

Christian schooling

WHY
BOTHER?

“BUT DON’T YOU TAKE BOTH CHRISTIAN CHILDREN AND TEACHERS OUT OF THE MISSION FIELD OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM?”

“ARE YOU NOT JUST SHELTERING STUDENTS FROM THE REAL WORLD?”

“SURELY A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL MUST BE ACADEMICALLY COMPROMISED DUE TO SPLIT ENERGIES?”

Have you ever been asked these or similar questions? Have you possibly wondered similar things yourself from time to time? This is the first in a series of four articles published throughout this year. These articles discuss the rationale for Christian schooling in the contemporary context and seek to offer apologetic tools to teachers and parents, who are often called upon to defend the existence of Christian schools. The first article will be a positive statement outlining the necessity of Christian schools. The remaining three articles will seek to defend Christian schooling against clusters of common arguments made by opponents.

The three clusters of arguments could be summarised as: **Quality**; **Equality** and **Qualification**. Quality arguments concern the charge of academic inferiority, disadvantage and lack of rigour. For many people there is an absolute dichotomy between biblical perspective and academic attainment—you only achieve one at the expense of the other. Equality arguments concern the private/public debate; the Christian flight from the mission of public schooling; and the affordability and accessibility of Christian schooling to all. Qualification arguments concern the question of how well Christian schools qualify students to participate in the ‘real world’. They raise issues of over protection; lack of critical thinking; and loss of opportunity to grow in leadership through opposition.

WHY CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS?

Before this question is addressed, there is a prior question to consider—why Christian education? They are not the same thing; the former is one expression of the latter. All Christian parents are responsible for Christian education: raising their children with a biblical understanding of the world. The bible assumes as well as directly teaching that this ought to occur. Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 6 are passages that are often quoted.

Four options for unfolding this mandate come to mind:

- **Home schooling.** Some parents believe this is best done by continuing informal home education into the formal education that is normally carried out at school.
- **Secular school.** At the other end of the spectrum, some parents believe that their children should attend a public school or a secular private school where teaching contrary to a biblical worldview will be counteracted by biblical critique and teaching at home.

- **Private religious school.** A further group prefer a private school where, although a Christian witness is allowed; regular, formal education is generally seen as distinct from the extracurricular religious program. Such parents may think they are ‘getting the best of both worlds’ while others might see this as the most dangerous option.

- **Christian school.** The fourth option is for parents to choose a school where they are confident that their children will have a Christian teacher and that all aspects of the educational program will be evaluated in the light of a biblical understanding of the world. There are two subgroups within this category: Schools that primarily see themselves as a communal cooperative and schools that primarily see themselves as a service oriented institution.

Christian parents have freedom to decide how they are going to carry out their responsibility for Christian education. That they have the responsibility is not in question. Rather than beginning the conversation with what school the children should attend, it would be more profitable to first establish the biblical imperative for parents to raise children christianly. As to how they do that, no option should be insisted upon as the only right approach!

Respecting Christian freedom does not preclude Christians believing that a particular position is preferable or of sharing that preference with others humbly in the spirit of genuine fellowship. It is the fourth option and particularly the communal cooperative model of Christian schooling that this article seeks to defend and promote.

Christian education starts with Christian parents. Community based Christian schools are an expression of Christian parents fulfilling their responsibility for Christian education cooperatively with others. With particular regard for the more formal aspects of education, parents do together what they believe they cannot do alone. Not only do parents form community, they also partner with believing trained educators in community. In this model, parents ideally are committed community members rather than consumers of a product. Starting with Christian education and Christian parents in community allows the cultural paradigm of schooling to be evaluated and redeemed rather than perpetuated.

Starting with schools often assumes that the paradigm is neutral and a Christian flavour can be added to it. Such an assumption fails to discern the cultural expectations and educational values and practices that are in conflict with the gospel. When a community of Christian parents seek to fulfil their responsibility for Christian education the option of school needs to be evaluated. In this context, Bill Andersen—in 1983—suggested that such an evaluation might mean we have to call schools by a different name.

Once again we must start with a Christian view of life and education, and then we see what schools might look like and how they might function. And if, in the course of this project we were to finish up with some set up so different from the present, that the use of school would be inappropriate, what does it matter? A new name often captures and symbolises a new reality. (p. 25)

After twenty five years no such radical renaming has taken place and we might ask whether we have achieved a ‘set up’ that is so different! Nevertheless, Christian parents believed and continue to believe that with critical thinking and creativity, schools are redeemable and can be a suitable vehicle for Christian education. From such a belief, this defence of Christian schooling is being made.

Christian schools allow for the proclamation of the gospel in the public space (not withstanding the risk of enculturation and domestication of the gospel). The gospel says that Jesus is Lord of all of life and therefore reference to him is crucial in rightly understanding life, i.e., education. We are used to relegating the gospel to the private realm of church and home; morals and evangelism. That is one reason why Christian schooling is a contentious issue among Christians. But taking a concept so public and common as school

and rethinking it in terms of the gospel is a powerful undertaking.

...Christians can never seek a refuge in a ghetto where their faith is not proclaimed as public truth for all. They can never agree that there is one law for themselves and another for the world. They can never admit that there are areas of human life where the writ of Christ does not run... The church can never accept this thesis ... that there has been no public revelation before the eyes of all the world of the purpose for which all things and all peoples have been created and which all governments must serve. (Newbigin 1986, p. 115)

Christian schools are a helpful and legitimate vehicle for Christian education as long as they don’t become private in the sense of elitism or in the sense of private truth. Christian schools can also be a powerful expression of the lordship of Jesus over ‘all things’.

A gospel shaped school will see itself as a learning community rather than defining itself in terms of control, conformity and competition. Such a community will be committed to the development of disciples or learners of Jesus. Teachers and parents growing in their commitment to Christ and students discovering who they are; what gifts they have; what the world is like and how they can serve God in it. Such a school will see relationships as the essential stuff of community and learning. Such a school will see the disciplines of knowledge as tools for loving service.

Christian schools should never see themselves as a religious alternative to the ‘normal secular’ model of schooling but as a school with a competing religious orientation. All schools promote a vision for life or a religious perspective. In some cases there are multiple visions. Often a modern vision perpetuating the myth of utopia through science and technology and a postmodern vision celebrating the diversity of personal reality, image and identity exist in a confused state of mind where the only commonality is the undisputed autonomy of humans.

Christian schools are motivated by a biblical vision for life where the world is created and sustained by God; where God has acted in history to deal with the distortions of creation caused by human rebellion; and where history is advancing towards a new creation in which all things are reconciled to God through Christ. A biblical vision for life that motivates Christian schools is one that repudiates human autonomy but honours human beings as image bearers of God created to rule the world. It is a vision for life that is realistic about human weakness but optimistic about our capacity and future because of God’s sovereignty. A biblical vision for life honours service, suffering and sacrifice because it understands that the cross is the central event of history.

Christian schooling is not about private protection and preparation for life within an exclusive cultural enclave. It is about cultural transformation. It begins with ongoing personal transformation; flows out to transformation of structures and practices; works towards transformed lives of students and transformed engagement with every area of human life so that our culture is challenged with the gospel of Jesus. Christian schooling wants to inspire students to be agents of God’s shalom in a decaying civilisation.

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