

VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by John Heikoop

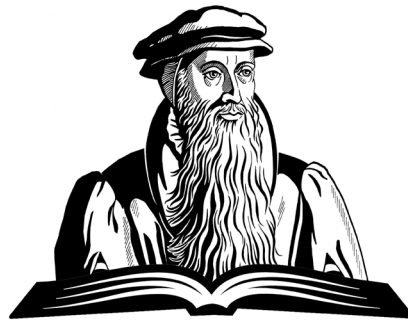
FOUNDATIONS

of

CHRISTIAN
EDUCATION

Lecture #4

The Curriculum



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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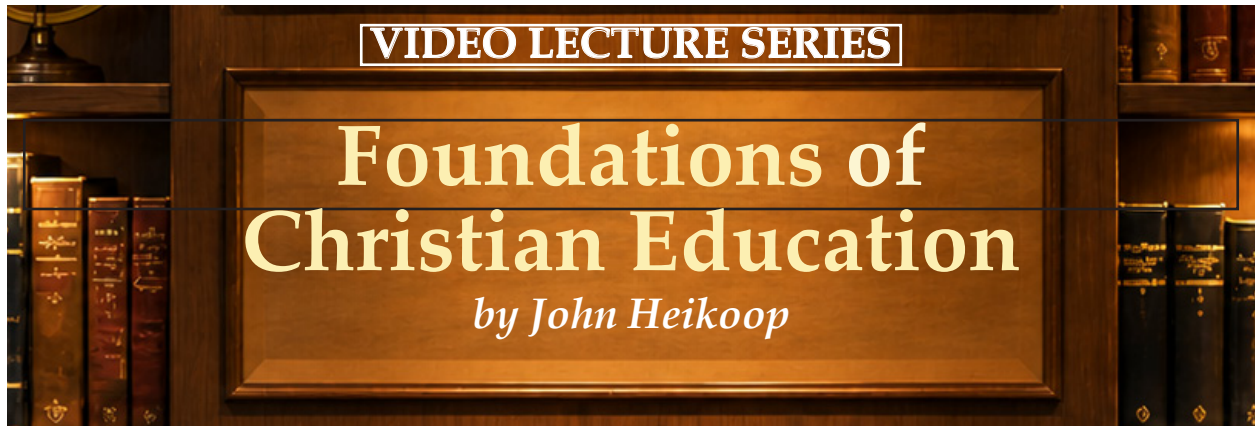
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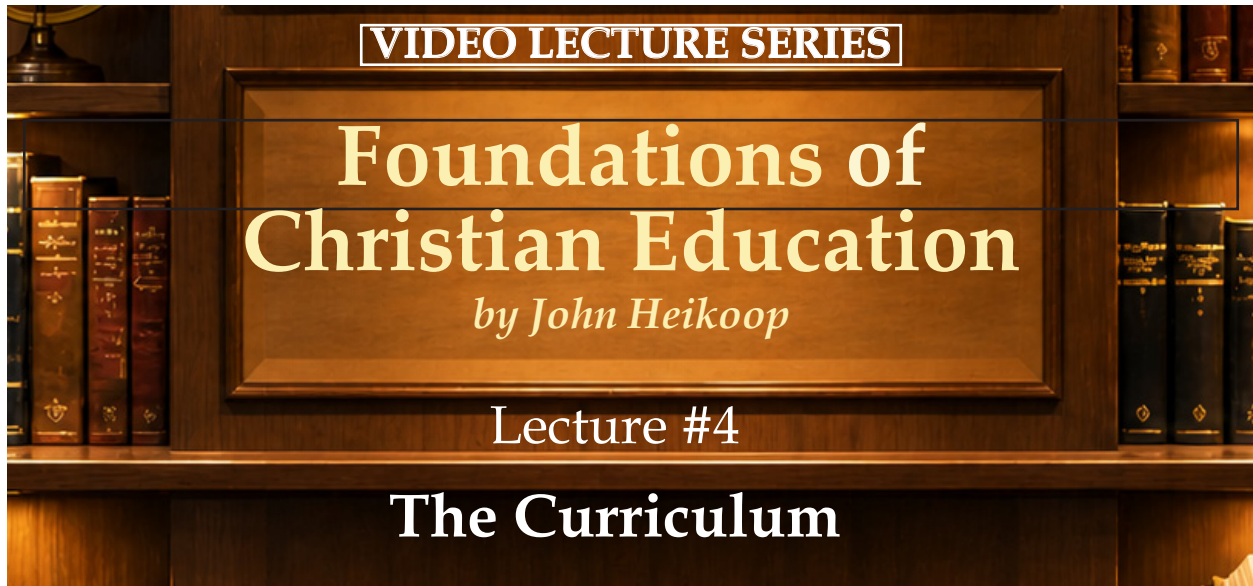
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Mr. John Heikoop has retired from his 32 years in Christian education, 16 years as a teacher, 16 years as Principal at the Rehoboth Christian School, in Norwich, Ontario, Canada.

He and his wife, JoAnne, have eight children and a growing number of grandchildren.



1. Introduction to Foundations of Christian Education
2. The Child
3. The Home
4. The Curriculum
5. The Teacher
6. Christian Education in Its Various Forms



Dear friends, welcome back to *The Foundations of Christian Education* series, presented by the John Knox Institute of Higher Education. In our first three lessons, we have laid the foundational groundwork, asking why we educate, and by whose authority, considering who the child is that we are educating, and what they truly need, and examining the Christian home, the primary institution in which education begins and must always be anchored.

In this lesson we turn to the curriculum itself, asking what we are actually teaching, and how we decide what to teach, and what we hope to see in the young people who have received a Christian education. These are not merely practical questions, they are profoundly theological ones. A curriculum is not just a list of subjects. It's a declaration of what we believe about the child, about knowledge, about truth, and about the purpose of human life. Every curriculum teaches a worldview, whether we have thought about that or not. The question before us is whether the worldview taught in our schools is faithful to the Word of God.

Three questions will guide us. *What does the Bible say about the purpose of education?* and, *What should a Christian school graduate look like?* and, *how do we build a curriculum that supports that graduate?*

1. What Does the Bible Say About the Purpose of Education?

We begin where we must always begin, with the Word of God. In Lesson One, we established that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That truth must govern everything we say about curriculum. But we must be precise. Education, rightly understood, is not salvation. The Protestant and Reformed teaching of Scripture remind us that good works are always dependent upon God's regenerating and saving grace. As the Heidelberg Catechism¹ teaches, true good works are those performed from faith, according to the Word of God, and to the glory of God.

The curriculum, therefore, must never lower God's standard on account of man's fallen nature. We must not confuse what *is* with what *ought to be*. While we cannot keep God's law perfectly, we are called to strive to be conformed to it in all things, continually seeking grace from God to

¹ *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1663) is a Reformed catechism taking the form of a series of questions and answers for use in teaching Reformed Christian doctrine. It is one of the Three Forms of Unity, reflecting the doctrinal concerns of continental Calvinism.

do so. This very tension is intentional. It is meant to drive us and our children out to Christ, the only Savior, who saves his people from their sins. A Christian school without Christ does not produce humble servants, but proud Pharisees. What our children need is exactly what Nicodemus needed—the regenerating work of the Spirit.

Knowledge and skill can be used to honour God, or they can be used sinfully. A person is responsible both for diligently developing the talents that God has given and for how those talents are used. Above all, we need sanctified knowledge — the Holy Spirit’s saving application worked in our hearts. May our prayers, as an arrow going upward, never fall short of the mark. An education that produces brilliant graduates who do not know the fear of God has failed at its most fundamental task, whatever else has been achieved.

The goals of Reformed Christian education flow from this. We educate to promote God’s glory in every aspect of life. We educate to teach the truth of God’s Word and his works. We seek the integration of truth and learning, viewing every subject as an opportunity to see more of God and his creation, and to nurture the whole child spiritually, mentally, and physically for service of God, and to the community that he places us in.

The wise man of Proverbs captures the spirit of a Christian curriculum. In [Proverbs 4, verse 7](#), we read, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.” Wisdom is the principal thing—not information, not credentials, not competitive advantage. Wisdom—the God-given ability to see all of life through the lens of his truth and to live accordingly—that is what a Christian school curriculum is designed to produce.

At the center of that curriculum stands an open Bible, and the Apostle Paul tells us, in [2 Timothy 3, verses 16 and 17](#), “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” Thoroughly furnished unto all good works—the goal of Christian education is not passive knowledge but active, fruitful service to God, to the church, to the families, and to the community.

2. What Should a Christian School Graduate Look Like?

With that biblical foundation in place, let us ask more specifically: what should a Christian school graduate look like? What are the qualities, the knowledge, and the character we are hoping to see formed in a young person whose Christian education has been blessed?

In our opening lesson, we introduced the three dimensions of Christian education: *the Heart*, *the Mind*, and *Life*. These dimensions are not merely a convenient framework. They reflect the biblical understanding of the whole person, and they shape everything that we do in the curriculum.

The Heart dimension, the spiritual and religious dimension, aims to form students in the knowledge, reverence, and practice of the Christian faith, teaching them biblical truth and pressing upon them the need for personal conversion and faith in Jesus Christ. Our desire is that students would seek to learn wisdom, and that wisdom would ultimately be found in Christ. This dimension includes growing in the knowledge of the Triune God as Creator, Sustainer, and Governor of all things; learning to receive the Bible as God’s holy, infallible Word, and the only rule for faith and life; becoming acquainted with the great acts of God in redemptive history and with the doctrines of the Old and New Testaments; and being introduced to the history and theological heritage of the Christian church within which they have been placed.

Just as importantly, *the Heart dimension* seeks to cultivate reverence—listening attentively to God’s Word, engaging thoughtfully in prayer and song, and developing a conscience shaped by

the principles and virtues of Scripture, so that students learn to seek the Lord's will in every aspect and area of life. *The Curriculum* is a God-appointed means, but the sovereign work of the Spirit cannot be manufactured.

The Mind dimension develops the God-given talents of literacy, and the abilities necessary for effective communication, careful thinking, and lifelong learning. Here, the Reformed tradition matters. The fall in paradise has corrupted our human reasoning. And we strive to use the gifts received in God's common grace with humility, and knowing that without renewal of the mind by the Holy Spirit, true Christian wisdom cannot ultimately be practiced.

The Life dimension cultivates the Christian virtues of humility, diligence, respect, honesty, compassion, and stewardship, nurturing young people who are caring members of families, churches, and communities, whose conduct is upright. Man was placed in creation with the command to dress and to keep the garden, to labor faithfully in whatever calling God has appointed. That calling to faithful stewardship is at the heart of what *the Life dimension* aims to develop.

These three dimensions provide the structure from which specific graduate expectations can be drawn. And it is those graduate expectations that drive *The Curriculum*.

Let me ask you something for a moment. Think of a child you know, perhaps in your school, your church, or even in your own home, a child in Kindergarten or Grade One. Imagine that child twelve years from now, standing at the threshold of adult life. What do you hope for that young person?—not what marks have they achieved, or what career they chose. What do you hope they are, in their heart, in their mind, and in their life, when they walk out of the door of your school for the last time? When we ask that question honestly, the answer shapes everything—the subjects we teach, the books we choose, and the values we model, the way we handle failure and success. The graduate expectations are simply that question, answered carefully and prayerfully, and written down.

So let me describe what we are hoping for. A young person formed by a genuine Christian education is, first of all, a discerning follower of Christian doctrine and life, one who believes the Bible, God's Word, to be holy and the infallible Word; who fully embraces the Reformed Confessions grounded in God's Word; who understands that we are conceived and born in sin and are in need of regeneration; and who recognizes that God's Word and commandments are the only guideline for judgment and for life. And without this, all the rest is only human accomplishment.

From that heart, shaped by the Word and the Spirit, flows a mind equipped for the world. This young person communicates clearly, honestly, and with care for others. They think reflectively and critically, evaluating ideas through a biblical lens, solving problems creatively, and making decisions with discernment—not, "what do I want," but, "what wilt thou have me to do?" They are self-motivated and lifelong in learning, taking initiative, developing God-given talents, managing time and resources faithfully, always with the aim of honouring the Lord.

And from that mind flows a life of service. This young person is to be a collaborative contributor, finding meaning in the work done honestly and well, and exercising leadership, humility, bringing their skills to their God-appointed vocation. They are caring members of their family and community, compassionate, respectful, committed to the biblical design for marriage and family, and active in their family's worship, and in their worship in the church. They are responsible citizens, honouring their God-given authorities, acting with integrity, accepting responsibility for their actions, seeking and granting forgiveness, promoting the sanctity of life, and stewarding God's creation faithfully.

This is the young person that we're educating towards, in heart, mind, and life, formed together into one integrated, God-fearing, and Christ-centered life. These expectations are not the final

word for every school in every context. Every community will shape them according to its own confessional identity and cultural setting. They are offered as a framework, a starting point for those who want to have a Christian aim and goal for their curriculum, and to think biblically and carefully about what they are working towards.

3. How Do We Build a Curriculum that Supports the Graduate?

Knowing what we are aiming for is the essential first step. But how do we get there? How does a Christian school community move from graduate expectations to the actual K to 12 curriculum? This curriculum will shape their students year by year. So before moving to that concrete example, we will note a biblical principle that quietly governs all faithful Christian instruction, especially in sensitive areas of life and conduct. In Romans 16, verse 19, Paul writes to the Roman church, “I would have you wise concerning that which is good, and simple concerning evil.” That single sentence captures a profoundly important educational wisdom. Christian education does not seek to make children experts in sin, nor does it shelter them through ignorance. Rather, it aims to point them deeply and confidently in what is good, true, and pleasing to God, while guarding them from an unnecessary familiarity with evil that can dull conscience and awaken sinful curiosity.

This principle has direct implications for curriculum development. Faithful instruction must be intentional, measured, and age-appropriate, providing clear moral direction without exposing students to burdens they are not yet ready to carry—not only *what* we teach, but *when* and *how deeply* we teach it. This restraint is not rooted in fear or embarrassment, but in obedience to God’s wisdom regarding the formation of moral conscience. While this biblical principle is especially evident in matters of life and human development, it belongs to the teaching of every subject and every age.

Let me share what we did in our own school—not as the only way, and not as the prescribed model for others to follow, but as a living example of how principled curriculum development actually works in practice. The challenge we faced was in the area of life and human development, covering family roles, relationships, and the boundaries that God requires. The world around our students was providing a powerful curriculum of its own in these matters, through media, peers, and a culture that has severed sexuality from the creation order and from the covenant of marriage. Without intentional, principled, age-appropriate instruction from a biblical worldview, our students would form their understanding from sources that did not share our convictions. We began, not with a list of topics, but with a question—What does God’s Word say about this area of life, and what do we want our graduates to know, to value, and to practice when they leave our school?

We started with the graduate expectations. We worked backward from the finish line. From those expectations, we developed a scope and sequence, which is a map of the principles which would be introduced at different age levels, from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Two convictions guided us throughout, that without instruction, students will learn these things from the world around them in a negative way, but that overburdening students with knowledge they are not yet ready to carry is equally counterproductive. Age-appropriate instruction, building year by year, is the key.

We scripted each lesson carefully, so that each teacher would teach the same content with the same level of modesty and care. We built in parent communication at every stage. When a lesson was taught at school, a note went home summarizing what had been covered, offering discussion questions, and providing additional resources, so that parents could continue the conversation at home according to their own values. The development took three years before a draft was shared

with the staff, and it continues to develop today. Faithful curriculum is never finished. It grows with the community, responds to new challenges, and is constantly tested against the Word that it's designed to serve.

The biblical worldview that shaped that curriculum—created in God's image, fallen, in need of redemption, and called to faithful stewardship—is not unique to one subject area. It is the same worldview that must shape every area of the school's program. A Christian curriculum is not a regular curriculum with Bible added. It's a curriculum in which the biblical worldview permeates every subject. The school curriculum, in all its subjects and courses, must draw its basis and its theme from the Word of God.

In Theology—the study of God's Word—the student grows in appreciation for God's gift of Scripture and the gospel of salvation in Christ alone. In the Language Arts, in History, Geography, and the Arts, they encounter God's gift of language, community, culture, and creative expression. In Mathematics and in Natural Sciences, they learn to appreciate the order and glory of God's creation, and the mandate to investigate and use it for the good of others and the glory of God. In the Applied Arts, Technology, and Physical Education, they develop an appreciation for God's gifts of work, craft, health, and the body that he has given them to steward.

My dear friends, in this lesson, we have considered the biblical purpose of Christian education in the three dimensions of heart, mind, and life; the graduates that we are hoping to form; and how a community moves from expectations to curriculum; and what it means for every subject to be taught through the lens of a biblical worldview.

This is demanding work. It requires theological clarity, educational wisdom, community patience, and above all, dependence on God. No curriculum, however carefully built, can produce a regenerate heart—this is the sovereign gift of God alone. But a faithful curriculum, built on his Word and directed toward his glory, can be a means of grace in the hands of the Spirit, preparing the soil, sowing the seed, and shaping the conscience of the next generation. And when the Lord has been pleased to work in this one and that one of our children in their early years, to strengthen the faith of those who have received it, what greater encouragement could a teacher or a parent ask for?

This is precisely the ground on which the Canons of Dordt encourages us in our labors. Hear the final words of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Article 17: “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is his work advanced; to whom alone all the glory both of means, and of their saving fruit and efficacy is forever due. Amen.”

To whom alone all the glory both of means, and of their saving fruit and efficacy is forever due—that is the teacher's charter and the parent's consolation. We are not responsible for the fruit. We are responsible for the means. We take up our duty faithfully, and we leave the outcomes with the merciful God who governs all things by his wise and sovereign providence.

We close with Paul's charge to the church at Philippi, words that belong equally to the teacher at the chalkboard and the parent at the dinner table: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things”—Philippians 4, verse 8.

May the Lord give wisdom to all who build curriculum, teach lessons, and form the minds and hearts of the next generation. And may the fruit of this work be a generation that loves his Word, fears his name, and serves his kingdom faithfully, regardless of the calling he has appointed for

them.

In our next lesson we will turn to *The Teacher*—the calling, the character, and the daily work of those to whom the education of our children is entrusted. Thank you, once again.