

TODAY'S STUDENTS:

Redeeming EARTH Day



BY GEOFFREY STABLER

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of visiting my daughter's first-grade class. On this particular day, they were not in their regular classroom. Instead, they were in the "Wonder Room," a classroom dedicated to all things amazing in the natural world, and they were looking at crickets. Mr. Wiechmann, the elementary science resource teacher and legendary proprietor of wonder, had the mood set just right. In the background, sounds from the forest were playing, and the unmistakable chirping of crickets filled the room. After a few brief instructions, he divided the children into groups.

I followed my daughter's group to a table with small clear plastic cubes on top. In each cube was a live cricket. The challenge at this station was to measure the length of the cricket. My daughter and her friend leaned in close and the chatter began: "Look, there's its ear on its leg! Eeww! Why did God put it there? Look, look! There are the little holes it breathes out of! Why are they on its bottom? Aah! It moved!" They giggled together. "Look how weird its eye looks. I think he's kind of cute! Mr. Wiechmann, how do you know if it's a girl?" As words piled on top of words, it struck me that this is precisely what the Lord intended. For those girls, time stood still, and they were locked in amazement by a cricket that they were sure God had designed.

It was a great moment, but as is the case with most great moments, it didn't last very long. The boys at the end of the table were laughing with the kind of laughter that the teacher in me immediately recognized. It's the kind that follows the words, "Hey, watch this." No sooner had those words escaped a small boy's mouth, than he proceeded to violently shake one of the cubes. After he stopped, the cricket inside kind of twitched, and the boys, laughing, shouted, "Do it again! Do it again!"

I wish I could say that I brilliantly transformed this act of cruelty into a wonderful teaching moment that those boys would never forget, but at the time all I could muster was a stern, "Boys, don't do that." It seems that something more was needed. As Christian educators, how can we do better? How can we lead our students to joyfully embrace God's design for stewardship of the natural world?

We must first acknowledge God's purposes in creation. The Lord creates out of the overflow of love and delight from within the Godhead. The Lord "saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31, ESV). Against this backdrop, the Lord placed Adam in a garden, intending that he, too, would look at creation and be driven toward worship. We see hints of this in the Lord's

provision for Adam. “And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is *pleasant to the sight* and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). Notice that Adam was to look joyfully at the trees before he was to eat the fruit, and in so doing participate in the worship of the Godhead.

Mr. Wiechmann has a Wonder Room, a place where students can look. This strikes me as the Lord’s intended entryway into biblical stewardship. When my daughter and her friend “saw” a cricket, the door was opened for them to do what they were created to do, worship. As Christian educators we must place students in environments where they can marvel at Creation and worship. This probably means getting out of the classroom a bit more often.

It also has implications for our budget. We must be careful not to communicate tacitly that utility is what really matters and aesthetics are simply a luxurious afterthought. Beautiful spaces ought to be central to our curricula. The Lord placed Adam in a garden, not on a farm. The trees were more than food dispensers. They were beautiful!

Once we understand this emphasis on worship, we are positioned to understand the Lord’s commissioning of Adam to work and keep the garden (Genesis 2:15). Adam, being made in God’s image, was to extend God’s work of creation. Just as the Lord had created beautiful things to reflect His wisdom and grandeur, Adam was to shape his environment in a way that would reflect the wisdom and grandeur of his Creator. Adam was to worship both by looking and by working. This seems to me a major point of departure from many forms of environmentalism. Adam was not to leave the natural world untouched as if he were an intruder. Instead, he was to “work” it, to extend what the Lord had done, to create structures and systems; however, he was also to “keep” the garden. The Hebrew word here is *shamar*, and it implies preservation. Adam’s working was not to be independent from the Lord; rather it was at once to extend and *preserve* the purposes of the Lord.

Another important step, then, in teaching our students to be good stewards of Creation is providing

opportunities for meaningful work. At our school some students elect to participate in the *RISE* (Research, Innovation, STEM learning, and Entrepreneurship) Institute led by director Jennifer Canady. Her goal is to afford students the opportunity to engage in meaningful, real-world research. She understands that it takes the whole body of Christ to shape the natural world, so she recruits students who are interested in many fields: science, engineering, inventing, and entrepreneurship.

She then connects these students with professionals in each field. This unique approach has led to some extraordinary looking and working. Whether it’s tracking the transmission of Lyme’s disease or attempting to eradicate invasive air potato plants by using beetles, her students are working as teams to shape the world.

Now granted, not every teacher is as well connected and funded as Mrs. Canady, but we can all learn from her vision. We must think of ways to engage our students with

meaningful, collaborative work, and we must extend our understanding of stewardship to include not only the study of the environment but also economics, politics, and other systems that are inextricably linked with the natural world.

But what of our boys tormenting a cricket? As Christian educators we must teach the gospel. The gospel confronts the attitude that says, “This is mine. I can do with it what I want!” It transforms rebels from users into worshippers. The greatest need of our students is not a deeper appreciation for the natural world; it is gospel transformation. They need the power of the gospel to transform their looking and working, so that they will see how all beautiful things point to the Beautiful One and so they will have the humility to accomplish meaningful, collaborative work that extends the purposes of the Creator in creation.

How can we lead our students to joyfully embrace God’s design for stewardship of the natural world?

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