

What Is the Big Deal about Accreditation?

From time to time, a prospective student will ask me, “Is CBIS accredited?” Without hesitation, I tell them that we are not regionally or nationally accredited but that our accreditation is ecclesiastic. Then the question usually begins with, “Will my credits be accepted elsewhere? If you are not regionally or nationally accredited, you have poor quality, right?” There is no doubt about the sincerity of these questions, but it is important to understand some philosophy about accreditation and its effects on Christian institutions before questions like these are answered.

Accreditation Defined (Source: Merriam Webster)

To accredit is to give official authorization to or approval of; to provide with credentials; to recognize or vouch for as conforming with a standard; to recognize as maintaining standards that qualify the graduates for admission to higher or more specialized institutions or for professional practice; to consider or recognize as outstanding.

Accreditation has many benefits for both educational institutions and students, but it is neither a guaranty nor is it the sole criterion of an excellent education. Every accredited institution was once unaccredited. For example, Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) was founded in 1924 but was not accredited by SACS until 1969, long after the graduation of notables such as Dwight Pentecost, Charles Ryrie, and Chuck Swindoll. Dallas Theological Seminary was not accredited by ATS until 1994, but its excellent education before then is unassailable.

Forty years ago, fundamental Christian colleges were unified in their thinking about accreditation. It was looked upon as an unnecessary and unhealthy thing. Pioneers and leaders in the Christian college movement—like Myron Cedarholm—cited a number of objections to the practice of accreditation in the Christian college realm. In recent years, several colleges who at one time eschewed accreditation now proudly declare it as a valued distinction of their institutions. What has happened through the years? In the following paragraphs, I would like to share with you some reasons why CBIS has made the conscious choice to seek neither regional nor national accreditation but that we have chosen ecclesiastical accreditation and or accountability instead.

An accrediting agency is an organization that is approved by the US Department of Education to establish operating standards for institutions. According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, there are seven institutions that provide *regional accreditation*. This type of agency is responsible for providing approval of many secular universities and some private Christian colleges and universities. Another type of accreditation is known as *national accreditation*. Agencies providing national accreditation are usually specialized in nature. The Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS) is a good example of an agency that provides membership to schools that are distinctively Christian. Both regional and national accreditation can be found in fundamental Christian colleges today.

It is also commonly thought that accreditation ensures that credits must be allowed to transfer from one accredited institution to another. That is not what the Department of Education says.

They encourage students to investigate whether or not their credits will be accepted by another accredited institution before making plans for their education.

While nationally accredited institutions will usually accept credit from regionally or nationally accredited institutions, regionally accredited schools often do not accept credit from nationally accredited institutions.

It is also commonly thought that accreditation will ensure the highest quality of an education. While accreditation can provide a college with institutional safeguards and organizational standards, it can by no means guarantee that one is going to get high-quality training in the classroom. That is the responsibility of the administration and board of the school. Accreditation does offer some helpful concepts such as self-study and accountability. However, these things can also be done without the help of an accrediting agency that is endorsed by the Department of Education. At CBIS, we are committed to providing the highest quality of training that can be received from any Bible College, University, Seminary and or Institute.

Accreditation causes Christian colleges to place growing financial dependence upon the federal government. The distinction has been made by several accreditation proponents that the colleges do not get the funding directly. It is given to the students. That observation may be correct, but in the end, the same result happens. If a college loses its accredited status, it stands to lose a consistent income provided by Uncle Sam. At the very least, the college will be tempted to reconsider its “Biblical” convictions. CBIS does not want that temptation.

Along this same line, I have seen a growing number of graduates who prepared for the ministry in accredited Christian colleges who are forced to delay their entrance into the ministry because they must first repay large student loans. In a conference hosted at Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary in Lansdale, PA, in 1995, Dr. Les Ollila cited this very reason as one of his oppositions to accreditation in a Bible college setting. In a way that only Dr. O could say it, he told the preachers in attendance: “Don’t trust Clinton instead of Jehovah-Jireh.”

Accreditation could restrict institutions like CBIS from hiring teachers who are spiritually qualified to train young people for the ministry. The secular world is looking for credentialed teachers with degrees from accredited institutions. God is looking for men who are like 1 Timothy 3 and for women who are like Titus 1. The secular world places the emphasis in the wrong place. Character is trumped by knowledge and pedigree. It would be better to have a preacher who has walked with God and was skilled in the Word training preachers than a man with the right degrees but no spiritual substance. This is why we prefer ecclesiastic accountability.

In the event that an accredited Christian college would want to leave an accrediting agency, it would not be a simple process. The breaking of that relationship could trigger lawsuits by unhappy alumni. By withdrawing from the accrediting agency, their diplomas would be rendered “worthless” in the system of the world. Is it really worth the risk? Just recently, I read of some proposed bylaws by the Department of Education that would have pressured all Christian colleges to seek licensing in order to exist. Thankfully, the proposal was withdrawn. With the

advancement of the homosexual agenda and other developments, the pressure will come to accredited Christian colleges.

The truth is that all Christian colleges should be held to a higher accountability—the Word of God. For CBIS to maintain a high level of excellence and to improve for God’s glory, it must remember 1 Corinthians 10:31 and “do all to the glory of God.” While we may be regionally and nationally unaccredited by conviction, we are ever mindful of the high standard of Scripture.

I realize that good men disagree with our position. Nonetheless, we are persuaded in our own conscience that this position is true to the Scriptures. I heard a noted Christian educator say that if he led his institution to seek accreditation, the school would have “one ear turned to the accrediting agency and the other one turned to God.” At CBIS, we want both ears tuned toward Heaven as we train God’s servants for God’s service

Notes

1. “FAQs about Accreditation,” U.S. Department of Education Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs, accessed January 27, 2011. <http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/FAQAccr.aspx>
2. “Regional Accrediting Organizations 2010–2011,” Council for Higher Education Accreditation, accessed January 27, 2011. <http://www.chea.org/Directories/regional.asp>
3. “Accreditation does not provide automatic acceptance by an institution of credit earned at another institution, nor does it give assurance of acceptance of graduates by employers. Acceptance of students or graduates is always the prerogative of the receiving institution or employer. For these reasons, besides ascertaining the accredited status of a school or program, students should take additional measures to determine, prior to enrollment, whether or not their educational goals will be met through attendance at a particular institution.”
(“FAQs about Accreditation,” U.S. Department of Education Database.)
4. Dr. Les Ollila, speaking at the 1995 Leadership Conference held at Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary in Lansdale, PA, on March 2, 1995.
5. Dr. Bob Jones III, speaking at the 1995 Leadership Conference held at Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary in Lansdale, PA, on March 2, 1995.