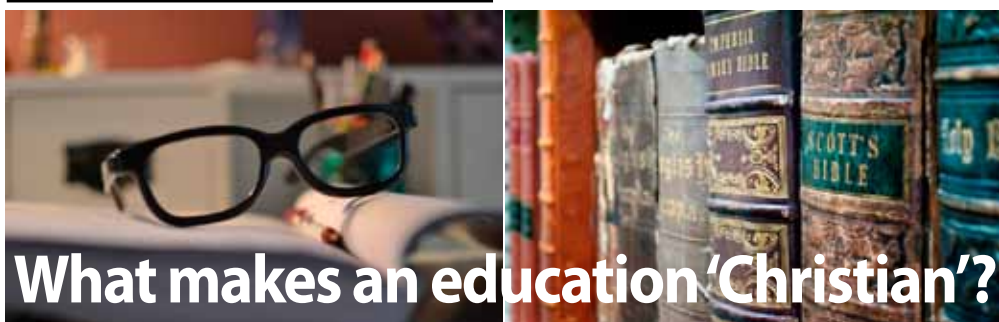


Columns

Technically Speaking



Derek Schuurman



Does hiring Christian teachers and administrators automatically yield a Christian education? Well-meaning and sincere Christians have taken very different approaches to Christian education and scholarship. What follows are six examples.

The first approach is to proceed as if there is not much difference between a secular and a Christian education. This approach is a type of *dualism*, which holds that the Bible deals in matters of faith whereas education deals in academic skills and reason. From this perspective, being a Christian school may simply imply having high standards along with the addition of chapel or a Bible class. While Bible classes may deal in matters of faith, other subjects like mathematics, physics and art have no relevance to faith. This approach is essentially a denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all areas of creation.

A second approach is to equate Christian education with “Christians educating.” In this case Christian education is all about the Christian character of the professor, teacher and student. The relevance of faith to the actual subject matter is not relevant.

A third approach to Christian education is what I like to call the “discipline frosting” approach. The idea is that you teach a subject in the same way as one might in a secular environment, but you shoe-horn something in to spiritualize the lesson. An example from computer science is to have students write a program to sort items from the smallest to the greatest and then connect this concept to the biblical notion that “the last shall be first.” Another trivial type of frosting is to simply tack prayer to the beginning of class and then carry on as if faith did not matter. Although “integration of faith and learning” has become a popular slogan, it suggests faith is something that needs to be added to a discipline. When faith is added artificially, students are left with the sense that genuine faith integration is actually not possible.

The Bible – our only textbook?

A fourth approach to Christian education is *biblicism*. In this approach, all truth is seen to come from the Bible. For example, the number *pi* is found in 1 Kings 7:23, the motion of the sun in Psalm 19:5-6, the continental plates in Job 9:6, wireless telegraphy in Job 38:35 and atomic theory in Hebrews 11:3. The biologist J.S. Morton writes “Many scientific facts, which prove the infallibility of Scripture, are tucked away in its pages.” Richard Mouw writes about a Bible institute which uses the motto: “Our only textbook, the Bible.” If this was the purpose of Scripture, then one might expect that all the information Solomon collected about flowers, cedars and animals (1 Kings 4:33) would have been included in Scripture. Although this approach is based on a high regard for Scripture, biblicism makes the mistake of using the Bible as a science textbook rather than seeing it as a trustworthy book of God’s salvation story. The Bible needs to be interpreted within its own historical-cultural setting.

A fifth approach to Christian scholarship looks for *analogical relationships* between academic subjects and God or attributes of God. For example, one might propose that logic functions reflect God in that they are also eternal, omnipresent and powerful. Another example is making an analogy between God and a programmer who speaks words to create things. Although promoters of this approach are quick to point out the limits of analogical comparisons, it seems to blur the distinction between Creator and creation. Another concern is that it seeks to apply theological categories to all aspects of creation, areas that are diverse and distinct from the discipline of theology.

Integral vs. integrated

Finally, a sixth approach is to sift all content through a biblical worldview, one shaped by the biblical narrative. This approach is a holistic one that seeks to steer a course between dualism and biblicism. This approach holds in tension the goodness of creation as well as the potential idols and distortions that are embedded in the foundations of each discipline. This approach seeks to acknowledge Christ as king over every square inch and our responsibility as kingdom citizens.

In my opinion, this last approach is most faithful to the Bible, but it is not easy to work out in practice. Schools that are serious about Christian education need to dedicate at least as much time and resources to pursuing this as they do on buildings, technology and current teaching techniques. Without an intentional approach, Christian education is likely to be just a frosting, or simply Christians educating, or worse yet, an expensive education that is barely distinguishable from its secular counterparts. ✎

Derek Schuurman is currently working as a visiting associate professor at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa. Over the next few months he will invite some of his new colleagues at Dordt to contribute in the place of his regular columns.