

The Local Church and Christian Education

By Dr. David M. Doran

Christian education has been a very important part of my life. As an eight-year-old boy, my parents, sisters, and I were all brought into contact with the gospel because we came in contact with a Christian school that pointed us to a gospel-preaching church—the same one I currently serve as senior pastor! All of my academic pursuits from third grade through doctoral studies have been done in the context of Christian education. My four sons are all involved in Christian education. It is safe to say that I am committed to Christian education.

The Christian school movement seems to be at a challenging stage of its history. The movement is definitely past the fad stage when every church seemed to conclude that it must have its own school. Many schools begun in the heyday of the movement have closed. The initial excitement about the Christian school movement has been confronted with the significant costs involved in sustaining an excellent school. There is no denying that Christian schools consume valuable resources—calendar, energy, facilities, and money. I have had more than one conversation with leaders from local churches who wonder if the movement has actually hurt rather than helped the local church.

When I find myself in a conversation like this, I like to ask questions about why that local church has a Christian school. My point in asking is that I firmly believe that unless a local church is convinced that its Christian school is genuinely and legitimately an extension of its God-given mission, that school will eventually be viewed as a competitor to the church's purpose and for its resources. The local church has no right to be doing anything which cannot be justified in terms of its biblical mission. So how does a Christian school fit into the church's mission?

The Foundation

For sake of space, I can only provide a summary statement of what I believe is the mission of the local church. I would summarize it in the following way: *The local church exists to honor God by making and maturing disciples who are becoming like Jesus Christ.* We have a God-centered purpose in that we exist to bring Him glory and honor. The chief means through which we do this is fulfillment of the Great Commission (making and maturing disciples). The outcome of this process is Christlike believers who assemble in congregations which are committed to the purity for which Christ gave Himself to produce in the Church (Eph 5:25-27).

The Application

Given this foundation, the real question regarding Christian education is whether it can genuinely and legitimately help the church fulfill its mandate to make and mature disciples. This question can be easily answered in the affirmative, but the troubles plaguing the Christian school movement may be rooted in offering only an easy answer. We need to be more specific and thorough—how exactly can a Christian school help fulfill the discipleship mandate of the local church? Allow me to propose three ways in which this can be done.

Educating young people from a God-centered perspective of all things.

Romans 11:36 says, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” God is the source, support, and goal of all things, and this world cannot be properly understood without this biblical, God-centered perspective. If it is true, and it is, that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (Pro 1:7; 9:10), then the pursuit of wisdom must begin with God and be conducted with Him clearly in view. Any educational system that operates in denial of God’s existence and right to rule over all things is inevitably distorted by its faulty presuppositions.

The Christian school movement exploded precisely because the theistic framework for education was abandoned by the government schools. Congregations found themselves in a difficult situation. Education was compulsory through 12th grade, so believers were required to subject their children to an education that, by its rejection of God, would potentially undermine biblical truth. Families saw this as a genuine threat to their responsibility to bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). Therefore, congregations moved to establish schools that would openly acknowledge God’s place as Maker and Master over creation.

Developing Christlike character and conduct

The goal of discipleship in the local church is “so that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Col 1:28). Churches can’t limit their attention to a pre-set list of external qualities; the goal is spiritual transformation into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Clearly, the pre-adult years of life are crucial to the formation of solid character (Pro 22:6). During these years, character is being formed through instruction, experience, and the discipline imposed.

The fact is that the educational process cannot be divorced from character development. Education communicates values and principles in multiple ways—the content of courses, co-curricular activities, nature of the educational environment, etc. Education always uses discipline, both formative and corrective, to reach its objective. What and how a student is required to study is as important as for what and how the student will be corrected (or not corrected). It is axiomatic that much of education is caught more than taught, so the question became, “What will our children catch inside an educational system that has rejected God’s authority over all things?”

A Christian education, in contrast, exists because it is committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all things, and that the source of genuine spiritual transformation is the work of the Spirit through the Word (2 Cor 3:18). Without God’s Word applied to the hearts of students, then spiritual change won’t happen. The formation of character is a discipleship issue, and congregations recognized that the long-term health of the church was in danger if a godless system was allowed to shape the character of its young.

Training the next generation of ministry leaders.

Pastors have a biblical responsibility to equip all of God’s people for ministry (Eph 4:11-12) and to train men for the ministry of God’s Word (2 Tim 2:2). Neither of these obligations demand the establishment of a formal educational process, but we live in a culture where school is usually how people receive their training. Compulsory education beyond elementary school is a development of the 20th century, and the number of students who finish high school rose from about 6% to about 85% between 1900 and

1996. Education through high school is considered basic and essential in our culture. This development forced local churches to wrestle with the hard question of whether education in a godless system during the potentially turbulent teen years was the best route for training its next generation—pastors, deacons, missionaries, teachers, faithful members, etc.

The coinciding rapid degeneration of moral standards in our culture and particularly among young adults made education in the public system questionable at best. The alternative is to establish an educational process that is designed to equip young people for ministry as part of the overall educational process. The students have to be in school, so let's train them in God's Word and seek to cultivate both the vision and commitment to serve Jesus Christ in the local church.

Conclusion

Has the Christian school movement lived up to its claims? I really don't feel compelled to answer that question because it is too general, and I don't accept some of the claims that have been made by the "movement." As a pastor, however, I can rejoice in the fact that our Christian school has been used by God to educate hundreds of young people from a God-centered perspective, cultivate Christlike character, and train the next generation of leaders for local church ministry. It has not been without challenges, and we are far from perfect—what ministry isn't? But we have pastors, deacons, school administrators, teachers, missionaries, and loads of faithful church members who all have graduated from our Christian school. We need to be clear about why we are involved in Christian education in the context of the local church. Does every church need a Christian school? No, only those who believe it is consistent with their biblical mission and will be committed to doing it right for God's glory and the good of His people. May that kind of school increase and abound!