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That They May Teach Them to Their Children

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II Timothy

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The Word of God plainly teaches that believers are called to a life of serving one another. Jesus told His disciples not to seek to be masters over one another, but rather to serve the others. Serving others follows a principle of God's kingdom, namely that "whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" ([Matt. 23:12](#) ^[1]). Applying this principle Jesus admonished His disciples, "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant" ([Matt. 23:11](#) ^[2]).

Jesus demonstrated that truth in a most dramatic and striking way. The night before He was crucified, He moved from one disciple to another around the table and, on His knees, washed their dust-covered feet. After He finished He informed His astonished disciples that it was done for their instruction. "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" ([John 13:14-15](#) ^[3]).

However, as striking as that incident is, it pales in comparison with the ultimate act of sacrificial service, namely that of Jesus laying down His life for the benefit of His people. He taught His disciples, "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" ([Matt. 20:28](#) ^[4]; the word for minister in this verse is serve).

Christian schools are called to instruct the children of believers in the fear of the Lord. The aim of the school is to equip these young believers to serve God in this world. The goal is the "perfect man," the spiritually mature believer, one "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" ([II Tim. 3:17](#) ^[5]).

It is to be expected, therefore, that the Christian school will both teach the students how to serve others and equip them for a life of service.

In fact, a significant new development in the Christian school is that a particular kind of Christian service is not only encouraged but, in more and more instances, required. It is encouraged through organizations which set up concrete opportunities for giving service. It is fostered by assemblies in Christian high schools and colleges which promote "service" in a variety of ways, including the public recognition of those students who participated in "service projects." In some institutions, students are bombarded with announcements and notices of service opportunities.

"Service" is even required for graduation in some schools. Consider the following paragraph from a particular high school student handbook.

...[E]ach student at _____ Christian High School will be required to provide sixteen (16) hours of applied service each academic year. These service hours will be a requirement for graduation. In order for a student to be in good standing in his/her academic class, the student must complete the 16 hours between June 1 and May 31 of each year.

That is not an isolated example. It is becoming commonplace to require students to perform service hours. In some institutions service is a separate graduation requirement; in others, it is demanded by individual courses such as government or religion (Bible).

When it is seen in this light, the concept of "service" takes on a rather different character. Is this what Jesus meant when He told His disciples to be "servants"? What are these "service hours" and "service projects" that are being touted by so many Christian high schools and colleges?

What constitutes "service" is often rather vaguely defined. It may involve helping an elderly or handicapped person with house or yard work. Service may include such a wide variety of activities as assisting in Sunday School, participating in the Big Brother/Sister program, helping out in a Special Olympics event, or volunteering in a hospital or nursing home. Working in an inner-city kitchen for the poor or visiting prisons also constitutes service.

Service projects are organized endeavors, often involving light construction, almost always in a place far from home. Homes are built or restored in the slums of Chicago or in economically depressed regions in Mississippi or Kentucky, for example. Christian community centers are remodeled and cleaned up. Service work can involve painting, roofing, hauling away construction debris, tearing down unwanted concrete walls, and yard work. Often times the students have opportunities to interact with the people in these poorer areas and, through that contact, to witness to the residents of their (the students') faith.

Such service projects are the ultimate kind of service, tailor made for Christian high schools and colleges. These projects tap the enthusiasm, idealism, and boundless energy of youth. Service projects attract young folks eager to make a difference in the world. The projects give tremendous satisfaction in that regard. At the conclusion of the week or two of work, the old dilapidated building has been transformed! The people who benefit are most grateful. The students have a sense of accomplishment, much heightened by the fact that it was done in the name of Jesus. The people who saw them work, those who benefited, were told, "This is our way of showing the love of Christ." That is heady stuff for Christian youth.

Students have every incentive to join in. Youths who work on such a project (either on spring break or in the summer) fulfill any service hours requirement that the school may have. They have a very good time with like-minded students - enjoying a unity and camaraderie not often felt in day-to-day living. In addition, they have opportunity to experience a different culture and interact with different people, as well as see a new part of the country, or even the world. Finally, participants receive approval from parents, teachers, and church members for their work. Not a few students even receive public recognition in church bulletins and school assemblies.

Schools that encourage or require service hours like these projects as well. Service projects are supervised either by a church or a school organization. They are not hard to monitor - it is plain that the projects involve sufficient hours to cover service requirements. Besides, committees who monitor each student's service hours are assured that this fits the school's standards for "service."

Since a few people with old-fashioned notions of Christian education might wonder about the propriety of schools encouraging or even requiring service hours, promoters have ready answers. The rationale 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.

Also in support of service hours the point is made that showing love to God and the neighbor is the necessary exercise of the Christian's faith. If the Christian does not do service, he falls under the Bible's condemnation of 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" (James 1:22-26 [6]).

Not only that, but it is asserted that Christians are called to "wholistic service" (i.e., whole or complete). Such service requires meeting not only the spiritual needs but also the physical needs of those who are served.

Service hours, it is maintained, has additional biblical support. James 2:14-26 [7] teaches that faith must produce works, otherwise it is no faith. The judgment set forth in Matthew 25:34-40 [8] 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 confessional, 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.

Goals for the service projects include: "To share Christ's love"; "To challenge participants to adopt a more service-oriented lifestyle"; and "To assist and encourage the growth of the ministry centers."

Finally, it is averred that doing service is "kingdom work." The Christian is a citizen of the kingdom of Christ. The whole world belongs to Christ. It is the proper work of the Christian to regain this creation for Christ. Although this regaining of the creation is not limited to service projects, it certainly includes such communal action. Indeed, some are so bold as to assert that Christ will not return until the whole of the creation is regained for Christ.

Armed with such support, many a Christian high school and college have pushed students into service.

The Reformed Christian, however, must not be taken in by these arguments. This conception of service is simply wrong. In brief, let it be noted that, on the one hand, service hours and projects are a perversion of the life of Christian service required by God. And on the other hand, they lie outside of the proper work of the Christian school. This will be examined next time, the Lord willing.

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[1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Matt.+23:12>

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[3] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=John+13:14-15>

[4] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Matt.+20:28>

[5] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=II+Tim.+3:17>

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