

# God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School

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At Bethany Baptist Academy, character development is a matter of steeping students in the Word of God and inculcating the norms of Christian behavior.



DEDICATED TO  
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

In fundamentalist Christian<sup>1</sup> schools throughout the nation, it is not the din of ideas but the din of values, attitudes, and norms that resound in these self-designated, God-centered places that claim scripture as their foundation. To be sure, they offer their students academic and nonacademic opportunities of the type public schools provide. Judged by tests with national norms, their students do as well as or better than public school students; just why they do so is another story. What is most striking about these alternative schools is their enormous investment in socializing children to think and behave according to the dictates of fundamentalist Christian doctrine as they construe it.

I learned about fundamentalist Christian schools from 18 months of field-work<sup>2</sup> in Bethany Baptist Academy, a K-12 school of 350 students located in a medium-sized Midwestern city. Bethany belongs to the doctrinally conservative American Association of Christian Schools, which provides its 1,000-plus members with its own version of teacher certification and placement, student honor society, and administrator clinics.

Bethany's normative thrust is implemented in a school staffed by teachers who believe God has called them into full-time Christian service; it is directed by administrators devoted to the concept of a "24-hour umbrella." By this concept, Bethany considers its students, wherever they are, to be fully subject to its rules and regulations. Students, teachers, and parents pledge themselves to obey and reinforce the school's behavioral obligations.

### **The Religious Message**

A school, any school, is literally awash with words. Read its bulletin boards, yearbooks, and newspapers; study its tests and homework assignments; listen to its students and teachers talk; and note its textbooks and lectures. See where the meanings of the words from these many sources converge to inculcate and reinforce the same point. At Bethany it is more than the modest dress of the girls and the short hair of the boys, and more than order

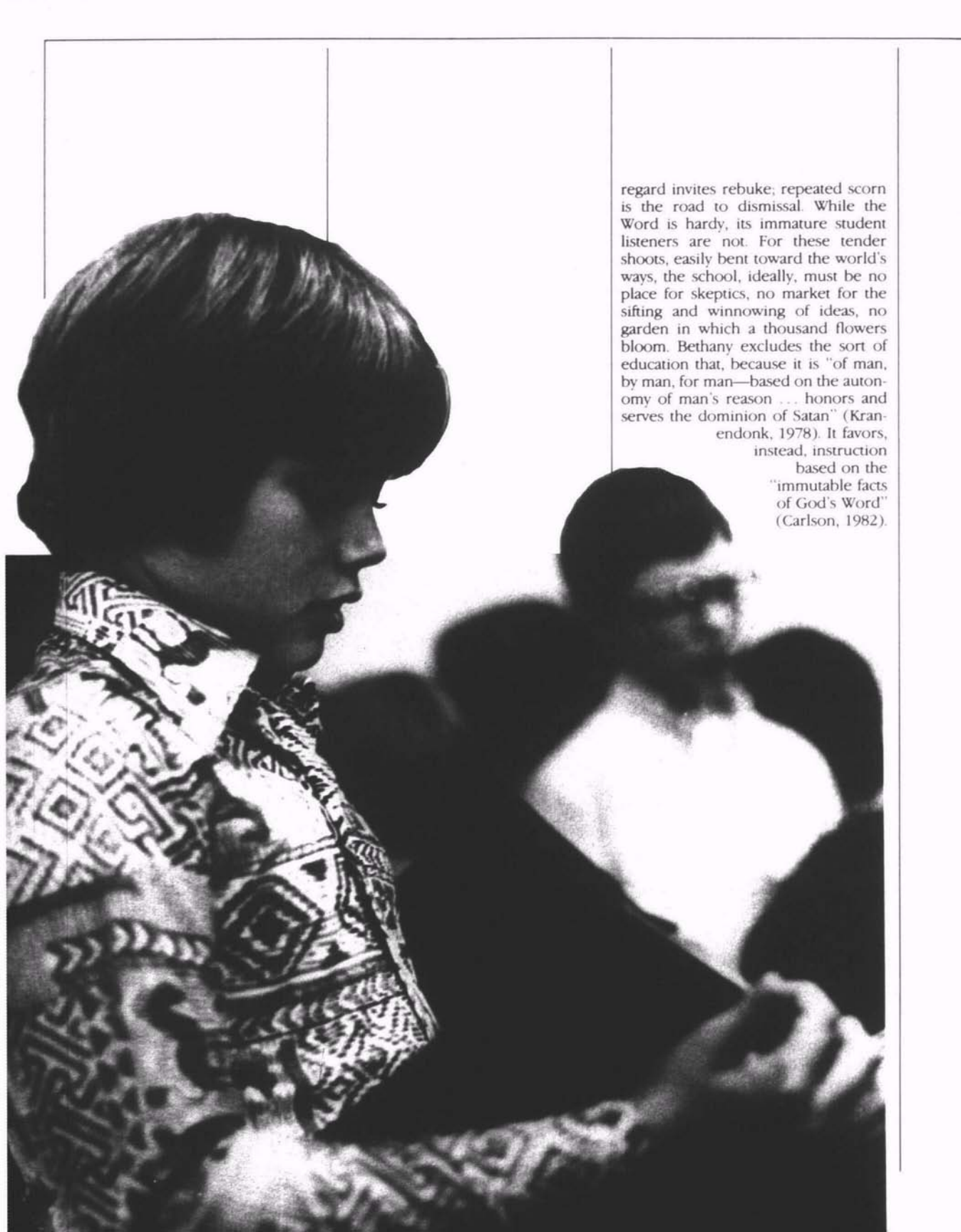
in the corridors and the absence of graffiti on bathroom walls that sets it apart from public school and non-Christian private schools. It is the words. They roll about, pouring forth *shalts* and *shalt nots*, a scriptural pearl never more than a breath away. No public school was ever charged with so explicit a mission, nor packaged a

set of means so calculated to fulfill its mission. The educators exhort, plead, and warn; they edify, cajole, and threaten their young Christians to be immersed in the Word, and to obey and to promulgate what they have heard.

Students cannot escape the words. Feigned interest is soon detected; dis-



Photograph by Paul M. Strick



regard invites rebuke; repeated scorn is the road to dismissal. While the Word is hardy, its immature student listeners are not. For these tender shoots, easily bent toward the world's ways, the school, ideally, must be no place for skeptics, no market for the sifting and winnowing of ideas, no garden in which a thousand flowers bloom. Bethany excludes the sort of education that, because it is "of man, by man, for man—based on the autonomy of man's reason . . . honors and serves the dominion of Satan" (Kranendonk, 1978). It favors, instead, instruction based on the "immutable facts of God's Word" (Carlson, 1982).

*Jesus-Suffering-Sin-Salvation.* The formal school experience at Bethany covers a vast range of content, as it does at any school, but in few places do the teachers who present it vary so little in their beliefs and values. Though there is no coordination among the various teachers and preachers who address Bethany's students, their words return repeatedly to a number of themes in a continuous process of illumination, beginning always with the life and death of Christ: "Let's read Philippians 2:5-8, first. We'll talk about the death on the cross today. What is the death? What does it mean to you? ... Christ went through such a death for you and me."

Jesus-suffering-sin-salvation: these notions give form and substance to the entire Bethany experience. They are the premise of the invitation Bethany offers its young people at the end of chapel sermons to get with the Lord in the first instance or, in the second, to get right with Him. Neither their parents' piety nor their own good works, baptism, or perfectly faithful attendance at church advances the students one inch down this path. They learn that accepting Jesus as their personal savior is the only path to salvation.

*Soul Winning.* While keeping their spiritual life untouched by the world, students are expected to reach out to the unsaved in the world by witnessing. At a chapel session they hear that "There are young people in this school who haven't been saved. Are you living right for their sake? Have you witnessed to them for their sake? Or are you just concerned about yourself?" Students are reminded daily of the significance of their personal testimony, which can be the bright face of goodness they beam forth before the unsaved world or the burdened, sin-laden countenance that places a stumbling block before others.

Pastor Burt leads students in his optional soul-winning class to understand how their personal limitations may affect their soul-winning activities. Knowing that fear may restrain their witnessing, Burt advises students: "Memorize your approach to questions, pray about your fears, admit that

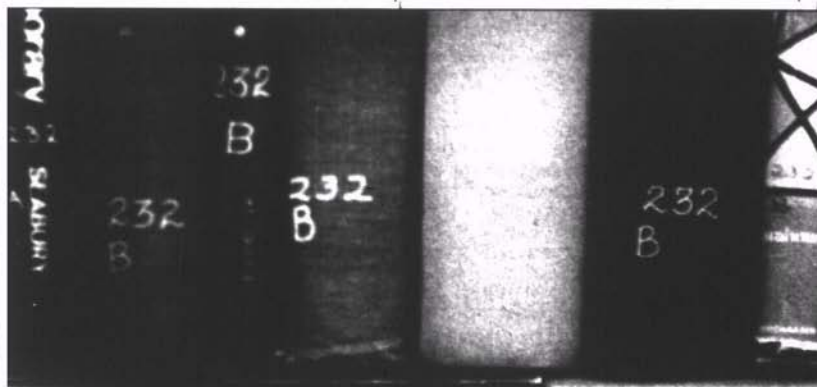
you have them, and realize that the Lord is with you." And he cautions: "Don't carry a big Bible in your hand; carry a New Testament that fits in your pocket. Don't spend time praying in your car in a prospect's driveway; he'll wonder what you're doing there. Watch your grooming and your manner of dress. Be friendly and smile. Ask a friend to check your breath before you visit the prospect."

*Christians Persecuted.* These budding soul winners and all their fellow students are led to expect rebuffs, not only for trying to reach the unsaved, but also just for being Christian. Persecution, they are taught, is their expected lot at the hand of the Satan-led populace. Teachers remind students of the courage Jesus' disciples needed, assuring them that persecution and the need for courage are not passé: "Kids, the day will come, maybe soon, when the world will treat us like animals. Psychiatrists will call us nuts."

*Prayer.* Prayers punctuate a student's day. Everyone is expected to pray before eating; all school activities begin with prayer. For an out-of-town basketball game, the bus driver-coach prays before the bus begins its journey; before the game starts, someone will pray that both teams be safe and play for the glory of Jesus Christ. During the daily in-class prayer, Mrs. Reynolds, an English teacher, requires her students to pray for one of the many missionaries that Bethany Baptist Church supports; they know she does

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the same in her own prayers. Mr. Kruger, the science teacher, advises his students to think of others when they pray, to recall those of their troubled classmates who would benefit from prayer. He even advises them to pray for new teachers like himself: "The more you pray for us, the more you'll get out of your classes." Prayer is not routine posturing at meal times and before other ceremonial occasions; it is communication with a God whom Bethanyites believe never tires of hearing the prayers of those directed to Him through His son Jesus. "See if God doesn't answer your prayers," encourages Mr. Swanson.



**232 Jesus Christ**

**Material Possessions.** Bethany advocates neither renunciation nor hardship to sustain the good Christian life. Yet, given the temporality of this life, students are taught to have the right perspective on material acquisitions, to balance the understandable concern to live in comfort now with due regard to the imperatives of eternity. "It's a tragedy," Pastor Muller informs the students in chapel, "when things of this life appeal to you more than the things of the Lord." Like all of Bethany's critical lessons, this one is not easy to incorporate in one's life. The moral is straightforward, the words readily learned: "Money itself is not bad; the love of money is bad. Worldliness begins to set in with possessions. We live in a pleasure-mad world. We need pleasure, but it should be in the right proportion and not draw us away from God."

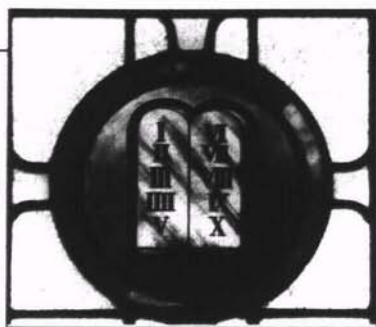
**Last Things.** While clear socialization for jobs and living in this world is part of its school experience, Bethany frames its entire educative effort with an awareness of the end of the world, eternity, and Christ's second coming. Visiting evangelists, chapel speakers, and teachers address when the end of the world will come, who will be seen when all Christians are united in heaven, and how the body must be transformed before it can enter heaven. They discuss the return of Jesus with the palpable reality of last Sunday's football game.

Evangelist Bill Hall is at Bethany for a week of revival meetings that are organized during the day for students and each night for both students and adults. He urges students to focus on the imminence of Christ's return.

All the signs are prevalent. Internationally we're in a mess; Khomeini is a religious fanatic who is leading the world to war. Nationally we're in a mess; our leadership [then President Carter] is bankrupt. Educationally we're in a mess; the NEA [National Education Association] is hopelessly communistic, humanistic, and liberal. Theologically we're in a mess; people deny that Jesus was born of a virgin. The U.S. is becoming more and more pagan.

### Character Development

This, then, is a brief picture of the religious outlook that Bethany com-



municates to its youth in formal and informal settings. Accompanying this picture is one that includes the particulars of behavior in everyday circumstances. However less grand and less implicated with eschatological considerations, these particulars receive serious attention for they relate to character, to Christian character, to the front that is seen by Christian and non-Christian alike. "Mr. McGraw, oh, yes, he is strong on character in everything he says and does," observes a teacher. "When I first came here, it was academics with me more than anything else, but that isn't the right perspective."

Headmaster McGraw most decisively instructs and reinforces character traits, whether it is one more reminder that teachers unflinchingly require "yes, sirs" and "no, ma'ams," or that students risk permanent removal of salt, pepper, and mustard from lunchroom tables if they misuse them. In the cause of character development the voices are many, as are the targets. Respect your parents, urges Pastor Muller in chapel. "Most of the time you think Mom and Dad are old fogies. Give them a chance. Think of how they work to keep you in a Christian school." Disrespect of adults, explains Assistant Headmaster Russ Warren to the participants in a statewide academic tournament, will earn fouls for one's team: "Fouls are earned for un-Christian behavior, like quarreling or showing a bad attitude toward the judges."

**Sex Roles.** Quite understandably, Bethany carefully defines sex roles and the nature of the male-female relationship. The student newspaper prints a letter from "Concerned," who is troubled by boys who make "nasty side remarks" in the presence of girls. "The young ladies don't like it." Mr. Swanson reads from Ephesians 5 and comments to his 12th grade bible class: "Relationship of man to wife—I'm the head of my wife, and my kids come under her. That's God's order. If

a wife doesn't submit, the doors are wide open to Satan."

What are the special needs of male and female children? Bruce Jackson (1982), Educational Director of the American Association of Christian Schools, makes explicit the fundamentalist Christian view of sex roles. Sons need to learn craft skills, work habits, gardening, manners, economics, leadership, music, and rhetoric. Daughters need to learn cooking, housekeeping, household management, manners, sewing, growing and arranging flowers, interior decoration, literary skills, and child care. Women are expected to be leaders in women's organizations, but leadership, otherwise, is a clear male prerogative.

Paster Muller tackles dating in a chapel message. Limited though their chances are to meet non-Christians, students hear few scriptural verses more often than 2 Corinthians 6:14, which directs them to "Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers. . . ." This means that dating non-Christians is taboo. Pastor Muller reassures his students that their interest in the opposite sex is perfectly natural and "absolutely necessary according to God's program unless He gives you the gift of celibacy."

The range of injunctions Bethany means to impress upon its charges is too lengthy to list here. Some idea of its extent is illustrated by the Bible class worksheet, cheerleader tryouts, and Bethany's annual summer youth trip.

**Bible Class Worksheet.** The dittoed bible class worksheet is a page of notebook-sized paper that is divided in half vertically. On the left, inside a darkened, ominous-looking heart, are the words, "My will," "born of the flesh," "received from Adam," and "old nature." On the right, inside a glistening heart, are the words "God's will," "born of the spirit," "received in Christ," and "new nature." Listed under the dark heart are attitudes of the flesh: "But I've seen certain Christians doing it . . . so why can't I?" "Just this once won't hurt. No one will know." "It's my life! I'll live it any way I please." "I'll get even if it's the last

thing I do." Students learn the "spiritual antidote" to these objectionable attitudes by selecting from the scriptural verses listed under the bright heart the one that reveals God's truth. For example, students should counter the old-nature sentiment, "But Mom . . . all the girls are wearing them," with the new-nature antidote of Ephesians 6:1-2, paraphrased on the worksheet as, "Even when I can't understand their reasons, Lord, help me obey my parents to honor your command."

**Cheerleader Tryouts.** On Wednesday of the week before school begins, Bethany's cheerleader candidates fill the gym, alive with nervous excitement as they anticipate their trial before peers, two teacher sponsors, and Assistant Headmaster Russ Warren. Thirty-two girls sit on the gym floor listening to Warren explain the selection procedure. Earlier, each girl received a copy of the cheerleader guidelines, which she and her parents had to sign. Warren elaborates on these guidelines, beginning with the observation that no girl can be chosen unless she is "an example of the believers, in word, conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). The verification of a girl's spiritual reputation is made by Headmaster McGraw, Russ Warren, the youth pastor, and Pastor Muller.

As Warren discusses the guidelines, his tone is serious and the culotte-clad girls are perfectly quiet and attentive. The two cheerleader sponsors lean against the stage listening to him say, "If these ladies [the two sponsors] don't see the joy of the Lord on your face right now in the tryout, it won't be there afterwards. You know you'll have to submit to leadership baptism [sign the leadership pledge] if you make it." Warren stresses the importance of dependability and having the right attitude. Teachers frequently refer to "right attitude," but never explain exactly what it entails. It seems to refer to virtues that everyone understands.

**Summer Youth Trip.** For the cheerleading losers, there always is next year, when both they and the winners go on the annual two-week summer youth trip. All students aspiring to



student leadership positions must take this trip. Youth Pastor Burt, assisted by several Bethany teachers, leads this intense experience in the mountains of Wyoming or Montana. A typical day includes an early morning service, a pre-lunch service, afternoon classes, an evangelistic service in the evening, and, finally, bedtime devotions. Students are expected to benefit from the cumulative effect of overwhelming contact with the Word of the Lord undiminished by any competing alternatives. For Bethany students, this is their total spiritual experience; for Bethany educators, it is their chance to prepare student leaders for the year ahead and to motivate all students to dedicate themselves to full-time Christian service.

Aside from the spiritual aspects of this trip, it also is an occasion to reinforce desirable character traits. From a sheet titled "Laws to Live By" trippers learn that tobacco, liquor, and questionable literature are forbidden. They are expected to be smiling, cheerful, and willing; "rebellious spirits" are not allowed. Finally, romantic expression is controlled much as it is at school: girls sit in the front of the bus and boys in the back, no physical contact is allowed, and no couples can go off by themselves.

### Immersed in The Word

Bethany teachers believe that to properly socialize a Christian child they must "guard his mind." Guarding minds is a hallmark of the didactic milieu. Thus the religiosity that permeates the Academy is as complete as Bethany educators can manage. Given the teachers' doctrinal orthodoxy, any divisiveness of belief and behavior that may exist is not on a matter of consequence.

More than most schools, Bethany emphasizes doing and being, rather than knowing about, but this is a relative matter. Bethany, after all, instructs its children about the linguistic, nu-

merical, and environmental aspects of life. Thus, the study of verb tenses, logarithms, climate, and the Constitution compose the school's nonspiritual, cognitive experience. While teachers value and seldom ignore this aspect of their work, it is perhaps the least of what they do, not in terms of time but of commitment.

Most of what they do is directed toward becoming and being Christian, leaving no doubt that the proof of their fundamentalist pudding is in living always as a Christian. Informed that there is but one standard, one outlook, one code of conduct, students are taught to see all of life as one, with no warrant for spiritual adjustments. Right behavior does not vary with time and place. Choice, doubt, evidence—these are excluded from the pedagogical arsenal. On principle, they are strangers to the Christian classroom where Truth reigns. □

All references to Christians in this article are to those persons who consider themselves fundamentalist, born-again Christians.

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