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24

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James

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1

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25

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15

## *Seminary.*

In the last issue of the Standard Bearer we took notice of a trend in Christian high schools and colleges, namely, that of encouraging or even requiring students to perform various kinds of Christian "service." This service, usually not clearly defined, includes volunteer-type activities—helping the elderly, the poor, the handicapped, etc. Increasingly, schools are requiring students to fulfill a minimum number of hours of service, either for a class, or as a graduation requirement.

A mainstay in the programs are "service projects"—planned and sponsored group service activities. These service projects often involve light construction in city slums or economically depressed areas of the country. The service projects are usually set up by churches or by organizations on college campuses.

As was noted last time, the rationale for promoting or requiring service hours of the students is that the Christian school seeks to instruct the whole person. Learning Christian values and standards requires not only thinking, but doing. The Christian school has the structure to encourage as well as monitor the activity. Showing love to God and the neighbor is the necessary exercise of the Christian's faith.

Supporters also insist that this wholistic service ("whole" or "complete") is required to meet the physical needs (not merely the spiritual) of those who are served. If the Christian does not engage in this, he falls under the condemnation of the [James 1:22-26](#) <sup>[1]</sup> against those who only hear the word, but do not do it. Indeed, not the "forgetful hearer," but the "doer of the work, ... shall be blessed in his deed."

Service hours, it is maintained, has additional biblical support. [James 2:14-26](#) <sup>[2]</sup> teaches that faith must produce works, otherwise it is no faith. The judgment set forth in [Matthew 25:34-40](#) <sup>[3]</sup> demonstrates that Jesus expects His people to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoners.

In addition, service hours are in harmony with the Reformed confessions, it is asserted. The three parts of the Heidelberg Catechism are summarized by the words Sin, Salvation, and Service. The knowledge of sin, faith, and the gift of salvation must lead to service.

What must the Reformed parent, teacher, and school board member say about this? An answer is required, for friends or relatives may inquire as to why your school does not require service hours, or why you do not allow your children to participate. School teachers and administrators encounter others in their vocation who ask, "What is your school doing for service?" School boards may well deal with parents who request that the school provide some opportunities for service.

Let the issue be clearly understood. There can be no objection to the fact that the students are forced to perform some unpaid labor. On the contrary, this is one of the best things that covenant young people can do. It is required of all believers that they demonstrate the love of God in their hearts by concrete acts of love for the neighbor. How spiritually valuable it is for believing youth to help the elderly with yard work or to volunteer in nursing homes and hospitals! In this age and society where it seems that all that counts is the financial reward, it is most profitable for covenant youth to learn the joys of giving themselves freely — serving Christ by serving His body in some way, or showing love to the neighbor whom God puts on the path. Parents ought to look for such opportunities for their children.

It is quite a different matter for schools to promote, or worse, require service hours. A number of objections must be raised against this practice.

First of all, service projects, in particular, foster elitism. This is particularly true where the schools give special acknowledgment to those who participate in a service project. As was noted last time, some churches print in their bulletins the names of the young people going to such and such a church-sponsored service activity. Some schools hold special assemblies to honor those who are going on, or have returned from, a service project. This may be done with the best of intentions. A comparison is sometimes made to the honor given to the athletes of the school. Understandably, the Christian school considers academics and Christian service to be at least as important as basketball and volleyball. Hence, if honor be bestowed upon the athletes for their work and accomplishments, how much more ought not those who perform Christian service be honored?

No matter how well intended it may be, it still promotes elitism in the school. These students performed this service. They are held up for public acclaim, lifted up above the rest of the student body. Ought this to be? Have such students been more diligent than the rest in serving others simply because they participated in a service project? (We note, only in passing, that the same argument can be raised against honoring the academic achievements of students.) Rather than to create another group of honored students, schools ought to evaluate the correctness of honoring their athletes as most now do.

Even where the projects are voluntary, for the student who "gave up" a spring-break trip to Florida or the Gulf in order to work in a service project, it is virtually impossible not to have a sense of moral superiority. To the extent that a school promotes such projects, it encourages such a spirit.

A second objection to service requirements is that it promotes Phariseeism. This is so, first of all, because service requirements necessarily emphasize the external acts in distinction from the attitude of the heart. The activities of the students must be evaluated by someone (usually a committee) to determine whether or not the activities meet the requirements. The judges can only decide whether or not the acts conform to some standards of "Christian service." They cannot judge the heart. They can only declare a work to be "Christian service."

This is spiritually hazardous. It promotes mere external works to fulfill school requirements. It is difficult enough for the Christian to perform good works from the heart, out of a love for God and a desire that He be glorified. What a struggle the believer has to put down his proud self and give all the glory—even for the good works he does—to God. Add to the mixture, then, that students must write down their good works on paper and hand them in for approval. And that, in order to receive credit for the class, or to graduate. Let not that added stone (stumbling block) be placed in the path of covenant youths.

Even more serious is the objection that this kind of "Christian service" is most emphatically not the calling of the child of God. The Reformed believer ought to object strenuously to the misuse of the Heidelberg Catechism. The three parts of the Catechism are not "Sin, Salvation, and Service." They are rather how great are our sins and misery, how we are saved from sin, and how we may express our gratitude to God. The Catechism does not call the Christian to "service," but rather to gratitude—a life of gratitude! Simply stating that service requirements should be done out of gratitude to God will not take away this serious objection.

If the school's service hours requirement is supposed to be the same as "expressing gratitude," it is even worse. What an insult to God that the school would require only ten or so hours of gratitude per semester or per year!

In fact, such a requirement may well militate against a life of gratitude by leaving the impression that after he has completed his ten hours of service, the student has done his duty. Nothing could be further from the truth. Gratitude is required twenty-four hours a day, every day, and in every activity—in work, study, play, worship, and even sleep.

The trouble is that service requirements do not demand gratitude. Rather they demand specific outward acts by the students.

It must also be noted that texts used to justify service requirements are not to the point. There is no doubt that the passages do indicate that the believer is to be ready, no, even looking for ways to do good to the neighbor. But the question is always, who is that one to whom we must be neighbor? The Bible's answer in a word is—the needy one whom God puts on our path. This is demonstrated by the well-known parable of the Samaritan.

That is also the teaching of the very passages cited. James 2 <sup>[4]</sup> speaks not of believers searching out those who have need in order to do good to them, but rather of someone coming to the believer for help. In Matthew 25 <sup>[5]</sup>, Jesus speaks of His people seeing His brethren hungry, naked, in prison, etc., and then giving them the appropriate aid. This confirms the point that the believer is called to a life of gratitude, not an arrangement of Christian service for a part of our life.

The convictions stated above can very well be taken out of context and caricatured. Some would view this as world flight. These must be people who live in their monasteries, close their eyes to the needs of others, and go their own way, only helping their own. This is nonsense. The Christian is called to look for ways to help the neighbor. But that is very different from going out (even hundreds of miles) to look for a neighbor who might need help. God places on the path of the believer countless opportunities for serving others in a very natural way. These same believers can continue helping their neighbors as long as they need it, not merely for two weeks. Faithfulness requires that each believer seize these opportunities. The result will be a life of gratitude.

Finally, even if there were no serious objections to the concept of service hours and service projects, Christian schools ought still to reject them. Why? These requirements fall outside the school's realm of responsibility and authority. This is evident from the fact that the parents establish the schools to do for their children what parents cannot do. Covenant youth must be taught from many different disciplines in order to live as God's friend-servants in this world. Many parents could give some of the instruction, but not all that their children need. Thus they hire teachers to stand in their place and teach for them.

However, believing parents do not abdicate their responsibilities. Nor do they give the whole training of their children over to the school. The subjects that can be taught by every parent, ought to be. Obviously, parents both can and must teach their children of all ages true Christian service. By adopting service requirements, the school takes for itself this parental responsibility.

In addition, service requirements result in the school claiming authority over what children do when they are not in school. The school will determine what is a legitimate service. We repeat,

service requirements are outside both the responsibility and the authority of the Christian school.

In light of all this, Christian schools may not make service a requirement, and ought not be promoting this kind of service. This is wrong.

It is also dangerous.

There is more to this trend than at first meets the eye. There is a philosophy and theology mixed together that spawns this. It is the theology that produced the social gospel in un-Reformed churches whose goal it is to improve society. It is the theology that looks for a prosperous, earthly (postmillennial) kingdom. It is the philosophy in colleges which spurs on their students to ever greater kingdom work, redeeming the creation, and even allows the colleges eventually to "redeem" godless rock music, the dance, and blasphemous movies. But this must be explored at a later time, the Lord willing.

**Source URL:** <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/articles/christian-education-and-service-2-0>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=James+1:22-26>

[2] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=James+2:14-26>

[3] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Matthew+25:34-40>

[4] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=James+2>

[5] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Matthew+25>