

Christian schooling

WHY bother? PART 4



One of the authors has just reached the ripe old age of two score (he was having his nappy changed when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon). This milestone has resulted in a certain amount of reflection. What have I achieved in life? How has the first 20 years prepared me for the last 20 years? How well have I met the challenges of adult life in the big, bad, real world? These are all questions that have flowed from this reflection.

This is the last in a series of four articles addressing the purposes of Christian schooling and some of the objections that are often raised. In this article we will explore the concern that Christian schools are lacking in their ability to prepare or qualify students to participate in the 'real world'. Issues are raised in regard to protection and sheltering; lack of encouragement to critical thinking; and loss of opportunity to grow in leadership through opposition.

OVER PROTECTION AND SHELTERING

This concern may be summed up by the claim that Christian schools shelter their students from the rigours of the 'real world'. It is a cloistered environment; a bubble of overprotected unreality. This results in an underexposure to community issues and the production of likeminded homogenous graduates. Included in this concern is the notion that Christian schools provide an environment of emotional protection; they molly-coddle and shelter from 'real life' struggles such as competition and failure. The authors suggest that, although this view is perhaps again based on a caricature and exaggeration, there is an element of truth to be faced.

This first thing to say to this claim is that it is to some degree true! There is a desire of the Christian school to initially limit and then gradually expose students to some of the harsh realities of the world. This is a protection of innocence that we see embraced by Christian parents of little ones when they limit exposure to things they watch and read and to certain ways of relating and socialising. The Christian school provides an extension of these same parental desires into the early years of education. We are all easily 'taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ' (Colossians 2:6), and this is surely even more the case for our little ones.

The Christian school provides not so much a cloistering but a desire to wisely consider the rate and timing of exposure to the 'basic principles of this world'. As detailed in our previous articles, the vision of a Christian school is ultimately to teach Christian discernment and wisdom through progressive exposure to 'real life' issues and the paradoxes and struggles of life. The Christian school does not shelter but through relationship and discipling, Christian teachers wisely and prayerfully guide their students through the harsh reality of life in a broken world. The early grades in a Christian school are more like a greenhouse providing nurture and an element of protection for the young sapling, but the same environment becomes stifling for an older plant and they will be guided and disciplined into the 'outside' environment. Students need to be judiciously exposed to issues with appropriate tools to resist and to critique. Despite various enrolment policies, all Christian schools are aware that worldly influences cannot be completely locked out. A mark of a Christian school is how it confronts these issues.

LACK OF CRITICAL THINKING

There has been the claim that Christian schools are characterised by a stifling of critical thinking among the students and a discouragement of critical dialogue between students and teachers. There is no denying that the Christian school is a place that encourages a culture of respect and submission to authority. It would be a shame if this healthy aspect of the Christian school community is misconstrued as a stifling of expression and creativity in thought. These are important in the development of young minds and must be nurtured in every school. In the Christian school, respect is not one way. Students must respect teachers in the same way that teachers must respect their students and their developing opinions and perspectives as they understand them to be precious and made in the image of God.

It may be that there have been occasions in Christian schools where a culture of respect for authority that emphasises submission, a common view of the world held by the majority and a vibe that we are all too 'nice' to argue, have inadvertently fostered a climate of compliance. The Christian school recognises that it is easy for strengths to become weaknesses and that a community of respectful critical dialogue is crucial; just as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

As previously stated, the Christian school's great strength is its desire to develop the ability to critique culture from a biblical worldview, while being careful to allow a healthy level of internal critique as the community seeks to interpret the Bible faithfully and explore what it says about living, laughing, learning and loving in God's kingdom. It needs to be also noted that Christian schools don't have the monopoly on the potential to create homogenous belief environments where counter ideas are discouraged. All schools are faith based to some degree and the secular school may initially present as if all ideas are accepted. However, every culture/community has its sacred cows; human autonomy, consumerism or individualism. A student who offers a critical view during the learning process, by suggesting that God is sovereign, the Bible has authority, and that self sacrifice is nobler than self interest, may be stifled and coerced into submission. This is not an excuse for us to inhibit space for critical and divergent thinking. In encouraging critical thinking we invite critique of our inconsistencies while at the same time asserting, that all things need to be critiqued against the word of God.

LEADERSHIP THROUGH OPPOSITION

The last of the claims that we will address in this article is that the Christian school does not provide an environment where the young Christian leader is nurtured. What may well be observed is that the desire to nurture humility and respect results in a lack of overt public leadership among the student body. Although it must be stated that the Christian school will foster and nurture all forms of leadership, the question of what defines Christian leadership must be explored. The world uplifts positional, power based leadership and speaks of leadership in these terms. The Christian school defines leadership biblically with ideas such as strength of character, perseverance, service, integrity and humility.

In some schools it is true that possible opposition placed on a Christian student may provide good training and may result in them being strengthened to make a stand. However, this flourish or flounder environment will not provide the nurture for all young Christian leaders. Those with a quiet, relational, servant-hearted character-based leadership may flounder without the careful discipling of mature Christian teachers who point to Christ to define leadership strength. This leadership is in many ways far more difficult with its character based, rather than skills based emphasis. In fact it may at times be far harder for a young Christian to take a stand in a nominal Christian environment and this may even provide a richer training ground for Christian leadership.

CONCLUSION

In considering the claims against Christian schooling it must first be realised that the Christian school is only a physical expression of something that is far more fundamental for Christian parents - Christian education. Christian parents are responsible before God to raise their children in a biblical understanding of their world. Whether Christian parents choose home schooling, secular schooling, private religious schooling or Christian schooling, they are not free from this responsibility. These four articles have suggested that Christian schooling provides an option that offers great support to the Christian parent. Although parents are free to choose which type of educational community they will embrace for their child, it is helpful to discuss the various options together without judgement or contempt. It is also important that we examine the issues without creating caricatures.

Chris Parker
cparker@nice.edu.au

Chris is online communications manager for the National Institute and Christian Education National (CEN)

Ken Dickens
kdickens@cen.edu.au

Ken is the principal of the National Institute for Christian Education and is the CEO of Christian Education National (CEN)



THERE HAS BEEN THE CLAIM THAT CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS ARE CHARACTERISED BY A STIFLING OF CRITICAL THINKING AMONG THE STUDENTS

