



What Should a Christian School Do?

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Deciding where one's children will attend school is not easy. In some measure it may be similar to shopping for an automobile. There is a variety of options from which to choose; there is a wide range of prices; what seems appropriate for one family may not meet the needs of another.

To be sure, choosing a school for one's children is a more important decision than selecting a car. Educational experiences do affect our children more than whether the family rides in a Cadillac, a Chevrolet, or a Honda although the advertisers might attempt to convince us otherwise! On the other hand one must wrestle with the fact that choosing a car does educate our children. That decision communicates a sense of the values held by the family.

When an item is bought in the marketplace, one is quite concerned that the quality received is equal to the amount of money spent. We want to be good stewards of our resources. It should surprise none of us that the same interest in stewardship pervades our decisions regarding education. We expect that our resources are being well managed.

I suggest, however, that education, whether public or private, is no place to look for a bargain. We applaud responsible stewardship, but we cannot afford to be miserly in educating our children.

A Christian school certainly is of unique interest to the church. What is it that we want a Christian school to accomplish? How will we know if our investment in Christian education is making a difference? How can Christian education be done in an environment that is sometimes suspicious of intellectual growth and where exposure to the liberal arts is occasionally resisted?

All truth is God's truth. It is our intention in Christian education to hold commitment and reflection, faith and reason together. In the words of the evangelical theologian, John R. Stott, "We are looking for a warm devotion set on fire by truth." Arthur Homes, a philosophy professor at Wheaton College, states it another way: "All truth is God's

truth." If that premise is foundational for the work of the Christian school, it will mean several things:

1. Our students will receive information and gain a perspective on the stream of people of which they are a part. Someone has suggested that what a person finally becomes is conditioned by his or her choice of a tradition. Our tradition is Christian, and more specifically Anabaptist/Mennonite. We seek to be rooted in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition while respecting the contributions which other theological perspectives make to the Christian experience.

As we stand firmly in a particular tradition, we do well to hear the words of Daniel Hertzler: "Education is not concerned simply to transmit a tradition. The process of education should result in a continuing restatement, redefinition, and reformulation of the people's uniqueness and calling." (Mennonite Education: Why and How!, Herald Press, 1971, pp. 20-21.)

This is to say that taking one's tradition seriously does not suggest that the maintenance of the status quo is a primary goal or even desirable. In reality, if the expression of one generation's faith is expected to be identical to that of a previous generation, it is almost certain that the second generation is not being faithful to God's call in its time.

2. If all truth is God's, our students will learn to think. Education should prepare one to critique, to adapt, to be creative. Some might suppose that it is obvious that we want our people to be intellectually alert. In practice, however, that commitment is not so clear. We are more likely to reward indoctrination than to encourage the development of critical intellectual skills. We are satisfied when the student believes and behaves just like his or her teachers, but we risk much if he or she does not own the beliefs.

3. A Christian school should be about the task of preparing students for living in the 21st century. That calls the school to do more than teach the student a skill that will be vocationally rewarding. Since our children will be doing many jobs that do not now exist, we must be concerned to give them tools by which they can adapt to a constantly changing environment. For this reason, not to mention many others, liberal arts education is truly liberating.

4. Our children should receive an education that helps them to understand the church as a growing organism interacting with the society around it. The Christian school does not exist primarily for the purpose of protecting our children from the world. Surely there are many values in society with which we disagree. We are confronted by practices that we do not accept as biblical. Education for mission means, however, that Christian schools cannot be isolated from the world, but must have positive reasons for their existence.

Many persons have observed that the Christian school movement in North America has sometimes been fueled by negative reactions and by fears of the society. Some of those same fears are present in us. I would argue that such fears are not adequate reason for our involvement in Christian education. We need leader who articulate a

positive vision for the future and who see the church as involved in bringing that vision to reality.

5. Our people can be called educated when they express values that are biblical, and not only know certain facts about our world. Albert J. Meyer, executive secretary of Mennonite Board of Education, has sometimes said, "Education is conversation between the generations."

We look to the teachers and administrators of our schools to help us articulate biblical values that give us an identity as God's people. We expect our children to learn science, math, literature, and foreign languages. And we want them to pursue that knowledge within the framework of a Christian value system that is modeled by parents, teacher, and other persons in the church.

Investment in the future. Education for mission is not an economic bargain. Unlike the purchase of an automobile there are no "sales" in education. It is true that the escalating costs of Christian education are of concern and some families are being priced out of the market. Our response should be one of mutual aid. Brothers and sisters in the church must take up the slack. Such partnership is not an act of charity, but an investment in the mission and future of the church.