

Dedicatory Letter

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Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

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INTRODUCTION

Composed in the wake of the Thirty Years' War, which scattered the Bohemian Brethren and cost Comenius his wife, children, and library, this open letter prefaces his *Great Didactic*, the founding document of modern pedagogy. The argument here is theological before it is educational: humanity, expelled from Eden, must be cultivated back into a garden fit for God, and the work of teaching is the work of restoration. Comenius addresses magistrates, pastors, and parents alike because he holds them jointly responsible for what the human race is becoming. Read it as a lament that gathers itself, mid-sentence, into a summons.

To all superiors of human society, to the rulers of states, the pastors of Churches, the parents and guardians of children, grace and peace from God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Ghost.

God, having created man out of dust, placed him in a Paradise of desire, which he had planted in the East, not only that man might tend it and care for it, but also that he might be a garden of delight for his God.

For as Paradise was the pleasantest part of the world, so also was man the most perfect of things created. In Paradise each tree was delightful to look at, and more pleasant to enjoy than those which grew throughout the earth. In man, the whole material of the world, all the forms and the varieties of forms were, as it were, brought together into one in order to display the whole skill and wisdom of God. Paradise contained the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; man had the intellect to distinguish, and the will to choose between the good and the bad. In Paradise was the tree of life. In man was the tree of Immortality itself; that is to say, the wisdom of God, which had planted its eternal roots in man.

And so each man is, in truth, a Garden of Delights for his God, as long as he remains in the spot where he has been placed. The Church too, which is a collection of men devoted to God, is often in Holy Writ likened to a Paradise, to a garden, to a vineyard of God. But alas for our misfortune! We have at the same time lost the Paradise of bodily delight in which we were, and that of spiritual delight, which we were ourselves. We have been cast out into the deserts of the earth, and have ourselves become wild and horrible wildernesses. We were ungrateful for the gifts, both of the body and of the soul, with

which God had so richly provided Paradise; with right therefore have we been deprived of them and been dowered with calamity.

But glory, praise, honour, and blessing for everlasting to our merciful God who abandoned us for a while but did not thrust us from Him for ever. ... The garden of the Church, the delight of God's heart, blooms anew.

But does this new plantation of God succeed entirely according to His wishes? Do all the shoots grow successfully? Do all the newly-planted trees bring forth spikenard, crocus, cinnamon, myrrh, spices, and costly fruits? Do we hear the voice of God calling to His Church: *I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?* (Jeremiah ii. 21). Here we have the complaint of God that even this new plantation of Paradise is deteriorating. . . .

He who knows not that he is ill cannot heal himself; he who feels not his pain utters no sigh; he who sees not his danger does not start back, even though he be on the brink of an abyss; and so it is not to be wondered at that he who perceives not the wave of disorder which is sweeping over the human race and over the Church, does not lament the fact. But he who sees himself and others covered with countless wounds; he who remarks that the wounds and boils, both his own and other men's, fester ever more and more; and who knows that he, with others, stands in the midst of gulfs and precipices and wanders among snares, in which he sees one man after another being caught, it is hard for him not to be terrified, not to marvel, not to perish with grief.

For what part of us or of our concerns is in good condition? None. Everything lies overturned or in shreds. With most men such a dulness of wit is predominant, instead of the understanding through which we ought to be equal to the angels, that they know no more about those things which are worthy of our attention than do the beasts. Instead of the circumspection with which those who are destined for eternity ought to prepare themselves for it, there reigns such forgetfulness, not only of eternity but also of mortality, that most men give themselves up to what is earthly and transient, yea, even to the death that stands before them. Instead of the godly wisdom through which it has been given to us to know, to honour, and to enjoy the One who is the height of all goodness, there has arisen a horrible shrinking from that God in whom we live, move, and have our being, and a foolish conjuration of His holy name. Instead of mutual love and purity, reign hatred, enmity, war, and murder. Instead of justice, we find unfairness, roguery, oppression, theft, and rapine; instead of purity, uncleanness and audacity of thought, word, and deed; instead of simplicity and truth, lying, deception, and knavery; instead of modesty, pride and haughtiness between man and man.

But in spite of all this, there remains for us a twofold comfort. First, that God keeps the eternal Paradise in readiness for His chosen ones, and that there we shall find a perfection, more complete and more durable than that first one which we lost. Into this Paradise went Christ (Luke xxiii. 43), thither was Paul caught up (2 Corinthians xii. 4), and John saw its splendour with his own eyes (Rev. i. 12; xxi. 10).

Another consolation consists in this, that here below also God continually renews the Paradise of the Church, and turns its deserts into a garden of delights. We have on several occasions seen with what grandeur this has already taken place: after the Fall, after the Flood, after the entrance of the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, under David and Solomon, after the return from Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, after Christ's ascension into heaven and the preaching of the Gospel to all nations, under Constantine, and elsewhere. Perchance even now, after such a bloody war and after such devastation, the Father of mercy looks upon us graciously: how thankfully should we approach Him, and ourselves take care of our own interests, working by those ways and means which the most wise God, the Ordainer of all things, will show us.

The most useful thing that the Holy Scriptures teach us in this connection is this, that there is no more certain way under the sun for the raising of sunken humanity than the proper education of the young. Indeed Solomon, after he had gone through the whole labyrinth of human error and had mournfully recognised that perverseness could not be cured nor imperfections enumerated, turned at length to the young and adjured them to remember their Creator in the days of their youth, to fear Him, and to keep His commandments, for that this was the whole duty of man (Eccles. xii. 13). And in another place, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs xxii. 6). David also says, "Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Psalm xxxiv. 11). The heavenly David himself, the true Solomon, the eternal Son of God who came down from heaven to turn us from sin, leads us on to the same path when He says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark x. 14), and said to us besides, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew xviii. 3). What advice is this! Hear, all of you, and weigh carefully what the Lord and Master declares; how He announces that the little ones only are fit for the kingdom of God, that they are heirs of the kingdom and that only those who become as little children are to be admitted to share this inheritance. O dear children, may you rightly appreciate this goodly privilege! Just consider, we elders, who consider that we alone are men, but that you are apes, that we alone are wise, and that you lack sense, that we are eloquent, but you speechless "we, I say, are sent to learn our lessons from you! You are set over us as masters, you are to be our models and examples.

If any one should wish to deliberate why God prizes children so highly, he will find no weightier reason than this, that children are simpler and more susceptible to the remedy which the mercy of God grants to the lamentable condition of men. For this reason it is that Christ commands us elders to become as little children, that is, to throw off the evil that we have gained from a bad education and from the evil examples of the world, and to return to our former condition of simplicity, gentleness, modesty, purity, and obedience. But, because nothing is harder than to lay aside our habits, it comes to pass that there is no more difficult task than for a badly-trained man to return to his former state. The tree remains as it grows, high or low, with straight or with crooked branches, and when it is full grown cannot be altered. The felloe, the piece of wood which has been bent to the shape of the wheel and has become hard in this position, breaks rather than be straightened, as experience teaches us. God also says the same of men who are accustomed to evil dealing: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard

his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evilâ€•(Jeremiah xiii. 23). From this it necessarily follows that, if the corruption of the human race is to be remedied, this must be done by means of the careful education of the young.

But in order to educate the young carefully it is necessary to take timely precautions that their characters be guarded from the corruptions of the world, that the seed of honour sown in them be brought to a happy growth by pure and continuous teaching and examples, and, lastly, that their minds be given over to the true knowledge of God, of man, and of nature, that they may grow accustomed to see in this light the light of God, and to love and to honour the Father of Light above all things.

If this take place, the truth of the Psalmist's words will be evident, â€œOut of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avengerâ€•(Psalm viii. 3).

For this reason has God given the little ones angels as guardians (Matthew xviii. 10), has placed their parents over them to take care of them, and bidden them to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians vi. 4); and thus He solemnly bids all others, under penalty of eternal damnation, not to lead the young into sin through a bad example (Matthew xviii. 6, 7).

But how are we to carry this out when corruption is spreading so rapidly? In the time of the Patriarchs, since these holy men dwelt in seclusion from the world, and, in their own families, were not only fathers but priests, masters, and teachers as well, this was not such a difficult matter. For, after they had removed their children from intercourse with wicked men and had enlightened them by good and virtuous example, they brought them up by gentle admonition, encouragement, and, where necessary, by correction. God Himself is witness that Abraham did so, when He says: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment" (Genesis xviii. 19). But now we dwell close together, the good and the bad are mingled, and the bad are many more than the good. The example of these men makes so powerful an impression on the young that the precepts for the practice of virtue, which we administer as an antidote against evil, have either no result at all or one that is inappreciable. But what must be the result if even these precepts are seldom delivered? There are few parents who are in the position to teach their children anything good, either because they have themselves never learned anything of the kind, or because their heads are full of other things; and thus education is neglected.

There are also few teachers who can bring good principles home to the young, and when one arises he is snatched up by some man in high position that he may busy himself with his children; the people get little advantage from him. Thus it comes to pass that the rest of the children grow up without the education that they need, like a forest which no one plants, waters, cuts, or keeps in order. Hence it is that we find unruly manners and customs in the world, in towns and in market-places, in houses and in men, for these both in body and soul are full of confusion. If Diogenes, Socrates, Seneca, or Solomon were to come to life again this day and visit us, they would find the world in the same state as formerly. Were God to address us from heaven He could only say as He said before: "They are all gone astray, they are altogether become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Psalm xiv. 3). If, therefore, any man exist who can devise some plan, or who with tears, sighs, and entreaties can obtain from heaven a method by which some improvement may be made in the youth who are growing up, let him not hold his tongue, but rather let him advise, think, and speak. "Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way," says God (Deuteronomy xxvii. 18). And cursed, therefore, is he who can free the blind from their error and does not do so. "Woe unto him who shall offend one of these little ones," says Christ (Matthew xviii. 6, 7). Woe also unto him who can prevent injury and does not. God wills not that the ass or the ox that strays through field and forest and sinks under its burden be deserted, but that it receive help, even if the helper do not know to whom it belongs, or if he know that it is his enemy's (Deuteronomy xxii. 1). Can it then please Him that we pass by without thought, and stretch out no helping hand, when we see the errors, not of beasts, but of intelligent beings, not of one or two, but of the whole world? Let this be far from us!

Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully, and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood (Jeremiah xlviii. 10). And yet we hope to remain guiltless while we thoughtlessly suffer the terrible Babylon of error that is ours! Up, let him seize his sword who is girt with one, or who knows where one lies buried in its sheath! Let him demand the destruction of Babylon, that he be blessed by the Lord!

And so fulfil this command of the Lord with eagerness, ye rulers, ye servants of the Most High, and with the sword of righteousness banish the disorder with which the world is filled.

Busy yourselves, ye governors, ye faithful servants of Jesus Christ, and utterly destroy evil with the sword that is entrusted to you, with the two-edged sword of speech! Ye have seen that early youth is the best time to attack the evils of the human race; that the tree which is to thrive for ages is best planted when quite young; that Sion is most easily raised on the site of Babylon when the living building-stones of God, the young, are early broken, shaped, and fitted for the heavenly building. If we wish to have well-ordered and prosperous Churches, states, and households, thus and in no other way can we reach our goal.

But how to take this in hand and to carry it out with the desired result, this I will place before your eyes, I whose spirit the Lord has called to the work. See, hear, and mark its nature carefully, you to whom the Lord has given eyes to see, ears to hear, and minds to judge.

If a light, unseen before, be revealed to any, let him give God the glory and not grudge the illumination to the rising generation. But if he perceive any defect, even the smallest, in this light, let him complete and perfect it, or, that it may be perfected, let him recall the saying, many eyes are better than one.

Thus we shall mutually help one another to carry out the work of God with unanimity; thus we shall escape the curse which threatens those who neglect the Lord's work; thus we shall consult the welfare of the world's most precious possession, the young, as much as is possible; thus we shall shine with the brightness granted to those that turn others to righteousness (Daniel xii. 3).

May God have mercy on us, that we see the light. Amen.

Editor's note: Following Lindner, Keatinge has slightly curtailed this Dedicatory Letter in his translation.

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

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