

How can we lead our schools and pupils as we approach 2020?

(Teaching for Shalom)

European Conference of Christian Education

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Good morning! It is good to be with you and to be back at this conference again! I bring you greetings on behalf of the Board of EurECA (the European Educators' Christian Association) and from the Centre for Christian Education at Liverpool Hope University.

The question for which I have been asked to provide an answer this morning is: "How can we lead our schools and pupils as we approach 2020?"

By referring to a date, the question draws attention to the fact that we are in a changing context so before attempting to answer it, I will say a little about that changing context, the changing world in which the Lord has called us to lead our schools and pupils.

The Changing World

We are moving into a new stage in western society and production. Throughout many centuries, most people worked in the fields.

With the Industrial Revolution, people began to move into cities to work in mills and factories.

We are now in a post-industrial age with the invention of the computer and robotics and more and more people work in service industries rather than in manufacturing. The development of 3-D printing is turning the office or even the home into a place of manufacture!

But note this – schools as we know them developed in the industrial age and were shaped by it! Schools are organised on factory lines with ringing bells, separate subjects, teaching by age-group (date of manufacture).

How we communicate in writing is also changing.

For many centuries, written material was produced by hand on tablets and scrolls and in hand-written books that were carefully copied by monks and other scribes. The majority of people relied on oral communication because they could not read and write.

Then came the invention of the printing press, a means of producing lots of copies of written material. This was a revolution that brought the written word to more and more people across the world.

Knowledge was book-shaped. It existed on the pages of books stored in libraries.

But now, brothers and sisters, we are moving from the age of the book into the age of the screen with its digital images.

Every book has a last page but there is no last page of the internet. When something is written, immediately others can comment on it and write more and what they write is all available to everyone who has access to the internet. We are in an age of global communication, an interactive age such as we have never known before.

We are not only moving into a post-industrial age and a post-books age but we are also in a post-modern age in how we think about the world and people and life.

I will not spend time on this, not because it is not important (far from that!) but because I think you will have listened to many talks about post-modernism in your churches and conferences.

Rationalist modernism says that the mind is all that matters. The body is a transport system for the brain!

We have moved into a post-modern age, a very relativistic age in which absolutes are denied as being merely ways in which we control other people. But it also is a more holistic age in which you matter as a whole person and not merely as a thinking-machine. It is an age in which relationships matter between people.

This is the big context in which you live and teach and in which your students live and study! It is increasingly a post-industrial context, it is increasingly a digital post-books context and it is also a post-modern one.

Seeking Shalom

How can we lead our schools and pupils in this age of change? If I had just three words in which to answer the question, my answer would be this: teach for shalom!

Shalom is a big word, a word full of meaning, a very positive word and I believe it has huge relevance to what we do in our classrooms and schools and why we do it, to what we teach and how we teach and especially so in our post-industrial, post-books and post-modern age.

In thinking about this, I have been influenced by the work of Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff, formerly of Calvin College in Michigan and Yale University, a world-renowned philosopher who throughout his life has had a deep interest in education and schooling.

One book of his writings is actually entitled 'Educating for Shalom'. That book focuses on Christian Higher Education but he has similar things to say in other writings about teaching children and teenagers.

But in calling us to embrace shalom as an aim of our teaching, I am not simply echoing a twenty-first century philosopher from the United States. I am reaching back over two and a half thousand years to the days of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. He wrote a letter in which he called on his readers to seek the shalom of the city. What city was he writing about? Not Dublin as shown on the screen. Nor was it Jerusalem, a city that we would normally associate with a prayer for shalom. The city was Babylon, a magnificent city but a pagan city. Jeremiah was writing to the exiled Jews there.

As Psalm 137 and also a popular song say, they might well have been sitting by the rivers of Babylon, asking how they could sing the Lord's song in this strange land, how they could possibly seek the peace of this wonderful but wicked city. They were weeping as they remembered Zion.

But Jeremiah was saying, yes, that pagan city is exactly where you are called to serve the Lord, that is exactly the city whose shalom you are to seek!

And I believe that it is what the Lord is calling us to seek in our classrooms and schools, our communities and towns and cities in this early part of the twenty-first century!

The Meaning of Shalom

What do we mean by shalom? Shalom is an Old Testament word that is usually translated as 'peace' and, when we think about peace, we usually think of freedom *from* war, strife, disorder etc. but the biblical usage is not a mere absence of something - it is much more positive.

This is what a Bible dictionary says about the meaning of 'shalom': 'Shalom' signifies wholeness, completeness, integrity, soundness, community, connectedness, righteousness, justice and well-being.

The Greek word for 'peace' is *eirené* but whereas the Greeks were content to think of *eirené* either as freedom from strife or as an inner state, the New Testament writers followed the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) which translated shalom as *eirené* and gave it the full content of shalom in the Old Testament.

The breadth of its meaning is especially apparent in its linking with such key words as grace, life and righteousness and its use in greetings and benedictions.

This biblical usage is therefore much more positive, much richer and fuller than our ordinary language use of the word 'peace' or the use of the word in everyday Greek in New Testament times.

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

The Relationships in which We Live and Teach

Shalom is not just an inner feeling or a mere absence of conflict, it is rooted in relationship. Shalom is a relational matter and it gives us a biblical basis for what could be called a relational pedagogy because teaching and learning are relational.

We and the students that we teach live and breathe in three basic kinds of relationship.

They are our relationship with God our Creator, our relationship with the physical world that he has created and our relationship with our fellow human beings, the people he has created.

These relationships were designed to be holy and just, loving and caring, to be enjoyed by us. They were to be relationships characterised by shalom. They were to be peaceful, harmonious, loving and caring relationships, shalom-ful relationships.

This is how it was meant to be. However, we fell into sin with catastrophic effects on all our relationships.

The thunderbolt of our Fall into sin broke the relationships of peace and shalom with God, with Creation and with one another. We could no longer walk with God in the Garden and know him walking with us in the cool of the day. The whole physical creation is affected, the ground is cursed and Paul says in Romans 8 that the creation was subjected to frustration and decay. Our relationships with one another were broken, jealousy and hatred came in and the first murder took place right back there at the beginning.

But a second Adam came to the rescue!

Jesus came to overcome sin and death by himself going to the cursed death of the Cross. He came to restore shalom. Colossians 1 (19, 23) says this:

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace (SHALOM) through his blood, shed on the cross.

... This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”

I believe that all this has huge significance for our approach to teaching and learning. I want to talk about teaching and learning in the light of each of these three kinds of relationship.

I am because ...

But first, as a way in, I want to mention an idea that comes to us from southern Africa. It is the idea of Ubuntu.

This idea is usually summed up in the saying “I am because we are”. It goes totally against the individualism of Western life and culture. It speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. No person is an island – we are joined to one another. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself.

However, if we stop with Ubuntu, we have Humanism.

The Bible tells us that it is not simply about our being connected to one another. There is more to it than that and I would like to propose the following three things that make us the human beings that we are.

- I am because God is.
- I am because the physical Creation is.
- I am because we are.

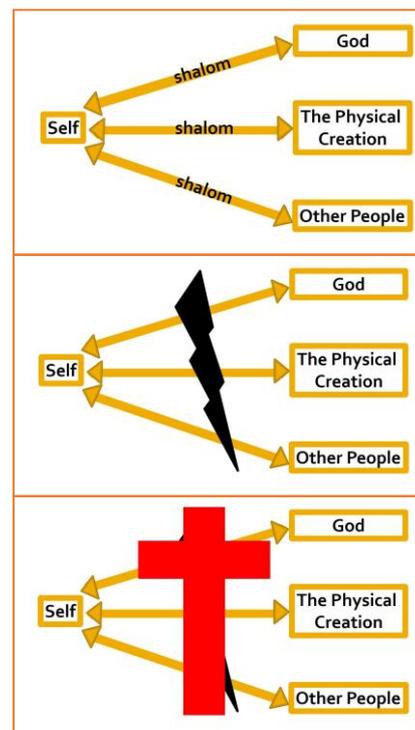
Not only I am because we are! I am because God is, I am because the physical Creation is and I am because we are. These three come in the order of Genesis 1 and 2.

Genesis 1 begins “In the beginning God ...”. Without God we would not be. We are all ultimately totally dependent on Him for everything – for the next breath that we take. And this is true of all your colleagues in your school and all the students that you teach, whether or not they acknowledge it.

This is the primary relationship in which we live and teach. It is the relationship within which all other relationships are possible and have their meaning. It is within this primary relationship that the relational activity of teaching has its meaning.

He made the world and he said that it was good. Then the Lord God “formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

I am a physical being made of the same stuff as the rest of Creation. I am incomplete without my body. That is why Jesus in becoming human had to have a body. He rose again as a physical being – not a ghost. We will die



and our bodies will disintegrate but we will have new bodies at the resurrection and a new physical existence in the new heaven and the new earth.

God cares about the physical Creation and it was good and he will make it all new again because Jesus died.

God made everything and it was good ... but there was something that was not good. He said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). So he made woman. “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27) ...” and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). And he gave us work to do to take care of what he had created, to study it and to classify it by giving names.

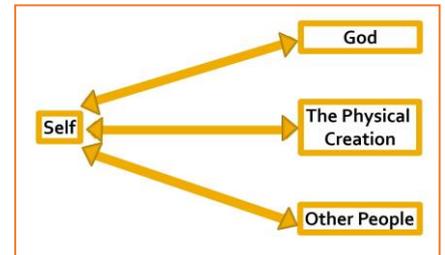
These are the three relationships in which we live and breathe.

If we reduce everything to the third relation, our relation with our fellow human beings, then we become Humanists.

If we reduce everything to the second relation, our relation with the physical world, then we become Materialists.

If we reduce everything to the first relation, talking and thinking only of souls or spirits, then we become Spiritualists.

It is all three relations together that make us the human beings that we are, made by God in his image, creatures of flesh and blood, made to be together with one another, to love God, to care for and tend the physical Creation and to love one another.



Teaching for Shalom

Teaching is about relationships. Life is about relationships, shalom-ful relationships.

Listen to Parker Palmer who is one of my favourite Christian authors writing in one of my favourite books about teaching: “Connectedness is the principle behind good teaching.” (Parker J Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, p. 115)

It is all about connectedness, about our being connected with those among whom we teach and learn, our students and our colleagues, and about our being connected with what we are teaching and our helping others to be connected with it.

And it is all about our being connected with God. Much of our teaching may not be explicitly about God at all.

But God is present in the classroom even where his name is not mentioned—just as he is in the Old Testament book of Esther!

We are in relation to God as we teach and He is present as we teach. First and foremost, we serve Him as we teach. It is for Him!

We teach for shalom because God is and we also teach for shalom because we are.

The calling of the Christian teacher is to relate to those she teaches as those who are made by God in his image and therefore fundamentally related to him, whether or not they recognize or acknowledge it.

Other people do not belong to you – the children and young people that you teach and even members of your family. Their relation to you is not the most important thing about them. They are because God is.

We see those we teach all too readily as ‘our students’ but they do not belong to us. They are in relation to God as their maker. They are not there for us to control, they are there for us to love as we teach them and learn along with them in the community of the classroom. We are called to dialogue with them rather than monologue at them. We are called to love them because God first loved them and us.

We teach for shalom because we are. We also teach for shalom because the physical Creation is.

The calling of the Christian teacher is to teach about God’s world and to teach others to have a caring relationship to it whether or not they recognize or acknowledge that it is his world.

We are a part of the physical environment. It is God’s world for he made it and he sustains it. When he made it, it was good until sin entered but he will make it anew. We are mandated to care for it as his world.

As teachers, we open windows on God’s world, the mathematical window, the biological window, the psychological window, the linguistic window and all the other windows of the disciplines that we teach. We

open windows and look through them with those we teach and we help them to know God's world and care for it.

You are not only serving God when you teach religion or ethics – you are serving him when you teach physics, chemistry and biology, when you teach mathematics and art, when you teach history and geography, when you teach music and ceramics, when you teach anything about God's wonderful world and the people he has made. He is the Great Mathematician, he is the Great Artist, he is the Great Musician, he is the great Potter, he is the great Biologist! You are made in his image and the children and young people that you teach are made in his image.

Are you excited and in awe about the wonderful universe that God has made and the wonderful way in which he has made you and me? If so, let some of that awe and excitement come across to your students.

It is all about connectedness – being connected with those you teach, being connected with the world about which you teach and helping them to be connected with it. Teaching for shalom is promoting that connectedness between your students and you, among your students, between you and your students and God's world.

So let's open windows on God's world whatever it is that we teach. It's a wonderful world!

I am and I live and breathe and teach and learn because God is, because the physical Creation is and because we are. My calling is to promote wholeness and connectedness in my students' relationships with God and his world and with other people.

May God help us all to do this more and more to his glory!

John Shortt