

Luther's Influence in Education

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IN this year which is being widely celebrated as the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation, it will not be amiss to recall Martin Luther's contribution to the cause of modern education. For, a careful study of his writings shows that Luther was almost as great a reformer of education as he was of religion. So profound was his interest in the subject, and so large his contribution to it, that he has frequently been styled "the father of modern education."

In concerning himself deeply about popular education, Luther was simply carrying the fundamental principles of Protestantism to their logical conclusion. The Reformation took salvation out of the hands of pope and priest; and made it depend, under God, on the man himself. This necessitated sound judgment and intelligence, which alone would enable him to act rightly in such important matters. It also took authority in religion away from the church and vested it in the Word of God; teaching that men are to get their interpretation of the Bible, not from church and priests, but through the exercise of private judgment, by an enlightened conscience. Thus it became essential for all Christians to know the Word of God, and a great premium was put upon knowledge. The common people must needs learn to read, so as to be able to read the holy scriptures; and teachers and pastors must learn the original tongues, in order to thoroughly understand and expound them.

Thus was there imbedded in the very nature of the Reformation a powerful and inevitable impelling impulse towards universal education which soon put Protestant countries in the lead in intelligence and enlightenment, and has kept them there to this day.

While there are references to the imperative need of schools

and better education in nearly all Luther's writings, we find his principles most clearly and definitely laid down in the letter "To the Mayors and Aldermen of the cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools" (1524); and his sermon on "The Duty of Sending Children to School" (1530). In view of their time and circumstances, these are two of the most important pedagogical documents ever written. Let us learn from them just what Luther believed and taught concerning education.

1. *It is the Duty of the State to Educate its Citizens.*

Prior to that time the church, religious orders, and philanthropic persons interested themselves in the establishment of schools, and training of youth. But these efforts were sporadic and inadequate; and Luther clearly saw that to insure stability, efficiency, and universality it was necessary that the State assume responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of both primary and secondary schools. In answer to the objection as to expense, he said, "Therefore it will be proper for the civil authorities to exercise the greatest care and industry in regard to the young; for, since the interests of the city are committed to their trust, they would not do well before God and the world if they did not seek with all their might to promote its prosperity. Now, the prosperity of a city does not consist alone in vast treasures, strong walls, beautiful houses, large supplies of muskets and armor; yea, when these things are found, and fools exercise authority, it is so much the worse for the city. The best and richest treasure of a city is that it have many pure, learned, intelligent, honest, well-educated citizens, for these can collect, preserve, and properly use whatever is good." "If we must annually spend large sums on muskets, roads, bridges, dams, and the like, in order that the city may have temporal peace and comfort, why should we not apply as much to our poor neglected youth, in order that they may have a skillful schoolmaster or two?"

Graves, in his History of Education in the Middle Ages, well says, "This was the first hint since the Roman days of a system of education supported and controlled by the State, which before very long was destined to become general in Germany and then throughout the world."

2. *Education is to be Universal.*

Learning is not for the privileged classes alone; not for those destined for the learned professions alone; but for all classes in all walks of life. A good education is the birth-right of every child, and it is the duty of the State to provide facilities that will give it to him. Even the girls were to share in this high privilege, and women were to be used as teachers as well as men. No longer should sex be allowed to debar them from the pleasures and profits of knowledge.

"Even if there were no soul, and men did not need schools and the languages for the sake of Christianity and the Scriptures; still, for the establishment of the best schools everywhere, both for boys and girls, this consideration is of itself sufficient, namely, that society, for the maintenance of civil order and the proper regulation of the household, needs accomplished and well-trained men and women." (Address to Mayors and Aldermen).

Meyer Prinzhorn says, "An impartial investigation of history will always again arrive at the conclusion that the German common school is the product of the Reformation, and that Luther must be called the founder of the common school."

3. *Attendance on the Common Schools Should be Compulsory.*

Realizing the natural indisposition of children to schools, particularly as then constituted, and the covetousness of some parents who would wish the services of the children, Luther felt it necessary to make education compulsory. The needs of the case would not be fully met, nor the interests of church and state properly conserved, unless parents were compelled to send their children to the schools.

In 1524 Luther wrote, "The civil authorities are under obligation to compel the parents to send their children to school. If the government can compel such citizens as are fit for military service to bear spear and rifle, to mount ramparts and perform other martial duties in time of war, how much more has it a right to compel the people to send their children to school."

4. *Education Should be Practical.*

Luther conceived of it as a disciplinary process that should

prepare boys and girls more efficiently and easily to perform their daily duties in life. It was to include the training of the body as well as the mind, both gymnastics, and manual training being earnestly advocated. Domestic Science and Industrial Training were also urged. Even the modern night-school, or at least schools at hours which would not interfere with the labor of those obliged to earn their living, were recommended to the authorities.

"The people should practice gymnastics, in order that they might not fall into revelling, unchastity, gluttony, intemperance and gaming. Therefore, these two exercises and pastimes please me best, namely, music and gymnastics, of which the first drives away all care and melancholy from the heart, and the latter produces elasticity of the body and preserves the health. But a great reason for their practice is that people may not fall into gluttony, licentiousness, and gambling, as is the case, alas! at courts and in cities. Thus it goes when such honorable and manly bodily exercises are neglected." "My idea is that boys should spend an hour or two a day in school, and the rest of the time at work at home, learning some trade and doing whatever is desired, so that study and work may go on together, while the children are young and can attend to both."

5. *The Curriculum Should be Broad and Rich.*

The old fixed courses of study, comprising Latin, Greek and a little mathematics did not satisfy Luther. He retained all of these as of value, added Hebrew to the course in languages, and urged the study of more mathematics. But he also insisted upon the introduction of nature studies, and the sciences, rhetoric, gymnastics, and history. Indeed, he laid great stress upon the latter, as one of the most valuable parts of the curriculum. He realized the cultural power and practical value of music, and introduced it in some form into all the schools. Naturally, Luther gave religion the first place in his curriculum, using the Bible and Catechism as texts, aiming to develop the heart as well as the head. He felt deeply the need of books, and insisted, in an age when books were rare, that every school should have a library.

6. *Better Methods Should be Adopted in Education.*

Instead of imparting all but elementary instruction in Latin, he directed that teaching be in the vernacular. Though a matter of course to us, this was a new idea to the men of the 16th century, and soon revolutionized the common schools.

Luther condemned the extreme harshness and cruelty customary in the old schools; and taught that children were to be dealt with gently and kindly, being ruled by love and not by fear, so that they might have joy in their tasks. Much liberty and opportunity for self-expression were to be allowed them. As far as possible, concrete things should be substituted for books as materials of study. Subjects of instruction should be few, lessons simple, and there should be frequent repetition and review. The languages should be taught, not in any dry theoretical manner, but in as practical a way as possible, by contact with the living teacher, and direct daily use.

It was doubtless a realization of Luther's sound and forward-looking ideas concerning methods, that led the United States Commissioner of Education, Dr. Claxton, to say in a recent address, "The real father of the Gary System of Schools is Martin Luther."

These are some of the leading pregnant and dynamic ideas of the great Reformer in the realm of public education. How modern they sound! How fully was this prophet of the 16th century in harmony with the best educational thought of the 20th century! Dittes says, "If we survey the pedagogy of Luther in all its extent, and imagine it fully in practice, what a splendid picture the schools and education of the sixteenth century would present. We should have courses of study, text-books, teachers, methods, principles, and modes of discipline, schools and school regulations, that could serve as models for our own age. But alas! Luther, like all great men, was little understood by his age and adherents; and what was understood was inadequately esteemed, and what was esteemed was only imperfectly realized."

In spite of the uncertainty of the times, the ravages of the Peasant War, the incessant opposition of his enemies, and the woful lack of necessary funds, Luther was able to accomplish a great deal in behalf of education, even in his own generation. Commissioned by the Duke of Mansfeld to originate a system of education for

his native town of Eisleben, he established primary and secondary schools, which both in curriculum and in method, became models for many others throughout Germany. He influenced the various Protestant cities and states to adopt forms of government containing provisions for the founding and management of schools. A secular school system was established in Saxony as early as 1528, which became the fore-runner of all state school systems. During the Reformation period alone sixteen hundred middle schools were established, and by the dawn of the 17th century one hundred and fifty higher schools were in full operation. Thus it came about that the Protestant provinces were soon well supplied with schools. As Emil de Lavelle well says, in countries touched by the Reformation, education and enlightenment became general.

But if Luther's influence on the schools of his own age was great, his influence on those of subsequent ages has been greater. His contribution to education was of permanent value, and is still operative. The suggestions he made, and the principles he enunciated, have been embodied in our modern public schools, and are aiding in their further evolution and development. Thus in view of the deep impression he made upon education in his own time, and the profound influence he projected into the coming centuries, we must class Martin Luther among the great educators of the world.

