

**Submission
No 170**

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

Organisation: The Rock International Church

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To: Legislative Council, General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2.

Submission regarding Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011

By: The Rock International Church, North Ryde

Authorised by Senior Pastor Richard Tng.

Date: 18th February 2012

Summary:

We respond in the affirmative to the Inquiry Terms of Reference part (b) “whether the

Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed”. The Ethics Course taught in NSW schools is fundamentally flawed in its philosophical foundations, its instruction and its level of complexity. Children are not taught morality, they are not taught ethical reasoning and their conscience is not trained. The Ethics Course is not a valid alternative to Scripture class, which establishes a metaphysical belief system for the psychological and emotional wellbeing of students, which establishes an ethical code of the highest standard, which trains and shapes the conscience of children and which teaches children compassion, leading to real behavioural change. The Ethics Course, despite being constructed by leading academics and the St James Ethics Centre, has been a total waste of NSW Department of Education funds. Therefore, the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.

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Submission:

We represent The Rock International Church, North Ryde, an Australian Assemblies of God church established in 2007 (<http://therockintl.org/>). Our focus as a church is loving Jesus Christ passionately. We achieve this through small group culture in the provision of pastoral care; a family-based church concept in the provision of community care; Christian Education programs in the focus of good biblical and moral values; and through our mission network in the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ both nationally and globally. In our local Ryde community we ran public events for the last two years, namely *Christmas in the Park*, which was inaugurated by the Hon Victor Dominello MP (Member of Ryde) and *Madfest*, a youth-orientated community outreach event. More recently, we are running English and practical workshops for new migrants to NSW.

As a church, we are very concerned about the Ethics Course being taught in NSW schools. We submit that the Ethics Course established in 2010 should be cancelled and the legalisation permitting the teaching of a "secular alternative" to Special Religious Education (SRE, "Scripture") in NSW schools should be repealed.

Our reasons are as follows:

1. The Ethics Course uses modern philosophical thinking to give children a blurred and superficial understanding of morality, whereas Scripture class exercises and shapes the children's conscience.

1.1 In the NSW Ethics Course Trail Final Report ("the Report", [K10]), the Ethics Course is stated to be based on the "notion that morality is grounded in suffering and wellbeing and understanding that humans (and to varying extents other sentient beings) share common capacities for such" (p8). References are given from the last decade to confirm this. This is extremely dangerous as young children are being taught to think with their feelings. They are taught not just to understand the feelings of others, but to share in these feelings, and to rationalise behaviours from these feelings. Empathy and 'sharing feelings' is subjective, yet rational philosophical thinking is objective - there is an extremely sophisticated distinction here that cannot be taught to young minds. In the end they get a blurred understanding of feelings

and rationality. Ultimately, they are taught in the Ethics Course to think with their feelings and their conscience is not even mentioned, let alone trained.

1.2 Children do not learn in the course that their feelings can change rapidly, can be manipulated, can be deceptive (eg. "if it feels good then it is good"), can be immature, and often too powerful for their rational mind. These subtleties cannot be taught to young minds but are only learned through life experience and the development of EQ.

1.3 Children do not learn in the course that their feelings are subjective and fundamentally only based on their own perspective. Children do not learn in the course that how they perceive another human to feel is not necessarily accurate to be able to make a good judgement. Let us consider one of the questions posed in the course to year 6 students: "Is child labour right or wrong?" Firstly, children who have the luxury of living in a country like Australia with social welfare and free public education could not possibly have, even remotely, the perspective of a slum kid. Any response can therefore only be insincere and shallow, despite the discussion. Secondly, children are given an oversimplified and biased version of the issues. Are they taught that these children labourers would simply not eat if they did not work because their family is too poor to feed them? If so, why is there a discussion about it? To discuss the pros of cons of having enough food to eat would be offensive to a slum kid. The real question is a much broader and deeper question of social justice, global economics and poverty which is too complex to discuss faithfully at the primary school level, let alone give the children some useful outcomes and actions to take home. The whole discussion therefore is a straw man, and is oversimplified to the point of being inhumane.

1.4 The human conscience is not at all mentioned in the course. Moral education should begin with the conscience, and it can only be trained by hearing stories of others' right and wrong behaviour. Tried and tested moral stores of the highest ethical standard are found in Scripture, taught by the greatest ethics teacher of all time, Jesus Christ. He fought for gender equality, the rights of both employers and employees, broke down walls of discrimination and social injustice, pioneered rehabilitation, saw mankind as he is, both the good and the bad. Jesus was the first

moral teacher to say "Do unto others as you would have them do to you", which is the most profound and deep truth that undergirds society and community. Mark 12:14 summarises Jesus' ethic: "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." Why not hear from the man who has shaped the world and Australian culture more than anyone else?

1.5 Consider the simple command "Honour your father and mother, than your days may be long in the land the Lord gives you" (Exodus 20:12). A child can write it down and memorise it and understand it. It will shape the conscience and affect relationships within the family unit. It does not have to be discussed and relativised in an age where the value of family is already under threat from poor role models found in society and the media where parents are often dishonoured, e.g. The Simpsons.

2. The empathy taught in the Ethics Course is morally useless in comparison with the compassion taught in Scripture.

2.1 Consider Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan (included in Appendix A). The Samaritan spared nothing in terms of his own resources to tend to the injured man, and even when he had to go his own way, he made provision for the patient to be cared for. Reverend Tom Jewett makes this helpful contrast between compassion and empathy: "If you can imagine the Good Samaritan coming along and seeing the man who had been robbed, laying down beside him, and saying "When you groan, I will groan with you, when you hurt, I will hurt with you", this is empathy. It does nothing for the injured man. It is compassion which gets things done, nothing less than the love of Jesus." [J04]. Understanding and sharing the feelings of another, or empathy, motivates talk but never action.

In the parable, the Samaritan was "moved with compassion" when he saw the injured man. "There is a clear distinction between the meaning of the words 'compassion' and 'empathy'; they are not synonyms or interchangeable in meaning. 'Compassion' in the Greek New Testament has the meaning of 'Loving from one's bowels (the seat of one's spirit)." [J04]. The Samaritan loved the injured man from his 'guts', not from his mind or feelings, and so he was able to forget the ethnic enmity between his people and the Jews, and love him with action.

2.2 Moral philosophy based on empathy will always fail whenever the situation comes down to "my feelings" vs. "your feelings". Without the voice of the conscience, human nature will always put one's own feelings ahead of another's. One of Jesus' points in the parable of the Good Samaritan as demonstrated in the inaction of the priest and Levite is that a purely rational and emotional understanding of moral responsibility will always amount to nothing whenever real personal cost is required.

2.3 Reading, imagining and reflecting on a parable such as this one will produce the same physical changes in the brain as would actually occur if the reader lived out the behaviour in the parable [D06]. It is therefore far more beneficial neurologically to learn morality by studying parables, than attempting to construct a moral framework from philosophy, which would be as weak as the empathy that underlies it.

3. The Ethics Course is not educational, fails to teach children moral philosophy and children are taught the personal beliefs of the volunteer who has had limited training and is not accountable to any local organisation or authority. The subject matter has been rejected by school principals and 1 in 3 students who took the course.

3.1 The primary purpose of the Ethics Course was to teach children how to justify an ethical position by reasoning, i.e. teaching them moral philosophy. The Report on the 2010 trial showed that the Course had a negligible effect on student's ethical reasoning ability (p. 73, 74 "the Report"). Out of the 281 primary students tested, only 7% had learnt to include an "ethical" reason in their response as a result of the course (increased from 13% to 20% of the students)! All other performance criteria failed to show a quantifiable improvement. Only students who were able to write a response were tested so there is no evidence whatsoever that K-2 students had any benefit from the course. This clearly showed that at the end of each ethics class, the children did not understand how a particular opinion was formulated. Their skills in ethical reasoning were not developed, demonstrating that the course was completely ineffective in what it was intended to do educationally ("It is disappointing to find little apparent change in the ethical reasoning items across the two time intervals" - Report p16).

3.2 The classes in the 2010 trial were out of control and always finished late. Quoting the Report, "In the lessons observed, there was insufficient time to allow students to struggle through the formulations of the principles that were guiding their reasoning; rather the volunteer had little choice but 'to put words in their mouths' (p12). It is ironic, that while the course is claimed to promote discussion, the true substance of the course and its deepest principles is ultimately the opinion of the volunteer. The Ethics Course teaches children whatever the volunteer instructor happens to believe. These volunteers only attended a single training course on how to teach the Ethics Course, *but have not and are not accountable to any local organisation or authority*. The Ethics Course puts children under the supervision of someone who is untrained, and unaccountable to anyone. Who knows what their beliefs are? Who knows what they are teaching our children? Contrast this with the Scripture class. Scripture is legally defined as 'education in the beliefs and practices of an approved religious persuasion by authorised representatives of that persuasion'. It is taught by approved volunteers from local community churches in every NSW public school. The teachers are well trained in the material, faithful and approved members of their local community church, to whom they are accountable on a regular basis, and are by the highest standards 'authorised representatives of an approved religious persuasion' with a deep knowledge of its beliefs and practices. Scripture classes run on time and use material that has been well developed and covers established beliefs.

3.3 The full curriculum for either the 2011 or the 2012 Ethics Course has never been made public to either the Minister to Education, elected members of parliament or the general public. The Education Minister was forced to intervene at the last minute and removed controversial course content on terrorist hijackings and designer babies from the Year 5-6 classes in the 2010 trial [A10]. It does not make educational sense that children are presented with complex controversial issues when they are at such early stage of learning. Education on controversial issues is already part of the curriculum in subjects such as 'Behind the News'. This material is well-planned, vetted and designed for discussion and analysis by students.

3.4 The classes in the 2010 trial were rejected by 1 in 3 non-SRE students [A10].

A number of school principals involved in the trial were concerned that the classes contained no 'right or wrong' answers. The lessons plans had one or, occasionally, two points. While this prompted much discussion, the discussion was aimless, and principals noted there was no development of a 'moral compass' (the Report, p12).

3.5 Contrast the Ethics Course with parables from Scripture, where there is clear right and wrong, the material is easily accessible (originally spoken to simple farmers 2000 years ago), the underlying moral argument is clear, and it is relevant to everyday life. There is also a spiritual dimension that is vital to a young child, who is seeking meaning in life. Knowing that God loves them, and searches for them like a shepherd searches for a lost sheep, brings lifelong enrichment. In a tough time, where there is no logical explanation or a "non-judgemental space to explore" (p9 "the Report"), the child (or adult) can recall this and find hope.

4. The Ethics Course does nothing for the psychological and emotional wellbeing of NSW children nor does it teach them an ethical code.

4.1 "The Report' argues that a secular ethics course is required as children whose parents object to SRE miss out on finding out the purpose and meaning of life (p 29). However, the Ethics Course does nothing to address this. There is no such question discussed nor could one know the meaning that would be given to the children.

4.2 In comparison, "children who attend Scripture have the opportunity to learn about values and virtues and examine fundamental questions such as 'what is our purpose?' or 'what is the meaning of life?'" ("the Report", p 29). Moreover, Scripture classes teach children that there is a God who loves them unconditionally and cares for them unconditionally. Even the 10 commandments were preceded by "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Exodus 20:2). God acted first in unconditional love, then gave them an ethical code to live by.

4.3 The Ethics Course does not set out an Ethical Code, unlike Scripture, which sets out a clear ethical code ("the Report" p 30). Instead, the Ethics Course is situational, based on current social standards, highly subjective, and consequently teaches a

morality that is superficial and relative. Technology, such as stem cells and genetic research, or even downloading movies, already has far outpaced current laws and social ethical understanding. How can a course that is based on current social standards establish a lasting morality in children when current social and legal standards are already obsolete and ineffective?

4.4 The questions discussed in the Ethics Course seem to put less focus on how to treat humans and more focus on how to treat animals. This makes the course even less relevant to the children's later adult lives.

4.5 Learning morality through Scripture class does not leave a negative impact on a child's ability to choose their future metaphysical or secular beliefs. There are serious consequences however, for a child who learns poor morality or amorality, which is happening currently in the Ethics Course.

5. Scripture and the Christian spirit is an important part of Australian culture and history

5.1 Scripture has been part of the official curriculum in NSW state schools since the inception of free public education by an Act of Parliament in NSW in 1866 [N86]. This is almost 150 years of history. Scripture teaching has been so important to the NSW population throughout this time that it was mandated to be 1 hour per day by Act of Parliament [N86]. It is expected that many children will take the ethics course rather than scripture as the course is offered to all students not just those who opted-out of SRE. When the trial ethics course was run in 2010 in 10 NSW Schools, Scripture classes lost around 47% of enrolled students [M10]. Running an ethics course in parallel with Scripture will only divide students and cause growing friction and conflict between those attend Scripture and those who attend the Ethics Course.

5.2 "The Report" cites the German Education system as a model for courses on moral philosophy (p 84). Since when has Australia been taking moral lessons from Germany?

5.3 The heart of Christianity is community and social ethics and this is

foundational to Australia and Australian culture and laws. Many early Australian founders and pioneers were strong Christians and Australia has a great Christian heritage, being the only nation with reference to Almighty God in the constitution [C00]. The Ethics course totally disregards this.

5.4 Scripture teaching has a proud tradition in NSW with 12,000 volunteer teachers giving up their time each week across the state. It is one of the largest volunteer efforts in NSW and is an important contribution from the community to our children.

5.5 Christian charitable organisations such as Wesley Mission, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army have a proud history in Australia.

5.6 The bill that legitimised the Ethics Course was rubber stamped by the morally bankrupt Keneally Labor government that was spectacularly evicted 4 months later in the 2011 election. The course itself was implemented very hastily, with only a single failed trial, and only a single report done on that trial. There has not been a follow-up trial or a committee established to test whether the current ethics classes have improved since the original trial.

6. Conclusion

It was not a matter of insufficient time or behaviour management that led to the failure of the 2010 trial of the Ethics Course. The course itself is fundamentally flawed in its philosophical foundations, its instruction and its level of complexity. Children are not taught morality in the Ethics Course, they are not taught ethical reasoning and their conscience is not trained in the course. The Ethics Course is not a valid alternative to Scripture, which establishes a metaphysical belief system for the psychological and emotional wellbeing of students, establishes an ethical code of the highest standard, trains and shapes the conscience of children and teaches children compassion, leading to real behavioural change.

The Ethics Course does not train NSW children in morality. The Ethics Course, despite being constructed by leading academics and the St James Ethics Centre, has been a total waste of NSW Department of Education funds. Therefore, the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.

Yours Sincerely,

The Rock International Church, North Ryde
(Authorised by Senior Pastor Richard Tng)
18th February, 2012

7. References:

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[C00] Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act. <http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/general/Constitution/preamble.htm>

Appendix A: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37 (New King James Version)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?”

²⁷ So he answered and said, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,^[a] and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’”^[b]

²⁸ And He said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Then Jesus answered and said: “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.

³³ But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ On the next day, when he departed,^[c] he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’ ³⁶ So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?”

³⁷ And he said, “He who showed mercy on him.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”