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## Christian Codes of Conduct—A New Issue in the Culture War

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Readers of The Dallas Morning News were greeted on December 21, 2004 with this headline: “Gay Student Forced to Leave School, Academy Forced Him to Leave after Learning of Website He Created.” The article is actually an extensive editorial masquerading as a news report. Trinity Christian Academy, a private evangelical school located in Addison, a Dallas suburb, is described as a “fundamentalist” school, and the student is presented as a model citizen being persecuted because of his sexuality.

The paper’s account presents the student as “a varsity athlete and a winner of service and citizenship awards,” who was also active in the school’s theater program, had helped edit the yearbook, “and helped younger students with Bible study.” The honor student considered the school “his second family,” and the school had treated him like one of its favorite sons. “But when the school’s top administrators learned that the student had created a Website where teens chat about homosexuality, he said they gave him a choice: either leave quietly or face expulsion for ‘immoral behavior,’ which is prohibited by the school’s code of conduct.” As the newspapers saw it, “In a matter of days, the student, who is gay, went from prized student to sinner outcast.”

The student, who was not named in the newspaper’s coverage, told the reporter, “I feel completely violated. . . . The big lesson here for me is that you can’t really trust anybody. That, and I should have kept my mouth shut.”

The article included excerpts from a statement provided by the school’s headmaster, David Delph. “As a community of Christian families we also believe the Bible provides insight to help us discern God’s desire for our conduct. . . . Therefore, we demand high Biblical standards of behavior from our students both academically and socially. Our families are asked to embrace these standards of conduct by signing a covenant with the school when students are admitted. Within this framework of Biblical standards and academic rigor, an atmosphere of enhanced learning, character development, and love are allowed to flourish.”

The student’s withdrawal from the school came after officials learned that he had created a website for homosexual teenagers. When confronted by school administrators, the student acknowledged that he considered himself a homosexual and that he had sponsored the web site. According to The Dallas Morning News report, the boy asked school administrators not to tell his parents about his homosexuality. Nevertheless, the article indicated that his mother and father were involved in the disciplinary action and were thus aware of his homosexuality.

Even in The Dallas Morning News’ unfortunately biased account, it is apparent that the school acted within its rights and responsibilities as a Christian institution. Confronted with a student who was violating the code of conduct he and his parents had willingly signed, the school acted with integrity and conviction in requiring the young man to withdraw from

the school or face expulsion.

The statement released by Trinity's headmaster acknowledged the school's Christian responsibility. "We strive to handle each situation as Jesus Christ would. Since love is at the core of Jesus' nature, we try to ensure each student is surrounded by an abundance of loving care during any disciplinary process."

Once the story reached the press, it became an instant controversy. Articles have appeared in newspapers across the country, and the young man, named in some of these reports, has become a celebrity in the gay media.

The student's web site was the catalyst of the controversy and the focus of his trouble. As described by The Dallas Morning News, "The site, which is not pornographic or sexually explicit, is a place for gay teens to meet, chat and post pictures of themselves. The student said a similar site was instrumental in his coming to terms with his own sexual identity." The paper went on to report that as of the date of the young man's withdrawal, the site had some 1,724 registered members. Other press and internet-based accounts have described the site in similar terms. One weblog headlined its account, "Gay Student Outed and Expelled for G-Rated Website."

This is nothing less than a whitewash, and readers of The Dallas Morning News were misled by the paper's report.

The student's site, known as "my-boi.com," serves as an electronic bulletin board for young teenage boys to advertise their availability for homosexual exploits. The boys establish accounts, post descriptions of themselves, and most attach photographs to their profiles. If this site is "G-rated," the rating system is meaningless.

Consider this entry from an eighteen-year-old boy in the Dallas area. "What I like in a guy is . . . that he's sweet, not ashamed to be himself, pretty secure about his sexuality, and not a slut. I'm also not really . . . into flaming fairy guys, if I wanted a woman, I'd date one." Another boy, seventeen years old, after describing his various body piercings, went on to describe himself: "I love listening to music, and hangin out with my friends. I think I'm fun, but I'll let you decide. I love having new friends, but let's be honest, something more would make me very content." That "something more" leaves very little to the imagination.

The web site does not allow what it considers to be pornographic photos, but some of the boys are presented in sexually suggestive poses.

Can this young man really be surprised that he was forced to withdraw from the school once this web site was discovered? According to other press reports, headmaster Delph's statement went to the heart of the school's convictions. "As a community of Christian families we also believe the Bible provides insight to help us discern God's desire for our conduct. Therefore we demand high Biblical standards of behavior from our students both academically and socially. Our students are asked to embrace these standards of conduct by signing a covenant with the school when students are admitted . . . The code for conduct and discipline at Trinity Christian Academy comes from a desire to please God and preserve a wholesome environment for the benefit of all our families."

In its report, The Dallas Morning News acknowledged that students had been expelled or forced to withdraw from the school for heterosexual immorality and that the school had the right to act in this way. Nevertheless, the context and character of the article was clearly intended to censure the school for fulfilling its disciplinary responsibility. A representative for the Association of Christian Schools International [ACSI] told the paper that honor codes at Christian schools play an important part in protecting a school's mission and culture. "A school has the right and responsibility to fulfill its mission," said John Craig, ACSI regional director, "and that may involve rules that not everybody is going to agree with. But the honor code makes it clear so there can be no misunderstanding: Here's who we are, here's what we're about, and here's what we're trying to accomplish with our students."

Establishing what should be understood as a minimal standard of integrity, Mr. Craig warned that students and parents shouldn't sign honor codes they do not intend to keep. "When you sign something, that's your word," he said.

The parents who send their children to Trinity Christian Academy must surely expect the school to maintain the standards of conduct it claims to require in its honor code. As a Christian institution, the academy has the right to establish the rules and principles of conduct it would expect of its students, faculty, and staff.

The official adoption and regulative application of conduct codes should be understood as a basic requirement for any institution that intends to be serious about its Christian character. Without explicit rules, an institution will simply accommodate itself to moral relativism and the political pressures that develop in any institutional setting.

According to its web site, Trinity Christian Academy's mission statement makes its Christian commitment clear: "Trinity Christian Academy is an independent coeducational school that offers Christian families and their children a demanding college preparatory curriculum within a Christian community committed to integrating Biblical faith and learning. The school desires to educate the whole person for the glory of God by helping equip each student to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, and to become a faithful disciple of Him."

Given the realities of dealing with teenagers and young adults, specific codes defining sexual immorality are absolutely necessary. Reflecting the Bible's clear teachings on the issue, the school clearly considers homosexuality—as well as other forms of sexual immorality—to be incompatible with its Christian character.

Significantly, this student did not find himself facing the school's discipline simply because he was troubled about his sexuality, but because he had openly endorsed the homosexual lifestyle and created a web site that functioned as an electronic meeting place for other homosexual teens.

Readers of the account in The Dallas Morning News also learned of the existence of "HeartStrong," an organization dedicated to assisting homosexual students in Christian schools. According to its web site, "HeartStrong is a non-sectarian organization established to provide outreach to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and other persons adversely affected by the influence of all denominations of religious educational institutions." The group exists, according to its publicity, in order to educate the public "about the persecution of [homosexual students] and others at religious educational institutions." The organization claims to have assisted more than 830 students in religious schools over the last eight years.

A major Christian school in Dallas, Texas now finds itself on the firing line of public controversy for fulfilling its responsibility as an institution committed to biblical morality and Christian truth. We have reached a moment of moral absurdity when the behavior of the school, rather than the behavior of the student, becomes the issue of social concern. This is an ominous sign of things to come.

