrics and metals.

As is evident from the wide scope of Proverbs, which seeks to impart wisdom (Proverbs 1:2), wisdom concerns all the areas of life. Although rules are not given for every conceivable situation, the guidance and principles are clear enough (e.g. on the harlot and drunkenness) to grant wisdom and practical help for the twentieth century in evaluating literature, music and the offerings of the mass media.
The wisdom of Proverbs is not speculative philosophy as you later find in Greece. It is practical life wisdom, with life understood in its fullest sense as we have seen earlier – life before God in all its practical and religious ramifications. There was in Israel no dilemma of theoretical speculation and practical knowledge. All wisdom is life wisdom.

This wisdom is to be taught. There would be little rationale for much of Proverbs if this was not so. Listen to Proverbs 4 on parents teaching this wisdom:

Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction,
and be attentive that you may gain insight;
When I was a son with my father, tender,
the only one in the sight of my mother,
he taught me, and said to me,
“Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live;
do not forget, and do not turn away
from the words of my mouth.
Get wisdom; get insight.
Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
love her and she will guard you.
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever you get, get insight.”
(Proverbs 4:1-7)

There are conditions for teaching and learning wisdom. As is clear from Proverbs 4, effort is needed. It is not automatic. This fact is also evident from the Hebrew term used for “instruction” (mûs_r) in the RSV of Proverbs 1:2, 3. This term also means “training” and has the idea of discipline. The instruction is therefore a teaching accompanied by correction and reproof, a teaching presented with authority.

The reason for this character of the instruction is evident from Proverbs. There is resistance to this teaching of wisdom. There is resistance to this teaching of wisdom. There is an inclination to despise wisdom and instruction (including discipline). This is what fools do (Proverbs 1:7). As the rest of chapter 1 shows (Proverbs 1:8-33), the fool is rebellious, not just against his father but against God, for the wisdom at issue is the wisdom whose source is God. (Note the contract between son and sinner in Proverbs 1:8, 10. Also cf. e.g. vv.22, 9.) Resistance to this wisdom results in death (v.32).

The knowledge given with the teaching of this wisdom is the knowledge of God. He is in the most pervasive and basic sense the content of this knowledge which makes for true wisdom. Without the LORD, there is no true knowledge and wisdom (Proverbs 1:7a, 2:5). This knowledge and fear of God is not something for which one could sit back and wait for. No, effort is needed. Teaching, discipline and the application of authority is needed as well as effort by the student. As we read in Proverbs 2:1-7:

My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding,
yes, if you cry out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom;
from His mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
He is a shield to those who walk in integrity.  
So wisdom comes from God and is brought into close relationship with Him.

In Proverbs, wisdom is also personified (e.g. 1:2 and chapter 8). This personification can be seen as a preparation for the New Testament revelation of Christ as the true wisdom. Christ is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) and God has made Him our wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3).

Main points
Let me repeat the main points: Wisdom is life wisdom in the fullest sense of the term. He who finds wisdom finds life (Proverbs 8:35).
This wisdom is only acquired in the fear of Yahweh, for the fear of Yahweh is the beginning, that is the first and controlling principle, of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). True knowledge is only attainable in God, in knowing and fearing Him.
Wisdom, knowledge and teaching is therefore very much bound up with one’s relation to God. In knowing God and understanding His ways, will and handiwork, true insight, discretion, prudence and understanding are found.
There is really no such thing as objective true knowledge by autonomous man. Only with reference to the God of this world and all its contents and facts, can there be true knowledge and understanding.
With such an orientation one can truly be educated for life, here and now before God and in His service in this world as responsible children of Him. Only then can one savour true life and enjoy the beginning of life eternal in this world.

Methods

Discipline must be life producing
All this has important implications for teaching. Let us therefore now turn to some methodological considerations.

In the first place, the nature of discipline in the school is to be determined by this understanding of wisdom and knowledge. Discipline must be conducive to the “life knowledge and wisdom” which you want to give to those in your care. As school “fathers” (and “mothers”), your “sons and daughters” must sense your deep love for them, for the LORD and for the high calling you have to prepare them for life in this word before God. The exercise and discipline and authority must not be stifling, but life-producing, not discouraging but encouraging for the students. As the old saying goes: “If you act like a warden, you students will behave like prisoners”.
Of course this does not suggest that there is to be no discipline. Think of Proverbs 19:18: “Discipline your son while there is hope. Do not set your heart on his destruction”. However, in disciplining, something of the love and atmosphere of the home must be present in the school. Teachers are fathers, mothers. Needless to say, the same applies to home. Disciplines must be life producing.

Importance of memory work
In the second place, if we understand something of the nature of the wisdom and knowledge which is to be passed on to the students, then the great importance of disciplined learning and memory work is appreciated.
If God and the fear of Him is the key and the beginning of knowledge, that is, if this is the first and controlling principle for all teaching and learning, then being “soaked” in the Scriptures, the revelation of His will and way, is a must.
Students must be trained in all subjects and areas of life to look at life and all objects of study through the eyes of God Himself, so to speak, as much as that is possible.
The question must constantly be asked, “What does God think of this? What connections has The Most High laid?” We must learn as it were to “think God’s thoughts after Him” in the matters that affect us and about which we have to make decisions and seek to understand.
All this presupposes learning and memorizing Scripture and Confessions of the church in a meaningful way. Although it is understandable, perhaps too much emphasis has been given to learning rhymed Psalms rather than passages of Scripture. I would plead for much more of the latter (without sacrificing the former), provided that the passages assigned are meaningful to the student. Students need to think in Biblical terms, using Biblical thought forms and Biblical presuppositions. Also for this reason the memorization of God’s Word was to occupy such an important place in Israel. The covenant people was exhorted:

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.  
(Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

The memory of the LORD’s saving acts was regularly reinforced with the celebration of the three great annual festivals, namely Passover (Exodus 12:26f), Pentecost (Deuteronomy 16:12), and the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:42f). Constantly Israel had to orientate to what God had said and done and was doing. And, it was all done in such a way a child could understand and remember.

Considering Israel’s situation and principles involved, it is obvious that the assigning of memory work today from God’s Word is important, and it should be done on a child’s level. Also, as the fathers were to explain the meaning of the feasts to their children and know exactly what to say, so teachers should know themselves the work that they assigned to students to learn. If the teacher does not know the memory work which students are to learn, the message which the students receive is clear: it is not that important and once you get out of this school you can forget about is. Nothing can be further from the truth.

As the remembering of God’s Word and deeds was to be an integral part of life in the Old Testament, so should it be today and our homes should stimulate and reinforce this! The Word of God must be a vital part of our lives and our homes too! The great and constant challenge of teaching is that the thinking of the students is to be orientated around the LORD and what He has said and done.

All the subjects need to be permeated with the language and presuppositions of the Scriptures. In a real sense, teachers and parents mediate the wisdom and knowledge of God’s Word as it concerns their subjects to their students/children. Children need to be constantly challenged to see reality and all things pertaining to their lives through the glasses of God’s revelation to us. That is the only antidote to the pervasive secularization of so much thinking and writing today.

The place of memorization should not be underestimated. It is a recent development that memorization is down played. Recent is the idea that truth can exist meaningfully in a book (for reference purposes, to be used as needed) instead of in a person’s mind. These trends must be resisted (also cf. Psalm 119:11, 37:31). Truth is then easily divorced from life and not part of it.

‘Trick of the trade’

Of course, besides using memorizing, teachers and parents should use every legitimate “trick of the trade” to aid students in organizing their thinking and remembering in a God pleasing manner. The use of, for example, proverbs or striking stories to get a point across is clearly one way. Who will readily forget, for example, the characterization of the sluggard as found in Proverbs 26:14, “as a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed”, or, who cannot but remember the description of the loose woman luring a young man without sense (Proverbs 7:6-21). The result is, “All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter ..” (Proverbs 7:22). So teaching should be vivid and refreshingly vigorous. Because this teaching will be the more readily remembered, it will make the students think. Indeed, if students are to be taught true wisdom and knowledge and grow and mature for a full life
before God, then they must be taught to think through issues and struggle with questions under the guidance of their school “parents”. This takes us to a third implication.

Questions
Students should be encouraged to ask questions. The LORD also expected questions from the children when the annual feasts (which also had a didactic purpose) were celebrated (e.g. Exodus 12:26). Memorials were set up in part to evoke questions from the children (Joshua 4:6).

When questions were asked, definite answers were to be given (Exodus 12:26, Deuteronomy 6:20-25, Joshua 4:7). Although education was given authoritatively, the fact that questions and inquiry were encouraged, indicates that two-way communication was desirable.

Faith and reason
This raises the question of the relationship of faith and reason. What is the relative place of each. God has given us a critical faculty and perception. Inquiring children are a great gift. You will agree that our reason must always be subject to God’s revelation. We proceed from the Word. We believe it. Faith seeks understanding. Our reason can never be an autonomous entity. It has been correctly said: “The gift of logical reason was given by God to man in order that he might order the revelation of God for himself. It was not given him that he might by means of it legislate as to what is possible and what is actual”. Teachers and parents can reason with their students or children about the revelation of God – in faith. That is the condition and the beginning point. Then one can proceed and ask about the why and how. Faith and reason do not compete. The latter serves the former to the extent that we are allowed to go, that is, as far as Scripture allows us to go. But by ordering God’s revelation and thinking it through a gold mine, of insight and knowledge and wisdom can be discovered and related to the subjects that are being taught. All parents and teachers of God’s sons and daughters must constantly be busy with God’s revelation. Are we not to love the LORD with all our heart, soul and mind, that is with all the strength and faculties god has given us? (cf.Proverbs 23:26). The basic attitude and methodology of starting and being subservient to Scripture in meeting questions of the day must be imprinted on the student’s mind. They need this methodology to function as adult Christians in wisdom.

Practical
A fourth implication for both the home and the school father and mother’s task of imparting life wisdom and knowledge to those entrusted to their care is that as much as possible their instruction be practical. What is taught should be related to the real life needs and no false separation should be made between theoretical and practical education. This dilemma of theoretical or practical was unknown in Israel. Wisdom was intensely practical (as we have seen) and it was not abstracted from life (cf. the Book of Proverbs). Therefore the relevance of the education given at school must be clear to the students. They must know, for example, why the study of history is important, even though it seems so remote from the present. Unless the students know the practical need of their studies, how can they be expected to apply themselves? There must be a good communication with the home and the school so that parents can reinforce what their children are taught at school and so that one education is given.

Secular textbooks
Finally, for brief consideration, there is the question how we are to regard the use of secular textbooks in schools which seek to give the Biblical wisdom and knowledge as the guiding and unifying principle to everything, while these fundamentals are not shared and even opposed by secular thought? In responding to this question, let us consider Proverbs one more time.

It is striking that in several instances proverbs similar to those in Scripture are found in the ancient literature of nations beyond the borders of Israel. There are certain truths that were recognized by
all peoples, e.g., the virtue of honesty. However, when two say the same, it is not the same. The presuppositions underlying Proverbs are totally different from those of the writings of pagan authors. When one reads Proverbs, one is in an atmosphere different from that of pagan collections of proverbs. Today we also share certain true facts with secularized wisdom.

Because of God’s creation activity, also unbelieving scientists, for example, have to conclude certain truths. But the manner in which they are presented will be totally different. It is therefore a tremendous thing that Reformed curricula are being developed. That is necessary. One the other hand, as encouragement in the present situation where Reformed material is not always available, the teacher sets the tone and the ‘atmosphere’ in the classroom. He is in charge and even so-called ‘neutral’ textbooks containing certain truths can be used to good effect if the teaching is filled with the wisdom and knowledge that originates from the Spirit of God Who moulds the minds of men by the Word. The teacher is of utmost importance. He is to show how antithetical Christian presuppositions re to secular ones.

Our library collections often carry a variety of books. They are not all written by those who share our convictions. Let book reviews be written and so encourage the critical faculty of the students. Training students to be critical in a proper way will be a good preparation for the world outside the classroom. Although we are not of this world, we are in it, and the students need to be prepared for it realistically. Indeed think, e.g., of newspapers found in our homes. We are not isolated from the world.

In closing
As parents and teachers we have tremendous influence over those entrusted to our care. Not only parents, but also teachers are fathers (and thus also mothers) of sons and daughters. Teachers too are to give life wisdom and knowledge, both for their practical living as well as for their eternal well being. As teacher too you mould. As school parents you produce “offspring” in your image. That is all right, is it not? For are you as Christians not image of Father in heaven? That is a reality that motivates and encourages in the unending and difficult task of teaching both at home and at school.

C. van Dam

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