

Sermon Title: Educational Alternatives
Scripture Text: Various (Provoke the Pastor #68)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 8-28-22

Last Lord's Day, we finished the Book of Ephesians. I hope you got at least *some* fraction of the blessings that I got from spending that time in that precious portion of God's Word. And it is now kind of late in the summer, and we typically do a few weeks of what I call "Provoke The Pastor," where I answer your questions. But as I said earlier in the service, we are going to start with "Provoke *By* The Pastor"—something that *I* want to deal with, just looking at the life of Heritage Bible Church, and wanting to minister to *all* of our families.

When we studied Ephesians Chapter 6, Verse 4, on "Spirit-Led Parenting"—if you have a great memory that goes back four weeks—I concluded that sermon by asking you to ponder this statement: "You have no choice about homeschooling." Well, I want *that* to be my theme-statement for today; and I think you will understand what I mean when we finish.

For a long time, I have been asked if I was going to update our position paper on that. We have had a position paper for 15 years, cleverly titled: "Educational Alternatives"; and I originally wrote that as an article to send to people who listen to our radio program—and I did that about 30 years ago; and then, eventually, that turned into a position paper that has been adopted by *several* churches and passed along, so it has kind of been around for most of a spiritual generation.

And by the way: I *did* update that position paper this week—minor changes, but there are things that weren't even *around* 15 years ago, that *do* affect people's choices about educating their children.

I have learned over the years that this subject evokes *very* powerful reactions from some people. For all the things that I teach—all the things that I am known for, the countless hours on the radio, all the sermons on the Internet—I don't think I have ever been *attacked* any more than I have for our position on educational alternatives. And some of the attacks have come from people who are not even *remotely* spiritual about the response—I mean, *flagrant* carnality!

Somebody that wasn't part of Heritage e-mailed us a few weeks ago and said, "We are new to the area. We are looking for a church. We have been searching things on the Internet. We *really* liked what we saw with Heritage. We were thinking about visiting. And then, we read your position on 'Educational Alternatives'—*how dare you?!?!?*" Well, they didn't yell, because it was an e-mail. But they just said a bunch of absolutely rude, sub-Christian attacks on this position.

So, here's your chance. We may not need to ever expand our building, if I say this in the wrong way; but I'll do my best. Over the years, I have received several very thoughtful comments and statements and questions about this, and they contrast with the scathing ones. But I thought, let's begin; I'll just share with you a couple of questions that I got.

These are not fresh; these are not people in the room, so nobody needs to be scared—if somebody is bowing their head, it's not because they are being embarrassed. But here are some of the *legitimate* things to consider:

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When is it okay to send Christian children to schools of other religions for the purpose of educating them? If a school does not allow Christianity to be preached, isn't it anti-Christian, and should Christians attend?

Now, I think the specific behind that—and I have helped a few families deal with this—is, they were pondering sending a child to a Catholic school because of the high standards of academics and relatively higher standards of behavior than public schools.

And then there is a secondary application of that: What about a college sponsored by a different religious organization?

And my personal recommendation is that for elementary, junior high, high school, I would *far* rather have kids in a government school—where we *know* that the school is committed to an openly anti-Christian stance—than to have them in a place where they are going to be *told*, "We are educating you in a Christian way"—and then teach doctrines which are blasphemous! (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-16)

A *false* teacher of pseudo-Christianity is *far more dangerous* than your garden-variety evolutionary, heretical person (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Tim. 4:1). You may not *agree* with that, but that is my advice.

Now, I am much *more* okay with it on a *college* level, *if* the student is *sound* in doctrine when they enter, and *especially* if they will stay in touch with their spiritual family, and we can help them along the way. And there are schools that fit that category not very far from here, and people from Heritage have attended and are going to attend such schools. *You still have to be careful*, but it is not as serious of an issue as if you are training a child who is hearing one thing at home, and then something *completely contradictory* at school *in the name of Christ*.

Alright, here's another one. It starts out: "I don't know exactly how to phrase the question"—and then they phrased it very well—"but, could you address the issue of parent responsibility at school—whether it be public, private, Christian, or homeschool. I know a number of homeschool parents who make me feel like they don't recognize the value of the public schools. And so, would you talk about parental responsibility?" Okay—tee it up, I will hit it! We are going to do that this morning.

That gets to the issue—which is another one of our purposes for this morning—the issue of getting along with Christian brothers and sisters with which you disagree on something, and that does happen (cf. Rom. 14:4).

Now, here is one that also pulls some of the factors together: "I encourage my grown children, as adults, to *get in* those public schools and be a light for Christ. I'm thrilled that our granddaughter is thriving at (fill in the name of the school); our grandson is off to a [city of] Meridian school in September. As a former public school teacher, I know that this is a good and fertile place for service and relationships. Can you turn this into a question, and make some biblical suggestions—like you have dozens of times—without locking out the option of public schools?"

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Yes, I can. And by the way: I happen to know that that question is from somebody who, in the teaching career, left behind a bunch of people who had become Christians—largely due to the influence of that person teaching in a public school setting.

Now, those questions come from people with personal convictions—as everyone should have—and they come from a spectrum, even on opposite ends of the spectrum. There was the person who just was *furious* that we would *ever* support *any* Christian sending *any* child into a public school. That's an extreme end of the spectrum, but then there is the other extreme end of the spectrum. The point is: *There is a spectrum there!* What does *God* say, and how do we apply it?

I'm not going to give you everything that is in the position paper; get a copy if you would like, or you can read it online at HBC-Boise.org if you are interested. I want to give you the proverbial bottom line.

First and foremost, I will say this: There is *one* nonnegotiable, crystal-clear biblical absolute on this subject. If you *do not accept this*, it *does not matter* what option you choose for formal education; because if you don't accept this, you have abdicated your God-given responsibility—you are *not* a Christian Parent if you don't accept this! The absolute is: You are the one. *You* are responsible! Parental responsibility.

It is not hard to find that in the Bible. Start with the well-known words that God gave to Moses to give to Israel before they entered the Promised Land: Deuteronomy Chapter 6, Verses 4 through 7—"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And here is the education part of it: "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." (NASB-1995; and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Christian education is: parents loving the Lord "with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your might"—and in *that* framework, in *that* worldview, interacting with your kids. What days of the week? All of them! When? Whenever you "rise" and whenever you go to bed—*all the time!* It is a lifestyle.

And that is *not* talking about formal education. It is talking about the *highest priorities of life*. Your children need to see, by how *you* live—what *you* do with *your* time and *your* money, and what *you* read, and what *you* study, and what brings joy to *you*—they need to see how *you* worship, how *you* pray; and they need to hear what you teach them as you *show* them what it means to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

You are *commanded* by God to *know* what the Bible says—"These words, which I am commanding you today"! Now, *they* had it easy compared to you. That's in the fifth book of the Bible—*there are 61 new ones since then!* But you have the whole story. And you need to *know* it, and it need to be "on your heart"—that is: controlling the center of your being. And you need to "teach" it, not occasionally, "*diligently*" to your children!

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Okay, I'll just say it strongly: If you are not doing that, you are *not* a Christian Parent! You might be a Christian who is a parent, but Christian parenting is nothing less than what Deuteronomy 6 says.

If you want to protest that those verses are in the Old Testament, and therefore for Israel—yes, it is, and yes, they are; but if you want to say, "Therefore, they don't apply to me," that won't work because the New Testament says the same thing!

What was it—way back *earlier this month*, we studied Ephesians Chapter 6, Verses 1 through 4—"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Notice that *that* passage requires *you* to teach your children the Ten Commandments! I'm starting to get an idea that this may just be a theme that is supposed to happen for Heritage Bible Church, because we just saw it in Ephesians. What are we doing in our daily e-mails? The Ten Commandments. And what are we talking about this morning? Christian parenting.

But here is what you need to understand: *You* are the ones responsible to God for what your children learn, both from *your* words and from *your* example; and it is *your* job to manage what they learn from *any* other source—it *has* to pass through you!

Your children *watch you*. They are wonderful imitators! They get their accent from you, when they learn to speak. They get their sense of "normal" from you. They are going to get their idea of what it means to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk. 12:30).

They need to see—you know, we have our jobs, we have our hobbies, we have our friends, we have all of our extended family, we have all of our relationships, life is complicated, there is a whole lot of things there; but *the central thing is*: We belong to Jesus Christ. We are with His people on the Lord's Day, in His church, worshipping together, corporately encouraging each other—*that* is Number 1 in our week! *I know* your soccer team has to travel—but *this is Number 1*, this is most important! *Nothing* upsets that—except *rarely*, for *very* important reasons or for total inability to be there (Heb. 10:25; cf. Prov. 18:1).

What is the most important thing that controls my life? What is at the *center*? What controls my heart? What do I want more than *anything else* to teach you, even if you *flunk* English Literature? What do you need to know about your Lord?

Proverbs Chapter 6, Verse 20, says it this way: "My son, observe the commandment of your father and do not forsake the teaching of your mother." What does that say? Fathers and mothers: "Command" children and "teach" them. God expects nothing less from you (e.g., Ex. 13:14-15; Deut. 6:20-24; Ps. 145:4).

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Proverbs 22:6, famous words: "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it." That famous proverb summarizes biblical parenting. There is *one right way*—which is God's way (cf. Ps. 119:128, 160; Is. 8:20; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). And that works in 21st Century Boise, Idaho, just as it worked in 8th Century Persia! (cf. Ps. 19:9a; 72:5; 102:12) It is *universal*! It has a lot of different wrinkles of application in different places, but *that* is the "right" way (Ps. 19:8a). It is specified in a lot of detail in Proverbs, and many other passages; we read it in Ephesians a while ago.

And since it is axiomatic that early training in the home drastically affects lifelong habits, then parents must insist upon *this way*, which is teaching God's Word and enforcing it with loving discipline, with consistency throughout the child's upbringing, and setting the right example.

This is easy to understand—if you don't have children. *Then* you realize: "It is *really easy* to understand, but, *oh, Wow, is it complicated!* God gave me *a human being* to care for! And he is *defective*—as sinful as *I* am! How do I apply this?" And then you kind of get a handle on it, and you are starting to figure it out; and then maybe God will bless you with a second child, and you'll notice: "Uh-oh! There is not a cookie cutter out of which these things all come! They're *different!* And they *think* differently! How am I going to do that?" Well, with *great wisdom!* You need to know *each child*—know his or her heart, his or her bent—their quirks, their loves, their joys, their hurts, their pains. *You* are the one that God put them with, to get Himself glory.

Now, what does that mean for your child's formal education? It means there is *only one right way to do it*: the way that says, "*You* are in charge! *You* are accountable to God." *That* is the one right attitude to have.

Now, it *does not mean* that there is only one acceptable way for Christians. It does not mean there is only one godly way to educate your children. Because if you are not committed to "loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," I don't care *where* you send your kids to school—the strongest influence in their life is ungodly if it's *you*, and you are not committed to the right thing!

Our position paper on "Educational Alternatives," if you work your way through that, contains a series of lists of positive and negative things to consider as you weigh the options that are available to us in our culture, in our place now. And we have pretty much three of them. And somebody pointed out another wrinkle that I forgot to mention here; I'll try to make a comment or two as we go along.

But you need to weigh public schools, you need to weigh Christian schools, you need to weigh homeschools—and then the one that I talked to this morning said, "Well, we homeschool using an online public tool." Okay—you can have the problems of *all three of them*, rolled into one, if you like! The point—what is the key, what is the nonnegotiable, what is the absolute? *You* are responsible to God.

Now, with that said, I want to take a few minutes to speak from the heart to you who are parents of children still in your home, still in school—maybe not yet old enough for school.

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You might be a grandparent, and you can say, "Whew! Wow! I'm glad I'm not raising kids *now*! It was hard enough when *we* did it!" Well, I can almost guarantee you that some of you are going to want to send some of this to some of your kids, and lovingly come alongside them and help *them* make these decisions.

The decisions need to be made child-by-child, year-by-year, maybe even semester-by-semester, from the alternatives available—from the options available to you. And realize: You live in a place that is *really unique*! In the 2,000-year history of the Church, very, very few Christian people have *ever* had the breadth of options that we have to weigh and to consider.

Now, if you *can't* figure out a way to apply this—well, write me a question on the insert of your bulletin, and I will get to your subject next week in "Provoke The Pastor."

This is from my heart. I have been in the Ministry 50 years. I have been with people of very different perspectives in this subject. I just want to talk to you from my heart. So, let's start.

Dear public school parents (this is from me): I am thankful that you are involved in public education. We *need* people there. Why? Because *there* is where there are *lots of people* who *desperately* need a Savior! And you will find that through your child's school activities and extracurricular activities, that is going to put you into *many* positions to be "salt" and "light" (Matt. 5:13-16; cf. Phil. 2:15). And you can get into places that *I can't*, now, because *I do not* have a child in that age range.

I find a lot of Christians *do not* want to consider what I am about to say; they *will not* give any credence to it, but I will stand by it: One of the main reasons for the rapid degeneration of our public education in our country—and I don't know if you have noticed: *It is going bad*; I mean sour, rancid...*it's not good*! What *I* got in *public* education back when *I* was a kid, now would be considered the highest rungs of classical education, by some people; and it's the same school system—just give it 50 years to go down the drain. But one of the main reasons for the rapid degeneration of public education in our country in the last generation is: Christians have *withdrawn* their influence from that part of our world. Name me *one* group, *one* institution, that is going to be more godly if all the Christians boycott it! It's *axiomatic*, right?

But I will say to you, dear public school parents: You and your family are *far* more likely to preach the Gospel and to bring people to church than our friends who choose other alternatives! Make the *most* of those opportunities. Make the most of those non-Christian acquaintances and downright friends that you might make through your connection through school, because: What is our highest calling on Earth? Bring souls to the Savior! (Matt. 28:19-20; 2 Cor. 5:18-20).

That is why God has left us here. And if you are not wholeheartedly committed to that task, maybe you don't belong there. You will fail your children if you take on that task, but you do not do it as somebody whose heart is controlled by the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Jn. 15:5).

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Now, dear public school parents: I am glad you are where you are; make the most of it. But I have to warn you: Your children are at risk! *Every day* when they go to that place, they are going to be taught *anti-biblical* ideas such as Evolution; here's one I never had to say when I preached this before: Gender Fluidity; Identity Politics. They are being taught an overall anti-Christian worldview in their curriculum.

They are *also* at risk of lots of negative peer pressure (cf. Ex. 23:2; Prov. 1:10-15). Now, we had negative peer pressure when I was a kid, too; but they've gotten *really* creative nowadays. And now they have the Internet and social media to help them along the way—and that's not just in public schools, by the way. That peer pressure is probably *far* beyond what you realize. I remember 25 years ago when our son was still in high school. He knew of classmates and teammates who were alcoholics, drug users, drug *dealers*, and other sundry criminal types—not to mention the rampant promiscuity of everything going on; and that was *high school!*

Your values and your child's values, if you are in the school system—*they will be tested* with regularity. And that is good or bad, depending on how you handle it. It is good if you use it as a way to say: "Here is how someone whose Lord Jesus Christ is at the center of their heart will handle this." And you stand for the truth, and you teach your kids to stand for the truth, even when it is unpopular.

But they are going to be watching *you*, because *you* are the one responsible for what they are taught, and *you* are responsible to God and accountable for how it is applied. If you make your children go to school—I mean, "You don't have an option! You are going to school!"—but then, when it comes to *you* reading the Bible, studying the Bible, praying, being faithful to church, you send the message to them: "Well, *that's optional*. That's like a hobby. That's something you can do or don't do. You *must* go to that place where they hate Christ; but when it comes to being with the people who love Him, we are kind of *easy* on that."—they will read that loud and clear. And they will—though they would *never* articulate it—they will learn that you are *not* a Christian Parent. At best, you are a parent who claims to be a Christian.

If you do not *know* the content of your child's textbooks, and if you do not discuss how those things interact with and contradict the Bible, you are *failing* your children! This is a tough task! This is a *big thing!* But God wants you to do it.

If you are not involved with your child's teachers, if you do not know the school principal and everyone else in a position of authority over your child, if you do not make it your *business* to be acquainted with them, if you are not working hard to befriend those people—I think that's *dereliction!*

Now, do not *smother* your child—you have to have some wisdom here. Don't be that dreaded "helicopter parent." But don't stick your head in the sand, either. If you are not a cheerful, supportive volunteer in your child's school, you're missing a great opportunity, and you are failing to show your child what the right priorities really are; and not to mention, you are missing out on *many* witnessing opportunities—people who need Christ. If you are not praying for your child, and for his or her teachers—well, why not?

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Every day that your child comes home from school is a *golden* opportunity for you to obey God by taking your responsibility to teach them critical thinking. They are going to hear some *wacko* stuff, some *really bad* stuff! *That* is the *golden opportunity*! How does a person with the Lord at the center of their heart interact with that *awful* idea? How do we respond to that? How do we apply Scripture to it? How do we analyze that? And then you can teach them the Scriptures, you can teach them to pray, you can teach them to be representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ in a hostile world. Ignore that responsibility and that opportunity to your own peril—and you jeopardize your kid.

Now, there *are* some of a different perspective who say that children are *not* called to be evangelists, so do not *excuse* the *sin* of sending your children to a public school by saying, "They are going to be an influence for Christ." Would you please find me a verse that tells me what the minimum cutoff age is for when you need to preach the Gospel? *Every child that is saved has every single command in the Bible that we have!* And they are not alone, because *you* are their backup! *You* are the ones that are with them.

But understand: We *need* to have an influence in a non-Christian environment if we are going to send our kids there! Let's *do it* as those that "love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength."

And by the way: Don't wait to get started in that, because there are all kinds of books and statistics about the avalanche of kids leaving the church when they graduate from high school and go off to college or into the adult world; but a substantial percentage of those young adults who abandon the church—that have defected, if you will, run away from the faith—they said they started to doubt the Bible as early as Fourth Grade!

So it is not because they got out from under the safety of their parents' wings; it is because the foundation wasn't laid: They did not learn the Doctrine of Sin, the Doctrine of Grace, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, at the youngest possible age. So don't wait to get serious about it. And by the way—and a lot of this applies to the other groups that I am going to address, too; but understand: You are the strongest influence on your children, *by far!* (1 Ki. 15:3, 26; 22:43; 22:53; 2 Ki. 21:21; Prov. 17:6b; 1 Tim. 2:15; Titus 2:4-5)

A public school teacher friend of mine was at a Christian gathering, and someone gave him a rant about how the schools *brainwash* children, and are just turning them into secular humanists. He had the most gracious response I've ever heard; he said: "I only *wish* I had that much influence! The problem is: I, as a Christian, cannot *begin* to compete with what they get at home!"

Think about it. Yeah, "the system"—big, *big* problems; and they are getting worse, and they're getting worse fast, and they're getting worse *faster* than they used to get worse fast! But understand, dear public school parents: We are here. As your brothers and sisters in Christ, we support and encourage you *any* way we can. We will pray for you. We will provide supportive children's ministries, supportive youth ministries. We will give you advice, we will give you resources, we will try to help you through crises if they come your way.

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Now, switch gears. Dear Christian School parents: I want to applaud you for your sacrifice, to send your children to a quality school where the teaching most likely, generally, comes from a biblical perspective. I know that you sacrifice a lot, financially, to do this. I know that it takes a lot of time to work out those deals of transportation and other logistics. I know that that school does not have the resources of government funding, and so they expect a lot from you—I get that. And good on you for accepting the responsibility and applying it in that way.

But, one more thing I want to say to you. I need to warn you: Your children are at risk. In a Christian school—a private Christian school—the risks take a little different form than the way they come to your public school brethren, but ditto everything I said to public school parents about the need for *diligent* involvement!

Just because there is a cross over the building where your kid goes to school, it doesn't mean that every book that comes home from there is going to support what you know and believe from the Scriptures. Don't you *dare* let a book or a piece of paper come home from that school, and you don't learn the contents, and help your child apply critical thinking to it.

A family in our church some years ago—they had a high school senior attending a Christian school, one of the better ones available in this region. And their high school senior was given a book—the whole class was given this book, and then we found out that it was also given to the youth group at that church, and any family that would take it. And it was an *absolutely terrible* sniper attack from inside the camp! It was applying Postmodernism, it was ripping away at absolute truth—*it was awful!* And it was given away by a Christian school: "Here's a gift to all of our seniors as you go out into the world—*deny* everything we have taught you, or that your parents have taught you!" (cf. Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:30; Jude 4)

Not every book used at a Christian school is automatically going to be sound. Not every *teacher* at a Christian school is *necessarily* committed to helping your child grow in Christ. You know, people are people, and some are better at what they do than others.

You are *probably* going to be pleased with the influences on your children from their teachers in *most* cases, but you have not satisfied your obligation to the Lord as a parent, *merely* by choosing a Christian school. Even if all the books your children use *are* sound, you have to work *extra hard* to prepare your kids to face non-Christian thinking when they get into the real world (Acts 2:40; Phil. 2:15).

Now, there is an issue that is *different* at a private Christian school than at a public school, and that is: There are going to be different standards of behavior, and they are going to be *better*, and they are going to be better enforced—and that is *mostly* a good thing, but it has a couple of unintended consequences.

One is: It covers up the fact that most of those students *are not saved*. Because if everyone is forced to behave the same on the outside, it is a lot easier to fool people into thinking that you belong in that group, whether you really do or not.

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Did you hear Sam Rotman's testimony? "I did all of these things, and on the outside: moral, right, talented, all these good things. In my heart: wicked." You don't want to *cover that up*. We need to *get to the heart* to bring the Gospel (Rom. 10:9).

The other possible unintended consequence is that requiring people to conform to *external* codes of conduct can easily breed Legalism—the idea that you are accepted by God because of how well you perform in keeping the rules (e.g., Lk. 18:11-12). Now, those teachers are not trying to be Pharisees; those parents are not trying to be Pharisee at all. But you have to make sure that you do not *confuse* the Gospel with Moralism—"You are *good* because you don't break the rules! You haven't been arrested all week? Gold star!" Maybe you were in a coma, but judging spiritual success by what you don't do, and how you don't get in trouble—that doesn't work.

Among graduates of *good* Christian schools within *my* sphere of knowledge—so I'm not making this up, this isn't anything scientific; I can just tell you that among graduates of good Christian schools, who were sent there by good Christian parents—or, parents that said they wanted the best—I know among them: a heroin addict, a person busted for growing marijuana, a homosexual, some who got married soon after high school because of the out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and some who went through the same thing but didn't get married.

Christian schools! Is *that* the answer? *No!* The *Gospel* is the answer! And who is responsible? The parents.

So, dear Christian school parents: We are here to support you and encourage you in *any* way we can! We will pray for you. We will provide supportive children's ministries and supportive youth ministries. We will give you advice. We will give you resources. Several times, I have played in your benefit golf tournament—*that's how much we love you, okay?*

Now, homeschool parents. My dear homeschool parent friends: Wow! You are the *superstars* of taking parental responsibility *seriously*. I know you make *great* sacrifices of time and energy and money to do what you do. Anyone who challenges your commitment to your children is...well, *nuts!*

But, that said, I have a very important message for you who are homeschooling in this era. I need to warn you: Your children are at risk. The biggest problem with *your* children is the same thing that is the problem with the Christian school parents and the public school parents—they are *your* children, and *you* are depraved! They were born to you! (Job 25:4; Ps. 51:5; 58:3) They are as *messed up* as you are, and they have a *whole lot more options* for how to *express it* than you ever did! They're at risk!

Now, the risk does not come from the curriculum, because you choose it. The risks are not from daily negative peer pressure, unless your firstborn is a problem. You won't deal with many of the things that your public school brethren deal with, that their kids bring home from school. But ditto everything I said about Christian school families, *but put it in bold capital letters!*

Sermon Title: Educational Alternatives
Scripture Text: Various (Provoke the Pastor #68)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 8-28-22

Your home is a *great* environment to go to school. I mean, would I have *loved* to stay home with my mom all the time! Oh, wow, would I have loved that! That's a *great* environment; and the intense love, the intense involvement that you have with your kids—that is a good thing.

But realize: It can *cover up* the fact that they may not be saved, *even if* you and they think they are (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5). You need to be *relentless* and *patient* with the *long term* process of making a disciple. When values are not put to the test, *character* doesn't get revealed as easily (cf. Rom. 5:3-4; Jas. 1:2-3). And that's a lot bigger issue than what you think it is! We *need* to learn how to live in a sin-cursed, upside down world. And if we are *completely insulated* from it, that is one of the big things to overcome.

Great positives about homeschooling, but there are things that you need to overcome. That same issue of breeding Legalism. I'm not saying that every family that chooses homeschooling is legalistic; far from that! Most that I know are the *antithesis* of that. And like I said, it is not because parents are *setting out* to teach a false gospel; but it's because you have to do the things necessary to keep order, and to get work done; and kids need to learn that there is a difference between biblical commandments, and personal standards and family habits—and if those two are comingled all day, every day, the lessons are harder to learn. And so you, as the responsible party, have to work *harder* at being creative to learn how to teach them.

And even considering how much commitment it takes, educating your children at home, it will spare you from many trials that face other parents—no doubt about that. But you have *different* trials; you have *different* challenges.

And make no mistake: We love and support our homeschool parents! Our facilities are available if you need to have a group event of some kind. We will help you any way we can with resources.

But realize that there can be some unintended consequences of *this* choice as well. The very nature of homeschooling *breeds* isolation from the world (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-10). Now, you want to *protect* your kids—but on the other hand, our goal is not to raise the most trouble-free children possible; our goal is to produce mature disciples of Jesus Christ, who are trained and ready to take the Gospel into a hostile world.

Christian school parents—same thing to you, maybe to a different degree. But when we make choices that remove our influence from the world, we make it that much harder to fulfill our duty to preach the Gospel. So we have *a lot more work to do* in creating opportunities to spread the Gospel (Col. 4:5).

There is another concern: The unintended consequence of how your children relate to people outside your family. Now, I have been involved with homeschool parents since the movement got started among Evangelicals in the early '80s. I did a number of radio programs with the people who were fighting for the rights to educate their own children, back when the movement was getting started. I have seen people who have done it very, very well; I've seen people who have done it not so well.

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But understand when I say this: I have *no* individual family in mind; I am not thinking of any particular child or any particular parents. But I just want to say something, and I want you to receive it in the spirit in which it is intended, which is helping you to do your best: I know some things you don't. Oh, you know way more than I do about a whole lot of things, *but* I will tell you: Youth pastors often have difficulties dealing with homeschool kids. If what you are doing is successful, if it is meeting the goal, your kid should rise as the cream of the crop to be spiritual leaders of their peers in youth ministry. That is *not* often the case. More often, homeschoolers either *boycott* youth ministry altogether, or they have trouble fitting in to group activities.

I have heard the same things from AWANA leaders. We don't have AWANA here, but most of you know what it is. AWANA leaders tell me they often have the greatest difficulty with homeschool kids; because all the rest of their time, they are in the peace and order of their daily routine, under the safety umbrella of Mom and/or Dad—and then you say, "Now, *here* is where we are going to go for some Christian activity," and they go to AWANA, which is a *mildly organized version of chaos*...with some good things that get accomplished there, and the Gospel can spread through that. Now, the AWANA *organization* is heading down the tank, theologically; that is another issue. But the point is: It is not just to keep your kids nice; it's to produce mature adults.

College professors say the same thing. Sometimes people tell their pastor things that they don't tell their parents. I spent four years teaching at the Master's College, and *you can tell* pretty much what groups people had come from; and boy, we had quite the diversity there: Homeschooled K through 12, missionary kids who hadn't lived in a primarily English-speaking culture their entire life, kids that came out of public schools—it was quite impressive to see the array and the divergence of academic skill, which didn't always match up with where they were schooled.

But understand: Your kids, as they come out—and the things I mentioned that they might say to a pastor that they wouldn't say to somebody else, a couple of things that they say that are the most heartbreaking: Some of them felt smothered and micromanaged, so they *couldn't wait* to get out—but then they didn't know how to handle it when they *did* get out into the world. The other one is that they felt they were trained to feel superior to other kids, and they did not know how to relate to them.

Those are *worst* cases—I get that. But understand: Those are *dangers*. And just because you choose something for its *positive* attributes does not mean that there are not pitfalls and things that can go wrong.

My experiences in the church, my relationships with other pastors, my little bit of time teaching at the college level, give me a perspective that I think is probably more informed than that of many people.

I say these things with a certain fear and trembling, because I know that some people believe that homeschool, or Christian school, is above criticism—and "No *truly* God-fearing, Gospel-believing person could make any other choice than the one that I make." That's not true.

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If you go away from this and say that I am anti-homeschool, you're lying. What I want to get across is that *regardless* of which option you choose for formal education, there are strengths and there are weaknesses, there are things that you can gain with one tool that you cannot gain with another—so you need to make your decision the best you can for every child you have, from the options available to you, semester-by-semester, for "the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

And homeschool parents—we are here to support you and encourage you in *any* way we can. You have our prayers. We will provide supportive children's ministries and a supportive youth group. We will give you our advice. We will give you our resources.

Finally, dear people of Heritage Bible Church: No matter whether you have kids or not, what their age is—I don't care; you might be great-great-grandparents by now; you might have your first little one on the way...*All* the people of Heritage Bible Church, I want to let you know—I need to warn you: Our children are at risk. And so I want to say this: Support and encourage each other (1 Thess. 5:11). Set the example for your children to be *joyfully* involved with the *entire* Body of Christ—*not only* with those who do everything the way you do.

Now, in this era, if you are giving pastoral advice in our theological circles, the *best* thing you can do is: quote Tim Challies. Some of you don't know who Tim is; he is a pastor in the People's Republic of Canada, doing a very good job. He has dealt with these things. He is younger than me, but he is pretty smart for a guy younger than me. I want to close with words from him, because I could not say this any better.

He says: "So here is my exhortation for those in either camp: *We must not let education divide the church!* For the sake of church unity, *be careful!* The church does not need to be *fractured* between the homeschoolers and the public-schoolers! Satan is *no doubt* doing *all he can* to set one Christian against another, and to make disputable matters into *so much more*. Homeschoolers need to love and support those who choose to send their children to public schools. When difficult times arise, they must not use these times as an opportunity to say, 'I told you so!' Rather, they can use these difficult times to pray for their friends, to comfort them, challenge them, support them, and to bear with them. The *same* is true of those who send their children to *public* schools: *They* must support their *homeschooling* brothers and sisters, bearing with them and supporting them, understanding that these people are following *their* conscience. In either case, parents must teach their children to love and embrace children who are educated differently, lest we see *children* divided from one another on that basis! The church is big enough for both those who homeschool and those who do not. We absolutely *cannot* afford to make this an issue of division. There are bigger battles to fight; and to fight them successfully, we must *stand together!* A little understanding, a little respect, will go a long way to fostering the unity that is so important to the church. So think through the issues, choose carefully, and prepare to love those who choose differently."

You can't say it any better than that! So why did I take 45 minutes to lead up to that? There is *one* position on educational alternatives that we *will not support* and *will not tolerate*; that is the position that says: "There is only one position; it's the one I chose."

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"We are *members* of one another" (Eph. 4:25); we *belong* together! (Ps. 16:3; 119:63)
We need *every one of us* in this battle! (cf. Eph. 4:16)

Let's pray:

Father, thank You for granting us the privilege to be influencing the generation and generations that come behind us. I want to pray right now for all of the parents in our midst: Give them wisdom and grace and joy along the way. Help them to do the hard work of the diligence and the commitment and the discipline it takes to be the kind of people who it is very clear have Jesus Christ at the center of their lives. Help us learn from one another. Help us "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" as we support each other in family life and in the battles for truth in the world around us. And Father, for those who look at decisions that they have made and things that they have done, and say, "Oh, I wish I had known this before!"—Father, I know that Your grace is sufficient for every situation. I also know that the very best day to begin to do the right and best thing is today. So, make that the plan for every family represented here, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.