

Creating a Robot Citizenry:  
The Christian Right's opposition to Outcome-Based Education and  
Whole Language Learning

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The Christian fundamentalist view of biblical inerrancy is extremely powerful. It affects nearly every social and political view of the Christian Right. Biblical inerrancy means that absolute truth exists, and anything that embraces relativism is wrong, evil and antithetical to the Bible. In education, this has been interpreted to mean that the teaching of strictly factual material is paramount. In this paper I will show that the Christian Right is opposed to outcome-based education and whole language learning due to their simplistic worldview derived from biblical inerrancy.

Throughout the paper I refer to Christian fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are a more theologically and politically conservative subset of evangelicals. Fundamentalists believe all knowledge comes from the Bible and the Bible contains answers to all of the complexities of life. Fundamentalists and evangelicals both believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, but fundamentalists generally take a more literal interpretation. For the purpose of this paper, then, it is more accurate to focus on fundamentalists because they have a more narrow view of the Bible than evangelicals. Furthermore, fundamentalists are generally at the forefront of the outcome-based education and whole language debates.

In part I, I provide an historical account of the Christian Right's view on public education. These views are important to consider because the Christian Right, generally, wants to regress the morals and behavior of society to a time before civil rights, the civil war, and even further, back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In part II, I discuss the strategies used by the Christian Right to gain influence in local school board elections. These strategies are vital to exerting their influence on topics that they disapprove of. In part III, I examine the Christian Right's arguments against outcome-based education, and in part IV, I examine the debate over phonics and whole language learning.

## **I. The Christian Right and Public Education**

From the Christian fundamentalist perspective, public education has deep roots in biblical teaching. In 1642, the first public schools were established in Massachusetts. They were founded on religious principles and the main objective was to teach children how to read the Bible. The Puritan leaders viewed the public school system as a way of passing down their values from generation to generation (Deckman, 2004). This desire is based on an interpretation of the Bible that gives parents ultimate authority on education. Parental authority continues to be a major theme in education policy for the Christian Right today.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants began enforcing their values on others using state law. They were focused on issues of temperance, Bible reading and opposition to teaching evolution. They saw these areas as social ills, and the only way to change that them was through cultural conditions, which are tied to the public school system (Spring, 1997). These Protestants were unabashed about imposing their pietism, which stressed right behavior, on the public because they were confident that all reasonable people shared their beliefs (Tyack, 1985). They believed the majority of the people shared their morals.

The 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial represented a turning point for fundamentalist Christians. The Tennessee law that prompted the trial outlawed any teaching that “links man in blood relationship between any lower form of life” (Deckman, 2004). William Jennings Bryan believed that teaching evolution in public schools is anathema to the Genesis account of creation. God created man, so it is impossible for humanity to come from millions of years of evolution. Scopes, the teacher tried for teaching evolution, was found guilty but the trial was considered a success for pro-evolution forces. Jennings was

humiliated for his overtly ideological testimony, including an explanation for how Jonah became stuck in the belly of a whale (Deckman, 2004). That humiliation, by extension, affected all Christian fundamentalists.

After the trial, fundamentalists largely retreated from politics. Instead, they focused on private schools like Bob Jones University and Dallas Theological Seminary (Deckman, 2004). Home schooling was another popular option for the public-education-weary fundamentalist. Keeping their children out of public schools was a way for evangelical parents to retain authority over the education of their children.

Fundamentalist leaders returned to politics over the 1950s debate of anticommunism in schools. The Reverend Carl McIntire, founder of the American Council of Christian Churches, said the United State's free market prosperity and political system were instruments of God's purpose (Deckman, 2004). Modern education was viewed as communist propaganda designed to brainwash their children. Patriotic language is often used in the debate over capitalism and communism. Today, this is still a common theme employed by the Christian Right when it comes to new ideas, like outcome-based education.

Anticommunism was often linked to sex education. Fundamentalists believed teaching about sex in school was a way for the communists to undermine the moral fiber of America, making the next generation more susceptible to the Marxists (Deckman, 2004). When it comes to sex education, the Christian Right does not tolerate any discussion of birth control, abortion or homosexuality. The only sex education they approve for their children is abstinence until marriage (Spring, 1997).

In terms of educating children about homosexuality, fundamentalists ridicule the teaching of gays living an alternative lifestyle instead of a deviant behavior. This would prevent children from understanding that some behaviors are always right, while some are always wrong. Fundamentalist parents were concerned that students would be taught that absolute truth did not exist (Deckman, 2004). For the fundamentalist, absolute truth and biblical inerrancy are one and the same. Anything that taught their children that absolute truth does not exist is labeled a secular humanism, the understanding that individuals can make moral decisions without God.

Secular humanism, according to fundamentalists, is very dangerous for children. It teaches children that they can use their moral reasoning and critical thinking skills to solve problems. Fundamentalists don't want their children to use reasoning, for that could lead them to challenge their strict obedience to the word of God (Spring, 1997).

In the same vein, the Christian Right is opposed to teaching multiculturalism. This is tied to the fundamentalist idea that Christianity is the one true religion. Moreover, the Christian Right believes that America is superior to other cultures because it was founded on Judeo-Christian principles (Spring, 1997). Therefore, any curriculum that teaches that all religions are equally valid "threatens the eternal well-being of their children" (Burron, 1994). This concept is inextricably linked to the Christian Right opposition to outcome-based education and whole language.

In 1963, the Supreme Court prohibited official school prayer and Bible reading in *Abington School District v. Schempp*. Much like the Scopes Monkey Trial caused fundamentalist parents to take their children out of public schools, Schempp prompted another school choice movement. In their eyes, this ruling took away their parental right of

education derived from the Bible, and ended the traditional function of public schools, dating back 300 years. Christians declared public schools the enemy of Christianity (Spring, 1997). These fundamentalist parents thought it was unfair that they had to pay for public schools they didn't attend. This sparked Christian Right support for voucher programs in which the government would provide direct financial aide to parents to help defray the cost of private school tuition. Voucher supporters argued that this would force public and private schools to compete for student enrollment (Deckman, 2002).

Although President Jimmy Carter was an evangelical, his administration caused another backlash from the Christian Right. In 1978, the IRS required Christian private schools to prove that they were not established to preserve segregation, due to extremely low minority enrollment (Spring, 1997). Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition would later say, "More than any other single episode, the IRS move against Christian Schools sparked the explosion of the movement that would become known as the Christian Right" (Spring, 1997).

Christian Right strategist Paul Weyrich said the IRS move "shattered" the idea that the Christians could isolate themselves and teach what they wanted (Deckman, 2004). Fundamentalists thought they could protect their parental authority on education by joining private Christian schools, but the IRS didn't accept that. The long-held conservative belief of an intrusive and powerful government was exacerbated. This belief is important in the discussion of outcome-based education.

Since 1978, the Christian Right has evolved from a conservative fringe group focused on social issues that conflicted with the Chamber of Commerce type republicans to what it is today: the de facto establishment of the Republican Party. Throughout the 80s

and 90s, the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, among other organizations, were needed to advance the platform of the Christian Right. Today, the Christian Right has become a part of mainstream politics that no longer needs one or two organizations to bring attention to Christian Right issues (Cibulka, 2008).

## **II. The Christian Right and School Boards**

Before discussing the Christian Right opposition to outcome-based education and whole language, it is important to understand how the Christian Right uses local school board elections to achieve their goals. In the late 80s and early 90s, the Christian Right realized the best way to shape curriculum and to get what they wanted out of public schools is to get their people on school boards. The tactics employed by the Christian Right resemble the differences between the first wave and second wave of Christian Right organizing.

In 1986, Robert Thoburn, of the Fairfax Christian School in Virginia encouraged Christian Right members to run for their local school boards and to be as obstructionist as possible:

“Our goal is not to make the schools better.... The goal is to hamper them, so they cannot grow... Our goal as God-fearing, uncompromised... Christians is to shut down the public schools, not in some revolutionary way, but step by step, school by school, district by district” (Thoburn, 1986).

This is representative of first wave organizing, characteristic of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. Thoburn encourages his followers to be uncompromisingly ideological in their goals. They don't try to do what they think the public will accept. They have a narrow-minded goal that doesn't actually help anyone but themselves. The success of this strategy has proved to be limited in that their issues are put on the table, but they typically don't

achieve any real change. Deckman (2004) notes that most school board candidates that try to force their ideology on people tend to be voted out after their first term.

The end goal of the Thoburn-type Christian Right school board candidates is directly related to the push for voucher support of private schools. They want to hamper public schools to the point that at least 2-4 percent of parents pull their children out of public schools and transfer them into Christian private schools or homeschooling (Berliner, 1997). This would create more demand for voucher programs. To make the public schools less effective, Thoburn encourages his followers to vote against all taxes, promote larger class sizes, reduce teacher salaries and to demand tighter accounting practices (Thoburn, 1986).

The Christian Coalition strategy, on the other hand, is quite different. While people like Thoburn (1986) push for the abolition of the Department of Education, the Christian Coalition considers the hesitations of normal voters and moderate issues in making decisions (Johnson, 1995). In the mid 90s, the Christian Coalition made a push for its members to run for local school boards. This was an integral part of Ralph Reed's grassroots organizing. Showing the perceived salience of education to the Christian Right, Reed once said he would "exchange the Presidency for 2,000 school seats in the United States" (Deckman, 2004). Through local school boards, Christian Right members can gain experience in public office, then slowly gain more recognition and attention. Christian Coalition Director of Voter Information Charles H. Cunningham said, "Local candidates, particularly those for school board, are the farm teams for higher elected office" (Johnson, 1995). To prepare and educate Christian Right school board members, the Christian Coalition held seminars for candidates on how to raise money, develop campaign messages,



recruit volunteers for churches and conservative organizations, and mobilize voters (Deckman, 2004).

The organization's first school board candidate convention was held in Atlanta in May 1994. At this convention, the Christian Coalition used characteristic techniques of the second wave of Christian Right organizing. Christian Coalition leaders put a lot of effort into appearing to be centrist and not "kooky" (Johnson, 1995). The 100 school board candidates at the convention, however, were not so centrist. For example, a speaker on voucher programs was asked by a school board candidate from Volusia County, Florida, if it was possible to eliminate a school-based clinic that she claimed was performing abortions (Johnson, 1995). In addition to abortion, many attendees asked about classroom Bible study and multiculturalism. Here we can see the common problem of second wave organizing. The leaders want to appear more moderate than the actually are, to be able to win elections and reach their legislative goals, but the supporters are more ideological.

The differences between Thoburn and the Christian Coalition are an example of the differences between fundamentalists and evangelicals. Evangelicals prefer to negotiate, while fundamentalists are more ideological and more likely to confront their opposition head on (Holderer, 1995). Fundamentalists believe Christianity is the one true religion and salvation is possible only through faith in Jesus (Burrton, 1994). Fundamentalists leaders routinely tell their followers that the "conservative agenda [is] fundamentally right" (Johnson, 1995). If you were absolutely sure that you are right, why would you want to compromise? This goes back to the historical white Anglo-Saxon protestants that imposed their pietisms on the public because they were sure a majority of people shared their

beliefs. These deeply held convictions are derived from the fundamentalist conservative theology regarding biblical inerrancy and absolute truth.

One similarity between the Thoburn strategy and the Christian Coalition strategy is the use of stealth campaigns. This stealth strategy was common among the first and second wave of Christian Right organizing. By appearing moderate and touting common-sense issues that affect schools, Christian Right candidates are more likely to be elected to office. Thoburn (1986) suggests that Christian Right school board candidates not reveal their motives or strong Christian beliefs until after they are elected. At the Atlanta convention, Shelley Uscinski, a school board member from Merrimack, New Hampshire, told attendees, "Don't wear your religion on your sleeve. You may be religious, but you must stay focused on school issues. Talk their language; they don't understand yours" (Johnson, 1995). This is evocative of the December 1999 Republican presidential debate when George W. Bush cited "Christ" as the political philosopher or thinker he most identifies with. Moderator John Bachman asked Bush to explain his response, to which he responded, "Well, if they don't know, it's going to be hard to explain" (American Presidency Project, 1999). This exchange reinforces the idea that non-evangelicals really don't understand the evangelical language. They are living in two different worlds and if you haven't been born again, then you don't understand where Bush is coming from. Without a stealth strategy and the Christian Coalition's insistence on appearing moderate, Christian Right candidates would appear to be extremist fringe candidates to the general public.

The Christian Right is a very broad group and it is dangerous to label and stereotype them as one homogenous organization. Some Christian Right school board candidates, such as Thoburn, want to hamper public schools to increase demand for vouchers. While these

types don't want to make the public schools better, the Christian Coalition doesn't necessarily aim to do that. Their strategy wants to make public schools more Christian oriented, by singling out curriculum or books that teach secular humanism. They aim to dismantle initiatives they don't want their children to be introduced to. In the 90s, two main sources of attack from the Christian Right include outcome-based education and whole language learning.

### **III. The Christian Right and Outcome-Based Education**

The Christian Right criticizes outcome-based education (OBE) because of their simplistic worldview derived from biblical inerrancy. For the Christian Right, OBE marked the departure from the traditional method of teaching, characterized by the learning rote memorization of facts, to a modern method, which allows the student to come to conclusions by thinking critically. They say it changes the way their children are taught, focusing on politically correct values, attitudes and behaviors instead of objective facts (Spring, 1997). The traditional method distinguishes "good" from "evil," while the modern method allows good and bad principles to change according to the situation. The latter is antithetical to the fundamentalist belief of biblical inerrancy, and causes their children to question the word of God.

The Department of Education's Goals 2000 brought the principles of OBE into the public eye. Goals 2000 was a federal program that set national education goals and offered competitive grants for public schools that detailed their goals and how they would meet them (Deckman, 2004). The program was initiated by President George H. W. Bush but carried out by President Bill Clinton starting in 1994. Congress cut funding for the program in 2002 after the passage of President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act.

The program was composed of eight goals, including increased graduation rates, getting the U.S. to rank first in the world in math and science and increasing parental involvement and participation in public schools (Deckman, 2004). To the objective observer, these seem like fairly common-sense ideas that everyone can support. Who wouldn't want more kids to graduate high school?

The Christian Right opposition to Goals 2000 is based on the fear of national or state curriculum control. Opposition to OBE is based on similar fears of undue influence on their schools, but OBE is instituted at the school district level, not nationally. The deeper reasoning behind the opposition "is based on fear of losing control over their children's thinking" (Berliner, 1997). James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, interprets the Bible to give educational authority to the parents: "a child learns to yield to the authority of God by first learning to submit to the leadership of his parents" (Berliner, 1997). With OBE it isn't about national guidelines driving the public schools, it's about giving teachers the freedom to teach open-ended values and attitudes (Parkyn, 1994). The opposition to Goals 2000 and OBE is about losing parental rights over education.

This justification goes back to the historical roots of public education in passing on the parents values to the children. If the public school system takes away this right from the Christian fundamentalist parent, then the parents either protest the changes or take their children out of public school. Christian fundamentalist parent Vicki Frost exemplifies this concept. Frost was deeply upset that her sixth-grade daughter's public school tossed the old Economy readers and adopted the new Holt, Reinhart and Winstron Basic Reading Series. The old books emphasized what she viewed as good American Christian values, but the new books were full of "minorities, foreigners, environmentalism, women in non-

traditional roles, and open-ended value judgments without clear right and wrong answers” (DeFatorre, 1992). Frost wanted to make sure that she had complete authority over her children’s education and that the values that she learned as a child were passed down to her children. The basic values and lessons her daughter was being taught in school conflicted with the principles of the absolute truths in the Bible. Critical thinking has the capacity to lead the born-again Christian away from the concept of Biblical inerrancy.

Instead of critical thinking, the Christian Right prefers teaching only factual knowledge. Parkyn (1994), a Pennsylvania school board member and Spanish professor at Messiah College, says the facts-only approach fills students heads with minutia and completely ignores the bigger picture. She provides an example of her 15-year-old daughter and some friends studying for her American History final exam. They had to review the dates of six Tariff acts. Parkyn asked the group, “What’s a tariff?” They responded, “I doesn’t matter, we just need to know the dates.” This is the effect of relying only on memorizing facts and ignoring the context and critical thinking aspects of learning. OBE, says Parkyn, addresses these deficiencies and adapts to a changing world with new demographics and new ideas.

When Goals 2000 was initiated, most people were unaware of the term OBE and what it meant. For the Christian Right, OBE was a nebulous concept of teaching secular humanism and taking away their parental rights. But what was the intent of OBE and how did it become interpreted this way by the Christian Right?

For the answer, we must turn to William Spady, the self-proclaimed father of the OBE movement. Whereas the Christian Right criticizes the modern teaching method, Spady criticizes the traditional method. He says that method is based on the theory that “every

student, without exception, had to perform the same task in the same amount of time and in the same sequence on a fixed schedule” (Tucker, 1998). This is restrictive, arbitrary and does not fill the needs of every student, because everyone learns at different speeds.

According to Spady, OBE is based on four simple principles that allow every student to succeed at their own pace. The system is based on clarity of focus on outcomes of significance, expanded opportunity for successful learning, high expectations for a high level of performance, and finally, designing down, or building backward from where you want students to end up (Tucker, 1998).

So how did these four principles create a backlash from the Christian Right? Spady says, “Critics read into the outcome statements, not the spirit of what was intended, but an endorsement of the specific practices they disapproved of” (Tucker, 1998). In Pennsylvania, a phrase about appreciating diversity in others was interpreted to be an endorsement of teaching homosexuality in the classroom. Often, fundamentalists agreed that OBE contradicts their values, but they weren’t sure which specific elements they object to (Burron, 1994). The Pennsylvania case shows how a simple idea can be misinterpreted. And when the opposition to OBE is based on different interpretations, the Christian Right becomes fractured movement.

A few weeks after the Pennsylvania diversity statement was misinterpreted, the Christian Right had made sweeping declarations that everything labeled OBE was directly related to secular humanism. “We quickly found out the public had been convinced we were the enemy,” said Spady (Tucker, 1997). OBE was translated to be the complete opposite from what Spady intended.

According to a 1998 survey of Christian Right school board candidates, opposition to OBE was not definitive. Of 671 candidates, 36 percent strongly support OBE, 35 percent are undecided and 25 percent strongly oppose OBE (Deckman, 2004). These results are indicative of the nebulous definition and implementation of that teaching method. As the Pennsylvania case demonstrates, OBE can be interpreted in many ways that seculars would not even think to consider.

Burron (1994) of Citizens for Excellence in Education suggests that many ideas that seem harmless from the secular perspective can deeply threaten the beliefs of fundamentalist Christians. No matter how well meaning or innocent a new initiative may sound, the Christian Right, with their simplistic worldview derived from biblical inerrancy, can interpret them to be relativistic and thus dangerous to their children's minds. Christian Right parents' just want strict obedience to the word of God.

Robert Simmonds, founder of Citizens for Excellence in Education, said OBE is "an insidious development to lock all children into mind control—creating a robot citizenry" (Berliner, 1997). Upon examining the actual method of OBE and comparing that to how fundamentalists parents want their children to behave, it is pretty obvious which one is more suited for robots.

The opposition to OBE is reminiscent of the Christian Right's 1950s anticommunism movement. The traditional method of teaching meant that some students succeed while some fail. It is the classic idea of the bell curve. The reasoning behind OBE methodology is that every student can succeed, just not necessarily at the same pace (Tucker, 1998). This dichotomy resembles the differences between capitalism and communism. Christian fundamentalists like the idea that some people will fail, while, hopefully, their children will

succeed. They don't want everyone to be equal. That would mean including homosexuals and other social undesirables.

Adding on to the theme of capitalism versus communism is the idea of individual work versus group work. In many Christian Right private schools, interaction between students is cut off because group work is not valued (Berliner, 1997). Cooperative learning is seen as undermining the individuals' relationship to the subservience of God (Berliner, 1997). OBE, on the other hand, routinely relies on collective discussion and group work to reach solutions "to complex problems affecting their communities" (Spady, Marshall, Rogers, 1994). This kind of language scares the fundamentalist Christian. They think their children are being indoctrinated to believe absolute truth doesn't exist. The Christian Right, particularly the first wave, is not used to compromising to reach a consensus, which does not correlate with biblical inerrancy.

The 1998 survey of school board candidates, mentioned earlier in this section, showed strong support (79 percent) for phonics among Christian Right candidates, this was the highest of any Christian Right issue (Deckman, 2004). As we will learn in the next section, phonics was a very salient point for the Christian Right, and the GOP establishment.

#### **IV. The Christian Right and Whole Language Learning**

The Christian Right views phonics as being distinctly Christian, while teaching children to read using the whole language method is viewed as secular humanism. The simplistic worldview of the Christian Right, derived from biblical inerrancy, makes phonics easier to understand than whole language. Phonics is the process of associating sounds with syllables. Whole language thrusts the child directly into reading, where they have to understand a word by looking at it. This method is best demonstrated by the "Dick and



Jane” story books used in the 1950s, which repeat similar words on each page (Reyhner, 2008). The Christian Right support of phonics comes from a scriptural basis, an extreme dualistic mentality, parental authority, obedience and misleading fact sheets.

In 1983, Tim LaHaye, cofounder of the Institute for Creation Science, said the whole language method was “a theory based on atheistic, humanistic beliefs” and that the liberal education establishment saw “phonics textbooks as inculcat[ing]... too many acknowledgements of a supreme being” (Paterson, 2000). The idea that phonics acknowledges a supreme being stems from the book of Genesis. According to the Bible, God created an orderly universe and gave humanity language as a part of that order (Holderer, 1995). The Christian Right has interpreted this to mean that God gave humanity speech, not the ability to discern meaning from written text. This interpretation insists that phonics must be taught first to allow the child to learn to speak and sound out syllables, because that’s what God gave us. The connection of speech to the Bible further establishes the idea of absolute truth. Whole language, then, is repugnant to God because it suggests that there is no absolute truth. Phonics upholds the idea of absolute truth because it is based on a systematic set of grammar rules and syllable-sound relationships. The Christian Right wants phonics to be taught before any type of reading or writing takes place.

Biblical inerrancy and absolute truth make it difficult for the fundamentalist Christian to understand how a child can know what a word means simply by looking at it. The look-say method, as it was called, turns children’s “brains into macaroni,” Samuel Blumenfield said (Paterson, 2000). Similarly, the Eagle Forum routinely said whole language is too difficult for children and only causes confusion (Holderer, 1995). Deriving a

specific sound from a specific syllable is easier to comprehend than trying to derive meaning from multiple syllables put together.

Absolute truth leads to the extreme dualistic mentality of the Christian Right. If the Bible is right and good and true, then anything that contradicts the Bible is wrong and bad and false (Holderer, 1995). It assumes that all information is either right or wrong, there is no middle ground. The extreme dualistic mentality is intensified by the shift from traditional rules and facts centered methods to modern theories that are more relativistic. The traditional Christian teaching method relied on the Bible, and the Christian Right believes this was a time when all children were truly educated (Holderer, 1995). The modern method focuses on the future, instead of the past. The Christian Right views this method as hostile to Christianity. Whole language learning and OBE do not truly teach all of the children because they imply relativism and do not rely on the Bible.

This simplistic worldview is dangerous for education policy. The goal of education, in general, is to broaden the intelligence and knowledge of students. In schools, teachers are the authority figure, and fundamentalist parents want them to teach their children principles that they agree with. When teachers, or textbooks, veer from absolute truth, fundamentalist parents protest.

For an illustration of this concept, we can turn our attention back to fundamentalist parent Vicki Frost. Her daughter was reading a story about Martians that can transfer their thoughts directly to the minds of Earthlings in whatever form they can understand. For example, a medical doctor would hear “fractured tibia” and someone else might hear “broken leg” (DeFatorre, 1992). A question at the end of the story asked why some Earthlings called the Martians “Beautiful People” while others called them “Lovely Ones.”

The correct answer was, “The thought behind both expressions was the same” (DeFatorre, 1992). For Frost, this was a refutation of absolute truth, and thus an attack on the Bible, even though the content was completely ideologically neutral. Questioning the existence of absolute truth, Frost believed, is dangerous to the mind of her young impressionable daughter; it would most certainly lead to questioning the literalness of the Bible.

The whole language method takes away parental authority because it allows students to choose literature. Phonics relies on basal readers that are extremely structured. They guide the elementary school student through different short stories or exercises. The Christian Right prefers this strict rules-based method. Whole language, on the other hand, encourages students to pick literature they are interested in and to read silently. This creates empowerment in the child and eliminates parental authority over what the child is reading. The Christian Right argues that letting their child choose what to read makes them less obedient to the parent, and to God (Holderer, 1995). Also, literature provides plenty of room for interpretation. The words are not just on the page, but in the mind of the reader as well (Berliner, 1997). Interpretation of any kind suggests that absolute truth does not exist, and again, disproves biblical inerrancy.

Mel and Norma Gabler, of Longview, Texas, object to allowing children to interpret anything on their own. “Allowing a student to come to his own conclusion about abstracts and concepts creates frustration...a concept will never do anyone as much good as a fact,” said Mel Gabler (Deckman, 2004). This reasoning suggests that absolute truth extends to nearly every facet of education.

Two Christian Right organizations were big players in the phonics debate. The Citizens for Excellence in Education and the Eagle Forum both distributed fact sheets on

phonics and encouraged their members to protest whole language at school board meetings (Holderer, 1995). Phyllis Schlafly, of the Eagle Forum, borrowed many of her ideas from the Gablers. Schlafly claims in her fact sheets that whole language is too hard for children to understand and reduces comprehension to guessing. In the 90s, many parents came to school board meetings armed with Eagle Forum fact sheets that condemn snippets of literature that they disagree with (Holderer, 1995). Often these parents have never actually read the literature, they just rely on the few brief passages in the page-long fact sheets. When taken out of the larger context of the book, the passages can be interpreted to mean any number of things that the Christian Right disagrees with. The extreme dualistic mentality of the Christian Right makes it even more difficult for parents to understand deeper, symbolic meanings of literature. Biblical inerrancy causes the Christian Right to believe that anything that isn't clearly stated is complete nonsense and poses a threat to their children.

Furthermore, many Christian Right parents often support a phonics-only approach to reading. They don't understand, however, that phonics isn't reading at all (Berliner, 1997). It is just the process of sounding out syllables. The problem with phonics is that the English language is chock full of exceptions, homophones, and words that are spelled differently than they are pronounced. If phonics is the only method used for teaching language, then children will grow up being confused over simple words used in prose. A deeper context of reading is needed for children to actually learn to read. Cibulka (2008) says the Christian Right is ideological, oppositional and adversarial. This is clearly seen in the phonics debate. They refuse to accept whole language because they believe it introduces subjectivity.

The phonics-only approach is counterintuitive to how children learn. Most educational theorists suggest that a balanced approach that uses a variety of methods of teaching elementary school students to read (Berliner, 1997). A balanced approach would begin with phonics and then use the whole language concepts of silent reading of literature. The extreme dualistic mentality of the Christian Right encourages them to strongly be opposed to whole language, which has been equated to secular humanism in fact sheets, so they generally completely oppose any effort to introduce whole language.

Aside from the questionable fact sheets, and local school board pushing for systematic phonics drills, spelling bees and intensive grammar drills (Holderer, 1995), the Christian Right put their legislative muscle to work to support phonics. From 1990-1997, over 100 phonics bills were introduced (Paterson, 2000). From 1994 to 1997, the level of detailed language significantly increased, showing a heightened sense of state government intrusion into the classroom, something that the Christian Right would usually be opposed to. The detailed language generally stipulates a “sequential” or “systematic” phonics approach. This goes back to the strict rules based method supported by a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Not surprisingly, Paterson (2000) found a strong correlation between the number of phonics bills, the level of detailed language and states and a strong Christian Right presence. Five bills introduced from 1994-1996 in Oklahoma, Alabama and Mississippi, all explicitly say whole language is a method that “teaches children to guess” (Paterson, 2000). This exact language appeared in Eagle Forum factsheets around the same time. This suggests a good deal of Christian Right influence over state legislatures. Cibulka’s (2008) claim that the Christian Right no longer needs one or two organizations to bring attention to their issues is certainly feasible today. With polarization at an all time high, the

GOP establishment relies on the strong support of the Christian Right. It truly is a mutual relationship.

### **V. Conclusion**

In response to fundamentalist parent Vicki Frost's textbook protests, the local school board argued that the reason all citizens pay for school is that the education of future generations is of concern to the whole society (DeFatorre, 1992). The Christian Right's simplistic worldview makes them forget about the concern of the whole society, because they believe their interpretation is right and everyone else's interpretation is wrong. The Christian Right could benefit themselves, and society, if they expanded their idea of what is acceptable in the classroom. A right versus wrong, black versus white worldview without any sense of compromise or middle ground is dangerous. It makes children hostile to any ideas except they are not familiar with. It is not consistent with the common good.

Education is extremely salient to the Christian Right because they believe the weak, anti-Christian public school system is the root of the major ills of society. In order to bring back traditional morals, the public schools must be changed and secular humanism must be rejected. Biblical inerrancy fosters a simplistic worldview that shapes Christian Right opinion on many social, political and educational issues. The idea that everything is either right or wrong creates a dangerous dichotomy in society. In education, biblical inerrancy has been interpreted to mean teaching just the facts. This means students know a lot of information, but are clueless in terms of interpreting the world and thinking critically.

It is hard to prove one way or the other if the modern teaching methods of outcome-based education and whole language are better than traditional methods. The Christian

Right, however, believes their simplistic worldview is inherently right and everything they disagree with is inherently wrong. That's the result of believing the Bible is the only source of knowledge. Not everything in life has to be put in two distinct boxes. Labeling every teaching method as either right or wrong is dangerous to society.

If Christian fundamentalists could time travel, they would go back to 17<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts. The traditional public schools taught children how to read the Bible and passed down the same values from generation to generation. The Christian Right fears modern teaching methods will create a generation that does not know how to read the Bible, and even more dangerous, won't interpret it literally. The simplistic worldview of the Christian Right leads them to believe that outcome-based education and whole language, are two modern teachings methods designed to dumb-down a generation of children.

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