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Book Review of Ronald B. Hoch and David P. Smith's *Old School, New Clothes: The Cultural Blindness of Christian Education*

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OLD SCHOOL, NEW CLOTHES: THE CULTURAL BLINDNESS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

By Ronald B. Hoch and David P. Smith.

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Newberg, Oregon, USA.*

***Old School, New Clothes: The Cultural Blindness of Christian Education.* by Ronald B. Hoch and David P. Smith Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011, 165 pages, ISBN: 978-1-61097-161-4**

In *Old School, New Clothes*, Hoch and Smith accuse Christian schools of being blind to the forces and forms of modernity, in fact not only blind, but founded on the very same principles as public schools. This cultural blindness extends to the institutions that train Christian school teachers, to administrators, teachers and parents. Hoch and Smith want to explore the roots of this widespread cultural blindness and its effects, and they want to point to ways forward.

They offer the caveats that they do not imply that Christian schools are not run by well-meaning people of faith, and they do not mean that all Christian schools are getting it wrong. But, on their account, most are.

Hoch and Smith offer a number of useful insights for those involved in Christian schools. For example, with reference to the popular phrase, *faith-learning integration*, they note that God's purposes are to 'reintegrate[e] us' (p. 70) into a coherent creation that worked correctly at the time of creation. So there is a sense that integration is not

so much our project as God's. They also note that not every Christian or Christian schooler will do everything in the same way (pp. 72, 94, 141), a welcome word when so many Christian schools seem to get their vision and mission from an organizational head office and when a whole culture seems to be obsessed with standardized assessment. They criticize the constant search for whatever is new in education and they raise needed red flags about the uncritical acceptance by some Christian educators of behaviourism.

However, these welcome contributions to the discussion of Christian education are possibly overshadowed by a number of flaws, the cumulative effect of which may be fatal. First, the book gets off to a rather uninviting start; rather than beginning with the schools at which their target audience presumably work, they give the first two chapters to intellectual history, specifically by showing how the faith-learning integration and worldview discussions are both wrongheaded because of their foundations. They trace the mess that western philosophy has got itself into, relying frequently on a rather intimidating footnote apparatus replete with what feel like intramural references to Kuyper, Warfield, Kant, Schleiermacher and the like. I did not even find such footnotes interesting when I studied theology in seminary, and most Christian educators will not want to till this same

ground again (especially in a chapter 1 of a book about Christian schools), even if they grant that one of the books' authors did his dissertation on Warfield and a bit of dog-wagging could be expected. In fact, at points, the intellectual history and its heavy reliance on Warfield and J. Gresham Machen read like an illustration of the very human rationalism that characterized the modern project, not like a Spirit-led adventure in understanding faith in education at all.

Many readers will find the exclusive language for people a barrier. Even a chapter title survived what should have been the cut, yielding 'Man and the integrated universe' (chapter 3). In one paragraph alone (p. 36), Hoch and Smith manage to use the word 'man' six times, supplementing that achievement with three masculine pronouns. Granted, they were repeating and describing bits of the Genesis creation narratives. But the absence of a woman in the first parts of that narrative does not excuse their exclusivity in a book published in 2011, especially one that would point us all toward a better conception of Christian education. One possibility is that our authors are unaware of the importance of inclusive language at this time, an irony in a book about cultural blindness. Another is that they have chosen deliberately to write in a way that omits reference to the majority of people involved in K12 education. Careful reading perhaps shows that Hoch—the author who is a Christian school teacher—uses inclusive language in the portions of the book he drafted and Smith does not, a difference that renders it more noticeable where it is absent. One hopes that in a revised version of the book, they will both use language that invites more readers into conversation with them.

A revealing anecdote explains the chapter title 'The Teacher is the Class' (ch. 5, repeated on p. 114). Smith recounts how when students tease

him that he might be late for class, he points out, 'I can't be [late], I *am* the class' [italics his]. I want to grant Smith that the teacher takes on immense responsibility; in fact Paul himself warned Timothy about this matter. But to my nose, Smith's implying that he knows and his students don't know smells of the same modernist epistemology *Old School, New Clothes* criticizes others of in its early chapters. A thoroughly Christian understanding of education might make space for the idea that God reveals truth through students as well as through teachers.

Standing out from my growing list of concerns with Hoch and Smith's book was an anecdote which I believe Hoch viewed as a simple illustration of the experience of getting lost. To illustrate that rather straightforward idea (that begins ch6), he tells of getting lost in North Philadelphia. He does not use the word 'race' in this story but clearly he was lost in what he considered a bad neighbourhood, and his story unavoidably smells of racial tension and fear. Having been raised in a working-class neighbourhood myself, I wonder if a book that speaks of the blindness of Christian education might be more persuasive if the authors demonstrated more awareness of their own deep motivations. Surely hiking, finding a registration desk at a conference or finding one's spouse in a mall could have furnished a low-temperature illustration of being lost.

At one point, Hoch and Smith note that they have seen 'good, bad and outright ugly teaching and writing in Christian education' (p. 81) and they add that they do not mean to 'give needless offense' by saying so. I don't mean to give needless offence either, but I cannot see how or where this volume will contribute to the discussion of Christian schools. I draw this conclusion without satisfaction because Hoch

and Smith include some worthwhile material that readers may not get to if they find themselves repelled in the early going. For example, their final chapters on Sabbath, work (including the purposes of schools) and the role of the family in education contain some good ideas. The second of these chapters especially contains some welcome thinking related to student-teacher ratios (they want lower), to physical plant and classroom layouts (they want more interaction between teachers and students), to schedules (they want more free time). Unfortunately, by this point in the book they have painted their critique with such a wide

brush—perhaps a roller—that such details disappear under the weight of criticism, of dense theological footnotes and of quotations from long-dead theologians Machen and Warfield. I fear that many of their readers will disappear under the same weight.

Some might find summarizing B.B. Warfield's theology and its context daunting. And some might find offering constructive critique of Christian schools moderately challenging. To accomplish both between the covers of one book, while connecting the contents, turns out in this case to be impossible.
