

Why Every Church Should Start a Christian School

by Joseph Backholm

There's a story about a man standing on a roof during a rising flood and praying for deliverance. In sequence, a rowboat, a powerboat, and a helicopter came by to offer help, but in each case he declines saying, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me."

The man dies and goes to heaven and upon arrival complains to God about why he wasn't rescued. God replies, "I sent a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

The United States Supreme Court, in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, recently said religious schools cannot be excluded from Montana's private school tax-credit program.¹ It may be the answer we've been praying for. Granted, the hand of God isn't always obvious in court cases involving tax-credits and the First Amendment, but let's take a closer look.

First, a little history.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

In the late nineteenth century, America wasn't just majority Christian, it was majority Protestant, so public schools were effectively Protestant schools. Prayer and Bible reading were common. While the culture was generally comfortable with religious education in public schools, not everyone appreciated the specific flavor of religious education that was present. Catholics didn't want their children receiving religious instruction from Protestant teachers, so they did the difficult work of starting Catholic schools. Many of those schools still exist today.



The Protestants were fine with Catholics starting their own schools, they just wanted to make sure Catholic schools didn't get any tax money designated for education. So they started a campaign to prevent that from happening.

The result was that 37 states placed language in their state constitutions prohibiting government funds from being used for "religious education." Since the Protestants were already providing religious education in public schools, they weren't actually concerned about religious education, they were concerned about Catholic education. But they couldn't say that. These anti-aid provisions became known as Blaine Amendments, in



honor of a U.S. Representative from Maine named James Blaine who nearly succeeded in amending the U.S. Constitution with anti-aid language. Thank God he failed.

In 1962, the Supreme Court said it was unconstitutional for teachers to lead their children in prayer in their classroom. That decision was a small part of a broader secularizing of schools and culture. Gradually, the secularists took the reins of public

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education that had long been held, culturally if not legally, by Christians. In this new world, the Blaine Amendment that had always been intended to create a religious monopoly in favor of those in power, served the purposes of the humanists rather than the Protestants.

However, the Protestants did not respond as the Catholics did to being outsiders. Despite losing control of the education provided in public schools, Protestant Christians sent their kids to the public schools anyway. Today, though 70 percent of Americans claim to

be Christians, 90 percent send their kids to public schools.² As it turns out, it has been having an impact, and it's not a good one.

THE SECULARIZATION OF THE CHURCH

America is becoming less religious and has been for a while. In just the last decade, the number of people claiming to be Christian has declined 12 percent—from 77 percent to 65 percent. Not only is America less Christian as a percentage, the total number of professing Christians has declined from 176 million in 2009 to 167 million in 2019, even as the population increased by 23 million.³

What should be more concerning to the church is the fact that those who claim to be Christian don't actually believe Christian things anymore. Research by George Barna estimates that only 17 percent of American Christians who consider their faith to be important and attend church regularly have a biblical worldview.⁴ Not only is America becoming less Christian, the church is as well. As the convictions of the church decline, the number of ex-Christians increases.

The fastest growing religious category in America is the “nones”—those who claim to have no religion at all. Over the last decade, the number of Protestants declined 15 percent and the number of Catholics declined 12 percent, while the “nones” grew 70 percent—from 12 percent of the population to 17 percent in 2019.⁵ That's an additional 30 million people who now claim no religious faith. Of those, 78 percent grew up in the church.⁶ The church is losing its own kids.

The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex, but some of it may not be that complex. Nearly 90 percent of children raised in Christian homes spend 30 to 35 hours a week in public schools typically run by people who do not espouse a biblical worldview. Thank God for school leaders who do. Still, the goal of many parents is to keep children in a secular educational environment for 12 years until they are deemed academically ready to

go to an institution of higher learning where the hostility to the faith of their parents is likely much more intense.

As a result, many children from Christian homes are immersed in a culture which teaches that male and female are social constructs, not biological realities. It teaches them that good people believe marriage is a relationship between loving committed people regardless of their gender, and they desperately want to be seen as good people. We've taught them to want that. They are taught that all sex is good sex as long as everyone consents, that abortion is an honorable choice, that people are a threat to the planet, capitalism is evil, profit is greed, creation didn't happen, and those who started our country should be subjects of scorn. Increasingly, they are taught that gratitude and forgiveness are tools of oppression while rage and bitterness are virtuous attempts to disrupt unjust power structures.



In an attempt to moderate the effects of what they're taught in schools, mom and dad will take their children to church on Sunday. If they're really serious, they'll take them to a youth group on Wednesday also, but even that is happening less frequently than it once was. According to Pew, only 62 percent of Christians—45 percent of Americans—attend church at least monthly.⁷ That number shrinks to 35 percent for millennials. Thirty-seven percent of self-identified Christians attend church somewhere between “never” and “a few times a year.”⁸

Year after year, Christian children soak up attitudes, perspectives, and loves from an environment that we hope—in the best-case scenario—is neutral toward their faith. Unfortunately, neutrality doesn't actually exist. When parents hope for neutrality, they are hoping that their child's educational environment will simply avoid any reference to faith rather than mock or ridicule it. If that's the best we can hope for, even the best-case scenario is bad. Teaching children knowledge of the world without reference to God simply communicates that God is not necessary to accurately understand the world—a foundational claim of secular humanism.

A biblical understanding of life is that nothing can be accurately understood without first having an accurate understanding of God. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...”⁹ “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.”¹⁰ If our hope is that our child's education will simply ignore God, we shouldn't be surprised when they form a view of the world that sees God as largely irrelevant.

To paraphrase Voddie Baucham, if we send our kids to be educated by Caesar, we have no right to be surprised if they act like Romans.

The church, of course, is aware that young people are leaving, and many church leaders

are humble enough to try to understand why. Sincere efforts at self-reflection have led to a variety of conclusions, often informed by surveys of those who have left. “We’re too hypocritical. We’re not relatable enough. We’re trying too hard to be relatable. We talk too much about politics. We don’t talk enough about social justice. We aren’t doing a good enough job answering hard questions. We’re too anti-science.”

Largely missing is an assessment of why kids who grew up in the church think worship styles or human hypocrisy have anything to do with whether Jesus is Lord of all. The Nehemiah Institute annually administers the PEERS test among high school students which seeks to identify a person’s worldview in five categories: Politics, Economics, Education, Religion, and Social Issues (PEERS). Each statement is framed to either agree or disagree with a biblical principle. Based on their responses, a student’s worldview is placed in one of four categories: Biblical Theism, Moderate Christian, Secular Humanism, or Socialism.

The 2015 test showed that 90 percent of students from Christian homes that attended public schools score in a range that indicates their views are grounded in basic tenets of secularism.¹¹

The problem of young people walking away from their faith is not fundamentally about music styles, skinny jeans, or hymnals. The problem is that the education and formation of Christian kids has been outsourced to people outside the church. As a result, they have learned to love the wrong things. The answer to that question can’t be fixed with a guitar, haircut, or new sermon series.

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This is why every church needs to start a Christian school. We don’t need to retreat from the world, we need to build the communities and institutions that allow the gospel to be the most significant influence on our children. We have to stop outsourcing education. Many Christian families send their children to public schools in the hope that they will be missionaries. To their credit, some students have done just that, but they are remarkable because they are the exception rather than the rule. On balance, the culture is doing a much better job of converting Christian kids than Christian kids are doing of converting their peers, and it isn’t close.

In fact, almost half of millennial Christians (47 percent) believe it is at least somewhat *wrong* to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in the hopes of converting them.¹² That would be “intolerant.”

On some level, we understand why Christian families send their kids to public schools. They don’t want their kids in an environment that will kill their souls, they just feel like they don’t have real options. Homeschooling is not possible for every family and private school is an additional expense.

Which brings us back to *Espinoza*.

In *Espinoza*, the Supreme Court said it is unconstitutional to exclude religious schools from school choice programs intended for private schools. In plain English, this means that vouchers and tax-credits can now be used to send kids to Christian schools. This is new.

For more than a century, state Blaine Amendments have forbidden this almost everywhere, but the Supreme Court said it's unconstitutional to exclude religious schools from these programs. The First Amendment does not forbid cooperation between governments, it requires the government to treat all religious organizations equally.

Today, 26 states have some form of voucher program, education savings accounts, individual tuition tax credits, scholarship tax credit programs, or special needs program that allow parents to use education dollars at private schools.¹³ Most are limited in scope and 24 states have no school choice options of any kind.

The United States spends over \$700 billion a year on education, or \$13,847 per student.¹⁴ The amount varies dramatically by state. New York spends over \$23,000 per student¹⁵ where Idaho spends the least at \$7,486 per student.¹⁶

Wherever you live, that money is now constitutionally free to be used by school programs to fund religious education as directed by the parents, but it won't happen automatically. Two things have to happen first.
State legislatures have to pass or expand school choice laws and churches need to start enough schools so that there are real, quality alternatives for Christian families.



The *Espinoza* decision does not move any child from a harmful school environment into an ideal one. It does, however, give us a green light to do so if we're willing to do the work. Here's what needs to happen.

1. CHURCHES MUST BEGIN WORKING WITH STATE ELECTED OFFICIALS TO CREATE OR EXPAND SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS.

While the Supreme Court opened the door for religious schools to take advantage of school choice programs, it is state legislatures that determine whether school choice programs exist. The reason school choice programs don't exist everywhere is because they have strong opposition from teachers unions. The open secret of education policy is that *the priority of the education system is not education. The priority of the education system is teacher employment.*

In every market, we understand that competition improves quality. It's true for technology, agriculture, health care, as well as education. The fact that Apple and Microsoft both exist

makes both of them better companies and provides us with better products.

Education is unique in its opposition to competition. Why? Money. Education policy is established by politicians who negotiate with teachers unions on things like teacher pay and benefits. In addition, teachers unions in nearly every state have convinced politicians to pass laws that require all teachers to give money to the teachers union in the form of

union dues. In California alone, the teachers union has 325,000 members that contribute \$1,000 per year to the union. This means the union brings in \$325,000,000 annually to “advocate” for teachers.



A significant part of their advocacy is political work. This means that unions take the money teachers had to give them and use it to help the politicians who forced the teachers to give the money to the union. In a different context this would be referred to as a kickback. The California Teachers

Association currently has five active political action committees that plan to spend \$35 million in the 2020 elections.¹⁷ That number does not include direct contributions that will be made to individual candidates.

Money not given to politicians or political campaigns is often spent trying to make life difficult for those who try to compete in the education market for education dollars. In 2019, the California Teachers Association spent \$1 million lobbying the California legislature to crack down on charter school programs.

In a nutshell, the architecture of public education operates this way. Politicians take tax dollars and give it to teachers who are legally obligated to give it to teachers unions who then use that money to help the politicians stay in power. Anything that threatens to take money out of this system is opposed, regardless of how good it might be for education. Private and charter schools are a threat to this system because they threaten to employ teachers who are not obligated to give money to teachers unions.

If there is ever a conflict between what is good for teachers and what is good for third graders, the teachers win every time. Third graders don't vote and third graders don't have any money.

None of this is to suggest that individual public school teachers are uninterested in the education of children. Most of them care very much and the vast majority are capable educators. Many are as frustrated by the teachers union's war on innovation as the parents are. Teachers are not the problem. The problem is a system that prioritizes the employment of teachers over the education of children. But in most places, that is the reality. As a result, any attempt to give parents the authority to direct the education of their kids will be met with strong opposition.

But it is absolutely a battle worth fighting because the stakes are nothing less than the souls of our children and the soul of our nation.

2. WE MUST START CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS.

If the church is going to prevent the next generation of Christian kids from falling away in the same way the last generation of Christian kids did, we have to create the infrastructure that will allow Christian kids to be formed in a different environment. We cannot offset 35 hours a week in a secular culture with 90 minutes on Sunday. The church must end the habit of outsourcing the education of kids and once again become the greatest influence in the lives of our children.

Not every church is big enough to sustain their own Christian school, but every church is big enough to be part of one. We need to build cathedrals again. Not literally, though that may not be a bad idea. We need to start building things we will never see completed. We need to dream generationally. We need to understand the world we are living in is not the world we were born into. If we want things to be different in the future than they are now, we have to behave differently than we have behaved in the past. If we want the next generation of Christian kids to love goodness, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and stand courageously against the cultural tide, we have to stop looking to Caesar to educate them. We have to do that ourselves. We have to.

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Real education is too hard and too important to deceive ourselves into believing it can be accomplished on Sunday morning and, maybe if we have time, Wednesday night. Our ambition needs to be much bigger than church attendance; we need to create an environment where Jesus can capture their hearts and become the object of their affections. Not simply their knowledge, their affections. For that to happen, they can't simply know about goodness, they have to absorb it. They should experience it through habits of prayer, song, and meditation that feed their souls. They should have front row seats to the way these habits change the lives of those around them as well. This is how they will learn to love the right things. But none of that will happen on accident.

Our desires are the window to our loves. Many Christian kids simply aren't around goodness enough to develop an appetite for it, so their heart is captured by weak imitations.



As C.S. Lewis wrote, "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

That's our problem and, with respect to our children, it's also our fault. We have delegated the formation of our children's hearts and failed to show them something aspirational to love. Even when we are the primary influences in their life, this is difficult. If we aren't, it's nearly impossible. But now we have options.

You can't make a school magically appear overnight. It takes a plan and people with the passion and knowledge to execute the plan. So, while you're getting to know your state legislators and organizing support for school choice programs, start a kindergarten. Make the hearts of those kindergarteners the object of your passion. The year after that, you start a first grade with a new class of kindergartners. Within a decade, maybe sooner, you have a real school. Of course, it doesn't guarantee the life-long discipleship of every child who attends, but there's no question that the odds will improve when the rhythm of their life is surrounded by people desiring goodness more than TikTok.

We're standing on the roof and the culture is drowning. We've prayed for an answer and something happened. God sends a global pandemic to completely disrupt the education system and then opened the door for the church to once again lead in the education of their children—and use tax dollars to boot.

Maybe you had a different solution in mind? One that required less effort? Keep praying, but it could be that the answer has already presented itself. This may be the time to start building cathedrals again. Otherwise, we run the risk of getting to the other side and hearing God say, “what more did you expect?”

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