

Threats To Parental Education

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All Around Us

It is that time of the year again when our children have returned to school. This is an important time of the year for covenant parents because the sending of their covenant children to covenant schools is part of the fulfillment of the vows which they made at the time when they presented their children for baptism. They send their children to school with many prayers — prayers for the School Boards upon which falls the responsibility for the operation of the school; prayers for the teachers who have the difficult task of taking charge of this aspect of covenant instruction; prayers for their children that, through this instruction also, the children of God's covenant may be thoroughly equipped to walk as God's party in the midst of the world.

Parents have not only sent their children to school in the realization that these children are precious gifts of Jehovah their God, but also in the full consciousness that the education of these children is a *parental* responsibility. This is a point which, I think, needs no argument among us. We believe that the truth of God's everlasting covenant of grace carries with it the solemn obligation for *parents* to instruct their children in the ways of the Lord. This is also emphasized throughout Scripture. God lays upon parents, and upon them alone, the task of giving their children covenant instruction. No one else is given this task in Scripture. It is for this reason that we have erected parental schools. And they will survive as covenant schools only if they remain parental schools.

With all this I am leading up to a point of increasing concern to me in recent years. I refer to various threats to parental schools which have manifested themselves from time to time. It is well that, at the beginning of a new year of school life we be warned of these threats that we may be on our guard against them and strive earnestly to maintain our schools as parental schools.

There is, of course, the threat of government intervention. This is a very real threat, and it comes particularly in the form of government aid of one sort or another to those who operate and maintain parochial and/or parental schools. This problem of whether government aid to parochial and parental schools is constitutional or not is still not completely solved and still awaits further judgment in the courts. The temptation is always there to ease the "burden" of supporting our schools through receiving government aid. But it is a sure way to bring into our schools government control. The state knows perhaps better than we that the way to mold the minds and

lives of men is to educate the youth according to the philosophies which the state believes. Especially in these days of refined methods of propaganda and subtle indoctrination the state is gradually attaining its goal of mass conformity to its godless philosophies. We know that the state is determined that all the populace shall be bent to its will and that not very subtle efforts will be made to include in such education the children of God's covenant. We must steadfastly resist these incursions in whatever form they take. They spell the end of covenant education.

But it is not with this threat that I am particularly concerned in this article. I see, within our own school structures, a three-fold threat to parental education. As most of our readers know, most parental — Christian schools (not parochial) are set up in such a way that a society of parents appoints or elects a Board which is in charge of the operation of the school. To this Board is entrusted the responsibility of raising money, hiring teachers, determining the curriculum, etc. Within the schools the teachers themselves are responsible for the education of the children while an administrator is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school. This, in broad outline, is how the schools are operated.

There is in this set-up a three-fold threat to parental education. That threat arises when either one of the three involved in operating the school (parents, Board or faculty) fails in some way in its assigned task.

It is possible for teachers to threaten parental education. I am not referring to the fact that it is possible to have in the school incompetent teachers who are simply not intellectually and spiritually equipped to perform their task. This, of course, can also happen. But it is not this which concerns me at the moment. What does concern me is the fact that there can conceivably be a spirit on the part of all or some of the faculty in a given school which manifests itself in what I can only call professional arrogance. It is possible that teachers begin to consider themselves a professional elite who alone are in a position to determine *what* must be taught in a given school and how such instruction must be carried out. The argument goes something like this. Teachers are trained for their profession. They go to High School, College and University with the express purpose of becoming masters in their own fields not only, but also with the purpose of learning all the principles of education in the fields of philosophy of education and educational methodology. They consider themselves, as a result, authorities in their fields. Add to this knowledge which they have acquired over the years, a number of years of actual classroom experience in which they have put all they learned to the test of classroom work and have honed to a fine edge their professional abilities, and there is a real danger that these teachers assume that they alone know all there is to know about this matter of education. The conclusion is therefore, that they, and no one else, are in a proper position to determine what ought to be taught in a school and how such teaching should be carried on. In most instances parents are not as highly educated as the teachers, and, if parents have been educated, they are at least, not competent in the field of education. So not parents but teachers must assume the entire responsibility of taking care of the education of the children of the covenant. The whole responsibility then, is taken from parents and given over completely into the hands of a professional elite. This is one threat to parental education.

I am *not* saying that this is happening in our own Protestant Reformed Schools. As far as I have been able to observe, this is not, generally speaking, an *immediate* danger. Nor am I saying that teachers ought to have nothing whatsoever to say about what ought to be taught in the schools; and that they should have absolutely no voice at all in all questions of methods of teaching. Nor am I saying that education of teachers and professional competence is a thing to be scorned. Do not mistake me.

But I am saying three things: 1) The danger is very real. In a proposed statement entitled "Schools in the Christian Community" authored by James H. Olthuis and Bernard Zylstra the whole problem of parental responsibility in education is discussed. The authors come specifically to the conclusion that, "it is our conviction that the school as we envisage it today lies outside of the parents' authority in the home." They add a bit later: "(Parents) execute that responsibility sending the children to a school, within which educational *authority* is exercised by the team of teachers. From this vantage-point the authority of the parents does not reach into the educational process of the school." What is left to the parents? ". . . when the child is too sick to attend school; what clothes it should wear; whether corporal punishment is to be allowed; in what context homework is to be done, etc." This is a flat denial of parental education and a complete abdication on the part of parents who hand over, lock, stock and barrel, their responsibility to a professional elite. This view has had more influence than we often recognize. 2) Parents must recognize that teachers are in a position to do much for their children and are certainly, under normal circumstances, better equipped to advise and suggest concerning all aspects of the educational process. But this should be done in closest cooperation with parents. 3) The final and ultimate responsibility under God rests with parents and with them alone. They must have the right to have the final say in all matters of education. No teacher may ever deny a parent the right to have a voice in the education of the children — although this voice must be expressed in orderly ways. No teacher or group of teachers may ever set their professional competence above that of the parents' responsibility before God to instruct the children of the covenant of grace in the fear of Jehovah.

The second danger which is a threat to a parental school is the danger of what we may perhaps call 'boardism.'" An example of this lies at hand. It has been said to me that we should not elect to our boards in our Christian Schools any men except those who have had at least a college education. We should not entrust the operation of our schools to uneducated parents, nor should we permit boards composed of parents without some educational degrees to be in charge of the affairs of the school. Behind this plea lay a supposition which amounted to a claim that all the power for the operation of the school should rest with the Board. I have, in my own experience, met with Board members who conceived of the relation between a School Board and a School Society as being analogous to that of a Consistory to the congregation. The argument was then that just as a Consistory is invested by God with authority to rule over the congregation, so was a School Board invested with the authority to rule over a School Society. Hence, the Board and the Board alone have the "say" in the operation of the School. This Board not only determines on its own all matters which pertain to the School, but it is not answerable to the Society for what it does. And the implication is once again that the majority of parents are nincompoops who do not have sufficient education or intelligence to fulfill the responsibilities which God has given to them and to them alone. This is a threat to parental education which is to be avoided like the plague.

The third threat to parental education is a threat which arises from the failure on the part of parents to exercise their God-given responsibilities. Whether this is the greatest threat or not I do not know. I do know that within our own school system parental neglect and indifference to covenantal instruction lies at the root of many problems which the teachers and the Boards repeatedly face. It is almost true sometimes that teachers take upon themselves decisions which they ought not because there is thrust upon them the necessity of making these decisions by parental sloth. The attitude often prevails among us that, because we have excellent schools, dedicated teachers, consecrated School Boards, we as parents can safely leave the whole matter of covenant instruction to these teachers and we need not bother our heads about the whole matter.

There are two aspects to this evil which we ought briefly to remember. One aspect of the problem is the failure on the part of parents to concern themselves in almost any way with the education which the children are receiving in the schools. These parents never (or seldom) inquire of their children concerning their instruction, progress and work. They never supervise homework. They rarely talk to the teachers about their children. They do not even, as a rule, attend society meetings. The education of their children is a process of which they have no awareness — until disaster strikes in one form or another. And then the teacher gets all the blame. Most, if not all, teachers welcome the active interest of parents in all aspects of the educational process. They want the parents to be involved as much as possible. And they fret when parents show little or no interest.

The other aspect to this problem is the failure of parents to perform their own covenantal tasks in the home. Just because our children are regularly attending Christian schools does not mean that we have nothing more to do in the calling and responsibilities of covenant instruction. The fact of the matter is that the instruction which children receive in the home is still the spiritually *decisive* instruction of the covenant. So true is this that without faithfulness on the part of parents in their calling, the best Christian Schools will flounder and be of no avail. Teachers, dedicated and consecrated teachers, not only know this is essential, but must, in the nature of their task, assume that parents are fulfilling their responsibilities all the while these same children are attending school. In the final analysis, any successful education in the school becomes impossible without it.

These are present day threats. I speak of them to warn you against them that you may be on your guard. We must, for the sake of the precious truth of God's everlasting covenant of grace and for the future of our Churches, maintain the principle of parental education.

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