

The Accreditation Trap

Selecting a sound Christian school for their children is a major decision for many godly parents. How do they know they are making the correct choice from an array of competing institutions? They are not educators. They are not trained in educational methodology or philosophy. Often they do not feel qualified to really assess an institution and substantiate its claims. At times like that, an issue like accreditation can appear to be a life preserver. It can confirm the educational excellence of the institution they are considering and allow them to make the choice on other parameters that they feel competent to judge, such as special programs, friendships, commuting distance, cost, etc. Or can it? Just what is accreditation and what does it mean?

The concept of accreditation is very simple; the devil, as usual, is in the details. Accreditation simply means that some agency has evaluated an educational institution and has, according to a predetermined set of standards, determined that it is worthy of their stamp of approval. The question of course immediately becomes, "whose" accreditation, and "by what standard?" In other words, how do we accredit the accreditation process? Christian parents especially need to give this some thought. They have rejected the public schools and determined that they want a Christian education for their children. That is, and think about this carefully, they have rejected a system of fully accredited public schools staffed with fully certified teachers. Obviously, accreditation is not enough. The question becomes whose accreditation.

Frequently, the accreditation that is desired is accreditation by the state. That is because it is "official." The state accredits not just schools, but professions, such as doctors, and who would consider going to an unaccredited "doctor" if such a practice was even legal? The idea is that if the state approves the institution it must be academically qualified, and then we can just add the fact that it is "Christian" and, voila, we have a "Christian school." Actually, what we then have is a "baptized" public school. Think about it! The state has an unscriptural educational philosophy. The state has an unscriptural educational methodology. The state has an unscriptural anthropology; their view of a child and its mind and spiritual state. The state has a set of unscriptural standards and then measures institutions to see if they conform and measure up. That Christian schools could seek such accreditation and that Christian parents could value such accreditation is a real conundrum.

Historically, state accreditation has been a real trap for Christian institutions, especially, as this has frequently meant sending their teachers or professors to study in state schools, to earn their academic credentials. This is at the heart of teacher certification by the state. Teachers must go to a state teacher's college to learn their educational philosophy and methodology. To the state it matters less if the teacher is competent in their field of study than that they be indoctrinated in the educational philosophy of the state. Most private schools, colleges, and seminaries in the United States started off as Christian institutions, frequently with church support. Over the years they have morphed into private secular institutions scarcely distinguishable from state run institutions. A key part of that process has generally been seeking state accreditation. Princeton Seminary, the flagship Presbyterian seminary in the nineteenth century, is a good example.

To appear "accredited" in the eyes of the world Princeton encouraged their professors to seek advanced degrees in accredited secular institutions, even if they were dominated by unbelief. To conform with this requirement such a renowned professor and Presbyterian stalwart as Benjamin Warfield studied at a German university, a veritable citadel of unbelief, higher criticism, and theological liberalism. Although he retained his Christian faith throughout the experience, and many do not, he brought back a lot of baggage. He introduced textual criticism to Princeton, overthrowing the historic Reformation view of the Scriptures. He adopted the methodology of higher criticism and used "higher criticism" in his defense of the Bible. Essentially he said that the Bible must be treated like any other book. It must be independently verified by objective standards such as secular history, archeology, and science, and if verified and found to be reliable, then we can believe it. This is like telling God we will believe the Mosaic account of creation in Genesis only if we can verify it by science. If science supports creationism, then we will believe that; if it supports evolution, we will believe that. The higher standard of science will sit in judgment on God's word. The Apostle Paul had a better position; he stated, "By faith we believe that the worlds were framed by the word of God." Warfield wound up believing theistic evolution and accepting the feminist position of women holding office in the church. Like I said, he brought back a lot of baggage. Accreditation can have its price. The state will get its pound of flesh.

Of course all accreditation is not by the state. There are many private professional organizations that provide accreditation services. But the principle is the same. There has to be a set of standards by which the

institution seeking accreditation will be judged and to which it is expected to conform. Only to the degree that these standards are scriptural will the accreditation process in some measure certify that the school is indeed "Christian." And that leaves Christian parents with the same dilemma. They still need to ascertain what accreditation by any specific organization really means. Add to that the historic fact that as various Christian denominations fall away from the faith and succumb to the spirit of the age, the internal rot generally starts in the church's educational institutions, its colleges and seminaries, which is where theological termites love to burrow in and do their destructive work, and you can see that even Christian accreditation services have to be thoroughly vetted to determine what their accreditation signifies. Just as one cannot blindly accept the ministry and teachings of any church that calls itself Christian, neither can one accept all accreditations by any organization calling itself Christian. That there are accreditations that reflect an institution's genuine commitment to and conformity to Scriptural educational standards may well be true. However, it also true that the significance of a particular accreditation may not be readily apparent and simply ascertained. Parents still need to do their due diligence.

What are parents then to do? Well, let us turn to the scriptures and see how it handles the issue of accreditation. Let's examine how the Apostle Paul sought to provide accreditation for his ministry. New Testament Christianity was a new religion, radically different from all pagan religions, and Paul was a late comer as an apostle, and a former persecutor of the faith. He had a lot of opposition, including dealing with false teachers, false apostles, and even forged letters purporting to be from him, to say nothing of persecution by the authorities. When his apostolic authority was challenged, how did he respond? Unlike the other apostles who were fishermen or former tax gatherers, Paul had an accreditation he could have appealed to. He had a theological degree. He had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the great rabbinical teacher. However, Paul scorned to appeal to his "Judaic" accreditation. He saw no value at all in being accredited by unbelievers. Here is what he said on that score...

2Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! ³For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, ⁴though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a

*Pharisee; ⁶concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. ⁷But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in Him. **Philippians 3:2-9***

Rather, when challenged there was another kind of accreditation that Paul appealed to...

*¹Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? ²Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: **2 Corinthians 3:1-2***

Rather than appeal to his attainments according to the flesh that an unbelieving world might place credence in, there was another kind of accreditation that Paul appealed to. Paul appealed to his product. He appealed to the fruits of his ministry. He appealed to the transforming power of his ministry of the gospel. As he told the Corinthians...

*⁹Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, ¹⁰Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. **1 Corinthians 6:9-11***

Paul knew that a false gospel, a gospel without the grace of God and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, could not match these kind of results. Former idolaters, enmeshed in the licentious culture of a pagan world, had been radically changed by his ministry. That was his accreditation. And that is a good place for Christian parents to start when evaluating and doing their own accreditation of a local Christian school. Check out the product. What kind of students is the school graduating? Is that what you want your children to be like, by the grace of God, when they graduate?

Ultimately, the only real accreditation that a Christian school can have is the quality of the students that they graduate. What kind of a spiritual and academic impact is the school having on the students? Is the Lord blessing

the ministry of this school and prospering the means of grace that it uses to instruct the children in its care in the knowledge of the Lord and of his word and how it applies to a sinful world? Ultimately, the blessing of God on the ministry of the school is all that really matters and everything else is secondary. Now it is true that the Lord blesses the means that he has appointed. And accreditation by a consistent set of Scriptural standards can ascertain if the Biblical means are being employed. However, if McArthur can say that, "In war there is no substitute for victory," then we can say that "In a Christian school there is no substitute for well trained, godly graduates." That is the ultimate accreditation. We have Paul's inspired word on that.