

The Legacy of Good Christian Schools

YEAR:

1992

AUTHOR:

Engelsma David

ISSUE:

Issue: 1, 10/1/1991

ARTICLE TYPE:

Editorial

One of the most precious aspects of the inheritance of the Reformed faith and life that has come down to us in the Protestant Reformed Churches is the Christian school. Our fathers in the faith have handed over to us the priceless legacy of a solidly established system of good Christian schools. Where such schools are not yet possible, because the number of cooperating parents is too small, there is still the legacy of the idea of Christian education as a goal to be prayed and striven for.

For many of us, it is true in the most literal sense that we have received the legacy of our schools from our fathers. In the mid-1940s, as a boy of seven or eight, I watched my father, my future father-in-law, and the other men of Hope PRC in what is now Walker, Michigan build the Protestant Reformed Christian School building with their own hands after work and on Saturdays. Adams St. Christian School in Grand Rapids, Michigan came into existence in 1950. Both were preceded in 1934 by the Protestant Reformed Christian School of Redlands, California. Since then many others have been established throughout the United States.

But when I speak of Christian education as a legacy bequeathed to us by our fathers in the faith, I refer to Christian education as part of the Reformed tradition. Our Christian schools have their roots in a long and noble history. They differ significantly in this respect from the Christian schools of the evangelicals and fundamentalists who suddenly became "Christian school minded" in the late 1960s and 1970s when the state schools took a nosedive morally. It is amusing to the heirs of Christian education in the Reformed tradition to see these "johnnys-come-lately" to Christian education congratulating themselves in the religious press on being the source and standard of Christian education in the United States.

Our own Christian schools carry on the commitment to Christian education that was found in the Christian Reformed Church from the late 1800s on. This commitment motivated Reformed parents to maintain the Christian schools during the depression of the 1930s by sacrifice that was nothing less than heroic. Our fathers in the faith - and the Christian schools - lived then by the principle, "The schools first."

The tradition extends back into the life of the Reformed saints in The Netherlands. Way back. One of the articles of the church order adopted by the Synod of Dordt of 1618/1619 read: "Everywhere consistories shall see to it, that there are good schoolmasters who shall not only

instruct the children in reading, writing, languages and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and in the (Heidelberg) Catechism."

At the very beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther himself called for the establishment of Christian schools as an essential element of the Reformation. In 1524, he wrote the tract, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools." This plea for the establishing of Christian schools was followed in 1530 by a powerful appeal to the parents to use the schools, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School." Replace "councilmen" by "parents with the encouragement of their consistories" and you have the two main parts of Article 21 of the church order of the PRC: "The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant."

The foresight of our fathers in their advocacy of good Christian schools was unerring, and of the greatest practical benefit to us their heirs. Today's newspaper announces the trial of a longtime teacher in the state's schools for the murder of a prostitute; the conviction of another teacher in a local state school for the homosexual seduction of a teenage student; and the continuing strike by a teachers' union in the area for higher wages that shuts the doors of the schools to any education of the children. These things have become everyday occurrences. They are the fulfillment of Luther's warning to parents who reject Christian teachers in good Christian schools:

Because they are not now willing to support and keep the honest, upright, virtuous schoolmasters and teachers offered them by God to raise their children in the fear of God, and in virtue, knowledge, learning, and honor by dint of hard work, diligence, and industry, and at small cost and expense, they will get in their place incompetent substitutes, ignorant louts such as they have had before, who at great cost and expense will teach the children nothing but how to be utter asses, and beyond that will dishonor men's wives and daughters and maidservants, taking over their homes and property, as has happened before. This will be the reward of the great and shameful ingratitude into which the devil is so craftily leading them ("A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," in Luther's Works, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 218).

Our more immediate fathers foresaw the certain destruction of distinctively Reformed education by the secularizing doctrine of common grace. Writing in 1932, Herman Hoeksema prophesied:

I assure you, that this principle of common grace, wiping out the antithesis between the Christian and the world in regard to civil matters, will bear fruit, will obliterate the practical difference between Christian and public instruction, and thus will prove to be the real cause of the failure of the Christian School movement. That we dare no longer to be distinctive as a Reformed people in the declaration of the truth certainly implies that we do not want to be really distinctive in the practical life ("The Christian School Movement: Why a Failure? VI," in The Standard Bearer, Vol. 8, p. 319).

This warning is now being realized with a vengeance in the crumbling of the Christian schools based on the notion of the goodness of the unregenerate world under the favor of God.

We have a precious legacy in our Protestant Reformed Christian schools.

They are covenant schools.

They are not mere reactions to the godlessness, utter this worldliness, profanity, immorality, and disorder of the state schools. They are not merely islands of academic excellence in a sea of mediocrity. They are not fertile fields for child-evangelism, as though the Christian teachers work for the regeneration of the unsaved children of church members, counting the "decisions for Christ" or first time conversions as the best fruits of their labor.

Neither are good Christian schools agencies for the improvement of society or for the help of the disadvantaged in the neighborhood. Opening up the schools to the children of unbelievers, whether poverty stricken minorities or rich whites, is the subversion of the very idea of the Christian school, the destruction of truly Christian education, and the ruin of the children of the covenant who now are thrust into friendship with the heathen with all the peril that this entails.

Our schools - good Christian schools-are institutions of the covenant. Article 21 of the Reformed church order of Dordt describes them as "demands of the covenant." Their origin is the covenant of gracious friendship in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit that God establishes with believers and their children. The reason for their existence is God's demand that believing parents rear His little people, their children, in the truth of Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior. The pupils are our children, our dear children, doubly dear as our own blood, bought with God's blood. The subjects are two great books written by God about Himself: Holy Scripture and the elegant book of creation. The basis and standard of all the instruction is the Bible, the book of the covenant, as expressed in the Reformed confessions. The rule of all behavior in the schools is the law of God, the guide of covenant-life. The purpose of the schools is the enabling of the children to carry out their part in the covenant in the service of God as mature men and women in all areas of life now and eternally. For the children, this is life, peace, and honor. For God, it is glory.

We ought to receive the legacy thankfully, maintaining it and, wherever possible, building it up. Since the Lord Jesus gives it to us to be used, to be invested in the children, we parents are to use the schools, sending our children with the obedience that a demand of the covenant requires.

In the covenant-nature of the schools lies the solution to the financial problem. The financial problem is especially twofold. There is the inadequacy of the wages for teachers. Married men with families are forced out of teaching into other work in order to supply their needs. Others are required to supplement their salaries by taking on other jobs, not only during the summer months but also throughout the school year. This should be intolerable to the covenant community that is responsible for the schools.

The other aspect of the problem, working against the remedy of the first, is the high tuition, threatening to overburden many parents. Parents are oppressed by tuition bills that they cannot pay. Others may consider taking their children out of the schools. Or mothers go out to work to make ends meet.

We look in vain, no doubt, to the state to reduce our taxes as would be just since we ourselves provide the education of our own children.

The solution is to be found in the covenantal nature of the schools. Parents bring up the tuition, as best they can, with the willingness that the covenant of God alone can compel. Teachers are willing to make sacrifices for the cause of the covenant. But all members of the churches, old and young, whether they have children in school or not, have reason to contribute liberally to the schools. In the covenant, schools and children are the schools and children of all. In the

covenant, the friends of God work together with each other.

Widows should give their mites. The rich - and we have them - should give their thousands or millions. The schools should be named in wills: The plates passed regularly in the worship services for the Christian schools should be filled, especially by those not paying tuition - the young people with good jobs; the single people; the couples whose children are out of school; the grandparents.

Not to relieve the parents of their responsibility.

But to make their responsibility manageable.

For the sake of the children of the covenant.

God forbid that we despise, and lose, the legacy.

- DJE

Source URL: <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/articles/legacy-good-christian-schools-0>