

Martin Luther and School Education

By

Stephen J. McKinney

On the 31st of October 1517 Martin Luther sent a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz who was an important leader of the Church. The letter is very critical of the sale of papal indulgences for the rebuilding of St. Peter's and asks the Archbishop to ensure the practice ceases. Martin Luther added two further documents to the letter: the 95 theses and an essay on indulgences. He may also have posted the 95 theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. The letter and the 95 theses set the Reformation in motion and this year is the five hundredth anniversary of the commencement of the Reformation. Much of the attention will be focussed on the theology, ecclesiology and the social, cultural and religious impact of Martin Luther and the Reformation. This article will explore the educational vision of Luther as articulated in two seminal works: *The Letter to the Councilmen of all Cities of Germany that they establish and maintain Christian Schools* (1524) and *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530).

The first work: *The Letter to the Councilmen of all Cities of Germany that they establish and maintain Christian Schools* (1524) argues for greater provision of schooling to ensure an educated populace. He explains that it is a command of God to educate the youth and he draws on Psalm 78:5 and Deuteronomy 32:7 to substantiate this point. He further explains that schooling would be an investment in the future and that they have many young men learned enough to instruct the youth. Luther is aware of parental responsibilities for the education of children but provides a number of reasons why they neglect their duty in this matter. Some parents can lack piety and decency and are unsuitable to educate their children. Others do not possess the knowledge and skills and he articulates a major concern that parents have neither the opportunity nor time to devote to education. The education of the young becomes, then, the concern of the councilmen and magistrates. Luther states that the welfare of a city depends upon material security but also on an educated body of citizens. He points out that a city that annually spends large sums on firearms, roads, bridges and other items should be equally committed to education for 'the poor, needy youth'. He extols the advantages of children being 'instructed and trained in schools or elsewhere where there were learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses to teach the languages, the other arts and history...'

Luther's vision of education is ultimately focused on preserving the spiritual and temporal estates. The spiritual estate is described in *A Sermon* (1530) as 'that which has the office and preaching and the service of the Word and Sacrament, which gives the Spirit and all blessedness...' The temporal is concerned with matters such as commerce and governance. He envisages a school system where both boys and girls will be educated at the elementary level. The boys will be educated for one or two hours a day and in the remainder of the day they can work at home and maybe learn a trade. The girls will be schooled for one hour a day and can then attend to their duties at home. The exceptional pupils (boys) will be kept longer at school and be educated to become pastors, preachers and teachers and support the spiritual estate or be

educated to become rulers and members of civil government. Luther was very keen that this second level of education should be broad and include the Arts, History and Mathematics but he was understandably very committed to the study of the scriptures and the languages required to read and interpret scripture. The study of languages also included German and the classical languages. He called upon the Councilmen to establish good libraries, especially for the larger cities. The education of the young was thought to be hugely beneficial for the temporal estate, as it will provide 'good and skilled men and women'. The men will take up duties such as ruling the land and the women 'may keep house and train children and servants aright'.

The second work *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530) is focused on ensuring that children are kept at school, once again the ultimate goal is to produce an educated population to maintain the spiritual and temporal estates. He expresses anxiety about the consequences of children not remaining in school and lacking an education. Both the spiritual and temporal estates will be badly affected. Although the title of the *Sermon* is on 'keeping children in school', the focus is on boys and young men and the importance of educating them for God's service. He differentiates between the learned Doctors and Masters of Holy Scripture and the ordinary pastors but continues to argue that both require education, though to different levels of advancement.

Martin Luther's vision of school education has some very interesting features and appears to resonate with some contemporary themes in school education. The vision appears to be for universal education and is very inclusive: he advocates the education of boys and girls and both the rich and poor. He strongly desired an educated populace that would create a better world. The emphasis on languages can be interpreted in contemporary terms as a commitment to literacy. He sought well-trained schoolmasters and mistresses for schools. Interestingly, Calvin was another reformer who held the role of teacher in high esteem. It is important, however, to understand the theological and historical context of this vision. Luther argues about the benefits of school education for the spiritual and temporal estates, yet it is not clear that these are completely distinct entities. Luther's vision of school education is very rooted in a concept of Christian education for all. This is characterised by the study of scripture and also by the way in which Luther understands the role of schoolmaster. He often groups pastors, preachers and schoolmasters together in his comments because he perceives these three roles as high and exalted offices in the spiritual estate. They are God's stewards and servants. The inclusion of girls in the vision of education is laudable but this is still heavily influenced by the social and historical context. The girls will be educated and this will be balanced with domestic duties. There is reference to 'learned and well-trained school mistresses' though there is no evidence that he envisaged that girls would progress to higher education. The *Sermon*, as has been seen, concentrates on the male world of pastors and preachers and schoolmasters. The final point concerns Luther's vision of universal education. It is clear that Luther publicly aspires for elementary education for all boys and girls and more advanced education for the boys. It can be reasonably claimed that he contributes to the long and slow progress that will lead to the introduction of universal education in most parts of the world. It is important to qualify this by recalling that his aspiration is very localised: his *Letter* is addressed to the councilmen of the cities of Germany and the *Sermon* concentrates on Germany.

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A full list of references is available on request.

Stephen McKinney is Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Glasgow.