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## Academic Accreditation: Quality or Compromise?

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# FUNDAMENTALISM TODAY



by Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson

**T**he rise of Fundamentalist Christian involvement in education is one of the unique phenomena of our time. The numbers of Christian day schools and schools of higher education make this obvious. A study of the explosive growth of the modern Christian day school movement reveals that in 1954-55, 123 Christian schools in the United States had a combined enrollment of 12,187 students. Today, over 20,000 Christian day schools flourish in America and several new ones come into existence every day! These schools are staffed by 125,000 teachers and enroll over two million students. In addition some 200,000 college and graduate students now study in Christian institutions of higher education.

## Quality Christian Education?

The contemporary (or current) Christian school movement is distinctively religious in orientation and dedicated to quality education. It is marked by parent participation, zealous teachers and administrators, grass-roots enthusiasm, and community support. Parents appreciate the Christian schools' safe, academically sound, spiritually oriented atmospheres as a responsible alternative to the public schools.

Demands and expectations of Christian parents for quality education must be met by these Christian institutions. In their initial fervor to establish a Christian school, parents and churches alike often make great sacrifices. Church families expect a superior education for their investment. However, in schools often characterized by lower teachers' salaries and limited facilities, the question emerges: Do students really get quality education?

## The Controversy over Accreditation

In the quest for quality, many Christian schools are considering state and regional accreditation. Believing that Christian education is superior, they suggest there is no need to fear public evaluation and scrutiny of the schools. Others argue that a Christian institution should not submit to secular evaluation. The extremely volatile issue of accreditation has even become an issue of spiritual integrity. Bob Jones III, in a recent article in *Faith for the Family* (April 1983), stated that "accreditation is intolerable" and that "it is impossible for a school to obey the Lord and be a member of a regional accrediting association." Others argue that standardization is harmful to a school's intellectual life and positively

## Academic Accreditation: Quality or Compromise?

fatal to its spiritual life!

Those defending accreditation quickly point out that submission to the accreditation process is voluntary; one can withdraw from it at any point. Kenneth E. Young, past president of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, has defined the purpose of voluntary accreditation: "To encourage and assist institutions in the evaluation and improvement of their educational quality and to publicly acknowledge those institutions that meet or exceed commonly agreed-to minimum expectations of educational quality" (COPA 1980, p.5). The purpose of accreditation is to ensure that a school actually provides what it claims to provide, as stated in its publications.

## Objections to Accreditation

1. "It will cause us to drift into Liberalism." This is the most frequently raised objection to the whole issue of accreditation. Too often it is assumed that submission to evaluation by a secular agency will automatically force a school to capitulate to theological Liberalism. This is a grossly naive oversimplification. Liberalism results from internal deterioration, not external pressure. This nation's earliest Christian schools (Harvard, Yale, etc.) drifted into Liberalism long before accrediting associations ever existed! Accrediting associations do not ask Christian schools to change their doctrinal statements, only to substantiate that their institutions are consistent with their statements.

2. "Why should a Christian school accept licensure from a secular organization?" Frequently this question provokes argument on the separation of church and state issue. However, ministers accept a license to operate a motor vehicle. Churches accept licenses to run buses or to construct a building and, in some cases, to erect a sign. Such a license represents standards to ensure quality and to protect the general public against unsuspected abuses. Accreditation assures students and parents that standards of academic quality have been met in order to protect them from fraudulent or incompetent operators. In addressing this issue, Christian educator Elmer Towns has observed, "Just as a license to build a building does not determine what goes on in that building, nor a license to erect a sign on a church property determine the message on the sign, so accreditation does not dictate the content of what is taught in the classrooms."

3. "Why should we seek the approval of an inferior system?"

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Assuming any Christian education to be superior to any and all secular education, some have objected to accreditation on the basis that a secular agency cannot properly evaluate the quality of Christian education. A leading Fundamentalist preacher has insisted that "superiority should not seek accreditation from inferiority." When this preacher was asked why he refused to let his schools be accredited, he replied, "For the same reason that Mickey Mantle didn't seek accreditation from the Little Leagues!"

A statement by Towns responds, "In actuality, accreditation assures that a baseball game is in fact a baseball game!" The real issue is whether Christian schools are in fact educating young people.

4. "Accreditation will force us to change our rules of student behavior and conduct." This is totally erroneous. Accrediting agencies do not insist on changing student regulations. They insist only that all such rules and regulations be in accordance with the stated philosophy and purpose of the institution. This unfounded paranoia may be provoked in part by the fact that some schools really do have a problem justifying some of their rules as a legitimate expression of their stated purpose. Accrediting agencies make no demands about student dress codes, hair length, music styles, movie and theater attendance, and so forth. They merely require that schools clearly state their rules in print before students enroll.

5. "Accreditation will force us to hire teachers with accredited secular degrees." The standards of accreditation do demand an institutional commitment to the hiring and retention of competent faculty, whose degrees support the area of their instruction. While they also demand that a high percentage of these degrees be from accredited institutions, they never dictate which institutions or who is selected to teach. To assume that a Christian teacher who holds a degree from a secular institution is automatically "contaminated" by Liberalism and Secularism is ludicrous and unfair. On this basis, the apostle Paul (a graduate of the "University of Tarsus") would have been considered suspect in many Christian schools. What made the difference in Paul's life was Christ, not what school he attended.

#### Advantages of Accreditation

1. *Professional Competence.* Contemporary technical society demands professional standards as entry-level requirements in the public job market. An accredited degree is usually considered the minimum for acceptance into these professions. This is one reason we have so few Christian doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and so on. Those schools whose commitment involves training Christians to enter, influence, and evangelize the public professions must meet these standards. To avoid accreditation is to isolate Christians from this sector of society. Some Christian schools exist only for the training of full-time Christian workers and therefore may choose to not seek accreditation. However, Christian schools that offer degrees in the liberal arts and professions, but refuse accreditation, may be doing a great disservice to their graduates who expect the degrees to have a certain value in the pursuit of a chosen career.

2. *Testimony of Excellence.* If we really believe that Christian education is superior we have no reason to hide from public scrutiny and evaluation. Christian schools that claim

they could be accredited, but have simply chosen not to, should offer alternative data to substantiate their claims to educational competence. Failure to do so implies to some that their objections to accreditation may be simply a smoke screen for academic incompetence. An accredited degree in itself does not necessarily guarantee success, yet it does present a testimony of excellence to the general public.

3. *Commitment to Improvement.* The nature of the accrediting process requires that an institution continue periodic evaluation. These self-studies guarantee that such an institution is committed to continual improvement. Earl Mills, executive director of the Transnational Association of Christian Schools (TRACS) states: "Peer evaluation helps establish a communication network that will assist developing institutions reach their full potential." Periodic reviews and reports prevent academic stagnation. Constructive self-criticism is essential in maintaining the vitality of our schools.

4. *Institutional Integrity.* The Christian school movement has often been criticized for a lack of institutional integrity in regard to faculty standards and salaries, financial and business policies, physical facilities, and so forth. Accreditation requires that adequate standards be met in all these areas. Accredited schools must treat their faculties with respect and their students with dignity. Such schools follow established accounting and business principles in the management of their fiscal resources. They also provide safe and adequate facilities commensurate with their educational purposes.

#### Conclusion

Those Christian schools that have both rejected accreditation and insisted that all other "truly" Christian schools do the same have in essence become their own "accrediting agencies," dictating a list of approved standards acceptable only to themselves. They have a tendency to become intoxicated with intolerance toward any who deviate from their list of standards, schools, textbooks, and student regulations. Such extremism can only lead to eventual isolationism.

However, there are also many fine Christian schools that have chosen not to be accredited or state approved and have not attempted to dictate their convictions to other Christian schools. We must always recognize and defend their right to do so. Such schools often establish alternative methods (such as standardized testing) to demonstrate their academic competence. Those schools that choose not to be accredited have every constitutional right to do so.

The Christian school movement is faced with two options: to seek or to refuse accreditation. Those seeking accreditation become more numerous all the time. Every day Christian schools become accredited without denying their faith and practice. On the other hand, we must defend the right of those schools that have chosen not to seek accreditation. Accredited schools must guard against the tendency to consider unaccredited schools as academically inferior. Conversely, unaccredited schools should guard against the tendency to speculate that all accredited schools are compromising with Secularism and Liberalism. In our widely diverse society there is certainly a place and definitely a need for both. □

## Accreditation: A Promise?

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