

A Covenant School

by Prof. David Engelsma

Today we are witnessing a striking thing in education in the United States: the arising of many private schools that call themselves Christian schools. In the past, only the Roman Catholic Church, some Lutheran Churches, and Reformed parents established Christian schools; the others were content with the public education set up by our government. Of late, many other churches and parents have been establishing Christian schools alongside the public schools. Many such schools have been established in the past few years in the South, but they are also springing up here and there all over our country.

It might seem that other churches and parents are seeing the light and that they are now one with us in carrying out the calling we have of educating the children of the church in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). In many, if not most, of the cases, however, this is not so. They have not really seen the light at all. They are not really one with us in the cause of Christian education. The schools, although religious, are not genuine Christian schools. This becomes plain when we note the reasons for the establishment of many of these schools.

The reason for the establishment of these schools can be expressed in one word: dissatisfaction with the education of the public schools. This dissatisfaction is very widespread. It is found among many parents who are not Christians. It is, of course, well-grounded. Mainly, it has to do with the threats to the physical well-being of the children. Through the years, these people were not perturbed by the absence of God and His Word from the public schools, nor by the presence of atheism and evolution. But now, when the physical welfare of their children is threatened, they become concerned.

There are several forms of dissatisfaction. In many instances, especially in the South and in the big cities, the establishment of private, religious schools is due simply to hatred of integration. The schools are nothing more than attempts to avoid having to send one's white children to school with black children. I submit to you that this is a mockery of Christian education and that it is an abuse of the name of Christ to call such a school a "Christian School." Others are dissatisfied because of the lawlessness within the public schools. There is little or no discipline. Drugs abound. Sexual wickedness is rampant, including the approved and official sex education by the schools themselves. The environment is that of the hippie and his culture. Parents are afraid, with reason, that their children will be ruined in the schools. Hand in hand with the breakdown of discipline and law goes the deterioration of the quality of the education, and some today are dissatisfied with the schools because the education itself is poor. Perhaps the children do not get much individual attention. Perhaps the instruction simply is inferior. So, churches or parents establish schools in which there is discipline, decent conduct, and superior education. However, schools established for these reasons are not yet Christian schools.

It may well be that the mushrooming of these schools will become a serious threat to our own Christian schools. The government and the majority of informed, influential citizens know the reason for the arising of these private schools. Already the State shows alarm at the evasion of integration by many private schools. It may happen that as the movement appears to threaten the public school system the government cracks down on all Christian schools, also ours that exist for reasons of principle.

Our school differs from these schools. We have established it for a radically different reason. It stands on a completely different foundation. We did not set it up to avoid integration; because we fear for the physical safety

of our children; because we are terrified by drugs; or even because we saw the quality of education going downhill. Mind you, we desire discipline in the school, and we have it. We rejoice that our children are free from the temptation of drugs in the school, as well as the way of the life of the hippies, sexual corruption, and, indeed, wicked schoolfellows and playmates. We require a superior quality of education. But none of these is the reason for our school.

Our school is a covenant school. We parents and other saints established it and maintain it in obedience to the demands of the covenant. Its existence is due to the covenant of God that He has established with us parents who believe in His Son Jesus. This makes our school a truly Christian school.

Let me give a word of explanation about the covenant of God. In His free and sovereign grace, God has made Himself known to us who believe in Him through Jesus Christ. He has reconciled us to Himself and made us His friends. He has taken us for His own people and lives with us as our God. Our entire life is a life of friendship with God, a life of knowing His love and loving Him. His relationship, graciously established by God, is the covenant. It is salvation. It is the highest and only good for man.

To give us this, now and forever, the Son of God in our flesh suffered and died. It belongs to the wonderful grace of our covenant God that He has bound Himself to save the children of believing parents. This is biblical doctrine. In Genesis 17:7, Jehovah promised Abraham, the father of believers: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee."

To show that neither His covenant nor Himself had changed, God had His apostle proclaim in the first sermon preached to the church of the New Testament: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." Infant baptism is based on this truth of the covenant. Because our children are included by God in His covenant, God demands that we rear them in His fear, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in accordance with the truth of Scripture. This refers, of course, to the total upbringing of the children, first of all in the home, then in the church, but also in the school. So important is this demand, that the godly rearing of our children is the way, and ordinarily the *only* way, in which God carries out His promise to save our children.

All of this now is clearly and beautifully set forth in Psalms 78:1-8. This passage teaches that God saves His people in the line of generations. It mentions three generations that have a saving knowledge of God, the present generation of fathers ("we have heard and known," v.3), the fathers of the present generation ("our fathers have told us," vs. 3), and the children of the present generation ("the generation to come," v. 4). It is not that three generations are the limit, but usually there are three generations alive at any given time, grandfathers, sons, and grandchildren. God's salvation of the succeeding generations is accomplished in the way of parents instructing their children: "our fathers have told us...we will not hide them from their children." God *requires* believing parents so to educate their children. According to verse 5, God has "appointed a law in Israel," and that law is the command to the fathers "that they should make them (i.e., God's praises) known to their children." The goal and result of this instruction are given in verse 7: "That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."

Here then is found the explanation of our school. We are called to instruct our children by showing them the praises of the Lord, His strength, and His wonderful works. We are to do this at home, in the church, and in the school. Our school is founded upon and grounded in the covenant.

Does this make any difference? Does it make any practical difference as far as the actual education is concerned that our school is a covenant school? Specifically, does it make a difference of any importance between our covenant schools and the private schools of a religious nature that are arising in our country?

It makes a radical difference.

First, if we view our school as a covenant school, we will maintain it for God's sake, for God's glory. The work of establishing and maintaining it will not be a work of self-love, the self-love of protecting our children from drugs, a hippie-life, etc. The work of establishing private schools today is in many cases nothing more than self-love. Our Reformed confession, the *Belgic Confession*, warns us in the article on sanctification that there is a danger that we "never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation" (Art. XXIV). It teaches, correctly, that a work done out of the motive of self-love or out of the motive of fearing punishment is not a good work. Only a work done out of the love of God is a good work. Now we want our work of establishing Christian schools to be a good work. Our main purpose in Christian education must be that our children grow up to know and serve the Lord so that He may be praised by them. With the motive of the love of God, let us parents send our children, pay the costs, and encourage our teachers. With this motive, let the teachers labor, giving their all. With this motive, let the Board work.

Secondly, if we view the school as a covenant school we will persevere when maintaining it gets tough, even tougher than it is now. The school is, with us, a matter of principle, not mere expediency. Our support is an act of obedience to the covenant God. Neither will we give up because of the imperfections of the school. The teachers will not, even though the imperfections hurt them. We parents will not, although the imperfections pinch us. There is a place for self-denial and sacrifice.

Thirdly, the nature of the education will be different. In many of the schools that are called Christian, instruction is given that tends to be positively harmful to our children, because there is no covenant conception. They work in their Arminian evangelism. I know, many of them claim that they do not teach doctrine. As a matter of fact, neither does our school teach doctrine. Teaching doctrine is the duty of the home and of the church. Nevertheless, the doctrine that the school stands on necessarily comes through. Many of the religious schools regard the children as small heathens who have to be saved by a decision for Christ that the school feels itself bound to obtain. These schools urge patriotism and decency, but they have no sense of the truth of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, that a holy life is a life that is lived out of thankfulness to God for His redemption of a person from sin. Indeed, many of them *cannot* give this instruction and admonition because they deny that the children share in redemption, being ignorant of the covenant.

Do not say that it does not matter *why* a child lives decently, as long as his conduct is clean. Scripture tells us that there are those whose lives are outwardly impeccable, but who are an abomination to God because they are self-righteous. They are merely moral. Their motive is to earn or to do something for God or to do good for society. Many of these schools have no idea that the purpose of the child's knowing the creation and of equipping of the child through education is to prepare a child of God for a covenant life in the world. Do not these things represent really the overthrow of everything that a Reformed parent stands for in Christian education?

In contrast, we do not evangelize; we do not teach obedience and purity of life and submission to the authority of civil government to make fine little self-righteous individuals who are doing things for Jesus and the world; we do not impart neutral wisdom in many subjects because that is what is needed for a successful life later on in America. Rather, we instruct those who *are* God's children as recipients of the promise made to their believing

parents. In our discipline and admonition, we call redeemed, covenant children to show thankfulness to God for His salvation in Christ by a holy life: "Honor your father and mother (and president and policeman)" because Jehovah brought you out of the bondage of sin and death of hell and made you too, with your parents, His own people. We give instruction in every subject that shows the praises, the strength, and the wonderful works of the Lord. Our goal is young men and women who live *covenantally* in the world, that is, as friends and servants of God, prophets, priests, and kings under Christ, praising God.

If our school is what Psalm 78 says it is, we are engaged in a great task. There is a danger that we become tired or apathetic. We look at the beginning of another school year as the start of an old wearisome routine that stretches from September to June. We ought to take up the work again with the zeal that is fitting for an aspect of the coming of the Kingdom of Christ. It is worthy of our labor and our prayer.

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