1998

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Recommended Citation

Badley, Ken; Belcher, Christina; Crick, Ruth Deakin; Hanson, Kathleen; Hull, John; Pederson, Carsten Hjorth; Roodnick, Brian; and Sandsmark, Signe, "Identifying Christian Schools: How do you tell when you've found one?" (1998). *Faculty Publications - College of Education*. 132.
https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/132

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Identifying Christian Schools: How do you tell when you've found one?

Eight writers from six countries in three continents and a range of Christian traditions discuss what it is that makes a school Christian. They discuss the aspects of schooling to which judgements are applied of whether and to what extent a school may be said to be Christian and the criteria by which such judgements may be made.

Introduction (by Ken Badley)

In January, 1996, Signe Sandsmark presented to those attending the Stapleford House conference, *Towards a Christian Theory of Education*, her understanding of Luther's idea of the two kingdoms and how that idea applies to education.¹ In an aside, she made reference to 'vaguely Christian schools'. Her reference sparked a whole chain of questions:

- (i) Is there a continuum of schools from anti- or non-Christian on one end to intensely and thoroughly Christian on the other?
- (ii) What aspects of a school does one examine when judging whether it is Christian or how Christian it is?
- (iii) To what criteria does one refer when judging an aspect of a school?

These questions have been put to a number of Christian educationalists who have contributed their responses in the conversation that follows.

1. Christian Schools: A Continuum or a Starburst

Is it possible or useful to develop some kind of continuum on which we could place all schools making some claim to be Christian?

1.1 Ken Badley

My task is to launch a discussion of the first of the three questions: Is there a continuum? If there is a continuum, what are the appropriate labels to represent the

1 Signe Sandsmark, 'Is Faith the Purpose of Christian Education?' in *Journal of Education & Christian Belief* 1:1 (Spring 1997), pp. 25-32.

various degrees of Christian-ness about the schools? While this first discussion is the briefest of the three (aspects and criteria being central questions and the usefulness of a continuum being only a kind of preliminary question) it is nevertheless an interesting question. Perhaps the human tendency to organise and classify drives all three of these discussions; certainly it drives this first one.

Answering 'yes' to the continuum question would imply that one could take the two labels I used above, push them to the ends of a continuum, insert several intermediate words between them and, presto!, derive a sort of scale for measuring the Christian-ess of a school:

- ❑ Anti-/non-Christian
- ❑ vaguely Christian
- ❑ moderately Christian
- ❑ authentically Christian
- ❑ intensely Christian

The first difficulty with this continuum is that different people have different connotations for all the descriptors we might want to place in front of the word 'Christian'. If I wanted to use 'quite', for example, should I place it to the left or the right of 'moderately'? Does 'nominally Christian' go to the left or the right of 'vaguely Christian'? On the right-hand end of the continuum, where do 'authentically Christian', 'explicitly Christian' and 'deeply Christian' fit in relation to each other and to the 'intensely Christian' that already appears there?

One could simply prescribe the place of each term on the scale, but then one risks losing others in the conversation. These semantic difficulties will not resolve themselves by simple declaration. For the moment, I want to suggest that the idea of a continuum is doomed, as useful as it might be for classifying schools.

Still, if one could get wide agreement on what aspects to examine and criteria to use, one might be in a position to claim that a continuum serves appropriately to classify Christian schools. But for the time being, what I want to call a starburst seems more appropriate. Christian schools are, as we say in Canada, 'all over the map'. I think it will be genuinely difficult for people in this conversation to agree on what aspects to consider and what criteria to use for making our judgements.

That difficulty leaves me wondering why we seem so confident that we can justifiably label one school 'authentically Christian' and another only 'vaguely Christian'. Perhaps we all do have a list of aspects and criteria buried in a subconscious pocket somewhere. Readers of this journal may say that some schools are more Christian, if we may use the word in this way, than others. If I am right that we could never agree with each other on a common set of terms, perhaps we are actually working on the basis of our intuitions.

1.2 Signe Sandmark

I agree that a continuum is too simple. We need something more complex to come to grips with the Christian-ness of a school. Certainly, the discussion of aspects in Section Two illustrates this need. A starburst may do, but if we want something more systematic, maybe we could use a matrix? One dimension would be the aspects (curriculum, teachers, admission policy, etc.), the other the degree to which each of these aspects makes the school Christian. Would we then need some kind of weighting of the aspects before we could find the sum total? This seems a bit too mathematical for me, but if we want something like a continuum, I

think this is better.

'Authentically' is an interesting adjective on Ken Badley's continuum; to me it differs from all the others. 'Non-', 'vaguely', 'moderately' and 'intensely' all seem to say something about the amount of Christianity we find in the school, they are quantitative. But 'authentically' says something about the quality, about how genuine the Christian-ness is. For example, a school might have collective worship every day and, because of this, be said to be *very* Christian. However, what went on in worship might not be filled with Christian life and be said not to be genuine worship and the school would then not be *genuinely* Christian. I think we have to distinguish between formal aspects (timetabled worship, RE lessons, rules, *etc.*) and the actual Christian life that fills the school, the extent to which God is seen to be a living reality there.

'Intensely' is to me a slightly negative word, and the appearance of it on the continuum sparks the question: can a school become too Christian? This is a question of how we define 'Christian', but I think there is a danger of overdoing it, either formally by putting too much Bible teaching, worship, *etc.* on the timetable, or by turning any and every topic into a topic about God. An example would be having Bible quotations spread out in all textbooks in completely irrelevant places. This way of 'christianising' the subjects and the school is, however, not Christian. Physics and history are both about God's creation and do not need a context of preaching or evangelising to be Christian.

1.3 Brian Roodnick

	Hostile	Anti-/non-	'Neutral	Vaguely	Moderately	Joyfully	<i>etc.</i>
Love							
Worship							
Curriculum							
Worldview/ Statement of Faith							
Outreach/ Christian service							
Sports Philosophy and Practice							
Administra- tion							
Discipline							
<i>etc.</i>							

Any attempt to evaluate the Christian-ness of a school is probably going to be a simplification. To reduce a complex community down to one word requires a focus that will exclude or minimise the impact of certain aspects of the community. Given that this focus will also be tainted by the viewer's preconceptions and

biases, the task can seem overwhelming. Despite this, it seems that people do in fact make these judgements and so there is probably value in trying to identify the elements that make up an effective evaluation of: 'How Christian is my school?'

I think that Signe Sandsmark's idea of a matrix has value. A single level continuum will probably allow too many unidentified intuitive judgements to penetrate the evaluation. A starburst has the joy of allowing individual schools to achieve a fuller expression, but also allows a complex variety of aspects to cloud the evaluation process. I would like to suggest that a simplified matrix would be more helpful. Each row of the matrix could be used to evaluate an aspect of the school.²

The advantage of this model is that it allows one to identify the strengths and weaknesses of any particular school, rather than classifying all of them on one continuum and thereby possibly minimising an important aspect of the school. A difficulty to be aware of is that the aspects do overlap and flow into one another, making clear distinction difficult (worship is a lifestyle and has implications for both Christian service and worldview).

1.4 John Hull

If the challenge is pegging schools that claim to be Christian on a continuum, then the main difficulty is not in finding the best set of descriptors that mark the gradations from one pole to another, but rather in distinguishing between faith as God's gift and faith as a human heart response to God. There is something integral to the meaning of 'Christian' that defies any attempt at shading or sorting the people or things it signifies. Even though Jesus differentiated between those of little and those of great faith, we should not assume that the designation 'Christian' can be obtained by degrees, or is maintained by a particular level of performance. The gospel truth states that faith is a gift from God. All disciples of Christ lay claim to the title 'Christian' by virtue of their faith status: saved by the death of Jesus. We must never lose sight of the fact that in the history of the church there is but one faith.

To be sure, there are many traditions of this faith: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, *etc.* Clearly, these traditions interpret and express the Christian faith differently. However, to suggest that the people and institutions of one tradition are more or less Christian than those of another misrepresents Jesus's gospel of freedom from the law.

Having said this, I think we can legitimately compare the respective educational visions and accomplishments of Christian schools both within and across traditional boundaries. We can speak, for example, of smaller-to-larger visions and more-to-less consistent results.

A vision of Christian education must, first of all, clarify the relationship between faith and learning. Educational visions range from those that draw a small circle for faith-learning integration to others that encompass everything. For example, at the small end of the spectrum faith may only impact individual attitudes toward learning. Gradually, the area of faith integration is enlarged to include school atmosphere, moral character development, foundational perspectives and, finally, worldview.

2 With reference to the heading of the third column, can a school be neutral? I think not.

By itself, a continuum based on the size of a Christian school's educational vision is not a sufficient test for quality. Educational visions reflect the best intentions of a school community, but these intentions are rarely realised. In addition to establishing a continuum that gauges the intended impact of faith, we need to determine the extent to which actual practice reflects these intentions.

In a best case scenario, the gap between 'what is' and 'what ought to be' represents a challenge. Schools with a 'gap-challenge' are on the right track; they simply have yet to arrive at their intended destinations. However, many schools face a 'gap-problem' instead. A gap-problem occurs when the distance between the 'ought' and the 'is' is so great that practice mirrors an 'operative vision' which is not the same as the 'espoused vision'. Gap-problems often go undetected because the rhetoric of (the espoused) vision is substituted for actual faith-learning integration.

I would go so far as to say that educational visions and 'ought-is gaps' appear in combinations which either add to or take away from the effectiveness of schools which claim to be Christian. However, nowhere along this continuum does the Christian status of these schools hang in the balance.

2. Christian Schools: Relevant Aspects to Judge

The question: what are the relevant aspects of schools to consider in granting or withholding the honorific title 'Christian' or judging to what degree a school is Christian?

2.1 Signe Sandmark

I would claim that the most important aspect to ask about if we want to judge how Christian a school is, is the faith of the staff. Christianity is not a theory, it is lived life, a personal relationship between God and individuals. For a school to be Christian, this relationship must be real, and it must be visible. So the staff members' closeness to God is most relevant for a school's being Christian. Whether it is necessary that all staff be Christians, or only a certain proportion, might be questioned.

Teachers should not only be Christians, they should also be good teachers. Evaluating the 'Christian-ness' of a school, we must look at how professional the teachers are, at the extent to which they know their subject(s), and at their ability to teach in a way that helps and encourages the pupils to learn and develop as persons.

Apart from the teachers and other staff, the most relevant aspect to tell us how Christian a school is, is its ultimate aim or purpose. A Christian school cannot have just any aim for its work, *e.g.* it cannot aim at 'producing' people who see a good job and a high salary as the purpose of life. The aim must – in theory and in practice – be in line with a biblical understanding of the good life.

Another aspect to examine is the teaching of Christianity, both whether it is taught or not, and whether it is taught as the Truth, explicitly or implicitly. Martin Luther regarded the teaching of the Bible as that which made a school Christian, although other schools too might be based on a Christian view of life.

What about the curriculum in general, can it tell us anything about a school's 'Christian-ness'? Yes and no. The curriculum can be judged as to how useful it is in helping the pupils to fulfil God's purpose for their lives. But I would argue that subjects, topics, and textbooks in themselves cannot tell us anything about how

Christian a school is. To know that a textbook about occultism is used, for instance, does not mean anything until I know how it is used.

Several other things may contribute to making a school Christian, but I would regard them as less important than the first four aspects. I am thinking here of assessment methods, teaching methods, organisation, administrative routines, and so on. As long as they help the school to move towards its purpose, and people are treated in a Christian way, none are more Christian than others. The same goes for the physical plant and equipment, the art and the architecture. I would also include formal worship in this category; it is not a must. Whether there is formal – by which I mean organised or timetabled – worship or not says very little about how Christian the school is.

Finally, I consider two aspects irrelevant. I would argue that who owns or governs a school does not in itself make it more or less Christian. The same is true, I would claim, about admission policies. Whether the school is for Christians only or open to children of all faiths and worldviews, is not a relevant aspect in our judging it Christian or not.

2.2 Carsten Hjorth Pedersen

First, I would not give the faith of the staff top priority. I say this because in Denmark, over the last twenty years, we have repeated this over and again as being nearly the only thing that matters. The problem is that you can be a good and committed Christian teacher without being able to link faith and school subjects in a right way. Among teachers in Christian schools you would find some who are more guided by Christian tradition than by the Bible. Also, sometimes links that should have been there are left out, for instance the link between the New Testament's strong judgement of materialism and our own 'Christian' version of the same materialism.

Signe Sandmark's second point I would change or elaborate by trying to define what characterises 'a good teacher'. To me, the good teacher is primarily the one who brings the pupils into contact with the good and constructive parts of reality and who excludes (or guards against) the evil and destructive parts. Since St. Paul, Christians have always distinguished God's self-revelation in nature – 'general revelation' – and God's self-revelation in Christ and Scripture – 'special revelation'. The two main areas within which the Christian school works, and which it also transmits, are thus the created world (nature and culture) and the Christian revelation. The first area is primarily attended to in the so-called secular subjects, the other one primarily in the teaching of Christianity, but they also overlap and interact. The Norwegian theologian, O. Oeystese, says: 'A school is a Christian school to the extent it gives the pupils the possibility to understand themselves and the world around them within a Christian understanding of reality'.³

Therefore, thirdly, a Christian school will characteristically preach the Word of God; we do not only speak about the Word, but we let the Word speak to and address the pupils. Such proclamation must take place in a Christian school, be-

3 Oeystese, O., 'Hva er en kristen skole?' in *Foreldrerett og friskolekamp. Festskrift til rektor Hans Bovim* (Oslo: Lunde Forlag, 1985), p. 57.

cause this Word, which is the school's basis and norm, will be proclaimed. Participation in sessions where the Word is proclaimed and the pupils take part in worship must be voluntary. The Danish theologian, S.L. Hvas, writes: 'All upbringing and education are humanistic because the human being is its starting point and goal. Here the Christian and non-Christian school are in the same situation. The important difference is whether the school is open to the tension that is revealed in the encounter with the gospel'.⁴ I do not completely agree with him but he has an important point.

The school's basis and purpose (in practice more than what is formally written down) are also relevant:

- *Basis*: A Christian school is bound to Christianity's normative basis, the Bible. The Bible is therefore the basis and centre for the school's everyday work. The Bible as God's faithful Word is the critical norm to which nothing in the school – ideally – ought to be opposed.
- *Purpose*: A Christian school wants Christianity's aim for life to be the school's aim for the pupils: a life in faith and service for God and our neighbour.

So, to summarise, (1) a Christian school has the Bible, the Word of God, as basis for its work; (2) the purpose of the school is a life in faith and service for God and neighbour; (3) the content is certain parts of the created, fallen, and redeemed reality; (4) upbringing and education in a Christian school should happen within a Christian understanding of reality, which gives room for contrasts; (5) in a Christian school, the Word of God is preached for the pupils; and (6) the administration and staff in a Christian school should be committed Christians.

2.3 John Hull

A school may rightly be judged Christian when it offers a 'Christian education' – this is not to be confused with 'Christians educating' or 'Christianity and education.' The delivery of a Christian education is impossible without Christian teachers and a Christian environment, but as significant as these are, something vital may still be missing – a vision that guides the integration of faith and learning. Without this vision, Christ-believing teachers cannot extricate themselves from the powerful grip of the Enlightenment worldview which limits the role of faith to an optional 'add on' in an otherwise science-driven endeavour. The lack of an integrating vision is the reason why many schools which employ Christian teachers – and in some cases, which also foster a caring, supportive spiritual atmosphere – do not offer a distinctively Christian education.

Carsten Hjorth Pedersen provides us with two helpful descriptors of Christian education in his second point. A Christian school should offer an education that teaches its students how to discern between good and evil and how to understand the world and their place in it. Statements like these begin to flesh out the distinctive purpose and perspective that characterises a Christian school education.

The fundamental aim of a Christian school will, as Signe Sandsmark states, redefine our priorities and the meaning of the 'good life'. A Christian philosophy of

4 Hvas, S. L., *Folkeskolens kristendomsundervisning - begrundelse og opgave* (København: Gyldendal, 1974), p. 67.

education also offers distinctive answers to our ultimate questions of educational concern, *e.g.*, What does it mean to be educated? What is worth knowing? Who is a good student? What is the purpose of education? How should students be evaluated? The answers to these primary questions impact the school in at least five key areas: school goals, school structure, curriculum, instruction and evaluation. In a Christian school faith must make an impact in these areas if the ideal is to be actualised – and it does not occur automatically when we have our theology straight.

Much can be learned from the public school innovation establishment which often represents the weaker Humanistic pole of Enlightenment thinking; through their futile efforts this century to break education loose from traditional formalism, a positivist form of inquiry and the factory model of schooling, Humanists have come to understand that even the so-called 'regularities' of schooling are upheld by values which obstruct those seeking educational alternatives. This discovery only affirms my contention that a school should be called Christian only when it consciously offers an alternative Christian education where faith is expected to transform our secular theory and practice.

3. Christian Schools: Criteria for Judging

The question: what criteria do we use with reference to the various aspects when we are deciding to give or withhold the honorific label 'Christian'?

3.1 Ruth Deakin Crick

This section is a daunting one, and one which I approach with considerable reluctance. Of course there are specific features of schools which can be defended as being distinctively Christian, and there are certain types of evidence, such as staff prayers, which may indicate an intention to be distinctively Christian. However I remember a particular paradoxical situation in which I was working with a committee member whose whole stance towards Christian work was concerned with judging whether or not the person, paper or action was doctrinally sound, according to certain rather sophisticated criteria, and his time and energy was taken up with judging who was within the kingdom of God and who was not. As a contrast I was also working with a psychotherapist, who was probably a Buddhist, and who believed that what was wrong with the world was alienation, what was needed was the power of Love, and that Love is a transcendent power. I have to admit believing that the psychotherapist was closer to the spirit of Christ and that transcendent power than was the sophisticated committee man, and that his actions produced more 'Christian results'. So when it comes to criteria for judging how Christian a school is, I feel deeply ambivalent.

However, I think there are some things that can be said. Signe Sandmark talks about the three most important aspects of the Christian school being the faith of the teachers, the quality of the teachers and the ultimate aims or purpose of the school. Actually, these three cohere to form the one feature that I would look for in making an assessment. They also cohere at a level which is difficult to define cognitively and they touch upon areas for which we have inadequate language – such as the whole idea of presence. My argument is this: if a group of teachers are deeply committed to Christ, participating in the canon of scripture as those for whom everything is at stake; if they are also very good teachers who are able to

grow in their task, reflecting on their practice intelligently and openly; and if they share an overarching aim for their practice to be moving in the direction of the kingdom of God in all its detail, then there will be a synergy, or a presence which makes it a deeply Christian school.

Beyond that, how can we judge? The gospels themselves are clothed in the culture of their time. Each school is located within a culture, and has particular local, national and global forces which influence it. The same group of teachers described above could produce very different practice in different circumstances and still be deeply Christian. Within a school we should look for features of the Reign of Christ – action against oppression in all its forms; people finding their identity and vocation; love which reconciles; a sense of connectedness or relationship both within the curriculum and ethos of the school; the celebration of critique; the mystery of knowledge, and the worship of God in Jesus Christ.

3.2 Christina Belcher

This section is a challenge. However, to respond, we need to consider the previous two questions as well.

Is it possible that we have difficulty in developing continua and criteria for Christian schools because we are not asking the right questions? Before we can discuss how Christian a school is, we need to reflect on why it exists. It is clear that public/state school systems were implemented to create a certain kind of public or state, fulfilling a certain futuristic 'manifesto'.

Does Christian education also need a driving vision to state what Christian schools should or should not be to society? Could we, as educationalists, living by faith in God, reflect education as something seen as distinctly different?

Brian Roodnick's matrix, which includes worldview, statement of faith, and outreach, introduces the idea of Christian education as a way of life, which is formative of a certain type of person. Signe Sandmark notes the importance of this as 'authenticity'. Carsten Hjorth Pedersen says that we need to link faith and school subjects in a 'right' way. John Hull states that Christian education needs a vision that guides (I would suggest not only guides, but drives) the integration of faith and learning. Ruth Deakin Crick speaks of the 'spirit of the kingdom' and its 'presence' in the spirit of a school.

How do you determine the spirit of a school as 'system', in order to redeem it over time? Does the spirit of Christian education need to be cleansed from that of system to one of redemption? If Christian education is meant to be a model of the Kingdom of God, and if we as God's people pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' then some creative folk may do well to consider what education designed by God would look like in criteria, aims and purposes, teachers and outcomes. What kind of a person (Kingdom product) do we find ten to twenty years after graduation? Does Christian education equip students to go forth to live out the kingdom principles of justice, faith, love, work, teachability, and reconciliation to the world, aiding pupils in fulfilling God's purpose for their lives?

All of the above demonstrate the absence of, and need for, a non-negotiable model of what is Christian education. This is modelled in the teaching style and content of Jesus. This should become the basis for this task. This lack of concrete model is what lies behind Ruth Deakin Crick's comment: 'When it comes to criteria for judging how Christian a school is, I feel deeply ambivalent'. That

saddens me, but I understand how she feels. However, we don't need more ambivalence. Her criteria for assessing the 'Kingdom of God' and her criteria for judging teachers both flow from her comment that culture and local, national, and global forces all influence a school. True, but we are called by God to influence culture and local, national, and global forces in which we may not be fully synergistic! (Romans 12:1,2)

Christian education should transform and change us as we remain teachable by the Spirit of God and become educational thinkers and shapers. We need to evaluate our own mentoring and criteria model for deciding independently and in community what makes a school Christian. When we have truly Christian education we won't need criteria for judging. Our students will become more like Jesus' model and change the world.

3.3 Kathleen Hanson

Realising the reign of God and nurturing children so that they might live the Christian faith with us, growing in belief, trust, and service to God and neighbour, these are the ultimate aims which guide the life of an authentically Christian school. When we reflect upon the depth of our aim, we easily recognise the difficulty. We are to know God, not merely know about God, to be just rather than simply discuss justice, and to love rather than merely to think loving thoughts. It is the knowledge of God, the exercise of justice, and the giving of love, which reflect the depth of the holiness to which we are called. These are among the marks that distinguish a [clearly] Christian school from a vaguely Christian school.

Perhaps, with this in view, we can begin to discern criteria which may be used in judging various aspects of Christian schooling.

There has long been among many Christian traditions the same assumption that right thinking would lead to right living. With that assumption in mind, criteria for judging the 'Christian-ness' of education would typically have been applied to the way the Christian story was told: Is the telling true to the Scripture? Is the story being communicated clearly and accurately? Are the other subject areas taught from a perspective that is shaped by the Christian story and vision? Is the faith being demonstrated in the life of the teacher?

However, if we recognise that faith is to be lived more deeply than the mind often allows and if we believe that the Christian story is to be deeply embodied our beings, we must extend our judgement to include the consistent experiences of school life which engage and deeply shape our inner selves, along with the motions of our lives, and which may or may not lead us or incline us to know God, to live justly, or to love one another.

Our experience must also be judged. There are, certainly, a multitude of experiences to be examined, yet I think that we may be able to discern a limited set of criteria that could be applied generally. Criteria should be used in judging both the way in which the story is experienced by students and the way in which it is told. In either case, however, the criteria should reflect the depth in which the Christian faith must be lived, encompassing human senses and emotion, understanding and intellect, judgement and decision, responsibility and action. The following are, I suggest, a beginning:

- *genuineness* – are we being honest [authentic? from the heart? transparent?]?
- *order and coherence* – are we, by the pattern of our expressions, worship

- (liturgy), and activities, routinely retelling the Christian story?
- ▣ *engagement* – are we involved and interacting with the story, the tradition, each other, and our own lives?
- ▣ *alertness* – are we being continually attentive and present to what is true and real?
- ▣ *insight* – are we increasingly understanding the truth and of the Christian story and vision?
- ▣ *openness* – are we making a place for critical reflection, correction, and change?
- ▣ *responsibility* – are we encouraging responsive action?
- ▣ *life* – we have not arrived, but are we growing?
- ▣ *communion* – are we loving one another, are we growing in Christ together?
- ▣ *faithfulness* – are we believing, trusting, becoming obedient to the truth?

3.4 Carston Hjorth Pedersen

We also need to look at this discussion of Christian schools from a theological perspective. Doing so implies looking at it within our various denominational frameworks. My own perspective is Lutheran, and I want to point to two theological claims that can help us and at the same time make it difficult for us to find an answer to what a Christian school is.

Only people can be Christian. Christian faith centrally involves a personal relationship to Jesus Christ, not anything external or institutional that we can point to. Therefore, strictly speaking, schools cannot be Christian. But we still need to specify some characteristics of a (so-called) Christian school. To do so is all right as long as we remember that these specifications never can define the centre of Christianity, which is personal and spiritual.

Christina Belcher asks: 'Does the spirit of the Christian school need to be cleansed from that of system to one of redemption?' My answer is: the spirit of the Christian school cannot be cleansed from that of system so that it becomes one of redemption. Redemption is for persons. Systems are for schools – and that sort of thing! Therefore, not even the most creative Christian person will 'consider what a school designed by God in heaven would look like in criteria, aims, ...'. God in heaven only 'designs' people, he has given us the task of designing (Christian) schools based on a few fixed points in his Word. Therefore I would claim that there is no need for 'a non-negotiable document of what Christian education is', simply because there is no such document, and because the documents we need, must be negotiable. I am worried that attempts to find The Solution in matters where the Bible has no one solution, will make us into Pharisees of sorts. Because, strictly speaking, it is only people who can be Christian, the preaching of the Gospel must be central in a Christian school. By God's Word and the sacraments – baptism and holy communion – people are born again and kept in the kingdom of God.

We must to a higher degree be aware of the presence of sin. This is necessary for a number of reasons:

- a) The danger of hypocrisy. Even the most obvious characteristics for a Christian school can be undermined by teachers and board-members who, perhaps unconsciously, pretend to have Christian faith.
- b) Realism. There are limits for how far we can get in our work on ourselves and our pupils. Even as Christians we are still sinners, and this will show in everyday life at school.

- c) Christian schools must therefore be able to tackle sin. According to Lutheran thinking, this happens in two ways: in the secular government by rationality, force, commands, and institutions, in the spiritual government by the Word and the Sacraments.

I want to include these theological reflections here, not only because I find them important, but also to show how our individual theological standpoint influences our educational thinking.

4. Conclusion (by Ken Badley)

I began this conversation almost two years ago by asking three questions sparked by a remark Signe Sandmark probably never intended to carry such weight. The questions were: (i) would a continuum help us think about Christian schools? (ii) when we want to judge how 'Christian' a school is, what aspects of its life do we examine? (iii) within those aspects, can we point to criteria?

As I noted in a short comment earlier, my idea about the usefulness of a continuum has been answered helpfully, albeit negatively; it will not serve us well.

Still, a naive question sparked an interesting discussion. One cannot read far into this conversation without noticing the rich differences among the participants' understandings of what 'Christian school' and even 'Christian' mean. Although I want to celebrate these differences rather than try to eradicate them, they certainly do affect the answers one gives to the questions I initially asked.

The discussion of aspects reveals how complex and perhaps difficult is the achievement of developing a Christian school. If I have followed the conversation correctly here, having all the right parts in place does not guarantee that I will have a Christian school. As Signe Sandmark put it, such schools do not occur automatically simply because we have our theology straight. Not only is this process complex. From this conversation, I also sense that the standard is high. But I like what these educators have said; I would like to see them all on a staff, creating the school they have talked about here! If anything, their challenge can come to us all as an encouragement to re-envision what Christian schools can be.

In the third discussion I get the same sense – that the participants in this conversation *do not agree with each other, but that their disagreement nevertheless enriches our thinking about Christian schools*. We exchanged ideas about criteria for making judgements about what aspects to examine in schools claiming to be Christian. One would not expect such an exchange to produce unanimity. But in failing to achieve agreement about what standards one might use, this conversation has again shown how the envisioning process produced fruit of its own. Some of the remarks in this third part of the discussion lead – in me at least – to a deep, kind of visceral 'Yes!' rising to expression. I want to be part of a school that reflects about schools in these ways, and that tries to achieve these goals.

Certainly, the conversation points to the need for further discussion. Perhaps some of the disagreements in this exchange do not warrant celebration; perhaps some of us need to sharpen our thinking. For some of us, that sharpening process has already begun by our participation here.

But the conversation also points to both the need and the benefit of standing back a few steps from our day-to-day work in schools and reflecting again on what we are there to do. Such reflection obviously might bring us up short about

counterproductive practices which have crept in. But it also brings before our vision again the ideals (or at least the kind of ideal-ising) toward which most schools were aimed at their founding, and most teachers were aimed when they were first called to the profession.

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Continuing the Discussion on the Web

Readers may join an ongoing discussion of the issues raised in this article on the web site of The Stapleford Centre. This can be found at <http://www.stapleford-centre.org>. On accessing the discussion from the *JEE&CB* page you will be asked to enter a usercode (use 'badley') and a password (use 'starburst'). Contributions to this discussion may be published in future issues of *JEE&CB*.

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