



Preserving the Christian Mission of Christian Schools

By Paul A. Kienel, Founder and President Emeritus of ACSI

A friend of mine, Dr. Robert Ashcroft (now deceased), adopted the following words as his life verse from 2 Chronicles 26:5: “As long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper” (NKJV). Those words appeared on his calling card, Christmas card, and his letterhead. Everybody knew him by those words. The guiding principle of those words was essential to his ministry as a Christian educator.

Words matter, especially words from the Bible that guide individuals. Words from the Bible that guide schools also matter.

Forty-five years ago Gus Enderlin, the founder of Redwood Christian Schools in California, selected Philippians 2:5, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” He wrote: “This verse clearly and succinctly indicates the ultimate goal of the Christian school in regard to its final product.” According to Bruce Johnson, the school’s current superintendent, 45 years later, “The Christian mission of Redwood Christian School has not changed under the guiding principle of that scriptural passage!”

Biblical words that matter for individuals and for schools also matter for organizations like ACSI. I remember selecting a passage of Scripture in a meeting in the late 1960s of the board of the California Association of Christian Schools (CACS) that would appear on the association’s letterhead. CACS was one of the 10 associations that merged to form ACSI in 1978. David Wallace, the founder of Valley Christian Schools in San Jose, California, suggested the last nine words of Colossians 1:18: “That in all things He [Christ] might have the preeminence” (KJV). That powerful passage of Scripture calling us to the preeminence of Christ in our schools is still a guiding verse for ACSI today.

Some years ago I wrote an article entitled “Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing.” The main thing, of course, is keeping Christ preeminent in our schools. Since Christ’s name is directly linked or implied in our school name, keeping Him preeminent must always be “priority one” if we are to maintain our integrity as spiritual academic institutions. Staying true to truth (“thy word is truth,” John 17:17, KJV) is foundational to our existence as a Christian school movement.

How ACSI Came to Prioritize a Christian Philosophy of Education

It all began with lunch! I like things that begin with lunch! Several Christian school educators and I were having a noon meal at Reuben’s Restaurant in Whittier, California. Our guest was the dean of the Western Graduate School of Theology, Dr. Robert S. McBirnie. In the course of our lunch Dr. McBirnie suggested that our association publish a book on the philosophy of Christian school education. A few weeks later the project was presented to our board and approved. The first printing of *The Philosophy of Christian School Education* was published in 1977. The writers and the editorial board included the following: Eugene Birdsall, James Braley, Dr. James DeSaegher, Dr. Kenneth Gangel, Gene Garrick, Dr. David Hocking, Dr. Paul Kienel, Dr. Tim LaHaye, Dr. Robert McBirnie, Robert Miller, and Dr. James VeltKamp. In the book’s introduction I wrote: “A movement of this momentum and magnitude, if it is to continue, must quickly bring into focus its biblical philosophic foundation or it will soon flounder.”

I also suggested that the new philosophy book could “serve as a textbook in teacher and administrative training programs in our Christian colleges and graduate schools. It is essential reading for teachers and administrators now serving in the Christian school ministry.” We know, of course, a school’s philosophy of education greatly makes an impact on the outcome of students it serves.

If our philosophy is based on biblical foundations in which the Bible is lovingly presented to students as the reliable point of reference for leading meaningful or productive lives, we then, as teachers are providing a priceless moral perspective in education that is absolutely vital to the survival of our society. We must never minimize the noble cause of our mission. Nor should we ever be ashamed that we are teaching servants of God in the ministry of Christian school education. It is always reassuring to remind ourselves that Jesus came to this earth as a humble teacher. What a great model for us to follow!

How We Maintained Our Sense of Community

A few years ago I was privileged to speak to the teachers at the annual convention of the Community Christian Schools of Australia, held at their nation’s capital in Canberra. My wife, Annie, and I were recently honored when the retired president, Robert Frisken, of that organization visited us in our home in La Quinta, California. I told him about my assignment from ACSI to write this article and asked him about his ideas on the need for a sense of community in Christian education. He said a sense of community begins at the local Christian school. He described a true Christian school as “a God-fearing, Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Bible-based, learning community.” He said, “Everyone associated with a Christian school must feel a sense of responsibility for the spiritual and academic mission of the school.” He also talked about the need for an “all-school buy-in” to a common vision for the school that provides a clear sense of direction for everyone to follow.

I remember in the early years admonishing our constituency that we cannot afford the luxury of not getting along with each other. We needed then as we need now an awareness that every Christian school educator,

regardless of the size of the school or grade level represented, is a treasured colleague in this ministry. A sense of belonging and a sense of welcome into a community of Christ-centered schools has always been an important feature of the value of school membership in ACSI.

How We Became a Credible Organization

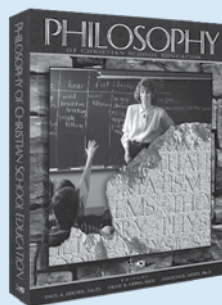
ACSI’s credibility over the years has come by simply keeping our word with our constituency. My mother used to say, “Who you are shows in everything you do.” As a service organization to our member schools we made sure we lived up to our promises—that our services were all that we advertised them to be. We tried not to be slipshod in the quality of our conventions, administrator conferences, preschool conferences, school accreditation, student activities, our saleable items, legal/legislative services, volume purchasing sources, and even our annual directory of schools.

Much of the credibility of ACSI came from the people on the front lines of our association who served God in our regional offices—namely our gifted regional directors and their staff. Today we have 28 regional offices and satellite offices around the world! It is those “boots on the ground” people who gave and continue to give ACSI momentum and credibility to the service ministry of ACSI. A meaningful program of services to our member schools and colleges has been and continues to be the heartbeat of our association.

Paul A. Kienel, LLD, is the founder and president emeritus of ACSI. Dr. Kienel has addressed audiences in 35 countries, and he is the author of 10 books including his two-volume *History of Christian School Education*. He and his wife, Annie, live in La Quinta, California, and they have three married daughters, seven grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.



Paul A. Kienel, Founder and President Emeritus of ACSI



The Philosophy of Christian School Education was published in 1977.



Ten associations merged to form ACSI in 1978.



ACSI today—still preserving the Christian mission of Christian schools