

# **The Early Christians And Schooling**

**By Dr Larry M Arnoldsen**  
*Emeritus Professor of Education, BYU*

Written ~1998  
Distributed by [www.LDS-OHEA.org](http://www.LDS-OHEA.org)  
with permission Dr Arnoldsen, May 2006

## The Early Christians and Schooling

### The Jews

The first Christians had been almost exclusively Jews and were therefore steeped in the Jews' traditions and values relating to the home and to children. As Christians, they undoubtedly continued the important and serious teaching of their children in the home, as was the custom of the Jews. Consider Paul's statement to Timothy: "And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures which were able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (II Timothy 3:15) And who was Timothy's teacher? His mother and grandmother. (II Timothy 1:5)

The purpose of these early Christian parents, as of the ancient Jews, was to train up their children in the fear of God. In order that the children might be exposed as little as possible to the corrupting influence of heathen associations, their education was conducted within the healthful precincts of the home. As a result, they grew up without a taste for debasing pleasures; they acquired simple domestic tastes; and, when the time came, they took their place as consistent and earnest workers in the Church. Such was the character of education among primitive Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The early Jewish Christians having schools for children, aside from the home (as the Jews had begun to do just prior to the birth of Christ), is another matter. Historians believe that Christians during the first two centuries, had no schools beyond the home for at least two reasons: one, the desperate and persecuted condition of Christian life during that time, and second, the Christians were very limited in number in any geographical area making it difficult to operate schools had they desired to. The first reason was by far the more important.

### The Gentiles

The growth of Christianity, at an early point in its history, began to take place among the Gentiles, the non-Jews, although the first Gentile Christians had previously become Jewish converts or **proselytes**. The first Gentile of record to become a Christian without having first become a Jewish proselyte, was Cornelius. (Acts 10) By the end of the first century, the Christian church had largely become a religion made up of non-Jews. There is evidence that many of the Gentiles who became Christians were descendants of Israelites who hundreds of years earlier had been "disbursed." (See, for example, John 7:35.)

Even though many of the early Gentile Christians were Israelitish descendants, they had lost their religion and culture through assimilation, and so were coming from a very different tradition of family, of child, and of society than the Jewish Christians. Schools for children were very much a part of the Gentile's world as was the case of the Jews at this time. However, the home and family were very different between the two peoples. The Gentile family was not the source of high esteem, love and safety for each of its members as it was among the Jews. These Gentiles were now Pagans, and among Pagans at that time was the widespread practice of infanticide.

---

<sup>1</sup>*A History of Education*, F.V.N. Painter, 1986, p. 90.

There was nothing wrong with the killing of unwanted babies and children, especially females. Note the Egyptians' value of infants more than 1,000 years earlier as reported in *Exodus* of the *Old Testament* of the *Bible*. The king of Egypt had no problem having new born babies killed. (Chapter 1; 15,16) Women and wives were subject to chattel-like treatment, violence and death. Human life had far less value comparatively, to Gentiles than to Jews. Children had less value in the Gentile family, and the individual as well as the family had less value in Gentile society.

So, in becoming a genuine Christian, the Gentile acquired a completely different view of the nature and value of a person, whether adult or child, male or female. A child, to the Jew was the same to the Christian. The child was "a gift from God" to the parents. The worth of the individual was much greater for Christian and the Jew than for other peoples of the time.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, the aim of children's upbringing between the Jews and Christians was moral in nature. Thus, education was for the making of good people. It was "character education" first, and foremost.

The central pedagogic truth of Christ's teaching is this: All education is for the individual. Oriental (the middle easterner of the day) education had for its end the interests of the State. Christian education has for its end the interests of the individual. The State is the creature of man, and man, not the creature of the State. Man will create, and support, and preserve the State for his self-protection and for his own good. The highest ideal of the State is that in which the people rule, that which furnished the greatest liberty. This is the logic of Christianity, and the logical conclusion of education. It is really for the individual.<sup>3</sup>

### Gentile Schools

The children of Gentiles who became Christians would most likely have been attending a school. Schooling of children was widely practiced in the Gentile world from which the Christians came. This world was largely the Roman Empire which was very extensive and included many peoples and nations. Many, even most Gentiles may not have been Romans racially or ethnically, but they were Romans politically whether they resided in Rome, Greece, Ephesus, Egypt, Gaul (Spain), Britain, or even Judea. Schools for children existed in all these environs.

The schools were for Romanizing the children and they were intensely religious in nature. The religion was the Pagan religion of the Roman. Hardly a day went by in a Roman school that a child did not participate in some rite or ritual of this pagan religion. When people became Christians, the Roman schools were no longer an acceptable place of learning for their children. What exactly the Christians did in lieu of sending their children to Roman schools is little known, but it is believed that the home became the exclusive place of Christian children's learning because of reasons mentioned earlier: persecution and limited numbers.

---

<sup>2</sup>See Cunningham Geikie, D.D., *The Life and Words of Christ*, 1891, pp. 118-120.

<sup>3</sup>*History of Education*, Levi Seeley, 1914, p. 95.

As the school (public) was the stronghold of the pagan culture, it gradually became regarded as the enemy of the Church and its work anathema to the true believer.<sup>4</sup> s.

Another reason had to be the long tradition of home and family centered teaching of children by the Jews. The early Christians were for more Jewish in religion than currently believed, and the Jews were for more Christian as well. That is, these religions at that time had for more in common than they do today.

### Pagan Learning

All Roman and Greek literature was rejected as proper school material for Christian children because all such writings assumed, described and advocated religious teachings deeply repugnant to Christianity.

Abstain from all the heathen books. For what hast thou to do with such foreign discourses, or laws, or false prophets, which subvert the faith of the unstable? For what defect dost thou find in the law of God, that thou shouldst have recourse to those heathenish fables? For if thou hast a mind to read history, thou hast those of the Prophets, of Job, and of the Proverbs, in which thou wilt find greater depth of sagacity than in all the heathen poets and sophisters, because these are the words of the Lord, the only wise God. If thou desirest something to sing, thou hast the Psalms; If the origin of things, thou hast Genesis; if laws and statutes, thou hast the glorious law of the Lord God. Do thou therefore utterly abstain from all strange and diabolical books.<sup>5</sup>

The Jews had felt similarly to the Christians when it came to non-Hebrew literature, i.e., Jewish education had not included the literature of other nations such as Greece and Rome. The faithful Jew had his own school for his children. His children did not attend a Roman school. Jewish literature was the literature of the scriptures: The Psalms, the Prophets, etc. Consider this observation about Jesus Christ:

But to whatever extent He may have known these languages (Greek and Latin), it is clear that they exercised little or no influence on His human development, nor is there in all His teaching a single indisputable allusion to the literature, philosophy, or history of Greece or Rome.<sup>6</sup>

### Christian Schools

It is believed that the early Christians taught their children in the home almost exclusively until

---

<sup>4</sup>*A Students Textbook in the History of Education.* Stephen Duggan, 1948. p. 70.

<sup>5</sup>From *The Apostolic Constitutions* written in Syria about the middle of the third century (250 A.D.). Cited by Frederick Eby and Charles Flinn Arrowood in *The History and Philosophy of Education, Ancient and Medieval*, 1940, p. 593.

<sup>6</sup>*The Life of Christ*, F. W. Farrer, 1912, p. 81.

as late as the third or fourth centuries. In those later centuries schools for children began to be established though they were not co-educational as Roman schools were. Why did Christians begin to establish schools for children? There were at least three reasons.

### Preparation for Church Membership

Schooling first began to evolve from efforts to properly teach investigators of the Christian religion. These “schools” are referred to as catechumenal schools and they slowly became more and more substantial both in time and in content. Though mostly for adults, children and youth as well began to participate in this “baptismal preparation.” This schooling slowly grew into training for the priesthood as well, and eventually included schools for boys who held the promise of entering the priesthood. These latter schools eventually evolved into what became known as Cathedral schools.

### Growth of Pagan Educated Church Members

A second reason schools began to be established among the Christians was because of increasing numbers of converts who became church leaders and who were also graduates of the pagan schools. By the third and fourth centuries Christianity had become widely accepted and respected by intellectuals. Then with the historical change in Christianities status under Constantine, with it becoming the official religion of Rome, it was suddenly *the* religion of the age. Many new converts and church leaders at this time were highly educated in the pagan schools, especially in Greek learning. In earlier times the educated, whether Jew or Gentile, and particularly the highly educated, found little in Christianity to interest them. The early Christians truly did come from the poor, the lower classes of society. To the educated in those times, Christ and Christianity were "foolishness." (I Corinthians 1:18-31).

When Christianity eventually triumphed over its enemies and persecutors and became the official religion of Rome (approx. 300 A.D.), many of those church leaders (Bishops), who had been highly educated in the pagan schools prior to becoming Christians, greatly valued their education and believed it could have great service for the church.

The values and attitudes of these school-educated religious leaders led them to put much more confidence in the value of schools for children and, in “qualified” teachers and teaching, and in “the learning of the Gentiles.” The nature, structure, practices, beliefs, attitudes and values imbedded in the pagan school became the model, the **paradigm** for viewing children's education in the school *as well as in the home*.

A most enlightened view and defense of schools for children by a pagan can be found in the writings of Marcus Flavius Quintilian, "Rome's greatest teacher."<sup>7</sup> Chapter two of Book I is Quintilian's explanation of why a school for children, independent of the home, is superior to what parents can do, even though the parent may be a most eminent teacher, or they employ a

---

<sup>7</sup>*Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*, 94 A.D., translated by James J. Murphy, 1987, pp. 19-24

most eminent teacher to teach their children at home. Quintilian said the school. ". . . has had the sanction of those by whom the polity of the most eminent states (The Jewish State was not included) was settled, as well as that of the most illustrious authors." Christian educators of the fourth and fifth centuries agreed.

### Growth of Christian Schools

By the fourth century, Christian leaders had accepted the pagan view and practice of schooling for children. They saw it as the counter to ineffective families. Schools were increasingly utilized in the proper upbringing of the young. The Catholic historian Patrick J. McCormick said,

. . . it was only when the discipline of the family began to wane and the home was frequently found incapable of imparting the moral training deemed essential for the young, that the Church took upon herself the responsibility of providing for their complete elementary training.<sup>8</sup>

What was not foreseen was that the schooling of children by the church would continually and fundamentally weaken the family.<sup>9</sup>

Church schools were one thing. Public schools were quite another. St. John Chrysostom (347-407 A.D.) urged Christians not to

. . . send children to schools where they will learn vice before they learn science, and where in acquiring learning of relatively small value, they will lose what is far more precious, their integrity of soul. . . . Are we then to give up literature? you will exclaim. I do not say that; but I do say that we must not kill souls. . . .

When the foundations of a building are sapped, we should seek rather for architects to reconstruct the whole edifice, than for artists to adorn the walls . . . In fact, the choice lies between two alternatives: a liberal education which you may get by sending your children to the public schools, or the salvation of their souls which you secure by sending them to the monks. Which is to gain the day, science or the soul? If you can unite both advantages, do so by all means; but if not, choose the more precious.<sup>10</sup>

### Christianity Became Legitimate

The third reason for the growth of Christian schools was the changed status and condition of Christianity. When Constantine made the church legal and official, persecution quickly ceased and there was a peace and stability never before known by the Christians. This new political and social status combined with the favorable beliefs, attitudes, and backgrounds of Church leaders toward schools for children rapidly led to the establishment of Christian Schools. These

---

<sup>8</sup>*History of Education*. P.J. McCormick, 1946. p. 168.

For a discussion of the school's effect upon families, see James R. Coleman's "Families and Schools", *Educational Researcher*, Aug-Sept. 1987, pp. 32-38.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, p. 181.

schools imitated the public schools in a curriculum as well as methods. The curriculum went way beyond what it had been for the early Christians, and before them their spiritual predecessors, the Jews. Homer and Plato and Virgil became equal to Moses and Isaiah and Paul.

### In Conclusion

Throughout the history of the Hebrew and Christian God's peoples, even from Adam to the third and fourth centuries of early Christianity, children were essentially educated at home by their parents. In other nations and societies, the teaching, education of children, evolved into a function of society, of the state. In time, "God's people" were increasingly influenced by peoples and nations in the education of children and in many other ways. In light of this, and in reference to this, it is interesting that when an official of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was asked,

. . . is it likely that in the city of Zion a good deal of the teaching will be done right in the home as some modern educators are now suggesting? Will the home become a place where the child will learn? Some educators even now are beginning to say the school as a building is really becoming outmoded, and we are going to be able to let the child learn most of what he needs to know right at home. What are your thoughts on these concepts?

He answered:

I think that during the millennium we will evolve to that situation. I think that by the end of the millennium, for those who will occupy the celestial kingdom, the home will be the only medium of teaching children. Teaching will be through the family. **You may note that Jeremiah said that the time will come when no man will teach his neighbor.** To me this means the teachings will come fundamentally through the unit of the family. But I think there will be central places where instruction will go forth, directed to the family level. Thus there will no doubt be sources of information for the family. In the family it will be the father and the father's father who will be doing the teaching. In ancient times the fathers were the instructors, meaning the patriarchal fathers--it will be the same during the millennium. . . . And this is true in the ancient patriarchal order, as I understand it. *We will come back to that same method of receiving instruction.*<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis added)

---

<sup>11</sup>"Education: Moving Toward and Under the Law of Consecration," President Alvin R. Dyer of the First Presidency, *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol X, No. 1. Autumn 1969. p. 5.