



FIRST THINGS FIRST: What Makes Christian Schooling Distinctive?

by D. Bruce Lockerbie

This fall marks the beginning of my 51st year in Christian education. In the providence of God, I have been blessed to work at or observe schools and colleges and universities and seminaries throughout the world. I have seen some of the oldest and have helped to found some of the newest; I have known historic institutions that were intended to be lighthouses to the world and whose light has now flickered and grown dim; I have known more recent schools whose originating vision has been altered by current leaders less committed to the gospel than were their prede-

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cessors. I have known schools that have remained faithful over decades and even centuries, and schools more recently founded in order to take the place of apostate institutions.

As schools come and go—are founded and either thrive or decline and disband—I have come to this conclusion: God has no need for Christian schools, unless they are intentionally different from the mass of other formal institutions also calling themselves schools. In particular, God has no need for quasi-sanctified “Christian schools” that imitate every aspect of public schooling—state-ordained curriculum, state-certified teachers and administrators, “Spirit Week,” athletic franchises whose importance dwarfs academics, marching bands, booster clubs, fund-raising sales, homecoming court, senior prom, and so on—with only a weekly chapel service and a minimum of Bible instruction sprinkled on top.

Because God has called us to the mission of Christian schooling, He expects more from us than bad imitation. God expects schools that stand apart; God expects distinctiveness. God calls us to a unique vocation that stands out from the world’s model of institutionalized education and its glitzy carnality and superficiality. God also demands more than sanctimoniousness; God demands excellence marked by a humble holiness.

In short, God expects priorities: *first things first*. What, then, are the priorities for Christian schooling? What makes Christian schooling distinctive?

I can give my answer to these questions in three words: *wisdom, knowledge, and understanding*. Or, in three phrases: *biblical worldview, biblical epistemology, and biblical integration*. Or, in this one word: *truth*.

Christian schooling is a pedagogical paradigm different from any other form of education. All schooling claims to dispense knowledge; however, not all schooling professes to deal in both wisdom and understanding. In fact, much of modern education would scoff at any claim to wisdom and understanding, especially if the source of such wisdom and understanding were identified as divine.

Yet such is the premise on which wisdom in Christian schooling rests: “Anyone who comes to [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). The writer to the Hebrews sets two standards: first, acknowledgment of God’s existence; second, a sincere desire to know God, the reward for which is the promise of a personal relationship with Him.

The existence of God has come under extraordinarily hostile attack in recent years. Best-selling books such as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (2006), *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris (2006), and *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens (2007) ridicule theism and characterize those who hold it precious

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as dangerously deranged. Increasingly in contemporary society, any profession of belief in a personal God becomes a blemish on one’s résumé as an admission of an inferior mind. Still, a belief in God is the mandatory starting point for attaining wisdom because stemming from this belief comes a corollary: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10), to which the psalmist applies this converse reality: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’ ” (Psalm 14:1).

Therefore, believing in the great I AM—the God who is—authentic Christian schooling also believes that wisdom originates in God and with God and from God. To deny God is to foreclose on one’s own access to divine wisdom, except as proffered through common grace. Wisdom is an attribute that God holds in reserve and that He reveals only as a result of His own choice—when and where and how much. What God chooses not to reveal remains hidden as mystery. But God discloses enough of Himself and His wisdom through general revelation (nature) and special revelation (the Holy Scriptures, the Incarnation of the Word-made-flesh in Jesus Christ, the witness of the Holy Spirit through the faithful Church) to make Himself well-known to the human race.

The boldest distinctive of Christian schooling, therefore, ought to be in declaring that it is in the business of extolling the wisdom of God as its highest priority. Through the careful study of the text of the Scriptures and through the godly example of mature and maturing Christian believers, a Christian school creates an ethos in which its highest aim is not merely having students who earn stratospheric SAT scores or admission to elite universities but ultimately helping its students acquire and live by the wisdom of God.

But God also invites us to master and enjoy the full panoply of human knowledge. Every topic, every curiosity—from astronomy to zoology—is available for us to discover, observe, examine, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. Nothing is inhibited, nothing is shut off from our asking, and nothing is taboo. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1 and 2 summons us to take control of God’s creation, even as we respect its wonders and awesome beauty. So the Christian school, if it is authentic, honors God by the rigor of its academic curriculum in the quest for human knowledge.

Then God summons us to act on our limited grasp of wisdom and our growing body of knowledge in such a way that we demonstrate our possession of understanding, the balance point for all we know. This understanding means that we have Spirit-imbued discernment in recognizing how best to make use of the wisdom and knowledge we have obtained.

Granted these distinctives of Christian schooling, we are also summoned to acquire a biblical perspective on learning and teaching. In other words, we need a carefully developed and articulated worldview, a carefully developed and articulated epistemology (the science of knowing), and a carefully developed and articulated integration of the broken pieces of life into a coherent whole. For those who administer and teach in a Christian school, the common denominator for these three elements must be biblical authority.

Any worldview depends on the metaphorical platform or vantage point from which a person chooses to look out and see the world. For someone like Prince Hamlet, the world may be either a prison or a weed-infested and unproductive garden; for Ernest Hemingway’s Frederic Henry, the world is a game in which nobody plays by the rules; for Herman Melville’s Ishmael, the world may be nothing more than “a vast practical joke.” An insane asylum, a treadmill existence, a meaningless voyage, a stone pushed up a hill that rolls back inevitably to the bottom—these are the worldviews of the desperate and lost figures of literature. Each of them has found a philosophical place to stand and holds that perspective to be operative for his or her life.

A biblical worldview is essential to any believing Christians in making sense of the life they are living and the knowledge they are acquiring and transmitting to students.

My personal expression of a biblical worldview is from the foot of the Cross and the door of the empty tomb. For me, to look out and see the world from the vantage point at the foot of the Cross and the door of the empty tomb means seeing the full picture of human experience: guilt and grace, loss and gain. For from this point of view, I see first the chaos and corruption of a fallen world, but I also see beyond the tragedy of death and destruction to the glory of redemption and victory.

An essential goal in molding disciples of Jesus Christ is to develop in them a maturing biblical worldview. No Christian school is worthy of the claim of having a biblical perspective on teaching and learning unless its philosophy of pedagogy is worldview oriented. It is not that the Christian school imposes a biblical worldview on its students, as if brainwashing were a test of discipleship. Yet worldview awareness is—for this generation—what the integration of faith and learning represented 50 years ago: a new way of speaking about the commitment to bring every thought, every concept, every theory, every hypothesis, every axiom into submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ. A biblical worldview is the philosophical end for which Abraham Kuyper’s stunning declaration is the premise: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’ ”

A Christian school also needs to hold to a biblical epistemology. Simply put, we need to reduce the science of knowing to two principal questions:

1. How do we know what we know?
2. How do we know that what we know is true?

We know what we know because—as people made in the image of God—we share the attributes of the Trinity: God the Father, who willed the world into being; God the Son, who spoke the creation into existence; God the Spirit, who enlightened the universe with the light of life. As God’s beloved creatures, we have an invitation to participate in His likeness because we possess volition, communication, and illumination. So we come to know what we know by God’s wisdom revealed by God’s will, by human reason that acquires human knowledge, and by the light of love and grace imbued by the Holy Spirit as discernment or understanding.

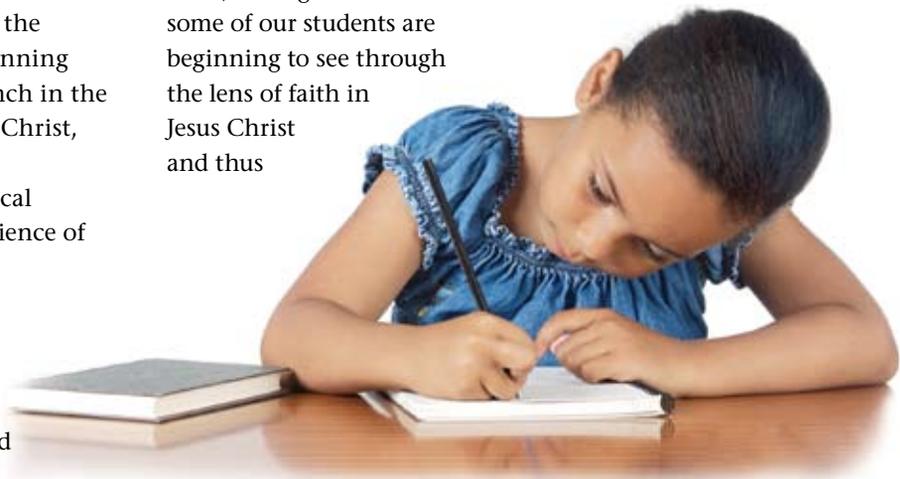
But we come to know that what we know is true only as our faith matures. If God is truth, then whatever we know to be God’s wisdom is also true. We will always be cautious in claiming to possess God’s wisdom, remembering “that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20); instead, we will test our grasp of God’s wisdom by comparing Scripture with Scripture and by the counsel of other believers, current and historical. Even as we confirm our realization of God’s wisdom, so too will we

confess both that our human knowledge may also be limited or corrupted because of the Fall and that our understanding may be skewed by bias or prejudice or faulty reasoning. So Christians throughout the ages have erred in knowing and understanding the cosmos and justifying slavery and subjugating women and presuming chronologies for the end of the age.

Ultimately, we know that what we know is true when God’s wisdom confirms our knowledge and when our understanding conforms to the revelation of Scripture and its precepts. Until then, we see through a glass darkly.

But as we grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding—for this is hardly ever a matter for spiritual novices—our grasp of wholeness increases; we begin to see the connections among interwoven threads that make up the tapestry of what we are learning. We begin to make such connections and see how readily everything relates to everything else. We come to rejoice in the reality of an integrated life rather than experience a life marked by fragmentation and disintegration. Most of all, we begin to exult in the fact that

some of our students are beginning to see through the lens of faith in Jesus Christ and thus



perceive for themselves—sometimes even without our mentoring—the implications of a biblical worldview, a biblical epistemology, and a biblical integration of learning and living.

Here, then, is the crux of Christian schooling’s distinctives. To put first things first, we must assert what Frank E. Gaebelein called “the unity of all truth under God” (1968, 22).

All valid schooling claims to be in search of truth. Many institutions have engraved the following words by Jesus of Nazareth: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Western civilization’s ideal is a mind that education has liberated from the shackles of ignorance; hence, we have the terms *liberal arts* or a *liberal education*.

But how do we come to know the truth that alone can set us free? Is it as easy as fulfilling the distributive requirements for a liberal arts degree or enrolling in the Great Books curriculum or setting out to become a polymath or a

Renaissance man or woman? Certainly not. Only biblically informed, biblically authenticated Christian schooling sets up the declaration “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” in its proper context of obedience and discipleship.

What is that context? In His preceding statement, Jesus says, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). Then and only then, and as a direct consequence of adhering to the preceding *if* clause, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” *If you hold to my teaching*—here Jesus inextricably ties condition to result: obedience

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and discipleship to truth and freedom. Literally, a disciple is someone who sits at the feet of the teacher and absorbs his instruction word for word. St. Paul speaks of his having been “brought up ... at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3, KJV), a famous Jewish rabbi and grandson of Hillel. Was Saul of Tarsus literally taught by Gamaliel? At the very least, his instructors were themselves disciples of Gamaliel, and they imitated Gamaliel’s philosophy and manner of instruction in creating disciples of their own. Similarly today, we have disciples of Maria Montessori and of Howard Gardner and of Frank E. Gaebelien. But Jesus of Nazareth summons us to be a different kind of disciple: we are summoned to obedient discipleship, for only by obedient discipleship can we gain knowledge of the truth that sets us free.

And what is that truth? It begins, again, with the existence of a personal God who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. It carries forward with the responsibility of each human being—made in the image of God yet estranged by sin—to enter into a restored and forgiven relationship with the Creator through the atonement of Jesus Christ, God’s perfect sacrifice for sin. Truth includes the glory of a redeemed life—reconciled with God in the here and now and in the hereafter—for all who have trusted in God’s grace for eternal life.

So here we have God’s wisdom, which sanctifies our human knowledge by an understanding granted by the Holy Spirit. And we have a biblical worldview, which gives us a means of knowing and appropriating truth so that our perspective on life is whole and wholly Christian. These are the distinctives of a school calling itself Christian. These are the essentials that we must recognize as first things first.

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