Challenges to the Vision:

Cultural Constraints in the Nineties

The Public School Monopoly vs. the Family’s Right to Educate

John eased his van into his driveway, carefully, so that the paint ladders attached to the roof wouldn't hit the overhanging tree branch. It was 9:45 P.M., a typical end to a typical day. After nine hours of painting and wallpapering for a local contractor, John had eaten a quick supper before heading out for his moonlighting jobs. Gathering his lunch pail and records, he climbed the steps to his door. Once inside, he saw his wife, Judy, sitting at the empty kitchen table. John knew that if she was sitting there not doing anything she probably wanted to talk.

“This isn’t working, hon,” Judy said, not unkindly.

“What’s not working?” said Jon, with a quick kiss to her cheek.

“You're working nights like this,” the kids and I hardly see you. Half the time you’re stressed out and exhausted. There’s got to be a better way.”

“Like what?” John replied. “You know we depend on this income. Without it, we couldn’t pay tuition.”

“Well, I’m wondering,” said Judy somewhat hesitantly, “if Christian schooling is worth it.”

“You're kidding,” said John. “I’m working night and day like this and you’re not even convinced it’s, worth it?”

“Not if we never see you,” said Judy, warming to her side of the debate. “What’s more important: the kids getting a Christian education or the kids spending some time with their father?”

“Judy, we’ve been through this before. The public schools aren’t very safe. There are all kinds of lousy influences on the kids there.” He settled into a chair and searched under the newspaper for the remote control,

“Bev sends her kids to the public school, since Nick left her, and she says the place is fine. The teachers care. There aren’t any big problems with drugs and stuff.”

John shook his head. “Besides, Christian education is more than a school without drugs,” he said, clicking the remote to get the evening news. “In a Christian school, we parents get to determine what gets taught and how. Not the district office or some textbook publisher.”

“What about the family?” said Judy, sensing she wasn’t making progress,

“I’ll make more of an effort,” said John, getting absorbed in the newscast,

Judy sighed. “Well, I’m getting ready for bed,” She held up a light green sheet of paper. “By the way, the school newsletter came today. Tuition is going up again next year.”

One cannot understand Christian schooling unless one understands the social and educational milieu in which Christian schools operate. This chapter analyzes some of the political, cultural, and social constraints that undermine, or at least inhibit, the Christian school effort, and suggests that Christian schooling, if understood as educating for responsive discipleship, can be a powerful institutional response to a troubled society.

The broadest political and legal constraint under which Christian schools labor is the public school monopoly. Public schools in the United States collect no tuition but receive 220 billion dollars in public
monies. Christian schools in the U.S. receive little in government assistance and must depend on parents’ tuition payments usually for 80 percent or more of their budgets. The situation in Canada is somewhat more just, but it varies from province to province. The result is that Christian schools almost always lack the financial and human resources provided to public schools.

Although some might argue that the conditions of sponsorship for Christian schools (often a parent-controlled society) can result in better fiscal accountability, a clearer sense of mission, and the closeness of community, the essential financial inequity remains: Christian school supporters are taxed twice for education, once for the community’s children, and once for their own. Many Christian parents, usually young, usually at the lower paying beginning of their careers, and faced with all the other financial demands of raising a child, often find paying Christian school tuition a challenge requiring tremendous sacrifice. In addition, although some parents sacrifice greatly, tuition and school contributions in many areas fail to meet the financial needs of teachers. Many Christian school educators receive between two-thirds and three-quarters of a public school salary, a hardship and an injustice not sufficiently addressed by the school’s supporters.

The public school monopoly depends on a modern cultural understanding that certain areas of life, such as religion, are private, and other areas of life, such as business and education, are public or secular in nature. For this reason, North Americans generally embrace the notion that some schools are public because they do not espouse any particular religious or moral viewpoint beyond a general civic-mindedness and are thereby worthy of public funding. Other schools are private and should be prevented from receiving tax monies.

As Rockne McCarthy and his colleagues (1982) have carefully documented, the history of education in America has been one of the spread and growth of this publicly supported, bureaucratically centralized, “religiously neutral” public school system. The family’s right to educate has been subsumed by the government’s need for control. State or provincial legislatures empower schools, but they also control schools with a wide variety of requirements: mandatory attendance until a certain age, a set number of school days per year, a set number of hours per day, curriculum requirements (e.g., X number of years of social studies), teacher certification requirements, school building requirements, financing structures, and so on. Although some government influence (such as safety minimums) has no doubt improved schooling, the essential absurdity, that schooling can be morally and religiously neutral, and the essential injustice, that the state, not the parents, should have the greater say, remain as the twin pillars of the public school monopoly.

If the monopoly is both absurd and unjust, why does it persist? Why can’t the monopoly be broken up? Charles L. Glenn, Jr., in The Myth of the Common School (1988), examines the power of the idea of the common school. He uses “myth” not in the sense of false reality or imaginary vision but as compelling cultural idea. For him, the myth of the common school is a powerful component of the sustaining ideology of modern democracy. The public school has come to symbolize the American experiment: all are together; all are learning to respect and get along with each other; all are given equal opportunity. Glenn suggests that the crisis in confidence in public schools today draws much of its irrational quality from the exaggerated hopes that we have cherished over the past century and a half. “It is no wonder that suggestions that the common school be diversified, that the ‘public school monopoly’ be broken up, that our society’s secular church be disestablished arouse the deepest anxiety and confusion today” (Glenn 1988, 84-85).

The public school monopoly makes up the larger context, the “background noise,” of Christian schooling. Because of the monopoly’s cultural power, the Christian school has two strikes against it before it even comes to the plate: the disadvantage of no public funding, and the suspicion of the wider culture. Any genuine renewal of Christian schooling with respect to the wider political culture unavoidably will have to take into account this “myth of the common school.”

But in addition to the public school monopoly, Christian school educators labor under a variety of cultural and philosophical expectations regarding the way children are “schooled.” Almost everyone in North American society has learned that schooling occurs in a certain way, accompanied by certain methods, certain sequences, and certain expectations. Variation from these norms is suspect. Innovations
often meet heavy resistance, this time not by legislative decree, but by the expectations of all those involved in the educational process.

The Subculture of Schooling vs. the Unwrapping of Gifts

Glennis and Nate will normally begin their schooling experience in preschool or nursery school, a setting designed more for social interaction and guided play than for serious academic work. Preschool is followed by kindergarten and elementary school. In North America, the school year begins in late August or early September and ends in late May or early June, a relic from a predominantly agricultural past. (Today, such a school calendar remains entrenched by vacation time preferences.) Glennis and Nate are assigned to a “class” with children of the same age. The school commits itself to a new class only when economies of scale permit, when a certain number of similar-age students requires a new class to be organized. The class begins a lock-step progression through the “grades.” The emphasis during the early years is on reading and arithmetic; the sciences and social studies are explored somewhat; and music, physical education, art, and (in very few schools) a foreign language are “extras,” the first programs cut when funds become tight.

In first grade, the class is divided into reading groups according to aptitude. Glennis is with the best readers. Nate is with the slowest. Because the classroom is small and filled with twenty-eight individual desks arranged in rows, the possibilities for learning activities are limited. Worksheets and “seat time” activities make up much of their day. By age twelve, Glennis and Nate may enter a middle school or junior high school. They shift from having essentially one teacher responsible for all the subjects to having several teachers, each responsible for a certain subject area. Glennis and Nate receive doses of each subject, often in prepackaged curricula, often in textbook form, often in time periods of forty-five minutes. They move from class to class, switching orientations as needed to accommodate a science class on aquatic ecosystems, a history class on ancient Greece, a music class on American jazz, a geography class on South America, and so on.

After the prescribed number of “periods,” the normal school day ends for Glennis and Nate. Most of their classmates return home; many stay for “extracurricular” activities. The school offers several sports throughout the school year, such as soccer, volleyball, and track, but, in America especially, the triumvirate is football, basketball, and baseball. Glennis and Nate must “try out” to secure a place on the team. Glennis makes the volleyball team. Nate is “cut” from the basketball team. In addition to the sports teams, a few clubs meet after school, pursuing activities such as photography, theater, or skiing. Nate, who likes to make models, decides to go home when school is out.

The methods of instruction in high school classes are quite similar. A teacher usually lectures or supervises a learning situation. Assignments, usually the reading of a text, are given and often done in class. A “quiz,” often a set of multiple-choice questions, is a short evaluation given about once a week. A “test,” which covers more material and might include an essay question, is given every two or three weeks. Class discussion is encouraged on occasion but normally not required. Some teachers “grade on the curve,” which assures that the bottom 15 percent, regardless of their scores, will get the F grades. While such a method builds failure into the system, some teachers defend it because it “motivates” the children. After the grades are given, the students quite often are “ranked,” resulting in a “valedictorian,” the student with the best grades in the class.

Glennis enjoys school and participates vigorously, both academically and socially. Nate would rather be working but he has learned that if he shows up, makes no trouble, and does a modicum of work, he will pass the course and receive the credit necessary for graduation. Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) called these arrangements “treaties”; though they are an unspoken agreement between the two parties, both teacher and student have clear expectations. Essentially, the student promises to go along with the system -- to show up, give
a degree of cooperation, and refrain from disrupting the whole arrangement -- and in return, the teacher will “pass” the student into the next grade.

Glennis excels at volleyball and enjoys it, but this year, she will miss her family’s vacation because of the required conditioning practice. The interscholastic sports program is important to the life of the school. The administrator says it promotes “school spirit.” Parents say it keeps their children active and “off the streets.” The school has “school colors,” white and blue, and a nickname, “the Wildcats.” The boys’ games are well-attended by vocal fans. A cheerleading squad made up of girls encourages fans to cheer by performing various gymnastic-like routines. A “pep band” adds to the energy. The game itself is intense; the purpose, as one father commented, is clear: “We like a winner.” Last year parents petitioned for and achieved the removal of the coach because of the team’s losing record.

By age fourteen, Glennis and Nate and their same-age classmates are ready for high school. The social dimension of schooling now thoroughly overshadows the academic endeavor; for most students, popularity is their high school priority. In classes, they continue to receive instruction in the various subjects, but now they choose one of three high school “programs” -- general, vocational, or college preparatory. The programs differ according to the types of classes offered, the degree of difficulty, and the vocational and educational opportunities that follow upon graduation. Glennis chooses college prep. She also has been accepted into honors classes and will be taking the advanced placement tests, enabling her to gain college credits while still in high school. Nate chooses the vocational program. He senses that his program is somehow not as worthy as that taken by the college-bound students.

One highlight of Glennis’s and Nate’s senior year, and one of the rites of passage in the subculture of schooling, is the senior banquet or prom night, a dinner for the senior class usually followed by an evening of late-night celebrating. In recent years, the banquet has become, for some parents and their children, a financial black hole. Another rite of passage is the graduation exercise itself. The diploma is granted because the student has gained the proper number of “credits” in the proper subject areas. The treaty arrangement has come to its proper conclusion. Teachers, parents, and even the students themselves may have no idea what they have actually accomplished, what it is they know and can usefully apply, but the diplomas they receive “mean something” in North American society. They are credentials for moving into the world of work or further education.

While variations undoubtedly occur, much of North American schooling, including Christian schooling, looks like what Glennis and Nate experienced. Do Glennis and Nate attend a Christian or a public school? It’s hard to tell. Christian schooling too often looks exactly like its public school counterpart: fragmented, superficial, and deeply antithetical to Christian presuppositions and purposes.

As the narrative suggests, schooling in North America has developed a highly refined model resembling factory production. Building design, teachers as technicians, scheduling, prepackaged curriculums, the ringing of bells, assignments, grouping of students, accumulation of credits, testing/grading/ranking of students -- all such practices assume that a product is being manufactured in some way. Mass production assumes similarity of treatment and conformity of outcome; it hardly provides the best model for the unwrapping of gifts, the sharing of burdens, or the seeking of shalom.

A consistent theme that runs through Glennis’s and Nate’s schooling experience is the primary role of competition. They learn and achieve almost always in comparison with others. Glennis and Nate quickly learned that getting As (as Glennis did) or Ds (as Nate did) doesn’t simply mean one got an A or a D on a report card; it means one is an A person or a D person (Kohn 1986). Such messages are sent, consciously or unconsciously, throughout the schooling years. As David Purpel (1989,35) observed, “Students learn very quickly that the rewards that the schools provide -- grades, honors, recognitions, affection -- are conditioned upon achievement and certain behaviors of respect, obedience, and docility.”

Grading, however, is not the only form of competition in the schools. This is because spelling bees, science fairs, and the state band competition are used as a form of control: “The class that sells the most magazine subscriptions will get a pizza party!” Even group efforts such as the athletic team end the year by
appointing a Most Valuable Player. The system needs winners; just as important, the system needs losers. We give dignity only to those who achieve. In fact, as Purpel (1989,36) suggests, “the schools’ job includes, however unintended, that of identifying those who are of little or no worth.”

The questions surrounding competition and the subculture of schooling go straight to the heart of schooling in general and Christian schooling in particular: “Is there no other way, to control and motivate students?” Competition, along with other bureaucratic structures, is an institutional tool that promotes conformity rather than the unwrapping of individual gifts. When the definition of winning is narrowed to grades, athletics, and popularity, only a few can win. When “excellence” comes to mean only high scores on standardized tests, schools bypass, as Purpel (1989,18) put it, “the serious and perplexing questions of what should be taught, for what reason, and for which model of humanity and community.” When our schooling procedures are so prescribed and so self-serving, it is difficult to teach children to be “responsive” to anything but the system and the ways of working it to their advantage.

**Individualism vs. the Sharing of Burdens**

“I send Glennis to this school to learn something, so she knows what she’s supposed to know for college. I don’t send her here to learn how to get along with other kids or serve others. That can come later. This is a school, for crying out loud.”

Bill Mathers hadn’t intended to raise his voice but his conference with the school’s principal was proving frustrating.

“Look,” he continued, “I know this is a Christian school. I know we want the kids to be nice to each other and so on, but I am frankly worried about the academic excellence of this place. Glennis has enjoyed attending here but she’s now in a position to get a college scholarship. She’s even thinking about being a doctor. She needs accelerated math and history and science, not projects to increase her sensitivity to the world’s problems.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Mr. Mathers,” said Claire Brown, “but here we don’t think academic excellence, as you call it, and social involvement are mutually exclusive. We’ve collaborated with Habitat for Humanity to build this house because we believe the project teaches things that can’t be learned from books alone.”

Although Bill Mathers sensed some merit in Mrs. Brown’s ideas, he persisted. “But it seems so inefficient, such a waste of time. You don’t see the Academy kids building houses. They’re taking AP courses. Ninety-eight percent of their kids go on to college. They become doctors and lawyers and engineers.”

“I’m all for that!” cried Claire, enthusiastically. “Doctors and lawyers and engineers are important for society’s work and for God’s work. All I’m saying is that besides being trained as a doctor, Glennis should be educated to be a healer, a peacemaker, an agent of shalom. Our school not only holds up the ideal of social involvement, it gives the whole life philosophy -- a Christian world view -- that gives meaning and motivation for a lifetime.”

“OK,” said Mathers, thinking of a new tack. “But why not just let the slow kids who have trouble with academics build a house? That would be great for them -- give them a sense of accomplishment and so on. And let the bright kids do real schoolwork.”

Claire swung her chair around in order to look out the window a moment. Although she appreciated this parent’s concern, she rejected the implications of his perspective.

“Mr. Mathers, do you know Nate Simpson?” Mathers nodded, so she continued. “Nate is someone many consider slow. He finds schoolwork a constant source of failure. For too many years already, he’s been like Robert Frost’s ‘Hired Man’ -- nothing to look back on with pride, nothing to look forward to with hope, so now, and never any different. The Housing Project is for Glennis and those who enjoy school -- I hope I’ve already explained why that’s so. But it’s also for the Nates of the world. Nate is a wonder with tools and materials. He and others could be separated in order to develop their gifts, but that’s not how we do things in the Christian community. We try to share each other’s burdens and celebrate each other’s successes. It’s
hard for students to do that when they’re tracked academically and socially. We’re trying to build structures here that send a different message.”

Mathers seemed to be listening, so she continued. “For example, we want students to know that academics -- areas such as math and physics and social studies and Bible, in this case -- can be directly connected to real life and real needs. One can’t build a house without knowledge of how certain materials save or waste energy, or without the ability to measure and compute correctly. One wouldn’t want to build such a house unless one had a sense of the housing problem in this country, its social and economic causes and its effects. One wouldn’t feel impelled to build such a house unless one had examined and prayed over our obligation as Christians to care for others. One wouldn’t build an ugly house because we are called to create beauty in form and function. See, we’re trying to integrate all these dimensions into one single project, a whole. Academics aren’t being shortchanged; they’re being enhanced and embedded in students’ minds and bodies. Besides, we want students to recover the idea of craftsmanship. We want them to know that using their minds to fashion something with their hands is a fine ideal worthy of their best effort.”

Mathers thought for a moment, nodded slowly, and said, “OK, I’ll give it a try, see how it goes.” Rising to leave, he winked, and added, “How about teaming up Glennis with your plumbing supervisor I’ve got this persistent drip from our upstairs bathroom faucet . . .”

What is the essence of the schooling experience in North America at the end of the twentieth century? Purpel (1989,33) would reply, “When we go to school, we are taught mostly to learn to be alone, to compete, to achieve, to succeed.” This analysis of schooling may sound glum, but it summarizes our culture as well, for the two are inextricably related. We have what he (1989,36) calls “an ethic of conditioned love: we will love you if you achieve.” This deeply rooted cultural orientation towards achieving in competition, along with its expression in our schooling structures, is an outgrowth of the individualism of our day. Our cultural hero is the individual who accomplishes despite great odds; we are less enthusiastic about the suffering servant who bears the burdens of others. The essence of schooling in contemporary society is that it is a vehicle for getting ahead, and “ahead” has meaning only in relationship to others.

The best-known documentation of our cultural individualism is Robert Bellah and associates’ *Habits of the Heart* (1985), in which they trace two kinds of individualism, utilitarian and expressive. The former suggests a Ben Franklin, “whatever-works-for-me” approach and is best represented by the rational, self-interested individual who has replaced traditional loyalties with market motives. Expressive individualism, on the other hand, celebrates a life free of all constraints and conventions, a life rich in experience, a life that luxuriates in the sensual as well as the intellectual, a life of strong feeling. This Walt Whitman approach to life allows for human flourishing, but gives priority to my flourishing. Both strands of individualism are starkly obvious in our schooling methods. On one level, we attend school to get ahead, to make our way, to prepare for the career. But we also attend for personal fulfillment, for “self-actualization,” and for personal flourishing.

Neither kind of individualism has much to do with bearing others’ burdens and sharing their joys. Bellah’s greatest concern is with the loss of community in our society. Because traditional social ties have been crippled by the new economic relations, people must find meaning, purpose, and closeness in community elsewhere. Bellah calls the new social network that develops the “lifestyle enclave” and suggests that “whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity” (Bellah et al. 1985,72). He notes that people seek out and join up only with those of similar economic success and social status. Together they pursue leisure and consumption according to a similar standard -- and lifestyle becomes the all-important term for describing all of life not connected directly to one’s work. Why should we do one thing rather than another, especially when we don’t feel like it or don’t find it profitable? Historically, the question “Who requires this of me?” could be answered “God” or “church” or “community.” But now the answer can only be “self”
What about the Christian school community? Is it simply another lifestyle enclave, a group that shares similar economic and social status, but with the added glue of similar religious beliefs? Do we teach a religious and moral code but keep it on a personal, Sunday-only plane? Is it possible to be a disciple and not reach out to others different from us? Who decides? To modern ears, a “life of discipleship” sounds extremely odd or at least quaint, and “bearing each other’s burdens” is understood not as a biblical command, but as a psychic reward for “those who are into that.” Where, we should ask, does unwrapping one’s gifts, sharing each other’s burdens, and seeking shalom, come in?

Robert Coles, the eminent child psychiatrist, has observed this individualism and the resulting moral relativity in his study of young children. Coles and his colleagues interviewed more than five thousand children in grades four through twelve, asking questions such as “Do you believe in God?” “How do you decide what is right and wrong?” “What system of values informs your moral decisions?” The answers reveal a fairly complicated belief system among children but one that often runs counter to traditional values. “I saw an awful lot of kids who are bright,” says Coles, “but whose conscience is not all that muscular. ...What I think we are seeing here is a conflict. On the one side, kids with a strong belief in the Judeo-Christian religious ethic, and on the other side, [kids] paying very close attention to that ‘get ahead at any cost’ attitude that they’ve picked up in their family lives” (Coles and Genevie 1990, 40).

Although me-first and winning-is-everything were common themes among the children, Coles believes that the important finding of his study is that many children have no firm religious or moral code to guide them. They may do the “right” thing, but they do it because it makes them happy, gets them ahead, keeps them out of trouble, or seems best for everyone. The children to a large extent merely reflect the values of their society. “Given their membership in a highly competitive, SAT-conscious culture, some children can very easily entertain the notion of cheating.... They’re so fiercely committed to using the schools to achieve their own ends. Sadly, as so-called ‘cultural literacy’ grows, what should be called ‘moral literacy’ declines” (Meade 1990, 49).

Christian schools, too, may teach “love your neighbor” in Bible class, but it does little good if other school structures teach “make sure you win.” Our modern Western individualism may have provided us with a “freedom” of sorts but we have a poor understanding of our place in the universe, of how we relate to each other, and of how we ought to be living.

Social and Ecological Decline vs. Shalom

“Are you going to talk about the drug problem at school?” asked a Christian high school student we were interviewing. It seems an undercover policeman had recently been on campus, though his “cover had been blown.” We were somewhat taken aback: we don’t like to think of Christian schools as places with these sorts of problems. Teen pregnancy, alcohol abuse, intimidation of people who are different, theft, obscenity, and blasphemy -- unfortunately, we have to acknowledge that these are common problems, in some places more than others, certainly, but problems that need to be faced.

There are Christian school students who never sit down with their families for an evening meal; teenagers who are frightened to go home because they might be beaten by an alcoholic parent; children who cannot take their friends home because their parents don’t want to be bothered with the noise and distraction; adolescents who have no curfew, or if they do, need only be home by the set time without advising their parents of their whereabouts. Christian school students do not come from perfect homes. Then there are the very young children -- and the not so young traumatized by the break-up of their parents’ marriage, not sleeping adequately, estranged from a loved one, or not remembering whose house they will he staying at the coming weekend, or not able to arrange to have friends over because they are spending it with one parent in a suburb far away.

When we look at the social problems faced by the community at large, we can no longer pretend that we are immune from them. Nor of course should we expect to be. Sin clings closely to us, even in our communities of faith.

Marc Miringoff (1992, 18) had this to say about our social plight: “It’s like the movie ‘Jaws.’ We can’t keep denying there’s a shark out there. There are people bloodied on the beach. We can’t leave the beach
open and let everybody swim. We better take action.” The Index of Social Health, published by Miringoff’s Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, tracks such social problems as infant mortality, child abuse, teen suicide, drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, homicide, and the gap between rich and poor.¹ The 1991 report documented the worsening of social problems over the last twenty years. In 1970 the index stood at 68 (on a scale of 100); by 1989 (the last year for which complete data are available) it had fallen to 33, the worst rating in twenty years. The report notes, among other trends, that child abuse, teen suicide, and the gap between the rich and the poor have grown worse nearly every year since 1970; that, of the six problems relating to children and youth, four -- child abuse, children in poverty, teen suicide, and high school dropouts -- grew worse.

Andrew L. Shapiro (Marty 1991,3) recently observed that among Western industrialized nations, the U.S. is:

Number One in percentage of children living below the poverty line, Number One in teen pregnancy, Number One in murders of males between 15 and 24, Number One in murder by handguns for all ages, Number One in percentage of population incarcerated, Number One in percentage of commuter trips made by private auto rather than public transport, Number One in per capita energy consumption and Number one in emissions of air pollutants.

Martin E. Marty (1991,3), in whose Context newsletter Shapiro was quoted, wryly adds, “It’d be nice to be Number Two in some of these. We have to try harder.”

What does this mean for Christian schools in a society aching for shalom? Increasingly, Christian school communities are directly affected; but even if they have been to this point spared, Christians who take the Bible and culture seriously must feel their responsibility to address these problems. To simply isolate ourselves and our children from social ills and to ignore the biblical call to seek shalom is to fail in our calling as responsive disciples of Christ. Christian school communities must lead children to see the assaults on shalom evident in specific areas of modern life and then equip them with the skills and disposition to do something. Three areas in particular deserve attention.

### Economic Overconsumption and Environmental Degradation

Economic exchanges -- day-in, day-out, large-scale, small-scale, city-wide, world-wide -- do much to shape people’s lives. Economic activity, while not the only factor, determines to a large extent a person’s present well-being and future potential. Because business contributes much to the health of a society, it is essential that it be carried out in a way that glorifies the Creator. Material well being (not to be confused with raw prosperity or unrestrained consumption) is a legitimate human pursuit, an authentic dimension of shalom. But stewardship of God’s gifts is the key: biblical mandates on the well being of other people and the created world are clear and plentiful (Tiemstra 1990).

We must not pursue the enjoyment of God’s created wealth at the expense of shalom. David Korten (1990), an international relief and development expert, divides the world’s five billion people into three segments: marginals, sustainers, and over-consumers. This table shows the challenge facing Christian educators: How do we teach students who have material wealth as their main goal, when so many in God’s world have so little? Are we simply equipping our students to be the next generation of over-consumers?

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From the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee’s Partner letter (1 April 1992). Based on material in David C. Korten, Getting to the 21st Century (West Hartfield, Conn.: Kumarian, 1990).
Some fear that the teaching of economic justice or the economic implications of shalom “politicizes” Christian schools; however, teaching an economic status quo is just as “political” an act, usually more self-serving, and contrary to the biblical call. Glenn Tinder (1989, 69) writes, “The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world -- that we can practice a spirituality that is not political -- is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God.” He points out that the extremes of ostentatious wealth on the one hand and Calcuttan poverty on the other testify to our weak moral and spiritual grounding. While we celebrate the global downfall of authoritarian communism and the establishment of free market economies, we need to remind ourselves that the principles of capitalism are dangerously anticommunal. As Tinder (1989, 84) concludes, “A system that enables an industrial society to achieve a degree of order and efficiency without depending on either goodness or governmental coercion cannot be entirely despised. Nevertheless, even if capitalism worked as well as its supporters claim, it would by Christian standards fail morally and spiritually.”

This failure is evident in its impact upon the world which God has entrusted to our care. Calvin DeWitt (1991, 14–22) describes seven degradations of the creation: land conversion and habitat destruction, species extinction, land degradation, resource conversion and wastes and hazards production, global toxification, alteration of planetary exchange, and human and cultural degradation. These degradations, suggests DeWitt, form an “arrogant assault on the fabric of the biosphere,” a crisis beyond what the world has ever known, a crisis rooted in a profound religious misunderstanding of how we should relate to each other and to the created world. The problem is that in the last several centuries, “we have chosen to redefine the long-recognized vices of avarice and greed as virtues. We have come to believe that ‘looking out for number one’ means getting more and more for self” (DeWitt 1991, 22).

Our schools cannot pretend that these economic pressures and their environmental consequences do not exist. The question is whether we have the will to confront them.

**Media Domination**

According to the authors of *Dancing in the Dark*, most children today are immersed in an independent youth culture that is transferred and communicated through electronic media (Schultze et al. 1991). The traditional triangle of influence -- church, homes, and school has become a rectangle that includes the electronic media. A nightmare world seems close to reality: children’s social and sexual expectations shaped by thousands of hours of TV shows, their values and life goals determined by advertising, their leisure time spent with video games, VCRs, and headset radios (Clark 1989). Reading and reflective, principled thought takes too much effort (Postman 1985). Children (like some adults) want only speed, toys, and sugar.

At the same time that we may resent how the media dominate our lives, we also realize they have great potential for informing us of the condition of our global world. With such information we are better equipped to make responsible decisions that could move our world closer to shalom. Because media “savviness” will become more and more essential if we are to be discerning, responsive disciples of Christ, the Christian school must serve up an antidote to the media-driven superficiality and violence and sex-as-commodity orientation that surrounds us.

Too often teaching such media discernment is neglected. Media courses might include filming technique or anti-advertising units, but they fall short of analyzing the full range of the media industry’s economic, social, and cultural effects.

On the positive side, the Christian school should teach children to claim the cultural good available in media culture. Children would learn to forego those TV shows, movies, music, or magazines that are sensationalist and superficial in favor of the deep and abiding. Students would also learn to find reliable sources of information from the various media and to use that information wisely. In sum, as Vern Boerman (1975) put it, the Christian school joins with the church and parents to hammer the rectangle back into a triangle.

The mass media are but one facet of a life dominated by the trappings of technology, the myriad of devices-fax machines, cellular phones, computers, pagers -- designed to make our life easier, which can in fact accelerate it to a pace seemingly beyond our control. We live “in an era so seduced by the
instantaneous that we’re in grave danger of losing our ability to wait. Life moves at a staggering pace” (Kidd 1990,17). The “ability to wait,” to pause and reflect, suggests Kidd, is a key to spiritual growth that we have misplaced, or more accurately, hurried past, in an age of rapid change. Perhaps Christian educators, when considering the latest educational technology, should go beyond discussing its educational effectiveness to ask, “What does this technology do to our souls?” (Monsma 1986).

**Family Mobility and Social Disintegration**

In the last half of the nineteenth century, as social mobility and economic opportunities increased, fathers left the home for the workplace, leaving mothers to assume more of the child-rearing duties. One hundred years later, mothers made the same move from home to workplace. Janice Castro (1992,41) writes, “With both parents typically holding down jobs, home life has been reduced to a mad scramble at the end of the day to cram in shopping, laundry, cooking, mending -- and, oh, yes, communication.” The school was the only logical institution to assume the responsibilities abdicated by the parents -- from serving breakfast to handing out birth control aids to teaching students how to drive.

We lament not simply the problems faced by the nuclear family, which, improperly understood, can lead to further privatization, isolation, and loss of genuine community. We also lament the social mobility and disruption in contemporary society that seems to be accelerating. Broken homes, substance abuse, runaway consumerism, gangs, alcoholism, teen suicide, poverty, free-floating anxiety about the future and the meaning of life -- what are the implications for educators of such a deterioration in the fabric of North American society? What can the school as schools do? What is the relationship between the way our schools are structured (often impersonally) and oriented (usually competitively) and our felt loss of community? For example, how much of the substance abuse among young people is actually self-medication? How often are problem peer groups (in their worst form, gangs) simply the way kids obtain the feelings of belonging and acceptance that they crave?

All of our concerns -- economic injustice and environmental breakdown, media domination, family and social disruption -- are only, examples of areas needing attention by Christian schools. These are areas where the world is hurting. These are jumping-off points for mission. These are some of the best places to work as responsive disciples of Christ.

Christian schools have an institutional role in bringing about shalom, human and creational flourishing. An eloquent explanation of what shalom is comes from Cornelius Plantinga (1990,24-25). “We call it peace, but [shalom] means so much more than just peace of mind, or cease-fire among enemies. In the Bible shalom means universal wholeness and delight, each created thing a wonder, each created person a source of joy, and the Creator and Savior opening doors and speaking welcome to his children.” Our calling in education, says Plantinga (1990), is to equip ourselves with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes “that can be thrown into the struggle for shalom.” The question now before us is how to build places where such education takes place.

**The Challenge Facing Christian Schooling**

Charles Glenn (1988) describes the “myth of the common school” and its power over our cultural life. Robert Coles (1987) claims we are neglecting the moral and spiritual lives of children. Robert Bellah (1985) has described our loss of a common moral vision and the language of moral discourse. Dozens of educational scholars have described the subculture of schooling and its emphasis on competition and individual enhancement. What do we as Christian school educators and parents make of all this as we seek to shape our schools for the twenty-first century?

Because “schooling” is a subculture, its structures and procedures and programs -- the take-it-for-granted givens -- are deeply entrenched in the expectations of everyone. Everything from the agricultural year to cheerleaders to diplomas awarded for “seat time” are a part of the subculture. There is little
questioning of the status quo. There is little discernment. Those involved shrug, “We’ve always done it this way. It seems to work pretty well. Why fix it if it isn’t broken?”

Of course, whenever one brings a large number of people together, there have to be routines and organization. Time and space and other resources have to be allocated. This will be done fairly and efficiently. But an organization can unfortunately take on a life of its own, and the living, growing communal purposes that were originally meant to be served can suffer as a consequence. Any subcultures resistance to change is partly psychological (we are creatures of habit) and partly institutional (schools are very conservative organizations). But in addition, the schooling subculture provides benefits to society that are not specifically educational. Schools provide a warehousing or baby-sitting function for children until society is ready for them in the workplace. They are a sorting mechanism, providing credentials for moving into economic and social positions. Employers and colleges embrace the credentialing system as a means of ascertaining the quality of applicants. Various tests (ACT, SAT, etc.) are a part of the processing and sorting structure. Thus, much depends on the school fulfilling its assigned function in society.

The entrenched nature of the schooling subculture and the inability of those involved to reconsider aims and methods led Jeannie Oakes (1985, 27) in Keeping Track to complain:

We seldom think, very much about where practices came from originally and to what problems in schools they were first seen as solutions. We rarely question the view of the world on which practices are based -- what humans are like, what society is like, or even what schools are for. We almost never reflect critically about the beliefs we hold about them or about the manifest and latent consequences that result from them. And I think this uncritical, unreflective attitude gets us into trouble. It permits us to act in ways contrary to our intentions. In short, it can lead us and, more important, our students down a disastrous road despite our best purposes.

Christian schools need the institutional self-examination suggested by Oakes as much as public schools because Christian schools often have an unsettling resemblance to their public counterparts. Critics would say that the schools are tainted that they are “both in the world and of it,” that they are simply private schools staffed and populated by people who go to church. In their methods, curricula, structures, and ethos, Christian schools have followed too closely the public school’s lead. They have not taken advantage of their unique position to be an alternative; they have not fully worked out the specifics of practice that arise out of their vision of life.

Christian schools, like most schools, are conservative institutions. They have been more reactive to red herrings originating from the church or parents than proactive on the basis of a sound reading of research, the culture, and their guiding faith. Far from advocating change that is based on research, Christian educators have often been strongly skeptical of such research, choosing to neither fund it nor trust it. As a result, the problems of Christian schooling go undetected, and the successes go unexplained.

For example, if Christian schools enjoy high academic scores (and often they do), is such achievement due to the conditions of sponsorship -- usually parent-controlled societies? Or is it simply because most Christian school students are from white, two-parent, $40,000-plus, English-speaking households? Only empirical research can enable us to answer these questions (Vryhof 1992).

Besides attending to serious research and its recommendations, Christian educators must help Christian communities see how their individual Christian schools have become what they presently are. They need to narrate -- to tell the story, to identify the social and cultural influences, to put up the mirror of self-recognition, to acknowledge both successes and sins -- in order to show how institutions have both stood against and accommodated themselves to the surrounding culture.

For example, many Christian schools were originally intended to isolate and insulate their children from the surrounding culture, preserving an ethnic and a denominational purity. Some schools have matured greatly from such beginnings but many remain limited to a particular ethnic and denominational group. Why is that? What social and cultural expectations have shaped us and continue to shape us in such directions?

Christian school people need to realize that the context of Christian schooling -- in this case the secularized and fragmented subculture of schooling in North America -- might not fit the mission of the
Christian school as understood today. We may be trying to put new wine into old wineskins. Our children -- new creatures in Christ -- do not belong in the traditional schooling structures. We should not expect nor should we want Christian schooling to match the surrounding cultural context.

Profoundly important questions result: What is the mission of the Christian school in twenty-first century society? Indeed, what is the nature and task of the Christian life in today’s pluralistic world? How are we to think of our institutional mission? What is it we ought to be about? Then educational specifics must be explored: What ethos should characterize a Christian school? What curricula should be offered? What structures and relationships should be put in place? How do we assess? And finally, when, if ever, do we say we have succeeded?

A Vision with a Task

A Vision without a task is but a dream;
a task without a vision is drudgery;
a vision with a task is the hope of the world.

Inscription in a church in Sussex, England, 1730

The current educational scene seems alive with ferment and innovation ranging from philosophy for children to video-disk science instruction to cooperative learning to writing-across-the-curriculum to whole language. How many of these innovations are really taking hold in Christian schools? How many should, given the task of Christian schooling? What is the best new wineskin for the new wine? As Christian school people consider the dozens of educational ideas around them, what elements of a Christian vision of education can help them make their decisions?

The answers to such questions will move us beyond the ordinary picking and choosing among educational specifics (or worse, following the whims of today’s most powerful subset of parents) to a fundamental restructuring and reorientation of the school’s mission and purpose in which educating for responsive discipleship -- the free and willing commitment to he faithful to all that Christ has taught us -- becomes the highest priority.

Education, David Purpel (1989,12) insists, requires not only knowledge and skills, but also “a commitment to a vision of who we are and what we ought to be.” Such a vision is unavoidably religious. In the public school, the espoused vision is unmitigatingly secular, though many communities and teachers work to subvert this. But, as John Alexander (Marty, 1991b, 1) affirms,

Kids need to be nurtured in an environment sensitive to spirituality. Where the wonders and horrors of the universe are considered at least as often as are the names of the state capitals. Where the adults lead lives of grace and truth, and where justice is as important as grades. Where the study of poetry does not focus on meter but on finding ways to express depths unknown to scientific formulas.

And, we would add, where service of God in a loving relationship with him is the pervasive theme.

But a vision is not only a way of seeing: it is also a way of going. The vision comes with a task wrapped up in it. Being God’s people in the world here and now, with all the weight of sin that constrains us, requires our energy and our effort, with God’s wisdom guiding us in our weakness.

Such a vision with a task should not be triumphalistic, in the sense of assuming that we can proudly and brazenly transform the world after our own image. We cannot transform a world marred by sin; this task belongs only to the Lord and Ruler of this world. He will one day return to establish the new heavens and the new earth. Our task is to be a “presence,” to live in the world with integrity, to witness to the light of Christ, and to follow him as faithful disciples.

Refusal to take on this hands-dirty-in-the-world dimension of the Christian life must not be considered an option. Our culture, with its extreme of wealth and poverty, is aching for shalom. Christians may not simply wait for the rescue of their souls while working for the American dream. Glenn Tinder (1989) calls for a “hesitant radicalism,” an approach to political and social change that is both cautious and far-
reaching. No negotiator of compromise, he claims attitudes toward the kingdom of God have to be acted on. This is a matter of spiritual integrity.

To anticipate the coming of the kingdom is merely sentimental, a private frivolity, unless one tries to reshape society according to the form of the imminent community, a form defined by equality and universality and requiring particular attention to the disinherited and oppressed.... From a Christian standpoint, a frightened refusal of all social change would be highly inappropriate. (Tinder 1989,84).

Understanding both the reality of evil and the reality of grace, then, the Christian community seeks to be a Christ-like presence, salt and light in a needy world. And its schools educate each young person to be just such a presence.

As John sat in front of the television, his mind began to wander. Why did they send their kids to a Christian school? In one sense, he had never given it much thought. He had been to a Christian school and so had Judy. He had always just expected that when their children were old enough, they would follow in their parents' footsteps.

John thought about what Judy had said. “Is it mainly for safety’s sake that we made that choice? Of course, I want the best for my kids. I want them to have strong moral values, to be able to get good jobs. I want them to know that God is important in everything they do. But I’m just not sure anymore. It takes such an incredible toll on me and my family, Is Bev right -- are caring teachers and a safe environment enough?”

Picking up the newsletter, John got up and went to the kitchen to get himself a juice. Coupon drives, band nights, sports teams -- what else was happening at the school? “What do I really know about the curriculum? How different is it from what happens in public schools? Are Judith and Michael any different than they would be in another school? What do I really want from the school anyway?”

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways does the “myth of the common school” or the public school monopoly affect the establishment and renewal of Christian schools? What can be done to effect a system that better acknowledges parents’ rights and the explicitly religious nature of schooling?

2. It has been said that the one word that best describes North American culture is “competitive.” Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a culture that values competition so highly. What types of school structures could provide personal and institutional motivation to become what God wants us to be without paying the price of competition?

3. To what degree is your school community a “lifestyle enclave” as described by Robert Bellah? What could be done in your school to increase diversity, social involvement, and the sharing of burdens?

4. This chapter suggested three contemporary challenges to shalom: economic overconsumption and environmental degradation, media domination, and family mobility and social disintegration. Discuss the validity of each of these three and offer any others which you think are just as, perhaps more, urgent. How should Christian schooling adapt its structures and emphases to address such challenges?

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1 The “Gap Between Rich and Poor” refers to the difference in the proportion of the total aggregate family income received by the richest fifth and poorest fifth of the country’s families.