

Parental choice for pupil discipleship

Christian ethos

What principles do Christians use when choosing a school for their children? What should Christians do differently from their secular neighbours when selecting a school? How can any Christian select a school in such a way that the work of the Christian teachers in the school is advantaged by them? What about boarding schools? These questions are important, and yet seem relatively unaddressed within the Christian community. Education is, it seems, not a big issue in many churches in the UK. And yet, I suggest, it should be.

To a certain extent, this article is borne out of a frustration which has grown over the last 17 years I have spent working in the independent sector. During this time, I have worked in two largely secular boarding schools, both with an Anglican foundation, and I now find myself as the principal of a school with a lively and vibrant Christian ethos. The frustration has emerged from my conversations with mature Christians about the choice of school for their child.

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Richard Backhouse was appointed Principal of Monkton Combe School in September 2005. He is married to Debbie and has two children – Olivia (10 years) and William (8 years).

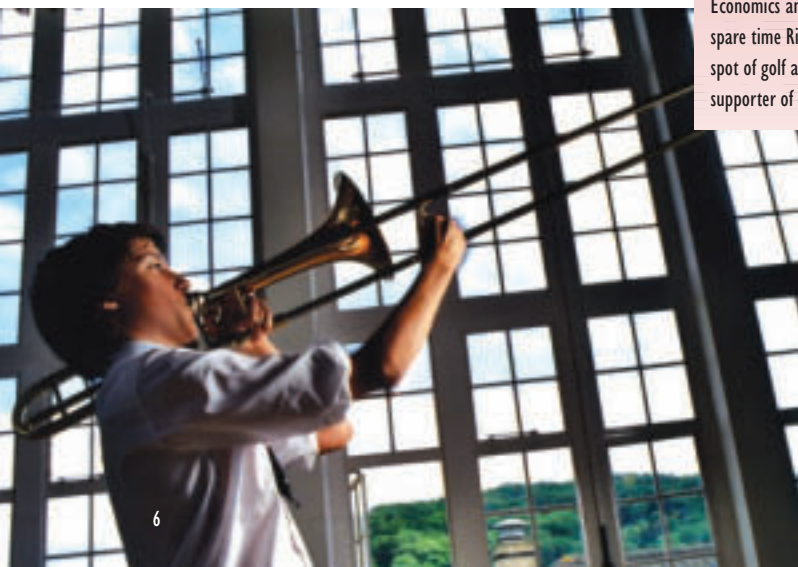
Richard was educated at Marlborough and Selwyn College, Cambridge where he read Economics, ran the Christian Union for a year and was Vice-Captain of the Boat Club. His first teaching post was at Oundle in Northamptonshire where he taught Economics, Business Studies and Maths. After six years, he moved to Bradfield College, near Reading, as a Housemaster and Head of Economics and Politics. In his spare time Richard enjoys a spot of golf and is an avid supporter of Southampton FC.

Joined-up thinking

Last summer I had a conversation with a mature Christian who had just chosen a school for his daughter, aged 12. After asking where the school was and what sort of school it is, I asked what the spiritual provision was like. He didn't know. Was there a Christian Union, I probed. He didn't know. What questions did he ask, I inquired, about the spiritual life of the school. None, it transpired.

This worries me for two reasons. The first is that this man's daughter, a young person with a Christian commitment, was heading off to a school which would, no doubt educate her mind and exercise her body through the curricular and co-curricular activities timetabled for pupils, but there was no guarantee that they would feed her faith. The second was that the Christian staff in the school would have been deprived of the clout that prospective parents wield when they ask awkward questions. If, for example, a young Christian teacher had recently asked the head of this school if they could start a Christian Union, the answer is likely to be conditioned by the head's personal view, and influenced by his or her understanding of the parental constituency. The absence of parental questions about the spiritual life of the school meant that their expenditure on the child's education was value neutral, whereas if it had been accompanied by the appropriate pressure, the parent's 'dollar' could have had real Gospel power.

Returning to the first point, I ask myself if the reason why some parents don't ask about a school's Christian activities is because their thinking isn't entirely joined-up. I once showed some delightful parents around the school at which I had a marketing and pastoral role, made clear my own personal faith and my role in running the Christian Union. These parents, like many others, made no comment, and so I was surprised when I



A Monkton senior school musician



Monkton pupils enjoying learning in the prep school library

saw them in the congregation of a large London church when I was visiting friends in the city a few months later. In retrospect, I suspect that they were looking for a school with their Monday to Saturday head on, and had not thought of the influence their faith might have on the process of selecting a school for their children.

Right priorities

Nearly all parents, I believe, underestimate the power of two forces in a school. One is the effect of the role models in the school. The fact is that from the age of five, young people in this country spend more time in the company of young adult role models, often with attractive personalities, at school than they do with their own parents. We noticed how our children's language and behaviour changed from day one of their time at primary school. The second powerful influence is the peer group. One parent of two boys, aged 16 and 18, recently commented to me that their eldest son had left his school with excellent exam results, but, having absorbed the prevailing ethos of his peer group, as a scientific atheist, who hated God. Most parents think that they retain the position of being the biggest influence on their children long after the power-balance has actually shifted to these two aspects that the school is more in charge of than the parents. This is why the choice of school is crucial.

In addition, what seems important to us about a school when our children are younger – the exam

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Some Christian parents have real reservations about boarding education



A relaxing break time at Monkton

results, the music, sport, drama, outdoor education – is unlikely to be reflected in what we are concerned for when we wonder what our offspring will be like when they are 40. One wise pastor asked his congregation, of which I was a student member, what their highest priority for their children was – it reveals a lot, he went on, about what your priorities for yourself really are!

Awkward questions

It is so important therefore that parents consider the effect that the role models and peer group of their short-listed school will have on their children. Is the prevailing school ethos close to that expressed at home? This provokes tough choices: C of E primary or high-achieving-SATS-results primary; basically secular secondary school, one with a Christian headteacher, or one with a strong Christian ethos? For me, the choice is simple: my children are likely to stay at school – and to go to university – because of the parental attitudes they will grow up with, and therefore the spiritual effect of their school on my children was the single biggest influence on our choice of school. This means that we originally selected a school that our neighbours wouldn't, turning down places at a



A hat made by a Prep School pupil

What should Christians do differently from their secular neighbours when selecting a school?

much more selective school an equal distance in the opposite direction. Now – I am even more fortunate, since my children are able to attend the Christian school that I am employed by.

Whatever the ethos of the school parents select, I would also strongly encourage parents to ask probing questions about the school's ethos when choosing a school, and to go on asking them when their children are pupils. Is there a Christian Union? Does it have space/time to meet? Would the school allow the pupils to run a Youth Alpha? Is there a parents' prayer meeting? And so on. Schools – all schools – really are affected much more by parental opinion than they used to be, and this is true, in my experience at least, of both maintained sector and independent sector schools. Parents are immensely powerful, and should remember that schools they don't choose will have been affected by their experience of the parents, the questions they were asked, and the reasons they believed the parents to have chosen a competitor rather than them.

Developing independence

Boarding is a thorny issue for some parents: I don't think there is a clear answer here. Some Christian parents have real reservations about boarding education – in the maintained or private sector. But around 95% of our children board at university, where there is essentially no pastoral care. Boarding at an earlier age (for some at eight, some at 11, more at 13, and many at 16) gives an oppor-

tunity to develop independence within a pastoral framework which can offer as much support as is necessary. This can ease the transition to university life very substantially. The most important thing is that children themselves should want to board – that makes all the difference.

There are some really excellent schools out there – excellent not because they get young people good exam results (although they do), not because they run superb extra-curricular activities which develop leadership, teamworking, people skills, and generate confidence (although they do that too), but excellent because they also have an eye on training young people as Christians, and as young Christian leaders. The school I work for now regards this as a key goal, and we see ourselves as generating a significant number of young people who will play a part in running their university CU, and maybe go on into full-time Christian ministry (including teaching!). To give just one example from history: the man who succeeded Hudson Taylor as Director of CIM (China Inland Mission) was a former pupil of Monkton School. This man is just one example of hundreds, if not thousands, of our leavers whose vision of Christian service was shaped here.

My prayer is that many of today's parents will choose schools which give their children the best chance of flourishing spiritually, of growing in wisdom, and in being disciplined at school as well as at home! Our society will certainly need such young people!

■ Richard Backhouse

Information

Monkton – a genuine and beguiling one-off

Monkton is an independent co-educational boarding and day school with a lively Christian ethos, situated in beautiful countryside just a mile from the World Heritage City of Bath. We provide an education for 700 pupils aged 2-19, from all over the UK and abroad.

We are an unashamedly Christian school: our Christian ethos underlies everything we do – our relationships, our decision making, the very rhythm of the school day. We encourage pupils to develop their own personal faith and follow standards of behaviour based on traditional Christian values. Our Chapel stands both literally and metaphorically at the heart of the school and most mornings start with a short service led by either staff or pupils.

Our outstanding pastoral care, high academic standards and fantastic range of sports, clubs and



activities make us an ideal choice for parents looking for a school that will nurture and challenge their child spiritually, emotionally and socially as well as developing their academic potential to the full.

Contact Registrar, Mrs Patricia Neaverson

T: 01225 721133

E: admissions@monkton.org.uk