

Journal of Education & Christian Belief

Vol 1 No 2 (Spring 1997)

The Prague Declaration

Part A: Statement of Faith

A1.

WE AFFIRM, as participants in the Conference of the European Educators' Christian Association (EurECA) at St John-under-the-Rock, Prague, from 16th to 19th May 1997, the historic Christian beliefs, expressed in our statement of faith as a member organisation of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA), together with their significance for education in contemporary Europe.

A2. The statement of faith of the European Evangelical Alliance

As evangelical Christians, we accept the revelation of the triune God given in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and confess the historic faith of the gospel therein set forth. We here assert doctrines which we regard as crucial to the understanding of the faith, and which should issue in mutual love, practical Christian service and evangelistic concern:

- The sovereignty and grace of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in creation, providence, revelation, redemption and final judgement.
- The divine inspiration of Holy Scripture and its consequent entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.
- The universal sinfulness and guilt of fallen mankind, making him subject to God's wrath and condemnation.
- The substitutionary sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God as the sole and all-sufficient ground of redemption from the guilt and power of sin, and from its eternal consequences.
- The justification of the sinner solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ crucified and risen from the dead.
- The illuminating, regenerating, indwelling and sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit.
- The priesthood of all believers, who form the universal Church, the Body of which Christ is the Head, and which is committed by His command to the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world.
- The expectation of the personal, visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ, in power and glory.

A3. Christian beliefs of particular relevance for education in contemporary Europe

WE AFFIRM, as individual Christians and representatives of Christian organisations primarily concerned with education, that Christian beliefs have particular relevance to the theory and practice of education. Specific beliefs that are relevant are:

A3.1 The Trinity

WE AFFIRM that there is one God in three persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The existence of God provides the foundation for human knowledge through relationship with Him. The existence of one God as three persons provides the foundation for human individuality as well as for relationships in community.

A3.2 Creation

WE AFFIRM that God created the universe, declared it to be good and maintains it in existence.

Everything therefore is designed by God for His purposes and belongs to Him so that nothing is ours to do with as we will.

A3.3 Created in the image of God

WE AFFIRM that God made all human beings in His own image.

Our physical, mental, emotional, creative, moral and spiritual natures therefore set us apart from other created beings.

Human beings are made for loving relationships with God Himself and with one another in families, communities, societies and in the wider human community.

Human beings are equal in dignity and equally worthy of love and respect regardless of race, gender, age or social status.

Each is individually unique in personality and gifts and ultimately accountable to God, particularly for the stewardship of creation.

A3.4 Revelation

WE AFFIRM that God reveals Himself to human beings in different, non-contradictory ways:

- in the universe He has created, in history and in human conscience;
- in His Son Jesus Christ Who came into this world; and
- in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which the Holy Spirit inspired and interprets.

We are subject to the final authority of the Scriptures and are therefore not on our own in a purely human pursuit of knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

True knowledge is possible even though our knowledge as finite beings is always limited.

A3.5 Fall

WE AFFIRM that human beings chose to disobey God at the prompting of Satan. As a result, we became sinful by nature and this affected the whole of creation.

This has resulted in a world where good and evil continue in conflict. The activity of Satan and the sinfulness of our nature affect all aspects of our lives, all our relationships and therefore our knowing. Our knowledge as fallen beings is not only limited but distorted and prone to error because we now tend to look for a final point of reference in human knowing rather than in divine revelation.

There is a reality to be known but, in our claims to know it, we should always humbly acknowledge the possibility that we are mistaken.

A3.6 Redemption

WE AFFIRM that right relationships with God, with all that He has made and with one another, can only be restored on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and through faith in Him.

Although many in our contemporary plural society claim to offer ways to knowledge and fulfilment, only by faith in Christ can we experience true freedom and the process of becoming more Christlike.

A3.7 The Church

WE AFFIRM that those who have faith in God through Christ are called to live as the people of God in our contemporary world.

This involves a calling to serve other people, especially children, the poor and the disadvantaged, and to be a transforming influence within society.

A3.8 Future Events

WE AFFIRM that God through Christ and the Holy Spirit has sovereignly engaged in the process of human history which is moving towards the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom.

Everything is therefore moving to a goal and will not always continue as it has been and is now.

Part B: Education in Europe

B1.

WE AFFIRM, as participants in the Conference of the European Educators' Christian Association (EurECA) at St John-under-the-Rock, Prague, from 16th to 19th May 1997, the significance for education in contemporary Europe of the historic Christian beliefs, expressed in our statement of faith as a member organisation of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA). (See Part A: Statement of Faith.)

As Christian educators working in a variety of educational contexts, including public and private, Christian and secular schools, we have a vision for the aims, content and practice of education, which is shaped by the foundational Christian beliefs described in Part A. In the context of plural societies, we wish to share this vision with others in the spirit of mutual understanding. These are our ideals, towards which we wish to work. We recognise and respect the fact that others have different ideals.

We believe that the task of building harmonious societies is better served by people sharing their different ideals and negotiating with each other, rather than by excluding them from public discussions of education.

In our present democratic societies, Christians have a responsibility to advocate a Christian perspective on education at all levels of national government up to the European Commission.

B2. The contexts of contemporary education in Europe

There are three significant contexts which we are taking into account in proposing the Christian educational principles that follow.

B2.1 The social, economic and political context

- Changes in family patterns and breakdown in relationships generally.
- Searches for new identities for historical people-groups who look nostalgically to their more distant pasts. At the same time and in tension with this, there is a search for a new European identity which can appear quite parochial from a global perspective.
- Greater mobility across more open national frontiers leading to tensions between resurgent racisms and concerns to create more multi-cultural societies.
- Following the collapse of communism, a pervasiveness of the free market philosophy, in which the individualism of consumer autonomy is paramount.
- Disillusionment, scepticism and a lack of trust in political systems following the failure of both communism and capitalism resulting in a prevailing pragmatism, particularly in Eastern Europe.

B2.2 The spiritual and intellectual context

- A search for a new spirituality following the decline of Enlightenment modernism and loss of faith in a universal belief system.
- Abiding Christian influences in national cultural heritages across the continent (including the former communist lands) and attempts on the part of the established Christian denominations to reclaim lost ground.
- The rise of a form of pluralism which insists that all world-and-life-views are equally true and that tolerance is the greatest virtue.

B2.3 The educational context

- Variety of formal and informal contexts such as educational institutions, churches, homes, and voluntary groups.
- Unprecedented access to information.
- Ascendancy of auditory and visual media.
- Widespread concern about moral values and educational standards.
- An unprecedented rate of change.

B3. Christian principles for the theory and practice of education

WE AFFIRM the following principles for contemporary education in Europe:

B3.1 Responsibilities in education

B3.1.1 WE AFFIRM that parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children. They have therefore the responsibility to ensure that, as far as possible, the type of education their children receive is in keeping with their own beliefs and values. This may be in the form of home education or of schooling administered by church or other community groups or by the state itself.

B3.1.2 WE AFFIRM that the responsibility of teachers for the education of children in their care is delegated to them by the parents of the children, remembering that parents should continue to be involved in the education of their children.

B3.1.3 WE AFFIRM the responsibility of students and teachers and, indeed, all of us to engage in life-long learning and to do so in partnership.

B3.1.4 WE AFFIRM that Christian churches have responsibility for teaching church members and their children to think and to live as followers of Christ. They also have a wider responsibility to serve the whole community, incarnating the love of God in a broken world, in part by their involvement in education in the wider community. (See A3.7.)

B3.1.5 WE AFFIRM the responsibility of parents to prepare their children to respond critically to school lessons and activities which are clearly opposed to their own beliefs and values and, where necessary, to withdraw their children from such lessons and activities.

B3.1.6 WE AFFIRM that governments have responsibility for the well-being of the citizens of the state and that this includes seeing that educational provision is made for children. The state also has the responsibility to determine a framework of common values but this should not inhibit the development of distinctiveness and, in particular, the responsibilities of Christians to shape and practice education from their faith perspective.

B3.1.7 WE AFFIRM that all those who educate in whatever educational context are ultimately accountable to God for what they do.

B3.2 Aims of education

B3.2.1 WE AFFIRM that education is a lifelong process of learning concerned with:

- the development of the whole person (e.g. spiritual, volitional, intellectual, moral, social, cultural, emotional, physical);
- an integrated understanding of the whole of reality in all its distinct aspects (e.g. ethical, mathematical, linguistic, historical, aesthetic, scientific); and
- the whole of life and its different kinds of activity (e.g. working, playing, resting, thinking, creating, imagining, discovering).

B3.2.2 WE AFFIRM that education should provide opportunities:

- to learn about Jesus Christ and to understand His claims upon people's lives (see A3.4 and A3.6);
- to discern truth from falsehood and do that which is good rather than evil (see A3.5);
- to live as responsible citizens in relationships of mutual love, respect and service with one another in families, communities and societies (see A3.1, A3.3, A3.6 and A3.7);
- to study all aspects of created reality and to learn how to manage and care for it responsibly (see A3.3);
- to appreciate and enjoy the beauty and wonder of what God has made as well as human achievements and creativity (see A3.2 and A3.3);
- to develop practical skills, and the ability to communicate, to make decisions and to be creative (see A3.3); and
- to understand, appreciate and evaluate their history and heritage (see A3.4 and A3.7).

B3.3 Content of formal education

B3.3.1 WE AFFIRM that teaching involves the imparting of knowledge of God's created reality in all its inter-related aspects (see A3.2 and A3.3).

B3.3.2 WE AFFIRM that the selection, content and organisation of the curriculum always reflect the foundational beliefs of those who design it. No curriculum is neutral. Therefore a valid basis for determining curriculum content and organisation is to be found in the beliefs and values of the Bible (see A3.4).

B3.3.3 WE AFFIRM that a central element of the content of education should be the importance and all-pervasiveness of beliefs and values. Students should be helped to discriminate among them and to critically evaluate their own views as well as those of others. This applies in all subjects of the curriculum and underlies the centrality of the study of the Bible (see A3.4).

B3.3.4 WE AFFIRM the importance of the hidden curriculum as well as that of the formal curriculum. Therefore, the underlying beliefs and values should find coherent expression in the way in which the whole life of a school is conducted as well as in the content of the subjects which are taught.

B3.4 Methods of education

B3.4.1 WE AFFIRM that the Old and New Testaments, especially the example of Christ, constitute an important source of methodological principles for teaching in appropriate and varied ways (see A3.4).

B3.4.2 WE AFFIRM that relationships of authority, respect and love are of central importance to creating a secure environment conducive to learning (see A3.3).

B3.4.3 WE AFFIRM that teachers should model Christian beliefs and values in their attitudes and ways of teaching (see A3.6).

B3.4.4 WE AFFIRM that teaching methods should be designed to develop students' ability to take ownership of their own beliefs and values rather than to manipulate or coerce them into acceptance of the beliefs and values of others (see A3.3).

B3.4.5 WE AFFIRM that teaching methods should respect the personal dignity of individual students, developing in them a proper self-esteem (see A3.3).

B3.4.6 WE AFFIRM that teaching methods should take into account:

- the nature of the subject material,
- the individual needs and abilities of the teacher and student, and
- the various learning styles of the students,

in order that students may learn and develop the ability to take responsibility for their own learning (see A3.3).

B3.4.7 WE AFFIRM that discipline is necessary because of the fallen nature of human beings; it should be motivated by love, involving praise and reward; and it should have as its goal positive change involving repentance, forgiveness and restoration (see A3.3, A3.5 and A3.6).

B3.4.8 WE AFFIRM that good pastoral care is essential and should meet the real needs of children and families. It should employ methods that are consistent with biblical teaching and reflect the love and understanding displayed by Jesus Christ (see A3.3 and A3.4).

B3.4.9 WE AFFIRM that educators should equip and motivate their students for life-long learning (see A3.6).

B3.5 Leadership, policy and management in education

B3.5.1 WE AFFIRM that education policy in general, and management of particular educational institutions and agencies, should serve the higher purposes of education rather than a merely economically driven vision (see B3.2).

B3.5.2 WE AFFIRM that government and school-based education policy should always seek to protect and assist the poor, the marginalised, the powerless and the disadvantaged (see A3.3).

B3.5.3 WE AFFIRM that educational leadership should be devoted to vision, inspiration and service rather than dominance (see A3.3).

B3.5.4 WE AFFIRM that the exercise of power should be in a facilitative, open and authoritative manner rather than a punitive, closed and authoritarian manner (see A3.3).

B3.5.5 WE AFFIRM that the leadership and management of schools is a critical concern. Christian thinking and values have a particularly crucial contribution to make to the development of school ethos.

B3.5.6 WE AFFIRM that leaders should empower teachers to be effective classroom managers, e.g. through pastoral care and by facilitating further professional development.