

CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING MAKES A DIFFERENCE IF...

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSH McDOWELL

The following interview with Josh McDowell by Derek Keenan took place in June 2004.

Over your years of acquaintance with the Christian schooling movement in this country, what changes are you seeing that are positive, and do you have concerns?

The positive I see is that the quality of Christian schools is going up, specifically over the last 8 to 10 years. They have further to go. Second, I see a greater emphasis on worldview. When the school has a foundation like that, it is so much easier to integrate truth into all the curriculum. Without a biblical worldview, you can't get it done. Right now, probably as high as 90 percent of born-again Christian kids do not have a biblical worldview. Only 9 percent of Christian adults do. The emphasis on worldview has been encouraging. It's nowhere near where it needs to be, but the quality of the Bible teaching is improving. And it really needs to improve.

One of my biggest gripes about Christian schools has been the quality of their Bible teaching. They'd bring in a part-time person or a homemaker; or the pastor would do it for free. That is sad. To me, the number one course for quality instruction taught should be Bible and Christian worldview.

Another plus factor is that more and more pastors are seeing the value of Christian schools. Pastors used to want kids to be "salt and light" in the secular schools. I'm

not sure if that's really biblically correct. I told my own daughter—you've got the rest of your life to be salt and light, but you don't have the rest of your life to learn in a Christian school.

The negatives I see are tied in with the positive. There's not enough teaching of the worldview in a solid, healthy way. The other is that the mentality of many

Christian schools is still too secular. They use the world's curriculum. It's so subtle that a lot of teachers don't even see it. Even in math, the illustrations they use all reflect a secular mind-set. What I think is happening is that there's too much shallowness in the teaching in Christian schools. It is clear that ACSI is trying to change this.

What are the particular elements of school culture that almost invariably influence young people to live for Christ?

Relationships—and that's probably one of the weaknesses in Christian schools. Even secular education doesn't seem to value training teachers and administrators on how to build relationships. The need for relationships is probably more true now in the postmodern culture, but it's always been true biblically.

There's a study that was done by Dartmouth Medical School and the YMCA USA—secular groups. They concluded that from the moment children are born, their brain is biologically and physically (not emotionally) wired for relationships. One, you must build what they



call living, intimate connections with children, or the children will walk away from your values and truth. You must build a relationship with them. Second, you must model that very truth for them. Talk about the secular telling the church, the pastor, the youth pastor, the elders, Christian teachers, and the schools—we had better start building relationships!

You see, for adults—even most teachers nowadays—truth is discovered; it's objective. For almost all young Christians, truth is created by them as they go. It's their personal perspective or opinion. This is where the phrase "It's true for you, but it's not true for me" comes from.

For most adults, we believe if it's true it will work. That's how we process. But for our youth, the ones right in our Christian schools, if it works, it's true. Kids today don't begin intellectually; they filter it through their emotions. Their relationships define the experience. Even if the pastor preaches it, if it doesn't work, it's not truth. This is why teachers must build those relationships—because kids process through experience. Unless teachers build the relationships that model living the truth, they will fail as Christian teachers.

It is said that conformity walks the halls of many Christian schools. Do you make the distinction of when conformity is helpful and when it is not?

This is where without the concrete worldview foundation you can't stop young people from becoming secularized. This is what my book *Beyond Belief* is about. Unless genuine Christian living is modeled by teachers and administrators, I don't think you can stop secularization. The biggest problem the schools have addressing the dress code and sex issues with kids is the parents. As soon as the school sets a clear standard, a parent will come in, and the other parents will agree: "Oh, you're being too hard on them."

Affluence is a real issue when parents can afford anything they want to give their kids. It's as if parents see limits as negative—even Christian parents who should agree with biblical limits. If the school or a teacher limits students, parents' first response is that the school or teacher or headmaster is wrong. Kids learn that there are no consequences. In some schools, because of who certain kids are, this stuff is allowed to go on.

So you talk about conformity, but how do you tell children conformity is wrong when their parents are con-

forming? I'll tell you this from parenting—a school ought to become so good that it has people waiting in line to get in and the school can mandate parent-training seminars for parents. Mandate them! If the Christian schools don't move toward that, they'll never have the impact they should.

Many pastors, parachurch ministry leaders, and churches are not supporters of Christian schooling. What are your insights into this phenomenon?

Pastors need to answer the question, biblically answer it, Why are you not on board in support of Christian schooling? The ultimate educating of children is to help them grow into the image of God.

Many people, for major reasons, have their kids go to secular schools. Some families just can't afford Christian schooling. For some years, my wife and I couldn't have our kids in Christian schools. We stayed very involved whether our kids were in Christian or public schools.

You have spoken a great deal about the power of the pop-media culture and its full acceptance by a great many Christian kids. What do you see as an effective strategy that will carry the Christian voice back to these kids?

Pop culture isn't that much different from what it has been for the last 30 years. It's more prevalent and accessible through the computer and television. You've got text messaging, downloading, PDAs, smart phones—everything like that. But it's not so much that there's more of it. It's become more anti-Christian.

If two or three things don't take place, I don't care what you do, things won't change. One, unless Christian schools work with parents to build loving intimate relationships and connections with kids, we will fail to counteract pop culture because it's not the truth that's going to turn them around; it's relationships. In my book, I call parents to consider that their kids need a mom, a dad they would die for—their heroes they worship.

Second, there has to be a context of Christian worldview. If you do not have an ingrained Christian worldview, you sound stupid addressing kids. The pop culture, no matter what aspect of it, will backfire on you if you don't come from a genuine Christian perspective. You can talk until you're red in the face, but it won't do much

good. So it comes back to what we've said—the relationship with the parents and a consistent Christian worldview.

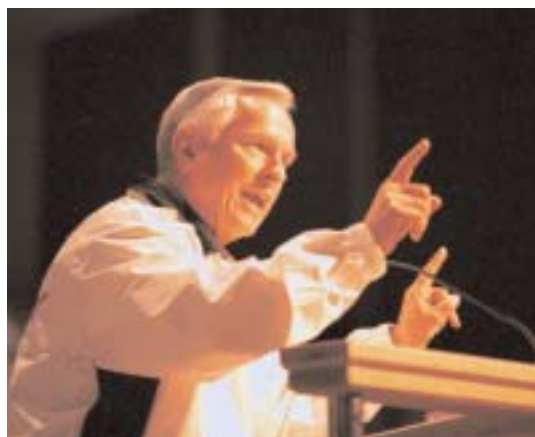
Do you think in regard to worldview development that we need to get teachers talking less and students talking more, especially as students get to the middle and high school?

There has always been a need for that, but this is where you need that right content and teaching, or you can't do it. Right now I wouldn't know where to point you to, but there must be some people out there who know about it, right in the Christian school—especially some of the younger teachers coming up. The problem with the older teachers is that many of them are obsolete in their approach. It breaks my heart to say that. If teachers teach the way they did 10 years ago, they'll fail. And most of them are still using the same lesson plans they did 10 years ago. Young Christian school teachers have said, "The curriculum they give us is obsolete. It's no good. It's all totally linear."

A number of Christian thinkers, writers, and commentators—yourself included—are apparently convinced that there is a fairly short window of time available to the North American culture before the evangelical influence is virtually extinguished. Is this your view, and how would you like to comment on it?

If the Christian school doesn't do it, I don't think it will be done. I don't think the church will take the lead and do it. But I look at the Christian school as part of the church, too. Secular education is *so secular*, it's no longer nonbiblical or unbiblical—it's antibiblical. It's not post-Christian; it's anti-Christian. Children coming up all the way through school, in secular schools and then going to secular universities—few of them will truly become orthodox, biblical models and leaders and influencers because they will be so ingrained in the secular mind-set. This would not have been true 20 years ago, 15 years ago, but it is now. If the Christian schools can really get their act together, and I think they can with the leadership they have, our future leaders will come out of the Christian school and home school movements.

We have a window. I hope it's ten years, but I'll tell you this, unless something happens, we won't take the



culture away or defeat its influence on our kids, and we might not turn the church around either.

Speak, if you would, as you often do at ACSI events, to Christian school teachers and administrators and put before them what you believe is the importance of what they are doing day in and out that will affect the eternal future of these children. Encapsulate a message to Christian school teachers.

Teaching has to be more than a job. It has to be a calling. And the first calling of teachers is not to education. Their first calling is to conform to the image of Christ and live out His life; then they have the second calling of being a teacher. Third, they must be what they want their students to become—with a clear conscience—in their marriages, in their families, with their own children. Then teachers have got to get good training. They need to go beyond their regular level of expertise and knowledge.

Then I would say to the Christian schools, "If you don't do it, who will? If you don't do it with the parents—and they're not doing it—they probably won't. If you don't do it with the parents, nobody is going to." Why do I say that? Research shows that the number one goal of kids is no longer knowledge of the Scripture but knowledge for knowledge's sake. Schools have to develop a program for and with parents because what you really want students to learn and become will happen only when parents and schools are on the same side. Schools and parents must be trained and equipped to work together in giving our children a biblically based Christian worldview education. That is what students must have, and we as parents and Christian schools should be giving it to them.