Chapter One

What Makes Education 'Christian'?

Don C. Roy
Avondale University College

Abstract

Calling education 'Christian' doesn't necessarily make it so. Over the years, many words and expressions have become part of the rhetoric of Christian educators as they seek to define the essence of Christian education and what it means for schools to function as genuine communities of Christian faith. Two particular concepts are foundational in defining their character: first, genuine Christian schools are *Christ-centred* in their focus; and, second, the *Bible* provides the orientation, foundation, and frame of reference to determine their identity, their reason for existence, and their values and practice. But questions remain: what does all this mean, and how does it translate into the reality and practice of schooling as we know it, especially in those aspects commonly regarded as mundane and secular? In this chapter, the author seeks to explain how Christ-centredness and biblical sensitivity provides the answers to such questions, and how the knowledge gained is able to transform the understanding and practice of Christian schools as communities of faith.

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Why are names important? In one of Shakespeare's popular plays *Romeo and Juliet*, (1597/2016), Juliet ponders the question:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
Romeo and Juliet, Act II. Scene II. Lines 45, 46)

However, in *Othello*, Iago thinks differently. To him, names are *very* important. As he insists,

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.
(McLauchlan, 1971, *Othello*, Act 3, scene 3, lines 155–161).

With similar sentiment in mind, I would assert that attaching the name 'Christian' to education as a qualifier has connotations that are profoundly important and significant. It is an option that should not be taken lightly. We often call education 'Christian' to give it special attributes and legitimacy. Certainly, critics are quick to accuse Christians of being hypocritical if their profession and practice are deemed to be inconsistent and contradictory. Exploring the implications of calling education 'Christian' is the aim of this chapter.

Christian education in Australia has undergone incredible growth and development over the last 50 years. During that time, many labels and terms have been associated with it to explain and justify its reason for existence. Ideally, the terms are intended to symbolise what Christian education represents: what it is, how we organise it, and how we actually present it to those whom it is meant to serve. The discourse of Christian educators often contains terms such as 'Christ-centred', 'Bible-based', 'holistic', 'thinking Christianly', 'the ministry of teaching', and so on. More recently, the terms 'formation', 'community' and 'kingdom-directed' have also gained popularity. For publications of various kinds, especially in digital media, onlookers have contributed to a burgeoning body of literature, and a larger audience has been better exposed to the philosophy behind Christian education. The rhetoric is dynamic, and as part of the community

of Christian educators, the terms flow. But that's understandable and doesn't mean it's a bad thing. Any cultural group builds its own vocabulary and discourse over time as its members interact and express shared meaning. However, there is a risk that—over time and through continual use—terms may become shallow, trivial, and take on new meaning. Some become clichés or fall out of favour. For example, beginning in the 1970s, I recall the enthusiasm associated with the concept of 'integrating faith and learning' (IFL). While the concept was—and still remains—valid, research and personal experience show that many applications of the principles of IFL have been ill-conceived, contrived, and unconvincing. Even the most potent ideas may be rendered useless by faulty application. What is more, a lack of clarity may lead to the misrepresentation of Christian education, making it difficult for onlookers to understand and appreciate its distinctiveness and purpose.

Calling education 'Christian'

Christian schools have not always been described as such. For example, national and state governments commonly classify schools operated by religious organisations as 'private' or 'faith-based' schools, and they have no particular interest in the differences between them on the basis of their respective belief systems. While that may appear reasonable and practical when it comes to managing governmental funding and compliance, the label 'faith-based' falls short of representing the true character of Christian schools. This would apply to schools operated by religious bodies that are *not* Christian. Therefore, in describing what Christian education stands for, I prefer to use the term 'Christian' rather than adopting the 'faith-based' tag. This is important for several reasons. One is that the general public often questions the right of Christian schools to exist as distinct entities. Many critics regard private or faith-based schools as elitist and an unfair drain on the public purse, thus undermining public education. But that is an issue for another occasion. Part of the problem is that the public sector often misunderstands what Christian education stands for. However, there is also another important question that needs to be raised: how well do Christian educators themselves understand what Christian education represents, and how might the existence of Christian schools be defended? Calling education 'Christian' doesn't necessarily make it so.

The importance of knowing the difference

Some years ago, while travelling, the words on a noticeboard by the roadside caught my attention. The slogan was promoting careers in the state education system; it read, 'Become a teacher and make a difference.' I have heard that expression 'make a difference' given on countless occasions by young teachers to explain the reason for their vocational choice. And as for the difference, what *kind* of difference did the sponsors of the advertisement have in mind? That depended on the imagination of the reader. And how could any respondent be sure that the difference they were thinking of would be in harmony with the aims and values of the sponsoring body? In reality, teachers *do* make a difference, whether they are conscious of it or not. Even cold, didactic information transfer carries implicit values. Teaching and learning typically represent an interpersonal relationship between teacher and learner that, ultimately, is personal and with profound implications. It is moral in the sense that, when we teach, we are entrusted with the lives and future of other humans. It is important what *kind* of difference it is likely to make. Each choice carries far-reaching consequences, some of which may be unintended. The foundational premises determine the character of what emerges.

Coincidentally, I received an email advertisement on behalf of Grand Canyon University in the USA with a similar slogan to the one on the noticeboard I described earlier. However, this time the promotion was focused. It read, 'Make a difference for God with a purpose-filled Christian education.' Those ten words are more specific.

The potential of orientation

One can only imagine what assumptions and premises lay behind the first advertiser's reasoning. However, it would be safe to assume that a public education authority would not be promoting *religious* education, nor could they be expected to do so. After all, they cater for a pluralistic public, and such promotion would be inappropriate. Nevertheless, the first statement was nebulous and open to the audience's interpretation, but the second statement—'Make a difference for God with a purpose-filled Christian education'—has a distinct focus and purpose. The assumptions and understandings behind the second statement are more predictable and understandable

to the readers. To my mind, the statement represents a distinctive orientation that has generative potential.

The word 'orientation' implies a vantage point. It may be regarded as an overview, related to a location or point of reference on a landscape. In one sense, *orientation* has a fixed, structural quality, but it also implies direction. It indicates a way to proceed, while it implies innate motivation and potential for action. Furthermore, the word 'generative' has connotations of potential consequences, either anticipated or unexpected. This view should not be regarded as overly deterministic. I would argue, however, that the ultimate outcomes are contingent on the orientation and the choices made.

By way of an analogy, I wish to share another experience. Several years ago, while driving in the Canadian Rockies, I stopped beside Divide Creek—a small, babbling stream, which is a few metres wide, in Kicking Horse Pass on the border between the Banff and Yoko national parks. I had read about this place as a young boy and had always been fascinated by its significance. An archway of logs had been erected over the road with the words 'Great Divide' engraved across the top. A short distance downstream, the creek forked, forming two separate streams, with one winding its way westwards, while the other makes its way gradually eastwards. The information board nearby explained that the western branch continues on its way until it empties into the Pacific Ocean on the north-western coast of the USA, while the other stream winds its way eastwards until, eventually, it reaches Hudson Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. By the time the two streams complete their courses, the two mouths are more than 2,500 kilometres apart on opposite sides of the continent. The point of separation in this case—the Great Divide—is not like the mere toss of a coin, but it represents alternatives with remarkable consequences. Everything that follows is contingent on where it starts, and any attempt to bring about a radical change requires going back to the source.

My use of the word 'orientation' here is intended to represent a cluster of landmarks in a symbolic terrain. In this context, the landmarks are the presuppositions and premises that are foundational and give the terrain its distinctive character. In the context of this chapter, it represents a specific perspective that accounts for the difference between authentic Christian education and the other alternatives. The difference is the orientation. James Sire (1990) describes this as

'ground zero'. It might also be likened to a magnetic compass point that, as the journey continues, indicates not only the direction but also the degree of deviation from the intended destination. 'Making a difference' also implies making a choice; not just a choice from a smorgasbord of alternatives, but thoughtfully staking an explicit claim. Importantly, this Great Divide foreshadows what follows.

Logically, making a difference means making a change from one state to another. It can also be expected that the reason for such change would be supported by a coherent rationale. That rationale would provide the following: first, a clear understanding and appreciation of the initial situation; second, the nature of the proposed change; and, third, a schema devised to promote its potential realisation. In the context of education, this might be seen as a philosophy of education. This is relevant to teachers of all persuasions. From a classical philosophical perspective, there is a string of fundamental terms that might be adopted: metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, axiology, and several derivatives. But, put more simply, it means exposing any such rationale to a bank of fundamental questions such as these: What is really real? Is what we see and experience through our senses all there is, or is there something beyond, such as a supernatural reality? Is God just an idea or a force, or does he really exist? What does it mean to exist as humans, and how did we get here? What is knowledge, and how can we know it? What is right and wrong, or good and bad? What is of value? What is wrong with the world in which we all live, and will it always be like this? What is really true, can we really know, and if so, how? Is the idea of right and wrong a fixed standard, or a social consensus to keep things in order?

The purpose of the discussion thus far has been intended to tease out how we might answer the question of what makes education *Christian*? With that in mind, the next step in the journey—the Great Divide—considers a form of education that assumes a supernatural, theocentric reality as opposed to the other form, which is naturalistic and humanistic in character. Some describe this contrast as having a *spiritual* as opposed to a *secular* orientation, but regarding Christian education as simply *spiritual* also needs further definition. To be more precise, Christian education should be regarded as being Christ-

centred and Bible-based, but what does that mean? I would assert that without *both* these characteristics, so-called 'Christian education' cannot be truly authentic.

The significance of Christ-centredness

As argued from the outset, 'Christ-centred' is more than a mere label. It relates to a person through whom human access is made possible to mysterious, creative potential of active engagement with God. Thus, Christ is the epicentre of dynamic activity. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul declares:

> We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body. He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.
>
> (Peterson, *The Message*, 2002, Colossians 1:15–20)

In its original context, Paul's declaration is the preface to a pastoral letter he was writing to Christians in Colossae. As an apostle, he was acting with the authority of the one he was representing. That is what an *apostolos* was: acting both with the authority of another person, and, specifically, in the *name* of that person. That is also significant today in terms of discipleship and service, when someone assumes the role of a Christian teacher. As such, service represents authentic ministry (Roy, 2013). While this chapter focuses on such ministry in the context of education, it should be remembered that the centrality of Christ is of equal necessity to *all* ministries (Ephesians 4:11, 12).

Based on these words, the question is how do those insights throw light on the significance of the term 'Christ-centred'? First, Christ the Son stands as the reflection of God the Father—a tangible, visible expression of the invisible (Hebrews 1:2, 3). Thus, he is the one through whom we understand the Father, his character, and his purposes (John 14:6) (also see John 1: 3–5, 14). Second, Christ is also identified as the Creator of the cosmos and all within it (also see John 1:3–5). Third, Christ is the active, integrating focus, and the true epicentre and source of both life and the light (John 1:9). Thus, he is the sustainer of all creation.

In this discussion, we should clarify the customary use of the titles of 'Christ' and 'Jesus', and how they relate to one another. The name Jesus is derived from the Hebrew name *Yeshua/Y'shua*, based on the Semitic root y-š-ʕ (ישׁי in Hebrew), meaning 'to deliver' or 'to rescue'. In the New Testament, the name Christ is derived from the Greek χριστός (*chrīstós*), meaning 'anointed one'. *Christos* was also used in the Greek Septuagint to translate the Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ (*Mašíaḥ* or messiah), meaning 'anointed'. In all cases, the core sense of salvific purpose is clear and obvious. For that reason, we will assume that the alternate use of the names in this chapter is appropriate.

It should be noted that the preceding summary rests squarely on the premise that the Bible is the authoritative source of this knowledge. This, in turn, is vital to the essence of Christian education. Thus, it is logical to assert the relationship between the two concepts of 'Christ-centred' and 'Bible-based'. First, these concepts should not be regarded as a strict hierarchical sequence, as if they are two discrete entities. Close reading of the Bible supports the view that the two concepts stand alongside one another and are *mutually interrelated*. The religious leaders of Jesus' day failed to understand this, and so incurred his displeasure: 'You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life' (NKJV, 1982, John 5:39). They failed to recognise Christ as the *embodiment* of truth. On another occasion, Jesus appeared beside the two travellers on the Emmaus Road following the Resurrection. They later attributed the 'burning of the heart' to Jesus' revelation to them 'from the Scriptures, things concerning Himself' (NKJV, 1982, Luke 24:27, 32). But perhaps one of the most powerful affirmations is in the eloquent introduction to John's Gospel, where Jesus is identified as 'the Word' (Greek—*logos*), that is, wisdom personified and revealed. Identifying with Christ-centredness is

profoundly personal and relational on the part of all involved in its function. Thus, Christian education reverently acknowledges the presence of Christ, and it seeks to consistently identify with him, his character, and his purpose. It thus strives to represent who he is and the meaning he embodies with 'all of heart, mind, soul and strength' (NKJV, 1982, Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). This response is contingent on several grounds. It is derived from what we learn of him as 'the one in whom all things consist' (NKJV, 1982, Colossians 1:17). Thus, he is the integrating centre or, as the Bible identifies him more than a dozen times, the 'foundation' or 'corner stone'. However, although the study of Christ's identity reveals a list of attributes, this is more than propositional information about him. Rather, Christ declared, 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (NKJV, 1982, John 14:6). A short time later, when Jesus was standing before Pilate prior to the Crucifixion, Pilate asked cynically, 'What is truth?' (NKJV, 1982, John 18:38). However, as Palmer (1993, p. 48) observes. Truth was standing in front of him, but Pilate didn't recognise him.

Once a choice is made, the way is set. The quality and consistency of the emergent outcomes will testify as to whether they are authentic or pretentious.

In what sense is Christian education Bible-based?

The second premise about Christian education is that it is Bible-based. As shown previously, Christian identity is personal and relational with respect to the Author (Hebrews 12:2). But the question is how do we know about that person? Despite countless volumes on library shelves that explore and seek to unpack biblical concepts, the reformational declaration of *sola Scriptura* stands pre-eminent. However, in applying this principle, we must avoid romanticising the Bible and trying to make it what it is not. This is compounded by the fact that it is difficult on the face of it to make a strong connection between the content of the Bible and the daily routine of schools, teachers, students, and so on. Despite the best of intentions of well-meaning Christian educators, the Bible should not be regarded as a technical manual or a philosophical theory. Neither is it primarily a set of creeds or a systematic theology in itself. Nor is it a direct source for curriculum content for the formal subject disciplines or key learning areas. That mistake has been made, for example, in the

rush of enthusiasm following the introduction and popularisation of the expression 'integration of faith and learning' in the mid-20th century. Many such attempts represent 'pseudointegration' (Wolfe, 1987), which is a false conception that has caused disillusionment and frustration from attempting to measure up to unrealistic and unreasonable expectations.

The relevance of the Bible in Christian education

The question is what is the connection between all this and the ultimate purpose of education as we know and practice it in the 21st century? In answering this question, we need to resolve two problems. The first is how to regard the contrast between the *spiritual* and the *secular* aspects of education. In Christian education, we assume to take responsibility for the spiritual development of our students. At the same time, it is difficult to recognise the relationship between spiritual development and the mundane and apparently secular aspects of education. A survey of the mission statements available online for many Christian schools and systems gives a professed commitment to the formative development of the *total* person—spiritually, intellectually, socially, and physically. Conversely, in the next breath, such prominence is given to 'academic excellence' that it eclipses the due consideration of other facets of holistic, integrated human development. The second problem is trying to make *direct links* between the Bible and every aspect of schooling. Let me hasten to qualify this opinion. Every aspect of Christian education is certainly embedded in the biblically informed, community-based ethos and telos. But to understand the purpose of Christian education, it is necessary to recognise its layered character, with each layer having an immediate, intermediate, or ultimate foci as it is addressed. These layers are also hierarchical, with all levels being interdependent. However, this does not support a preoccupation with academic and logistical interests being first and foremost and ignoring the importance of the context. It is the context that provides the distinctive character of Christian education, and that gives sense and meaning to its implementation. It is in this respect that authenticity is enacted and maintained. There are no shortcuts. Undoubtedly, most teachers—including Christian teachers—would concur with the following statement offered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (n.d.):

> The ultimate goal of any school improvement process is to enhance and facilitate better learning for students, including levels of achievement and wellbeing. For this reason, direct measures of student outcomes, and the collection and analysis of data, are essential to all school improvement efforts.

However, an education environment that is both vibrant and Christian is achievable, and the concept of ‘academic excellence’ takes on different meaning. In fact, Christian educators could justly claim that such a position adds value to such practices. It is likely that, for many of the parents and students in Christian schools, the dominant reason behind their choice of a particular school is based on their expectations that the school will facilitate academic excellence. Admittedly, the majority of those parents, students, and the teachers will participate in the overtly spiritual aspects of the school programs. However, in many Christian schools, the dualistic approach based on the separation of the sacred from the secular poses a dilemma. The consequences may take an extended period to reveal their effects, but, ultimately, history provides evidence that cannot be ignored.

It is hard to appreciate how much our minds—our *orientation*—have been shaped and influenced by events of the past. As a result, our sense of the transcendent has either diminished or been compartmentalised to erect a false divide between the sacred and the secular. In breaking free of constraints imposed by the European church, the Enlightenment proved to be a Great Divide in which there was the deification of so-called ‘scientific reason’ that claimed to be the only trustworthy way to understand and engage with reality. Consequently, instead of resulting in ‘progress’ in the form of human emancipation and freedom, as expected, a deep malaise of pessimism grew in an atmosphere of social and moral instability. The Cartesian separation of facts from values, which was central to the Enlightenment project, was soon reinforced by a technocracy emerging out of the Industrial Revolution. While the benefits of material production associated with incredible technological and scientific advancements are undeniable and appreciated, their collective impact on personal and social wellbeing can’t not be widely acknowledged. The conditions emerging from industrialisation, urbanisation, and moral decline motivated campaigners such as Charles Dickens, William Wilberforce, Elizabeth Fry, John Howard, and the like to fight against social injustice and degradation. Yet—despite the

ultimate humanitarian and moral progress gained by such advocacy, together with the strident, optimistic claims of secular humanists—the Godless, disorderly, senseless malaise deepened, punctuated by revolutions, wars, and genocides. According to Berger et al., (1974) the world has experienced dislocation, senselessness, madness and, ultimately, cosmic homelessness.

Thinking Christianly: The engagement of the mind

The mind is a faculty that distinguishes humanity from the rest of the created order. While animal behaviour sometimes suggests there is a level of cognitive processing associated with it, such cognition lacks the sophistication of human rationality. Humans minds develop 'maps of meaning' that build, grow, change, and influence choices and actions throughout life (Peterson, 1999). The Bible emphasises the primacy of the mind (νοῦς or *noos*), and its function is central to human perception, consciousness, understanding reality, and the capacity to reason. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul emphasises that the mind is the place of contemplative moral thinking, choice, and action. What we think about other people, for example, influences how we will act towards them. This is especially relevant to Christian teachers in the way they view their students.

In the Old Testament, 'heart' is used to speak of what the New Testament calls 'mind'. For this reason, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament urges the importance of 'guarding the heart, for it is the wellspring of life' (NKJV, 1982, Proverbs 4:23). It is notable that, in recent decades, neuroscientific evidence affirms this maxim.

A biblical understanding of what it means to be truly human also highlights the interrelatedness of mind, body, and spirit. The Bible does not separate *knowing pieces of information* from *knowing as personal, experiential, intimate engagement.* Consequently, a change in one aspect, whether for good or ill, will impact positively or negatively on the others. So, although the mind is immaterial, and the body is physical (note the distinction between *mind* and *brain*), significant change affects all dimensions of human personality and existence. In the Old Testament, the corrosive effect of guilt is suffered by King David following his deception involving Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11; Psalms 31:10 and 32:3, 4). Similarly, in the New Testament, the accounts of Jesus' miracles reflect the total effect of guilt on an

individual's morale (spirit) and physical state. The teachings of Jesus highlight the fact that, while outward behaviour may be judged to be morally wrong in a legal sense, the thinking surrounding it has a destructive impact at a deeper level. This is implied in Jesus' comment regarding 'looking lustfully' and its relationship with overt action (NKJV, 1982, Matthew 5:28). It is of interest that several Christian neuroscientists describe this as having a toxic effect on body, mind, and spirit (Leaf, 2013).

References to the 'mind' in the Bible affirm its fundamental significance. In Paul's letter to the Romans, there is a strong assertion of an influential relationship between society and the human mind. Thus, Paul exhorts, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (NKJV, 1982, Romans 12:2). In this instance, the Greek for 'pattern' is *schema*, as in *suschematizethai*; that is, it changes over time according to the circumstances surrounding it (Barclay, 1957, p. 170). In contrast, Paul urges 'transformation' (*metamorphe*, from *metamorphousthai*) which refers to the unchanging form, shape, or essence. This is not speaking of the outward form, but the inner essence; that is, a Christ-centred orientation. The significance of orientation also stands behind Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, where the recipients are exhorted to 'renew yourselves' or 'be renewed' (*ananeousthai* in Greek—Romans 12:2). Lawrence Richards points out that this is not 'to call back to what we once had, but to shape something new to replace the old' (1982, p. 212).

From the foregoing discussion relating to mind (*noos*) and change (*meta*), a further interesting insight emerges. Most Christians regard the concept of 'repentance' in forensic terms associated with forgiveness. However, another significant connotation should be noted: the Greek 'repent' is *metanoeo*, meaning 'a change of *mind*'. These connotations are also pertinent to the concept of 'spiritual formation' or simply 'formation'—terms that have become popular in the rhetoric of Christian education, and are the focus of a rich and thoughtfully stimulating body of literature, which is worthy of more extended discussion on another occasion (Cairney, 2018).

Thinking holistically

Understanding what God is trying to reveal to us in the Bible is also dependent on our capacity to think holistically. Popular use of the term 'big picture' reflects the recognition of the significance and power of thinking holistically. The Greek *holos,* from which the concept is derived, envisages not just a collection of elements but a macro view composed of elements so intertwined and interdependent (or integrated) that to remove one element destroys the integrity of the whole. In other words, the whole is more than simply the sum of the parts, and the presence of the minutest, most subtle element—such as a holograph—reflects the quality of the whole, even if temporarily removed from its source. Understanding the interwoven nature of those parts is vital. In this presentation, it is argued that it is only when a macro perspective is adopted that any sense can be made of how spiritual activities, and the apparently secular subjects and mundane routines, practices, and elements that make up the life of a school can coexist comfortably in a dynamic, transcendent relationship.

Holistic thinking challenges the dualism of the Cartesian rationalism that characterises Western society. The adoption of a biblical mindset and transcendent thinking sees all truth as God's truth. To the Christian mind, the separation of the sacred and the secular represents a false dichotomy. Faith, learning, and practice are seamlessly and appropriately integrated. Such a perspective transcends a this-world reality and perceives an other-world reality beyond the mere sensory world. According to Elizabeth Barret Browning's *Aurora Leigh*:

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God;
> But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
> The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
> And daub their natural faces unaware…
>
> (Browning, 1856, bk. III, l. 820)

In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto speaks of the *mysterium tremendum*, which is 'the numinous energy at the heart of reality' (Palmer, 2007, p. 114). This reality should not be confused with pantheism, but it is the recognition of a transcendent presence, like that experienced by Moses at the burning bush in the wilderness when confronted by the Lord God, Jehovah, who identified himself as 'I

AM' (Exodus 3:14). Interestingly, this intangible-yet-powerful reality is acknowledged and alluded to in various ways by numerous novelists (for example, see Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* [1908, chapter VII], and Leo Tolstoy's 'Where Love is, There God is Also' [1887]). This disposition alludes to a reality that Brother Lawrence (2004) describes as 'the practice of the presence of God', which can be experienced in even the most mundane of actions, particularly in service to others. This perspective transcends a humanistic view of reality to become a sacramental expression of our love for God, as expressed through our empathy, respect, and behaviour towards another person (NKJV, 1982, Matthew 25:40-45). In essence, it represents the spontaneous expression of an internalised awareness of the Kingdom of God, and ethical behaviour.

Implications for Christian education

In our discourse so far, several important principles have come to our attention with respect to our orientation to thinking, knowing, and acting. One of the fundamental assumptions about biblical thinking and knowing is that the human soul is more than merely the sum of its elements: mental, social, physical, and spiritual. The human soul is the result of the breath/word of life emanating from the Creator God. This same God has revealed himself through the Bible, and as it is possible for humans to know something of him and his true character progressively through the 'Creative Word' (Brueggemann, (2015). However, despite cognitive assent and good intention, Lawrence Richards explains that 'One of the most serious difficulties in Christian education is to shift the level at which persons relate to Scripture from the cognitive to the personal and experiential' (1982, p. 206). But, difficult as it may be, it is essential for authentic biblical thinking and knowing.

Reality revealed: The cosmic conflict

'God' is not just a concept or a 'force'. He really exists as a *personal*, *relational* God. In other words, he is a God who communicates and interacts with humanity. In this vein, Francis Schaeffer speaks of 'God who is there, and He is not silent' (1984). But God does not talk into empty space. He communicates with humanity, the pre-eminent

part of his creative action: humans with dignity and value, made in the image of their Creator, with the capacity to think, feel, relate, and act.

God's *special revelation* of himself is primarily through the Bible. For that reason, the foregoing discussion has already referred to the Bible as an authoritative source. Although declarative statements are made in places such as the Psalms, Proverbs, and the Prophets, they are largely statements that have grown out of historical events in which God has demonstrated his will and power to deliver and care for his people.

The essence of Scripture is the unfolding salvation story or what has been sometimes described as the 'Cosmic Conflict'. There is an underlying narrative quality in recounting the drama. However, it is not simply a single narrative or mere collection of stories but a mosaic that constitutes a metanarrative or master story from which a pattern of themes emerges: Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. These themes incorporate biblical metaphors and symbolism that work together to trace a linear historical trajectory linking the past with our present existence, which then projects into the future. Not only do they provide a frame of reference and normative values, but their effective sweep provides meaning and direction for the present, and hope for the future. It represents an ongoing reality check on both thinking and acting. This places the biblical, Christian orientation in stark contrast to postmodernism and its assertive rejection of metanarratives. It is also out of this metanarrative that a fundamental statement of belief is derived and articulated.

Creation

The Bible begins boldly: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth' (NKJV, 1982, Genesis 1:1). This is more than a simple statement of action. It is the ground zero of what God wants us to know and understand. The Creation story should not be regarded as scientific theory. It was written originally to challenge the myths of ancient civilisations, with their multiple deities who jostled and competed for supremacy, each needing to be appeased (Turner, 2004). The God of the Bible stands as the only true God—the God who spoke the cosmos into existence, thus revealing aspects of his personality and capacity (Psalm 19; Psalm 33:6). There is clear evidence of

rational, intentional, and orderly action, and a sense of pleasure in the quality of the results. The underlying theme of the Creation story is 'from chaos to order'.

The foundational significance of Creation is underscored by its reiteration throughout the Bible (38 times) as an authoritative reference and endorsement of the respective context (e.g. Isaiah on 18 occasions; Jeremiah 32:17; Nehemiah 9:6; John 1:1–4; Hebrews 1:1–2; Colossians 1:15–19). This usage signals the thematic quality of the Creation account. Creation isn't a *fait accompli.* God is not, as Richard Dawkins (2006) claims, like 'a blind watchmaker' who sets his work in motion, then leaves it to run. God continues to be intimately involved in maintaining and sustaining the cosmos. He is the God who acts. When there is chaos, darkness, no form, and a void, God is able to act by re-enacting Creation. And he does this perpetually.

We cannot move further without recognising an important characteristic of the Bible. Someone once described Genesis as 'the seedbed of the Bible'. In other words, many of the basic elements of biblical understanding find their starting point in Genesis.

Some readers of the Bible perceive that the plural form of the Hebrew *Elohim* implies a triune God in action. For example, in Genesis 1:26 (NKJV, 1982), God says, 'Let *us* make man in our image'. Note also, the 'Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters' (NKJV, 1982, Genesis 1:2). Later, in John's Gospel, Jesus is also declared to be the 'Creative Word' (John 1:1–4). Similarly, the New Testament's references to I AM—*ego eimi* (NKJV, 1982, Exodus 3:18)—throw light on Jesus, his divinity, and his role in Creation (NKJV, 1982, John 8:58). Jesus' reference to 'Light', 'Bread', 'Water', 'Vine', etc. with 'I AM' are significant allusions to his divinity. Also observe the association of commonplace objects and practices in the parables of Jesus in the New Testament. This implies God's desire to communicate by engaging our minds meaningfully on familiar ground. These instances begin to deepen our sense of the Trinitarian presence at Creation. The significance of this will be seen later in this discussion. But regarding this point, we note the foundational significance of Creation in the unfolding biblical narrative.

The culmination of God's creative activity is the formation of humankind 'in the image of God' (NKJV, 1982, Genesis 1:26, 27).

The Creator 'breathed into man the breath of life, and man became a living soul' (NKJV, 1982, Genesis 2:7), after which he declared the result '*very* good' (NKJV, 1982, Genesis 1:31)—a divine endorsement. Commentators refer to humanity's creation as reflecting *imago Dei*—the image of God.

The implications of *imago Dei* are profound and have captured the imagination of countless exegetes. We can only scratch the surface here. In one attempt to explain the meaning of *imago Dei*, Andy Bannister (n.d.) observes that, in the Hebrew expression *imago Dei*, the idea of *reflection* is implicit. It may be compared to the way that a mirror reflects what it is angled at. This means that humans depend on angling their attention towards the Creator as the source of life, meaning, understanding, and purpose, as they display intelligence, decision-making, creativity, emotion, physicality, individuality, sociality, and spirituality. Thus, they are image-bearers, designed to reflect—albeit in finite measure—aspects of what God is like (Genesis 1:26–28). Humans are therefore multifaceted and complex, brimming with potential to engage and exercise their created attributes. Nevertheless, the results of human endeavour will always be finite, incomplete, sometimes inaccurate, and ever growing. Humans are also cultural beings. Individually and together, they seek meaning and understanding, appreciate and create beauty, and communicate shared meanings through language, symbolism, ritual, and *mores*. It must be stressed that this situation is dynamically relational: God–man, man–man, and man–-environment. But, again, personality is more than merely the sum of those parts. However, while human personhood is essentially relational, it is dependent on the Creator-Source. These qualities comprise an interrelated whole, *the human soul*, which 'lives, and moves and has its being' in the Creator (NKJV, 1982, Acts 17:28).

The Fall

As early as the third chapter of Genesis, the spotlight focuses on the reality that affects every human—the Fall. It would be reasonable to conclude that if it had not been for the Fall, the Bible would not have needed to be written! Humanity would still be enjoying open communion with the Creator in an Edenic environment. Apart from the first two chapters of Genesis, which describe a pristine cosmos, the remainder of the Bible is devoted to explaining what went wrong, and what God has been doing in response.

Genesis 3 portrays, in stark detail, humanity's alienation from the Creator, which shattered the existing relationship built on trust. In his seminal commentary of the Creation–Fall saga, George Campbell Morgan (2005) attributes the root cause of the human predicament, and its destructive effect on the human race and created order, to Adam and Eve's choice to dethrone God and enthrone their own selves in his place. From this perspective, sin is seen at a deeper level, as I have intimated earlier. Accordingly, *sin* is not merely an act of commission in a legal sense, or even of omission, but rather a consequential condition or state to which humanity plunged. That choice in Eden represented a reorientation and reassignment of sovereignty, the consequences of which meant dislocation from the source of life, and the setting in motion of the insidious corruption of human intellect, emotion, and will. By their choice, order reverted to chaos. Genesis 3:6–24 captures succinctly the consequences of mankind's deprivation of a face-to-face relationship with the Creator, and the disintegration, dislocation, alienation, and homelessness that followed.

Redemption

Several seminal ideas representing the difference between 'God's way' and 'man's way' stand out in the Genesis narrative. God is clearly seeking to reveal to mankind something of vital importance. In Genesis 3, the Serpent's defamatory lies and insinuations about God's character are unmasked. Adam and Eve's deep sense of guilt and fear is revealed in their attempt to hide and cover their nakedness with garments of their own devising (Genesis 3:7). God comes seeking them, in the cool of the day, and replaces their leafy efforts to cover their sense of shame with coats of skins (Genesis 3:21). This is the initial foreshadowing of the Sacrificial Lamb. This metaphor and theme continue and grow significantly throughout Scripture, first in symbolic form in patriarchal days; then through the Passover, the Sanctuary, the Psalms, and the Prophecies; until John the Baptist's announcement of Jesus: 'Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (NKJV, 1982, John 1:29). Not only is Jesus identified as the fulfilment of what the Old Testament foreshadows, but at the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is also declared to be the creative Word. The creational—or, more precisely, the *re-creational*—intent is clearly apparent when, at the inauguration of Jesus' earthly public

ministry at the time of his baptism, the Trinity is again present: the Father, the Son, and the 'God, the Spirit hovering' over the unfolding drama (NKJV, 1982, John 1:32).

Shortly afterwards, in his midnight conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus declared, 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to *save* the world through him' (NKJV, 1982, John 3:17). The Greek word meaning 'to save' (*sozo*), which in many cases means 'to heal', is indicative of the work of the comprehensive restoration (re-creation) of man's brokenness, dislocation, and alienation from God, from others, from the environment, and from himself. Creation is re-enacted in Jesus' miracles of healing. Later, in the Epistles, Paul identifies Jesus as the integrating centre of the 'upbuilding' of the church as a community of faith (NKJV, 1982, Ephesians 4:11–16). The purpose is to restore integrity to the New Testament church (Greek–*ekklesia*), the Body of Christ, as the manifestation of his character in the universe (Ephesians 4:17). Thus, in Christ, chaos returns to order. It is this process that is envisaged in the use of words such as 'transformation' and 'restoration'. The key to this reversal is the removal of the obstruction between humanity and God, enabling God to be viewed again in the person of Jesus.

Consummation

Behind the biblical metanarrative, Genesis and Revelation stand like two bookends. If Genesis is viewed as the seedbed of the Bible, in Revelation all the books and narratives of the Bible meet and end. Bible scholars have identified in Revelation more than 70 references or allusions to other parts of Scripture, especially the Old Testament. A deep conviction of the inspiration of the Bible emerges from noting the contrast between Genesis 3's description of what was forfeited and lost, and the final two chapters of the Bible (Revelation 21 and 22).

The hope of Christians is the return of Jesus, for with it comes total, comprehensive restoration. These two chapters of Revelation resonate with the anticipated fulfilment of God's plan to redeem and restore. All that was lost is to be restored to its earlier pristine character—Christ, as the Lamb, will triumph (Revelation 22:5). Paradise will be reopened and repossession made possible (Revelation 21:24, 25).

Sorrow, death, and defilement will be gone forever (Revelation 21:4, 5, 27). Ultimate peace and harmony will reign at every level.

Christian education's ultimate purpose

Calling education 'Christian' implies an ultimate purpose that justifies its existence: a sense of mission in response to a need, which represents Christian education's *raison d'être.* But the inspiration for that mission has its origin in the portrayal of God's character and action derived from the Bible. It is also implicit in the names 'Jesus' and 'Christ'. As noted earlier, God's response to humanity's alienation—recorded as early as the third chapter of the Bible—is the prototype of the resolute, responsive, and ultimate purpose that unfolds in the biblical narrative. In that context, concepts such as 'redemption', 'salvation', 'restoration', and 'transformation' take on significant meaning and become conceptually interconnected to constitute a foundational theme that permeates the Bible. God's purpose is reiterated explicitly in Jesus' words to Nicodemus when he declared, 'For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved' (NKJV, 1982, John 3:17). Christian educators identify with and thus represent Christ as image-bearers and disciples in that mission in the context of education.

The way forward

From Lawrence Richards' (1982, p. 210) perspective, the terrain covered represents 'reality revealed'. As argued earlier, in addition to its intricate, holistic, and transcendent character, a major difference between Christian education and its secular counterpart is the scope envisaged by each. Listening to the opinions of politicians in this country, the stated reason for education being required is typically 'jobs and growth'. While that may be relevant to a point, it is limited in its scope and only part of the reality. Christian educators can be supportive of such efforts, but there is added value. While the goal of education for a Christian has relevance for life in this world, it does not stop there. It extends to a life that flows on into eternity.

In attempting to answer the question regarding what makes education 'Christian', I have focused primarily on the context and

qualitative underpinnings of Christian education without delving into the strategic aspects of teaching and learning, school management, and other routines that constitute day-to-day life in schools. How that might play out in reality is a task for another occasion. In the meantime, the lingering question remains: how might these principles translate into strategies, practice, and management that consistently reflect those principles? Borrowing from Richards again, such an enterprise envisages 'experiencing reality together' in a school community that is truly Christian in character (1982, p. 210).

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