



Becoming an Authentic Christian Educator

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Achieving a Christ-centered culture requires that each part of the school be grounded in, guided by, interconnected through, and fundamentally transformed by Christ.

In a culture that takes great liberties attaching “Christian” to many things, such as schools, music, movies, clothing, etc., I recall Dr. Vernard Gant’s consistent reminder to his listeners: “Only people can be Christians.” While Christ will transform and restore all things, only people have the privilege of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. People are the primary reason Christ came to live a sinless life and die for our sins. Therefore, Christ is our only means of transformation. The *Authentic Christian Educator Model* is a philosophy of education. Its aim is to encourage and facilitate true transformation through Jesus Christ. While structure is important in carrying out the school’s mission, a Christian school is only as effective as the least transformed person. To state this more positively, the more transformed people are, the more transformation occurs. Transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit, and God uses those who have been transformed as instruments to facilitate transformation in others.

As highlighted by the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI), two things are at work simultaneously for transformation to occur. First, there is the work of creating the conditions for spiritual formation through the development of a biblical worldview among all constituents. Second, there are the unseen parts, the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals who engage in biblical worldview development. While we cannot peer into a person’s heart to determine objectively whether biblical worldview development is occurring, we can at least inspect their fruit. The fruit of change in the head (what we assent to), the heart (what we have a positive disposition toward), and the hands (how we live in response to those convictions) manifests collectively in a Christ-like culture, spurred on individually by Christ-like leaders, teachers, coaches, and support staff. As the FFI graphic demonstrates, the Holy Spirit works mysteriously through each of the areas that constitute our being. The influence is non-linear; it does not necessarily flow from head to heart to hands. The right information is critical, but having it does not always translate automatically into the right action—putting what we believe into practice. The FFI suggests that one can be encouraged to assent to the right information if they see someone model spiritual disciplines and witness the tangible fruit of those practices in everyday life. A person who intentionally goes out of their way to mentor another (nurture) may increase the frequency of practicing spiritual disciplines. Another example is an educator taking time to engage with a student or parent, attentively listening to the barriers they face in their faith while prayerfully offering biblical examples of individuals who struggled yet ultimately overcame. This can lead to increased engagement with Scripture, parents owning their responsibility to disciple their child, and possibly engagement in a local

church. Since we don't know all the ways the Spirit will work in the lives of those we meet, our responsibility as educators is to be prepared to answer the call as the Spirit leads and directs. As we look at the scope of modern Christian education, which has made valiant efforts to recover its biblical and historical roots¹, it is, in many respects, still caught in the riptide of modernity — assuming that one's ability to "do" is sufficient evidence of transformation. What we call "traditional education" — brick and mortar — is still patterned after the industrial model that functions more like a factory — pumping out widgets based on a set of minimum standards — rather than gardens with individual plants needing cultivation based on its design. Further, the philosophy of education at many Christian schools is utilitarian in practice (even if the mission and vision statements promote internal transformation as a core goal.) Because of this, many Christian schools fall short of providing students with a biblical worldview, a unified and comprehensive understanding of reality in which Christ is the chief integrating factor that binds all knowledge together. Second, many schools do not have a clear understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God and how this fundamental biblical belief manifests itself in the school's educational policies, programs, and procedures.

Transformation is a state of being, with the fruit of transformation manifesting itself in doing. The evidence of this disconnect is twofold: the inability of Christian teachers to understand the biblical philosophy of their subject², and the development of modern Christian textbooks that take their cues from secular publishers (adding Bible verses and more Christian-framed questions) rather than beginning text development from the biblical philosophy of education. This should then trickle down to a biblical philosophy of disciplines (subjects). The remedy is the same—Christ must be at the center if there is to be transformation—but the work to make Christ the center of all things may manifest itself in two different forms: 1) A renovation of the school's curriculum philosophy that has a foundation in Christ but doesn't permeate throughout every part of the school. This is the proverbial taking everything in the school community back to the studs, reexamining the foundation, then rebuilding again. 2) A new build, which may require a complete leveling of the existing structure, including excavation of the foundation, or a new build on brand-new land. The first step is to examine the foundation. The ultimate goal is to ensure Christ is at the center of it all and through all, so that He might have preeminence in all things done in a Christian school. The authors of *Transformational Teaching: Instructional Design for Christian Educators* (2023) offer this lament:

"The most intelligent man who ever walked the earth—the sage of Nazareth, studied and followed by millions and millions of people, arguably having more influence than any other intellectual in history informs no part of educational theory or practice. The greatest teacher who ever taught has little or no voice at the table of teacher preparation or educational policy. Plato, Aristotle, Karl Marx (e.g. through the critical pedagogues) and Charles Darwin (though the psychological behaviorists) have more residual influence over American education agenda than does Jesus. Christians should certainly bring to the 'table' the 'voice' of the greatest teacher who ever lived."

This model is thoroughly focused on recentering and recovering Christ as the central integrating factor. Because He was a teacher, it makes sense to begin here. The Authentic Christian Educator is one who seeks to be like Christ, abiding, proclaiming, serving, discipling, and persevering⁴. From this place of abiding, the authentic Christian educator has the right aim, proclaims the right things, prepares to make disciples, cultivates those relationships for the long haul, and seeks to set an example for those in their care by modeling (living out) what they believe.

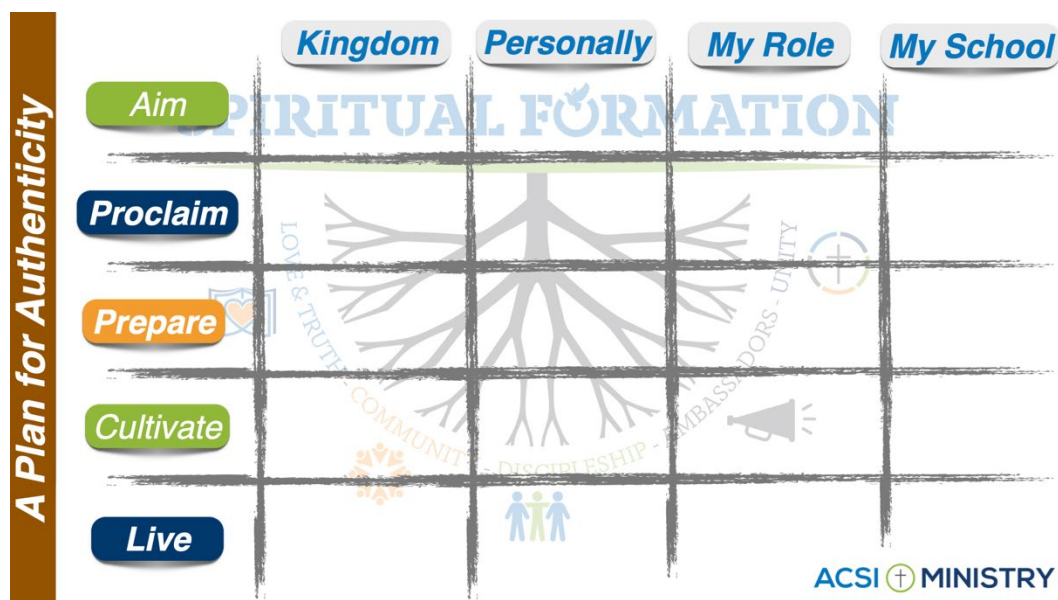
The heart of the authentic Christian Educator then echoes Jesus in John 17:25-26 “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

This philosophy of education considers five overarching questions:

- What is the **AIM** of Christian education?
- What should Christian educators **PROCLAIM**?
- How should Christian educators **PREPARE** to fulfill their calling?
- How does the Christian educator **CULTIVATE** disciples of Christ?
- How should the Christian educator **LIVE** before others?

Paul reminds the Colossian Church that they had been “rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves...”⁵. Therefore, our answers to these questions should be grounded in our reality as citizens of the Kingdom of Christ. The laws of the Kingdom are found in Scripture, not in the pattern of the world. However, if the desire is transformation, then another set of questions must be asked to ensure that what we assent to makes its way to our hearts and manifests itself in what we do.⁶

- *What does this mean for me **personally**?*
- *How does this truth apply to **my role***
- *What should this mean for **my organization (school)**?*



By considering these statements along two axes (the x-axis of personal and contextual reflection and the y-axis of biblical truth), we create the conditions for transformation as we hear what Christ commands us to do and what the Spirit is convicting us to do, both individually and collectively. This process enables collective discernment, with the aim that all who participate together will allow the Spirit to lead them into all truth, increasing the certainty that the community is following the will of God.

This is a necessary first step in producing a Christ-like culture. This is the proverbial “secret sauce” of authenticity. This method challenges the temptation to assume that what works in one place will work in another. Every community must take the universal principles of Scripture and ask how they apply to them in their context. This is both an individual and communal responsibility, facilitated by the Holy Spirit.

Back to Dr. Gant’s admonishment: The question to be considered is not necessarily “What is a Christian school?” That could mean anything these days. The better question is whether all the activities of a school are rooted in the principles of Christ, with Christ as the chief integrating factor that ties all activities together, and, most important, whether Christ is the chief object of the community’s affection. Is Christ at the center of all when everything is stripped away, back to the proverbial studs? Are the anchors firmly secured to the Rock? A Christ-centered school is a place where Christians are united in their obedience to everything Christ commanded. When the Spirit of Christ dwells in these institutions, collectively they are a city on a hill, a light in the darkness, salt to a culture that is perishing. Perhaps it is safe to say that no school can claim to be Christian without the reality of, or an intentional pursuit of, a Christ-like culture. This is ultimately about people and less about things. It is better to have a school full of transformed people than stuff with Christian labels on them. Let us put off misappropriated labels and put on what truly sets us apart in the world. We are Christ-followers who desire a Christ-like culture unto the ends of the earth, so that they may know that Christ is their only Savior and Lord, experiencing the benefit of this blessing for all eternity.