PRAISE FOR

*The Erosion of Education in America*

“A helpful read in our day of cultural and educational war, *The Erosion of Education in America* provides insights into how education and schooling both reflect and produce culture and engage in individual and community development. This study addresses the shared but descending degrees of responsibility for educating children in our culture, with the primary and key role being that of parents, supported by the church, and protected by the state. The author illustrates historically how these roles began to shift in perceived importance in America and have now reversed themselves in today’s mainstream culture, with the state assuming primary responsibility for education. The dangers and harmful results from this reversal is multiplied when considering the simultaneous shift of educational foundation from a Protestant, Christian, God-honoring one to a secular, agnostic, man-focused approach. Education is powerful and at the center of the battle for the minds and hearts of our children. U.S. history demonstrates this truth. Reading this will strengthen your understanding of why and how.”

—Dr. Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“Dr. Stull has given us a call to action. This book is a must read for every Christian parent and leader in the Church. The Church must strive by the grace of God to recover what has eroded in American education. Our children are too precious to be educated by those who do not share our biblical worldview. I highly recommend this book.”

—Dr. Sidney Dyer, Professor of Greek and New Testament, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
“The Erosion of Education in America provides a compelling case for the wisdom of 19th century Christian pastors and theologians Bushnell, Hodge, and Dabney in the arena of education. While most educational thought today fails to grasp wisdom from past eras, Dr. Stull appropriates the counsel of these men for our future. Each of these godly men agreed: parental nurture in the Christian faith is essential for raising well-educated, Christian children. As a Christian minister for over 25 years, an educator, and a parent of three faithful and wonderful grown-children, this seems obvious, but unfortunately many Christian parents still have not gained this insight and drift in a sea of experimentation. A faithful, loving home that names Christ as Lord is an indispensable bulwark against the storms of life that come in God’s loving, but sometimes “frowning” providences over the challenging times of maturation. This book will serve, like a compass, in the midst of such storms.”

—Rev. Gregg Strawbridge, Ph.D.
Author of Classical and Christian Education: Recapturing the Educational Approach of the Past

“Dr. Stull’s book is an argument for the importance of traditional education formulated from a Christian perspective. He carefully takes the reader through the phases of education in the history of American culture to show that the role of parents and the teaching of virtue have been lost sight of in the contemporary world. Education begins and is maintained at home. Formal education, properly understood, is an extension of the habits, character, and values fostered by parents. Most, if not all, of this traditional approach to education has been replaced by an uncritical commitment to a relativism of values. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Dr. Stull’s standpoint, it deserves attention and consideration.”

—Thora Ilin Bayer, Professor of Philosophy and RosaMary Foundation Professor of Liberal Arts, Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans, author of Moral Philosophy and Moral Education
“Dr. Stull’s book, *The Erosion of Education in America*, is a useful resource for all who are laboring for a reform in education and particularly those engaged in Christian education. Dr. Stull allows Dabney, Hodge, and Bushnell to speak for themselves. They offer diverse insights, but two very important principles emerge: the primary role of the family in the education of its children and the absolute necessity for the Christian faith to serve as the foundation of education. This book should stimulate intelligent discussion with respect to directions Christians need to take in education.”

—Dr. Joseph A. Pipa Jr., Ph.D.
President, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“‘Pastor, how should I educate my children?’ is a frequently asked question of pastors and Christian educators. In Clark Stull’s *The Erosion of Education in America* the author provides a thoughtful summary of historical perspectives and contemporary issues which will prove extremely helpful in responding to this question. Despite the fact that families and educational systems are engulfed in cultural currents that run counter to biblical training, Stull’s emphasis—God’s Word and our American heritage—provides hope for our society, one that some refer to as ‘pre-Christian.’ Echoing the wisdom found in Deuteronomy 6, the Gospels, and Pauline writings, Stull presents a resounding refrain throughout the book—the eternal significance of parents’ leadership and participation in their children’s education.”

—Kenneth S. Coley, Director of Ed.D. Studies, Professor of Christian Education, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Dr. Clark Stull offers a thoughtful analysis of the role of parents, faith, and institutions in education by looking at the ideas of three very different educational leaders. Whether you agree with Bushnell, Dabney, or Hodges, this book will challenge you to think seriously about the meaning of a Christian education.”

—Leigh Bortins
Founder, Classical Conversations, Inc.
THE EROSION OF EDUCATION IN AMERICA
For Beth and our four daughters: Devon, Carrie, Alisha, and Jessica—all of whom have given me such joy and a fruitful focus for the time and talents granted to me in this world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Preface

When the subject of education surfaces in today’s conversation, few people speak in glowing terms. Most are aware of the United States’ mediocre standing in math and science compared to other developed nations. Every year we hear of an outbreak of school violence somewhere in the nation. Studies reveal that many students are passed through the system without mastering basic skills or developing the ones to make them attractive to employers. School districts encounter decreasing funds as the American economy crawls along. The cost of attending, maintaining, and the values within our educational institutions leave many searching for alternatives. Home schooling, online education, and lawsuits against schools are on the rise. Then there are the cheating scandals over test scores.

Perhaps even more distressing, there are those who use our educational institutions to promote a world view so subjective that it is acceptable to speak of gender identity being disconnected from one’s physiology given at birth. Colleagues in secular education inform me of children being taught that they can choose whether they wish to be male or female. The question of identity is
one of the fundamental issues in life. When has any generation, in any civilization, thought of telling God that He made a mistake by determining our sex within our mother’s womb? Where is American education heading? Not in a godly direction, yet there was a time in American history when educating children for God was central.

Education in America is eroding. Its value is decreasing. Many reasons exist, but there are two fundamental ones—one within education itself and another outside its control. Too often reformers focus solely upon what schools themselves can do to improve without discerning the cultural and societal shifts that have an impact on the institutions of learning. For more than 30 years I have taught a multitude of students at different stages of development and across several disciplines. Generalizations always coexist with exceptions to the rule, but, by and large, I have observed that students who come from families consisting of both parents living together in a stable relationship outperform the students who do not have such a home in which to live. How often we overlook the importance of a stable and loving environment. After all, can’t anybody make it in America regardless of his or her foundation? The truth is some do, yet many don’t. Even more to the point, when was the last time you heard modern media and educators talk about the connections between character and destiny or between morality and genuine prosperity? No, the focus is usually on some methodology, which once implemented will make the problems disappear! In recent years the push to implement technology has overshadowed deeper root problems
which are more of a spiritual nature. Technology is a wonderful tool, but a tool cannot overcome more systemic and basic deficiencies.

How parents contribute to the education of their children, other than financially, is a neglected topic. As educators, we cannot control what goes on inside a home, but this is where a child’s foundation is set and where patterns of thought and behavior emerge before formal schooling comes alongside. The parental dimension receives much treatment in this book. Education is declining in part because the American family is declining, as is the institution of marriage in this country. In the 21st century, state populations vote on the definition of marriage. A few decades ago, that would have been thought ludicrous.

What transpires in education reflects the attitudes and thinking current within society. The forces and ideas outside school buildings are brought to bear upon the enterprise inside. We will examine the cultural shifts in philosophy with respect to the agent in education, what the curriculum or content should be, whether the church and state have legitimate roles, and if so, what the boundaries should be. To gain historical perspective, we will examine the golden age in American education, a time when there was an educational revival in this country. We will see the foundation upon which American education was built, and the subtle and gradual eroding of that foundation. We will see that there was a substantial period in American education when concerns we face today, such as school violence, moral relativism, and a denial of the coherence of truth did not exist.
Do schools influence, even produce, American culture, or do schools reflect or mirror American culture? The answer is both! So, we must not only examine how the culture affects education but also how education is affecting our culture. Thus, we shall also look at what goes on inside our educational system. This is what the evening news typically reports. Currently, our higher educational institutions are graduating young people with a skill set that often matches poorly with the needs in the job market. Moreover, these graduates face a mountain of debt to repay due to student loans. Today, one enters the college scene with no debt and promises of a bright future. Four years later, our “educated” youth finish thousands of dollars in debt and find it difficult to get hired. What kind of investment is that? How ironic that a so-called bright future presented to us upon high school graduation can turn into a situation of bondage where the borrower has become a slave to the lender four or more years later. So, ahead we shall examine such items as what to teach and what not to teach, and the distinction between what passes for education today and what is a true education.
CHAPTER ONE

Foundational Issues

“Do you ask, then, what will educate your son?
Your example will educate him; your conversation;
The business he sees you transact; the likings and
Dislikings you express—these will educate him—
The society you live in will educate him.”

The words above were printed on the front cover of the 1831 edition of *The Mother’s Book* published in Boston. They reflect the interest in education that had become a prominent issue in the middle decades of the 19th century, along the eastern seaboard of the United States. The training of the country’s youth was taking a more institutional and broader approach than it had earlier in North American culture. Indeed, one of the features that marked the single-term presidency of Martin van Buren, 1837–1841, was the growth of public school education. While the American public school system was just beginning to develop at this time, as an alternative to the small, local, and tutorial type arrangements common during the colonial period, there was still a concern for education within the context of the family and, in particular, an interest in how parents would execute their calling.
Was there any point, for example, in pursuing the nurture of the soul before children were old enough to articulate an interest in God, a spiritual awakening, or a conversion experience?

In the mid-19th century, several issues related to education emerged. How, for example, were children viewed? Where they considered good or evil or a mixture? How should they be trained, and what should be they be taught within the home and beyond? Did education rightly belong to the family, to the State, or both? What was the role of the Church in all this? With respect to popular or public education, how should religion be introduced, if at all, into the curriculum? How did the interpretation of the Constitution’s First Amendment affect the role of religion with the public school?\(^1\) Was the first amendment understood as necessitating a separation of Christianity from the public life of the country, or was America viewed as a Christian nation, yet without a State Church? Was it possible to guarantee that religious instruction would not be compromised if sectarian teaching was omitted? Should the devoutly religious send their children to the

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\(^1\) The First Amendment to the Unites States Constitution addresses the issue of the relationship between Church and State. It contains a clause restricting the Congress from establishing religion, and also has a clause protecting the free exercise of religion by the country’s citizens. Throughout American history, the meaning and the interpretations of this amendment have generated much discussion. Even the courts have had some difficulty achieving consistent rulings as they have tried to give expression to these clauses. At first glance one might question the relevance of the first amendment to education, but it has become central because the government has entered the educational business or enterprise, and education, by its very nature, rests upon certain religious foundations and commitments. Perhaps the most significant court decision affecting education and religion occurred in 1947 when the United States Supreme Court, in its interpretation of the First Amendment, affirmed the validity of a wall of separation between church and state. This metaphor itself is not present in the language of the U.S. Constitution.
public schools, or should they form their own parochial educational institutions? Who are the proper agents of education? These were some of the issues with which many wrestled as education came to be understood in the mind of the general culture as less of a familial function and more and more as a civic and political one. Historian Carl Degler of Stanford University has commented that there is a crying need for a broad, interpretive study of the ideas and forces behind the educational revival of the 1830s and 1840s.

While scholars have discussed the relation between education and religion, and have unfolded the reasons for the development of the institutional approach to education in American culture, not enough has been made of the power of parents in the process of nurture. While attention has been given to the shift in the goal of education from training in spiritual life to preparing for citizenship in American society, the parental role in the spiritual formation and shaping of a child’s character and destiny is given short shrift in favor of prizing the benefits of an education in which various departments of knowledge, doctrine, and some sort of skill development are presented.

Neither has there been much discussion as to whether the State ought to be in the educational enterprise. It is simply assumed as a given. Rarely does one hear any discussion of the pros and cons of connecting education and the state. Is it wise for parents to leave the education of their children simply to the State where the philosophies guiding practice may shift according to the spirit of the age?
Furthermore, for those who have children attending college these days, costs continue to rise for an education that is increasingly diminishing in its ability to open doors of employment. Why is it that going to college costs more than ever in terms of the percentage of income needed to pursue it? Some argue that it is because the government guarantees loans to the colleges and universities. Thus, there is no break on the escalating budgets because the schools and their students know they can get the money. Are government subsidies supporting a valuable, true education, or are they extending an eroding and declining one?

In this book, we are going to examine the issues in educating the next generation, and explain why education in America is in decline. We shall affirm that the most important principle of nurture or education is the role and influence of the parent upon the child. The family is a profound vehicle of God’s grace. We shall discuss the relationship between education and religion since the majority of the schools of higher education in the United States were started by Christians of one denomination or another, and a biblical view of life, though it was to wane, characterized the education offered at lower levels. We shall show that the modern diminishment of the Judeo-Christian worldview lies at the root of many of the problems we face in our country’s education today.

Thoughts on the wisdom or folly of a secular education, the place of religion in education, and the nature of the parent-child relationship will also be examined. We shall see how the issue of education took shape with an emphasis on the familial agency in nurture, and then progressed into the larger field of church and
state considerations in education. The 19th century witnessed a shift in the agent of education, moving away from the familial to the civic and political.

Attention will be given to the trends in different geographical regions of the country, each with their own sub-culture. For example, from New England came the perspective of Horace Bushnell who wrote:

“...this is the very idea of Christian education that it begins with nurture or cultivation, and the intention is that the Christian life and spirit of the parents shall flow into the mind of the child, to blend with his incipient and half formed exercises; that they shall thus beget their own good within him, their thoughts, opinions, faith and love, which are to become a little more and yet a little more his own separate exercise.”

From the mid-Atlantic region came input from men like Charles Hodge, the esteemed educator and theologian at Princeton for 50 years, who voiced great concern over the emerging push for a secular approach to education. As he saw it, such a path was destructive for society. The whole concept was in his opinion misguided and a dangerous experiment, peculiar to the 19th century. From the South, educational foundations and practice were addressed by Robert Dabney. The southern theologian

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wrote, “Parents are the real architects of their children’s destiny.” Dabney understood the profundity of the parent-child relationship, and claimed that education was a parental function, not universally the business of the State. His insight that permitting government a large hand in the educational enterprise could undermine true education and eventually lead to the removal of Christian elements was prophetic: “Christians must prepare themselves for the following results: All prayers, catechisms, and Bibles will ultimately be driven out of the schools.” Attention will be given to Dabney’s distinction between true education and what passes for education.

Dabney claimed that “the education of children for God is the most important business done on earth.” Every generation faces this challenge. As doubts continue to arise about the values within, about the cost and effectiveness of today’s various institutional approaches, and about the degree to which Christians should educate at home or at school, and how this ought to be done wisely, these insights remain relevant. In our time, at the beginning of the 21st century in America, most Americans think our culture is in decline, and education needs a reconstruction. A prudent first

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3 Robert Dabney, *Discussions*, edited by C. R. Vaughan (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897). Later edition, vol. 3. (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p. 244. The original date for this statement was April 18, 1876 in a letter written to the Superintendent of State Schools in Virginia, Mr. W. H. Ruffner. While designating parents as the real architects of their children’s destinies, Dabney did allow for exceptions to the rule.

4 Ibid., p. 289.

step would be to erect a proper foundation. Next, let us look at the basic principles as laid in the golden age of education in America.
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