



INSTITUTIONAL FAITHFULNESS AND THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

*Who are the patrons of the Christian school,
and what does that role mean?*

By Paul Brink

*I was walking down the street
When I thought I heard this voice say
“Say, ain’t we walking down the same street
together On the very same day?”
I said, “Hey Señorita that’s astute”
I said, “Why don’t we get together
And call ourselves an institute?”*

*You don’t feel you could love me
But I feel you could
You don’t feel you could love me
But I feel you could*
—Paul Simon, “Gumboots”

FROM WINTER
2013 EDITION:
[cardus.ca/
comment/
archives](http://cardus.ca/comment/archives)



Ask any Christian school board member. Talk to the secretary of your local Audubon Society chapter or youth soccer club. Maybe even your local political party organization. Ask them about their to-do lists, their worries, and the scarcity of their time. Here’s what you’ll find: institutions are hard work.

And if you talk to someone who has been doing that work for a while, you’ll discover that this work is getting harder.

Surprisingly, it’s not *creating* institutions that is so difficult. “Why don’t we get together and call ourselves an institute?” says Paul Simon to his newfound friend. The difficulty, as the señorita no doubt knows, is found in the maintaining, cultivating, and deepening of these creations. In a culture that highlights the entrepreneur, the innovator, the start-up, those who are the institutional caretakers, trustees, and patrons appear to play supporting roles at best. Part of the challenge may be natural: as we establish something new, there’s energy, novelty, and excitement. In contrast, maintaining our institutions is less

glamorous: preparing the annual report, cleaning the whiteboards, finding a way to balance the budget one more time.

own identity or nature apart from whatever we think of it, or that a church might possess an intrinsic authority and make

*As we establish something new, there's energy, novelty, and excitement.
In contrast, maintaining our institutions is less glamorous.*

But what makes the work of institution-care so difficult actually goes deeper than the fading of novelty. The liberal ideological commitment that dominates societies such as the United States and Canada is famous for its preoccupation with the dignity and the status of individual persons, especially against authority. This preoccupation has had tremendous consequences for society: the overthrow of tyranny, the rise of capitalism, the articulation of human rights, the establishment of democracy. But for *institutions*, the idea that individuals are autonomous (*auto nomos*, “self-law”) has had more troubling implications.

For one thing, institutions such as churches, schools, families, and governments are often what individuals define themselves *against*. That doesn't help. But probably more importantly, in a liberal era, institutions are understood as collections of individuals freely associating or contracting with each other toward some purpose that they themselves have chosen. Of course, institutions still exist in the liberal era—liberal individuals can arrange themselves in any number of combinations—but the idea that a school might have its

legitimate claims on persons and other institutions, has been seriously weakened. Rather, institutions are defined precisely as the sum of their parts—not less, certainly not more.

An important result is that institutions today, especially many that are close to the Christian heart, face significant pressures that challenge their ability to thrive, and in some cases, their ability to survive. As bottom lines become increasingly stark, and as institutions face threats to their institutional autonomy, their room to maneuver becomes more and more restricted. Meanwhile, in our personal interactions with institutions, even with those we care about, we discover our experience to be somehow “flattened.” We need our institutions to live fully as humans; institutions need people to tend and sustain them. Yet, more and more, we find ourselves reduced to bearing identities as consumers or donors, as spectators or performers, and as customers or workers. This is the language and logic of the liberal marketplace, and it's inadequate to understand or describe what we mean by church membership, for example, or our participation in the PTA, or the 4-H club, or the community soccer

league. The result is ironic: even in our institutional lives, in the very places where we should be most able to express our sociality, we discover ourselves to be almost entirely alone.

RE-IMAGINING CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Christian schools face these challenges in particularly profound ways. Indeed, these institutions are currently engaged in what Emily Rose Gum (see the Fall 2013 issue of *Comment*) might describe as a process of institutional [re-] imagination. It would take many books to describe the trends in family life and in educational practices that have made this reimagining process necessary: sociologists, philosophers, and theorists of all stripes could find much grist for many mills here. What I find striking, however, is how widespread, how typical, how accepted, these trends seem to be, despite the very great questions they pose to Christian schools, particularly with respect to the roles played by parents with regard to how schools are run.

Many Christian schools, often labelled, misleadingly, as “private” schools, can be better described as Christian community schools, where governing authority is established in a “society” of members that elects a Board, which in turn hires teachers, one of whom is Principal. Parents thus are involved in the schools as tuition-paying parents of children receiving instruction, but also as society members charged with the task of providing

Christian education within the community. The question that schools are facing is whether this model can be maintained in the face of the pressures and societal trends arrayed against it.

Some of these trends concern changes in family structure and family lifestyle. There can be little doubt that many parents experience their Christian school primarily through the lens of “customer” simply because they have little time for any commitment greater than that. The rise of dual income families, as well as the growing numbers of single-parent families, has had dramatic impacts on parental involvement in Christian schools. And for institutions that for decades depended on hundreds of hours of labour provided by parent volunteers, this has had drastic consequences. Indeed, in some cases, this reality alone is what has made tuition increases necessary, as additional staff is hired to perform tasks once performed by members, parents, and volunteers.

Also implicated in the changing role of parents in Christian schools is a related phenomenon: the growing professionalization of the field of education. More than a concern that teachers be properly credentialed, this emphasis on professionalization refers to the growing significance of education experts and professional managers of education. Their appearance may be entirely appropriate: there can be little doubt that the overall quality of education has improved, and non-traditional learners in particular have benefitted from



deeper consideration of pedagogical approaches and strategies. Yet the result can be a reduced role for parents and other non-experts in schools, and a further narrowing of personal engagement with the institution. For schools established by and dependent upon communities of “non-experts,” the result can be tragic, as the institution becomes distanced from the very people who created it and are charged with its care.

Curiously, it is sometimes the teachers themselves who find themselves among the non-experts. Teachers have long complained about distant office-bound bureaucrats in the ministry or department of education who make decisions concerning classrooms and curricula that can have significant (and often negative) implications for instruction. But even within schools, there is a notable trend toward sharper distinctions between the roles of school managers and the roles of teachers. Sometimes this is described as the introduction of a business management model into schools. That account may or may not be accurate, but the development is certainly important, with consequences both for authority structures and for collegiality. Broadly speaking, the responsibility of teachers in curriculum design and in school governance has decreased, while the role of the Principal in these areas has increased.

These trends have profound consequences for governance, particularly in community-held and community-run Christian

schools. Older models are fading, in favour of more corporate arrangements, where a Board (perhaps un-elected) hires a Principal as a Chief Operating Officer, who in turn hires and fires teachers. Authority relationships change as the Principal becomes the primary conduit between parents and the Board, and even between teachers and the Board. Meanwhile, the link between “members” (including parents) and the school suffers. Indeed, some schools have dispensed with the notion of society membership altogether.

The discussion of these trends and their consequences is partial and incomplete. In particular, it is difficult to determine causation: Which of these phenomena is a response to which other? But even this rough sketch allows us to ask interesting questions about institutional life. For instance, given the reality of changes in family support and in the field of education generally, what options do schools really have as they seek to care for their institutions? How should we be appropriately critical of our own responses to these trends, even those responses that seem most “common-sense”? What should those of us who love institutions do?

WORLDVIEWS, ARTICULATED AND EMBEDDED

Here’s my suggestion—or at least, the beginning of a suggestion. We need to recover—or discover—a means of

holistic institutional thinking that will overcome our current dualistic thinking about institutions.

Any Christian school that is worth its salt today has done a great deal of thinking about the matter of “Christian worldview.” For education in a Christian school to be genuinely Christian, deliberate attention needs to be paid to the integration of faith and learning, to what it means to teach from a biblical perspective, to the relation of faith and science, and to a host of similar topics. Indeed, one of the great strengths of Christian schools is that they are in an important sense, “worldview incubators”—places where the nuts and bolts of worldview thinking is worked out in the greatest detail. Christian schools are places where some of the most basic worldview work has been located. Not coincidentally, they are also the places where some of the very best worldview work has been done.

But if we note the challenge posed by liberalism, described above, we will recall that Christian schools are found within a liberal social context that has difficulty accounting for institutions *as* institutions, both theoretically and practically. In such a situation, Christian schools face the challenge that however deliberately they may think about the worldview they pursue in our educational efforts, the school itself is found within a pattern or context of institutional thinking that is almost impossible to escape. Sander Griffieon has described these patterns as “embedded worldviews”—patterns of life, that, while

not rising to the level of personal commitments, appear within social life as little-questioned or barely articulated assumptions, but exert powerful effects upon beliefs and behaviours, perhaps even without our knowledge or consent.

We might describe this as a new form of dualism. Earlier forms too easily divided human life into “Christian” and “secular” worlds, confining the gospel message to only certain areas of life. In contrast, a genuinely biblical worldview rejects such a separation, claiming rather that all areas of life are created by God, fallen from his purpose, but redeemed through the work of Christ. We experience the new dualism, in contrast, in the very attempt to protect the institutional space where worldview thinking has flourished. Even as we work out the details of the integration of faith and learning, even as we describe to each other the intricacies of a Christian worldview, when we face the challenges of caring for the institutions dedicated to those worldviews, the logic of the embedded worldview of liberal society requires us to dissociate, to accept institutional strategies not our own, to practice one worldview within, and another without. We are curricular holists, but institutional dualists.

The result of this dualism is similar to that of other dualisms Christians have known: disjunction, conflict, and irony. One irony is that the most “successful” Christian schools may actually be those who manage this dualism the most effectively. This doesn’t mean that these schools have been

appropriately critical of these trends, or of their own responses to them. Indeed, they may not even be aware of their situation. A school that successfully transitions from the older community-held structure to the modern liberal structure may be able to continue its mission effectively and professionally, but still has lost something vital to the nature of a Christian school. The point is that even the structures of our institutions are not neutral, and that to accept the modern “common-sense” design of institutional governance is very likely to accept the contours of an embedded worldview bent on maximizing individual autonomy at the expense of other authorities.

CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS AS STRANGERS IN THE LAND

What is to be done? These questions demand engagement by faithful worldview-bearers and culture-shapers. The good news is that simply in the asking we make progress toward the answers. In asking the right questions—good old-fashioned consciousness-raising—we become aware of the challenge of faithful institutional soul-care, even if we don’t quite know how to go about accomplishing it. This is the first step in becoming a patron of Christian institutions.

Becoming aware of the dilemma also helps us to dig deeper into our notions of worldview. One of the challenges we face as contemporary Christian worldview-thinkers is precisely that liberal society resists the embedding of other perspectives on reality:

while we may develop sophisticated theoretical accounts of our Christian worldview, the challenge of *actually living life* on that basis, of *actually developing* those theoretical accounts into lifestyles, into patterns of life, remains very great. In other words, we find it easier to develop our theories than to live them out. Patronage requires recognizing that worldviews must move beyond theoretical frameworks to genuine patterns of life.

For board members, for teachers, for families, for children, all who meet each other in this place called the Christian school, there is this institutional challenge: seeking to remain faithful to Christ, not only in the curriculum, not only in the integration of faith and learning, but also within the institution as institution. While acting in support of our mission, while “capturing every thought for Christ,” we need to be constantly surprising each other in our roles as members of one body, reminding each other that institutions should enrich how we see each other and how we treat each other, and not reduce these things.

I can recall a telephone call I received when I was in twelfth grade at my local Christian high school. My *elementary school* principal was calling: Might I be willing to serve as a judge for the local Christian school drama festival? From my perspective, the call came rather out of nowhere; I had done some theatre, but I didn’t think I had any particular or special expertise that qualified me to be a “judge.” Looking back, I can see that probably most jarring for me—and most formative—was the change in

perspective my principal was offering me, for it challenged how I thought of my school, and ultimately how I thought of my place within the community. I was being offered a new role: not as a learner, not as the school's *object* (so to speak), but rather as a contributor, as a *subject*.

This is an example of how institutions and individuals can care for each other. Invitations such as these allow us to pursue in our pattern of life a Christian care for institutions that, however incomplete or fragmentary, provides an alternative to the view that would reduce us to the mere positions assigned to us by liberal accounts. We must insist on the possibility of playing

other roles, and, somehow, we must be willing to take on that role when the evening phone call comes. Our concern for institutional faithfulness needs to be expressed not only by parents, teachers, and principals—but also by grandparents, by graduates, by pastors, by Christian citizens, by *patrons*. Dissenting from the logic of the age while continuing to respond to the challenge it presents is where we can find our institutional hope. Acknowledging our dualist situations, recognizing that even in our institutional life we must remain in the world, though not of it—that, finally, is how we make our way through the challenge of navigating our institutional lives. □



PAUL BRINK is Professor of Political Science at Gordon College, in Wenham, Massachusetts. He teaches in political theory and comparative politics and is currently researching the role of religious argument in political discussion, particularly in pluralist situations. His daughters, Erin and Annika, attend North Shore Christian School in Lynn, Massachusetts, where he also serves on the school board.