

The Christian Story and the Christian School (3): A Defense of the Narrative Approach in Reformed Christian Education

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That They May Teach Them to Their Children

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Two previous articles have traced the argument of Dr. John Bolt in the book *The Christian Story and the Christian School*, respecting the crisis in public education and the attempted educational reforms in public education since the 1930s. Included were descriptions of the symptoms and the proposed solutions during the 1990s, plus a section devoted to an answer to the question, what is really wrong with public education?

It is imperative for Christian educators, supporters, and parents to understand the developments in public education as directly and indirectly they influence Christian education. Although Christian schools among Reformed churches have existed for more than a century, during the past twenty-five years many evangelistic Christian schools have come into existence because of a "knee-jerk" reaction to the failures, the behavioral problems, and the controversial and sinful developments in the public schools. Although many Christian schools were established to escape the failures and blatantly evil developments in the public schools, these schools are not isolated from the issues in the public schools. Christian schools frequently employ textbooks that are prepared by textbook companies to be used in the public schools to indoctrinate students in secular ideologies. Scores of teachers in the Christian schools attend colleges that indoctrinate them in the ideology and the educational practices used in the public schools. In this connection, it ought to be observed that discernment by Christian school administrators and teachers is crucial if one is to be properly selective in the use of textbooks that were prepared for use in the public schools.

The current article continues the review of the critical questions respecting the contemporary educational scene by surveying the culture wars that have influenced public education.

Culture Wars

The section entitled culture wars in *The Christian Story and the Christian School* by Dr. Bolt refers to an analysis of American culture by James Davison Hunter in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York, Basic Books, 1991. Hunter defines cultural conflict as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding." Hunter identifies one system as an "impulse toward orthodoxy" and the other system as an "impulse toward progressivism."

Hunter states that the system representing the impulse toward orthodoxy involves the commitment on the part of the adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. He says that the system representing the impulse toward cultural progressivism is the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism — a system with no commitment to a definable transcendent authority. Progressive world-view adherents restate the historic faith according to the prevailing assumptions and practices of contemporary life.

The conflict between the impulse toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward cultural progressivism affects all aspects of society: the family, education, law, media, and political movements. It is essential to understand that in the educational arena the battle between "progressives" and "orthodox" is especially fierce in regards to the control of the pedagogical practices in public education. Progressives and orthodox have declared an all-out war and have determined that the battle over public education is the eye of the storm. Progressives and orthodox in collaboration with the mass media see education as the means to win the battle for control in the family, law, politics, and every area of life.

Hunter quotes an opponent of censorship, a progressive, who says,

This country is experiencing a religious crusade as fierce as any out of the Middle Ages.... Our children are being sacrificed because of fanatical zeal of our fundamentalist brothers who claim to be hearing the voice of God.... In this religious war spiced with overtones of race and class, the books are an accessible target (Bolt, p. 41).

Hunter quotes a spokesman from the National Association of Christian Education, a leader of the orthodox movement, who claims that the war being waged in America is a struggle for control of the heart, the mind, and the soul of every man, woman, and especially child in America. This advocate for the orthodox movement identifies the contestants as secular humanism and Christianity.

Bolt explains that the cultural legacy that fed the public school system in the past included explicitly Christian themes. The public schools were intended to be nominally and functionally Protestant in their instruction and value systems. For this reason Roman Catholics and Jews were encouraged to set up their own parochial schools. Concerning this solution to a

fundamental problem, Bolt asserts that the legitimacy of a monopolistic "Protestant Christian" public school system is questionable from a judicial point of view. He also notes that the Protestantism that existed in the public school was of dubious quality and veracity.

It should be observed that those who are committed to the cause of distinctively Reformed Christian schools must go further and affirm that God does not give to the State the responsibility to establish educational systems and that the State is not responsible for the education of the child. Although many children would not receive an education if the State did not establish schools, the education and training of the child is the responsibility that God assigns to each parent. For this reason committed Reformed parents, in their concern to live as responsible citizens of the kingdom of Christ, establish and maintain parental Christian Schools. These schools employ Christian teachers who have the same beliefs as the parents and the children that are taught in the schools.

Charles L. Glenn writes a chapter entitled "Molding Citizens" in *Democracy and the Renewal of Public Education*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 43, in which he states that Reformed Christians should not be pleased nor satisfied with the nineteenth century common school idea developed by Horace Mann in Massachusetts. Glenn writes concerning this nineteenth century development as follows:

The normal school, then, played an important part in the efforts of Mann and other 'liberal Christians' to promote a form of "common school religion" that was said to have no sectarian character, but that was in fact consistent with their own beliefs and profoundly subversive of that of their Orthodox opponents. It was in the normal school, with its strong emphasis on the teaching of morality and on an atmosphere of liberal piety, that the teachers were formed upon whom the hopes of education reformers rested. Training teachers was an effective way of avoiding the problems that a direct assault on local control of school would have caused; it made it possible to argue, in all sincerity, that the common schools were under the direct oversight of local school committees elected by parents and frequently chaired by an orthodox clergyman. The real content of public education would be determined by the emerging profession of teachers, shaped by state normal schools under control of the education reformers and not by the parents through their local representatives (Bolt, p. 217).

The goal of Horace Mann, John Dewey, and others like them was reached when students trained to be teachers in state schools and quasi-Christian training college and normal schools were employed in the public schools. In this way the schools were transformed into schools that taught a common school religion. It was religious instruction but a religious instruction that was not truly Christian, nor was it Reformed. It was a teaching and philosophy of life that Reformed parents could not permit their children to receive, since they had promised at the time their children were baptized, that to the best of their ability they would provide pious and religious instruction for their children. This was to be instruction that coheres with the truth confessed by the parents in the Christian church. It must be instruction based on the Word of God and the historic Reformed confessions.

In earlier times the public schools employed teachers who included in their instruction Christian ideas and concepts. The situation has dramatically changed in recent years. Because of intensive lobbying by ardent civil libertarians advocating a radical church-state separation, the Protestant Christian religion is now the minority (marginal) point of view in public education. Bolt notes that this change in attitude in education can be seen in the exclusion of devotional time

from the school day and from the school premises. More serious is the rewriting and publishing of textbooks that exclude traditional Christian values and eliminate direct references to the role of the Christian religion in public life.

Bolt cites the research of Paul Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in our Children's Textbooks*, Ann Arbor, Servant, 1986. A summary of the arguments of Vitz can be found in the chapter, "A Study of Religion and Traditional Values in Public School Textbooks," *Democracy and the Renewal of Public Education*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987, pp. 116-140. Vitz, in his careful examination of American social studies and literature books indicates how the Christian religion is ignored or trivialized. Bolt states that the study by Vitz clearly showed how the public schools systematically denied the history, heritage, beliefs, and values of a very large segment of the American people (Bolt, p. 43).

Vitz concludes as follows:

In sum, then, it seems that it is considered acceptable to mention America's less "typical" religions in textbooks, but mainstream Protestantism is for all practical purposes considered taboo. The effect of this is a denial of the fact that religion is really an important part of American life. Sometimes the censorship becomes especially offensive. One book, for example, devoted thirty pages to a discussion of the Pilgrims, noting that they celebrated thanksgiving because they "wanted to give thanks for all they had" — and yet it nowhere specifies that it was to God that they were offering thanks. This sort of thing occurred again and again in the sample texts. It is permissible to refer to the Pueblo Indians praying to mother Earth, but Pilgrims can't be described as praying to God (Bolt, p. 43).

Another example of the rejection of the true religion occurs in the "Hirsch project," which was intended to spell out the minimum knowledge that is needed to function in American society. After E.D. Hirsch produced a large *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, which included a sizable section of Bible knowledge, he began a project that would attempt to stipulate minimal cultural literacy for each elementary grade. The first volume, *What Your 1st Grader Needs to Know*, omits Bible stories. It is not surprising to hear that the teacher consultants of the Florida schools, where the program was tested, "deemed them unduly sectarian" (*Time*, September 30, 1991, p. 77).

Conclusion

Bolt notes that the impact of the conflicts that have occurred in public education have brought Christian schools to something beyond the question of mere existence. He contends that the Christian schools must exercise their responsibility for narrating, preserving, and transmitting past wisdom and cultural products of the Christian tradition. Bolt asserts that Christian schools must assume this task as an essential for the preservation of our civilization.

Bolt also notes that the development of a completely pagan society should cause us to perceive that our situation is similar to that faced by the medieval monks in a darkening age. Supporters of Christian education and the teachers in these schools must keep the lamp of Christian wisdom burning.

We agree with Dr. Bolt when he states that we must be aware of our context to be certain that our Christian schools are doing what our Lord asks of us. We differ with his emphasis on the purpose for performing this task.

Although Christian schools ought to perform the task of narrating past wisdom, they should not serve as uncritical purveyors of past wisdom, nor should they think that in this way they serve as the catalyst to preserve civilization. Yes, we may know and read the writings of past ages, but these must be read with discrimination and discernment. In our instruction, and in our construction of distinctively Reformed Protestant Christian schools, we are not to cooperate with the unbelieving world in building the kingdom of God. Such kingdom building we cannot do. Instead, believing teachers and parents, in the noble and necessary work of extending the kingdom of Christ through good Christian schools, must respond and react correctly to developments in the public schools.

Christian schools that remain true to their calling to teach according to the full counsel of God as this is taught in the Scriptures and the Reformed confessions will be doing that which they were established to do.

Therefore, instruction that will be helpful in the thorough preparation of the child of God for every good work is the important task of the school. Instruction that will help in causing young people to live as changed people in the world, and not as world changers, is instruction that is extremely important for the children and young people called to live in this present godless age. The life of the Christian in the world is such that he lives a full earthly life and must come into contact with, and must react to, the theories and ideology that develop in this world and are present in the public schools.

Christian teachers who work in public schools cannot Christianize these schools. They must live a life of the antithesis in these schools. The result of such a life will be persecution. The time may come when the believer, because of the hatred of the ungodly unbeliever, will be forced out of his position.

The calling of the Reformed Christian is to be faithful in the maintenance of good Christian schools that do not teach world flight. Instead, Reformed Christians must be faithful in the maintenance of schools that employ teachers who will instruct students to live antithetically in the world as citizens of the kingdom of Christ.

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