

**Imparting Wisdom, Knowledge, and Joy:
The Calling of the Reformed
Christian School Teacher**

Rev. Cory Griess

Cover art by Kara Kregel

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Foreword

Believing God calls us to promote Truth, Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, by means of The Evangelism Committee promotes the production and publication of solidly Reformed materials.

Those interested in knowing Biblical Truth do well to read articles such as the one found on the following pages. This well written pamphlet reflects on the Reformed, Christian perspective of the education of children of believers. It is addressed to teachers, but is valuable for all to read as it deals with modernism and post modernism versus the God centered worldview using the infallible, inspired words of Solomon as found in Ecclesiastes 2:26.

The text of this pamphlet was published previously in the Winter 2011 issue of Perspectives in Covenant Education under the title "God Gives Wisdom and Knowledge...and Joy." The article was originally delivered as a speech on October 7, 2010 at the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Convention in Hull, Iowa.

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Introduction

Rev. Cory Griess presents the calling and responsibility of the Reformed, Christian day school teacher to instruct the children of believing parents based on God-given wisdom as granted by the Holy Spirit. Such education must be strongly rooted in scripture. Although Rev. Griess writes primarily to teachers, the calling is one that first goes to believing parents. With the understanding that parents and teachers work together in the community of faith, the Grandville PRC Evangelism Committee considers this pamphlet to be profitable to instruct and encourage all who are serious about and interested in godly education. Such an education promotes true knowledge, imparts wisdom in the hearts of the next generation, provides joy for God's people, and strengthens the Reformed church of the future.

The words of Solomon as found in Ecclesiastes 2:26 read, *For God giveth to man that is good in his sight wisdom, knowledge, and joy.* This, Rev. Griess explains, is the basis for educating our covenant children. We hope you enjoy reading “Imparting Wisdom, Knowledge, and Joy: The Calling of the Reformed Christian School Teacher.”

Imparting Wisdom, Knowledge, and Joy:

The Calling of the Reformed Christian School Teacher

Ecclesiastes 2:26 “For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy.”

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 1:13 that he has undertaken a study of all the things that are done under heaven. “And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.” In the rest of the book, by inspiration, Solomon shares with us the conclusions he has come to from this study of life in this world. Therefore when we open the book of Ecclesiastes we immediately enter the realm of the great questions of life: why are we here, how are we supposed to live, and what—if any—is the joy of living?

Solomon in giving us his inspired conclusions presents us with two worldviews. They are first, the worldview of life under the *sun*, and alternatively, the worldview of life under the *Son*. These worldviews are strictly antithetical to one another, as black is to white.

Life under the Sun

There is a worldview that views life as strictly under the sun. It is the worldview that considers life as a materialist of today. This is the view that, as one grows up in this world, all that exists is what is under the sun. There is nothing above the sun. Reality is limited to what we can sense and perceive

ourselves. There is no God above the sun. There is therefore no real purpose to life.

It is the worldview of modern Western society. Solomon could just as well have been writing about Immanuel Kant and Western thought since the Enlightenment. Kant taught that all that a human being can know is under the sun, in the realm of what he called the phenomenal. A human can know only as he perceives causes and effects in the world by his senses and understands them with his mind. And since God cannot be perceived, if there is a God He cannot be known. According to Kant, God cannot reveal Himself, because if He could be known He would not be God any longer, but a being limited by our own perception. He would become a God under the sun, who is therefore not God. Kant therefore left Western thought with a worldview that could not get above the sun. There was no access to God. There was only what we could do and sense and discover with reason here, and that was the end of the matter.

This worldview is very much alive in Western society today. Even the postmodernism of today is rooted in Kant's modernism. Kant's thought effectively cut the Western world off from the God who is above the sun. The logical conclusion of this is that there can be no right and wrong, only the various perspectives of those under the sun. This worldview leads our society into exactly what it led Solomon into when he made his study: vanity and vexation of spirit.

Life under the Son

The second worldview that Solomon presents us with is the worldview of life under the Son. This is the worldview

produced by the revealed Word of Jehovah God. It is the worldview that says that God has pierced into the world He created and declared Himself and all reality to us in His Word so that we have access to the Divine mind. The second person of the Trinity has pierced our world and entered time and space as the full revelation of the Father. We are not limited to what is under the sun, but rather by Word and Spirit we are brought to know the God who is above the sun.

By this revelation we know who we are; we know why we are here; we know where this world is going. We know how to take what we learn under the sun and relate it to the God who is above the sun. This revelation by faith we put on as a pair of spectacles that we may take in life and the creation in a way that is not vain, but is rather purposeful before the God that created life and this world. We see that the heavens declare the glory of God, and as we discover those heavens we join them in shouts of exaltation. As a result we have purpose, fellowship, and joy.

Solomon's Experience of Both Worldviews

Solomon lived and worked under the first worldview (under the sun) in an attempt to find joy and satisfaction in this life. He describes that in chapter 2:1-23. What he describes is exactly the way the world seeks peace and joy under the sun.

In verses 1-3 Solomon, living under the sun, first looks to pleasure for satisfaction and peace and joy. This was ultimately vain, purposeless, and unsatisfying. Without a God above the sun there was no ultimate meaning to any of it. *"It is mad... What doeth it?"*

In verses 4-11 Solomon seeks joy in great works that can last throughout the ages: gathering wealth and making a name for himself. This too was vanity in the end. It did not satisfy. His conclusion in verse 11 is that there was no profit under the sun. It was vexation of Spirit; literally *grasping at the wind*.

Finally, Solomon turns himself to something a bit more noble in verses 12-16. Perhaps in understanding the difference between wisdom and folly, he would find some true and lasting joy and satisfaction in life under the sun and apart from God. In verse 13 he discovered that certainly in life under the sun, wisdom is better than folly. But, as he says in verses 14-16, in the end the wise and the foolish both die and that's the end of it under the sun. There is still no ultimate meaning and purpose.

Then in verses 17-23 Solomon gives us the inspired conclusion he has come to about a worldview apart from God and His Son Jesus Christ; the worldview that is limited to what is under the sun. Verse 17 is enough to get the point, *“Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.”*

In verses 24-26 Solomon shifts to the second worldview, the worldview of life under the Son. And for the first time thus far in the book of Ecclesiastes there is true hope and joy. Luther called these three verses the entire point of the book. *“There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto, more than I? For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and*

knowledge, and joy.” The only hope, Solomon says, is to know the God who is above the sun, and to view life in this world as a gift from God to His people. This gives life purpose, perspective, a goal, meaning, weight, and joy. Solomon recognizes God in that phrase in verse 24, *“I saw that it was from the hand of God.”* And in verse 26, *“God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy.”*

And it is because, by God’s grace, Protestant Reformed Christian school teachers recognize that as well, parents give thousands of dollars so that they can educate their children—so that by the grace of God and by the power of His promises established in Jesus Christ, their children might also know the God who is above the sun, and by God’s grace, know wisdom, knowledge, and joy in this life.

Wisdom and Knowledge

Ecclesiastes 2:26 speaks of wisdom and knowledge as gifts of God to the individual believer and the covenant community. In verse 26 there is no real distinction between wisdom and knowledge. Both words refer to propositional truth. But they also refer to the ability to discern. They are the ability to take propositional truths, and indeed all of life, and interpret it properly within the framework of the revelation of God, redemptive history, and the covenant of grace. Wisdom and knowledge are the ability to know and use truth, experiences, and the good gifts of God, in a right way before the face of God.

The Source of this knowledge and wisdom lies above the sun. It is God Himself. Solomon in verse 26 says, *“For God*

giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge...” Apart from God this wisdom and knowledge is closed to man. Man does not think of himself that way, but it is truth nonetheless. Erroneously, man believes that he can gain wisdom and knowledge apart from God. He views himself as a kerosene lamp carrying its own supply of knowledge and wisdom. But Solomon says here, that man is like a light bulb that needs the current of God’s revelatory electricity to run through it so that the bulb lights up. He needs God’s revelation in order to take bare facts and determine the “fact behind the facts,” the reason and purpose of the facts.¹ He knows certain facts and experiences certain experiences, but he cannot know the facts and experiences and the good gifts of God as they relate to God the giver. Only with divine aid from the maker of life can we understand how to build and interpret and use our lives properly. Natural man has no ability to interpret his own life. He has no ability to place himself on the timeline of God’s history and see where he is and where he is going. He has no ability to take life and the good gifts of life and use them properly as God intended. The non-Christian cannot know the fact behind the facts, and he is therefore doomed to vanity and grasping at the wind for purpose and joy. This is why we have Christian schools that not only impart facts, but also the proper interpretation of those facts.

Wisdom and knowledge are given by God through the Holy Scriptures—the revelation of God. At the center of the Word is Jesus Christ “*in whom are hid all the treasures of*

¹ Berkhof, Louis, and Cornelius Van Til. *Foundations of Christian Education: Addresses to Christian Teachers*. ed. Dennis E. Johnson (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), 16.

wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). Christ makes known the purpose of life. Christ as God come to redeem his own stands at the center of not only human history, but of all human knowledge. Nothing can be truly known apart from knowing Jesus Christ. In the scriptures, with Christ at their center, the student understands his own place in the history of God’s redemptive work in this world. The student who is taught all subjects under the covenantal framework given by scriptures, understands the meaning of the history of this world and can place himself properly in it. And no matter if he ends up a farmer or a carpenter or a biophysicist or a scholar, he has and knows how to gain and use knowledge. He knows how to use his gifts. He knows how to enjoy the good gifts of God in a proper way.

The calling of the Protestant Reformed Christian school teacher, along with the home and church, is to grant this wisdom by God’s Spirit **from the scriptures**. Here is Bavinck in his *Educational Principles*, “He who is instructed in the scriptures rises to a height from which he surveys the great totality of things; his horizon extends itself to the ends of the earth; he knows his position as human being, because he views himself and all things primarily in his relation to God of Whom, through Whom, and to Whom all things are.”² It is the job of the Christian school teacher to teach students to do this by God’s grace.

This does not mean that the only class that needs to be taught is Bible class. All courses are taught under the

² Bavinck, Herman. *Paedagogische Beginselen*. (N.p.: Kok), 1904. 60. *Google Books*. Web. 3 Nov. 2010.
<<http://books.google.com/books?id=PLlAAAAAYAAJ&dq=inauthor%3A%22Herman%20Bavinck%22&pg=PA5#v=onepage&q&f=false>>. (not my translation)

framework of life in the covenant. For as Hoeksema said, “The truth about every aspect of this creation, including man and his doings, is its relationship to God, the Creator, Ruler, and Judge of the World.”³ That means that never is the Christian teacher’s job to simply impart facts—even in first and second grade. Never is the teacher’s job simply to ensure that a child can pass a test. It includes that, but that is not all. It is his job to teach children how to live in God’s covenant and use all of life before His face. For as Solomon says here, wisdom and knowledge are **gifts** to be used and enjoyed. The use of words and strings of words in literature, the use of the wonderful mysteries of God’s world in science, the use of the glorious depths of numbers in math, is a personal gift of God to His covenant people. And the ability to use those things in a proper way as they relate to Jehovah God is a gift. It is a gift to us sent out of love that we might find purpose and joy in all of life before God’s face.

Solomon says this is reserved for the believer whom God loves. When Solomon says that “*God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge*” he is referring first to the good of imputed righteousness. The believer is declared good and righteous based on the righteousness of another. But Solomon is also talking about the actual life lived out of that position of justification. The phrase “*good in his sight,*” is literally, “*those pleasing before His eyes.*” That is the child of God as he lives out of his justification before God’s face. God looks down on His covenantal people living life before Him, and He delights to share Himself and the knowledge of His

³ Hoeksema, Herman. “The Christian School: Why?” *Hope Protestant Reformed Church* (N.p., n.d.) Web. 2 Sept. 2010.
<<http://www.hopeprc.org/pamphlets/school.htm>>.

works and world with His people. He gives them wisdom and knowledge as a gift of love. He delights in His children knowing what all of life is for and about.

And He uses teachers to pour this delight out upon His children. It is imperative that Christian school teachers know that by God's grace they stand in a position where they are lips whereby God whispers into the ears of His children the glorious secrets of His world. Whereby He tells them, "All this is a gift for you to understand and use to your and its fullest potential for My glory." When you stand in that classroom and teach, you are not simply getting through a lesson, or imparting facts; you are sharing the love gifts of a covenant God to His children. Let them know that what you are teaching them about God's world are gifts of God to His people. Teach them how to use the gifts of God correctly and how to interpret the reality in which they live. Teach them how to use the gifts of this earth not as ends in themselves, not merely to find employment, or to get a deployment, or because the law requires it, but as gifts from a God above the sun to whom all praise is due.

That's the gift of wisdom. It is using all knowledge and all life in such a way that the gifts do not become the god. They do not become the end in which a person tries to find fulfillment. But they are a means used to enjoy the God who alone grants fulfillment. Teach them to use the gifts of all spheres of human knowledge and experience in a proper way before the face of the God who gave them.

Joy

Teach this way because knowing how to use all of life in the proper way, as God's gifts of personal love from Himself to His children, produces joy. The joy of Ecclesiastes 2:26 comes as a result of the knowledge and the wisdom given by God. Joy comes from using all knowledge and all of life as a covenantal member enjoying life properly before the face of God. This is the goal of our teaching and our learning: that our sons and daughters might have true joy before the face of God. And it is the goal, because this joy is no superficial happiness; it is the joy that is a life of **worship**, bringing glory to God.

It is interesting that Solomon, at the end of chapter 1, uses the same words he uses here in 2:26 (wisdom and knowledge), but that there they have such a different effect. Ecclesiastes 1:18, *"For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."* There Solomon is speaking of the attempt to find knowledge and wisdom under the sun, apart from God in Christ. This only produces sorrow and grief. How could it not? As Solomon makes clear here in chapter 2, apart from access to the God above the sun, life just sort of moves in a circular pattern of causes and effects but with no purpose in view. Once one figures out the causes and effects, there is nothing left. There is no meaning and no joy to be had. The pursuit of knowledge only gives one a heightened awareness of how vain and fruitless and pointless it all is in the end. In verse 17 Solomon says, *"I hated life."* There is only the pursuit of whatever can give me a temporary high, and then it all ends, and there is no real point to any of it. Perhaps that's why Nietzsche and Freud along with many

others went mad toward the end of their lives. For them, life was grasping at the wind.

But do you see what God has given us in the covenant of grace? People want to teach and learn for different reasons. For some it's pride. For some it's power. For some it's fame. Whatever it is there is no ultimate purpose to it. But for you and me the ultimate purpose of our teaching and learning must be the joy of a life of worship. And I don't mean simply on Sunday, in corporate worship, although that too. And I do not mean only the singing of Psalms in school and praying before class, although that too. But I mean in all of life as lives lived before the face of God. In the classroom itself as the students learn and as you teach, worship must characterize the experience of the classroom. That is what this joy is. Delighting in God and His gifts is to live a life of worship. And this life of worship is the most joyful life possible. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says famously that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. In all of life, this is man's chief end. And the "glorify God" and "enjoy God" are not two separate things. For we glorify God the most when we enjoy Him and what He has given. This brings Him glory, that we receive His world, all its knowledge, all its gifts, and use them properly with joy to His glory. For this we were created. For this we were predestined: "*Having predestinated us...to the praise of the glory of his grace*" (Eph. 1:5-6).

It has been said that good teachers are passionate about their material. But to be good *Christian* school teachers, you must be passionate about the God of your material. Our own experience of learning God's world and gifts of wisdom and

knowledge as teachers must lead us personally into joy and worship of the God who gives all these things as gifts to His covenant children. And then we will be passionate about our material, and that for the right reasons. Our classroom will then take on the flavor of joyful worship and celebration as we pursue the knowledge of God and His world. We will take joy in God and in leading students to delight in God and in His gifts. There will be a covenantal experience that takes place in the classroom—a substantial aura created by the awareness of the fact that God is delighting in His children by giving them what we are studying.

There will be the joy of covenantal life there in the classroom. Teaching and learning are covenantal experiences. They are relational exercises. And that relationship is not only between the teacher and the student, but between God and the teacher and the student. God is personally delighting in our children by giving them the gifts of wisdom and knowledge through our teachers. And the children and teachers are delighting and joying in the God who gives gifts. That relationship must take place in the classroom. There must be reflected in the teaching the delight of the teacher at the reality of what is taking place there. The teacher must realize that in his classroom, in second grade math, in fifth grade social studies, God is granting us to reach our chief end. Redeemed by Christ we are delighting in Him and His works, that we might live a life of service, joy, and worship before Him.

God's charge here to teachers is, "Teach my joy!" Pray, and allow the material you are teaching to fuel your own worship of God in prayer. This will spill over into your classroom. When we teach it is not at all inappropriate to

follow the example of the apostle Paul, who after expounding the doctrines of grace and the mystery of the Gentiles being brought into the church, cries out “*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*” (Rom. 11:33). I can imagine a teacher, after teaching a particularly beautiful point in math class, exclaiming to his class, “O, the majesty of God found in the order of His creation!” I can imagine a history teacher, after expounding how the inclement weather sent at just the right moment allowed the Americans to escape the British in the battle of New York, exclaiming to his class, “O, the providence of God and how He controls all things for the good of His church!” I can imagine a second grade teacher, after teaching vocabulary stopping and exclaiming, “O, the gift of God in allowing us to communicate of Him and to Him with such varied expression!” Teaching is not merely the transmission of facts; it is a celebration of the divine giver of all good and perfect gifts.

The Antithesis and Joy

When we teach this way, we will teach the antithesis. For teaching the antithesis is not only teaching, “Do this; don’t do that.” The antithesis is also this: there is true joy to be found in this, and there is no joy to be found in that. Teaching this way, we will be teaching the antithetical worldview of Ecclesiastes 2:24-26. Solomon sought fulfillment, satisfaction, and joy in the things of this life under the sun. He used them as gods and not as gifts from the God in whom all joy and satisfaction is to be found. He came to realize that this was vanity; there was no meaning and no purpose. There might have been animalistic pleasure in these things, but not joy. Only in living, in all aspects of life, in the covenant of

grace under the Son is there joy. Teaching that is a celebration of the God of the covenant and the good gifts He gives—teaching that is worship—will teach the students that here is to be found true joy and fulfillment and peace. Here there is stability, purpose, meaning. There is no joy in the misuse of God’s gifts. There is only vanity and vexation of spirit.

Sixty or seventy years ago, one could take it for granted that people in Grand Rapids, Dutch Chicago, Northwest Iowa, and other places, would say that the Bible is the Word of God, the source of wisdom and knowledge. That is not necessarily so any longer. This makes the teacher’s calling that much more serious. By grace, the student must see that in Christ is the more abundant life. In the world of the materialist worldview, and the life of ungodliness that comes with it, is only vanity and vexation of spirit. Then he will be able to stand in a godless world, and he will be able to endure life’s trials and difficulties, yet with the smile of one who enjoys life in the covenant of grace.

Voltaire, who lived a godless life under the sun, wrote a letter to a friend at the end of his life. In it he said “I hate life, and yet am afraid to die.” I wonder if he knew he was echoing Solomon’s response to the life under the sun in Ecclesiastes 2:17. By contrast, John Calvin, who lived life under the Son, and delighted in the sovereign God of the covenant in every sphere of human endeavor, in a moment of intense suffering, cried out in the hearing of those aiding him, “Thou bruise me, O Lord, but it amply sufficeth me, that it is Thy hand.”⁴ For Calvin all of life—even suffering—had

⁴ Both quoted in: Bridges, Charles. *A Commentary On Ecclesiastes*. 1961. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981. 41. Print.

purpose in relation to the God above the sun. And in all of life—even in suffering—Calvin could worship.

May God grant us the grace to teach wisdom and knowledge as gifts from God, and the fruit of joy upon our labors.

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