The fundamental reason for the existence and operation of a Christian school is to educate children. About this there should be no debate. Noted Christian educator, author, and speaker D. Bruce Lockerbie says it best: “The primary and only legitimate purpose for our school’s existence as a school is to be a place of academic teaching and learning where Jesus Christ is honored as Lord. Note the absolute phrase as a school. We who have been called by God to serve Him might have chosen to do so in any of at least a hundred different ways. We might have founded a yearlong youth retreat; we might have begun a drug counseling center or a hospice for unwed mothers or a senior citizens’ community. Instead, we chose to found or join a school, which by its very name conveys certain expectations among those who choose to enroll and send their children to us” (2005, 7–8; italics in original).

To be sure, Christian schools are much more than educational institutions. Those of us who have felt called to professional careers in Christian schools are quick to point out the mission and ministry aspects of our schools. These aspects have provided avenues of Christian service for thousands of competent, capable, and committed Christian school educators. There are other aspects of Christian schooling, however, which have profound influence on the academic vocation we so dearly love. At the risk of overstating the case, I contend that the academic, mission, and ministry functions and goals of a Christian school are inextricably linked to the business practices and successes in that school. Without question, there is a positive correlation between flourishing as a school and being exemplary in business practices. Conversely, a school that is struggling in the area of business affairs is, or will soon be, struggling to survive.

Successfully addressing financial issues of Christian schools occupies an inordinate amount of time, energy, and additional resources. This catch-22 situation in which many Christian schools find themselves is certainly a problem with far-reaching ramifications. There are no simple answers; there are, however, some Christian financial-activities fundamentals that need to be examined or reexamined. Please allow me to offer not only a few words of analysis regarding the scope and seriousness of the problem but also possible solutions to reverse current trends.

Christian school heads must rethink the jack-of-all-trades mentality and realize that business matters require a greater measure of financial expertise. In A Christian Paideia: The Habitual Vision of Greatness, Lockerbie includes the words of an orchestra conductor who likened his work to one who “can look one hundred musicians in the eye at the same time and still keep the beat.” Lockerbie goes on to say, “His description applies as well to today’s head-of-school, who fills a far different role from that of the typical school principal a half-century ago” (2005, 159). The multifaceted and unrealistic nature of expectations thrust on Christian school heads has proved to be a recipe for vocational disaster. Indeed, I agree with my colleague in the assessment that the greatest threat to the Christian school today is the deteriorating state of relationships between school heads and their boards. Without question, the “honeymoons” are shorter, the “marriages” are rockier, and the “divorce rate” is unacceptably high. Lockerbie contends that “the turnover among heads-of-schools … is appalling in both the brevity of their tenure and, often, in the brutality of their departure” (p. 158).

Clearly, the profession of Christian school headship is under assault. As you read this rather sobering assessment of the current state of affairs regarding Christian school heads, you may be wondering why these words are included in comments relative to business matters. The answer is quite simple: many of the reasons for the widespread deteriorating relationships between school heads and their boards are related to finances. The assault comes in all areas of finance: raising money, spending money, managing money, and hiring and supervising those to whom these tasks are delegated. What, then, is an answer to some of the many points of contention between school
heads and school boards? I contend that hiring competent business professionals and empowering them to do their jobs is at least a partial answer to the problem. Expanding the metaphor used earlier of the orchestra leader, the job of the head of school is to assemble the orchestra and provide appropriate leadership and supervision, not to play one or more of the instruments. Jim Collins basically says the same thing in his bestselling book Good to Great when he uses his bus metaphor. He notes that effective organizations “first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and then they figured out where to drive it” (2001, 13; italics in original). Without question, one or more competent business professionals need to be on the bus and seated very near the driver.

Yes, it is absolutely critical for all Christian school heads to take a long introspective look at maximizing the business functions in their schools. If we fail to take such actions, relations between the school head and school board will continue to sour, and many more Christian schools may decline or disappear.

Business office personnel should be among the most competent and well-trained individuals in a Christian school organization. It is no longer adequate to treat business department staffing issues as matters of afterthought when building and managing an employee team. Gone should be the days when teachers who have exceptional business or mathematics aptitude fill key business department positions. To the contrary, schools need certified public accountants and other highly trained business professionals to deal with the nuances of accounting, budgeting, legal requirements, government regulations, contract law, and a whole host of other issues.

It is time to face the fact that typical school heads are much more capable and comfortable serving as the visionary educational and spiritual leaders of their schools than they are serving as their schools’ financial experts. Wise school heads hire and manage the best and brightest business personnel available, and those personnel should be given credit for their successes, complimented for their expertise, and compensated for their effectiveness. On a more personal note, whatever successes were realized in the Christian schools in which I have served were due in large part to the effective work of the business professionals in those schools.

Scriptural precepts and principles should govern all the business activities of a Christian school. A banner is displayed prominently on the wall in our athletic center: “Work Hard, Play Hard, Honor Him!” I love that message. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, we find, “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (NIV). Honoring God and giving Him the glory in everything, including all our school’s business dealings, should constitute our business plan. Fortunately, we are not without additional scriptural help to guide us in our policies and practices. We know some basics: doing things “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40, NKJV); letting our yes be yes, and our no, no (Matthew 5:37); and doing to others what we would have them do to us (Matthew 7:12). These verses, along with more than 2,000 additional ones, have much to say about money, money management, and money relationships. A serious study of Scripture is needed, and a comprehensive, professional application of biblical precepts and principles is essential.

Scriptural admonitions should guide all the business functions in Christian schools, including relationships with parents, lenders, vendors, and the legal community. Christian schools should be shining examples of professional and ethical behavior in the business community. If we operate properly, there is simply no limit to future blessings. Much like Jabez in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 4:10), we may very well experience God’s hand of blessing, God’s protection, and an expansion of our territories. Let us all commit to honor and glorify God in every business function in our schools!

References

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