

Flourishing Students, Beautiful Work

 Edvance Annual Gathering 2023



Edvance Annual Gathering Devotions

The following devotions have been written to help you as a staff frame the conference and create meaningful anticipation for our theme and time together. We hope they help you and your staff prepare to engage with our conference theme, “Flourishing Students, Beautiful Work.”



Week 1 – Flourishing Students, Beautiful Work

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 on your own or with your staff:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh¹ and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The Annual Gathering’s key verse is the final verse of the reading above from Ephesians: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”



To be honest, I have a slight fear in naming this as our conference theme. The fear is this: what if we skip the first 9 verses of Ephesians 2 and just jump right to the end? You may be wondering what the danger in that is. Let me illustrate with a story from Donald Miller.

In his book *Searching for God Knows What*, Miller highlights that all human beings tend to root our identity in our own achievements. He uses the analogy that we're all in a metaphorical lifeboat, but there isn't enough food for all of us. How are we going to prove our worth and not get thrown overboard? We've got to earn our place.

I wonder if the apostle Paul felt this way before he had his conversion experience. He was obsessively and violently persecuting Christians for failing to live up to the strict pharisaical moral code: you've got to earn your salvation. And then the scales literally fell from his eyes, and he encountered the risen Lord. I wonder if his own sense of forgiveness was top of mind for him as he wrote this letter to the Ephesians: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved." This gift of grace is the foundation of all flourishing—we can't earn it! It is a gift of God.

Years ago I taught grade 10 English, and I would read with the class the chapter from Miller's book that discusses the Lifeboat Theory. I used it to send a powerful message to my class—no one is going to throw you out of this lifeboat here. You're in. And because you're in, you don't have to try to throw anyone else overboard either. Grace is a gift for all of us.

One year, a student named Thomas made a painting to celebrate this important gospel truth. I kept that painting in my classroom ever since, and now it sits in my office here at Edvance. Here's what Thomas made for us:



I think Thomas' painting is beautiful work. I look at it often because of its importance to me. But, it isn't the painting that gives Thomas any worth. As Thomas reveals, Jesus himself is the lifeboat. There's nothing any of us can do to earn our place in it.



Paul states that we are God’s handiwork. We’re his *poiemia* is the Greek word. He made us as his beautiful work. It’s a gift of grace. But he has also prepared beautiful work for us to do. Let’s pursue beautiful work, knowing that we’re already in. We can’t earn it. No one is throwing you out of the lifeboat.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Where do you see the human tendency—in yourself and in your students—to try to earn self-worth? Why do you think this is such an intrinsic human tendency?
2. What about your work in Christian education makes it good? What are the implications that God has prepared it for us in advance of our doing it?
3. What are specific implications for you as a school to know that “it is by grace we have been saved, not by works, so that no one can boast?”
4. Tell a story of a student who, like Thomas, was both God’s handiwork and accomplished something beautiful.



Week 2—Woman Wisdom and God’s Beautiful Work

Read Proverbs 8:22-31 on your own or with your staff.

- ²² *“The LORD made me as he began his planning,
before his ancient activity commenced.*
- ²³ *From eternity I was appointed,
from the beginning,
from before there was land.*
- ²⁴ *When there were no ocean depths,
I brought them to birth
at a time when there were no springs.*
- ²⁵ *Before the mountains were shaped,
before there were hills,
I was bringing them to birth.*
- ²⁶ *Even though he had not made the earth, nor the fields,
nor the world’s first grains of dust,*
- ²⁷ *when he crafted the heavens,
I was there—
when he marked out a circle on the face of the deep,*
- ²⁸ *when he made the clouds from above,
when the springs of the depths were established,*
- ²⁹ *when he set a boundary for the sea
so the waters would not exceed his limits,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth.*
- ³⁰ *Then I was with him, his master craftsman—
I was his delight daily,
continuously rejoicing in his presence,*
- ³¹ *rejoicing in his inhabitable world
and taking delight in mankind.”*

I graduated from Hamilton District Christian High School as a student back in 1991. As was the case for every accredited Ontario high school at that time, HDCH divided courses into “advanced” and “general” streams, terms that have now been identified as derogatory. In an attempt to solve that issue and make high school courses more directed, we now have the “university” or “college,” courses in high school. Clearly this is better, but it still creates narrow categories about the purpose and direction of learning in our high school courses.

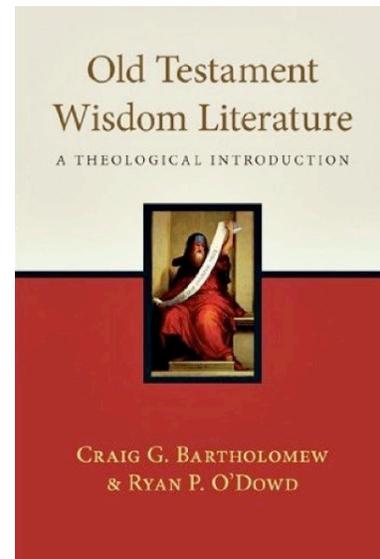
I lament that our high schools have a past that divided “head knowledge” from “working with our hands,” and Biblical wisdom literature seems to reinforce this idea.



In *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, Craig Bartholomew and Ryan O’Dowd offer powerful insight into the way this loving creator weaves wisdom into the very design of the universe. Wisdom is not a Platonic ideal in abstract, she is a deep *craftsmanship* woven into God’s design for all things. How do we know the wisdom of God? We access it by looking specifically at what he has *made*. In their study of Proverbs 8, they state:

“God has built, or etched, an order into the world, and wisdom, personified as a woman, is the key to discerning it. Wisdom thus offers us the key to interpreting our world: its beginnings, its purpose, its shape and its direction. She can guide us in walking wisely in this life because she knows the places that God carved out for us. Notice, too, her response to all that she sees:

‘When I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day, Rejoicing always in his presence.’” (Proverbs 8:30) (p. 89)



Proverbs reveals to us that the voice of wisdom calls out from creation itself, full of joy and intimacy with her creator. She rejoices in the beauty bestowed on her by her maker. Beautiful work reveals a close intimate relationship between the maker and work.

We are part of that voice of wisdom. God has made us, and we delight in singing our praise back to our maker as well. And we do so with such diverse voices and diverse gifts! We want all students, with all kinds of different vocational futures, to celebrate in their learning how God has made them unique. Last week we read from Ephesians that we are God’s *poiemia*—his beautiful handiwork. And looking at our diverse students helps us to realize the extent of God’s creativity. God’s wisdom is evident in the beauty of what he has created. No matter what future our students choose, such as entering the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program in a skilled trade, or going on to post-secondary education, we want them to experience that joyful intimacy with the God who made them, saves them, and prepares good work for them to do.

We examine and study all of life, looking for wisdom “as the key to interpreting our world.” But we also want to delight in the beautiful array of God’s children who attend our schools. May we support our students, in all of their diverse gifts, to discover and then act out of the wisdom that God has embedded in each of them.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What does it mean to say that God’s craftsmanship of the earth is “wisdom”?
2. What other Biblical passages highlight and delight in creation and God’s creative acts?
3. What Biblical passages celebrate humanity as co-creators with God in his unfolding Kingdom?
4. How do we as a school intentionally celebrate and support diverse student gifts?



Week 3—Work, Play, Love ... and Learn

Written by Darryl DeBoer and Matthew Beimers and reprinted with permission from
Comment Magazine

The full article can be found from *Comment Magazine* here: comment.org/work-play-love-and-learn/

Read Genesis 11: 1-9 and Revelation 21: 1-5 on your own or with your staff.

Genesis 11

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

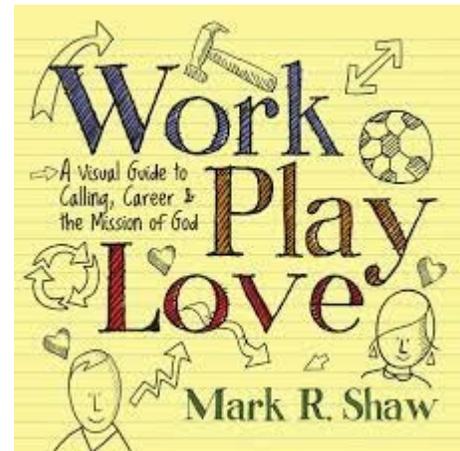
Revelation 21

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”



In *Work, Play, Love: A Visual Guide to Calling, Career & the Mission of God*, Mark Shaw attests to the importance of finding delight and joy in vocation. Shaw's book reminds the reader that finding joy in one's work allows a person to experience the *baraka* of God. *Baraka*, from the Hebrew word *berakah*, originally referred to "blessing," yet Shaw uses the Swahili spelling—*baraka*—and defines the word as "all things made new." A life void of delight or joy makes it impossible to partner with God in this *baraka*. Consequently, Shaw suggests that our work is no longer *baraka* but Babel—"anti-work," as he puts it. Babel takes root when people believe that "God is the problem and humanity is the solution" and the work of people is to fix the mess that God has created. Babel turns humanity into an idol by centering vocation on self-reliance and self-glory. In this context, Shaw's book has some serious implications for education; for it is in schooling that students will form the habits that lead to either *baraka*, co-creating with God to make all things new, or babel, living only for the self. So his invitation to work, play, and love is an occasion to rethink how we *learn*.



It is not the mission statement, but the practices of a school that will determine the formation of a *baraka* or a Babel-oriented citizen. In *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf describe work as "rearranging the raw material of God's creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish." Schools should become the training ground for students who will desire this type of meaningful work beyond their school years.

One mandate of Christian education is to form peculiar kingdom builders who understand that their calling is to participate in creating cities of delight. It is foolish to hope that our students, upon graduation, will suddenly transform from Babel mentality students, who conjugate verbs and perform long division simply to attain well-paying jobs, into kingdom-building *baraka* citizens. Christian schools *must* consider Shaw's essential question: "What is the best way for us to do life and work and play?"

Shaw points to the call of wisdom in Proverbs 8 to delight in *whomever* we are working with, *wherever* we are working, and in *whatever* we are doing. Shaw's reference to this "triple delight" is integral because God is at work everywhere and forever. This delight is only possible when students understand how their learning can be real work that meets a real need, intended for a real audience beyond the classroom teacher. This *real* work described by Shaw is essential because "the only kind of work we can do is to join a God who is already working, getting things started, doing the heavy lifting." When students understand they are co-creators, students have opportunity to understand that *all* work has the potential to restore. At a kindergarten level, students discuss how creating beautiful things can be a gift to others. This can lead to art works being created in their class and given as a gift to their friends at the seniors' home in the community. Secondary students who study why so many people in the world go without clean water might design projects that address this deep need.



This type of learning allows students to understand that schoolwork is real work that has real meaning in the community. Christian education falls short when schoolwork is simply about preparing students for the “real world,” as if the learning that takes place now is for a world that does not exist. Yes, schools must train students with one eye on the future, but they must also be diligent in helping students understand what it means to be a faithful disciple of Christ right now, no matter their age. Often the message students receive is that their work does not matter and can have little-to-no impact on the community in which they live. This view of education and schoolwork not only dishonors students and teachers, it dishonors the very God who calls these students to be active participants in His world.

Real work involves the formation and practicing of habits that point to and participate in the Kingdom. Students become justice seekers because Christian schools give them opportunity to practice and form habits of justice seeking. Students become beauty creators who delight in making beautiful things for the glory of God. Furthermore, Christian schools need to recognize that this message of serving others and the Kingdom is countercultural to the message that these students are receiving beyond the walls of the school; only through practice are these desires to engage God’s world in the servant way of Christ formed. It is through these opportunities for practice that Christian schools become relevant to the communities they serve and students themselves become village builders.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What details strike you in the comparison of Babel from Gen. 11 to the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21?
2. In what ways do schools sometimes default into encouraging Babel vs Baraka?
3. Where do you see evidence in your own school for Shaw’s vision and balance of work, play, and love?
4. Where do you see evidence of your students doing work that is “real” in the way Darryl and Matthew outline it above?