

the
California Table

Connecting Education and Culture

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A Work Research Foundation
White Paper

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February 22, 2008

Dear Reader,

The California Table of December 2007 was a symposium created to involve thoughtful Christians from various disciplines in dialogue on the connection between Christian education and cultural change. By Christian education we specifically mean K-12 Christ-centred education regardless of whether done in schools or at home.

From the moment each of the thirty-seven participants introduced themselves in the first session late Thursday afternoon, until their closing contribution twenty-four hours later in the final session, the symposium dialogue was characterized by intensity and energy. This could only have been born of an authentic passion and belief that our educational endeavours might actually influence the social and cultural world in which we live.

Our celebration and critique of contemporary Christian schooling was shaped by an initial call for our participation in forming graduates who embody love, wonder, heartbreak, hope and friendship.

The conversation on cultural change and renewal was punctuated by the inevitable tension of cultural reciprocity – we make culture and culture makes us. To what degree are our educational purposes, curricula, and pedagogy influenced by our culture? Are our efforts producing individuals and institutions capable of cultural influence?

In the report that follows, we summarize the discussions held at these sessions and list the topics that the participants prioritized as requiring further study and discussion to inform next steps.

An impromptu doxology in the late evening minutes after a shared meal symbolized our vision for the possibilities of committed Christians working together by and through the grace of God. It is the desire of *The California Table Organizing Committee*, Dr. Gideon Strauss, Dr. John Seel, Mr. Leonard Stob, Mr. John Voortman, Mr. Ray Pennings and Mr. Michael Van Pelt, that the networks created and the ideas generated through this symposium will contribute to further discussion and action.

Sincerely,

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California Table Participants

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The California Table Objectives

The invitation to participate in the *The California Table* included the following stated objectives:

1. To advance our collective understanding of how cultural movements happen and the place of education in that process,
2. To constructively critique the current state of Christian education with a view to improving its capacity to contribute to positive social and cultural change, and
3. To facilitate networking and the capacity to follow-up so that the ideas generated stimulate implementation strategies and an ongoing conversation.

Three issues received focused attention at the symposium: education, culture, and leadership. Below we summarize the discussion and contributions as they relate to each topic and highlight distinctive quotes offered during the course of the dialogue. Each section concludes with summary points from the three discussions.

An agenda (see Appendix A) was constructed to pursue each of these objectives through five sessions (of under two hours each) over a twenty-four hour period. The third objective was reinforced only hours after the discussion concluded; a dinner which featured an inspirational address by Ken Wales, producer of *Amazing Grace*, served as an additional time of networking and relationship building.



The California Table Summary of Discussion

Question of Education

Education is about the formation of a certain kind of person standing in a certain kind of relation to the world. It requires a person to embody love, wonder, heartbreak, hope, and friendship: love, as motivation framed by God and others; wonder, as skill in observation and reflection; heartbreak, as confessional cultural critique; hope, as joyful action informed by anticipation; and friendship, as networks of shared kingdom calling.

Christian schooling needs to be viewed with a broader interpretation. Increasingly, Christian schools will be realized in a variety of institutional forms and settings.

Typically churches have approached the teaching of children as caretaker or as cultivator. The caretaker approach develops consumer-based programs designed around a child's wants. The cultivator approach develops discipleship-oriented programs designed around a child's needs. The caretaker approach tends to dominate in the evangelical church and in Christian schooling.

The majority of teenagers give Christianity a try at some point during their teenage years, so there is great potential in reaching them. However, few remain within the church during their college years, so there is something fundamentally amiss in how they are being reached. The younger generation (mosaics and busters) has many valuable traits for God's kingdom. It is curious that Protestant evangelical clergy are often an obstacle to Christian schooling. Many hold a dualistic view about belief and life, and embrace the notion that the purpose of the church is evangelism, not discipleship, and that the purpose of education is to teach one how to secure a career. Consequently, many do not value Christian education and support public education for their children.

The wider culture largely shapes the life perspective and direction of students. Culture, not a Christian worldview, defines the animating story of what is the "good life" for many. Many students are being shaped by a culture of misplaced affections, rather than by the givenness of God's creation and the oughtness of God's Word. An individual's behavior is never neutral; it assumes underlying beliefs. Contemporary students have lost a sense of human nature and the created order. The task of Christian education is to conform people to God's reality. Christian schools have a responsibility to teach students that there is an objective reality larger than the individual subjective self.

There is a latent parochialism in many Christian schools. Trapped in an institutional sub-culture, using a religious language that does not translate in a pluralistic society, students are equipped to speak only to themselves rather than being prepared to engage their surrounding culture. Christian education has an obligation to teach students to be bilingual – how to articulate their world biblically in a manner that is also culturally accessible.

In particular, Christian schools need to address the moral imagination of their students. Imagination always precedes reason – culturally dominant metaphors rule. Christian schools must engage the dominant stories and metaphors that are shaping the lives of their students. They need to communicate the gospel story in terms of the given structures of reality (ought, is, can, and will be). This structure is an interpretive lens through which reality is understood.

But to be truly bilingual demands knowing both the language of the biblical story as well as the language of



the world's story. Learning the biblical story is always the starting point, but it's never sufficient if we are to equip students to be agents of cultural change. A priority in effecting this change is parents and teachers. Students become like their mentors. The role of parents in shaping the moral imagination of a child is incalculable. It is love that creates hope, longing, and dreams. The security of love provides the significance of calling. Being loved sets the context for personal action.

Learning to translate the gospel to culture, however, begins with understanding the truth of the gospel. Education begins with wisdom. Christian education must establish an understanding of and love for a normative reality before equipping children to translate that reality to others. To start with translation is to get the cart before the horse.

Christian schooling must not minimize the significance of a parent-led, home-based education. Schools need to connect more consistently with families. They must be intentionally complementary. Such an effort raises the question of authority and capability – who does what when? Not every parent knows what is required of a Christian mind. And yet, parents remain responsible for the education of their child. Ideally, parents and schools must mutually reinforce and respect each other.

Christian schools are not consistently graduating students with a Christian mind. Their actual results are a long way from their public rhetoric. Most students in Christian schools continue to follow cultural patterns that are foreign to the reality of God's world and Word. Christian schools are not sufficiently reframing their students' engagement with culture. Students are

overwhelmed with information and yet are starved for wisdom.

Key Quotes on the Question of Education

"Education is more about the formation of a certain kind of person standing in relation to the world than anything else."

"God wants to use this generation for his purposes."

"What a culture does is shape our sense of what type of creatures we are, and the reality in which we live."

"Can't change our practices without changing our beliefs."

"There is a need to change the actual structures of society as they shape the imagination."

"Believers need to be taught to name the world Christianly; they need to be bilingual."

"If fathers aren't turned, neither will be their children."

"Education begins in wonder and aims at wisdom."

"Our students live in a matrix that is foreign to the reality of God's Word and world."

"People notice the work of practitioners, not generally what academics write."

"We've focused on explaining redemption, not creation. We don't have a language for creation; here specifically we use secular language. Let's assume everyone is saved. Then how do we talk about our lives together?"

"We haven't captured the moral imagination."

"We have a discipleship problem."



Question of Education Summary

1. The educational priority is the formation of the heart.
2. Institutions play a role in fostering this heart formation.
3. Formation must be bilingual to be effective: grounded in creation, engaged in culture.
4. Cultural influence is dependent on institutions, not individuals.
5. Many refuse to support Christian schooling believing that the purpose of the church is evangelism not discipleship.
6. Christian education must commit to the message of creation, before the message of redemption. God's design precedes God's restoration.
7. Christian education must commit to shaping the imagination, before giving reasons. Metaphors rule, providing the framework for facts, the meaning system for behavior.



Question of Culture

Being made in the image of God means that we are culture-producing people. How do we equip God's people for obedience in created reality? We make culture and the culture we make in turn makes us. Culture is never neutral, though it is often invisible. Culture is public, not private; and institutional, not individual. Consequently, changing culture requires more than changing individual hearts.

Christian schooling must overcome the dualisms that dominate North American church: the priority of soul over body, spirit over matter, fact over value, individual over institution, reason over intuition, a gospel of forgiveness over a gospel of life, and evangelism over discipleship.

There is disagreement by Christians over which cultural practices should be resisted. Christians often lack cultural discernment. We are better at critiquing cultural content (the what), than discerning the dangers of cultural forms (the how). Christians are strong on proclamation, but tend to be pragmatic in practice.

The goal of Christian schooling is more than making contact with the modern sensibility. Rather, its purpose is to transform the modern into a biblical sensibility. We do not immediately accept the given culture. Rather, we teach cultural discernment – learning to identify a given culture's structures and direction. Teachers must connect with their students' world, but that is simply the starting point of their instruction.

There is an ongoing disagreement among those who place an educational priority on word over image and those who accept the modern tendency to place

image over word. To reach the modern student, Christian schools need to equip students with a facility in word *and* image.

There is disagreement on which assumptions and practices Christian schooling should be borrowing from culture. What is required to attract students? What is required to equip them? Churches often begin where their students are and then do little to move them toward maturity. Many take a posture of relevance that simply legitimates the cultural status quo. The result is that they squander their spiritual capital and fail to replenish it in succeeding generations. Evangelicals, in particular, have not been successful in transferring a traditional biblical perspective from one generation to the next.

Christian educators need patience. Personal change and character formation does not take place at the pace of cultural and technological innovation. Two overarching questions remain: What constitutes human flourishing? What constitutes a Christian mind?

Additional questions: What is the process of cultural change? Does cultural change take place from the bottom up through mass mobilization or from the top down through elite gatekeepers? Can it occur through individual change or does it require the formation of strategic institutions? (See Appendix B for one model of how cultural change occurs.)

Homeschooling advocates tend to suggest that culture changes by changing individual hearts and minds. Others question whether homeschooled students are given a coherent vision for cultural engagement, a vision that motivates them to be involved in the wider



structures and patterns of cultural life beyond the sphere of the family. Does homeschooling reinforce a private faith based in an insulated family? If so, it may fail to foster agents of cultural change even while it may protect the faith of children.

Likewise, Christian schools are criticized for creating a hidden curriculum – the invisible but influential peer culture existing beneath the formal school culture. Many question the effectiveness of these educational institutions to socialize students in biblical discipleship. Christian schools need better integration with their students' families.

With the rising number of broken homes, Christian schools may be one of the only stable places of discipleship. There is agreement that government education is fundamentally flawed and its educational monopoly a detriment to the nation.

Key Quotes on the Question of Culture

"How can we equip God's people for obedience in created reality?"

"In the kitchen and classroom, we will be educated to live in this world. We will be taught what it means to be a good person and what is the good life. Every person receives instruction on how to live in this world."

"What kind of cultural assumptions should we buy into?"

"Jesus captivated his audience. Shame on us for making the Bible boring. We do too much preaching. We're stuffy and theological in a way that does not relate to our students' lives."

"We are made in God's image with the capacity to know and love. We are made more perfectly in His image as we know and love. It is important to understand that knowing completes our nature."

"Half of all social capital comes out of spiritual capital. We are using up what we've inherited from the past. How are we going to recreate spiritual capital?"

"What is the contour and content of human flourishing?"

"Christian schools are often part of the problem, not part of the solution. We may want to talk about the wine (the content of the curriculum), but we need also to talk about the wineskins (the structures of the institutions)."

"There is a connection between cultural renewal and our children's imagination. The Christian school my children were attending was undermining, de-Christianizing their imagination so we began homeschooling."



Question of Culture Summary

1. There is little agreement over the cultural patterns that need to be resisted as followers of Jesus Christ.
2. Some emphasize word over image; others image over word, and some a complementary emphasis on word and image.
3. We cannot pass on to students what is not first embodied in teachers.
4. Lasting individual and cultural change takes time.
5. There is little agreement on the dynamics of cultural change as some see it as being fostered by individual change in families and others via institutional change that mobilizes cultural gatekeepers.
6. Homeschooling families need to ensure that their students are given a vision for cultural engagement.
7. Some Christian schools have a peer culture that undermines a student's spiritual and moral imagination.
8. Careful consideration must be given both to the instructional curriculum as well as the institutional structure.



Question of Leadership

Not every student is born to become a leader, but all are called to know God, to serve him and to be change-agents in Christ's kingdom. Servant leadership is caught as much as it is taught, learned from sitting at the feet of a master. There are different understandings between leadership and discipleship. The central purpose of education is to bring students to the knowledge of God and his creation.

While Christian education ought to serve whole-life discipleship, many Christian schools only foster pietism – an individualistic devotional faith with little or no connection to the whole person or to the rest of life. Waiting until college to instill a vision for a whole-life discipleship or a biblical worldview is too late.

One of the reasons Christian schools fail to lead, or to create leaders, is their lack of a commitment to excellence. "Excellence" is an acknowledged part of almost every school's mission statement, but the concept lacks substance without objective content and measurable comparison. Related to the question of excellence, is whether Christian schools have a commitment to reach elite cultural gatekeepers situated within reality-defining institutions that have a disproportional influence in shaping the content and direction of culture. Evangelicals tended to focus on the masses, to orient their attention on the lowest common denominator; those whose needs are real, but whose influence is limited. This pattern is also seen in Christian schools' relationship to the academy as seen in college admissions aspirations.

Thus, a robust definition of educational excellence, while it *may* include the nurturing and cultivation

of leadership, *will* include an emphasis on whole-life discipleship. Educational excellence will result in movements, which will shape and change our culture.

Key Quotes on the Question of Leadership

"Christian schools are a social compact between parents and schools that their children will not be deprived academically or socially. Some will become disciples, some leaders, but all should be well taught."

"Leadership is imitated rather than instructed."

"Christianity is not like a separate application that is running on our computers, but is like a new operating system. It effects everything."

"Culture is religion externalized."

"I don't think that everyone of our kids can be a leader that drives a movement, but they can be people that are the foundation of movements that will change culture."

"Shoddy Christian is still shoddy; and we have too much that is shoddy."

"Parents can delegate their responsibility to educate and disciple their children to schools if they choose, but they are never to delegate this responsibility to a secular system."



Question of Leadership Summary

1. All students are called to know God and his creation, to serve, and to be change-agents in the kingdom of God. Not all will be leaders that drive movements but they can be the foundation upon which movements are driven.

Christian education serves whole-life discipleship, not pietism.

2. Christian schooling needs a renewed commitment to excellence defined, in part, by external standards of assessment.
3. If culture is shaped by elites, then to serve cultural change beyond the Christian subculture, Christian schooling will provide students with a rigorous curriculum that will prepare them for elite colleges and universities and for engagement with elite cultural gatekeepers.



Future Directions

In the final session specific issues emerging from previous sessions (see Appendix C) were reviewed and participants voted to prioritize those most urgently requiring further discussion.

Topics Chosen for Further Discussion (in order of priority)

1. *Excellence*: What is “excellence”? What constitutes an excellent school, an excellent curriculum, and an excellent education?
2. *Cultural Change*: What are the dynamics of cultural change? What are the processes and priorities? Is the Hunter thesis accurate (top down, elitist, institutional, cultural)? How might the reciprocity of cultural influence be embraced?
3. *Pedagogy*: What is the significance of pedagogy in fostering an education that is culturally transformative? Does it make a difference whether one incorporates a traditional or progressive educational philosophy?
4. *Discernment*: What cultural assumptions and patterns can be incorporated and what should be resisted? How does one develop cultural discernment?

Plans for Further Discussion

Participants agreed that focused dialogue should ideally continue at future symposia. Separate focused discussions on each of the four topics should occur with smaller groups of experts. Subsequently, a larger symposium similar to this one should be convened to consider the feedback of these groups.

Participants suggested various works relevant to these and future discussions. A selected list is presented in Appendix D.

Appendices





Appendix A

**Agenda for *The California Table*
December 2007**

Thursday, December 6th, 2007

4:00 Opening and Welcome
Review of agenda, purpose, and introductions.

6:00 Dinner

7:00 Session I – *Understanding Cultural Renewal*

Gideon Strauss opened with a 20-minute presentation summarizing the key themes and basic questions proposed for discussion, and three respondents with varying positions were invited to provide three-minute responses. The balance of the session was discussion.

Friday, December 7th, 2007

8:30 Session II – *The Role of Education in Cultural Renewal*

This session focused on the role Christian schooling plays in the process of cultural renewal. Proponents of varying educational models were invited to make short presentations regarding their perspectives, which were followed by discussion.

10:30 Session III – *The Leadership Link*

Is “developing leaders the purpose of Christian education,” as one educator

recently suggested? What is the connection between education and leadership? What exactly do we understand leadership to be in the context of cultural renewal, and how are such leaders best formed?

12:00 Lunch

1:30 Session IV – *Pulling It Together*

In the final session, participants sought to build on the previous discussions to see if they could identify those issues and/or propositions around which the group might be in agreement (or if needed, articulate the main alternative positions that emerged) and also identified the key questions or issues that need further study and discussion.

In the second part of the session, participants attempted to identify the practical implications of these discussions for various stakeholders with a view to assist those on the ground in benefiting from next steps.

In the final part of the session, there was an opportunity to review the symposium and propose how, if at all, the group would like to continue the ongoing conversation.

4:00 Formal Adjournment, followed by dinner with Ken Wales, Producer of *Amazing Grace*



Appendix B

The Hunter Thesis

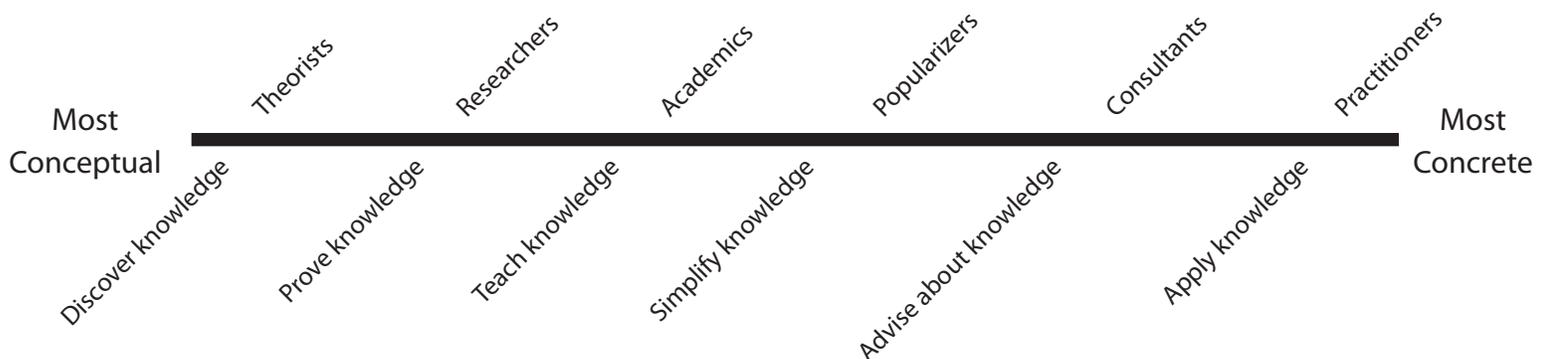
James Davison Hunter, LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory at the University of Virginia and Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, is the author of numerous books and scholarly articles. He argues that culture formation is an historically informed dialectical process. Culture is both socially constructed and constraining. We make culture and are in turn made by it. Culture is the frame or story through which we live our lives. Everything is seen or explained through its lens. Culture includes the ideas, images, and institutions that shape a given society’s understanding of what is thinkable, sayable, and doable in a given time and place. It serves as an invisible plausibility matrix.

Culture is a public reality maintained by public institutions. Hunter writes, “While everyone participates in the construction of their own private worlds, the development and articulation of the more elaborate systems of meaning, including the realm of public culture, falls more or less exclusively to the realm of elites. They are the ones who provide the concepts, supply the language, and explicate the logic of public discourse.” Those individuals or gatekeepers that have decision-making authority within the culture industry

have a disproportionate influence in society. The culture industry includes the academy, arts, media, advertising and entertainment. Each functions as a creator of the collective ideas and images of a society.

The power of culture is its ability to create an unconscious hegemony. Hunter writes, “The power of culture is not measured by the size of a cultural organization or by the quantity of its output, but by the extent to which a *definition of reality is realized in the social world* – taken seriously and acted upon by actors in the social world. In modern society religious elites have an existence that is essentially meaningless to the economic, political, and cultural dynamics of advanced industrial society – a side show to the ‘real’ issues of the day.” This is because religion in a post-Christian society has been relegated to the private subjective realm of individuals and families, rather than the public objective world of business and politics.

Cultural change is top-down not bottom-up, diffused through culture-forming institutions rather than mass mobilization. The gatekeepers who frame the public metaphors and shape the collective imagination, control the private behavior and consciousness of the masses. There is a food chain in cultural innovation and diffusion beginning with those whose work is most conceptual





and invisible to those whose work is most concrete and visible. With the advent of the information age, there is a proliferation of information and an acceleration of its cultural diffusion. Intellectual innovations that once took decades to filter into the cultural mainstream now happen almost instantly and globally.

Cultural influence requires a long-term commitment of collaborative intellectual effort and financial resources. Changing the cultural direction requires reshaping the taken-for-granted assumptions about reality, which necessitates gaining access to the reality-defining spheres of cultural influence, that is, reframing the collective imagination. There are no short cuts to lasting cultural change.



Appendix C

Emergent issues from each session

Themes

Session 2 December 6 7:00 p.m.

Character: Education as a tool to character change
Institutions: Impact on character
Language: Jargon creation, use of jargon
Legacy of education: Purpose
Pedagogy: Connection to cultural influence

Session 3 December 7 8:30 a.m.

Cultural Assumptions: Which are incompatible?
Attraction: Are the media used to create initial connection different from those used to sustain the student? (Joy versus fun)
Cultural pockets: Does Christian education serve, attract, and reflect all communities?
Content and curriculum: Can we give what we do not have?

Session 4 December 7 10:30 a.m.

Leadership and followership: Discerning which is required in each sphere
Cultural change: Through what processes does it occur? Do we accept Hunter's thesis?
Systems: Beyond institutions—engaging and challenging the isms of the culture such as capitalism, pluralism, consumerism
Pluralism: Implications for stability, identity, nationalism
Real needs: For what does our society hunger?
Diversity: Respecting diversities of giftedness
Excellence: What is an excellent school? What is an excellent education?
Passion and love: Balancing humility, courage, and urgency to engage both the heart and the mind

Session 5 December 7 1:30 p.m. Additional themes identified

Relationships: Mentors, disciplers, leaders, teachers
Anti-institutions within the institution: Are we the enemy?



Appendix D

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