Christian Views of Diversity

Diversity is a hot topic in American education, and Christians find themselves just as divided on the issue as non-Christians. The courts have tried to impose fixes on the schools ever since ruling “separate but equal” to be unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). But giving everyone an equal education and teaching K-12 students to inhabit a world of equality has proven quite a challenge. Freeing the slaves and passing civil rights laws does not yet guarantee that all Americans enjoy the same levels of educational and economic opportunity.

And demographic statistics consistently show that zip code (a.k.a. neighborhood) plays a bigger role than just about anything else in figuring one’s chances of having two parents, chances of graduating from high school or college, chances of staying out of prison, chances of starting a successful business, chances of staying married, and chances of living to or beyond the current average life expectancy (now at 79 in the U.S.).

Businessinsider.com writes, “White men with 16 or more years of schooling can expect to **live an average of 14 years longer** than black men with fewer than 12 years of education.” So the state of Mississippi, which ranks at the bottom of most national educational rankings and highest in percentage of African Americans ends up with the lowest life expectancy in the whole country. And probably also some of the lowest chances of having two parents, staying out of prison, and starting a successful business.

Is this fair or right? How we answer that and how we defend our answers depend a lot on our view of diversity.

Secular View #1

One secular view that has prevailed since the beginning of time is a protectionist view. This comes from the natural human impulse to distrust the stranger and to band with familiar, similar people. This makes a lot of sense in terms of wandering tribes seeking security and protection and risk-reduction. Picture yourself in a spaceship crash on an unknown planet; you’d naturally be wary of non-earthlings and try to band together with the other earthlings for shelter, protection, and moral support. Even if you didn’t share their language, gender stereotypes, or even religion – it would seem safer to find a cave with the other earthlings than to take your chances with the unknown beings. What would be best is if you could get to a colony of earthlings on the planet who could take you in, if such a group existed.

Similarly, on earth, shot-up American pilots parachuting into Europe could feel back with the good guys when people held their forks in their right hands and could spout stats about the Brooklyn Dodgers. Quakers found each other in Rhode Island (1700s), Irish immigrants to the U.S. sought out the other Irish-Americans in Boston (early 1900s), Hasidic Jews congregated in Brooklyn, Burmese refugees were welcomed by their countrymen in Fort Wayne, IN (1990s), and Syrian refugees found their kin in Minneapolis (2010s).

Unfortunately, this view (which can save your life in wartime) pretty much always sees the “other” as potentially dangerous and therefore potentially threatening to not only life and property but also to way of life and jobs. So this view, very alive and well in our current culture and presidential race, can lead to ideas like giant walls on our national borders, stronger show of force by police in minority neighborhoods, and cries of “reverse discrimination,” “black privilege,” and “white lives matter too.” Since the overriding assumption is that the “other” is competing for all the good things I want in life, this view also leads to deliberate impediments to voting, education, health care, and jobs.

People who consider themselves fair-minded and not racist may still hold to much of this view since they elevate “merit” and “earning” of privileges as a moral standard and perceive that those who do not have “good” neighborhoods, families, educational status, and jobs have not worked as hard for these things as those who do.

One educational effect of this view is that even a central-city public school may be essentially two schools in one – the college-prep classrooms and teachers for the richer, whiter students, and the second-rate books, equipment, and teachers for the poorer, black and brown students. Such schools exist in many cities.

Secular View #2

This is the exact opposite and finds expression in slogans like “equal rights” and “equal playing field.” Proponents argue that we would never condone a Little League game where one team was without baseball gloves, so why should we tolerate vast inequalities in the schools where one school has three or four times the money to spend per student than an inner-city school two zip codes away? If someone goes to a school where the roof is caving in, the toilets don’t flush, textbooks haven’t been replaced in ten years, there’s little or no working technology, and teachers are scraped from the bottom of the teacher pool barrel and paid accordingly, then that student in that environment has very little chance of becoming well-enough educated to go to college, start a business, become a community leader or even stay off drugs and out of jail. The fact that every now and then someone does manage to make something of himself or herself in these conditions just fuels the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” attitude among those in Secular View #1, which implies that if one or two can do it, then the other 99% should too.

The downside to this view is that judges and legislators throw rules and money at a problem which starts in people’s hearts and attitudes, not in our laws and government agencies. When courts ordered busing to desegregate the schools in the 60s and 70s, people who didn’t want to desegregate just moved away from those districts.

Christian Views

*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.* –Rev. 7:9 (NIV)

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* –Gal. 3:28 (NIV)

Christian View #1

Christians often find Secular View #1 to be a familiar feeling sentiment. They like the emphasis on hard work and earning your own privileges. They like the idea of protection from bad elements in society and from government overreach. This is the *Christianity against Culture* approach and it’s suspicious of social programs that seem to involve handouts, especially handouts paid for by hardworking families trying to do the right thing in their marriages, with raising their kids, with getting educated, with paying their bills on time. They find it uncomfortable to live, go to school, or shop with people who don’t hold their values. They want to protect their kids from bad kids with bad values. They want to make a good investment in their homes so they can be good stewards of their most valuable financial holding. They want their kids to get a good education so they can have a better life. They’re willing to make sacrifices for their kids to have a good education and a good set of friends and good character forming opportunities growing up. But the reason for these sacrifices stems from a distrust of the broader culture and to some extent of the government. So social programs and school integration are kind of suspect right from the start. Then if those seem to be taking away from one’s family and one’s children’s benefits, then that’s a problem.

Christian View #2

This view often starts with “What would Jesus do?” and often quotes Jesus’ words about “do to the least of these.” The emphasis is on the Christian concepts of charity and mercy. The Golden Rule. How would you like it if you had to immigrate to another country and learn the language and find a job and get your kid enrolled in school? How would you want to be treated?

Christians holding this viewpoint, however, may be representing *Christianity Sold-out to Culture.* If the culture is saying that anything goes, the Christian may focus on an emphasis on just loving everyone. Christians are often drawn to the sense of fairness and equality in Secular View #2 and may elevate that to the highest priority. This means that there’s sometimes very little scrutiny of how money is being spent on these projects, how the projects are being evaluated and supported, or how many moral compromises are being included with the project. For example, does racial and gender equality in a school also imply equality regarding sexual orientation or gender presentation?

Christians with this view may dismiss these questions as less important than overall concept of equality. Or as a necessary evil to endure in pursuit of overall equality. Or they may argue that the emphasis should not be on personal morality to the exclusion of social morality and social justice. This means that we should be looking beyond just our own sexual orientation, our own family values, our own financial goals, and our own tax dollars to ask what social inequalities should I be supporting and even promoting because they are the fair and equal thing to do? So my personal morality may have issues with a transgendered bathroom in school or tax dollars spent on Headstart or healthcare for teachers that includes morally questionable contraception or employment of teachers in a gay marriage, but my sense of fairness and treating people all across the social spectrum decently and fairly as a biblical principle may override the personal issues. That could be a typical conundrum and how it’s thought out within Christian View #2.

Christian View #3

In a Christ Transforming Culture framework, the emphasis is on neither personal morality nor compromising for the greater good. The emphasis is on Christ ruling even this very human and very tricky and very flawed attempt at fairness and decency we have in our culture. We say that we should be color blind. We say that we should have no racist cops, or teachers, or politicians. But we need to start by saying that sin taints everything. I recall a long, kind of emotional argument at a Christian college where I worked about ten years ago. I had convened, at the president’s request, a Diversity Task Force. The argument ensued after the meeting between a faculty member who had been a long-term missionary and taught courses on missions and a senior English education student. The missionary said there was no racism on that campus. The student, a white woman, was appalled and eventually kind of won the argument by asking rhetorically if there were any sin on campus. The issue, of course, was the definition of racism. Is racism merely the use of racial epithets such as “the N word”? Or is it “institutional racism” that pervades an environment, lingering in the committee decisions, the policies, the first impressions people make, and the assumptions about other people’s motives?

In Jesus himself we see a profound disregard for keeping separate – he talked to other races, tax collectors, prostitutes, etc. He revealed his risen self to a woman first. He treated the government like a thing one just has to deal with and not get all bent about. So while Christian debate whether we should be for or against the word “tolerance,” we might look first to how Christ was transforming the Middle-Eastern culture of his time for examples of how he might be transforming our culture now. Diversity scholars say we need to study and act on multicultural issues. It’s not enough to just “integrate” a student body, since minority kids will fail to thrive unless there are also minority teachers, multicultural emphases in the curriculum, and proactive diversity initiatives in the community as well. On the college level, many Christian colleges have established diversity scholarships only to fail in their efforts since minority students find no one like them in the faculty, in the curriculum, or at Walmart, where they are often followed around by an employee. Jesus modeled interacting personally with the “other” as well as illustrating ways to make him or her feel more at home – e.g., the Samaritan taking care of the injured Jew.

While some Christians are arguing that we should be less tolerant on moral-purity grounds, or saying we just have to be more tolerant and look the other way from moral issues, this view looks at ways to embrace, love, and support the other, while not being color blind. Jesus didn’t act like Zacchaeus had an OK work ethic or the prostitute had OK morals or the leper wasn’t in need of cleansing. Nor did he say the Samaritan’s theology was OK now. But he loved them just the same. That’s what transforms culture and the racism and other divisions we live with every day.

In table groups:

* Discuss where you have seen each view in your life.
* Have you seen them all in school?
* What are the pros and cons of each view?