

# The Christian Story and the Christian School (1): A Defense of the Narrative Approach in Reformed Christian Education

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3

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The Christian faith is a gift of God that in a very real sense is a story—the true story of the triune God and His people. Thinking about Christian education in narrative terms or in terms of the Christian story causes one to ask the question, how does the Christian school fit into the story of God and His people, and the question really becomes, how does the Christian school serve the mission of God. The story of God and His people is the story of the triune God's mission—commissioned by the Father, accomplished by Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and still in process until the end comes and God is "all in all" ([1 Corinthians 15:28](#) <sup>[1]</sup>).

It ought to be obvious to all who have an understanding of the Christian religion—specifically the Reformed Christian religion, in which context Reformed Christian schools and more specifically the Protestant Reformed Christian schools were formed—that the Christian school has a story to tell. In a certain sense the school is a part of the story, a part of the narrative that the school through its teachers must tell.

It is in this context and for this reason that John Bolt wrote the volume *The Christian Story and the Christian School* (Christian Schools International, 1993). Dr. Bolt dedicates his book to the many visionary pioneers—parents, teachers, and students—who believed that the Christian story also had to be told in the schools.

Dr. Bolt states that his book, which joins a growing list of books about Christian education, is written from within a decidedly Reformed theological and confessional tradition. He asserts that this tradition has in the past century in North America enjoyed a successful and impressive track record in Christian education from the elementary to the college and university level.

The writer believes that it is important for all those involved in Christian education, and those who support it, to reflect on the changed center of education. This is necessary if the education is to be relevant and true to the vision that gave rise to Reformed Christianschools, and if that education will be faithful to the Lord.

The author notes that in the changed cultural and social context, questions are being raised by some of the supporting constituency concerning the legitimacy of the Christian school enterprise. For this reason, among others, an apology (defense) for Christian schools is necessary. However, Bolt notes that those involved in the enterprise ought to believe that Christian education is needed today more than ever.

The writer indicates that he has written the book as a defense of the project of separate and distinct Christian schools. Therefore the first half of the book is devoted to exploring the cultural

and social forces that impact education. The second half of the book addresses the issue of the Reformed identity of the Christian schools that he supports.

Those who support the Protestant Reformed Christian schools also have this concern, because there has been an explosion in the number of Christian schools in recent years. It is necessary to reflect on what is distinctive about Reformed Christian education and how it is different from other Christian schools such as the Roman Catholic schools or the fundamentalistic schools.

An important reason for the writing and publication of this volume was the personal conviction of Dr. Bolt and his interest in what he calls the "notion of narrative." He argues that the account in *The Christian Story* and *The Christian School* is built on the foundation of a "narrative understanding of the Christian faith and provides a narrative interpretation of Christian education." Bolt writes,

It would be easy to dismiss this phenomenon as simply the latest in a long series of educational fads that have bedeviled North American education in the twentieth century, but this time I am convinced that something significant—and even promising—is afoot (Bolt, p. 10).

The final reason given for the book arises from concerns about the current crisis in North American education reflecting broader uncertainties about Western civilization. Dr. Bolt writes as follows:

Faced with a growing diversity of populations and religious-cultural visions, North America is becoming increasingly pluralistic. Accompanying this pluralism is a growing hostility toward the legacy of Western civilization informed and shaped by Christianity. Whereas the public school system of education was originally designed to enfold and incorporate immigrants into the American melting pot, multicultural education today rejects the melting pot notion in favor of a pluralist mosaic. On the face of it, pluralism promises a more just vision of society. In practice, however, multiculturalism tends to be critical of and hostile to the Christian religion and to the Christian character of Western civilization. However, the structures of Western religious, political, cultural, and economic freedom have been shaped by Christianity and are in some sense dependent upon it, so the suppression of the Christian story may ultimately jeopardize the possibility of pluralism itself. Thus, Christian schools where the Christian story is told and the Christian tradition is celebrated serve a public, national, and social good. The Christian school is not just for the Christian community (p. 11).

The author asserts that throughout the volume he tried to keep the public role of the Christian school before the reader.

Although it is true that the Christian school, i.e., the truly Reformed Christian school, is a public institution, one wonders why it would be the case that the Christian school must serve the public, national, and social good. Why is the Christian school not just for the Christian community? Could it not be the case that the Christian school, existing within the context of the national and social order, serves for the good of Reformed Christians who have been called to live as those that are in this world and not of it. This does not mean that the Christian school is subversive—an institution that exists to undermine the national and social order. Christians are not revolutionary in that sense of the word. Therefore I would contend that the Christian school is not for the preservation of the national and social order but to train Reformed Christians to live in this world as those who are transformed (cf. Rom. 12:1-3 <sup>[2]</sup>). Therefore they live unto God, who has

redeemed them for time and for all eternity.

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter deals with critical questions about contemporary education. Chapter two discusses the critical questions about our culture. The third chapter cites "Christian" threats to Christian education. Chapter four states that the Christian mind is necessary but not sufficient. The fifth chapter relates the rediscovery of the narrative method for instruction. The sixth and final chapter summarizes the data concerning the Christian story and the Christian school.

### Critical Questions About Contemporary Education

The introduction to chapter one focuses attention on contemporary public school issues, a focus, according to Bolt, that is both necessary and risky.

Bolt sees this as necessary because Christian education is directly influenced by what happens in public school education. The concerns about issues in the public schools have served as the reason for the existence of many Christian schools. For good or for ill, trends in educational practices, methods, and curricula find their way into Christian schools. Bolt believes that the result is that Christian schools either become preoccupied with being different from the public school or they fear being left behind the cutting edge.

Bolt quotes Steven Vryhof, who writes in an article "Christian Schools: Ripe for Change" (The Banner, Sept. 9, 1991, pp. 6, 7) as follows: "Historically Reformed Christian Schools have tended to isolate and protect.... To maintain doctrinal and ethnic purity, they segregated Dutch immigrant children from the rest of society" (quoted by Bolt, p. 16). This practice and tendency can be understood and appreciated because it was rooted in the concern of Reformed Christian parents to keep the promises they made when children are baptized, i.e., to see to the pious and religious education of their children. However, after some years of Americanization, a hankering after the public school mindset has developed.

Bolt correctly asserts that the growth in recent years of independent Christian schools has resulted from increasing dissatisfaction with public school education by evangelical Christians. They formerly could tolerate the public school, but decline in academic standards, the exclusion of prayer and Scripture, the valueless approach to sex education, and an aggressive secular and humanistic orientation influenced parents to choose Christian schools or home schooling.

The growth of Christian schools, says Bolt, entails two major risks. The first risk involves the negative attitude toward public education—something that is not sufficient for building solid Christian schools. Bolt argues that if the primary reason for Christian education is to keep children out of the hands of Satan, it is difficult to equip children positively for a life of joyful discipleship in God's world. The author condemns the hope for the failure of the public school as the way for the Christian school to thrive as a "profoundly unchristian posture." Bolt asserts that good public schools are essential to the common good and that the supporting of Christian education does not imply "studied indifference or open hostility to public education."

### A Crisis?

In a section concerning crisis in education, the writer notes that the word crisis appears with monotonous regularity in tandem with education. Bolt cites the following eight forms of crisis: 1/ crisis in academic standards, 2/ literary crisis, 3/ a cultural literary crisis, 4/ crisis in behavior and discipline, 5/ a crisis in moral values, 6/ a racial crisis, 7/ monetary crisis, 8/ a teacher crisis.

Concerning the issue of crisis Bolt makes three important observations to keep a balanced perspective. These are: 1/ The crisis in education is a reflection of society's uncertainty about values and goals, i.e., a crisis in confidence. 2/ A balanced assessment of the nature of the crisis demands a certain historical distance. It seems from this perspective that the crisis is a continuing and recurring crisis. 3/ One must understand that the educational crisis identified today is caused by reliance on expectations from "reforms" that were unrealistic and destined to disappoint.

Concerning the observation about disappointment with expectations for reform, Bolt quotes at some length from the volume *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of our Time*, by Diane Ravitch (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 27.

One important difference [in today's crisis] is that so much of the past agenda of educational reformers has been largely fulfilled. In one sense, the educational enterprise is the victim of its own successes, since new problems have arisen from the long-sought solutions to earlier problems. Idealistic reformers, eager to improve the schools and to extend their promise to all children, sought the appropriate level of change. If only teachers had college degrees and pedagogical training; if only teachers would band together to form a powerful teachers' union; if only there were federal aid to schools; if only all children were admitted to school regardless of race or national origin; if only all students of high ability were admitted to college; if only colleges could accommodate everyone who wanted to attend; if only students had more choices and fewer requirements in their course work; if only schools were open to educational experimentations; if only there were a federal department of education.... The "if only" list could be extended, but the point should be clear by now. All these "if onlies" have been put into effect, some entirely and others at least partially, and rarely have the results been equal to the hopes invested.

Ravitch concludes:

Paradoxically, the achievements of the recent past seem to have exhausted the usually ready stock of prescriptions for school reform and to have raised once again the most basic questions of educational purpose.

## **Educational Reform**

The author correctly cites the fact that during the past fifty years the "field of education has been a battleground for competing educational philosophies broadly described as progressive and traditional." Many can remember with me that these were times when the pendulum swung back and forth between the progressive and the traditional approach.

In *The Schools We Deserve*, pages 80, 81, Ravitch describes the swing between these two opposing approaches to educational philosophy and policy.

From the mid-1940s until the mid-1950s, the "good school" followed progressive practices; from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s, the "good school" emphasized the study of science, mathematics, and foreign languages and insisted on high academic standards; from the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s, the "good school" installed open classrooms, eliminated course requirements, and experimented with mini-courses and electives; since the mid-1970s, the "good school" has been eliminating frivolous courses, reinstating curriculum requirements, and restoring academic standards.

In an insightful paragraph Dr. Bolt clarifies and reduces the complexity of the terms "traditional" and "progressive."

A traditionalist approach focuses on subject content and mastery of basic knowledge and skills and insists on clearly defined and rigorous standards of excellence. Progressivism is primarily concerned with active, experientially based learning, creativity, originality, critical thinking, and cooperative learning for "the whole child." Much of the current debate oscillates between these two general poles (Bolt, p. 22).

Bolt correctly indicates that the "life adjustment education" of the late 1940s and early 1950s, with an emphasis on student needs, on practical, vocational, and how-to courses, along with "socio-personal adjustment" (health and guidance), went out of favor for two reasons. Hostile traditional critics faulted it for debasing academic standards, and the Sputnik crisis of 1957 gave rise to a high level of public indignation about the failure of American schools to train students for world-class performance in math, science, and engineering. The public demanded excellence and academic rigor.

Bolt continues his assessment, and, citing Ravitch again, he states that in the mid-1960s the hope and optimism had disappeared and complaints were being raised about the competitiveness and joylessness of American schools. Counter-cultural turmoil on university campuses, protests against the establishment, and middle-class values of success and achievement dominated public attention. The school was seen by many as an instrument to achieve broader social reform. Bolt quotes the summary of Diane Ravitch—a summary that is clear and to the point.

The informal approach was typified by individualized learning activities, rather than group instruction; by emphasis on play, experience, and concrete activities, rather than reading and listening; by an informal relationship between the teacher and the student; by student participation in selecting the day's activities; and by informal arrangement of classroom time, space, and materials to encourage student choice. Behind such practices was the belief that children develop and learn at different rates; that the best way to learn is through activity and experience, motivated by interest; and that children are by nature eager to learn. Some advocates went so far as to insist that the child had to be free to decide what to learn, when to learn, and how to learn, with the goal being not to "educate" the child in the traditional sense of filling him up with knowledge, but to free him from his dependence on teachers, schools, and books.

The open education philosophy answered perfectly the need for a set of educational values to fit the countercultural mood of the late 1960s; it stimulated participatory democracy; it justified the equal sharing of power between the authority figure (the teacher) and the students; it made a positive virtue of nonassertive leadership; and it implied that children should study only what they wanted. At the high school level, the

philosophy led to dropping of requirements, adoption of minicourses, creation of schools-without-walls, and alternative schools. (Quoted by Bolt, p. 24.)

The results of these "reforms" have been judged by many to be less than satisfactory, and some have said these changes are totally unsatisfactory. Concerns about educational mediocrity have focused on such indicators of eroding academic achievement as declining SAT scores. Fears are expressed about America's ability to compete in the international area of commerce if skills of American workers are inferior to those of Europeans and Asians. The cry is once again "return to the basics."

Those familiar with the educational scene will agree with the correct and concise conclusion of Ravitch that American educational policy in recent decades has been pulled from extreme to extreme every ten years or so in response to the changes in the social and political climate.

John Bolt concludes the section on educational reform by saying that this brings us to the current crisis of the last decade—1990-2000. Exactly where are we now in the great school debate?

...to be continued.

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