

## DIVERSITY IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Is there diversity among Christian schools? Or are all conservative Christian schools essentially the same—rigidly structured according to Conservative Protestants' interpretations of the Bible and views of morality? Researchers are beginning to question the simple picture of a monolithic Christian school movement. Important differences among Christian schools are submerged in accounts that see them as organized and run simply according to religious dogma.

One reason is that the religious dictates themselves vary more than is generally understood. Even within Conservative Protestantism, religious dogma doesn't generate uniformity in schools because it is too varied. For example, some Conservative Protestants use a literal interpretation of the creation story in Genesis to justify presenting “creation science” as in absolute conflict with evolution. Others see the biblical creation story as perfectly consistent with the general outlines of scientific theories of evolution (Nord 1995). At times the religious dictates of Conservative Protestantism don't even apply to day-to-day classroom activities. Even the most devout Conservative Protestants struggle to figure out exactly what the Bible has to say about whether a school classroom learning environment should be more authoritarian or egalitarian, or whether schools should focus on the advancement of all students, or expend special resources on the more academically gifted – or on those who lag behind.

It appears that the Bible can justify very different schooling strategies. For example, for deeply religious reasons, some conservative Christian schools require that

parents share the religious orientation of the school, while other Christian schools invoke biblical commands to support admissions policies that do not include religious qualifications. Some Christian schools use biblical passages to justify a disciplined, orderly, and individualized structure for student learning. Others give legitimacy to learning environments designed to foster creativity and community by drawing on *imago deo* doctrines that see persons as reflecting God's image through creativity, imagination, and social solidarity.

Besides the fact that religious dictates point in several directions at once, there are outside pressures that shape the relationship among school organization, classroom practice, and religious principles. Almost all Christian schools are financially precarious; market principles influence their policies and practices. One study has shown that, in an effort to attract enough students, Christian schools relax and generalize religious prescriptions to be acceptable to diverse religious parents (Wagner 1997). In addition, Christian schools confront the same cultural trends as other American institutions—trends that privilege individual choice and decision over institutional authority. This American penchant for expressive individualism (Bellah 1987) means that most conservative religious parents focus on the unique qualities of individual children and the priority of parental choice over church dogma.

Walk into one Christian school, as I recently did in North Carolina, and the second grade classroom wall is covered with the children's creative writing about a Monet painting. Below the painting of overcast skies and small boats on shimmering, calm harbor waters, the children's stories answered the question, "Where does the light in the painting come from?" and, "How does this painting make you feel?" Progressive

educators would be impressed with the open, child- and group-centered learning in this classroom. Walk into another Christian school classroom in North Carolina and find first graders reciting their phonics lesson in unison. A bright and caring young woman, with a genuine concern for the kids, leads the class in a chorus of "Aaah, Aaah, Apple," "Eh, Eh, Egg." The class has a community spirit, much like singing a hymn at church. The drill included a solo here and there as the teacher asked factual questions, looking for a single right answer. Though the classroom atmosphere is hardly grim, some educators would consider the structure of the learning experience too rigid. They would disapprove of the teacher-centered instruction, of the seemingly heavy-handed curriculum that is disconnected from the children's experience and leaves little room for individual styles of learning and creativity. My purpose, however, is not to discredit or celebrate any particular approach to teaching and learning, but to understand the diversity of Christian schools, which is evident in teaching techniques, admission policies, and so forth.

The diversity of Christian schools is rooted in religious differences within Conservative Protestantism, and school organizational characteristics, such as whether the school is governed by a parent Board or controlled by a church. The pages that follow describe and explain differences in mission and organization among Christian schools. Debates about school choice plans, and the relation of public purpose and religious education, would be better informed if they accounted for the diversity of Christian schools. Understanding this diversity requires an analysis of religious traditions within Conservative Protestantism, organizational characteristics of Christian schools, and the educational levels of Christian school parents.

## Christian Schools and Religious Traditions

What makes a school "Christian?" Forty years ago, mainline Methodist and Episcopal schools, and perhaps even Catholic schools, would be numbered among the country's "Christian schools." The dramatic growth in the 1970s of schools within "conservative" Protestant religious movements (which emphasized individual salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, missionary outreach, and close ties between individual faith and everyday life) led to a narrower definition: a "Christian school" is one that's affiliated with Conservative Protestant denominations, such as the Southern Baptist and Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and, in general, with the dominant streams within Conservative Protestantism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the evangelical, charismatic, fundamentalist, and pentecostal religious movements.

While these Conservative Protestant religious movements bear a family resemblance, their differing histories shape the diversity of Christian schools. Compared to the evangelical movement, the *fundamentalist* movement spawned Christian schools out of its more radical stance on separation of believers from "the world." Often found among smaller Baptist and, to a lesser extent, Southern Baptist denominations, fundamentalists seek to nurture children in the faith by uniting church, home, and school and walling out the outside world (Peshkin 1986). The *evangelical* movement, which arose in the 1940s to oppose the fundamentalists, attempts to bring conservative religious traditions and presence into the broader society and culture. Evangelicals think of their Christian schools less in terms of walling out the influence of the world, and more in terms of "integration of faith and learning," which includes an active engagement with

and critique of modern society and culture from a "Christian perspective." For those within the evangelical movement, particularly among the Christian Reformed and related denominations, Christian schools make sense because in their view education cannot be value-neutral. A teacher who teaches the difference between Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking and models a Christian way of life is the best hope for integrating faith and learning, according to some evangelicals (Glenn 1987).

Pentecostals contrast their emotional and experiential faith with the more staid conservative religious faiths, such as fundamentalism (Riesebrodt 1993). The lower-class origins of the pentecostal movement (Anderson 1979), as well as their emphasis on special spiritual experience, such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesy, includes a strong sense of outsider status vis-à-vis the surrounding society and culture (Wacker 1988).

The charismatic movement grew in the 1960s as an offshoot of the evangelical movement, though it shares with Pentecostals an emphasis on spiritual gifts in worship. Charismatics bring to community worship contemporary forms of music, lifting up of hands, and other forms of emotional individual expression (Neitz 1987; Miller 1997). Christian schools affiliated with charismatic "fellowships" are likely to display greater tension than other evangelical Christian schools between their schooling practices and traditional forms of education. They are more likely to eschew highly structured and authoritarian forms of education, in favor of individual expression and creativity (Rose 1988).

## Denominations and Christian Schools

The Christian school landscape is colored with the different hues of fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, and Pentecostals. And in few cases the diversity of Christian schools springs from denominations. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), a conservative branch of the Lutheran church, has a tradition of Christian schools that reaches back to the nineteenth century. Schools affiliated with the LCMS, which, for a single denomination, boasts the largest number of schools (over 1,000) outside of the Catholic Church, have their origins in the German ethnic communities in the Midwest. Like Catholics, German Lutherans were not welcomed with open arms in the growing public school movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and instead turned to establishing their own schools. Later, the LCMS schools grew stronger and took on greater symbolic importance in the LCMS struggles against “modernism” within liberal and mainline wings of the Lutheran church. This German ethnic heritage and the struggle over the definition of Lutheranism has led to LCMS schools that are tightly integrated with their local churches, permeated with traditional Lutheran doctrine, and staffed by Lutherans trained in LCMS colleges. The importance of this connection between school and church is evident in the tuition policies of the schools, which offer substantial discounts for members of the LCMS church. The result is that LCMS students are often the majority in the schools, especially at the elementary school level. In addition, the schools take on the task of preparing LCMS children for membership in the church and partaking of communion. These “confirmation classes,” in which children are encouraged to confirm the salvation that is offered to them through the church, are directly integrated into the LCMS school curriculum.

Another important denominational source of Christian school organizations—especially considering the small size of the denomination—is the Christian Reformed denomination, which traces its theological heritage not to Luther but to John Calvin. Largely based in Michigan and Iowa, Christian Reformed churches developed schools in keeping with their Dutch ethnic heritage and their religiously-grounded belief that education is inherently value-laden, and therefore Christians must attempt to integrate a Christian perspective on knowledge into every educational nook and cranny. One of the most influential national Christian schooling organizations, Christian Schools International, grew out of the Reformed denominations.

### Diversity of Christian Schools

The differences between Christian schools within the various Conservative Protestant religious movements and denominations are not always sharp. Over time, ethnic distinctiveness has subsided, and some Conservative Protestant religious traditions in schooling have diffused throughout the movement—partly through the growth and consolidation of Christian schooling organizations and publishers of Christian school materials.

But we can see the outlines of at least three types of Christian schools, each of which coheres because of distinctive religious networks and affiliations as well as the character and mission of the schools. First, the Christian schools affiliated with the evangelical movement, which would encompass some Southern Baptist schools and many independent Christian schools, tend to be more open to professional education techniques and somewhat more focused on academic mission. Christian Reformed

schools maintain some denominational distinctiveness, such as their priority of developing a Christian worldview, while making up a key segment of evangelical Christian schools. The Christian Reformed schools, which emphasize engagement of religion with secular teaching techniques and secular ideas and texts, are not cut from the same cloth as the more separatist fundamentalist Baptist schools. The fundamentalist schools—the whipping boy of Christian schools both within the movement and in the popular press—more strongly focus their schools on developing personal character and discipline and teaching specific fundamentalist doctrines, such as the literal interpretation of the Bible and six-day creationism. A third group of Christian schools, affiliated with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, seems to mirror the fundamentalist Baptist schools in their tight connection between school and church as well as their emphasis on creationism in science classes. Yet the Lutheran school culture, with its emphasis on music, German language, and "confirmation" classes, is not endearing to schools closely affiliated with a fundamentalist Baptist church.

Beyond these three religious types of Conservative Protestant schools, the boundaries are less clear. Schools affiliated with charismatic schools may look exactly like evangelical schools, though some would draw a sharper boundary between themselves and the outside world and many are closely tied to an independent charismatic church. Little is known about African-American Christian schools, but they are likely not only to differ because of race but also because of religion (Emerson and Smith 2000).

Not all Christian school diversity can be chalked up to religion—socioeconomic class and organizational characteristics underlie and often cross-cut religious differences

between Christian schools. Christian schools run by a board of parents from several different churches tend to differ in important ways from schools subsidized and run by a particular church. Socioeconomic class matters as well. Middle class and more educated parents tend to shape Christian schools toward less tension with the outside world, greater emphasis on academic excellence, less rigid social control of students and greater room for individual creativity and expression, and less denominationally distinctive ways of integrating religion into school life. These sources of Christian school diversity only partially overlap with religious sources. The combination of religious, organizational, and social class sources of diversity has contributed not only to a more colorful Christian school landscape, but also to the rapid growth of Christian schools.

### The Growth of Christian Schools

The sources of the Christian school movement are deeply rooted in denominational and religious history. The strength of these religious movements and denominations, however, is not enough to explain the explosive *growth* of Conservative Protestant Christian schools in the 70s.

In general, the Christian school movement of the 70s and 80s responded to the events and trends of the turbulent 60s: the consolidation of a secular science curriculum after the Soviet Union raced ahead in space exploration, the counter-culture and urban riots, and Supreme Court decisions to restrict school prayer and Bible reading in public schools. In this context, Conservative Protestant religious organizations were well-positioned—both in organizational and ideological strength—to respond with an unprecedented bricks and mortar campaign. The new breed of Christian schools grew

from roughly 2,500 in 1972 to about 9,000 today, and now comprise about 25 percent of all private schools in the US.

The explosive growth of conservative Christian schools coincided with the racial integration of public schools, leading many to claim that "segregationist academies" predominated in the early years of conservative Christian schooling. No doubt racial integration in public schools played a large role in spawning many Christian schools in the past. But the larger issue for most of today's Christian schools is the cultural shifts of the 60s and 70s, which were symbolized so vividly for conservative Christians in the Supreme Court decisions banning school prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. In an interview, a Christian school principal in rural North Carolina school claimed that the "segregationist academies" have died out and that those Christian schools that survive are motivated by the shift away from a Judeo-Christian culture. While this principal overstates the case, most Christian schools today see their mission as one of confronting or separating from a world that, in their view, has lost its moral and spiritual bearings (Arons 1983). Racial segregation seems far overshadowed by concern for bringing together family, church, and school in a common subculture (Rose 1988). In their view, they are not choosing to withdraw from American society; rather, the culture and society have moved away from them (Fowler 1989).

Painting Christian schools with a racist brush misses most of what animates their diversity. And, for many Christian school administrators, openness to racial diversity is now almost a necessity if they are to stay focused on their religious character. With many competitors selling private education, the Christian school claim to a religious brand name is what makes their product unique. The charge that they are selling racial

exclusiveness questions the identity of most Christian schools. In defense of this identity, Christian school administrators struggle to get applicants to consider and appreciate the religious distinctiveness of their school, as opposed to its academic quality, relative safety for children, or effectiveness in maintaining student discipline. Religious distinction is a precarious thing, though, vulnerable to the corrosive effects of market forces and parents' concern for status mobility and individual success. It takes a great deal of ideological work, as cultural sociologists are fond of saying, to integrate religion into all aspects of school life (Wagner 1990).

Rather than using religion to justify racial exclusion, most Christian schools now see racial inclusion as a way to demonstrate that religion matters because it (at least in theory) can create ties across races. Seen in this light, it is interesting that studies show that the Christian school context creates greater interaction across student racial differences than do public schools (Greene 1997). Policies of racial inclusion are required both for public relations reasons, since Christian school administrators are sensitive to charges of racism, to maintain the uniqueness of a religious educational product, and to enhance their own identity as people who put religious principle before all else. Interestingly, most of the schools I visited made special efforts—including reduced tuition—to reach out to African American churches to increase the racial diversity of their school.

A Christian school is more accurately understood from within the religious movement in which it grew. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod emerged out of its German heritage and its conflicts with early public schools, later with the liberal trends among other Lutheran denominations. Christian Reformed schools have a Dutch heritage

and distinctiveness that hails from the theology of John Calvin. Fundamentalist schools are explicitly structured to create a religious enclave within a hostile society and culture. And the so-called "Classical Christian Schools," one of the youngest and fastest growing types of Christian schools which I discuss below, emerged as some evangelicals attempt to follow Dorothy Sayer's work on the divisions of knowledge and learning techniques of the Middle Ages. In light of the distinctive ethnic and religious history of each Christian school tradition, no single explanation of Christian school growth is adequate.

### Inside Christian Schools

What are Christian schools actually like? Though there is no one answer to that question, I offer some glimpses of Christian school diversity through my visits in 1999 to five Christian schools in North Carolina and Indiana.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Free Will Baptist*

In 1974, Free Will Baptist Christian School opened in a medium-sized city in eastern North Carolina, and eventually grew to 250 students from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The principal, Mark, a seasoned veteran of 19 years, explained that the mission of the school was to train and disciple children in "the faith." From the size and prominence of the sports trophy case, it would be difficult to tell this school from many public schools. But the plaques and trophies were sprinkled with biblical verses that tried to balance religion and sports—for example, the "Lydia Christian Athlete of the Year Award" was inscribed with the biblical proverb, "A virtuous woman is hard to find."

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<sup>1</sup> I created fictitious names for the schools, since Christian schools—as with most public organizations—are sensitive about their public image.

Paralleling the scholar-athlete awards in public schools and colleges, the sports awards at Free Will Baptist mix religious and athletic virtue.

Mark explained that his school is a rib in the umbrella that is Free Will Baptist church. Many of the major decisions at the school are made after consulting with the Deacons and pastor of the church with which the school shares facilities. And about 40 percent of the students and their parents attend the sponsoring church. While affiliated with a smaller, fundamentalist Baptist denomination, Mark noted that they do not try to change students' Christian beliefs, but only insist on "things pertaining to salvation."

The atmosphere at the school can only be described as disciplined. Students, even the younger ones, eat their lunch in amazing tranquility. Dress is restricted; the girls wear skirts and dresses. Movement through the hallways is for the most part orderly. As the principal put it, the school can really run itself—that was not hard to believe. Classroom activities follow fairly closely an integrated curriculum put out by a Christian publisher, Bob Jones University Press, that is popular for many in the fundamentalist wing of Conservative Protestantism. The program uses almost entirely phonics in its reading instruction.

The first grade class I visited was running through its phonics drills with aplomb. If not welcomed by some professional educators, it makes for a rather impressive display of advanced phonics knowledge at this young age. And it is striking that nearly all the kids appeared to have mastered the drills, and that the class seemed to have built community partly through its structured classroom exercises. The teacher brought Christian faith into the classroom in ways that supplemented material that would be fairly standard fare in public school classrooms. For example, health class is taught from a Bob

Jones book, entitled "Health, Safety, and Manners." The kids seemed excited about getting their books out and read together that "God gave us eyes that work—we are thankful. God expects me to take care of my eyes, too.... God made our heads so wonderfully that our eyes are protected." The teacher then asks the class why God "put your eyebrows there?" and later reminds the class that "God gave us the responsibility to take care of our bodies." In this way, learning about and caring for the body is given a sacred motive, but, as in public schools, the kids are still simply learning to wash their hands before meals.

### *First Baptist Christian School*

First Baptist Christian School in Indiana was quite similar to the Southern school, but with a stronger fundamentalist flavor. The mission at this school is firmly oriented toward the moral development of the child, the building of Christian character. The principal here, Jeff, a graduate of Bob Jones University, was younger and less experienced than the principal at Free Will Baptist. Partly because of Jeff's relative inexperience, the First Baptist pastor and deacons play a large role in the decision-making at the school. The sponsoring church also offers scholarships to children of church families.

This school requires parents to sign a statement of faith, which closely follows conservative Baptist doctrine. In practice, parents are simply agreeing not to oppose the teaching of Baptist doctrine in Bible studies class. Parents must also have a recommendation and nomination from the pastor of their church, which certifies that they are active in the church. In addition, I was surprised to learn, the applicant's pastor must read the Baptist doctrinal statement of the school and circle the parts with which he

disagrees. As the principal explained, this is necessary because the three key engines for the spiritual and moral development of the child, the church, family, and school, must all be pulling in the same direction. As Jeff sees it, some Christian schools have an evangelistic purpose, but his school majors on discipleship, that is, creating discipline and character befitting followers of Christ. Those who want to come to the school, then, have to clear some fairly high hurdles. Jeff explains that the school attempts to "apply the Bible to every area of a child's life." And he says that he can usually tell if a prospective parent is serious about the kind of Christian education that the school provides. Parents looking only for discipline and orderliness are sometimes turned away. As Jeff puts it, these things are important, but the school "must have a spiritual reason for existing."

In practice, that spirituality comes into learning through the Bob Jones and A Beka curriculum, a weekly Chapel in which the principal or a local pastor challenges the students to greater discipleship, prayer and devotionals at the beginning of classes, and a daily Bible class for all students. In addition, students are encouraged to do "Christian service," including sharing their faith with others and helping in the school or community.

The school has many of the elements that are often thought to mark all Christian schools. As at Free Will Baptist, corporal punishment is allowed, but it is used only as a last resort. In addition, boys can only be spanked by the principal, and the girls, only by a female teacher. Witnesses must be present, and the parents must be notified. Before discipline problems require spanking, teachers and administrators try to persuade the child by reading Proverbs from the Bible, or giving demerits or detention. Creationism is

taught in science class first, and then evolution is discussed as a competing theory. Most teachers are not accredited, although they have college degrees.

### *Trinity Christian Academy*

An independent school of 65 eighth through twelfth graders in rural North Carolina, Trinity Christian Academy places much more emphasis than the Baptist schools on academic excellence. The mission of developing Christian character is clearly part of the culture and structure of the school, but academic excellence is seen as a Christian calling to glorify God in this world. The academic emphasis provides a small but viable niche for the school within a community in which education is not highly valued. In response to that lack of academic concern in existing schools, a handful of highly educated Christian parents banded together in 1988 to start a school in which academics and Christian community would coexist.

Some parents leave Trinity because they are not comfortable with its press for academic excellence. On the other hand, three students who were expelled from public schools for drugs and fighting have improved markedly under Trinity's rigorous discipline and academic focus. The solidarity within the school and across family and school contributes to effective socialization of students. Students are called upon to include "problem" youngsters and, as the students' would say, "weird" kids. Students caught smoking behind the school were suspended for the day, received a zero on their tests, and given a week of cleaning duties at the school, including mopping floors. The students apologized publicly to the rest of the school for breaking the rules.

The day starts at Trinity with a short chapel in which a student and a teacher provide an inspirational reading or devotion. At one chapel, a girl read an inspirational

passage, warning against the attitude that "if it feels good, do it." The moral of the story was that feelings are not an adequate guide to morality and learning. Prayer and announcements follow within a school culture that is best described as a family atmosphere. The chapel ends with the older students giving Ms. Bishop, who has been principal for four years, a "circle hug" in appreciation of her work over the school year. As with many smaller schools, the leadership has much to do with the overall atmosphere of the schools and its successes and failures. In this case, even the students are wildly enthusiastic about "Ms. Bishop."

The family atmosphere no doubt arises from the struggles and sacrifices that parents and teachers make to keep a newborn organization going. As with many independent schools, finding adequate facilities on a shoestring budget is a challenge. After several attempts, Trinity was able to rent a rundown community center in a poor area of town. Fixing up and maintaining the building, while keeping in good favor with their city landlord, is a team effort—parents, teachers, and students work side-by-side in this endeavor.

### *Reformed Christian School*

Reformed Christian School, located in a medium-sized city in Indiana is associated with Christian Schools International, the school group most closely affiliated with the Christian Reformed church. Many of Reformed Christian schools' teachers graduated from Calvin College in Michigan, and several parents in the school's leadership attend the Christian Reformed Church in town. The school has 150 students from preschool to eighth grade, and its facility is a new brick building with wide hallways and comfortable classrooms—an expensive building financed primarily by two people

committed to Reformed schooling. Since the school is run by an independent board of parents and several parent-led committees, it is not surprising that the students represent over 50 churches in the surrounding area. "Pastor-and-Me Day" brought together pastors from a diversity of Christian traditions, including a Catholic priest. According to the principal, the diversity of parents tends to mitigate the Christian Reformed traditions and doctrine, since some parents want denominational distinctives left to the churches.

Reformed's principal, Nancy, a young single woman who has been with the school for half of its six year existence, explained that the most distinctive aspect of the school is its "Christian emphasis"—though she added, "but it is not just Sunday School." The distinctive Reformed ideological position is evident in her concern that Christian education not consist of "tacking on a Bible story at the end of class." She finds this "Sunday School" approach in popular Christian curricula, such as Bob Jones Press and A Beka, and criticizes them for being legalistic and overly focused on individual behavior and discipline. Unlike First Baptist, Nancy explicitly states that a "Christian emphasis" is not primarily a matter of instilling morality and individual virtue. She would rather use a good secular text, and critique and apply it from a Christian perspective.

The Christian faith is supposed to be integral to the classroom in a Reformed evangelical school. How is this accomplished? Through teachers who "model servanthood," according to Nancy, and also in how subjects are taught from a Christian critical perspective as teachers attempt to uncover and critique foundational assumptions of mathematics, science, history, and so forth. It is doubtful that this ambitious "integration of faith and learning" project is actually carried into the classroom. You don't immediately notice it; teaching of subject matter actually seems similar to public schools.

But this may be due to the elementary-school age of the children, which makes it difficult to provide a meaningful Christian critique of mathematics, for example. And there are other ways that a Reformed religious orientation shapes more than the stated purpose and mission of the school (however important that is in itself). A "Christian emphasis," in Nancy's view, includes placing a high value on community—within the classroom and among parents and teachers—as well as academic success. The emphasis on community within the school did seem to have much more visible impact on the structure and general culture of learning at Reformed than Christian critiques and perspectives within specific subjects.

Reformed religious traditions have shaped the structure of the learning environment at Covenant, which conveys to its students the connections among different domains of knowledge. Rather than overall master plans organized around textbooks, Reformed Christian generally organizes each class around a thematic unit, such as weather, the solar system, or American Indians, which integrate math, reading, writing, art, and other traditional subjects. This is reflected in differences in the structure of the classroom: Free Will Baptist Christian School uses traditional desks organized in straight rows, while the classroom at Reformed is organized by "centers," with round tables and chairs in different sections of the room for activities for each subject. According to the principal, a structure of learning that facilitates making connections across subjects—a holistic approach to knowledge—not only helps kids learn, but helps them to understand the integral order of God's creation.

The Reformed Christian School curriculum is influenced in many ways by the latest trends in professional education circles. But that does not mean that religion at

Reformed is just window dressing. The school's leadership, guided by information and materials provided by Christian Schools International, has a burden to select and adapt—according to their understanding of a Christian worldview—the latest developments in the professional education literature. The other major emphasis of the school, creating a learning community in the classroom, also seems motivated by religious belief as well as being championed by some education professionals. As Nancy explained, from a religious perspective each child is uniquely created and gifted. Hence there is no one right path to academic success. Covenant attempts to structure classrooms around community learning and community project assessment, rather than individual achievement through standard tests. Showing the marks of Reformed religious traditions, Nancy not only thinks that her school has a religious obligation to do the best educational job it possibly can, but also that they "need to look at what the educational research is telling us about how this can be accomplished."

Community among parents and teachers is facilitated by the school's "open door" policy. As Nancy puts it, parents "feel needed" at Reformed Christian, and are found doing everything from assisting teachers in class by reading to children to planting flowers around the building. In this sense, Reformed has a much more egalitarian feel than either most public school classrooms or fundamentalist schools. The religious authority of administrators in the fundamentalist schools, and the technical professional authority of most public schools, creates a greater separation of parents from the educational process than at Reformed. Corporal punishment is not allowed here, as it is at First Baptist and Free Will Baptist. But Covenant has an elaborate policy for handling discipline problems that requires parents and teachers to work together and agree on

disciplinary strategies for a child. Since, from a Christian perspective, the school is an extension of the family, disciplinary authority based on a community of parents and teachers is part of the duty of a Christian school. So attests Nancy.

### *Covenant Christian School*

The first grade class at Covenant Christian school, set in a medium-sized university town in North Carolina, started the day with prayer and then said the Pledge of Allegiance in English and Latin. The Latin emphasis in this school gives away the influence of the "Classical and Christian School" movement. The movement is inspired by the writings of Dorothy Sayers in the early twentieth century on the "tools of learning" that marked Medieval education. Children begin their education by learning grammar, especially foundational languages such as Latin, and then move through logic and rhetoric. At the grammar stage, children are supposed to learn the different aspects of the creation, and their function—a foundation that they are expected to build on when they grow into the logic and rhetoric stage. Following the Pledge, the first-graders identified various body parts on a picture diagram, and learned about the five senses. The class then split into different centers. Five students read a play together with the teacher, which ended with the moral, "Don't make plans unless you are willing to carry them out." The first graders seemed well on their way to reading fluently, answering relatively complex interpretive questions on the reading, learning Latin, and still fitting in a devotion and moral lesson.

The 6<sup>th</sup> grade class was writing in their journals their feelings about their community service field trip. Desks were arranged in pairs, and students were relatively free to move about the room as they wished. The class seemed to have a strong sense of

comradeship, which appeared to partly arise out of the student's regular "chores" in class. And it may also result from the teacher's emphasis on bringing the student's faith to bear on their relationships with others. Rather than having a major impact on academic content, religious faith comes strongly into play when the teacher admonishes students against breaking up into cliques.

The next day, neatly dressed, the 6<sup>th</sup> graders filed into the church sanctuary—which was half-filled with parents, grandparents, administrators, and 5<sup>th</sup> graders—to debate the merits of capital punishment. Whatever the source of the debates' quality (Dorothy Sayers or the World Wide Web?), it was impressive. Expecting religious arguments to dominate the debate, I instead found that students freely mixed standard "secular" arguments for and against capital punishment with references to biblical passages and Christian obligations. Pointing out Bible passages that emphasized God's mercy and forgiveness, the team *against* capital punishment seemed to win the contest to invoke the most Bible verses. As one student put it, capital punishment is "killing one of God's prized possessions."

Because of the distinctive approach of Classical Christian education, it is not surprising that new Covenant parents are encouraged to attend a few discussions of school philosophy in the evening. At one of these meetings, a school board member emphasized that Covenant is sometimes controversial with parents because it spends considerable resources on liberal arts skills, including Latin, and that it favors "unhurried learning," which is code for a movement among homeschoolers and some private schools to account for a child's own interests and motivation in deciding how and what the child should learn at each stage in school. The question he posed was whether parents are

willing to give up "advanced placement" classes, which Covenant is not likely to have, in favor of a less structured and less pressured learning environment. An overly rigid school structure and too much homework, several parents agreed, suppressed imagination, creativity, and hindered the important work of the family. The contrast that these parents made between an overly-structured learning environment and a more open approach that instills a "love of learning" echoed the evangelical tendency to contrast a personal, loving relationship with God (evangelical spirituality) with merely institutional expressions of faith, such as church-going (Sikkink 1998). The board member also asked parents to avoid being simply consumers of education, who pursued their own wants and interests for their children, and instead to become part of a community of parents and teachers working toward a greater collective good.

### The Generic Christian School

If there is diversity arising from so many directions, what unites these schools? One constant across Christian schools is that family, church, and school should work together for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual direction of the child. Within this broad consensus, there are a great variety of Christian schools. But nearly all would see their mission in how it brings together family, church, and school for the growth of the child.

Reflecting this mission, the primary education goal at Christian schools, according to 68 percent of Christian school principals in the US, is the religious or spiritual development of students (Baker et al. 1996). So there is fairly strong agreement on the mission of religious and spiritual development, relative to other goals such as academic excellence and promoting relationship skills. Not all principals, however,

agreed: 13 percent see the primary goal as basic literacy skills and 12 percent mention academic excellence. Promoting good work habits and self-discipline, which is often thought to be the forte of Christian schools, is only mentioned as the primary goal at about 1 percent of all Christian schools. And promoting specific moral values is the highest goal at only 5.6 percent of Christian schools.

Principals were also asked to name the second most important goal at their Christian school. Interestingly, among principals whose first mention was religious or spiritual development, the runner-up goal most often mentioned is academic excellence: 37 percent of Christian schools mention this as their second most important educational goal. Again, self-discipline is not that popular nor is instilling specific moral values. But achieving basic literacy skills is fairly popular: 27 percent mention this as their second most important goal.

Christian schools, then, are fairly unified in seeing their premier mission as the religious and spiritual development of children, and this goal is closely linked to the pursuit of academic excellence—most likely for evangelical schools with more highly educated clientele—or with basic literacy skills—which may be more popular at fundamentalist schools. But it is noteworthy that, despite claims that fundamentalist schools disparage educational pursuits, academic goals rate very high at almost all Christian schools and vocational skills rate at the bottom. Teaching specific moral values is not a popular goal—only 13 percent of Christian schools bother to mention this even as a second priority. It appears that Christian schools see their first mission as religious socialization, with moral character as a byproduct of that mission. And, while the primary

identity of Christian schools is religious in nature, public purposes, such as basic literacy and academic quality, are a central concern as well.

Religious mission leads to another constant across Christian schools: nearly all of them require a fairly strong statement of faith from job applicants. Applications for teachers often include a written or verbal personal testimony of their faith, and agreement to what are considered the basics of the faith, such as belief in Jesus Christ through faith, and an obligation to live a holy life in response to grace. Some of the more conservative Baptist-affiliated schools require employees to be in accord with more detailed Baptist doctrine, though there is plenty of slippage between stated policy and actual practice. The LCMS schools take a slightly different approach: they require almost all of their teachers and administrators to be trained at LCMS colleges.

To ensure that family and school pull in one direction, most Christian schools require that one or more parents of an enrolling child sign a "covenant" or statement of faith and perhaps also a lifestyle agreement. Without the home working together in the Christian nurture of the child, many Christian schools would say, it is difficult to carry out their mission. These statements of faith, however, vary from a minimal assent to faith in Jesus Christ to a nearly complete doctrinal statement of a Baptist denomination. And a significant minority of Christian schools sees their mission as including applicants without regard to religion, so long as parents are aware of the religious nature of the school and will not oppose it. In fact, this organizational difference often marks a deeper fault line within the Christian school movement. While the more fundamentalist schools generally require covenants, the evangelical schools are split on this issue. Some believe that maintaining a Christian identity is done at the level of teachers and administrators,

and see their mission as enveloping Christian and non-Christian students alike. Other evangelical schools are just as committed to the view that, without parents' being on the same page as the school, the mission of the school is impossible to carry out.

There is little doubt that Christian schools usually place greater emphasis on student discipline and moral rectitude than the average public or private school. And most of them achieve moral conformity by tying good behavior to a sacred order, which includes the use of shame to increase social control. For most students in Christian schools, the stakes for disobedience are high. In addition, the structure of relationships among school, home and church sets up very different dynamics for individual behavior. As James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer (1987) have argued, within Christian schools the overlapping networks of school, church, and perhaps neighborhood create stronger social ties and greater moral consensus, which leads to more successful socialization of children. In other words, if Johnny's parents know and interact with the parents of Johnny's school friends, Johnny is more likely to behave at home and school, and to come to believe in the values and norms of his family and community. Christian schools are much more likely to foster a dense social network of parents, kids, and school personnel, which is more effective in instilling values and religious identities.

The principal at Covenant Christian relayed a story that seems to illustrate both Coleman's argument and the diverse ways that themes of sin, judgment, and repentance are incorporated in Christian schooling discipline. Covenant does not require that parents or students be Christians in order to be admitted to the school. But the parents are informed about the Christian nature of the school, including the fact that biblical stories, ethics, and devotions will be part of the classroom. One boy from a non-Christian family

cheated on a test, but was not caught. The boy couldn't sleep, and admitted to his parents that he had cheated and that he had to confess. The next day the family met with the principal to divulge the bad news, and agree on a punishment. Drawing on biblical themes of the response of God to confession and repentance, the principal reminded the boy of the story of Jesus's love despite our sinfulness and offer of forgiveness for the repentant. The boy cried as he was forgiven all, and, in true biblical fashion, told to go forth and sin no more. Consistent with a long tradition within evangelicalism, the principal noted that the Holy Spirit had brought this change of heart and opened the opportunity for hearing the gospel.

As this story illustrates, Christian schools tend to create a sacred canopy in which Christian beliefs and ethical guidelines have meaning and are more effective in child socialization. Authority is generally not exercised in a rigid, heavy-handed way (contra Peshkin 1986). The clear mission of the school, and the intersecting networks of school, church, and home, contributes to that sacred canopy, which deviant children must confront. It is not so much that Christian schools are more effective in instilling virtue and moral absolutes in children because they use the stick, as that the structure that unites family and school under a sacred canopy is much more effective in guiding behavior—and ultimately in shaping religious identities that usually last a lifetime.

### Making a School Christian—Curriculum and Organization

There is no doubt that a religious mission, especially dedication to the religious and spiritual development of their students, is the key way that Christian schools understand their work and create a market niche for themselves. But how "christian" are

Christian schools? Some researchers have seen them as total institutions with a single conservative Christian ideology that dominates everything about the school (Dwyer 1997; Peshkin 1986). More recent and careful accounts have shown that most Christian schools are not nearly as permeated by religiosity as often thought (Wagner 1997). Most depend on gifts and tuition, hence market forces soften the hard edges of religion as schools compete to attract students and financial support. And Christian schools confront nearly universal norms in America about what it means to be a school (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Not surprisingly, then, the curriculum at Christian schools generally follows the standard secular models of what education is about. Surveys have shown that they are no different from public schools in the number of math, English, science, social studies, and computer science classes that are required to graduate. There is a slightly greater emphasis on foreign language at Christian schools, which may reflect the ethnic origins of some of them. Yet the evidence does not show that Bible and theology requirements are crowding out the standard curriculum found in public schools.

So how is a Christian school classroom christian? The answer depends on the religious tradition of the school. What is fairly consistent is that Christian schools include Bible reading and some kind of devotional activity at the beginning of the day. In one school I visited, the teacher asked students if they had any prayer requests. Most students came up with somebody's health problem, or offered thanksgiving for a new bike or other things that kids care about. The teacher then tried—with limited success—to steer the students toward thinking beyond themselves and material things, and led the students in a short prayer. It is also common to read a short Bible passage at the beginning of class, and many Christian schools of all types have students memorize passages of the Bible. A

smaller majority of Christian schools have a weekly "chapel," in which the entire student body gathers for singing and a mini-sermon from the principal, teacher, or a pastor. The fundamentalist and LCMS schools are more likely to incorporate regular chapel, and to include a message that goes beyond generic Christian faith to the specific beliefs and doctrines of their denominations and religious movements. In general, however, the religious markers of the school are devotional exercises. Standard educational tasks—from reading to arithmetic—remain separate from these more devotional ways of creating a "christian" classroom.

Another way in which some Christian school classrooms are noticeably christian is through curriculum materials purchased from national distributors. A Beka and Bob Jones University Press are two of the heavy weights in Christian school curriculum, though evangelical schools would be more likely to turn to materials from the likes of Christian Schools International and will often meld Christian commentary in the classroom with secular texts.

A Beka and Bob Jones Press have a fundamentalist flavor—some evangelical schools will pick and choose from the Bob Jones offerings, but the fundamentalist school curriculum is often entirely from these presses. These publishers offer everything from English to Science to a full-fledged Bible curriculum. A Beka conducts week-long training seminars at Pensacola Christian College, a fundamentalist college in Florida which houses A Beka, to learn "effective use of materials and methods." A Beka's stated goal is "not sales but training young lives for eternity." They attempt to build "the content of every textbook on the foundation of God's Word." A Beka sees itself as distinctive because they "do not paraphrase progressive education textbooks and add Biblical

principles," but do "primary research in every subject and look at the subject from God's point of view." As a fundamentalist brand, A Beka claims to make a radical break with "humanistic philosophy and methods of the progressive educators." The rhetoric defines a market niche, but, interestingly, many Christian schools don't take this separatist stance too seriously. Many Christian schools mix and match the fundamentalist publishing materials with secular texts (Wagner 1990).

What about A Beka and Bob Jones materials would be strikingly different from public school curriculum? The basics would be quite similar, but the fundamentalist publishers take pains to mix in references to Scripture, the importance of religion to the Founding Fathers, and, where possible, the sense of divine purpose in ordinary historical events. History texts are perhaps the most laden with biblical references and religious interpretations of events, which is why many evangelical schools reject these. A Beka claims that their history texts "reject the Marxist/Hegelian conflict theory of history in favor of a truthful portrayal of peoples, lands, religions, ideals, heroes, triumphs, and setbacks." The result, according to A Beka, gives students a "positive and uplifting history text that gives students a historical perspective and instills within them an intelligent pride for their own country and a desire to help it back to its traditional values."

Another major player among the fundamentalist Christian publishers is the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), which calls itself the "School of Tomorrow." ACE claims to have 5,250 schools in the US, but most schools that use ACE tend to be just starting and many others tend to use ACE materials only for a small percentage of their students. ACE provides a highly standardized, pre-packaged curriculum designed

for individual students to work at their own pace. The teachers' role (as "supervisor") is limited mainly to grading worksheets. This style is popular with many fundamentalist homeschoolers, and is often used by fundamentalist schools for their high school students. Since the teacher's role is so limited, they can avoid hiring extra teachers for only a few high school students.

The ACE curriculum has been criticized for its isolated, individual learning, and emphasis on control and conformity rather than independent learning (Rose 1988). Students work quietly at their "stations" and there is little opportunity for discussion and questioning with other students or the teacher.

In contrast to the fundamentalist schools, evangelical schools often disparage ACE and A Beka. They will use secular textbooks or texts available from Christian Schools International and—especially for the Classical Christian schools—Veritas or Logos School books and materials. The curriculum available in evangelical publishing houses is less likely to promote the view of America as a Christian nation that needs to be restored to its former greatness. The CSI materials attempt to “develop effective citizens within the framework of the Christian faith and Christian principles” and “reflects the basic conviction that God ordains government.” They avoid portraying a single Christian view of history—especially one that sees the US as a "redeemer" nation. Veritas Press history texts are not radically different from public school texts, but, for example, they offer an Old Testament and Ancient Egypt series in which “students learn that biblically recorded history did not happen separately from non-biblically recorded history.”

The fundamentalist science materials from ACE “teach young students the facts of Creation as presented in the Bible” and “set forth the days of Creation and what was

created on each day.” The evangelical science texts do not insist on a literal six-day creation. Rather than emphasize scientific creationism, CSI claims its science materials will “empower students to discover the infinite complexity and amazing orderliness of God’s world, learn about themselves as a special part of God’s creation, and recognize themselves as caretakers of God’s creation.” Setting up a contrast with fundamentalist views of science and the Bible, CSI argues that “the Bible sets the facts obtained through scientific study in the correct context of ultimate causes and infinite relations. The Bible and science are complementary, together helping us to understand God’s plan and purpose for creation.”

As with the other evangelical Christian schools, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod schools generally use secular texts. LCMS headquarters does offer books for teachers that, for example, show how they can “include strategies and teaching techniques that integrate the Christian faith with children’s literature.” These reflect the tendency of evangelical curriculum to emphasize interaction with the secular world and to encourage independent learning, rather than censoring materials and maintaining tight control over the content presented to students (Rose 1988).

### The Demographics of Christian Schools

How many Christian schools are there? Where are they most likely to be located, and how many kids attend them? That depends on the measure (and definition) of Christian schools. The U.S. Department of Education defines "Conservative Christian" schools as schools that are affiliated with a conservative Christian schooling organization, such as the Association of Christian Schools International, American Association of

Christian Schools, and Christian Schools International. The estimate of these schools is nearly 5,000, and the number of children enrolled in them stood at 750,000 in 1997-98. But this doesn't capture all conservative Christian schools, since many are not affiliated with a national organization. According to the Department of Education, the total number of non-Catholic religious schools in the US stands at 13,200 and the corresponding number of students is nearly 1.8 million. So the actual number of conservative Christian schools and students lies somewhere in between. A good estimate is that there are about 9,000 Christian schools with 1.3 million students.

Even among those Christian schools that are affiliated with national Christian schooling organizations, it is clear that Christian schools tend to be small. Nearly 70 percent enroll fewer than 150 students. Most (63 percent) are combined elementary and high schools, and 34 percent are elementary schools only. The remaining 3 percent are high schools only. And these schools are most likely to be found in the South and Midwest.

Most Christian school principals (58 percent) have only a Bachelor's degree. Christian school principals tend to be less educated than in other school sectors. Though the average education is lower, the variation among Christian school principals is larger than other schooling sectors. This may result from the wide variation in the average level of education among parents of Christian schoolers. But Christian school principals are just as likely as those in other private schools to receive leadership training in evaluation and management techniques.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This finding is hard to evaluate, however, since the definition of Christian schools available in these data is limited to schools affiliated with Christian schooling organizations. Principals in affiliated schools are likely to have more opportunities to attend seminars provided by the national schooling organization. The finding may also

One clear difference between Christian schools and others is the low pay for employees. The average pay for a Christian school teacher in 1997-98 was only \$10,600, and the highest step on the salary schedule for Christians schools is slightly under \$17,000. Of course, some of the reasons for these low salaries are the smaller average size of the Christian schools, the lower education of the teachers, and the likelihood that Christian schools are located in areas with a lower cost of living. But even after taking all these other factors into account, Christian school teachers are paid (on average and net of other factors) \$8,000 less than public school teachers. And only 14 percent of Christian school teachers receive pension contributions—far lower than the public school sector or any other type of private school.

The lower compensation reflects the cultural importance of "Christian ministry," rather than economic gain, both in motivating teachers at Christian schools and justifying lower pay for teachers. Although there is plenty of grumbling about low pay, the vast majority of teachers would say that they have a religious calling to Christian schooling that overshadows any concern with financial gain. This may explain why Christian schoolteachers are much more likely to say that they are satisfied with their jobs than other private school teachers (NCES 1998). It may be that higher pay would create conflicts with the sense of religious ministry that legitimates low compensation. If Christian schools and Christian schoolteachers are doing their jobs "as unto the Lord," that claim is more credible if they are at the same time making economic sacrifices.

The day-to-day governance of Christian schools is very different from public schools and from some other private schools. Not surprisingly, control over such things

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reflect the extent that Christian school principals are active in churches, which may also provide information on training opportunities.

as hiring practices, and curricular and discipline policies at Christian schools is vested entirely at the school level. The principal of a Christian school seems to have much more say in these decisions than at other types of schools. And Christian school boards, which at independent Christian schools often consist of heavily involved and invested parents, are much more active in setting curricular and discipline standards than at any other type of school. The key role of the Christian school board is not surprising given that these school's mission includes uniting family and school. And board members often account for a good percentage of the donations that keep the school running. At one school, for example, the board compared tuition income and actual expenses at the end of the year, and divvied up the difference among themselves. At least in Christian schools that are not subsidized by a church, the board is not only a policy body but also the major shareholders of a company that always runs in the red.

At most Christian schools, tuition covers 80 percent or less of the budget. Tuition varies widely, but is usually somewhere between \$1,500 and \$4,500. As a result, most Christian schools not only are forced to spend a good deal of effort raising funds, but also are more market-driven than is often acknowledged. Pressures for religious particularity—such as teaching students the Baptist doctrine that only adult believers should be baptized—are nearly always checked by the need to attract more students. In fact, one study has found that Christian schools are a moderating force on religious sectarianism, since the school must attract students from other area churches, and parents from different churches come into close contact through involvement in a common school (Wagner 1997). Individual parents have a stronger impact on school policies and decisions because Christian schools are so tightly linked to market demand. The upshot,

for many schools, is that centralized decision-making and, rigid stances on religious principles and lifestyle requirements end up giving way to a more democratic governance structure in which Board and parents have a great deal of input into decisions.

### Christian School Parents

In a national sample, 4.2 percent of Americans with children over five years old reported that they had sent at least one child to a Christian school (GSS 1998). These parents tended to be younger, located in the South, more highly educated, and of higher incomes than the American average. Another study shows that, among Protestants who attend church regularly or feel that their faith is extremely important to their lives (about 34 percent of the US population), 25 percent have sent at least one of their children to Christian school for at least one year. A closer analysis shows that these parents are more likely to be white, to live in two-parent homes, and to have both parents working.

If we look just at these church-going Protestant Christian school parents, the national survey numbers show that they are very likely to say that the public school is hostile to their moral and spiritual values. Only 40 percent of church-going Protestants say the public schools are hostile to them, but 66 percent of Christian schoolers feel this hostility. When asked about the biggest problem in public schools, Christian schoolers were more likely than other church-going Protestants to say that prayer or religion had been taken out (the most popular response among Christian schoolers), and that schools are not teaching the 3Rs well. And fully 97 percent of Christian schoolers believe that we are seeing a serious breakdown of American society, though it should be kept in mind that 90 percent of other church-going Protestants agree.

Christian schoolers, not surprisingly, are distinctive on what they see as the most important goals of a good education for children. Compared to other church-going Protestants, they are less likely to think that learning job skills is the top educational priority, and much less likely to see building children's self-esteem as an important educational goal. Interestingly, even the average Christian schooler is not much less likely to think that a top priority in education is teaching children about diverse races, religions, and cultures (67 percent versus 73 percent for other church-goers). While Christian schoolers are commonly thought to choose Christian schooling so that their children could learn discipline and respect for authority, they are no more likely than other church-going Protestants to see this as a top priority in education (84 percent in both groups). But Christian schoolers are much more likely to say that teaching a Christian perspective on knowledge is a top priority in a good education.

According to these numbers, Christian schoolers have distinctive goals for children's education, but they do not on average have an authoritarian view of learning. They do believe that kids should learn a Christian perspective in their subjects, but they on average disparage a focus on the emotional development of the child. We can also draw some conclusions from these data about why parents put kids in Christian schools. Christian schoolers feel that their religion is trivialized in public schools, and they generally see America as in a severe moral crisis (Arons 1983).

### Why Parents Choose a Christian School

The reasons for choosing a Christian school are usually specific to the individual family and child. Only a small minority of conservative Christians takes the stance that

Christian kids should be in Christian schools as a matter of principle. In fact, most evangelicals have long considered participation in public schools as a religious calling (Sikkink 2000). When asked whether Christians should try to fix public schools or build strong Christian schools, 56 percent of Christian schoolers favored working with the public schools. Moreover, most conservative Christians have strong tendencies to focus on the individual, and most Christian school parents talk about the specific needs of a child when explaining their choice of school. The academic, social, and moral needs of the child are more important motivators of the Christian school choice than is a belief that Christian schooling is the "christian" way to educate children.

The result is that many Christian parents do not develop a strong, ideological commitment to the Christian school. More likely, the school is viewed as the appropriate vehicle in light of the child's needs, their personality, their experience at public schools, the available alternatives, and other factors. For example, many parents will send one child to Christian school, and others to public school, based on their assessment of each youngster's personal and moral strength to withstand peer pressure at public schools. An American emphasis on expressing individual difference—individual difference that is considered by Americans to be an outcome of deeply rooted personality differences (Bellah 1987)—affects most Christian parents as much as everyone else.

That makes it difficult for Christian schools to develop a solid and committed clientele. It is not uncommon for a child to move in and out of Christian school. As one board member explained, home schooling can become a competitor to Christian schools as parents focus on the personal and academic success of their own children rather than the Christian school community. The decision often hinges on whether a desired public

school teacher's class is open. It is difficult to characterize Christian schoolers as a disciplined marching army, bent on seceding from mainstream American culture and society. Some accounts of fundamentalist Christian schools portray Christian schools as "total institutions," that is, Christian schools are cut off from the world like a psychiatric hospital (Peshkin 1978; Provenzo 1990). But the fact that Christian parents focus on individual needs and balance cost and convenience while scouting available alternatives reduces the commitment of parents to Christian schools and makes it nearly impossible for Christian schools to become isolated enclaves.

Among conservative Christians, the strongest expressed support for Christian schools is found within the pentecostal and charismatic movements. These movements are in greater tension with the status quo at public schools, and define a much stronger boundary between their faith and "the world." In contrast, evangelicals tend to believe that Christians should keep their children in public schools as a witness and as sources of influence on non-Christians, the school, and the nation. Evangelicals usually leave public schools reluctantly, and see Christian schools as a stopgap measure in these "troubled" times (Sikkink 1999; Fowler 1989).

How do religious traditions influence the choice of a Christian school?

Fundamentalists and charismatics are (on average and net of other important factors such as level of education) the most likely to choose Christian schools. In raw numbers, there are as many evangelicals who chose Christian schooling as fundamentalists and charismatics. But evangelicals also tend to be more educated and have higher incomes than other conservative Protestants, which increases the likelihood that they would choose some type of private school. After taking into account the differing levels of

education and income among the religious groups, we find that evangelicals are not more likely to become Christian schoolers than are mainline Protestants, such as moderate or liberal Episcopalians or Methodists. The Christian school movement, then, has its strongest support among the fundamentalist, pentecostal, and charismatic religious movements. Evangelical parents, with the significant exception of Christian Reformed adherents, are no more likely to take up Christian schooling than parents attending churches of the mainline denominations.

### Christian School Organizations and Christian Diversity

Christian schools are divided by the company they keep. Most are affiliated with a major Christian school organization, which offers curriculum, national conferences, and leadership and teacher training, and, in some cases, engages in political lobbying. Schools often use these affiliations as a way to increase their visibility and credibility, and signal their underlying direction and educational philosophy.

The fact that the major Christian school organizations don't work together to any significant degree is rooted in religious differences and market strategies. One of the major reasons that these organizations seem to operate in isolation is that the religious denominations and movements with which they are associated don't spend a lot of time conversing either. Ecumenical movements among conservative Protestant denominations have not been popular. In addition, market forces reinforce these religious divisions, since the organizations must sell their products to survive. Each major Christian schooling organization offers a separate product and brand name, which would blur into worthlessness if it were interchangeable with all the others. And, as we will see, each

organization attempts to exploit a market niche. So religious histories, identities, and market forces interact to heighten the walls among the major Christian schooling organizations.

### *Association of Christian Schools International*

The largest of these organizations, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), sees its task as enabling Christian educators and schools to bring to their students, "wisdom, knowledge, and a biblical world view as evidenced by a lifestyle of character, leadership, service, stewardship, and worship." This group began in 1978 as a conglomerate of several smaller, regional associations, and now numbers some 4,500 schools with 870,000 students worldwide.

The history of merging separate organizations partly explains the mission and strategies of the ACSI, which is more flexible about its membership than other schooling organizations. It is less concerned with the doctrinal purity of its member schools, and its statement of faith is fairly general. The ACSI strategy lends itself to practical support to Christian schools through national and international conferences, teacher certification programs, legal services, curriculum, and technological services.

Rather than limit its clientele to a particular denomination or religious movement, ACSI sees its mission as providing information, services, and products to the "evangelical Christian community." The phrase itself has the effect (and intent) of being as inclusive as possible (including the charismatic movement, for example) while by default not being as attractive to the more fundamentalist—often Baptist—Christian schools. ACSI upholds the biblical basics, but in a way that is as inclusive as possible.

### *American Association of Christian Schools*

The American Association of Christian Schools (AACCS), founded in 1972, provides a vivid contrast. Comprising about 1,000 schools with 200,000 students, AACCS is a much more homogeneous group than the ACSI, and consists of fundamentalist—primarily Baptist—Christian schools. Rather than the general phrase, "evangelical Christian schools," the AACCS refers to their members as "Bible-believing Christian schools." To insiders, that difference provides a clear marker for the fundamentalist movement, and its battles with evangelicals, liberals, and charismatics. In case the hint is not taken, the AACCS mission statement notes in bold letters that "membership will not be afforded to those associated with, members of, or in accord with the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, the Modern Charismatic Movement, or the Ecumenical Movement." This is classic fundamentalist language of double separation from theological liberalism and the charismatic movement: be ye separate not only from the wayward, but also from those who refuse to separate from the wayward. One principal of an AACCS school was particularly adamant in pointing out that his school is distinctive because it will not associate with ACSI. The ACSI is suspect, he said, because it allows Christian schools affiliated with charismatic, Lutheran, and Seventh Day Adventist churches to join. Not surprisingly, AACCS schools tend to have much stronger and more specific doctrinal statements, which reflect the stances of more conservative Baptist denominations. The AACCS statement of faith, which must be adopted by its members, says in no uncertain terms, "we believe in creation, not evolution." AACCS schools are much more likely than ACSI schools to take a stronger stance on creation in

science classrooms, and often see an irreconcilable conflict between creation and evolution.

### *Christian Schools International*

A highly influential though smaller Christian schooling organization, Christian Schools International (CSI), differs from both AACCS and ACCS because of its roots in the Christian Reformed and related denominations. Founded in 1920, CSI provides for its members a monthly magazine, curriculum, a job placement bulletin, consulting services, standardized testing, etc. CSI refers to its clientele as "Reformed Christian schools," a term that CSI traces to John Calvin and the Protestant Reformation. Because of this narrow niche market, CSI affiliation includes substantially fewer schools: 475 of them, with approximately 100,000 students. And most of these schools are found in the upper Midwest, the regional home of the Reformed denominations and Dutch immigrants.

Many of the schools in this tradition have a greater openness and concern about using "secular" scholarship to improve learning. At the same time, they are concerned, as they like to say, that "all of life" reflect Christian thinking and action. They place a good deal of emphasis on the importance of community within the school as part of "doing Christian schooling christianly."

### *Association of Classical and Christian Schools*

The Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) shares some theological roots with the Reformed traditions, but takes this in a much more radical direction. The movement is influenced by a minority Reformed perspective, "Christian

Reconstructionism," which believes that Christians can and will bring the Kingdom of God to all areas of society and culture. As befitting a new and small organization, its leaders take strong positions based on their theological interpretations of Scripture. While every hill is a hill to die on for the ACCS leadership, these are not necessarily the hills one might expect. For example, the leaders of the movement absolutely oppose any form of government aid to Christian schools, including school voucher plans.

This organization is small—only about 125 schools are actually members—though it has influenced at least two to three times that number of Christian schools. The "classical" approach includes "recovering the lost tools of learning," the title of an influential book by Douglas Wilson, the leader of the organization and its flagship school, Logos Christian School in Moscow, Idaho. That means that students in grade school learn the Trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—which they see as the foundation of the Western educational tradition. One of the distinctive practices of these schools is an emphasis on teaching Latin in the early grades. Full members must commit to a K-12 program, and have a minimum of two years in Latin or ancient Greek for each student, and one year of formal logic or rhetoric in the secondary program.

Other important Christian schooling organizations are embedded within denominational traditions. With their constituencies defined by their denominations, these organizations have a very different mission from the likes of ASCI. The largest Protestant denominational association of Christian schools is the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. These schools tend to be closely connected with LCMS churches, or with regional associations of LCMS churches. LCMS schools number about 1,000, which

enroll some 200,000 students. Not all of them would fit the conservative Christian school mold, but most would. Members of the congregation receive free or reduced tuition at these schools, and about half the students belong to LCMS congregations.

### Religious, Organizational, and Class Diversity

Diversity among Christian schools, as shown above, is first of all rooted in differences among Conservative Protestant religious movements and denominations. The LCMS schools, the Christian Reformed schools, the Classical Christian schools, the fundamentalist Baptist schools, and the evangelical Southern Baptist schools divide over issues of classroom organization, admission requirements, integration of religion and school, and mission. These differences are reflected and reinforced through affiliations with Christian schooling organizations, which divide along many of these same lines.

But other sources of diversity arise out of the differing structures of Christian schools. Most important is the relationship of the school to a particular church. A school that is run of, by, and for a local church is more likely to mirror the religious contours of the denomination in its classrooms, Bible classes, and chapel. Its mission and organization is shaped by the fact that its primary constituency is usually the members of the church itself. The elders and pastors of that church tend to have considerable say over decisions in the school. The principal may also be an associate pastor at the church. Because of this relationship, the school will often have a more well-defined doctrinal statement and mission, one that closely follows the denomination of the church. For example, fundamentalist Baptist schools teach the importance of adult baptism in their

Bible classes. Admission requirements for parents and statements of faith from employees are more likely to include the specific details of denominational doctrine.

In contrast, schools run by a board of Christian parents, independent of any local church, tend to incorporate more generic forms of the Christian faith, partly because of the religious diversity of the board and parents. This makes it more likely that a school will have more general doctrinal statements and religious requirements for its teachers, and, if there is any religious test for admission, it is less likely to require parents to be like-minded Christians. It is conceivable—though the evidence is not available to prove—that an independent school organization is better suited to the engaged style of evangelicals, and less suited to the separatist strategy of fundamentalists, who attempt to unite home, school, and church in a coherent web that protects children from the world.

The nature of a school's clientele also creates different Christian school flavors. As noted, a clientele consisting mostly of members of the sponsoring church allows a school to create a tighter connection between school, home, and church. In addition, the parents' educational level creates different constraints and opportunities. More educated parents are apt to be uncomfortable with an authoritarian classroom, and to demand greater parental input. The more centralized authority of fundamentalist schools may rub better-educated parents the wrong way. And such parents tend to create an atmosphere that welcomes the latest techniques from professional educators. They are also more accepting of a school style that engages the secular society and culture, rather than withdraws from it.

Some researchers have looked to social class differences to explain differences among Christian schools. Perhaps the diversity of schools is not the result of religious

differences after all, but rather due to the fact that upper class parents are attracted to (and create) schools that the lower working class parent would not consider. Susan Rose (1987) argues that social class matters in her study of two Christian schools, one affiliated with the evangelical movement, and the other closer to fundamentalism. The lower class fundamentalists in her study choose an authoritarian style for their school, which fits with the working class origins of the families in a Baptist church—the major source of students for this school. The school reflects its working class character by selecting the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) curriculum, in which each student works on his own and progresses at his own pace through a highly structured education program. On the other hand, the evangelical school is populated with middle class kids, and, correspondingly, engages the broader culture from a Christian perspective. The curriculum emphasizes critical thinking and creativity, much like other schools of middle class families. What looks like a difference between fundamentalist and evangelical schools is explained as a difference between the parents' social class.

Socioeconomic class is part of the story, though class alone—and the relation between religion and class—is more ambiguous than Rose suggests. The difference between Covenant, the evangelical Classical Christian school in a university city in North Carolina, and Free Will Baptist in a rural part of the same state, is partly due to the higher average level of education in Covenant's community and among Covenant's parents. An appreciation of Monet probably wouldn't fly at Free Will Baptist, but it does at Covenant. Robert Wuthnow (1988) convincingly shows that rising levels of education have created new fissures among Protestants over the last 50 years. It is not surprising, therefore, that education also creates divides within the Christian school movement.

But perhaps this is only temporary. There is no doubt that most Americans place a strong value on education for their children; evangelicals—and even fundamentalists—are no exception. There is also a tendency of "middle" class forms of schooling to be picked up and spread throughout the Christian school movement. Remembering that the "new" Christian school movement is quite young in organizational terms, it is likely that forms of schooling that appear more compatible with the middle class right now will later be adopted by "working class" schools. As noted earlier, Rose worried about the rapid growth of the ACE programs in the eighties, because she thought they reinforced social inequality. By training kids to accept orders rather than think critically, by relying on individual competition rather than social interaction and cooperation in learning, ACE seemed to destine lower class Christian kids for lower class jobs and nothing more. Except for its rapid expansion outside the US, ACE now looks more like a fad than a long-term trend. For many conservative Christians, whose traditions have long valued personal relationships and personal mentoring ("discipleship"), the structure of ACE learning—individuals working alone in competition with each other—conflicted with their religious beliefs and values. In addition, conservative Protestants have experienced incredible social mobility—their income and educational levels have rapidly increased over the last 30 years (Smith et al. 1998). The growing middle class conservative Protestants are demanding schools to match their educational attainment and aspirations. It seems unlikely, then, that Christian schools further reinforce social class inequalities in the US.

While social class does matter in structure and culture of a Christian school, and therefore partially explains Christian schools' diversity, the relationship is not a simple

one, since well-educated Conservative Protestants are still highly religious and doctrinally orthodox (Smith et al. 1998). It is not that religion does not matter in Christian schools that serve more educated parents, but that it leads to different solutions to the questions of classroom organization, admission policies, and interaction with secular professional educational standards and materials. In many instances, the social class argument simply fails to explain some Christian school differences, which are in fact rooted in religion. For example, the LCMS serves a middle class clientele, while the fundamentalist Baptist schools usually serve lower class parents. Yet they agree on creationism in science class, the strong relation of church and school, and the incorporation of denominational distinctiveness in religious classes in the school. The similarities and differences are better explained as an outcome of the histories and theological marks of their differing religious traditions.

### Christian Schools and Public Purpose

The sharp distinction that we now make between public and private schools would not have made sense in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Jorgenson 1987; Ravitch 1974). And this sharp boundary between public and private schools makes it difficult for us to see the ways in which today's so-called private schools perform public functions. And even if we agree that other private schools have a public purpose, Christian schools still seem far removed from public purposes because of their explicit religious mission.

Christian schools contribute to public life, first, because they teach much of what is considered "public" knowledge. Even fundamentalist schools spend much more time teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic than teaching the Bible and Baptist

doctrine. Most of the "integration" of religion and basic subject matter at Christian schools would not offend your average American of any faith. Christian schools, then, perform the public function of preparing children for adulthood, employment, and citizenship. For example, we can safely conclude that Christian schools that integrate debate and public speaking into its organization and mission, such as the Classical Christian schools, improves the aggregate civic skills of America. Critics will still ask whether, even though Christian school 6<sup>th</sup> graders debating capital punishment gain valuable public speaking skills, the content of the debate is so laced with religious arguments that it can only increase strife in public life. But the kids at Covenant seemed very comfortable with secular arguments, and perhaps even learned ways in which their Christian assumptions could be better cast in secular language. And most kids at Covenant seemed to be learning about the diversity *among* Christians on contentious issues, rather than sharpening their religious swords to do battle as one in the public square.

Christian schools serve a public function by providing an organizational space for alternative teaching techniques and forms of schooling. They keep alive or develop instructional approaches and educational philosophies that may not have an opportunity to thrive in public schools, which are often governed by outside professional dictates and state mandates. For example, the trend toward "whole language" techniques for teaching reading in public schools contrasts with the hard-core phonics approach in fundamentalist Christian schools. Since students have different needs and learning styles, this diversity of reading techniques may serve a public purpose. Christian schools that eschew standardized testing, revive Latin, logic and rhetoric, emphasize the place of music and

foreign language, refuse to track students by ability, choose an unhurried approach to learning, and so on, offer models that may prove useful to public schools (Bryk, et al 1995). One of the hallmarks of Christian schools, their coherent missions and moral socialization through networks incorporating family, school and other aspects of life (in this case, churches), may provide direction to public educators who are worried about alienated adolescents and withdrawn families. And Christian schools have long served as models for local control of decision-making and smaller school size, which have loomed larger in debates about public school problems as well.

For parents whose children are not succeeding in public schools, the alternatives nurtured in Christian schools may provide a viable cure. One family I talked with turned to the Christian school after one of their children seemed overcome by negative peer influence, discipline breakdowns and drug problems in their public schools. The smaller school size, the strong and overlapping social networks, and the sacred canopy over moral norms and values, made it more possible to instill self-discipline in their child. Some students caught in a downward spiral in the public school setting may not only need a change of scenery, but may benefit from a sacred canopy and religious social networks. And here the educational alternatives of the Christian schools serve a public good.

### Christian Schools and Civic Participation

Does involvement in Christian schools lead parents to become more isolated and focused on private life, further fragmenting American society and reducing public and community participation? Are Christian schoolers withdrawing from public life? On the

surface, the answer seems to be "yes." But the way Christian schools operate actually increases the involvement of parents in the community and society.

According to some studies, Christian schoolers are withdrawing from public life into religious enclaves. One study of a fundamentalist Christian school finds that parents attempt to create a "total world," in which the entire life of family and child is imbued with sectarian religious meaning (Peshkin 1986). Another study finds that "the evangelical movement resists reliance on secular agencies for psychological, social, and educational services.... Evangelicals are attempting to establish their own 'Christian' networks and communities wherein they can exercise greater control and autonomy" (Rose 1989: 59). According to this research, parents chose private schools to unite home, church, and school into a coherent web—a religious web—that walls out connections to broader civic life.

Yet the structure and culture of religious schools have surprising and positive effects on civic participation. Such schools are part of tight social networks across church, school, and family that are marked by trust, reciprocity, and normative direction. That is, Christian schools are sources of community, which generates further outreach into other communities. Partly through their involvement in Christian school community, parents develop a sense of who they are and what they ought to be about. These characteristics of Christian schools generate civic participation in three ways that are noteworthy.

First, the social ties in church and school create incentives to participate in civic life rather than remaining focused on a (private) family life. Overlapping organizational ties create the means of social control; since your friends will insist that you not sit at

home, you are more likely to participate in civic life. Christian schools are more likely than other forms of schooling to provide for overlapping social ties, across families, church, and school.

Second, Christian schools increase civic participation because they offer the opportunity (and often require) that parents use and develop civic skills, such as public speaking, organizing an event, and working with people to bring about change, that transfer to other organizations and settings, such as politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Collective action within the Christian school—as with any type of organizational involvement—tends to instill virtues of community and cooperation. Even if these associations are actively pursuing political interests, involvement in Christian schools may increase public awareness and provide an antidote to isolated individualism (Kaufman 1999). Third, Christian schools create mobilization networks; that is, they tend to connect parents with information necessary to get involved in community and political activities.

Christian schools are creating strong social ties marked by trust and reciprocity among parents and school personnel. Through building civic skills and mobilization networks, Christian schools may contribute to more vital democratic life. Public schools may have played a civic-generating role in the past, but the social changes of modernity and the bureaucratic and professional nature of public schools makes it more difficult for public schools to foster broader forms of civic participation among parents. Christian schooling organizations may take up where public schools left off.

## Conclusions

The diversity of Christian schools is not surprising in light of the long history of religious pluralism in a America, in which the established churches of the Colonies and a union of state, church, and school faded by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Finke and Stark 1992). Competing in an unregulated religious marketplace, Conservative Protestantism grew in diverse ways not often appreciated in the popular press (Woodberry and Smith 1999). Christian schools are both an outcome of the diversity of religious movements and denominations and a competitive market for providing schooling services. Because of those conditions, Christian schools affiliated with Christian Reformed and other evangelical churches diverge from the fundamentalist Christian schools often affiliated with independent Baptist schools. As we have seen, Reformed Christian School favored openness to secular and professional educational texts and techniques over against the doctrinal clarity and Bob Jones University Press curriculum of First Baptist Christian School.

Religious differences matter as sources of Christian school diversity, but organizational differences cannot be ignored. Again, the relative openness to religious diversity at Reformed Christian School compared with First Baptist Christian School owes much to the different dynamics of an independent school run by a board of parents versus a school closely identified with a specific Baptist church. And, finally, social class further complicates the Christian school landscape. Covenant Christian School enjoys Latin and Monet paintings—while Free Will Baptist marches through phonics drills—partly because of the higher educational levels of the parents at Covenant.

Despite their differences, Christian schools share a family resemblance. Most importantly, they see their mission as uniting the family, church, and school for the moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth of the children. And religious requirements for employees and incorporating Bible reading and memorization and classroom prayer are found in some form within all Christian schools. Finally, the nature of Christian schools, which includes a strong moral order and tight relationship between family and school, seems effective not only in contributing to the moral socialization of children but also to the civic participation of parents.

These conclusions do not put to rest all of the standard critiques of Christian schooling—concerns about racial segregation, authoritarianism, dogmatism, insularity, and social inequality. But these criticisms are not nearly as far reaching as they once seemed. The influence of the market on financially precarious Christian schools forces Christian schools to moderate the role of religion and create a more democratic governing structure that is responsive to parents. Parents' commitment to a Christian school is less than it might seem since American individualism often trumps institutional and community authority—especially when parents face a schooling decision that affects the well-being of their child.

And most of the standard criticisms, if not narrowly targeted, run roughshod over the diversity of Christian schools. For example, educational styles vary widely across fundamentalist and evangelical Christian schools. It makes no sense to paint both as authoritarian and isolationist. Concerns about a sanitized, pro-American history or dogmatic approach to teaching scientific creationism do not apply equally across Missouri Synod, evangelical, and fundamentalist Christian schools. A Christian school

run by a school board rather than a church is not likely to fit the common complaint that Christian schools infuse the entire curriculum with a radical sectarian religious perspective. And, with increasing educational levels among conservative Protestants, charges of anti-intellectualism and concerns that Christian schools stifle student creativity and individual expression and prepare kids only for working class jobs is increasingly out of place. Educational reform—responding to demographic changes in part—has increased the diversity of public schools, which now include magnet and charter schools. For similar reasons—combined with the persistence of religious divides within conservative Protestantism—Christian schools are likely to become increasingly diverse. The rapid expansion of the Classical Christian school movement in the 90s is but one example of the increasing diversity of Christian schools.

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