



Recommitting to a Christian Philosophy and Community

By Milton V. Uecker

The idea of mission is deeply rooted in Christian thinking and the Latin theological concept of *missio dei*, the mission of God. The Christian school community, centered on the person of Jesus Christ, has historically been on mission to extend and build the kingdom through its ministry to children. In obedience to Psalm 78:4–7, God’s people are to “tell the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done ... that the generation to come might know ... that they should put their confidence in God” (NASB). The apostle Paul expressed his mission when he wrote, “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). This mission is *the mission* of Christian schooling, and it is to this purpose that Christian educators are called.

Mission and purpose are not unique to Christian schools since all schools and their respective curriculums are designed to fulfill a purpose. Neil Postman declares, “There is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end.” He explains, “For school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve, or, even better, several gods. If they have none, school is pointless” (1995, 4). Throughout the history of education there has always been a central narrative (god) that is the focal point of a curriculum and its design. Examples of these “gods” include democracy, the economic engine, the American dream, science, technology, and multiculturalism. Each god is based in

a narrative that is designed to give meaning and hope to the world (1995). These narratives are grounded in worldviews and their belief in the means to “the good life.” None of these are intrinsically bad, but when they become the unifying element of curriculum they “dethrone Christ” and become idols.

Idols can also stem from aspects of a program that have a valuable purpose and place in curriculum but over time begin to dominate the culture of the school. Should good things like athletics, the arts, or an academic emphasis like STEM become the center of attention, they may likewise become a competing narrative. This would be especially true when they mirror the values or practices of the world.

Christian schools must be proactive in their effort to resist the world’s idols. In 1983, Herbert Schlossberg warned that the apathy, pessimism, and despair of American society are rooted in a population that increasingly worships idols instead of God, the Creator. His book is a call for a biblical remnant that will stand up against the world’s systems. Three decades later this call for action is more critical than ever. One of Schlossberg’s most poignant statements expresses his belief that “the best [element] of the Christian school movement ... is a determined No! by parents to the homogenization of American life, a recognition that the model to which their children are intended to be conformed [*by public education*] has become evil” (1983, 310). One has to wonder what the primary purpose of Christian schooling is in

the minds of today's parents. If the mission of God is to be accomplished, a commitment to a biblical philosophy must be continually renewed, lived out, and monitored.

I cannot reflect upon a Christian philosophy of education without hearing the voices of faithful mentors in my own life. It was Dr. Gene Garrick that introduced me to Christian school philosophy. He not only knew it, but he lived it. Every year he reviewed the elements of Christian school philosophy with Norfolk Christian's staff and parents. Dr. Garrick believed that everyone needed to internalize the purpose and philosophy if the school was to stay on course.

What would I now say if I were addressing a school community? What follows is a brief review of the enduring ideas that I deem critical today. As I reflected upon these issues, I found myself returning to the pages of Dr. Garrick's unpublished philosophy notebook.

Worldview

A worldview is the product of every learner's education. This eliminates the myth that education can be or is neutral. Worldview answers life's big questions, and these answers are learned through the means of a school's curriculum. It is worldview that addresses the "whys" of life. Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? What is life's purpose? Does the world have meaning? Philosophy stated most simply is the study of these questions. "The kind of heart one has determines the worldview. If this heart is not Christian, the worldview cannot be Christian. Christian philosophy begins with a Christian consciousness which comes through regeneration. This comes through the revelation of God in His Word" (Garrick 1985, 5).

Christian worldview is ultimately dependent on rebirth and the ability of the learner, through the Holy Spirit, to have the mind of Christ and think Christianly (1 Corinthians 3:14–16).

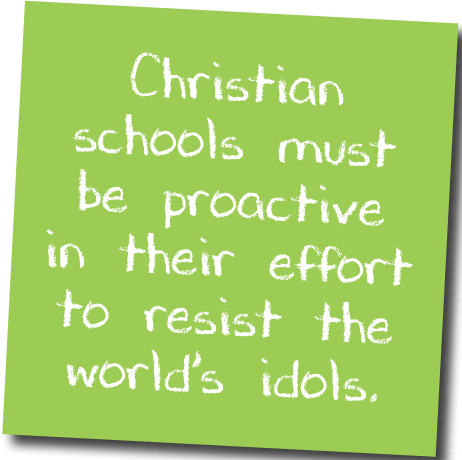
Reality (Metaphysics)

In a culture in which idols abound, the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—must be made central to all of life and learning. "Christian philosophy is the romance of seeing all things as one whole with God as Ultimate" (Fakkema 1952, 5). God is creator and all things reflect Him, and in light of His sovereignty all things are

dependent on and subservient to Him. The apostle Paul emphasized the centrality of Jesus in his letter to the Colossians: "For by Him all things were created both in the heavens and on earth ... and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16–17). Jesus is therefore the curriculum's coherence or integrating factor. In Jesus are "hidden the all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). It is in Him that we can be released from the power of sin and "made complete," and it is Jesus that is the "head over all rule or authority" (2:10). Dr. Jack Layman illustrates the place of Jesus within his lectures on the pursuit of truth through hermeneutics (2002). In Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens*, Plato points upward in search for philosophical ideals while Aristotle reaches down to the earthly plain to uncover truth within nature. Plato's transcendent ideals provided meaning but lacked verification, while Aristotle could verify his ideas but he could not provide ultimate meaning. John, in his gospel, solves this philosophical dilemma when he writes, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:14). Jesus entered the world to provide both meaning and verification. In a society that does not acknowledge Jesus as God or the Truth, the Christian school must glorify Jesus in everything and seek to establish His rightful place in the hearts and minds of students.

Knowledge and Truth (Epistemology)

In a culture that denies the existence of absolute truth, the Christian school must stand for objective truth as revealed in Scripture (John 17:17). The school cannot neglect the Word of God and must teach it not only with accuracy but with skill and the power of the Holy Spirit. Students must be guided to think critically and follow the example of the Bereans whose habit it was to examine everything they heard to make sure that it aligned with the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). All disciplines and the concepts therein are to be examined and interpreted under the authority of God's Word and Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:1–15). A biblically integrated curriculum is therefore an imperative.



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Nature and Needs of Man

In light of man's fallen nature a student's greatest need is redemption, as opposed to education. The fall of man, his total depravity, resulted in man's inability to please God and ultimately the school's inability to realize the mission of God. If education is to profit man, then trust, dependence, and obedience to God must be restored (Garrick 1985). Dealing with the problem of sin extends education's purpose beyond the temporary to the eternal. Man's chief aim is not happiness, but rather joy, hope, and the glorification of God.

Value (Axiology)

In the absence of truth, values have become subjective and relative. Moral absolutes have given way to the consensus of the majority in which what was good is now bad and the bad has become acceptable. A biblical worldview looks to the Scriptures to define what is good and what is valuable. Doing the will of God, obeying the laws of God, sharing the love of God, and thinking the thoughts of God bring priorities, proper conduct, motives, and beauty to life (Garrick 1985). Through teaching, discipline, and modeling, regenerated hearts are led to submit to a life in accordance with God's moral law.

Educational Responsibility and Authority

Children belong to God, but He has entrusted them to parents. Parents are responsible to train the child as He desires. Parents are given authority to make decisions regarding an education that will align with God's purposes and standards (Psalm 127, Ephesians 6:4, 2 Timothy 3:13–15). Christian school philosophy therefore establishes parents as having the authority for their child's education. This is evidenced by mission statements that speak of partnering with the home; however, the home and school often fail to fulfill this aspect of

mission. In today's fast-paced workplace where often both parents work, a consumer mentality rather than one of partnership is easily adopted. This shift, in which parents purchase rather than participate in education, often leads to stress and strife as parents look to their expectations rather than those of the mission. Schools must seek ways in which they can better communicate, instruct, and involve the home if the parental authority is to be realized.

Objectives

Educational philosophy must ultimately align with objectives—a description of the “fully taught” graduate. What will graduates know, be able to do, value, and believe? The main goal of a Christian school education is to enable the students to fulfill God's original purpose in creation, including the fulfillment of God's specific purpose and calling in their life (Garrick 1985). If world-views differ, then expected outcomes are also likely to differ. Dr. Glen Schultz, at the 2014 International Institute for Christian School Educators (IICSE), described the role of the administrator as the one responsible to see that the values and expectations of all members of the school community (board, administration, teachers, parents, students, and so on) are moving in the same direction. Unless they are one, they will likely be unable to withstand the swift and opposing current of culture. For this alignment to happen, leaders must lead the way in determining, publishing, and marketing the school's standards or outcomes.

Pedagogy

There are many instructional strategies that serve as the means to the school's ends, but none more important than community. “Since the child is a communal being, the impact of persons (adults and peers within the community) is crucial to his development. Children learn best in a positive caring environment, one of peace, love, and truth. The wrong community can hinder growth and internalization of God's truth and inculcate the world's values, ideas and patterns instead” (Garrick 1985, 50).

During NEXUS Live 2014, Dr. Dan Egeler reminded participants of the power of relationships. As teachers, staff, and parents—empowered by the Holy Spirit—relate biblically to one another they provide a model of life in and through Christ. The apostle Paul not only invited the Philippian believers whom he loved to follow his example

but they were also to “walk according to the pattern you have in us” (Philippians 3:17). It is a given that not all students and parents are Christians, but community standards and atmosphere dare not take on the character of the culture at-large. Children come to understand truth by experiencing it firsthand. Through seeing and experiencing love and the other New Testament “one anothers,” they are nurtured and prepared to accept Jesus’s love. The challenge within Psalm 78 was that teaching should lead to knowing, and Jesus said, “By this [love] all men will *know* that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, emphasis added). It is in and through loving, caring relationships that learning takes place.

A recommitment to Christian school philosophy starts with an assessment of the “state of the mission” within the reader’s school. This article reflects only a sampling of possible philosophical concerns. Leadership should also evaluate questions dealing with the teaching-learning process, the full scope of instructional strategies, and the school’s governance.

Herbert Schlossberg’s words as he concluded his book serve as both a challenge and an encouragement:

Even the good kings of ancient Judah, who expelled the worship of the Baals from the temple, left the Asherim and their devotees undisturbed on the hills. So rooted in communal life had these deities become, that it was unthinkable to be rid of them. In the late twentieth century [and now early twenty-first] the West is similarly plagued with major and

minor idols, some of them all but invisible. It is hard to imagine a more important or satisfying role than to embark on the spiritual, intellectual, and political adventure of working toward stripping them, root and branch, from the land. (1983, 334–35).

Let us recommit ourselves to a biblical philosophy of education and to the importance of community. It is ultimately not about any one school or the movement as a whole but about God’s kingdom, mission, and glory.

Philosophy + Community = Mission Accomplished.

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