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### Educating our Children: Making a Choice

Ken Badley

George Fox University, kbadley1@gmail.com

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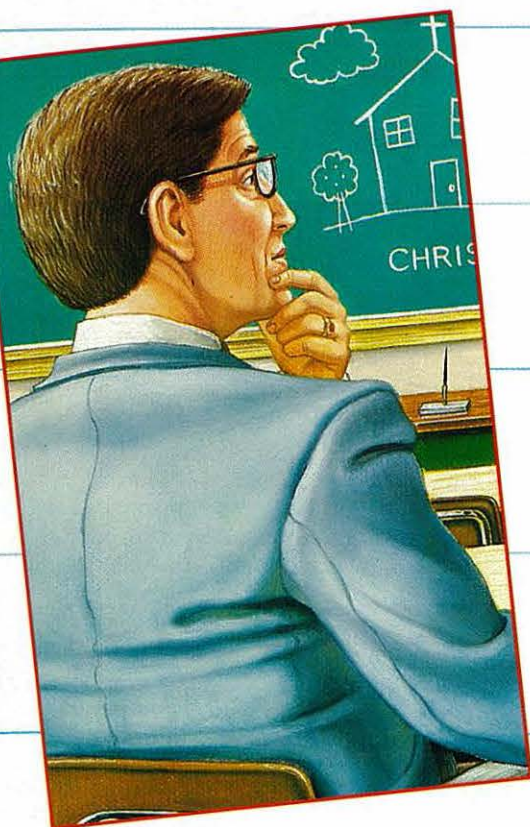
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# Educating Our Children:

*How do we choose what's best for our children? What are the plusses and minuses of public and private education? Faith Today presents a primer*



**T**he old one-room schoolhouse is empty. The chatter of friends, pig-tails in the inkwell, teachers both liked and disliked, initials carved on the old desktop — they're only memories now.

It seems the question of education was simpler then. For those over forty, the public school was the only place of education. There really was no choice. And our parents, it seemed, could then more easily trust the public schools to provide sound, well-rounded education. Although the education was not "evangelical," at least our parents were confident it wouldn't be anti-Christian.

Today education has changed. Some parents claim the public system has become a carnival of secularized values, and they call for abandonment to private schools. Other parents believe the public system is worth saving and choose both to send their children and be personally involved.

Parents wondering where to send their

*\* We use the term "Christian school" with caution, recognizing that it's not always clear when a school is "Christian." However, here we refer to private Canadian schools that affirm evangelical Protestant faith as the basis of their teaching. It also includes those private evangelical schools that receive partial government funding.*

children recognize that these choices may be some of the most critical they'll ever make.

A biblical proverb reminds us of education's importance: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Parents look down the road and wonder, "What will be the end result? What will my children be like when they're adults? Will the training at home and church be supported or negated by their experience at school?"

Wanting the very best, a parent asks, "Where should I be educating my children now? Is public education as bad as critics claim? If a Christian school is available and affordable, is that the choice I should make?"

But too often answers arrive after parents have made the decision. They need to understand there is much helpful information available which can help them in making a choice.

Right from the start, regardless of one's personal opinion, it needs to be recognized that there are various issues, each with valid points of view, to consider. Furthermore, responsible and articulate voices speak to both sides of the question. Be warned. There are no clear-cut answers. But we want to alert you to some factors to consider as you make your choice.

Last September in *Faith Today* (then *Faith Alive*) an Evangelical Opinion Poll

on Christian education asked readers how they view public education and what they've done or plan to do in educating their children.

The response was startling. It revealed why more and more Canadians are sending their children to Christian schools\* — or forming their own private schools. Pages 20 and 21 report findings from the survey.

## Holistic Christian education

*Faith Today* readers — parents, pastors and educators — seem to agree on one thing: for the next generation of Christian young people to thrive in their world — or even survive — they must be grounded in a holistic, Christian, integrated education. In addition, the poll generally implied that parents have the primary responsibility to see to this.

With this in mind, a parent faces the most fundamental of questions: Which school system — public or Christian — best meets my requirements for my child's spiritual, academic, social and physical development?

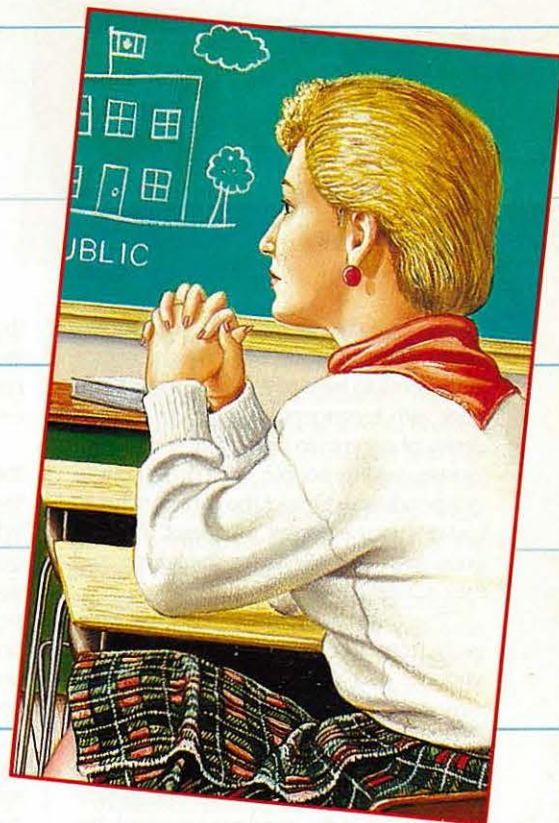
We don't suggest that it's only up to the school system to fulfill parents' requirements in each of these areas. The school environment, of course, is only one means of education. But parents expect that school should substantially contribute to each dimension of life.

Unfortunately, many parents send their



# MAKING A CHOICE

*on the Educational Question, outlining issues and concerns parents must deal with before packing their children off to school.*



children to particular schools for the wrong reasons. If a child is having trouble in a public school, they send the child to the Christian school to "solve problems." Said one teacher, "Having a Pollyanna view that the 'loving atmosphere' of a Christian school will meet the child's learning needs is quite frankly naive and unrealistic. They are deluding themselves at the expense of their child."

More specifically, what are some of the "ideal" expectations parents have for their children's education in the four areas of personal development?

## 1. MORAL/SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Spiritual and moral development are both central and critical. If students are to finish school with a strong, viable faith, ready to win in this battle of life, ideally there should be:

- \* The integration of a biblical world view into the subject matter;
- \* Teachers committed to Christian ideals and who model them in their lives;
- \* An emphasis on disciplined living and spiritual growth;
- \* Practice in relating biblical truth to real moral and ethical problems.

So how much can we expect public and Christian schools to deliver?

**Public School:** Public schools won't usually deliver a great deal in this area, except in the occasional extra-curricular activity. The closest they can officially come is by a kind of pseudo-religious training called Moral Values Education. (Dr. James Houston examines this issue in "The Illusion of Moral Neutrality," page 28.)

The public school, in attempting to create an "open mind" environment for the development of values, often seems to fail because it attempts to construct a moral skyscraper with a foundation of sand. Today's cultural values, including cultural relativism, situational ethics, and secular humanism, permeate our society and therefore our public school system. So for parents to rely on the bulk of teachers in public schools to transmit biblical morality and ethics, is quite unrealistic.

The level of quality varies among teachers, as it does in any field. Most teachers, it seems, are highly motivated and deeply care about the progress of their students. But if a public school teacher is either ineffective or downright anti-Christian, there is little that parents seem to be able to do to effect change.

In the public system children have to deal with the same kind of nonreligious environment they'll face after 3:30 p.m. or graduation. And they are challenged to test school learning with what they learn at home.

**Christian School:** In the area of moral/spiritual development, Christian schools seem to win hands down. Scripture reading, chapels, prayer, outreach, emphasis on service, committed Christian teachers — all are part of daily learning.

But what exactly is your child getting? Is the curriculum a kind of spiritual band-aid against basic secular values? Do a few Bible verses sprinkled on nonbiblical content make it Christian?

The ideal is an integrative approach to teaching where the student learns scriptural principles woven in with science, history, math or any other subject, resulting in a holistic biblical view of life and the world. Most Christian schools work toward that goal.

But what of the often-heard accusation that Christian schools promote a kind of "hothouse" mentality? Dr. Harro Van Brummelen, education director for the B.C. Society of Christian Schools, challenges that accusation:

"Perhaps young children shouldn't be expected to be the salt of the earth. One starts tender plants in a hothouse but moves them out into the natural environment only when they're older and stronger." Christian parents aren't alone in wanting their own children protected from the rivalry, teasing, and vulgarity that sometimes characterizes school experience.

However, Jay Kesler, in his book, *Let's Succeed With Our Teenagers*, draws at-



## Making a choice, continued

tention to a danger with this kind of concern: "If there is one overriding problem that seems to be evident to all people who work with teenagers today ... it's the tendency of parents to be overprotective and to keep young people from growing into independence. One of the most typical situations is the parent who says, 'My son went away to college (or the army) and they ruined him.'

"The truth is the young person goes away from home and becomes exactly what he really is when the props are removed."

### 2. ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

But perhaps more central to the educative process is the academic content: the nuts and bolts of what your child learns. In an age of rapid technology, shuttles, space stations and "Star Wars," parents want the best of learning opportunities. These include:

- \* Teachers with high academic qualification;
- \* The most current of scientific and literary material;
- \* The best in books, equipment and opportunities;
- \* Effective programs appropriate to learning needs;
- \* Practical instruction in preparing for living;
- \* Knowledge that *doesn't* undercut the faith.
- \* A learning environment that teaches children how to *think*.

**Public School:** At first glance, it seems "given" that our schools deliver in the academic area. But how good are they, really? On one hand we're told students are scoring higher than ever on standardized achievement tests. Yet university professors often complain that high school graduates lack elementary skills in language and mathematics. A recent study showed that over 60 percent of Grade 6 pupils couldn't even identify Canada's capital!

Public schools offer many advantages, however. Teachers are professionally trained and available resources are increasingly state-of-the-art.

**Christian School:** Some people charge

that Christian schools view life too much in a religious context, and they ask, "Just how good is the education children receive at Christian schools?"

Though grateful for biblical instruction, they wonder about the quality of everyday teaching. What is the teacher's source? Where did he/she get training and how good was it? How recently was it upgraded? What kind of progressive in-service program is there in the professional environment? Is "professional development" funded? Is it even encouraged?

What kind of learning resources are available for students? Besides religious subjects, what else is taught? Does the student have access to all the important subject areas? What if a child has learning disabilities? What skills do teachers have to deal with such children?

The substantially lower budgets and salaries characteristic of Christian schools can result in several problems:

1. A limited choice of high quality teachers;
2. A small ratio of male teachers because they find it difficult to support a family on Christian school wages, resulting in fewer male role models for children in the school;
3. Teachers may have to teach subjects beyond the range of their academic training; and
4. Principals may be unqualified for effective administration: Have they had sufficient experience to deal with the myriad of problems at a school? Have they taken the ministry of education's principal courses?

There is financial incentive in the public school to take courses and upgrade oneself. This is bound to improve the quality of the public school in comparison with the Christian school.

In addition, public school boards are required to implement new policies and programs handed down from the ministry. Christian schools don't have to do so.

"The Christian school should believe in excellence in all areas, whether in teacher qualifications and continual upgrading, facilities, curriculum content, administration or board involvement," said a private school teacher. "We have to be credible in the community and we have to prepare credible children."

"My concern is that standards are not

high enough for teachers or administrators in our private schools. There can be a real problem of an inward mentality and provinciality with little awareness of the need to grow. Children suffer and aren't stretched or given a balanced program because the teachers aren't informed."

It needs to be noted that among Christian day schools there is a wide variety of approaches to curriculum, provincial guidelines and teacher certification. Some schools, for example, use provincially approved materials and then add an occasional Bible course. Such a school will rely heavily on the teacher to provide the Christian framework of thinking. They may teach the regular academic courses, but also use materials that represent a Christian viewpoint. Such a school will seek to cooperate with provincial departments of education yet not compromise its own views.

Of Christian schools only a small minority views any involvement with government as a threat to the assertion that education is the parents' God-given responsibility. Such schools, in rejecting public curriculum, write their own material or purchase it from selected suppliers, frequently from the United States. Canadian curriculum is scarce or absent, with minor exceptions such as the Christian Reformed Church which has its own curriculum centre in Hamilton.

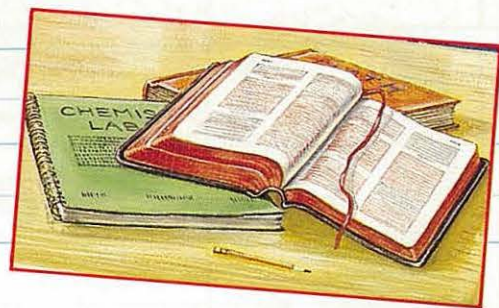
As well, a very few believe the government has no place in certifying teachers. Most Christian school boards, however, insist their teachers be certified by the government, so that the child's educational experience is recognized by the province.

### 3. SOCIALIZATION

Few will deny the impact of peers in any situation — and at no time does peer pressure seem to be as strong as in a person's early years. Educators recognize this. The true educative process may reside more in what a person learns from the growing relationships with fellow students of one's own age grouping than from the teachers and books in the classroom. Thus Christian parents will want as much of that influence as possible to be Christian.

**Public School:** Here the desirable exists





with the undesirable, the wheat with the chaff. Parents hope and pray their child will associate with the right crowd. But there's no guarantee. Choices are varied and compelling. Peer pressure is powerful enough to stifle Mom's and Dad's influence. That's why parents take a long, hard look at the friends coming home with their child or teenager; and they hope these friends will be a positive influence.

Yet, there's a certain gratification in watching one's child get along with non-Christian friends and continue to live the faith. What better semi-controlled setting is there in which to learn how to rub shoulders with the world and still serve Jesus?

**Christian School:** One would think that on the matter of socialization in Christian schools, a parent can relax. For here is a place surrounded by Christians — children of pastors, Christian leaders, church members. Parents are assured their child will profit from the positive peer pressure of kids eager to learn Scripture and biblical answers to life's questions.

Or will they? Maybe, as in the public system, there is some chaff in this crowd, too.

Moreover, how will they learn to interact with children who aren't Christians? Will they in fact be growing in isolation from the rest of the world? Will the school promote an elitist mentality rather than develop a Christian service orientation? (Or some kind of combination of both?)

These are important questions that have to be examined by each parent. But since parents tend to have strong control over private Christian schools, they have two obvious advantages over the public system. First, relationships have a defined biblical frame of reference: "love your neighbor as yourself." Second, if peer influence becomes too negative, changes are more easily and quickly implemented simply because the private school allows greater parental involvement.

Just because the school may be "Christian" doesn't insure positive peer pressure, but at least the biblical foundation is in place and corrective access is more readily available.

Said one parent, "A Christian school allows a child to remain a child a little

longer. He or she isn't as surrounded by the kind of promiscuous milieu forced so early on the life of a child in the public system."

#### 4. PHYSICAL FACILITIES

Our grandparents were happy with the one-room school house. Few physical resources were available, but no one seemed to mind. Education was viewed primarily as the learning of the "three Rs." A few went on to university but most went to the farm or into employment where they would learn "on the job." Today that scenario from yesteryear is gone forever. Now there are what social scientists call expectations: If there aren't adequate facilities or programs, parents and students call out for their rights. So how can a private school compete with the tax-funded and fully equipped public school?

##### Public School:

It's obvious the public system is way ahead. Town or city planners automatically plan for schools in the drafting stages of municipal development. Annual taxes are designated inevitably to ensure the finest of materials and facilities. One would think on these grounds alone the public system would win.

And it's true. The public school does have the edge by a long shot. Computers, the sign of latest technology, perch atop school desks. Athletic fields cater to a variety of sports. Occasionally one finds Olympic-size swimming pools on high school grounds, serving aquatic sports. This is not even to mention the latest equipment and instruction in the various fields of: science, the arts, sports, home economics, shop and technical studies — all designed to facilitate educational development.

##### Christian School:

Private schools surprise a lot of educational experts. Although it's obvious their location, facilities and equipment usually cannot match those of the public, there seems to be little evident loss in the student who chooses the private over the public. Though the private school may produce fewer professional hockey players, by concentrating on academic areas

there can be above-average scholastic achievement in the private school.

But there are obvious setbacks. There is a problem with not being able to provide the child with a truly rich, varied and balanced program due to lack of facilities. Regarding actual teaching facilities, there can be a real space problem, as when the school has to share its space with a church. The thought of "tearing down" the classroom for evening or weekend nonschool activities can stifle a teacher's set-up of learning centres in rooms and frustrate her/his innovative approaches to the physical environment that stimulate learning.

Moreover, due to lack of funds, many grades are split and taught by a single teacher, so that time has to be divided among the two or three grades in one room. As a consequence, there's often less time for sufficient individual tutoring in difficult areas.

#### COST

After all arguments have faded, one concern may narrow the choice for many: the high cost of private, Christian schools.

They are costly. Many of them have to operate without either provincial or municipal grants. And if there is no congregation to subsidize the school, parents must foot the entire bill. Tuition fees (typically \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year for the first child enrolled) in private schools pay most of the operating costs. Yet these parents must also pay municipal school taxes that support the public schools. Thus the parents pay two separate taxes for education. In some provinces the government will pay an accredited Christian school all or a percentage of the provincial allotment.

For many parents, however, (whether or not the province underwrites some of private school expenses) the cost issue doesn't seem to be critical. The *Faith Today* survey shows that family income usually isn't a major factor in the decision as to whether the children will attend a private or public school.

#### Putting it all together

Many wish for a simple formula. But after all the pros and cons have been listed, the parents still have to decide what is best for



## Provincial Arrangements in School Choices

Source: John W. Friesen, Ph.D., Department of Education, University of Calgary.

Province	Is a separate school system permitted?	Do they allow private schools?	Is there direct funding for private schools?	Are there other benefits?	Special arrangements
British Columbia	no	yes	yes	\$500 grant per pupil (in 1979)	private schools may have their own inspectors.
Alberta	yes	yes	Up to 75% of public costs for Category I		Minister of Education may inspect schools
Saskatchewan	yes	yes	yes	may charge fees for students from public systems.	subject to provincial inspection.
Manitoba	no	yes	yes	free textbooks, and shared services with public, e.g. transportation.	public boards may enter into tuition agreements.
Ontario	yes	yes	no	free curriculum materials.	secondary private schools may ask for inspection to become accredited.
Quebec	yes	yes, five types: general, vocational, handicapped, self-improvement, correspondence	yes	private school body may meet with Minister periodically.	provincial inspection required.
New Brunswick	no	yes	only for handicapped	Private schools must be fully independent, financially	
Nova Scotia	no	yes	no	private schools may buy materials through public offices wholesale	
Prince Edward Island	no	not really	no	Students allowed use of free textbooks while attending a private school.	Students need special permission from the Minister to attend other than public schools.
Newfoundland	yes	yes	yes, but only if they are the only school available to the community.	If conditions are met, private schools may be granted operational funding.	private schools are subject to provincial approval and inspection.

### Making a Choice, cont.

the family and the child.

The question again returns to "What's the best school for *Johnny ... or Karen ... or Joshua ... or Lisa*." It's a matter of matching the individual person — with his or her own unique needs, strengths and weaknesses — to the school that will best meet those needs. (See pg. 31 for practical suggestions).

One parent said: "For each child it's different. If I'd put my son in public school, he never would have made it. He needed a Christian school. But my daughter would have done just fine at the public school."

A father added: "Christian schools were completely out of the question because of my child's learning disability. Christian schools just couldn't provide the special kind of help she needs."

It's up to you to know both your child and the options available. Contact the agencies listed in this section of *Faith Today*. They are ready to help you. ♣

— with Kenneth Badley, Assistant Professor of General Studies, Canadian Bible College, Regina.

## What about Homeschooling?

**A** growing option for some Christian parents is "homeschooling," that is, teaching children at home rather than at a public or private school. They view the home as a healthier setting for nurture, education and socialization when they are in charge.

The homeschooling movement includes participants from a variety of ideologies and commitments, not necessarily Christian, who share the belief that parents are ultimately responsible for education. Because of this variety and loose-knit structure, it's difficult to estimate how many are involved.

Several provinces in Canada have home education organizations. The Ontario Homeschoolers' Association estimates that in that province approximately 500 children are taught at home by their parents. There is a Canadian Alliance of Homeschoolers, but most parent-

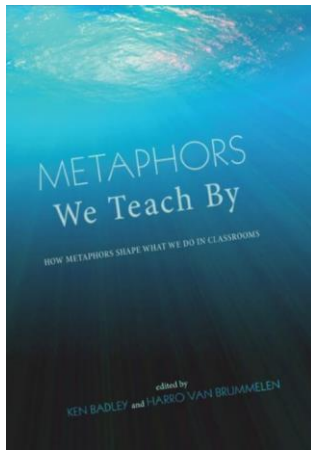
educators aren't formally associated. It is assumed, however, that Christians make up the majority of home educators.

Educational researcher Dr. Raymond Moore is a strong supporter of homeschooling and delaying formal instruction. His research team suggests that children aren't ready for formal education until at least eight or ten years of age.

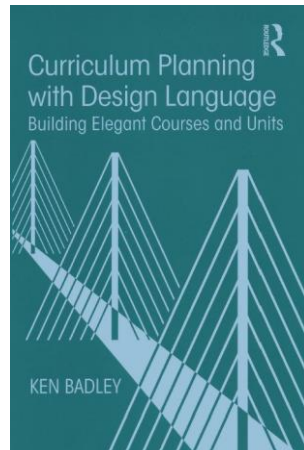
Home educators believe that home-educated children "outdo" publicly educated children. Brenda Babich, a homeschool teacher and M.Ed. student in moral education at the University of Regina, says the primary reason parents teach at home is that they've "discovered the joys of living and learning with their children. They've decided that for them, home-style teaching is a wonderful way to fulfill their responsibility not only to their children, but also to church and society."



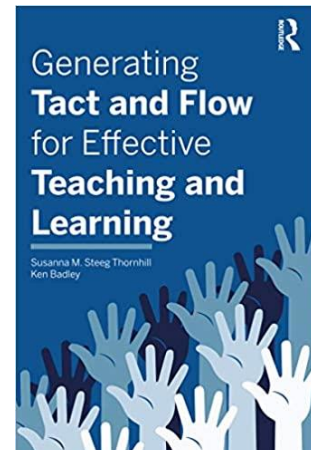
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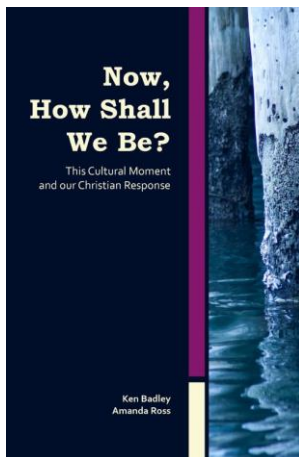
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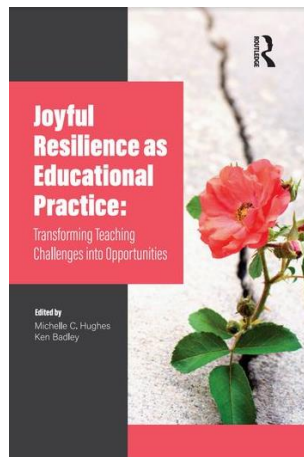
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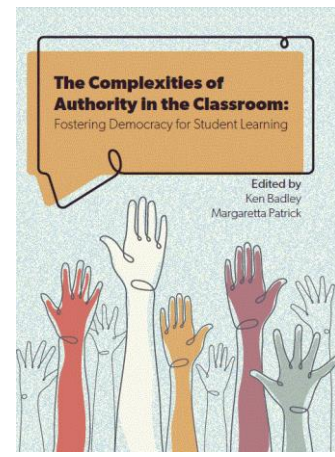
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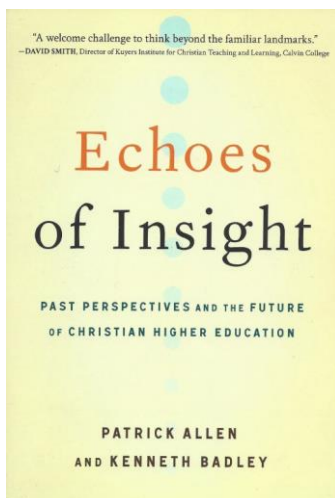


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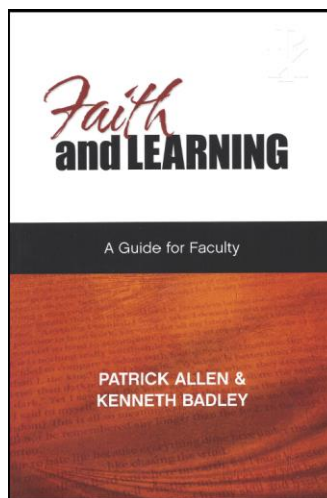


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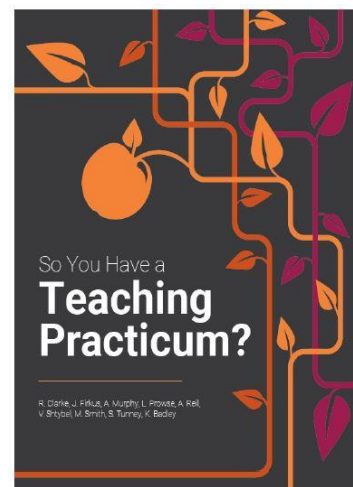


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