

Third Wave of Modern Christian Schools

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Models of Christian Schools	Strengths	Weaknesses
Pragmatic	Focus on <i>them</i>	Dualism
Discipleship	Biblical integration	Focus on <i>us</i>
Missional	Focus on <i>them</i> , biblical integration	Weak missiology of the classroom

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex situation, I'd like to suggest that Christian schools have typically been established on one of two models. I would like to propose a third possibility.

Missionary agencies have opened and closed many schools in the past century. I believe that the failure of many of these schools to survive as distinctively Christian institutions was caused by a weak, dualistic foundation. Many of the schools were founded to teach children basic literacy so that they'd be able to study the Bible for themselves—a noble objective. The schools were intended to provide the skills that would allow their students to develop economically and survive or flourish in the world beyond their tribal communities. Unfortunately, because the foundation was pragmatic rather than integral to their vision of Christian life, it was easy to allow non-Christians to take over the teaching so that missions could concentrate on Bible teaching and church planting.

Christian church models have often emphasized getting nonbelievers to come to special buildings or activities rather than sending believers to them to represent Christ in places of work, homes, leisure activities—the whole community. Schools are naturally places of community, and they have therefore been incompatible with the congregational model of church planting. When national Christians took the place of missionaries in the Christian schools, they followed the path of the missionaries but eventually left the schools as well because the only Christian activities that were really valued occurred within the church. The educational perspective that they had absorbed from their missionary teachers played out in their own behaviour. As the vision faded from one generation to another, the speed at which Christian schools were secularized accelerated.

Missionaries didn't have a well-developed, integrated philosophy of Christian education, because most had never been exposed to a Christian school before they became missionaries. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the "neutral" state education system was strongly established in the primary missionary sending lands—Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. The separation of life and thinking into the sacred and the secular was well under way, and the realm of the sacred steadily shrank and retreated from the public arena. The sacred became reduced to a limited, personal, private area involving church and devotional life and not much else. Missionaries became like their teachers, and their students became like them.

Missions grappled with the need to demonstrate the love of Christ by involvement in all kinds of assistance to people in need—medical, practical, and educational projects received lots of resources. Unfortunately, these projects all too often competed with spiritual endeavors because the primary mind-set saw them as separate. The discussions on this topic were generally based on the idea that we were dealing with two distinct entities rather than an integrated life in which Jesus demands lordship over everything. This idea imposed a constant choice between our way and His way.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, the modern Christian school movement began to develop a distinctively Christian philosophy of education. The growth of Christian schools was not always for the right reasons,

but God used the concern for the development of Christian thinking to produce a more integrated discipleship model of Christian education. Although the practise of integrated Christian education seems to lag far behind the theory, a growing number of people have experienced this kind of education and could be very effective in ministering to others.

While reaching *them* was the focus of the pragmatic Christian schools started by missions as the twentieth century began, the development of Christian schools in North America was part of a great shift in focus of the church to *us*. Although the intention was not to abandon missions, the cultural changes in society and a growing emphasis on discipleship allowed a shift from an emphasis on non-Christians to an emphasis on Christians. Christian schools became places to disciple those who were already Christians. The schools were related to existing churches. The focus of discussion was on persuading Christians of the importance of Christian education rather than seeing Christian education as a gift to be shared with the world.

The missional model seeks to combine the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of both previous approaches. The Body of Christ is not only meant to function internally, to care for itself, but is to be used by Christ to accomplish His purposes in the world, among those who are not yet part of the Body. It is consistent with His nature and purposes that He would use His Body to reach *them* instead of focussing only on *us*. It is also consistent with His nature and purposes that He be recognized everywhere by everyone as the Lord of *all*, and for that truth to be taught to children and young people to prepare them for life. Removing Christ from education is not an option if we believe that He is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of *all*.

The present proposals that all Christians put their children under godly teachers is motivated by a growing understanding of parental responsibility for education and of the importance of integrated, distinctively Christian teaching. But there is a huge danger that the benefits of God's good gifts will be kept for *us* and not shared with *them*. If Christians took the initiative to provide Christ-centered education for all, many of the arguments about the dangers of "hothouse" environments would disappear. It is all too easy to reject the marginal, the difficult, and those requiring

special education. We claim that it's because we "aren't equipped" to minister to them. But Christians have the resurrection power of Christ to bring life out of death, and the godless state systems have only money and empty promises to meet the temporal and eternal needs of their students.

Progress within mission schools can be expected to produce bitter opposition, for the "god of this world" will not lightly relinquish control over the shaping of the thinking of each new generation. However, even as the forces of secular, godless education become entrenched, there is a growing awareness of the inadequacy of their offerings. Reform proposals are being considered everywhere. Parents are looking for all kinds of alternatives. When people are blindly and desperately searching, there are always blind leaders available to lead. Muslim schools are spreading, not only in Muslim countries but throughout "Christian" Africa and Europe. People are asking for a fish, but Christians have been all too willing to give them a scorpion by allowing those who have no fish to answer their requests.

When Jesus sent out His disciples to proclaim the good news, He instructed them to go where they were accepted and move on if they were rejected. Such a strategy could be adopted in world missions. With all the felt needs in education, Christian educators have ample opportunities to share the gifts they have received, even in otherwise "closed" countries. Even when Christ is not yet welcome, His ambassadors may be given entrance if they come bearing gifts. What better gift can we offer than teaching that makes sense of life and the universe, that values all people because they are made in God's image, that realistically acknowledges the ravages of sin in God's good world, and that offers hope for the present as well as for eternity?

Christ didn't come only to die. He came to live in the same sin-polluted world that we live in. He came to give us hope that the power of God is more than sufficient for us to live a life of holiness here and now as well as in eternity. He came to show us that godliness can be expressed in the school, family, and carpentry shop, as well as in special ministry. He wants us to demonstrate the same kind of integrated lifestyle—a life in which all aspects of who we are and what we do are submitted to His good will. What better place to do that

than in a school where children who naturally are responsive to God are able to learn how to relate the work of their lives—being students—to God and His Word? Where teachers who are continually growing in Christ are able to share in the lives of those who are just starting their lives in Him? Where disciples are made—not through the theoretical, one-way communication of the pulpit but in the everyday interaction of the school?

We have experienced the failure of the dualistic model, and there is a great danger that the discipleship model will lead us further from those whom Christ's Body is meant to serve. Let us work together to develop the missional model. Most of us have experience with only one of the two strengths that should be combined—some with missions, others with integrated education—so it will require that we all humbly come together to be taught and led by the Holy Spirit. Only then will He be able to use us to accomplish His purpose of bringing people from every kindred, tribe, and nation together as mature disciples of Christ, who is Lord of *all*.

Pursuing missional education will require a re-visitation of our understanding of the church. The "new wine" of integrated Christian thinking and living will not fit well into the "old wineskins" of congregational organization. How do those who have developed within a Christian school community relate to one another when they move into such arenas as business, industry, and agriculture? Is a cell-church model, which emphasizes the ministry of each believer rather than the ecclesiological model prevalent around the Western world, more likely to be the result of school and church planting? We cannot expect fruitfulness if all we do is alter a few minor details of our church identity and strategy. God is a God of revolution, reformation, transformation, as well as steady growth over time.

We will also need to revisit our understanding and description of education. If Christian schools and prepared Christian teachers are to engage individuals and communities in relationships and with ideas that provide the context and content for preevangelism, conversion, and discipleship, we will need to think carefully about what we are doing. We must avoid the tendency to act as if we can educate people into God's family. Only God's Spirit can produce new life. We are completely dependent on His sovereign working, and we need

to act like it. We must also ensure that we do not try to accomplish in our own strength what God begins. Growth in Christlikeness is something God does, even though He uses His children to model, describe, and encourage.

Training, instruction, and nurturing are aspects of teaching that have been given different emphases at different times and places. Training that focuses on doing what is right has often been the emphasis, while understanding has been neglected. Instruction focuses on knowing what is right—but here again, the understanding is often neglected, and power is missing. Nurture focuses on having right relationships and is a primary value in education at the moment—but without God’s love, spiritual understanding, and divine power, the core of life is untransformed.

Training may move us to a more responsible lifestyle and less destructive choices. However, because we have been created as responsible creatures, sooner or later we will demand answers to our why questions and abandon submissive obedience. Or we will fall prey to a hard taskmaster who will—unlike God—abuse our submission. Or when our behavior is correct, we may drift into legalism. We may become convinced that our relationship to God is based on what we do. Training can be only the beginning.

Instruction very easily encourages our fallen expectation that knowing right and wrong will make us like God. Too often, knowing produces pride rather than humility, for in our finiteness we think that the little we know is everything, and that we are God. We fail to recognize that what we know is minimal and futile because we are not God. God created the entire universe to reveal Himself, in order that His divine nature will be obvious to everyone who looks at what He has made. The more we study the details of His world, the better we will understand Him. But when we ignore or reject God, we see only ourselves. Our alienation from Him will be reflected in our alienation from the universe, others, and even ourselves. Knowledge is insufficient.

The nurture or care of students is an essential element of teaching; neglecting relationships sabotages teaching. But our care for students must be combined with an understanding of the sinfulness of every person. We can unconsciously encourage a selfish narcissism among students instead of healthy vertical and horizontal relationships. Love and respect become

only pious words without the divine power to love the unlovely and honor the dishonorable who are found in every classroom.

The promise of education is to provide the answer to all needs through the right combination of training, instruction, and nurture. However, the center where all three overlap and fulfill the inadequacies of the other is an empty space within the unregenerate heart. Although we are made in the image of God, our sinfulness continually moves us away from Him. Without the indwelling Spirit of God, it is impossible to understand; there is no power to love or obey. Learning leaves the life untransformed unless God is allowed to touch it, for only He has the power to transform, to make new, and to bring life out of the death created by our sin. The way of the Cross—selfless, unconditional love for others and willing submission to the Father’s will—provides the only possibility to become conformed to the likeness of Christ. God has allowed people to catch a glimpse of what He has prepared for those of us who believe, but all human schemes to receive God’s gifts without acknowledging the Giver are ultimately futile.

Missional education is probably not the best term for such a model, although it does focus on the outward-looking, *them* focus. Perhaps *transform-ed* would be a better name that might allow discussion and avoid arguments about the often-unconscious prejudices associated with almost every other terminology. *Transform-ed* implies that change is not the result of human activity. Divine action is needed to fulfill the promise of education.

God is at work. He wants to equip us to work with Him to make an eternal difference in the lives of individuals, the whole Body of Christ, and the entire universe that He created for His glory. Let’s join Him in the classrooms of the world.



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