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THE EDUCATION REFORMATION

Why Your Church Should Start a Christian School



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CHAPTER 1

We Need a Reformation

Jimmy Scroggins

American families and churches are facing a crisis.

There was a time when most people in our country shared a common set of stories, perspective on history, and framework for morality and ethics, which had all been broadly informed by a Judeo-Christian worldview. Today, that shared story and moral consensus has collapsed into contentious ideological conflict.

Postmodernism, expressive individualism, the sexual revolution, intersectionality, and theological liberalism have acted as acids, dissolving once-common assumptions about God, the Bible, morality, marriage, and family. The educational system in our country, especially at the elite levels of policy and influence, has been captured by people hostile to Christian teaching and morality. Consequently, American families and churches are meeting active opposition, from the preschool to the university.

When a society gets to the point of their people finding nothing in common, its culture falls apart. This is exactly what is happening in America today. Anti-Christian waves of neo-paganism, self-worship, and moral degeneracy are beating against the homes of every family. No wonder we have a crisis of belief, a crisis of confidence, and a crisis of clarity.

In light of these realities, our job as Christian parents and members of Christian churches is to build a culture within a culture. If we are to pass on “the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 1:3) to new generations, we must cultivate and sustain a distinctively Christian culture.

We need trustworthy, biblically grounded, family-friendly, and evangelistically minded institutions to sustain, defend, and advance the gospel.

We need tools and allies to do the deep work of spiritual formation in our families and churches. We must rebuild a distinctively Christian culture that loves the people in the world yet resists the world's influence at the same time.

We need an education reformation.

Cards on the Table

We are writing this book with one goal in mind: We want every evangelical church in America to consider starting a Christian school. If you have a building—any kind of physical facility—we want you to look into hosting some kind of weekday school that is linked to, and in partnership with, your neighborhood church.

These schools could take a variety of forms (and we will point to several models in chapter 4), but they should be biblically grounded, financially accessible, and academically rigorous. Every member of your church should have the opportunity to put their kids in an environment that will underline and accelerate the faith formation taking place in the home and within the church family.

Some of you are already saying:

“We can’t do that.”

“We can’t afford that.”

“We have excellent public schools in our neighborhood.”

“That sounds like a lot of work.”

“We already have Christian schools around here.”

“If we take our kids out of public schools, who will reach *those* kids?”

“Homeschooling is the best!”

“Small Christian schools have lousy academics. Will our kids be prepared for college in these types of schools?”

“Are you guys trying to start a revolution or something?”

We understand. We’ve had the same thoughts and questions ourselves. But keep reading. Because we believe that when you see what is at stake,

and when you feel the headwinds against Christian parents and churches in our current cultural situation, you will agree that church-based, accessible, distinctively Christian schools provide an obvious opportunity for believers to not only defend our biblical values and beliefs but actually go “on offense” evangelistically. We need thousands of new church-based schools because we need an education reformation.

How Did We Get Here?

We are living through a dramatic cultural shift. Western culture has been barreling down the road of secularization at breakneck speed. The moral vision that once sustained and promoted the Christian values that shaped America has been sidelined. The church, once the keeper of our shared values, has been disapprovingly cast aside. The ties between our American culture and our Judeo-Christian roots have been largely erased, and the results are disastrous.

Many writers have observed this alarming change. Aaron Renn argues that since 2014, Christians have been living in “the negative world.”¹ Renn taps into a common intuition: the world has changed. The church is no longer the moral majority. Christian parents are raising their children in a world that is hostile to their values.

This cultural hostility is not confined to the U.S. In Australia, pastor Stephen McAlpine calls it a shift from “dispassionate disinterest” in Christianity to “hostile interest.” Christian doctrines and practices are not merely seen as false or old-fashioned but dangerous. In many cases, Christian views are no longer seen as worth considering but in need of silencing. “We’re the bad guys now,” McAlpine writes. “That we are experiencing a backlash after a remarkable period of religious peace and tolerance for the church in the West puts us back in the shoes of many Christians throughout history, and indeed of many in the current era around the world.”²

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, calls this change a “moral revolution.”³ For many years, Mohler has been chronicling the acceleration of the sexual revolution’s cultural influence. It was only in 2008, for example, when California voted

against redefining marriage, and both presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton advocated *against* the legalization of same-sex marriage! Since the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, individual Christians and Christian institutions have been under dramatically higher cultural pressure to fall in line with the new norms related to gender and sexuality.

A new moral code has overthrown the Christian moral vision, and it is narcissistic to the core. It commands you to pursue what you desire, find meaning within yourself, have any sex you want so long as it's consensual, and believe whatever you like. Gabe Lyons and Dave Kinnaman call it "the morality of self-fulfillment," and they see it as dominant in American society.⁴

There was a time when the majority of public institutions—think government, schools, Boy Scouts, little leagues, and the like—either shared or were actively supportive of Christians, churches, and their beliefs. Many people (even non-Christians) would describe American culture during this era as based on "Judeo-Christian values." Church attendance and membership would have likely added to a person's social capital and in many places might have been an unspoken but mandatory requirement for success in business or politics.

More recently, however, the major institutions in our country have begun to actively oppose Christian values. In many places, being connected to a Bible-believing church is no longer considered socially acceptable and beneficial. Christians and churches who hold to traditional values are considered anachronistic and possibly dangerous.

The world has changed. The world is negative. Pastors feel it. Christian parents feel it. We now live in a hostile world.

Living in a Hostile World

In a hostile world, continuing the culture war cannot be the only answer, simply because the votes aren't there. Political alliances may emerge temporarily around some shared conservative values, but politics will not protect our biblical values any longer. Even though the political pendulum may swing back and forth between Democrats and

Republicans, our position as a moral minority is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

This means we ought to recognize the need and call for culture-building in a world of culture-warring. We believe that a new commitment to a partnership between home, church, and school represents a better way forward in a hostile world. Theologically robust, financially accessible, academically excellent church-based schools give us a fighting chance to hold onto our kids, pass on our values, and do effective evangelism. We believe that the home-church-school strategy creates the framework for an education reformation in our country.

Dads and Moms are Ticked

Many Christian parents are now well aware that biblical values are under attack. For some time, it appeared that many parents were asleep at the wheel, had their heads in the sand, or were maybe just too busy to get involved. But something is happening right now in our culture. Dads and moms are awake now. Perhaps it was news stories about children taking field trips to see drag queen performances (and without parental permission!). Perhaps it was their child's elementary class throwing a party in celebration of a fellow child's gender transition. Perhaps it was teaching about gender pronouns to their kindergarteners. We are seeing more Christian men and women waking up and deciding to take more responsibility for the spiritual development of their families.

I (Jimmy) pastor a large, diverse, multisite church in South Florida. I interact with unchurched, far-from-God men all the time in my community. These guys own businesses, coach little league, and try to be good citizens. They love their families. Most of these men are ticked off and unsettled, although they can't exactly articulate why. They watch the news. They see gender confusion and what seems like insanity—men who identify as women sharing public restrooms with their daughters, as well as boys who identify as girls playing against their daughters in high school sports. They hear of kindergartners wearing name tags declaring preferred pronouns at school. They see educational elites refuse to repudiate genocide. These men don't know why they are upset,

but they know something is wrong. Although many institutions stand in opposition to Christian teaching, the speed of our society's abandonment of traditional values has created a sense of disorientation, which leads to an opening for the type of education reformation we call for in this book.

Consider three stories, all of which deal with the real-world effects of gender ideology. In Missouri, middle-school students were bussed from local schools on a field trip where a drag performance took place, *without* parental consent! The Christian parents of these children were angry, understandably so, but they assumed an oversight on the part of the school. They expected to see the field trip policies change so that parents would be better informed and anyone uncomfortable with their kids being taken to a drag show could opt out their children. They were in for a rude awakening. The district's superintendent wrote a public letter condemning the complaints, challenging the idea that a drag show was "sexual" in nature, and arguing that any opposition (including even the request for informed consent!) was "harmful to our students, our staff, and our community." What does this mean? Not only do students not have the right to opt out from such a show, but also their parents have *no right* to know ahead of time they might be going! If this can happen in Missouri, it can happen anywhere.⁵

Last year, my family and I were eating at Chick-Fil-A during a layover at Reagan National Airport. My daughter returned from the restroom with eyes wide and concern on her face. Something had scared her. She said, "Dad! I came out of the stall and saw a HUGE guy in a dress and horrible makeup. He was one of the biggest men I have ever seen—big enough to play in the NFL. I was scared to death to be in there with him!" My daughter is known for occasionally being dramatic. I was sure she was exaggerating. About that time, I saw the guy walking through the airport, past the Chick-Fil-A where we sat. He was at least 6'6" and 300 pounds. He had on a miniskirt and a crop top. His hair was styled like a woman's, and he wore bright lipstick. He was obviously a man. I immediately understood why my daughter felt frightened. And yet, in our society, the rules are on his side. In that airport, he has the right to use the bathroom next to my teenage daughter. You don't have to be

a Christian to see that our culture has abandoned all common sense.

Not long ago, my wife, Kristin, was in a conversation with a friend. For our purposes here, I will call my wife's friend Susan. Susan and my wife have known each other for over 15 years, and Susan is an occasional church attender—let's call her "Christian-ish." Kristin and Susan met for an appointment, and Susan said, "I have to talk to you! My husband is ticked, and I am, too. We don't know what to do. Our boys had a baseball game in the neighborhood, and there were these people dressed as 'furries' at the ballpark. And a bunch of moms at the ballfields were advocating for transgenderism!" These encounters required Susan and her husband to have awkward conversations with their boys they weren't prepared to have. Plus, Susan said, "Ever since COVID, we have been very upset. We don't want our kids to repeat what we are teaching them at home to their teachers at school. We don't want the teachers having long talks with the kids about what all that stuff means! We need to do something."

My wife has been sharing Christ with Susan for over a decade. So, she simply asked her friend, "What is it about the gender and sexuality conversation that has you upset?" Susan replied, "That's just it—I don't even know. We know it's wrong, but we can't explain why it's wrong. We don't even know how to discuss it with our kids because we don't know what to say!"

Even non-Christians and nominally religious people are unnerved and upset by the erosion of our common cultural values.

COVID-19. Parents' Rights. College Presidents.

What has stirred up this parental anger? COVID-19 brought a lot of the emotion to the surface. When schools around the country closed down, most school systems pivoted to online education. This shift gave parents a close-up view of what was being taught to their kids during the day, and many parents became alarmed. They discovered that much public school energy was directed at the indoctrination of their children around issues of race, gender, sexuality, and family structure. When parents complained, they often found that those in charge of public education were dismissive and condescending toward parents who want a voice in

the education of their own children.

Anger at indoctrination sparked an entire parents' rights movement around the country. Parent groups proliferated. In some districts, school boards were turned over through elections. Parents took school systems to court. And even though some limited changes have been made, many parents with traditional values lost trust in their public schools' leadership. They are still looking for something different. Christian parents are desperate because they need better, biblically sound, financially accessible alternatives.

Anger and frustration with America's educational system isn't limited to the local school board. Higher education has been shown to be deeply corrupt, and many colleges and universities are hostile toward traditional Christianity.

On December 5, 2023, the presidents of Harvard, Penn, and MIT were questioned during a congressional hearing. At each of their universities, students had been involved in explicitly antisemitic protests with no sanction or censure from university leadership. When asked directly if calls for genocide against Jews were a violation of their school's code of conduct, each president responded with some version of "Well, it depends on the context." These presidents had refused to rebuke calls for Jewish genocide on their campuses. Videos of their testimony went viral, and Americans were astounded at the compromised moral reasoning on display. This incident is further evidence that our most prestigious cultural institutions are morally bankrupt and likely beyond recovery.

Many parents are ticked.

These angry parents present a tremendous evangelistic opportunity for Christians. People feel the sand of the culture giving way beneath their feet. Even non-believers are upset and anxious. They are looking for something solid to build their lives upon, and they see the emptiness and despair that threatens to envelop everyone in a world where Christianity is on decline. Neighborhood Christian families organized in neighborhood Christian churches that offer neighborhood Christian schools can give everyone in the neighborhood a solid place to stand—a platform from which to proclaim the good news of Jesus. This education

reformation, anchored in the Christian home, the Christian church, and the Christian school, is not a retreat. It is a way for believers to live out the Great Commission and the Great Commandment in every neighborhood where a church exists.

The Decline of Marriage and Childbearing

So dads and moms are ticked. But there is an even stronger reason for us to rebuild a Christian culture. Statistical trends about marriage and family raise a real question as to how much longer there will be dads and moms around to care.

We know that God has designed the institution of marriage and the family to be the key building block of society. We know that God's design from the very beginning was for men and women to marry and bear children. This is the normative pattern, established in the book of Genesis, developed throughout the Old and New Testaments, and followed by God's people from the beginning up to the present. Yes, God does call some people to singleness, and gifted single adults bring great value to the Church as together we all are the family of God. Still, marriage and family life is God's design and the path to flourishing for most people.

Unfortunately, our culture is rapidly abandoning the institution of marriage. Over the last 50 years, the marriage rate in the U.S. has dropped by nearly 60%.⁶ People are waiting longer than ever to get married. The median age of adults entering their first marriage is now at a high of 29.2 years old.⁷ People are waiting longer than ever to start having children, now on average two years later than they did 10 years ago.⁸ Consequently, people are having fewer children than ever.⁹ Sociologists have proposed plenty of reasons for these shifts: feminism, the sexual revolution, fear of divorce, concerns about climate change, and lack of economic opportunity. A nation that fails to value and prioritize marriage and children is committing cultural suicide.

But what is the answer? How can we turn this situation around? Who will teach those around us to value marriage and desire children? Who will demonstrate to children how they can honor God and live out

His values? Who will instill in children the desire to aspire to a healthy marriage? Who will help people stay married when times are tough? Who will model delayed gratification and appropriate patriotism? Who will train little ones to have integrity, to live with conviction and courage, to sacrifice for others, and to be generous? Who will equip parents to raise children to love God and honor Christ, when many of these young parents grew up in broken homes? Who will coach dads and moms to fight for their families, fight for their values, and fight for the next generation?

The headwinds against us are strong.

We need alternatives. We need a means of building a truly Christian culture. We need a plan to pass our faith on to our kids, even as they need to learn how to survive in a hostile world. We need a blueprint for being salt and light, as well as true friends to our neighbors. Parents must be called up, trained, and given tools to fight for their families. We need an education reformation.

The challenges are myriad, the excuses are plentiful, and the world we live in is hostile. But we believe that an education reformation is possible.

Why Christian Schools?

In *The Fractured Republic*, Yuval Levin encourages Christians not to merely say no to the sexual revolution but to cultivate communities that showcase the beauty of their moral vision:

Social conservatives must ... make a positive case, not just a negative one. Rather than decrying the collapse of moral order, we must draw people's eyes and hearts to the alternative: to the vast and beautiful "yes" for the sake of which an occasional narrow but insistent "no" is required.¹⁰

How do we do this? It will take more than making a case for the truthfulness of Christian teaching. It will take the church showing the beauty and goodness of Christian truth.

The possibility of an education reformation exists if believers can recover the powerful partnership between the home, the neighborhood church, and the church-based school. We are calling for a recommitment.

A recovery. A renewal. A return to a dynamic partnership that can reshape our families, restore our churches, and reach the lost. And maybe, just maybe, this reformation can bring spiritual revival to our nation.

We know that the family is the basic building block of society. We know that the neighborhood church is God's ordained outpost for the gospel in this world. But why do we need distinctively Christian schools? And why now? What is the urgency?

In a hostile world, secular schools create a huge obstacle for Christian faith formation in kids from Christian families. The reasons are obvious, but here are a few:

- **Time.** Kids spend 8-10 hours a day—and sometimes even more!—at school and participating in school-affiliated activities. Family time and church time can't compete with those odds.
- **Oppositional Values.** Today's secular schools are committed to many values that are directly opposed to biblical beliefs. How are we to instill these ideals in our children?
- **Conflicting Influences.** Students are continually bombarded with messages that undermine what Christian parents and churches are trying to teach their kids.
- **Quality.** Many secular schools are practicing indoctrination rather than critical thinking. Many students in these schools are receiving a sub-standard education.
- **Pressure to Conform.** Affirming biblical views can get teachers, administrators, and kids "cancelled" in our society today. How are we to counter this divisive culture?
- **Physical Danger.** Some public schools are becoming violent, and many school systems have lost the will to discipline unruly kids. How will we prioritize safety for our children in all respects?

Do We Need Christian Schools in the Shire?

Some readers may feel that our take is too pessimistic and that it does not reflect their own personal experiences with public or private secular schools. It is true that different regions of the country, or even different neighborhoods, are likely experiencing opposition to Christianity to varying degrees. We commonly hear the following remarks:

- “Our schools are great! Good kids and teachers—why would we want to change?”
- “Lots of the teachers, coaches, and administrators in our neighborhood school are Christians.”
- “If Christians leave the public schools, who will win those kids to Christ?”

We certainly affirm the responsibility of every Christian parent to make the best choice for their kids and family. We desire to be supportive of public schools and secular private schools in any way we can. We are convinced, however, that public schools will increasingly become opposed to Christian values in every neighborhood. It is only a matter of time.

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, creatures called hobbits lived in an idealized setting called the Shire. In the Shire were happy families, beautiful surroundings, and a harmonious civil culture. Although the empire of the evil wizard Sauron was spreading and growing elsewhere, many hobbits convinced themselves that the Shire would never be impacted by Sauron’s influence. That view was shortsighted in Tolkien’s fictional account, and it is shortsighted for Christians in our world today.¹¹

We are urging neighborhood churches to mobilize now. Even if, in your own part of the world, things appear to be fine, you must understand the times in which we live. This world is changing—and fast. The sooner your church begins creating church-based schools, the stronger and further along those schools will be in the future when they are really needed.

What about the Christian Schools We Already Have?

We believe that in the near future and in most places, the majority of Christian parents will do whatever it takes to put their kids in Christian schools. They will need options. The ideological gap between Christians and the secular educational philosophies, along with a myriad of other concerns, will simply become too great. But many large, traditional Christian schools are financially, culturally, or geographically inaccessible to many Christian families. And homeschooling is not a viable option for every Christian parent. Homeschool co-ops like *Classical Conversations* are outstanding options, but, like traditional Christian schools, they are only truly accessible to a narrow slice of our society.

Neighborhood churches can step into the gap. Every neighborhood church with a neighborhood building should consider starting some sort of neighborhood Christian school. And doing so could be the start of an education reformation.

Proof of Concept

What makes us think this idea can even work? Why do we think the neighborhood partnerships between the home, the church, and the school are the way forward?

Because this isn't the first time God's people have found themselves living under cultural pressure. In Jeremiah 29, the prophet described the situation of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. God commanded them to plant themselves and build their families, homes, and businesses there in exile. Jeremiah told them to pray for the city in which they lived. God's people would exist as a witness and a blessing to the faithfulness and goodness of God in their pagan city. They were to hope and work for the success of the city because, as God noted, when the city prospered, God's people living in the city would prosper. They were to build a culture—within a culture—for the good of the culture.

You might wonder if something like that can work today.

In the 1700s, the New World was really opening up, and many persecuted religious minorities came from Europe. Most were Protestant, but

Catholics came, too, and were treated as an unfavorable religious minority in this country. They were shunned, mocked, and marginalized. So what did they do? They put a neighborhood priest in a neighborhood church in a neighborhood building. They spoke the neighborhood language, and they started a neighborhood school. This home-church-school partnership was how they kept their families together, maintained their values, evangelized their families and community, and passed their faith on to the next generation. And they did all of this while the mainstream of the culture treated them with mistrust and often with hostility. Conservative evangelicals can do the same thing with better theology.

There are already concerted efforts among Christian schools to measure the effectiveness of the home, church, and school model. The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) recently released a tool called the Flourishing Faith Index to measure biblical worldview and spiritual formation in Christian schools.¹² Tools like these will help strengthen the partnership between the home, church, and school as we seek to pass our faith to the next generation.

How is this Strategy Evangelistic?

As we have already mentioned, the family is the basic building block for human society. When Christians get married and have children, they participate in God's design for extending His promises and His kingdom work to new generations. It is God's plan for parents to pass His promises, values, and mission on to their children.

But the Christian family is also to be a gospel outpost in the neighborhood. Virtually every person in your neighborhood—even unbelievers—wants to have solid relationships with his or her spouse or significant other. They want to enjoy their children and earnestly desire good things for their kids. But most people have a difficult time achieving these things. They are looking for help and for models that work.

When a believing husband and wife love each other, forgive each other, stick together, and model kindness, patience, and genuine respect, they provide a powerful evangelistic witness for the entire neighborhood. Through the power of the gospel and with the help

of the Holy Spirit, Christian families prove that it is possible to get along, support one another, and thrive together. They can provide a successful model to a culture that is largely failing to do these things. And Christians who learn to practice genuine hospitality will have all kinds of evangelistic opportunities with their neighbors. The Christian family is the first gospel outpost that most people in the neighborhood will ever see or experience.

As the sexual revolution wreaks havoc in the lives of people around us, we have the opportunity to proclaim Scripture's moral clarity—not as a barrier to the faith, but as the beacon of light in a morally chaotic world.

When people encounter vibrant, dynamic, healthy, happy Christian families connected to a neighborhood church and involved in a church-based neighborhood school, many will be intrigued. We believe that the witness of thousands of these schools across the country could lead to a deep and wide evangelistic harvest—a powerful education reformation.

Some of you are sold. Your question is “How do we get started?” Well, keep reading.

You may not be convinced. But are you intrigued? Curious? If you have even a 1% interest in starting a church-based Christian school, you should keep reading as well. Our goal is to make you think. All believers are going to have to forge some kind of path forward through this hostile world. Maybe God will use this book to spark your imagination about what is possible.

CHAPTER 2

We've Been Here Before

Trevin Wax

In American society today, the Christian understanding of life and morality once held in high regard has been pushed to the margins, now viewed with suspicion or outright contempt. In previous generations, many if not most Americans gave at least a nod of approval to Christian convictions about the existence of God, the reality of sin, the importance of living a moral life, and the value of family and children. But times have changed.

I (Trevin) have often said that older evangelicals tend to see the United States as Israel (a blessed nation whose God is the Lord, a shining city on a hill) while younger evangelicals tend to see the United States as more akin to Babylon (a place indifferent or hostile to the faith, where we cannot expect favorable cultural conditions). This difference in outlook leads to a difference in strategy, with older evangelicals more likely to talk about “taking back” the country in response to moral decline and younger evangelicals more likely to focus on dealing pastorally, not politically, with the fallout from moral decay.

Truth be told, America is neither Israel nor Babylon. The *church* is God’s chosen people—the city on a hill, not any country or nation. And though it’s true that God’s people are always in exile, sojourners and strangers in this world, we must not underestimate the influence and authority we still have, culturally and politically—a voice that can alter the nation’s direction and even shape the next generation. We have more freedom and agency than Daniel and his friends did when they were hauled into Babylonian captivity.¹

Still, the cultural shifts in the past generation have shown us that we should not expect society to be pulled in the same direction as the church, especially when it comes to Christian morality. Tod Bolsinger in his book *Canoeing the Mountains* recounts the challenge that explorers Lewis and Clark faced on their journey to find the Northwest Passage.² They expected to find a water course and instead ran into the Rocky Mountains. They prepped for a canoe trip but found themselves mountaineering. Because the challenge of the Rocky Mountains was so unexpected and contrary to what they were prepared for, the explorers were forced to make a major shift in their mindsets. But Lewis and Clark adapted and successfully completed their journey. We can adapt, too. And we must.

God's People on the Margins

Unfriendly cultural territory is nothing new for the people of God. Both the Bible and church history give us stories of God's people living faithfully and fruitfully as cultural outsiders, a despised minority in hostile environments.

- Joseph, sold into slavery, remained faithful even amid the pressures of Egypt, among a people who did not believe in the one true God.
- Daniel and his friends modeled both tactical faithfulness in the matter of diet, as well as radical faithfulness in their refusal to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's idol or to follow Darius' decree to stop praying.
- Esther, an orphan from the Jewish minority in Persia, courageously stood up to represent her people when their lives were on the line.
- The early Christians resisted the pretensions of Rome, refusing to offer the pinch of incense that declared Caesar is Lord.

Church history fills out the picture, as the early Christians were often misunderstood or even despised for their strong stances. Their demonstrations of compassion and appeals to unity and other Christian virtues baffled the people around them. They crossed ethnic boundaries

and subverted the Roman hierarchy of status. They turned upside down the values of honor and shame, rejecting vengeance in favor of the radical forgiveness that flows from the cross. They showed hospitality to the needy. They rescued infants who had been left outside to die.

Historian Kyle Harper describes early Christian views of sexuality that forbade all sex beyond the marriage bed as coming “to mark the great divide between Christians and the world.”³ The early church stood out from the rest of society not merely because of what they claimed to be true of God, but also because of the distinctive set of behaviors they adopted regarding sexuality. Early Christians elevated the status of women and slaves who were often compelled into sexual acts. They elevated and protected marriage. They incorporated and involved singles as a witness to the coming kingdom of God. They raised the value of sexual self-control as part of their vision for human dignity.⁴

Christians have long been accustomed to surviving, even thriving, on the margins, outside the center of cultural power. The church in China, for instance, has learned to live under the glare of governmental and cultural disapproval, expressed with different intensities at different times, from official disapproval to violent opposition, depending on the region. Despite this pressure, the number of Chinese Protestants has grown by an average of 10% annually since 1979. By some estimates, China is on track to have the world's largest population of Christians by 2030.⁵

In Cuba, government opposition to the church forced Christians to organize in homes. The house church model was so simple and reproducible, it facilitated a surge of church multiplication—over 10,000 churches formed over 20 years, involving an estimated one million Cubans in evangelical churches. This unprecedented growth happened, according to church leaders, without an overarching strategy, buildings, or equipment.⁶

Iran, an Islamic theocracy, isn't gospel-friendly territory at all, but there we find a fast-growing movement of believers. Twenty years ago, there were just 5,000 to 10,000 Christians from Muslim backgrounds. Today, the estimate is 800,000 to one million—a staggering surge under an Islamic regime.⁷

As the Christendom era in the Western world fades, we can take heart by looking at the history of the church, as well as around the world today, to see God at work among Christians who have little access to levers of cultural or political power. Although we mourn some of the benefits of a disappearing cultural Christianity in America, we need not allow discomfort to turn into despair. Jesus' statement that we are the salt of the earth and light of the world has no expiration date. The Great Commission remains our task. If the church can flourish on the margins in other places, there's no reason the church can't flourish here.

Education as an Extension of Discipleship

Education has long been an outworking of the mission of God's people, especially as the church has found itself on the margins, outside the dominant culture. Jesus told us to teach others to obey everything He commanded (Matthew 28:20). Naturally, the Great Commission has, through the years, led Christians to prioritize education as an anchor of faith and essential aspect of discipleship, whether the settings were informal and familial or more formal and institutional.

In the Old Testament, one of the ways the Israelites sought to preserve a distinctive moral and cultural identity was through religious education in the context of the family. The famous *Shema* passage in Deuteronomy 6 commands parents to teach the laws and ways of the Lord to their children. In that time, children were present with their parents at home or in the fields most of the day, which made round-the-clock discipleship more easily accomplished. Parents were directed to speak of the Word "when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Today, parents often work outside the home. Kids are more accustomed to spending their time in school. But the instruction given in Deuteronomy 6 remains: we are to look for regular rhythms of life in which we disciple and train our children all throughout the week, not just in church-related activities on Sundays.

We are more likely to fulfill the Great Commission and align with the vision of Deuteronomy 6 when the family, the church, and the

school are pulling together in the same direction, in pursuit of a shared, Christ-focused moral and philosophical frame. “We can apply the concept of the three-legged stool to Christian education, with the church congregation, the home, and the school each representing one leg of the stool,” writes Stephen Maitanmi. “If the church, home, and school legs are balanced, the child will see the world better and survive well as a citizen of God’s Kingdom.”⁸

During the Babylonian captivity, education proved critical for Israel. In exile, God’s people no longer had the temple and its rites at the center of worship, so they adapted by organizing worship around the reading and study of the law in synagogues. After the return from captivity, local synagogues started village schools to teach children basic literacy and the fundamentals of the faith. It’s possible that Jesus Himself was educated in a synagogue school as a child, in addition to the instruction He received from Mary and Joseph.⁹

No wonder then that as Christianity spread, church leaders established catechetical schools in major population centers. These schools initially taught the Scriptures, but they also expanded to teach other subjects as well, including grammar and mathematics.¹⁰

A thousand years later, the Reformation took hold in large part because of the power of the printed word and rising rates of literacy. Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type made it easier and less expensive to produce books, leaflets, and other printed materials. Luther seized the opportunity with relish, speaking out against the corruption in the church at the time. The combination of his stubborn tenacity, intellectual clarity, and gift with words made him the perfect catalyst for reformation.¹¹ The circulation of Luther’s pamphlets and others like it provoked an interest in literacy, which in turn provided a reading audience for printed work, raising demand for still more printed materials.

As the Reformation progressed, the Scriptures were made available in the vernacular, which further raised the importance of literacy. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox all promoted the establishment of Christian schools to enable ordinary Christians to read the Bible. Luther even argued for educating girls, a progressive position for his time.¹²

In the American colonies, English Puritans believed so strongly in education that they pioneered the idea of tax-funded, compulsory public schools. The Massachusetts Education Law of 1647 required an elementary teacher in towns with 50 homes or more, while towns with at least 100 homes were required to hire a grammar school instructor to prepare students for college. The Puritan vision of a flourishing community required an educated citizenry, grounded in both the Bible and the classics.¹³ Education was not just about “book smarts,” but moral and doctrinal formation.

African-American churches, even from the margins, when oppressed by the majority culture, turned to education as a means of strengthening their communities. After the Civil War, millions of emancipated slaves searched for new opportunities, and education became critical to helping Black Americans forge a new path forward. In response to the Jim Crow regime in the south, Black churches and denominations founded educational institutions and left the legacy of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. From humble beginnings born out of conviction, these schools were responsible for producing an emerging Black middle class, whose doctors, lawyers, pastors, and teachers became culture-shaping examples of dignity.¹⁴

Roman Catholics in America also found the partnership between home, church, and school to be effective for preserving their distinctive religious convictions and identity. In the 19th century, America was overwhelmingly Protestant in population and in culture. Catholics were looked at with suspicion, particularly after a surge of Irish Catholic immigrants began to arrive in the United States. The prevailing sentiment of most Americans was that new immigrants should attend public schools in order to assimilate into the country. But Catholics feared that the civil religion of Protestantism would weaken their commitment to the Roman Catholic Church.

How did Catholics respond? By buttressing a well-organized system of local parishes in each regional diocese. They installed a neighborhood priest for a neighborhood parish in a neighborhood building, and then added a neighborhood school, Catholic in identity. After the Civil War,

as Catholic schools proliferated, many states adopted “Blaine amendments” that prohibited the use of public education funding for “sectarian” schools, primarily motivated by fear and suspicion of Catholics. Nevertheless, even without government support, by 1912, the Catholic school movement in the U.S. had grown to include 20,000 teachers and over a million students.¹⁵ Catholic primary and secondary education continued to blossom and peaked in the late 1960s, with 4.5 million elementary students and 1 million high school students.¹⁶ This growing strength helped Catholics preserve their sense of corporate identity.

Although we disagree with Roman Catholics on many points of doctrine and practice, we can learn from their union of family, church, and school—their ability to retain a distinctive doctrine and culture within their communities in a time of cultural disfavor. The formative power of schooling proved so effective, in fact, that over time, Catholics were no longer viewed as outsiders in American society. The increasing numbers and strength of Catholics in America led to broader acceptance, culminating in the election of John F. Kennedy as U.S. president in 1960.

Professor Michael Hanby has noted, “Education has to be at the core of Christian survival—as it always was.”¹⁷ When you consider the Israelites, the Reformers, the Puritans, African Americans, and the Catholics in the early 20th century, you discover a powerful synergy when the family, the school, and the church unite in the mission of forming the next generation’s values and beliefs. God’s people have maintained their integrity in the face of withering opposition by leaning into education as a central mode of discipleship.

Why Consider Schools?

Even if you nod your head with everything that you see in Scripture and in these examples from history, you may still be thinking: *Starting a Christian school sounds like a ton of work! Why not just send our children to secular schools that are up and running? Should we put more effort into a Christian alternative? Is Christian education really that different?*

It’s true that just because a school has a Christian origin or a Christian name, we shouldn’t assume the school remains Christian at the

foundational level. Christian schools don't guarantee faithfulness. Still, we must reject the common assumption in our culture today that education itself is religiously neutral. Too many people, Christians included, think of education as basically secular, with religious belief as a supplement. But this isn't the case.

Donald Williams is right when he says that secular education "cannot really be religiously neutral without implying that it does not matter which religion one embraces, or whether one embraces any. And if religion has no consequences, then it is trivial and unimportant. The harder education tries to be secular, then, the more it becomes secularist."¹⁸ Williams goes on to say that secular education subtly and unavoidably communicates the idea that God does not matter.

As believers, we know that God *does* matter. He matters more than any of us can fathom. To think of education apart from God is to get off on the wrong foot from the very start. Education forms human beings, and unless we know what a human is and what a human is *for*, how is it possible to do the job of educating? A major difference exists between seeing a human being as a product of undirected evolution versus seeing a human as an image bearer of the good Creator of the universe. What is the purpose of education? To aid a person in learning a skill, making money, or maximizing pleasure? Or is it to aid a person in the greatest pursuit, for which we were made—of becoming someone "fully alive," in the words of Irenaeus—as we come to know and love God? Our answer to these questions will shape our approach to education. Why settle for secular schooling built upon deep, foundational errors regarding the nature of God, human beings, and the purpose of education in the first place?

The Power of New Institutions in a Time of Decay

In many of the cases from our survey of history, Christians did not simply engage in educational practices; they founded educational institutions. From the synagogue to the parish school to a range of colleges and universities, believers have been builders.

Why is this? Because institutions are a means of sustaining cultural movements. Said another way, movements cannot sustain themselves if

they do not find an institutional expression. Occupy Wall Street was a protest movement that responded to the corruption of financial institutions which led to the Great Recession of 2008. Occupy Wall Street was non-hierarchical and anti-institutional. And it didn't last. The same could be said of some segments of the Emerging Church movement that arose among evangelicals 20 years ago. The anti-institutional ethos kept it from developing and sustaining organizations that would promote its vision of postmodern Christianity.

As we think together theologically, we come to realize an important truth: the redemptive presence of Christians as salt and light in the world is not just about our individual presence. We bless our communities not only as individual Christians, but through institutional expressions of what we value. Our redemptive presence is not just personal, but corporate. What better way to bless our communities than to build new and better institutions that accomplish the educational and moral formation of our children?

During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the responses of government and school leaders laid bare the inadequacies of our current approach to education. Around the world, governments and schools responded to the threat by pushing 1.5 billion school-aged children in 188 countries into online schooling—in some cases, for years—leading to deleterious effects. Children subjected to this dramatic change suffered a wide range of setbacks, the fullest extent of which we are only beginning to learn. Worst of all, early data shows that the most vulnerable communities suffered the most severely, with for instance, math achievement in disadvantaged communities falling 50% more than in wealthier communities.¹⁹

In addition, when school lessons began streaming into homes, many parents discovered with dismay that the education their children were receiving was not what they thought—either in terms of quality or content. Many Christian parents were alarmed by the political and sexual messaging their students were being subjected to. Parents who had the resources to do so chose, in large numbers, to withdraw their children from government school, opting instead for private schools, Christian schools, or homeschooling.²⁰

Since 2020, 1.2 million children have exited the public school system in the United States, as families have opted to explore other educational pathways. *Forbes* reported that from 2020-2021, the number of homeschooled students increased by 63%. Most parents seem to have doubled down on that decision, with only a 17% drop in homeschoolers the following year.²¹

Our existing educational institutions are in trouble, and we are growing increasingly aware of this truth. There is, of course, no single answer to this crisis. It's clear that we need renewal within our existing public schools, and some Christian parents and teachers may feel the call to be part of the solution there. But given the government's deep involvement, the high amount of legislated regulation, and the ideological capture of the entities overseeing public education, it makes sense that other parents will look for alternatives.

One way to spark educational reform within the public schools themselves is by offering the competition of a healthy alternative. Starting new Christian schools could become a pathway to renewal for our entire culture.

Strengthen What Remains

The other factor we cannot neglect is that the culture of discipleship in American evangelical churches needs rejuvenation. Jesus' words to the church in Sardis are fitting for 21st century Christians:

I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God (Revelation 3:1b-2).

If we are to “strengthen what remains,” we must give our full attention to the challenge of forming Christian children and families with the most robust discipleship we can provide.

In the 1990s, evangelical churches felt the impulse to establish relevance amid the wider culture. Many church leaders believed our churches were too isolated from our lost neighbors and therefore unable

to adequately engage in gospel mission. The goal was for Christians to build bridges to the world, to move into secular spaces so that the gospel could take root among those outside the church's reach.

Mark Sayers, commenting on this impulse, observed that we were attempting to colonize the culture, to step in and be a transforming source of salt and light. But instead, the culture colonized us. It seems the world had a far greater impact on the church than the church had on the world. In *Disappearing Church*, Sayers argued that post-Christian secularism proved more acidic to the faith of convictional Christians than we anticipated.²²

We have seen a decline in discipleship efforts and practices in the past 40 years. Across the landscape, we have jettisoned Sunday evening worship, done away with discipleship programming, and turned learning environments into community-building exercises, all in an effort to focus and streamline discipleship for people.

Combined with the impulse toward cultural relevance was a growing embarrassment about Christian subculture, especially its music and movies. Christian music was criticized as derivative, simply imitating the superior artistry of the world's music. Or, when Christian music found a wider audience, it was seen as watered down and compromised. Christian films were kitschy, saccharine, and "subtle as a hammer," but if they were more artistic and nuanced, the filmmakers were accused of having "sold out" to the world.

Many legitimate reasons to critique the Christian subculture exist. But even subcultures are formative. C.S. Lewis famously called hymns "fifth rate poems set to sixth rate music," but there's no question the church's songs have shaped the faith and theology of generations of faithful Christians.²³ When we turn up our nose at anything that comes from the Christian subculture, we wind up weakening our own formation and discouraging other attempts at creating culture.

Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* is right to point not only to the rising cultural hostility towards Christians, but also the need for Christians to give urgent priority to strengthening their communities while putting down deeper roots in Scripture, theology, and a God-centered

worldview. *The Benedict Option* garnered criticism as a run-for-the-hills, circle-the-wagons strategy of withdrawal—some of it justified—but his diagnosis of the American church’s weakness was dead on:

Christians often talk about “reaching the culture” without realizing that, having no distinct Christian culture of their own, they have been co-opted by the secular culture they wish to evangelize.²⁴

Starting schools is a way of strengthening what remains, of deepening and extending the discipleship of students and their families. It alone is not enough, but it can be an important building block as we restructure the crumbling wall of discipleship. Dreher, arguing for classical Christian schools, writes,

Rather than letting their children spend forty hours a week learning “facts” with a few hours of worldview education slapped on top, parents need to ... provide them with an education that is rightly ordered—that is, one based on the premise that there is a God-given, unified structure to reality, and that it is discoverable. They need to teach them Scripture and history. ... Building schools that can educate properly will require churches, parents, peer groups and fellow traveler Christians to work together. It will be costly, but what choice is there?²⁵

Conclusion

Today, we find ourselves in a season of opportunity. Parents are actively considering alternatives for their kids. Dissatisfaction with the available options is notably high. Public schools are trending in a direction unfriendly to Christian formation. Many jurisdictions are implementing educational vouchers to enable parent choice.

Education is a central feature of Christian discipleship. Many churches have buildings suitable for schools—education spaces sitting unused throughout the week. And there has never been a more urgent moment to invest more deeply in the spiritual and biblical formation

of our children. If ever there were a time to establish Christian schools, the time is now.

When the church returns to its educational mission, however, questions are bound to arise. Are church-based schools a distraction from the mission of the church to evangelize and disciple the nations? Does this mean we have to oppose public schools? In the next chapter, we will consider how the church can be the church, spreading the gospel and forming disciples of Jesus, whether we start a school, partner with parents, or lean missionally into the public school system. The call of God to be a blessing to our communities, even as we're living as exiles, is what will make us good neighbors.

CHAPTER 3

Christian Schools for the Church and Community

Trevin Wax

We've seen precedent in the Bible and throughout church history for giving prominence to the role of education as an extension of discipleship in the church. Starting and sustaining Christian schools flows from this history. But what about public schools? Millions of Christian students are enrolled in the public school system today, and many families face financial challenges that seem to put Christian education out of reach. Are we suggesting that all Christians everywhere abandon public schooling and withdraw from this place of cultural formation?

Emphatically no. Especially if such an action is based in a cultural strategy focused primarily on withdrawal. When we as Christians withdraw from the culture as a means of preserving our purity, we lose the power of what Lesslie Newbigin described as a “missionary encounter” with the world, and the Christianity we intend to preserve becomes, in itself, impure. There is no such thing as a perfectly pure Christianity apart from mission. Our goal is to bring the fullness of the gospel into an encounter with the assumptions and habits of a non-Christian culture. The Christian movement gains energy and vitality from both an uncompromising confession of faith and a deliberate engagement with people far from God.¹

Here's where we need to make sure we are being savvy, not sloppy, in our thinking. The status quo of Christians remaining in public school is not in itself an example of “missionary-mindedness,” and the starting

of Christian schools is not in itself a picture of “withdrawal.” To be clear, it’s possible to think of yourself as being on mission in the public schools (though it’s probably wiser to give this role to teachers than to assume it’s true of all Christian students). Likewise, it’s also possible to start and sustain a Christian school as a means of cultural withdrawal. But neither option signifies, in itself, that kind of approach or mentality.

Let’s look at the question from another angle. What if starting Christian schools is one of the best ways to *increase* opportunities for a missionary encounter with the world? What if Christian education becomes the means by which we deepen the discipleship of our students (and their families) through week-long instruction, worship, and spiritual formation while *also* training up a generation to adopt a posture of blessing toward their community? Take the long-term view: equipped and passionate followers of Jesus who know the Bible and who love and serve the world in Jesus’ name. At its best, that’s what Christian education can help the church develop.

Writing to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah countered the false prophets who promised a quick return to Jerusalem. He told the exiles to settle in for the long haul. He instructed them to build gardens, start families, and fortify their community of faith in Babylon. They needed to give attention to the strength of their own communities, that they would flourish amid a pagan culture.

Not only were they to preserve their unique identity, but they were also to be a blessing to the pagan society in their midst. The exiles’ own fortunes would rise as Babylonian society prospered, so they were commanded to be a blessing to their neighbors right where they lived. “Pursue the well-being of the city I have deported you to,” Jeremiah wrote. “Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for when it thrives, you will thrive” (Jeremiah 29:7).

God’s prescription for life in exile was not withdrawal and disengagement. Nor was it assimilation and compromise. Instead, God called His people to live differently among the pagans, to remain distinct in their beliefs and behaviors, and to take a posture of blessing and service toward their neighbors. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. And sometimes we stand against the world for the good of the world.

Withdrawal Is Not the Answer

As believers, we do not have the biblical option to disengage from society. On the one hand, there is no escape from some level of cultural formation. On the other, the command we received from Jesus is to go out and proclaim the good news. The gospel is to be shared. God's vision from the beginning was that Israel, God's chosen people, would serve as a light to the pagan Gentiles. The vision we see in Revelation is that people from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship in the presence of God. As we often remind each other at the North American Mission Board, the heart of God has always been for the nations. He sent His Son on a mission of redemption, and He invites His people to join in on that mission, sending us as ambassadors into the communities where we live, work, and play.

To withdraw into a protected enclave that has no contact with the world is not an option for God's people. The salt must not remain in the saltshaker. The question is: *what is the best way to offer the light of the gospel to a world in need?* What role might Christian schools play in redoubling our efforts to bless our communities?

Rod Dreher and the Benedict Option

For several years now, Rod Dreher, a writer and friend whose books I've enjoyed, has advocated "the Benedict Option" as a strategy for faithful Christians in a post-Christian world. His book, titled the same as the strategy, builds on the last sentence of Alisdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in which the renowned philosopher, after outlining how mainstream society has reached a point of no return toward the dissolution of ancient paths of virtue, says this:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not

waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.²

MacIntyre wrote those words more than 40 years ago. If in 1981 MacIntyre saw our civilization in the late afternoon hours drawing toward the sunset, Dreher today sees our society fading into dusk. For this reason, it's time for Christians to make sure that no matter the depths of darkness, our light mustn't go out. What is the way forward, then, for a civilization in crisis? Dreher lays out the plan:

If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and practice. We are going to have to learn habits of the heart forgotten by believers in the West. We are going to have to change our lives, and our approach to life, in radical ways. In short, we are going to have to be the church, without compromise, no matter what it costs.³

The floodwaters of cultural change and anti-Christian morality are rising, and now is the time to stop fighting the flood by piling up sandbags and to instead start building an ark that will make it possible for us to deal with the flood's aftermath: "Rather than wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles, we should instead work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation."⁴

For Christians, this means we need to remember who we are before we can recommit to being who we must be. So, Dreher says, it's time for a strategic withdrawal with the purpose of cultivating habits and practices that will fortify our faith and hope. He continues, "If we are going to be for the world as Christ meant for us to be, we are going to have to spend more time away from the world, in deep prayer and substantial spiritual training—just as Jesus retreated to the desert to pray before ministering to the people. We cannot give the world what we do not have."⁵

That last sentence is key to the Benedict Option. If we don't have vibrant Christian convictions and practices, then our churches will fail

to stand out in the world. We cannot offer to the world what we do not possess. In other words, “Christians often talk about ‘reaching the culture’ without realizing that, having no distinct Christian culture of their own, they have been coopted by the secular culture they wish to evangelize.”⁶

Dreher uses the Rule of Benedict and the monastic tradition of the sixth century as a prototype for how Christians should consider faithfulness in this era. No, he doesn’t recommend we all become monks and move into the desert. Instead, he wants us to recognize the importance of training our hearts to love the right things, of embracing the spiritual disciplines and habits of the ancient church, and of revisiting the church’s liturgies and doctrinal preparation.

The beauty of the Benedict Option is the insight that we cannot offer to the world what we do not possess. We cannot reach a culture if we have not built one of our own. The church must be fortified through vibrant Christian witness and spiritual disciplines if we are to be faithful in the days ahead.

That’s why the best parts of the Benedict Option are not about withdrawal, but about culture-building. Dreher wants to see the church flourish from the margins, as a robust witness to Christian truth that will last through difficult times. This reminds me of my time serving in Baptist churches that had weathered the storm of Communism in Romania. They were *against* the world *for the good* of the world. It’s not about building a protected, gated community for affluent Christians; it’s about establishing common practices and institutions that serve as salt and light, thus slowing down the decay of a lonely and fragmenting society.

The Benedict Option and the Believer’s Posture

The potential danger of the Benedict Option is that it can lead to an overly defensive posture toward the world. Consider the metaphors used throughout the book: a 1,000-year flood, the most serious crisis since the fall of the Roman empire, Waterloo, the dark age to come, the coming storm, an earthquake, Babylon. When Dreher recommends we follow the example of monks who literally headed for the hills, I worry that the dire

warnings in his book will cultivate a posture that is much too defensive, a fatalistic view of society that breeds long-term cultural pessimism.

Progressives always think they know the way the world is going, and that arc is always bending toward justice. However, they're often wrong. Conservatives sometimes think they know where the world is headed, that things are inevitably getting worse. But they're often wrong, too. A better approach is that of G. K. Chesterton, who said in the years leading up to WWII, "The world is what the saints and prophets saw it was; it is not merely getting better or merely getting worse; there is one thing that the world does; it wobbles."⁷

We sense the world wobbling a little more than usual these days, which should lead us toward recommitting to Christian *mission*. The fundamental posture of the Christian should be missional, not monastic.

To be clear, Dreher doesn't recommend passivity in light of cultural challenges. His focus is on building and rebuilding, shoring up the foundations. At times, he uses the metaphor of "the Shire" to make this point, where we display to the world a fresh vision of human flourishing, resembling the homeland of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*. I love the image of the Shire and the need for Christians to have a vision of culture-creation in our churches and communities. That kind of culture-cultivation is what appeals most to me in Dreher's proposal.

But the storyline of *The Lord of the Rings* focused on a *mission*. Someone has to take on Mordor and the orcs with the humble faith that goodness will win out in the end, right? Seceding from the cultural mainstream would not preserve the Shire; courage in the face of unbeatable odds is necessary.

Likewise, Scripture's image of the church is not a fortress besieged by barbarians, but of a missionary people battering hell's gates. Mission, not maintenance, is the story of the church in Acts, which was under far greater threat than anything conservative Christians in the United States are facing today.

That's not to say that the purity and fortitude of local congregations should be neglected. Dreher is right. What's the point of being a city on a hill if there's no light in the city? So, while I affirm Dreher's strategy

for strengthening local Christian communities, I question the defensive posture that coincides with it. Christian mission is oriented toward winning a spiritual battle, not surviving a spiritual siege.

The Options Before Us

So, how do we engage the world in mission while keeping ourselves unstained from the world's corruption? As parents, as church leaders, as Christians tasked with passing the gospel on to the next generation, the question of education arises.

In the United States, three basic options come to the forefront: (1) public schools, (2) Christian schools, or (3) homeschooling. Each option has advocates. Pros and cons are associated with each approach. No option comes without weaknesses or strengths.⁸ It is wrong to burden the Christian conscience with extrabiblical rules, as if only one right decision exists for every church or family.

In some regions of the country, public schools may still be an option, particularly where the local culture is still friendly to or at least accommodating of Christian convictions. Many devoted Christians actively contribute to public schools as teachers and administrators, where they personally foster an environment that welcomes people of faith. Public schools are a great context for getting to know people far from God and engaging with them over a long period of time. Of course, many families who are financially pinched may not feel like they have any option apart from the public schools, which are supported by taxes. Additionally, families whose children have special needs may be better served in programs specially designed with these exceptional learners in mind.

Nevertheless, the public education system is, by default, influenced by secularist ideology that reserves no place for God, and many schools now inculcate theories and ideologies hostile to Christian faith and morality. And with the rise of more affordable Christian schools, homeschool options, and vouchers for private schools, more and more families feel the freedom to look elsewhere.

Christian schools are a second option, but it's important to note that they aren't all the same. The title "Christian" does not necessarily

mean that a school is suffused with a biblical worldview. Some schools are covenantal, requiring parents to belong to a church or to agree to a statement of faith or conduct before their children can enroll. Others are open to non-Christian families and students. The clearest benefit of a Christian school of any kind is the ideal of instructing students from a biblical worldview and equipping them to analyze, critique, and stand apart from secular society. Christian students need not endure the feeling of being opposed and under siege because of their beliefs. Christian schools aren't free, however, and without government vouchers or other financial aid, many families struggle to afford Christian education. What's more, many Christian schools across the country are unable to receive all the students from families who express interest. The demand for Christian education is greater than its supply right now. (This is yet another reason we should consider starting more church-based schools!)

Homeschooling is an increasingly popular option, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. This option leans into the biblical direction that parents are responsible for their children's education and formation. Today, abundant resources have been made available to help compensate for a parent's lack of subject matter expertise, and many criticisms of homeschoolers being poorly socialized have been overplayed. One drawback, however, is that homeschooling requires a parent at home, requiring a certain level of financial stability. Today, many middle-class families require two incomes to make ends meet, and the challenges for working-class families are magnified, a reality that makes homeschooling inaccessible to some.

Each of these approaches has merits and drawbacks, and the church can serve and strengthen any of these methods of education. In this little book, we're making the argument for churches to start Christian schools, but not as a strategy of withdrawal. Our goal is to revive and renew the purpose of education, to teach truth in light of God and the gospel, both for the benefit of our members and also for the broader communities we serve.

Suggestions for Churches with Christian Schools

Here are some suggestions to consider, especially if your church decides to start a Christian school, or if you already have one.

Consider how your school can engage non-Christian families.

The primary target for most church-based schools starts with the members and families of the church. However, if you have room and resources to do so, and if you adopt the “open” instead of the “covenantal” approach to enrollment, you can promote your school to families in your neighborhood. The distress felt by Christian families over the direction of public schools is often shared by non-Christians, even if they do not express their concern from a theological viewpoint. A great missional opportunity is presented to us when we engage non-Christian families.

Pastor Gus Hernandez was the first Christian in his family of Cuban immigrants. New to their Miami neighborhood, his parents debated whether to send him to a public school with a bad reputation, a private school, or the Christian school in his neighborhood. They decided on the local Christian school. Gus began reading the Bible as a middle-schooler and was eventually led to faith and disciplined by his Bible teacher. Gus would go home each day and teach his mom about the Bible lessons he learned in class and through the discipleship he received at school. His mom came to believe in Jesus, and together, they went on to lead the rest of their family to faith.

Don't promote your school as the only Christian option.

As you talk about the need for a new Christian school, it's tempting to make the argument so strong that you imply all other choices are bad. Zealous advocates of classical Christian education or homeschooling have sometimes been known to look down their noses at families who make other choices for their children. Remember that many families, even with voucher support, are unable to afford private education at this time. We need to always remember the needs of under-resourced

families and communities and do what we can to open more pathways in which more families may benefit.

Stay friendly with other Christian schools operating in your area.

Sometimes we're tempted to view other churches or ministries as our rivals in competition. But the decline of cultural Christianity should put an end to this manner of thinking. Now more than ever, we need to abandon our competitive attitude and cheer for each other instead. The Lord promises blessing when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. There are more than enough families and students who need Christ-centered education to fill every Christian school and more. A heavily resourced, established Christian school can assist in the development of new school start-ups.

Find ways for your new school to bless the community.

One best practice for Christian schools is to help its students develop a servant attitude as part of their character formation. School-sponsored work and mission projects can make a big difference. Jacqueline from Family Church North Stuart reached out to her local high school and learned that their custodial staff had a long list of neglected lawn care projects. She rounded up a group of student and adult volunteers, and in one afternoon, they cleared a nine-month backlog of landscaping maintenance projects. The principal and custodial leaders were elated.

Opportunities abound in community non-profits, nursing facilities, parks, and schools. When you make connections with other people and organizations who are likewise seeking to do good works in the community, you make a difference by assisting in projects that need resources or volunteers.

See ministry to parents as part of the mission.

As in a healthy Kids or Student Ministry, a Christian school can and should minister to the entire family. Biblically speaking, the education of children is a family responsibility. Schools can turn the normal rhythms

of an academic year into gospel opportunities. Parents will help their kids with Bible homework. The real reason for the holidays will be evident. Conversations about following Jesus, orientation meetings for sports teams and other extracurricular activities, and helping students flourish as they discover God's will for their lives are opportunities for a distinctively Christian approach to education to be displayed. As families flock to student assemblies at key moments throughout the year, school leaders can take formal moments in the program to share the gospel and wisdom of God. Some schools may even offer parent seminars that impart biblical principles for raising kids today.

Winner Olmann, the pastor of Family Church Lake Park, makes it a practice to be present and available to the school operating out of his church—meeting and praying for parents at pick-up and drop-off, as well as being involved in key events throughout the year. Ministry to parents is a perfect way for the church to step in to support the school in these gospel opportunities. Church leaders can be presenters, interviewers, counselors, or helpers who simply provide relational support to those in need.

Other Ways to Help

If your church is unable to start a school right now, other opportunities are available to help families navigate the challenge of educating their kids in today's culture.

Talk to parents and teachers in your church about the educational process. Many times, they will already be thinking of or praying for solutions that you can discover together. Consider hosting forums for parents addressing common challenges. Look into helping offset tuition for a child to attend a Christian school in the area. Think about ways your church can organize worldview educational opportunities for children and students. Reflect on how you can also provide a supportive environment for public school teachers in your church as they navigate a culture that is often unfriendly to Christianity.

Consider ways that you could host a school in your building. Home-schoolers are likely in your area already working cooperatively with other

like-minded families. You may be able to provide a space for them to meet or otherwise encourage families who would like to homeschool or begin a micro-school.

You may also discover local teachers or parents who are pursuing innovative hybrid solutions. During COVID lockdowns, for example, two public school teachers in rural Florida decided to create a better solution for struggling students. They resigned from their positions, found space in a local church, and invited a group of students to come and work through the free, state-provided online curriculum, but to do so under their supervision. Their presence with these students added a personal touch and provided accountability for those whose parents had to work. They gave extra instruction for difficult lessons and organized snacks, breaks, and even outdoor recreation time. The cost to parents was manageable, and student outcomes improved significantly.

Forging healthy relationships with Christian schools in your area is beneficial to all parties involved. If your church is not in a place to start a school, consider the ways your church can help existing Christian schools with fundraising, advocacy, or hosting extracurricular events. Most Christian school principals are eager for connections with local churches as partners in discipleship. For instance, your church or its members might consider providing full or partial scholarships to lower-income families to assist with the costs of Christian school tuition.

Churches *for* Public Schools

Whether your church can start a school or not, do not miss the missional opportunity we have to engage with our public schools, no matter what we think of the philosophical or political forces driving them. The reality is that our communities have many lower-income students for whom public education is the only option available right now.

It's important not to overlook the real economic dynamics involved in our churches and schools. Most evangelical churches are structured around the schedules of people with 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. jobs, Monday through Friday, with evenings and weekends off. Working class families,

however, often do not have this kind of schedule. Those who work in the service industry are compelled to work in shifts on evenings and on Sundays in order to provide for their families. In the gig economy, many hold down two or three jobs just to make ends meet. Similarly, most Christian schools are only an option for families with financial means. For many families, private education of any kind is not a realistic option.

That's why, even if we disapprove of the direction and values of government schools, we cannot forget the children who attend. They bear God's image, and though they may not be able to attend the schools we start, we can and should remember them, advocate for them, and minister to them as God grants us opportunity.

Here are some ways your church can engage with public schools in your community:

Partner with principals.

At Family Church in West Palm Beach, every campus location adopts a local elementary school. They befriend the principals at these schools and work with them to find ways to bless the teachers, students, and families. This year, for example, one local principal identified 41 at-risk families in the school, so the local Family Church campus stepped up to provide Thanksgiving meals for all of them. Engaging your community's public schools can be a helpful bridge to blessing needy and disconnected families while also establishing future relationships.

Partnering with principals is one of Amy Sherman's suggestions for the church to make a difference in public education.⁹ Principals want to improve student attendance, academic performance, parental engagement, and teacher appreciation. Backpack drives for school supplies, lunches for teacher appreciation, or donating and serving at a school's food pantry are always appreciated contributions. Sometimes, Sherman writes, you can find community organizations that can serve as intermediaries between schools and churches, such as Caring for Kids in Kansas City, which catalyzes partnerships between schools in need and community organizations that can help.

Offer after-school programming.

Another way to support especially under-resourced schools is by offering after-school programming. The possibilities are immense. Churches can host physical education opportunities like soccer and basketball leagues or martial arts classes. Academic enrichment opportunities like tutoring are often needed and welcomed. Bible Center Church in Pittsburgh offers a rotating after-school curriculum for science, technology, engineering, agriculture, and math.¹⁰ BCC's aim is not to replace the school, but to supplement and enrich the instruction offered by the school.

Help immigrant and refugee families.

Engaging with public schools can be a way to assist with the needs of local immigrant and refugee families. Often the parents have needs that no one else is addressing. Churches can provide English as a second language (ESL) classes for parents, offer resumé workshops or job application support, assist with practical needs like food and furniture, or aid them in navigating the health care system.

Conclusion

We can learn how to think of Christian schools by comparing two types of monasteries. The Roman monastery was designed around withdrawal from the world and insulation from its corruption. It was both a sign of protest toward the world as well as a means of escaping it. The Celtic monasteries were different. They reflected St. Patrick's apostolic heart to reach all of Ireland with the gospel. Their mission was to engage the pagan world around them and to extend the reach of the church. Rather than turning into a cloister for individuals to hide in and find safety, a Celtic monastery was a community center where guests were welcomed to come and join the rhythms of prayer, work, and study.¹¹

Let's not think of Christian schools like Roman monasteries—places to preserve our faith by separating us from the world. Let's be more like the best of the Celtic monasteries—places of worship and learning

that welcome students and their families, strengthen and form them in truth, and send them out again as ambassadors of God's kingdom.

Planting new neighborhood schools is not a means of taking children out of the community; it's building a new place of flourishing that is designed to provide long-lasting service to the community. Christian education is better than what the world offers because it honors God, teaches the Bible, and forms students in a true view of human purpose. This kind of formation, along with the families being shaped by it, is the blessing our communities need.

CHAPTER 4

How to Start a Reformation

Jimmy Scroggins

The title of this book tells you what we are hoping for: an education reformation. In the opening pages, we “put our cards on the table,” so to speak. We hope every evangelical church in America will consider starting some form of a Christian school. The spiritual urgency is there. The biblical encouragement is there. The parental demand is there. The historical precedent is there. The legal and political permission is there. And the resources are there. We could have—we *should* have—we *must* have an education reformation.

Aren't existing Christian schools enough? Existing Christian schools are great. We are for them. We need them. Many kids in our churches will attend those schools, and many employees of those schools will attend our churches. But for the same reason we need new church plants, we need new Christian schools, especially in places where populations are growing. As we said in chapter 1, many existing Christian schools are culturally and financially inaccessible to many Christian families. Additionally, many Christian schools are simply full. Waitlists are already pending for multiple grades. We need a wave of new, church-based, academically excellent, financially accessible, distinctively Christian schools. This is the potential for an education reformation.

But What About ...?

What about supporting our public schools? Some of them are great. And what about all of the public school administrators and teachers

who attend our churches? And what about the homeschoolers? Will our new generation of church-based schools cause these people to feel abandoned?

Not if we do it right.

We need to resist the temptation to tear down what others are doing in order to justify the schools we're seeking to establish in our church buildings. We don't need to bash public schools. We have thousands and thousands of believers who are working and studying within these institutions. But the ideological trajectory of the public school system speaks for itself. Parents will figure this out without church leaders hammering the public schools from the platform.

We don't need to bash the local Catholic schools, the independent Christian schools, or other schools sponsored by other churches. If every church with a building would create a quality, accessible, biblically faithful school, then the benefit to families and their neighborhoods would be evident. We don't have to bash others in order to promote our own schools. The demand is there, so we should simply meet it.

What Now?

Some of you are convinced. Some are intrigued. Some are mildly interested. If a church or church leader wanted to start or re-envision a Christian school, where would you begin?

This final chapter of our little book will offer these simple, understandable next steps:

1. Decide to do it.
2. Identify a champion.
3. Identify a model and/or partner.
4. Build momentum.
5. Organize resources.
6. Take the leap.
7. Play long ball.

We are confident that smart, capable leaders who understand the stakes will be able to contextualize and adapt these suggestions to their

unique situations. This is not designed to be a step-by-step, exhaustive guide to starting a church-based Christian school. This chapter and book are written to spark interest and ideas in the minds of leaders. Organizations, such as the Association of Christian Schools International (acsi.org/namb), have already created all manner of resources to help you in much more detailed ways. But our suggestions may help you set a trajectory, and that is our goal.

Decide to Do It

Nothing happens until a leader decides to make a move. If you are that leader, you can't sit around reading books and articles or having planning conversations about education for the rest of your life. Once you are convinced that your church needs to participate in the education reformation, you must take action.

Starting something new and bold and consequential can be scary because you can't know the future. Voices inside your own head and voices from within your church may try to dissuade you from moving forward.

“We are too busy as it is.”

“We need to stay in our lane.”

“There are lots of great people involved in public schools—we don't want to hurt their feelings.”

“Our local Christian school will see us as competition.”

“I don't want the school to take over our church. Can't let the tail wag the dog!”

“We used to have a Christian school, but it was too much trouble.”

“A school is going to create wear-and-tear on our facilities.”

“This is going to end up costing us a lot of money.”

“We are going to lose our focus on evangelism.”

Those voices are not lying to you. Many of the above statements and others like them are, in fact, true.

But parents in your church need a fighting chance. Future generations of kids in your church need more time and more contact with gospel-centered mentors. For too long, we have acknowledged that our young people are leaving the faith in droves. A church-based school creates a better possible future for the kids growing up in our churches. We are talking about a revolution for the spiritual formation of our families.

But nothing will happen until a leader decides to make it happen. Is it you?

Identify a Champion

Every important initiative in a church starts with a person. God speaks into the heart of a leader or church member when something new needs to happen. Whether it's a maternity home, a soup kitchen, a thrift store, an AWANA group, a recovery ministry, a new campus or church plant, or even a new building—there is always a leader who sees both a need and an opportunity.

Once you decide to get serious about an education reformation in your church, you must identify the one who will serve as the champion of your cause. It could be you. It might be someone else. But you need to find the kind of person who is both passionate and capable.

At Family Church, when we sponsor a church plant or start a new campus, we are looking for a leader to say, “I am starting a church in this neighborhood with you or without you, but I want your help.” That is the champion mindset we need for our schools.

Of course, our champion must have the character and theological commitments that are prerequisite to Christian leadership within our organization. But we don't move forward with any new initiative until God brings us that leader—that champion!—who takes personal responsibility to propel the initiative forward. What kind of person could it be? A fired-up mom. A retired high school principal. An entrepreneur, business owner, or executive. A Christian school veteran from another neighborhood or state. God raises up leaders

from all kinds of places. You have to pray for them. You have to look for them. You have to talk to others. God will bring you the champion at the right time. But you shouldn't start without them.

Identify a Model

What do you think your neighborhood school should look like 10 years from now? It's alright if you don't know yet, but you should be thinking about it. You are more likely to hit your target when you know what your target looks like.

There are many different approaches to Christian education, and new models are being explored and developed all over the country. Here are a few models you might consider, depending on your church context:

Go Big. The most visible Christian schools on the national stage are the biggest. Think Prestonwood Academy in Plano, Texas; First Academy in Orlando, Florida; Second Baptist Academy in Houston, Texas; Stony Brook School in Stony Brook, New York; or the Christian Academy of Louisville, Kentucky. These schools have hundreds and sometimes thousands of students enrolled, world-class facilities, elite academics, and outstanding fine arts programs, and they compete for championships in athletics. These schools require large budgets, as well as massive, dedicated school facilities (mostly unused by a church) and sophisticated organizational infrastructure. They also make a huge impact, producing thousands of graduates over the years. For most churches, this scale is unattainable. The truth is that only a few churches have the bandwidth to pull it off. If your church has the vision and resources to create a school at this scale, then you should go for it.

Go Medium. There are church-based, distinctively Christian schools all over the United States. They have more moderate goals for their extra-curricular offerings. They develop their

facilities for dual use between the school and the church. These schools tend to be smaller, maybe a few hundred students. This approach usually starts small and evolves over time. Many churches with large educational buildings or children's facilities could use this model.

Go Small. Develop a school approach that matches your current facilities. Create a neighborhood school that serves as a ministry extension of the neighborhood church. If you have small facilities, you have a small school. If you have one room, you have some version of a one-room schoolhouse. Some educational innovators refer to these as “micro-schools.”¹

Host a School. There are new Christian school “companies” that will start a Christian school in your church facilities. Some of these organizations encourage extensive involvement and interaction between the neighborhood church and attenders of the school. The Ecclesial School Initiative in Orlando (esischools.org) is developing a strong model in central Florida that takes this approach. The advantage for the church is that an organization like The Ecclesial Schools Initiative takes responsibility for organizing the school, recruiting teachers, and enrolling students. The church simply opens their facility and participates in the spiritual formation of families involved in the school. Many existing Christian schools are interested in placing a “campus” of their school in the facilities of a neighborhood church. These kinds of partnerships can be spun up relatively quickly and remove a lot of the administrative burden from the church team.

Find an Online Partner. Several existing Christian schools and universities have seen the need and created educational products for churches to use. For example, Liberty University (liberty.edu) will work with churches who want to start a

Christian school by providing curriculum, record keeping, guidance counseling, and even video instruction. A church could commit some classrooms, provide a proctor or tutor, and allow Liberty or a similar group to provide all or most of the educational programming. The church recruits the students, hosts the classes, and provides additional spiritual enrichment (chapel) and extracurriculars. The King's Academy (tka.net) in West Palm Beach will provide similar products and services for churches that want them. Both Liberty and King's will even "white-label" their curriculum and materials so that churches can create their own branding around the neighborhood school.

Go Multisite. At Family Church in South Florida, we are a multisite church with 15 physical locations. We are in the process of starting a neighborhood school in every place we own a neighborhood building. Each school will have to look a little different because the school must work in the facility that already exists. Further, each school will be unique because the school needs to fit the profile of the neighborhood. Some of our schools are preschool only, some go through elementary, and some go through the eighth grade. Eventually, we hope to have high schools as well. There are thousands of multisite churches in the U.S. today—what if every location had a neighborhood school? That would be an education reformation!

So, how do we get started? The easiest way is to find an existing Christian school you want to emulate. Reach out and build a relationship with them. We have found that most Christian schools are eager to share what they are learning with others. So learn from them. Do what they do. Get permission to copy their policies. Borrow their strategies. Adapt their approach to your neighborhood, your church, your facility, and the current stage of development of your Christian school. Accrediting organizations like ACSI (acsi.org/namb) will be

eager to help you. The North American Mission Board (namb.net/schools) can provide some resources and direction. Of course, you will have some wrinkles that are unique to your situation, but there is no need to reinvent the entire wheel.

Build Momentum

If you start this conversation in your church, you will have to take the time to build momentum. We would encourage you to resist making huge public announcements until you have received buy-in from key decision-makers and stakeholders in your church. We have found that the mere idea of a Christian school is likely to muster up support in most congregations.

But once you actually begin to implement the plan for establishing a Christian school in your facilities, you will likely experience tension within your church family. Changes in how the facilities are used will irritate some church people. Changes in how the facilities are cleaned, maintained, and decorated may cause others to become upset. That's why you need a champion, a vision, a model, and a "mentor organization." Your model and mentor can help you have the conversations in your church that they have already had in theirs.

We recommend you start with a small group of key leaders, and then gradually "expand the circle" of conversations. Maybe you will start with key staff or elders. Once you get consensus to move forward from that group, you will then expand the circle one more ring—maybe through your deacons or some key donors. When you have consensus from that group, keep expanding the conversation. A few church leaders have the leadership strength and influence to simply announce, "Here is what we are going to do," and then the church falls in line. But most of us need to take time to build momentum behind important ideas and initiatives.

Organize Resources

There is a lot to think about when starting a school. Jesus warned us not to start building something until we have counted the cost (Luke 14:28). Once you have found a champion, a model, a mentor, and momentum, what are the absolute basics you need to consider before launching your church-based school? You need to assess your facilities.

Where are you going to hold classes?

How many classes can you have?

Are you equipped to start a preschool?

What about launching an elementary school?

Do you have a place for kids to eat?

Do you have a place for kids to play?

Do you have adequate restrooms?

Can you create a reasonably safe and secure environment?

Do you need to make minor modifications to your facility before enrolling students?

We would encourage you to assess your facilities, but don't let limited facilities dissuade you from moving forward. Start where you are, use what you have, and do what you can.

You need to become familiar with government regulations in your area. City, county, and state governments may have laws and regulations that govern schools. Find out what they are and determine if those regulations actually apply to church-based schools. Your "mentor school" or another local Christian or parochial school should be able to help you with that.

How will you find teachers? And what kind of teachers do you need? How many do you need to recruit before getting started? Each situation is unique. The number of teachers and the credentials required for your teachers will be different depending on your model and how many students enroll.

How will this all be funded? This is a big one. If you can start a school in a building that already exists as part of your church facility,

then you are already one step ahead in making your school accessible and affordable to Christian families. Your church may need to raise or invest some of the upfront costs for modifying facilities, marketing your new school, or hiring personnel. (You have to hire people before anyone pays tuition.) But once the school gets up and running, it should be able to pay for itself. In some cases, the school will actually meet its own budget and also be able to contribute to the budget of the church.

How will families afford tuition? Christian parents must prioritize this investment for the spiritual, academic, and social formation of their children. Parents will have to pay, and it won't be easy for some of them to do so. While church-based schools can be more affordable than other models, they still aren't free. Funding is a factor that church leaders must consider.

Fortunately, a strong "school choice" movement is getting traction in many states across the country. Family Church is starting church-based schools in Florida. The state of Florida has the most innovative and aggressive voucher program in the nation, but many other states are following suit.² States are developing their own versions of school vouchers that allow parents to use state funding for the school of their choice, which includes religious schools. If you live in a state with a similar program, the parents in your neighborhood may benefit, and that funding stream may allow you to accelerate your church-based school.

Take the Leap

You can see that starting a church-based school isn't easy, cheap, or necessarily quick. While you must count the cost, we encourage you not to fall victim to "paralysis by analysis." At some point, you just have to start the school. We believe that many churches can start a school within 24 months of initial conversations. Some can do it even faster.

If you believe God wants you to do it, what are you waiting for? Get the ball rolling and make adjustments as you learn. There is no way for you to have it all perfected before you begin. Starting a

church-based school is like getting married or having a baby; if you wait until you have all the money, all your questions answered, and all uncertainty removed, you would never do it. So have conversations. Do the research. Find the champion. Choose your model. Engage a mentor. Assess your resources. Count the cost. But start the school!

Play Long Ball

You shouldn't start a school if you are wanting a quick fix or are simply jumping on a bandwagon. We see church-based schools as a movement that should think toward the future. I (Jimmy) serve in a neighborhood church that was started nearly 125 years ago. Before my grandparents were born, people were giving, praying, and building something. Today, my family benefits because those believers had the foresight to plant something that would outlast their own lives.

Do you want your church to still be a gospel outpost in the neighborhood a hundred years from now? What if the church-based schools that we start still exist in the 2100s? What if, over the course of the next century, God uses your church and school to help disciple thousands of children and parents in your neighborhood? What if God uses your church-based school to help families hold on to their faith, hold onto each other, and spread the gospel in your neighborhood—even as the larger culture around us continues to drift away from biblical values?

When you commit to playing long ball, you give yourself the freedom to learn and make adjustments. You don't have to be afraid to go slow, press pause, or take two steps forward and three steps back. When you take a longer view of your church-based school, you realize that you don't have to get it all done in a day, a week, a year, or even a decade. You are building something for the future. You are participating in an education reformation.

Do Something

We realize that not every church is going to start a school right away. Some churches already have a school; some churches will never have

one. But we believe the education reformation is happening and that you should participate in this modern movement. In the New Testament, we see a clear pattern for neighborhood churches: stronger churches fund and strengthen newer churches and struggling churches. We believe the same pattern should apply to Christian schools. Do something. Start a school. Strengthen a school. Support a school. But do your part to fight for the future of the kids and families in your neighborhood.

Final Story

In August of 2021, the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan. We all watched the news as thousands of people crowded around the Kabul airport hoping to escape the Taliban as it regained control of their country. A journalist took a photograph of a father handing his infant daughter over the wall and into the hands of a United States Marine. The young girl's name was Liya, and she was only 16 days old. The photo went viral and became a symbol of the Afghani people's desperation in the face of the chaos that engulfed their culture.

Over the next several days, Liya's parents escaped, and they were reunited with their daughter. Liya's dad was later asked about his decision to hand over his daughter, though he didn't know if he would ever see her again. He responded, "That day, I handed my baby to a total stranger. The only thing I trusted was that he was a Marine and that my daughter would be fine."³

Think about that story. Everything was disintegrating. The survival of the family was in doubt. They had nowhere to go. But the dad saw the uniform of the United States Marines. And he knew that if he could hand his daughter to someone wearing that uniform, she would have a fighting chance to survive and have a life.

We, the neighborhood churches, are the Marines standing on the wall. The culture feels like it is disintegrating. Chaos is all around. Families don't know if they will survive. We need to be a gospel presence in our neighborhoods, inviting parents to bring us their children,

their marriages, their brokenness, and their hearts, because we can point them to Jesus. We can give them a neighborhood pastor in a neighborhood church in a neighborhood building. We can speak the neighborhood language and connect them with a neighborhood school. We can give them a fighting chance.

Welcome to the education reformation.

APPENDIX

Case Studies of Christian Schools

The following case studies show a variety of approaches to church-based schools.¹

Bethesda Christian Academy (BCA)

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Church: Bethesda Baptist Church (BBC)

Year Started: 1995

Current Enrollment: 210 Students

HISTORY

BCA started a kindergarten class in 1995 with the pastor overseeing the school. First grade was added the next year. In 1997, the church added an education building with four classrooms. The plan was to expand through grade five, but families wanted more. Over time, BCA opened a middle school and added 9th, 10th, and 11th grades.

MODEL

BCA requires students to come from Christian homes, have a pastoral reference, and sign the school's statement of faith to be admitted. This limits the scope of students who could be accepted, but it increases how much the school draws families who want to move away from public schools.

KEY FACTOR FOR THE CHURCH

A pastor who sees the school as an important part of the church will help the relationship between the two, especially if the church and school share space. Written documentation about who is responsible for what helps manage the relationship between the church and the school.

NOTABLE

BCA includes students from about 60 different churches.

Eagle's Landing Christian Academy (ELCA)

Location: McDonough, Georgia

Church: Eagle's Landing First Baptist Church (ELFBC)

Year Started: 1970

Current Enrollment: 1,000 Students

HISTORY

ELCA was established in 1970 but endured financial struggles. A different, established school tried to incorporate it as a new branch of its own, but the struggles remained. In 1994, ELFBC decided to absorb the school and make it a ministry of the church. The school grew within a few years from 170 students to 593 as the community grew around it. The school uses the same property as the church and now has an enrollment of 1,000 students.

MODEL

ELCA is an evangelistic school. The school's philosophy is to make sure the ratio is predominately students from Christian families to not be outnumbered but still be evangelistically focused. Some students have come to know Christ through the school then led their families to come to church.

KEY FACTOR FOR THE CHURCH

The church must see the school as a ministry opportunity and recognize growing pains will occur when managing the relationship between the church and school.

NOTABLE

Minorities make up 58 percent of the ELCA student body, which has led to increased diversity at ELFBC.

Heritage Christian Academy

Location: Montgomery, Texas

Church: First Montgomery Baptist Church (FMBC)

Year Started: 2017

Current Enrollment: 185 Students

HISTORY

FMBC started a two-day Mother's Day Out program for preschoolers in the 1980s, which expanded to four days in 2015. After that, many parents wanted their children to remain for kindergarten, so they extended each year, grade-by-grade, and started an elementary school. The church also started a homeschool ministry to offer à la carte classes to high school students then expanded to middle school as well.

MODEL

The pastor also serves as the head of school. The school uses classrooms in the church building throughout the week.

KEY FACTOR FOR THE CHURCH

Church members have a passion for education and support the school. Many of the teachers are also church members.

NOTABLE

FMBC encourages all churches to start a Christian school and to co-labor with other area churches to do the same. While starting a Christian school is a gradual process with slow and steady progress, it should be considered by every church with facility space to so do.

Lancaster Christian Academy (LCA)

Location: Lancaster, South Carolina

Church: Second Baptist Church Lancaster

Year Started: 2021

Current Enrollment: 80 Students

HISTORY

With attendance numbers down in the aftermath of COVID, the church had unused space and was looking to draw in people from the community. They quickly created and approved a school proposal, and LCA opened in August 2021 with five kindergartners and one teacher. The church began advertising and added K-4 in the second year with 44 students and three teachers. LCA expanded to K-6 in 2023, accommodating about 80 students and 10 faculty members.

MODEL

Second Baptist Church considered starting a school in the early 2000s, but it never came together. COVID shifted the landscape, and students doing work from home helped their parents see more closely the public-school curriculum. Those parents began reaching out for a Christian option.

KEY FACTOR FOR THE CHURCH

The church has close to 3,000 members, and the school is dependent on financial support from the church to offer lower tuition rates.

NOTABLE

Because it is a newer school, a key for LCA is having a long-range plan for the school to show parents what they're signing their kids up for and to assure teachers that their job will last more than one year. LCA also recommends establishing a parent handbook, student handbook, and discipline policy from the beginning.

About the Authors



Jimmy Scroggins

Jimmy Scroggins is the Lead Pastor of Family Church in South Florida, where he has served since July 2008. He and his wife, Kristin, have eight children and four grandchildren—James (Reilly, James VI, Wyatt), Daniel (Mary-Madison, Willow Kate, Haven Hope), Jeremiah (Logan), Isaac, Stephen, Anna Kate, Mary Claire, and Caleb. Under Jimmy's leadership, Family Church has grown to a network of neighborhood churches and schools across three counties in three languages. Family Church is passionate about building families by helping them discover and pursue God's design while carrying out their vision of taking the gospel to every person in every neighborhood in South Florida. Jimmy is the author of *Full Circle Parenting* and *Turning Everyday Conversations into Gospel Conversations* and hosts the *Church for the Rest of Us* podcast at familychurchnetwork.com. He also serves on the Board of Trustees at Palm Beach Atlantic University. Dr. Scroggins teaches as a visiting professor at both Southern and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminaries.



Trevin Wax

Trevin Wax is Vice President of Resources and Marketing at the North American Mission Board and a visiting professor at Cedarville University. A former missionary to Romania, Trevin is a regular columnist at The Gospel Coalition and has contributed to *The Washington Post*, *Religion News Service*, *World*, and *Christianity Today*. He has taught courses on mission and ministry at Wheaton College and has lectured on Christianity and culture at Oxford University. He is a founding editor of The Gospel Project, has served as publisher for the Christian Standard Bible, and is the author of multiple books, including *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*, *The Multi-Directional Leader*, *Rethink Your Self*, *This Is Our Time*, and *Gospel Centered Teaching*. His podcast is *Reconstructing Faith*. He and his wife, Corina, have three children.

Notes

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Chapter 3

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Appendix: Case Studies of Christian Schools

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