Re-generation: The Missional Imperative of Christian Schooling

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Abstract

We live in a time where the Christian church and our Christian faith have been pushed to society's peripherals. Operating in environments that are increasing secular, where consumerism abounds, it can be easy to define Christian schooling in almost oppositional terms. There is another way. What if those of us involved in Christian schooling were to reimagine Christian education through a shared missional lens grounded in the foundation of the Missio Dei (God's Mission)? The potential of the missional lens for Christian schooling is considerable. It grounds the Christian school movement, and identity of the teacher, in the larger biblical narrative. Additionally, with each generation invited to engage in mission in way that is contextual, it allows for a multiplicity of ways to participate in the outworking of God's mission within the context and setting in which each school has been placed.

Introduction

We live in a time of quite dramatic societal change. The decline of Christian church and the rise of the modern self is clearly before us. In this postmodern, post-enlightenment time there are challenging questions with respect to the relevance of the Church in the broader community, not to mention the traditional message underpinning Christian education. The Church, and our Christian faith, have been pushed to society's peripherals, dwelling in the private margins of our personal lives rather than the town centre. In the midst of this cultural change schools, secular or otherwise, are increasingly becoming the communities' educational and moral hub.

Parents often understand schools as places to see their children advance in their intellectual capacity and holistic formation as human beings. Christian education is no exception to this trend, creating both an opportunity and a challenge for Christian schools regardless of their heritage and purposes. Underpinning this shift in the Western context is a relentless focus on the "how", a fixation on educational outcomes as a ticket to prosperity, rather than the "why" of education. For the past century, the educational focus has been on practice and ignored two essential questions: "Why all this education? To what purpose?" (Knight, 2006, p. 4). The exciting prospect within these challenges is that Christian education is effectively placed to reimagine a story about the purpose and outcomes of education.

As followers of Christ, we should not recoil in response to this shifting tide of Christendom. Instead, we should embrace the opportunity by refocusing on a particular "why" that is common to us who profess faith in Christ. Christian schools routinely operate in a pluralistic and consumeristic marketplace where God is often perceived as absent, where pleasure and self-fulfilment rule the day. A challenge before us is that a society shaped by consumerism and entertainment can generate a church and educational environment defined by reductionism and deeply ingrained in Western culture (Guder, 2015). This may be at play in Christian schooling where, at times, we have described ourselves in almost oppositional terms. For example, schools use language such as open vs closed enrolment, church-based vs non-denominational, and community vs covenantal.

While these descriptive words will mean different things to different people, at play in all three is the suggestion of homogeneity against heterogeneity. The language of *community* or *open*

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enrolment has been used to describe Christian schooling that seeks enrolment from a cross-section of the community. Whereas *covenantal* or *closed enrolment* is used to describe Christian education for young people from Christian families. *Church-based* Christian schools tend to describe Christian schooling in a manner consistent with their denominational background. *Non-denominational* schools take a different approach. Regardless of what oppositional issued, rather than understand ourselves as competitors, it is suggested that, together, we engage in a complete paradigm shift that embraces the emerging reality that all Christian schools, regardless of model or creed, are missional communities in their core purpose. A missional paradigm provides the way beyond these challenges. It invites schools into a mindset where we are shared participants caught up in a "bigger and bolder vision of the kingdom of God" (Greer & Horst, 2018, p. 43). Put another way, the missional lens affirms a covenantal model as much as it does an open-enrolment approach by providing a consistent telos, while affirming the specific calling that has been placed on each specific school.

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What do we mean by a "missional lens"? The central nature of God's mission permeating the whole bible is in itself a "missional phenomenon" that renders a glimpse of the story of God's people called to participate in the mission of God for the sake of all of creation (Wright, 2006) To pursue Christian education in its missional form is to embrace a missional theology that continues on from the teleological calling of the Israelite people to be a blessing to the nations through Abraham; God's self-revelatory act through Christ and his Great Commission; and the consummation of all of history as defined in Revelation 5:9-10 where God's reign is universal through the sacrifice and blood of Christ. The underpinning tenets of missional theology are trinitarian in nature, eschatological in purpose, contextual in its application and praxeological in its hands-on focus (McKinzie, 2014).

When viewing Christian education through a missional lens, it becomes clear there might be a multiplicity of ways rather than one "right way" to do Christian education. Certainly, each generation is called to engage in ongoing interpretative translation of the Gospel with a missional located connectedness to the context in which they are placed (Guder, 2015). This calling recognises that the Christian Church and Christian education are all part of the theological foundation of the Missio Dei (God's Mission). Bosch (1991) defines this most clearly as God's self-revelation and involvement towards a world He loves, revelling in God's ongoing nature and redemptive activity that embraces both the Church and the world in which the Church is privileged to participate. This imperative calls Christian educators to welcome the opportunity to redefine a new identity within a missional philosophy of Christian education. Through accepting and responding to this need for the re-generation of Christian schooling, the movement is presented with a comprehensive foundation that brings a new lens, language, and practice by uniting the call of all Christian schooling forms and becoming a transformational presence by flourishing within the challenges of a post-Christian society.

A missional philosophy of Christian schooling will directly impact praxis in the classroom, leading to a transformational presence and cyclical influence through a missional lens. This process is ongoing in its dynamic response to God's revelation in light of context and experience. The potential of the missional imperative for Christian schooling leads to an opportunity to foster a new season of authentic Christian community nurturing the genuine transformation of young people across the western world. To ignore this imperative is to potentially succumb to the dangers that already confronts us, leading to a movement of Christian education that disappears into the norm of secular society. Knight (2006) summarises the challenge best by stating:

> *All too often, Christian education has not been deliberately built upon distinctive Christian philosophy. As a result many Christian schools have tended to offer something less than Christian education and have thereby frustrated the purpose of their existence. Gordon Clark has noted that what goes by the name of Christian education is sometimes a programme of "Pagan education with a chocolate coating of Christi anity."* (p. 164)

The overarching potential of this missional imperative to unify how we understand the Christian school movement cannot be understated. The surrounding metanarrative of the Missio Dei gives context and legitimises multiplicity across Christian schooling, leading to the emergence of a "hermeneutic of coherence" that provides an orientating point amid diversity (Wright, 2006, p. 40). From this foundation, a unifying narrative emerges that brings cohesive purpose and meaning within the larger biblically missional narrative. Informed by contextual praxis, engagement and responsiveness Christian schools can champion diversity of expression by accepting that all forms of Christian education are missional at their base.

The importance of identity plays a vital role in

empowering teachers to flourish in the classroom. Just as a school finds its identity in the meta-narrative of the Missio Dei, so too teachers find their identity in the collective story of their schooling community. Individual teachers find purpose by placing their story within the context of a broader framework of meaning. Parker Palmer (2017) rightly noted that effective teaching flows from the identity and integrity of the teacher. What teachers know and believe must reveal itself in how they live and teach. To do otherwise is to undermine the transformative effectiveness of a student's learning journey. A missional approach to Christian education provides the lens through which individual and collective identity can be formed. In so doing, a flourishing learning environment is established leading to the genuine transformation of students.

Teachers who find their identity in the broader missional narrative inevitably reshape the epistemology and pedagogy that is applied in the classroom. Few teachers are aware of their presupposed understanding of knowledge formation and how it effects their pedagogy. Secular hidden drivers, often adverse to the Christian faith, are easily championed in the classroom without teacher awareness. Equipped with a missional lens, educators begin to witness these antithetical influences behind proclaimed "best practices" that come packaged in contemporary pedagogical faddism and inadequate theories of knowledge. When teachers dynamically apply this renewed missional awareness to their context, they begin to move into a space of authenticity and relationship. Once missional education reaches the classroom level of an educational community the genuine fruits of true Christian teaching are realised.

At its essence, missional Christian education aims to participate in the outworking of God's mission as witnesses of Christ within the context and setting in which each school has been placed. As a living parable, each educational community looks to embody the revelatory truth of the Gospel in narrative, relational proximity, educational praxis, ongoing renewal, and dynamic responsiveness to God's calling and the Gospel of Christ. The unitive nature of a missional philosophy of Christian education removes the barriers of traditional oppositional paradigms and empowers unification of purpose within diversity of practice. TEACH

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