

**Piper, John. *Foundations for Lifelong Learning: Education in Serious Joy*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. 163pp. + 3pp. (front matter) + 7pp. (back matter).**

Conservative Christianity has long navigated tensions regarding the importance of education for individuals, society, and the church. On one hand, where the gospel has flourished, education has followed. Throughout most of its history, the church has established and advanced Christ-centered educational institutions. On the other hand, the church has seen formal education as a barrier to faith and spiritual fervency—appropriately so when formal education prizes intellectualism over faith. *Foundations for Lifelong Learning* does not overtly address these tensions; however, John Piper makes a persuasive case for Christ-centered formal education and lifelong learning.

Piper's thesis is consistent with his other theological writings. We glorify Christ best by enjoying or treasuring him above all. Believers, therefore, should understand education as "the process of growing in our ability to join God in this ultimate purpose to glorify Jesus Christ" (2). Piper asserts "that the great purpose of lifelong learning—education in serious joy—is to magnify Christ by enjoying him above all things and in all things, with the kind of overflowing, Christlike joy, that is willing to suffer as it expands to include others in it" (6).

Piper introduces several foundational principles in the introductory chapter. First, lifelong learning finds its end in serious joy. This phrase appears to be more than another expression of Piper's "Christian hedonism" ("God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."). Piper emphasizes a willingness to suffer in order to bring others along in this great purpose. Thus, he speaks not simply of joy but of serious joy. In this sense, Piper's exposition of serious joy might find wider acceptance than has his Christian hedonism.

A second foundational principle developed in the introductory chapter is that God reveals truth through both his Word and his world. Therefore, both merit study. Piper unequivocally affirms that Scripture and general revelation are not on the same authoritative plane. The Bible is primary and irreplaceable. The Bible is the authority without which we would grope in spiritual darkness. "But the decisive, saving power and authority of God's word," writes Piper, "does not cancel out God's world. The Bible gives the decisive meaning of all things. But the Bible itself sends us over and over again into the world for learning" (10). Piper's brief but compelling demonstration of how the Bible both "commands and assumes that we will know the world, and not just the word" is one of the book's strongest features (11). Christian educators who rightly emphasize biblical authority at times too quickly dismiss what Scripture assumes, illustrates, and even commands about understanding God's material world.

Building on the introduction, the book unfolds six habits of heart and mind for learning that best accomplish the aim to treasure Christ above all else. Piper does not correlate the habits—*observation, understanding, evaluation, feeling, application, and expression*—with success in particular professions or vocational service as is the bent of much education today, secular or Christian. In other words, he does not describe how these habits of learning help one become an eloquent preacher, inspirational teacher, innovative engineer, or a skilled surgeon. But he concludes that the result of practicing these habits "is a kind of maturity that makes a person more fruitful in whatever vocation God assigns" (161). Piper's

conclusion is difficult to refute. More importantly, his conclusion is refreshing in a culture that increasingly views education or learning as mere skill development and measures its value in transactional rather than transformational terms.

Piper's development of each habit in successive chapters is both theological and practical. Scripture abounds in each chapter. Most chapters end with enumerated lists for application. The chapter on *observation* is among the best in the book as Piper explains how our natural senses can serve spiritual purposes. "The created world is not incidental to God's self-revealing purposes, as if once we see him, we can dispense with the material world" (25).<sup>1</sup> In his chapter on *understanding*, Piper rejects the notion that logic is both cold and incompatible with God's purposes. Jesus not only used logic but also expected his hearers to follow his logic. The chapter on *evaluation* systematically establishes the necessity of correct judgments, arguing that observation and understanding are not ends in themselves. Regenerated image-bearers can learn to make correct judgments because God himself is the final, objective standard for all evaluation.

*Feeling*, as a foundational habit for learning, emphasizes that learning in God's design is more than cognitive and even moral; it is affective as well. Piper argues that an individual is not fully educated until rightly ordered affections accompany true thoughts and moral decisions. The final habits—*application* and *expression*—convey that education is incomplete unless lived out in both deed and word. Again, Piper develops the habit of expression in both theological and practical ways. Those who are truly educated in serious joy live fruitful lives through stewarding well the gift of language. In other words, they speak, and they write. Ironically, it is unusual to find such a strong claim about communication in Christian writings about education.

Throughout the book, the reader will encounter both thoughtfully provocative statements and paradoxes. For example, Piper equates natural abilities and spiritual gifts when discussing God-given aptitudes. "God ordinarily gives us natural abilities because he intends to use them. 'Spiritual gifts' are often natural abilities that have been sanctified and empowered by the Holy Spirit" (133–34). When advocating for creative expression in communication, Piper addresses the paradox of eloquence in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. He contends that Paul directed his criticism at an eloquence "aimed at self-exultation." The whole of Scripture does not condemn eloquence but in fact supports it, for "the Bible is replete with a kind of eloquence that creatively uses language for greater impact" (155).

If there is a substantive limitation to *Foundations for Lifelong Learning*, it is in the scope of its development and application. A companion volume would do well to apply these habits of heart and mind more fully to other disciplines such as the arts and humanities as well as social and natural sciences. Furthermore, Piper does not address implications for curricular and pedagogical choices. How the principles in this book apply more precisely to education is worth developing. Piper's concluding sentences hint at the breadth of what he has written and the absence of precision that Christian educators might seek in a book on this topic. "These are the habits of life, not just the habits of education. These are the foundations of living, not just the foundations of learning" (163). Again,

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Wilson, *The God of All Things: Rediscovering the Sacred in an Everyday World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

one is hard-pressed to disagree with Piper's claim even if there lingers a desire for a more precise treatment of education and learning.

In the end, Piper has developed a theology of learning that is biblical, and that is not a simple task.<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 2 describes the believer's responsibility to seek wisdom diligently and God's promise to give wisdom in such a way that one becomes wise, which is more than merely recognizing or understanding wisdom. Piper's foundational habits for learning outline a clear path toward this end.

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<sup>2</sup> See D. A. Carson, "A Biblical Theology of Education," *Themelios* 46, no. 2 (August 2021), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/a-biblical-theology-of-education/>.