

## Christians and Charter Schools

by John M. Frame

I want here to explore the question of whether biblical principles allow Christians to send their children to charter schools. My answer will be highly qualified. I will not argue in general that charter schools are the best way for Christian parents to provide for their children's education, or even that they are equal to other alternatives such as home schools and Christian private schools. I will, nevertheless, defend charter schools here, but only in a very weak sense: that God does not forbid the use of *all* such schools in *all* cases. Further, charter schools offer certain advantages, so that in some cases, perhaps many, charter schools may be the best choice for some parents.

Indeed, I intend to make the argument for charter schools very difficult for myself. For I believe that there are serious problems in the concept of a charter school which should give every Christian pause. And if a Christian nevertheless decides to make use of charter schools, he should do so only with much prayer and with enormous efforts to supplement the charter school teaching with distinctively Christian content. The arguments *against* charter schools from a Christian viewpoint are very strong, not to be brushed aside. My only point here will be that they are not absolutely conclusive. They do not amount to an absolute prohibition of charter schools in all cases. We should, therefore, consider the advantages of charter schools in our educational decisions.

### Some Biblical Principles for Education

1. *Scripture makes it clear that education, like every other area of human life, must be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31) and in the name of Christ (Col. 3:17). Therefore, it must be done in accordance with the Word of God, the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17).*

Scripture is not only a standard for education, but it pervades the content of a godly education. Deut. 6:6-9 reads,

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

“God-centered” is really too weak a term to describe this kind of education. “God-saturated” is more like it. Children are to grow up in an environment where they

cannot avoid the Word of God; it is always there, searching them, admonishing them, instructing them in the truth.

It follows that everything the child learns about the world should be related to God's Word. And in a way Scripture speaks about *everything*. It doesn't give us detailed instruction about plumbing, or British history, or auto repair, but it does teach us how to relate all these things to God, how to study them, and how to implement our studies in practical life so that God is pleased. We cannot, for example, study history while ignoring divine providence, let alone (as in many secular curricula) ignoring the substantial role of religion in forming the culture and politics of nations. We cannot teach science without emphasizing that this world is created and directed by God. It is God's providence that makes the world an orderly place that we can understand and dominate (Gen. 1:28-30). We cannot teach modern music and film without teaching children how to evaluate these from God's perspective.

*2. God has placed children into important relationships with family, church, and state.*

God intends for adults to take responsibility for the education of children. Here, obviously, the family plays the crucial role. Note that the Deuteronomy passage above tells us to "impress them on *your children*," an expression which gives special responsibility to parents. In the Book of Proverbs, also, instruction in God's wisdom comes from parents: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (1:8; compare 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, 6:1, 7:1, 19:27, 23:19, 22, 26-28).

It would certainly be wrong, however, to think that Scripture *restricts* education to the family. I know of no Scripture text or principle that forbids parents to delegate some of the education of their children to others. Certainly in Bible times apprenticeship was common, and God's Word says nothing against it. And obviously it is not wrong for parents to ask their children to read books written by others, allowing the author of the book to assist them in their work of education. Certainly it is not wrong for parents to send their children to piano teachers or carpenters for tutoring in specialized areas, of course, under proper parental supervision. The Deuteronomy passage is not interested in the fine points of how the education is carried out. It certainly cannot be pressed to imply that every speck of teaching must be presented solely and directly by the parent. It simply places the overall responsibility for education upon the parent.

In the discussion of charter schools, it is important to consider the distinct roles of family, church, and state, in the education of children.

First, the state. Does it have any business in the education of children? To answer this question, we must ask what the state is in scriptural terms. In my

analysis<sup>1</sup> (and I realize this is controversial), Scripture does not describe the divine appointment of a “state” as an institution separate from family and church. Some claim that Gen. 9, especially verse 6, provides for an independent “state” institution, but the passage says nothing of the sort. In the passage, God merely gives to Noah’s *family* the power in some cases to enforce God’s law by the shedding of blood.

What, then, is the state, if it is not a distinct institution with a special divine appointment? The state emerges when the human family gets too large to be ruled informally by a father or patriarch. A family of four can be ruled efficiently by the father in the home. But once a family multiplies into thousands, more formal structures of rule are needed. In Israel, these structures are clearly family structures. The leaders are “elders” (Ex. 3:18), older men, respected in the community, who sit “in the city gate” to make decisions too difficult for individual heads of families. They are like grandfathers, or patriarchs, but they rule over the whole nation. After the Exodus, with the population of Israel reaching into the millions, Moses’s father-in-law, Jethro, advised him to set up officials over “thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens” (Ex. 18:21). Later God gave kings to Israel, but the kings were part of this same structure. They were appointed and anointed by the “elders of Israel” (2 Sam. 5:3).

So the state is family government, the government of the extended family of the human race. This analysis helps us also to get a clearer view of the church. The church, too, is an extended family. It is the community formed by the *redeemed* family of God; it is our family in Jesus. The old family, the family of Adam, fell into sin; so God established on earth a new family in his Son. Jesus died on the cross for his “brothers” (Heb. 2:11-12) and his “children” (verses 13-14). So we become brothers and sisters of one another through Christ.

Now there is no question but that the church has an important role in the education of our children. The church has a teaching, discipling ministry (Matt. 28:19, Acts 5:42, 1 Co. 12:28-29, 14:19, Eph. 4:11, Col. 1:28, 3:16, 1 Tim. 4:11, 6:2, 2 Tim. 2:2, Tit. 2:4, Heb. 5:12, Jas. 3:1) and that is certainly not restricted to adults. God charges the church to teach the Scriptures to everyone. Parts of Scripture are specifically addressed to children (as Eph. 6:1-3), and all of it is relevant to them. The church should support the parents (and vice versa) in teaching the Word of God to children as their age and level of understanding permits. Church and family should not compete with one another, but should work together. That is implicit in the context of Deut. 6:6-9, for that passage is part of the covenant between God and the whole nation of Israel. The whole nation, as the people of God, was to maintain this commitment to teach the children God had given them. The commandment is given to families, but the whole nation has an interest in bringing this about.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see my article, “Toward a Theology of the State,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989), 199-226.

Does the state have any role in education? As we have seen, family and state are not radically separate in Scripture. If the state is an extended family, then it does have an interest in the education of children. At least, the state should carry out its duties in a way that helps, rather than hinders, the people in carrying out their divine obligations. And certainly the state has educational functions, in the training of soldiers, in the preparation of people for governmental functions, in teaching people their civic responsibilities. However,

*3. Christians must be very critical of the role of the state in educating children.*

What of the education of young children? I know of nothing in Scripture that absolutely *prohibits* the state from being involved in such education. There are, however, obvious disadvantages in the concept of a state school:

(a) The state, as state, is not particularly competent to educate children. The work of the state, in Scripture and in contemporary society, is focused on the maintenance of law and order. Government bears the sword against wrongdoers and against aggression from outside the nation (Rm. 13:1-7). Government is in the business of exercising force to make people do what is right. But although corporal punishment may sometimes be necessary in education, the primary tool of education is not compulsion, but instruction. Even the best government, therefore, is unlikely to be competent in the basic work of education. Today, the abysmal educational record of state public schools confirms this judgment. There are, however, some exceptions: there are some outstanding teachers and schools in the public system.

(b) The state governs the family of Adam, which has fallen into sin. Although there have been godly rulers in history, they have been the exception rather than the rule, and even the godliest rulers have usually been surrounded by other officials who have not shared their love of God. So the state has typically, from Bible times to the present, reinforced the worst trends in society, further disqualifying it from the education of Christian children.

(c) In the US and many other countries, the state is prohibited from encouraging any religion. Arguably this was not the original intention of those who wrote the US Constitution; but the “wall of separation” between state and religion has been the consistent view of the courts in recent times. We should, I believe, seek to change this by legal means. But humanly speaking we are not likely to succeed in the near future. Therefore, no state school can legally provide the kind of education described in Deut. 6:6-9.

(d) Indeed, state schools regularly *oppose* the Christian view of the world and human life. For it is impossible to be neutral between Christ and unbelief (Matt. 6:24, 12:30). As the state schools try to exclude “religious” views, they end up by default teaching secular humanism. Secular humanism is itself a religion in

the sense that it demands total allegiance and presents a distinct set of standards for all of human life, but standards contrary to Scripture. It teaches that the human mind is the ultimate standard of truth and right. At the same time, it teaches (inconsistently) that there are no ultimate standards. So secular humanism is both irrationalist and rationalist, relativistic and tyrannical. There are no absolute truths, but secular humanism is the absolute truth.

(e) The irrationalist side of secular humanism is detrimental to education as such. If there is no absolute truth, then why should students even bother with learning? If there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, how can the schools establish codes of behavior and tests of academic performance? Confusion about the goals of education is obvious in the various kinds of “new new math,” “social promotion,” and in general the substitution of self-esteem for academic standards.

(f) The rationalist side of secular humanism is no better. The state schools frequently teach dogmatically positions that are contrary to God’s word on many particular matters. They regularly teach that naturalistic evolution is a fact, not a theory, that biblical sexual standards are outmoded, that Christianity played a negligible role in world history, that all cultures are equally good, that people are naturally good, that socialism is the best form of government, that abortion is a woman’s right, that “safe sex” is the best way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. In short, state schools teach that one may ignore God in every area of life without suffering loss. And the recent tendency is for school advocates of “political correctness” to stifle any sort of dissent against radical feminism and egalitarianism. The result is the substitution of brainwashing for education.

(g) In schools, peer relationships are often as important as the content of the curriculum. Therefore, it is important that teachers exercise godly discipline over their students and seek to train them in godly character. State schools are unable to do this, because of their commitment to secular humanism. Therefore, Christian students attending state schools are often exposed to the worst values and behavior among their peers. And typically they face temptations to explore drugs, illicit sex, gang violence, etc. Further, secular humanism encourages the autonomy of children from the authority structures of society, parents and teachers. So the children typically adopt the values of their peers rather than those of their teachers (let alone parents).

(h) State schools often see it as their mission to rescue students from the antiquated views of their parents and churches. Typically they resent attempts by parents to influence their teaching. Indeed, for example by providing condoms and abortions without allowing parents to be notified, they place themselves above the parents and even drive wedges between parents and children.

(i) Since state schools are usually run by people who have no sympathy for Christians or for others who dissent from the secular humanist consensus, they seek in various ways to oppose, even intimidate Christian and home schools, and to encourage Christians to enter the state school system, so that the children of Christians can to some extent be under the power of the state system. Once Christian families are committed to the state system, the system seeks to increase its power over them.

These arguments are pretty formidable, and every Christian should take them seriously before deciding to send children to state schools (of which charter schools are one kind). Nevertheless, I think these arguments are not strong enough to prevent us from ever making use of state educational facilities. I will make that case below.

*4. A Christian education should prepare children to live in the unbelieving world, not only in the Christian subculture.*

Jesus told his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). The Old Testament was also a missionary religion, since God intended to bless all nations through Abraham’s seed. But for the most part in the Old Testament (Jonah’s mission being one exception), the emphasis was that Israel should remain separate from foreign nations, which might defile them and lead them astray to worship other gods. Not until the Jesus sent the Holy Spirit with power did the worldwide missionary movement begin in earnest. In Acts 2, the Spirit came on the church, and 3000 speakers of many languages became believers (Acts 2:41). After that, the apostles preach the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 10-11).

So in the New Testament, the rule is not to isolate oneself from the world, though we must continue to beware of the temptations the world sets before us. Jesus intends us to remain in the world, but not to be “of” the world (John 17:15-16). Satan is a defeated enemy; we may resist him and he will flee from us (Jas. 4:7). The gates of Hell cannot defeat the church (Matt. 16:18).

Children, of course, need to be isolated in the early years of their lives. They are not mature enough then to march by themselves into battle against the hosts of Satan, to withstand all the evils of our time. But the home and church should be preparing them for this very battle.

If they are to fight strongly against wickedness, they must have some knowledge of the world. Paul was not ignorant of Satan’s devices (2 Cor. 2:11); we should not allow our children to be ignorant either. Further, as they grow older, they need to enter relationships with non-Christians in which they can learn to stand for the truth and to lead others to Christ. Once they leave home, they will be exposed to non-Christian peers and culture on a regular basis. They should

be prepared for that gradually, when they have access to parental supervision. We do not want Satan's devices to catch them by surprise.

There is room for debate of course, as to how early, how quickly, and with what means we should expose our children to the world. Some things are obvious. Five year olds should not be exposed to a steady stream of pagan rock music, R-rated films, and sociopathic companions. On the other hand, however, a Christian college graduate ought to be able to attend a secular university graduate program without undergoing spiritual upheaval. Between those obvious points, many others are debatable. Children, after all, are very different from one another, and Christian children mature spiritually at different rates. I have known some to have gone to public high schools giving powerful witness of Christ to their classmates and without compromising either their beliefs or their standards of behavior. Others have suffered spiritual shipwreck in such contexts. Parents need to be wise for their own children.

My point, however, is that we should not only seek to shelter children from evil influences; we should also give them opportunities to test themselves in the world. And it is much better that they undergo these tests when they still have parents near by to counsel them, than if they wait and face the tests alone.

This argument suggests that for some families, it might be a good idea to give their children a limited exposure to the teaching and culture of state schools. Many home schoolers, for example, send their children to take classes at local community colleges, when they reach high school years or beyond. But community colleges, after all, are state schools, with all the problems of state schools mentioned above. Yet the parents believe that when their children reach college level, they are mature enough to handle the spiritual problems of a secular college, especially when they can live at home, under continued parental supervision.

Usually Christian home schoolers don't criticize one another for taking the community college option; but they tend to become very critical of fellow Christians who send their children to public schools for elementary and high school. Granted, that is more dangerous. It is right for us to ask one another hard questions about such decisions. But we should be slow to judge. Parents ordinarily know better than outsiders what their children are able to do, or what resources are available to a child to repel the attacks of Satan.

I have noted that a state school can never provide the type of education described in Deut. 6:6-9, and that is a crucial point. Nevertheless, I believe that some exposure to the state system may be a legitimate *part* of a Deut. 6 education. For an education saturated with God's Word must provide laboratory experiences in which the child is trained to *apply* the principles of Scripture to the world in which he lives. If the child cannot *apply* the Word, he really does not understand it. He must learn how to identify sin and righteousness, truth and

falsity, testing everything by the Scriptures, like the noble people of Berea (Acts 17:11). To do that, he must gradually be exposed to the world and its thinking—both through books and through practical experiences.

If the reader has been persuaded by my argument so far, he should be interested to know that there are ways in which parents can expose their children *gradually* to the state school system without allowing that system to dominate their children's education. That is, there are ways in which parents can give their children a taste of the public schools without giving the children up to the state. And when parents use the public schools in these ways, they gain some educational and financial benefits.

There are, for example, public school programs intended to help students with special needs. There are also independent study programs administered by public school districts, through which children can be home schooled, with some level of participation in the school system. And there are also charter schools, which is the subject of this essay. All of these options have disadvantages as means of Christian education. But they have advantages as well, which we shall explore below.

### **What is a Charter School?**

Linda Page writes,

Charter schools are actually a kind of hybrid between a public and private school because—even though they are public schools—they usually have far more autonomy and independence than mainstream public schools. Because they are not bound by certain school district policies and state regulations, and are responsible for their own operation including preparation of a budget, curricula, and personnel matters they may look a lot like private schools. Since they are public schools, they must be nonsectarian and non-religious, just like any other public school.

She then notes “5 basic characteristics of most charter schools:”

- 1. They are funded by the state based on the numbers of students enrolled.*
- 2. They operate through a contract between the organizers of the school and the school district or state.*
- 3. They are accountable for results in student performance and in fiduciary responsibility, or their contract will not be renewed.*

4. *If negotiated through the contract, they have the freedom to operate autonomously, exempted from many or most district and state laws and regulations, except for health, safety and nondiscrimination issues.*

5. *They must be nonsectarian and non-religious, tuition free, and must admit all students regardless of ability level or disability, like any other public school.*<sup>2</sup>

The key here is that charter schools have far more flexibility than other public schools. So there are many different kinds of charter schools. They vary according to educational methods: some stress “back-to-basics,” others “interdisciplinary learning,” some “great books.” They vary in curriculum emphasis: some stress technology, others classical literature, others fine arts, others traditional liberal arts.

And, most significantly, from a Christian point of view, they vary in educational philosophy. When Page discusses the question “Why should you want to start a charter school?” her first answer is,

One of the most important reasons to create a charter school is that you can design a school around your own educational philosophy, and your value system.<sup>3</sup>

Now this does not mean that a charter school can be Christian. The statutes governing charter schools are unambiguous: charter schools must be “nonsectarian and non-religious.” And certainly many charter schools are just as anti-Christian as the public schools I have described earlier. But it is possible, at least, for a charter school to be much friendlier to the interests of Christians than a typical public school. Indeed, charter schools can be *influenced* by the Scriptures in significant ways:

### **Possible Christian Influences upon Charter Schools**

1. A charter school may have a largely Christian board and staff. Probably the school’s charter may not include this as a requirement for leaders, but if a school is designed to attract Christian students, it will certainly also attract Christian board and staff members. Now a Christian board and Christian teachers do not constitute a Christian school. Such a school is not, as such, “sectarian,” in the language of the statute, nor does it provide a Christian education in the sense of Deut. 6. But for a child to be taught by Christians, with many Christian peers, certainly makes a great difference from the usual public

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<sup>2</sup> Linda S. Page, *Starting Your Own Charter School* (Colorado Springs: Linda Page Associates; no date of publication noted), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

school. Parents may conclude that such a school might provide a useful way of introducing their children to the world of institutional classroom education. As such it would provide *part* of their children's education, which can be supplemented by the parents' own explicit Christian teaching.

2. The teaching and curriculum will be secular, of course. Christian textbooks will not be used. But the school can choose textbooks which do not *oppose* Christian teaching, which do not seek to brainwash students into becoming radical feminists, secularists, egalitarians, socialists, etc. Teachers also can present the material in ways that do not seek to tear down the values of the home. And the school can take strong positions against abortion, pre-marital sex, and so on. It can support parental authority and the importance of family solidarity, seeking never to drive a wedge between parents and children.

3. Charter schools can renounce the cult of self-esteem, which opposes academic standards and encourages social promotion. They may teach students to think critically about their own abilities and character, a kind of self-examination that has driven many people to Christ and is often good for the soul.

4. Indeed, charter schools are free to take a critical approach to the dominant values of society. They may show that the philosophies of the mainstream educational establishment (pragmatism, postmodernism, naturalism, secularism, liberalism, radical feminism) are intellectually and socially bankrupt. They can therefore destroy all these systems of belief in the minds of the children, leaving only one standing. That one still standing will be, of course, the Christian faith, though the school will not be able to make that point explicitly. But the school can make it implicitly, and very forcefully indeed. Teaching this kind of critical thinking is an indispensable element of a Christian education. And it may be that in some cases charter schools will do it better than parents, better than anybody.

5. Charter schools are free to establish higher standards for classroom behavior and discipline than other public schools. Although the school may not say so explicitly, these standards may well be influenced by Scripture. It would not be wise, of course, for such a school to expect all students to behave as Christians all the time. That would be an unreasonable, indeed impossible, demand to make of non-Christian students. But the school may establish meaningful punishments against conduct which is disruptive or educationally detrimental. Thus the school will establish better peer relationships among the students and a better learning environment than is possible in most secular schools.

6. Charter schools may offer more flexible teaching hours than other public schools. Some may choose to hold classes only two days a week, enlisting the parents to teach the children at home for the other school days. Others may set up independent study programs in which virtually all teaching is done in the

home, with some accountability to the school. The two-day arrangement produces a kind of hybrid between institutional and home schooling. I said earlier that charter schools can be a way for parents gradually, in small doses, to introduce their children to traditional classroom instruction. This sort of arrangement may be a beneficial way of providing that introduction.

7. This more flexible schedule also permits an explicitly Christian emphasis during the home schooling hours. Mrs. Joan Peace requested the Rutherford Institute (a Christian organization providing legal defense and advice to Christians in religious/state issues) to respond to the question “whether or not a parent who is home schooling under the supervision of a public charter school may include their religious views in educational instruction.” The answer, based on consultation with counsel, was that

as long as the parent meets the charter school’s educational/curricular requirements there should not be a problem with supplementing that curriculum with the parent’s religious views. A parent may run into a problem if he or she attempts to exclude entire portions of the curriculum. For example, rather than trying to exclude the portion of a science curriculum which may require a parent to teach about evolution, the parent could teach about evolution and concurrently teach about creationism.<sup>4</sup>

This counsel is, perhaps, subject to dispute. Some may claim that during the time specified for compulsory education (7 hours, 180 days in some states) no religious teaching may be given under a charter school arrangement. Nevertheless, the First Amendment of the US Constitution forbids any restriction on the free exercise of religion. And at the very least, government may not restrict the teaching of religion to children in the home outside those 180 days, or whatever period is required for compulsory education.

The bottom line is that, however the legal question is resolved, parents are free to supplement the charter school curriculum with explicit Christian teaching to produce a Deut. 6 education. And the charter school is free to make that easy to do.

8. Charter schools are free, and they provide textbooks for the students free of charge. This can be a great advantage to Christian parents. The textbooks purchased will, of course, be secular textbooks, not Christian ones. Some charter schools have gotten into trouble trying to use state funds to buy Christian texts, and Christian parents should not assume that will be possible.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, many home schools and Christian schools use secular textbooks anyway, because they are often of greater educational value. They use these

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Shiloh Cullen, Paralegal, on behalf of the Rutherford Institute, to Mrs. Joan Peace, Jan. 20, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Lecture by Jim Davis and Mary Schofield, “Charter Schools and Public ISP’s,” given at the 14<sup>th</sup> annual CHEA Convention, Anaheim, CA, 7/11-13, 1997.

texts by presenting the text information in a Christian context supplied by the teacher. If that arrangement is acceptable, why should Christian parents not accept from a charter school the gift of secular textbooks, which they can supplement as in #7 above?

9. Charter schools can resist the tendency of the public school system to overreach its authority. They can work from inside the system to discourage attempts of school boards to persecute home schoolers and Christian private schools. They can be instruments of change toward greater educational pluralism in our society, toward ending the practical monopoly of state education. Though charter schools are public schools, they can work within the public school environment to discourage the notions that the state is the only true parent and that the state is the only appropriate educator of the nation's children. They can refuse to be instruments of such oppression, and they can act against it from their privileged position within the establishment. Positively, they can demonstrate in practice that this kind of alternative education can deliver results superior to those of traditional public education. As such they can greatly help the Christian community.

My conclusion, then, is that charter schools can be of great benefit to some Christian families. Obviously, Christian parents should not send their children to just any charter school. Some charter schools are, from a Christian point of view, as bad as, or worse than, traditional public schools. But when a charter school is formed under Christian influence, seeking to limit the influence of non-Christian ideas and movements, taking a critical stance toward secular thought and culture, providing high quality instruction, good peer relationships, support for parents, and high academic standards, it may well be worth consideration for *part* of the education of our children. Indeed, in these cases, we should be thankful to God for the opportunities he provides through charter schools.

### **Some Objections and Replies**

I have argued that in some cases charter schools may be helpful to parents who are seeking to educate their children according to God's Word. Some, however, have taken the position that Christian parents should *never* make use of public school programs of any sort. Their arguments (in italics) and my replies follow:

1. *God does not permit the state to be involved in education. By using public schools, Christian parents support the state in its disobedience.*

As I said above, I know of no way to show from Scripture that God absolutely forbids state-sponsored education. There are many problems with state education, especially in our present situation, which I have noted above. But I think that these are not sufficient to warrant an absolute prohibition of Christian involvement in the public schools. I have outlined a “best case scenario,” where a charter school is organized largely by Christians, in support of the rights of parents to give Christian education to their children. Such charter schools avoid most (not all) of the problems of the public schools. I have yet to see an argument that absolutely forbids parents from taking part in such endeavors.

But let’s assume that God does forbid the state to be involved in any kind of education. Does that imply that Christians should make no use of public schools? Perhaps an illustration may help: A thief takes all my money, then offers me \$5 for bus fare home. Should I refuse to take it?

It can be just as easily argued that the state should not be involved in the retirement saving of its citizens. Does this imply that I should refuse my social security checks when they come due? Certainly not. They are mine. One may argue that the state stole the money from me, but when the state offers to return some, I am certainly not obligated to turn it down. To accept the money is not to acknowledge the state’s right to have taken it in the first place. It is not to be complicit in the sin of the state.

In the church of Corinth, some were evidently arguing that Christians should not buy food in the market place, out of fear that some of it may have been dedicated to idols. Paul responds that they should abandon that scruple. Offering the food to idols is a sin, but Christians don’t become sinful by buying and eating the food (1 Cor. 8-10).

Similarly, if the state has sinned in establishing the public school system, Christians do not sin by making use of its benefits, any more than they sin by using state highways, accepting social security checks, or even by paying taxes (which Jesus commands, Matt. 22:21).

There may sometimes be sins *connected with* our participation in the state. Parents who give to the state schools free rein over their children from age 5, without any attempt to counteract the secularism of the public schools, in my opinion are guilty of serious sin. But the sin in that case is not the sin of using public school facilities. It is the sin of failing to take parental responsibility. Using state facilities, in and of itself, is not sinful.

*2. To send a child to public school is to place him under the authority of the godless state. To do so is idolatry.*

I have heard this kind of language often from earnest opponents of state-sponsored education, but I confess I do not understand it. In the most obvious sense, we and our children are already under the authority of the state, whether we like it or not. The state already imposes unjust restrictions upon us, which we may seek to change by legal means but may not disobey. I fail to see how placing a child in a public school (especially a Christian-friendly charter school such as I have described above) changes that situation for the worse.

Certainly children who attend any school face a new set of rules and restrictions that they have to follow. But in the Christian-friendly school I have described, those restrictions are bound to be largely helpful, both to the parents and the child.

*3. When we send children to public school, it gives the state a "foot in the door" to gain more and more power over us.*

I have heard that public schools boards sometimes make use of their independent study programs to get information on families and other home schoolers, so as to bring unjust actions against them. But of course, anything we do can be investigated by an authority that is willing to bend the laws concerning privacy.

Is it likely that a public school board will seek to take legal action against parents who include religious elements in their charter school-related home schooling? In my view that would be a transgression of the first amendment. If it happens, we should simply drop out of the charter school and find other ways to give a Christian education to our children.

*4. But participation in state schools is unwise for Christians. It aids and abets a movement toward greater state power, and hence toward a greater domination of unbelief in our society.*

I respect this argument, but we must understand the true force of it. It is a *strategic* argument, recommending a particular tactic in the cultural warfare of our time. The argument is that we can do more good for society in general if we simply boycott the public schools than if we make use of them. That may be true, but in this instance I am not convinced.

Christians are often asked to boycott things in order to send a message to organizations and to society in general. Recently the Southern Baptist Convention and other Christian organizations promoted a boycott of entertainment produced by the Disney Corporation. Certainly this recommendation does not have the status of a biblical command. If it did, we would have to boycott any corporation that contributed in any way to immorality in society. On that basis, we would have to boycott nearly every business, withdrawing almost entirely from the world of commerce.

Scripture never takes that approach. The pagan food-vendors at Corinth doubtless used their profits in all sorts of idolatrous and immoral ways. Certainly they promoted a kind of worship (often immoral) that did great harm to society. But Paul does not tell Christians to boycott them.

Nevertheless, if great numbers of Christians were to boycott Disney, the boycott would “send a message” that could do some good. The proposal deserves serious consideration, but it is not the Word of God. So boycott proposals are strategic suggestions, not biblical norms. Perhaps a Christian boycott of the entire public school system would send a useful message. But such a boycott is not likely to take place. And the first responsibility of Christians is their own children, not someone’s broad strategy for social improvement. Christian parents should consider such boycott proposals seriously, but they are not obligated by God to participate in them, and it may be to their children’s advantage if they do not participate.

*5. The use of secular textbooks and teaching that is not explicitly Christian is a violation of Deut. 6:6-9.*

To say this is to say that Christian children should never be exposed first hand to the ideas of the unbelieving world. I do not believe that such a conclusion can be reached from Deut. 6. As I have said, one does not properly understand God’s Word until he can apply it to the affairs of life. If a student knows nothing of unbelieving thought, he cannot use the Word as the sword of the Spirit, and he has not had a truly Christian education. If he has not had a *first-hand* exposure to unbelieving ideas, he has not gained an adequate exposure to the power of these ideas. He will then not be ready to deal with these ideas when he leaves the home.

Certainly an exclusive and pervasive use of non-Christian texts and teaching would be wrong. But we are speaking here about a controlled, gradual exposure of children to the broader educational culture (unbelieving, to be sure), by means of Christian-friendly charter schools and intensive parental teaching. It seems to me that such an arrangement, carefully planned and carried out, is very much in accord with Deut. 6:6-9.

## **Conclusion**

Planning our children’s education includes many difficult decisions. Those who oppose charter schools have impressive arguments, because they put the most important consideration first: that education must be based on God’s Word. Certainly these people have, for the most part, the best interests of children at

heart. The most important part of education is that our children be taught to think and live according to God's Word.

I do believe, however, that parents committed to this goal may, in some cases, make good use of charter schools. In these cases, which I have outlined above, I believe that the use of charter schools will contribute to, not detract from, the goal of a God-saturated Christian education.