



## **How Christians Think**

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## How Christians Think

Every Christian who has faithfully carried out the Great Commission, publicly identifying himself as a Christian and presenting the gospel to the lost, has come across the idea, whether stated or implied, that Christianity is an intellectually inferior position and that Christians are thus either naïve or stupid. By extension, then, Christian schools are academically inferior to secular schools, and Christian textbooks are academically inferior to secular ones.

In 2005 the University of California decided to reject all high school biology credits that involved the use of Christian biology textbooks. The justification for this decision was that students who used those textbooks would not be prepared for science coursework in the UC system.<sup>1</sup> In highly publicized works, several “new atheists” have charged Christianity (and indeed, all religious faith) with being not only intellectually inferior but also a positive danger to human society.<sup>2</sup>

So what are we to make of all this? Is Christianity intellectually inferior? And more specifically, are Christian textbooks academically inferior simply by virtue of the fact that they are Christian?

### The Scandal of the Cross

We have to begin with the clear biblical teaching that Christianity will never achieve intellectual respectability in the eyes of the world. The Scripture itself acknowledges that unapologetically. To the intellectuals of Paul’s day, whether Jewish or Greek, the gospel made no sense (1 Cor. 1:18). The Jews were repulsed by the idea of a Messiah who died a cursed death, and Greeks, who valued complex sophistry,

saw no respectability in a plain and simple gospel message (v. 23). Thus, we should not be surprised when modern intellectuals object to the “immorality” of the vicarious atonement<sup>3</sup> or the “ignorance” of young-earth creationism. There is an intellectual blindness in the unregenerate heart (2 Cor. 4:3–4) that cannot and will not understand the mind of God (1 Cor 2:14).<sup>4</sup> To some degree, then, the world views Christian thought and writing in any form as intellectually from the other side of the tracks. We are “those people,” and the world will welcome us no more than they welcomed the One we serve (Matt. 10:24–25; 1 John 3:13).

Christians need to guard themselves against the desire to overcome this scandal and be accepted by the world on its own terms. There are generally two reasons why Christians desire the world’s approval: pride and the fear of man. Pride, of course, is a root sin; it was apparently the sin behind Satan’s fall (Ezek. 28:17) and Eve’s as well (Gen. 3:6). It is among the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20), and its opposite, humility, is one of the characteristics of Christ that we are especially urged to emulate (Phil. 2:5–8). Our natural inclination is to exalt ourselves, to desire to be admired and accepted. This inclination remains with us even after Christ redeems us, but we need to recognize it as part of the old man, not the new man, and we need, by the gracious power of the Spirit, to value not our own exaltation, but Christ’s.

We also find ourselves afflicted by the fear of man. This is not a recent development in history; fear of man is at least as old as Cain (Gen. 4:14), and it was a constant barrier to Israel’s success in Canaan, from the initial survey of the land from Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13:21–29) throughout the extended campaign under Joshua more than 40 years later. Either directly or through His prophets Moses and Joshua, God repeatedly warned Israel not to be afraid of their human enemies (e.g., Deut. 20:3, 31:6, Joshua 8:1, 10:25). In our day we find that we

<sup>1</sup> Several Christian schools in California sued the University, charging that the decision constituted religious discrimination. On August 8, 2008, the trial judge issued a summary judgment for the University. On appeal (January 12, 2010) the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed (<http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/memo-randa/2010/01/12/08-56320.pdf>) the earlier summary judgment, and on October 12, 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case, thereby leaving the University’s policy in place and unassailable.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner / Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 1–3; Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 39–49; and Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2007), 1–6.

<sup>3</sup> See, as just one example, <http://www.skepticsannotated-bible.com/rom/5.html#9>.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the unregenerate are always wrong or are fundamentally incapable of logical thought. The image of God, which is the basis for reason and the recognition of truth, continues since Adam’s fall in all humans, even unregenerate ones (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). Secular authors can write really good books.

care more what the world thinks about us than what God thinks about us; we fear the visible more than the invisible. In doing so, we demonstrate that we are still directed by the flesh more than the Spirit, and we demonstrate further that we do not trust God to keep His promises to us. We're acting like the very lost people we fear, and in doing so, we are worshipping false gods; we have become idolaters.

Do Christian schools need to prove themselves the intellectual equals of unbelievers? Well, as we shall see, there are good and biblical reasons to excel at all we do, including our intellectual pursuits. But the motivating force for our efforts needs to be not temporal or earthly acclaim, but the glory of God and His gracious approval of our faithful stewardship of His directives.

### Good and Bad Schools

Beyond the world's inherent bias against Christian thinking, are Christian schools demonstrably inferior academically to secular schools?

There's no question that private schools generally do better academically than public schools;<sup>5</sup> academic achievement is only one reason that millions of parents pay private-school tuition, but it certainly is one reason. This is not to say that a specific public school might not have a better academic program than a specific private school, but in the aggregate, private schools outperform public schools by a wide margin. Proponents of public schools argue that the difference is due primarily to two reasons: better funding for the private schools (that is, the students tend to come from wealthier families) and more exclusive admission policies by those same schools ("creaming").<sup>6</sup> No doubt the fact that private schools can be more selective in the students they admit does play a significant role in higher test scores for some institutions. In

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Henry Braun, Frank Jenkins, and Wendy Grigg, *Comparing Private Schools and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling* (NCES 2006-461), National Assessment of Educational Progress (Washington: National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2006), iii-iv. Available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2006461.pdf>. See also the NCES data for 2007 at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_123.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_123.asp) and for selected years through 2010 at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_153.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_153.asp).

<sup>6</sup> *Are Private High Schools Better Academically than Public High Schools?* (Washington: Center on Education Policy, 2007), 11. Available online at <http://www.edline.com/uploads/pdf/PrivateSchoolsReport.pdf>.

fact, however, Christian schools, unlike elite private academies, are not usually highly selective in their admission policies, particularly with reference to academic aptitude. Furthermore, private schools typically spend less per pupil than do public schools, and Christian schools spend less than the private-school average.

**Table 1: Spending per pupil in public and private K–12 schools**

	Public School Spending per Pupil <sup>1</sup>	Private School Spending per Pupil <sup>2</sup>	
		All	Non-Catholic religious
2005–06	\$10,603 <sup>3</sup>		
2006–07	\$11,252 <sup>4</sup>		
2007–08	\$11,950 <sup>5</sup>	\$8,549 <sup>6</sup>	\$7,117 <sup>7</sup>
2008–09	\$10,499 <sup>8</sup>		

In order to compare apples with apples, however, we should ask whether private *Christian* schools are academically inferior to private *non-religious* schools. The data indicate that non-religious private schools outperform religious private schools academically in the aggregate.<sup>7</sup> It's worth noting that most private academies do charge higher tuition and admit students more exclusively than religious schools, so the comparison is not completely equal. There is no evidence that religiosity is the discriminating factor in the performance variance, especially since students in religious private schools handily outscore students in public schools.<sup>8</sup>

There are academically sound Christian schools, and there those that are not sound. There are undoubtedly some that are a waste of everyone's time and money and should be closed. The fact that the schools are Christian does not make them academically sound, and similarly it does not make them unsound either.

### Good and Bad Textbooks

The same principle applies to textbooks. There are effective and ineffective non-religious textbooks, and there are effective and ineffective Christian

<sup>7</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_153.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_153.asp). For the 2009–10 school year, students in independent private schools outscored students in religiously affiliated private schools on the SAT by an average of 24 points in reading, 30 points in writing, and 49 points in math.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* The point differentials are 35 in reading, 42 in writing, and 23 in math.

textbooks. Their academic strength or their effectiveness is not a function of their Christianity or the absence of it. They must be evaluated on their own merits.

In the University of California case, there was a simple way to answer the core question: Does the use of creationist biology textbooks impair a student's ability to do well in the UC system? This is a testable question. Over the years, the University system has educated millions of students.<sup>9</sup> The students who came from Christian schools could easily be identified, and their academic performance, in science courses or any other courses, could easily be compared to the performance of the larger student body. For even more precision, the Christian schools from which those students graduated could be identified, and data analysis could be limited to the schools that used Christian biology textbooks.

The University never bothered to do that analysis. However, a doctoral dissertation did something close to that. It evaluated a sizable sample of students at Christian schools in five Midwestern states, comparing those who used Christian science textbooks against those who used secular science textbooks. It found no significant difference in the mean ACT Science Reasoning scores of the two groups.<sup>10</sup> It would be a simple matter to compare those ACT scores to the scores of any other population, public or private, religious or non-religious, of any region or of the entire country.

So the hard data that we currently have simply do not support the idea that Christian textbooks are academically inferior as a group, particularly because they are Christian. We would all welcome further rigorous studies of the question based on available data.

## Reasons to Excel

Christian schools, and Christian textbook publishers, have several reasons to excel academically. Most importantly, the Bible declares that all

<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, the UC website stated, “The UC family includes more than 220,000 students, more than 170,000 faculty and staff, 37,000 retirees and more than 1.5 million living alumni” (<http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/campus/welcome.html>).

<sup>10</sup> Janice Marie Guthrie, *The Effect of the Use of Christian-Published Science Textbooks on the ACT Science Reasoning Subtest Scores of Midwest Christian High Schools* (Ed.D. diss., Liberty University, 2009). The dissertation is available online at <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/140/>.

believers will give an account of their stewardship (1 Cor. 4:1–2; 1 Pet. 4:10). Most Christians believe that this accounting will take place at the *bema* seat, the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), where “we shall all appear” (KJV), or more precisely, “we shall all be made manifest, apparent, transparent” (Grk. φανερόω, *phaneroō*).<sup>11</sup> This is a serious responsibility. If our purpose for existence is the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), how shall we defend actions that give the enemies of God reason to blaspheme?<sup>12</sup> It is one thing to wear proudly the scandal of the cross; it is quite another to be a shame-inducing ambassador (2 Cor 5:18–20). Christians have the direct command that we are to conduct our lives and choose our words so that unbelievers will have nothing evil to say of us (Titus 2:6–8).

Further, we are given responsibility for the education of our children (Eph. 6:4), and we are answerable to God for that task as well. Our goal is not merely to get them out of the house or even to make them functional in society; it is to produce believers who conduct themselves as lights in the world (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:14–16), who stand out as examples of what the image of God should look like.

Christian schools and publishers that do not strive for academic excellence do not deserve to stay in business; they do more harm than good.

## What Is Academic Excellence?

It's certainly worth defining our key term. Academic excellence cannot be simply an impression, a certain *je ne sais quois*. It is demonstrable, quantifiable. What are its distinguishing elements?

- Truthfulness. If academic scholarship is supposed to be the search for truth, then the teachers must teach the truth, and to that end the textbooks must be true. Several factors contribute to this:
  - Teachers and textbook authors who know their subject and speak and write with authority—who have a broad understanding of the subject so that they can not only get the individual facts right but also place those facts

<sup>11</sup> Compare the Amplified Bible's rendering: “For we must all appear and be revealed as we are before the judgment seat of Christ.”

<sup>12</sup> This is the wording Nathan used in condemning David's adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent murder of her husband (2 Sam. 12:14).

fittingly into their larger context and interpret their significance

- In most cases this expertise should come from formal education, which is generally peer-reviewed and subject to other correctives. In practice, however, K–12 teachers are not typically expected to have degrees in all the specific subjects they teach. (Textbook authors, however, should have graduate degrees, preferably doctorates, in their subject areas.) But teachers should know the subjects well enough to teach them at their respective grade levels, and they should continue to read and study to further their understanding and to keep up with changes in those fields as appropriate.
- Editors who are obsessive about checking and rechecking to ensure that words are spelled correctly, sentences are composed clearly and unambiguously, and the facts are stated precisely. Editors should question everything.
- Incidentally, it takes time for authors and editors to do their jobs well. When schools insist on a short revision cycle, they are increasing the likelihood that their textbooks will be rushed and thus sloppy.<sup>13</sup>
- Truthfulness includes the idea of comprehensiveness. The material should say all that needs to be said for an appropriate understanding of the subject. As we shall see, this often comes into tension with the need to approach the student at the proper level of comprehension.
- Pedagogical soundness. The material should be at an appropriate academic level for the students who will use it.
  - It should be explained in terms understandable to the student. Doing this often requires a certain amount of simplification, which in turn makes it likely that the descriptions will be less than perfectly accurate. Writing to a grade level is extremely hard to do well, particularly in technical areas, and especially in science. Teachers, because they are interacting personally and repeatedly with the students,

can use multiple methods to make even technical material accessible.

- It should be presented in ways that encourage the student to learn. This is a matter of motivation, of psychology. We've all had the experience of being disaffected with a subject because of the way it was presented. If we produce students who have no desire to learn more, it really doesn't matter how much they know now.
- It should move the student beyond memorization to understanding. A proper academic environment is preparing the student to extrapolate, to make wise decisions, not to win trivia contests.

## Conclusion

Because they will answer to God Himself for the way they have stewarded their educational ministries, Christian teachers should strive for the highest levels of academic excellence appropriate for the age of their students. And they should expect their textbooks and other curriculum-support materials to demonstrate that same excellence. Textbooks that are philosophically coherent with the school mission and worldview are the best way to achieve this excellence, provided that they demonstrate the qualities of excellence delineated above.

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<sup>13</sup> There have been numerous cases of textbooks with egregious errors. See, for example, <http://www.discovery.org/a/2075>; [http://www.christiansvssecular.com/textbook\\_trap/history\\_errors.htm](http://www.christiansvssecular.com/textbook_trap/history_errors.htm); <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/curriculum/the-rich-irony-in-virginias-hi.html>; and <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/textbooks/errorreportingchart.pdf>.

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**Table 1 Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> There is considerable question about the reliability of the statistics for public education. For the year 2006–07, for example, the National Center for Education Statistics, which is the official government source for such data, lists the annual spending per pupil in unadjusted dollars as \$9,683 in their “Fast facts” chart (<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66>), but as \$12,018 or \$11,257 in their “Digest of Education Statistics” ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09\\_182.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_182.asp)), depending on whether the student population is based on attendance or enrollment, respectively. An updated version of the same table at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_190.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_190.asp) shows slightly different numbers for the same year. The table above uses the lower Digest figures, since the Fast Facts figure is apparently based on the Digest figures. Some argue further that all these figures are artificially low; see, for example, [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=11432](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11432).

<sup>2</sup> This figure is simply the average tuition charged. Schools vary as to the percentage of their costs that tuition covers.

The Department of Education did a survey of private school tuition rates for the years 1999–2000, 2003–04, and 2007–08 (see footnote 14). Reliable data for other years was not available.

<sup>3</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_190.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_190.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09\\_059.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_059.asp)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www2.census.gov/govs/school/09f33pub.pdf>, p. 8. The Census Bureau figures are typically significantly lower than the NCES figures, which at the time of writing were not yet available for the 2008–09 school year. The latest NCES figures are always available at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/>.