Guest Editorial

Parental Educational Responsibility:
Is the Medium Necessarily the Proper Message in Christian Schooling?

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The theme of the 1967 book *The Medium Is the Message* by Marshall McLuhan was that the mode or medium of communication often defined the message more so than the actual content of the intended message. McLuhan’s message was apparently agreeable to a number of communication specialists. More recently we see his message validated by the increasingly powerful impact of image, or style, over substance in events as diverse as political debates, rock concerts, and TV advertisements.

Recently, while pondering McLuhan’s thesis, I was provoked regarding its potential similarity to an actual versus intended message sometimes heard from Christian schools. That is, it seems that the medium or actual practice of Christian schooling may not always present the message that verbalized messages from these same Christian schools intend! Typically we think that by virtue of its name, Christian education should be distinctly different from any educational medium that does not carry the adjective “Christian” in its name. Advertising and public rela-
tions statements from most Christian schools about their particular type of education, as opposed to that of secular education, tell us their medium inherently conveys a different message. More precisely, Christian schools unabashedly declare they represent biblical fidelity in education. That is in fact their reason for being. But is this possibly an instance of image over substance?

One of the clues that should cause us to wonder if the actual practice of Christian schooling really is the message is that there is very little evidence as to whether the message is successful. We should expect to see that this medium of Christian education “produces” graduates that live as the Bible prescribes, which according to the Bible is not as nearly possible for non-Christians. Yet the scant evidence available indicates that few Christian schools distinguish themselves in this way (Algera & Sink, 2002; Cox, 2000; Cox & Barnum, 2000-2001; Hull, 2003; and Schultz, 2002). An analogy, emotionally charged as this one may be, illustrates my point. In the evolution versus creation debate, there is a counterpoised fact that stands out in spite of all the rhetoric designed to convince that evolution is true. That is, there is little if any evidence of the transitional life forms that should appear in abundance given the vast numbers of life forms that supposedly evolved from lower forms. Analogously speaking, if there is little evidence confirming the success of Christian education, then there is reason to question the efficacy of the medium of Christian education in comparison to alternate educational mediums. For instance, while the discipleship that results from Christian education should demonstrate intimacy with Christ and thus contribute among other things to making Israel jealous (Rom 11:11), recent reports from the Nehemiah Institute (Smithwick, 2005) cast doubt that this expectation is regularly happening.

This matter of whether or not the medium of Christian schooling has the qualities that it proposes was brought home to me in a fairly disturbing way. My 12 year old grandson has periodically lived with me since his birth. In fact, I was the proxy father at his birth and for a number
of months afterward due to the military deployment of his dad. Over the years, we have enjoyed a bonded relationship that combines the best of father-son and grandfather-grandson relations.

Recently, while helping my grandson average three sets of elapsed times (minutes and seconds) recorded from a school science experiment, I noticed that the total to be averaged was not properly in pure minutes (e.g., 14.57) or in pure seconds (874) but in a mixed measure of minutes and seconds (14 min 34 s). So as a result his answer to the division problem was 5 min 18 s instead of the correct answer of 4 min 51 s. The conversation that followed as I tried to explain the proper averaging procedure bears directly on the theme of this article.

When hearing from me of the proper procedure, my grandson’s responses included doubt, subtle argument, and disbelief. After defusing these emotions by praying with him, I probed for how he felt. In so many words, my grandson confessed confusion to the point of disbelief in my explanation, uncertainty about whether to believe me or the science teacher who neglected to explain this division procedure beforehand, and insecurity about which of us to believe in the future.

My interpretation of this dilemma is that my biblical head-of-household, and even father/grandfather role of authority, paradoxically had been undermined by my grandson’s trust in an educational institution whose reason for being is to honor biblical principles. This reality stands in contrast to the fact that the Christian school my grandson attends openly acknowledges the primacy of parental educational responsibility. Even so, my grandson has apparently inculcated the reality of his school’s parent-school relationship that, according to other teachers and parents, is not an isolated phenomenon.

This illustration suggests to me that the institution of Christian schooling, contrary to its intended and proclaimed distinctiveness sometimes may not only be lacking but it also may subtly be promoting an antithetical teaching on a particularly important issue. In the above example, the medium of that Christian school is effectually maintaining the same
message against that crucial matter of parental sovereignty as its secular school counterpart. In spite of the best intentions of Christian schools they apparently can inadvertently convey that parental authority in education is secondary to theirs. The child comes to that natural conclusion because day in and day out, month after month, year after year, the child regularly experiences the parent relinquishing authority to the school. Yet the Bible suggests that parents have full 365/24/7 responsibility regarding what the child learns (cf. Mal 2:15).

This being the case, the Christian school practice, defacto, of subtly superseding parental educational responsibility is the true message of the medium, as opposed to the well-intentioned claims of these schools' to true biblical fidelity. Obviously, not a desired validation of McLuhan's thesis!

Truly, it is a noble thing to educate a child even when in proxy for the parent, but by the very nature of formal schooling, including Christian schooling, the parent de facto typically gives over authority that the Bible seems to say is exclusively the parent's. That is, the scriptures, both Old and New, make parents, and fathers in particular, the ultimate educational authority (cf. Deut. 6:7; Eph. 6:4). Even when the child is taught by others, the father is still responsible as suggested by Galatians 4:2. Tragically, Barna's (2004) research findings, that most Christian families are waiting for other institutions to take on this responsibility, seems relevant here. Of serious consequence, neglect of the important biblical principle regarding parental educational responsibility may even be linked to the disastrous familial consequences visited upon children as spoken to in Hosea 4:6.

This issue regarding ultimate education responsibility draws a potentially greater distinction between Christian education and Christian schools than typically imagined. Specifically, it seems that Christian education (i.e., homeschooling) has the obvious greater initial possibility of biblical fidelity regarding parental involvement and responsibility than do Christian schools. However, in all fairness, it is not the school that wres-
ties the child from the parent, but it is the parent who voluntarily, whether consciously or unconsciously, relinquishes the educational authority/responsibility for the child to the school. Case in point—the medium's actual message of school sovereignty has been accepted. In confirmation, few schools seem to stipulate, let alone intentionally operate as "subcontracted" extensions of parental responsibility. Conversely, few parents seem able to clearly articulate biblically what they would contract for these schools to do and not do (cf. Belz, 2005).

It is not my intention to offend; there are important reasons for why this issue is not to be left unexamined. The Bible indicates that parents, and fathers in particular (Deut. 6:1-9; Ps. 78; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:15, 4:6; Eph. 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 3:4-5), play a strong role in raising children, and it is an accepted truism that the way children see their fathers is generally the way they see God (cf. Eldredge, 2004). The last verse in the Old Testament (Mal. 4:6) suggests that where children experience a lack of nurturing from their fathers, personal and generational disaster follows.

Currently the estimates are that approximately 33% of all U.S. children under the age of 18 live apart from their fathers (Morley, 2005) and in two-thirds of two-parent families both parents work (Gallup, 2002). When combined with Barna's findings that Christians live pretty close to the ways of the world the same parenting tragedy is likely happening in Christian homes. And as the research shows (Morley, 2005) children from fatherless families are at significantly greater social, economic, and psychological risk than their two-parent family peers.

So perhaps it is time to examine more closely what message about fathering the children (and parents) are getting from the medium of Christian schooling. And beyond that, perhaps Christian schools should ask how they can be a major factor in establishing quality parental responsibility in education (cf. National Center for Fathering, 2005). The Malachi 4:6 "curse of our day" (Cole, 1984, p. 142) can likely be reversed if its antecedent, the shepherding and nurturing hearts of the fathers, is facilitated by the very institution parents often expect will nurture their chil-
dren’s hearts. The crucial question and thus challenge is whether Christian schools can and will intentionally redirect the heart of present and future fathers to their children as these institutions are already functioning to link the children’s hearts to the schools themselves! If so, then the medium really will be the biblically appropriate message.

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REFERENCES


*Dr. Cox’s interests are two-fold: to enable educational choice without government control and to promote the development of Christian citizenship. He has just authored the book, Tyranny Through Public Education.*