

REFORMED CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

As the month of September has again appeared on our calendars many of us turn our attention to education. As Christians we are convinced that all of life, thus also education, falls under the direction of our Father in heaven. Scripture has taught us that as early as the books of Moses. From Deuteronomy we learn that all the directions of the Lord must be followed in obedience and must be passed on to our children. We read, “Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the ordinances which the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it; ... and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (Deut. 6:1, 7)

At first glance we might conclude that these words only refer to our theological life, but when we read the whole chapter we soon discover that the instruction given by our Lord, through Moses, is a directive for all of life. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (vs. 4.5)

As mature Christians of the New Testament we have learned that the law of God, given to Moses on the mount, has been expanded in Scripture as a guide for thankfulness in our whole life. In history the church has summarized these instructions and showed, by means of Lord’s Days 34-44 of the Heidelberg Catechism, how they apply in all areas of our lives. We have learned that life may not be divided into isolated categories or spheres, but that life is one.

The principles presented in this sixth chapter of Deuteronomy play a significant role in the Christians understanding of education. We are taught that the responsibility for education rest with the parents: “And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children,” (vs. 6. 7a)”

The instruction of our children is not to be considered a part-time aspect of our relationship with them, but a full-time business: “(you) shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”(vs.7b) This instruction may not be only by words, but must permeate the whole of life. It must be reflected in our whole existence: “And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (vs. 8, 9)

It is even made clear in this chapter that we do not depend on education for the wealth and prosperity that we might enjoy. That comes by the grace of God. When the Lord blesses us with residence in a country at peace, and beautiful homes filled with wonderful things, we may not despise them as decadent possessions, but as gifts from a loving Father to His children. On the other hand, when we neglect to serve our God as He has taught us by His word, but pursue riches in our own strength, we will not be blessed in our efforts, and even the possessions that we acquire will not satisfy our appetite.

These are the things we must tell our children when they ask us: ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the LORD our God has commanded you?’ (vs20) Just like the people of Israel, we must answer: And the LORD commanded us to do all

these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.' (vs. 20, 21)

It is with this mind set that we must also approach our Reformed Christian schools. We have correctly taken our children out of the public schools, since it is not the responsibility of government to educate. Nor may we subject our children to an atheistic environment. In having decided to school our children at home we have followed the Scriptural norm found in Deuteronomy 6. But many of us have found that instruction in several areas of academics and other fields of learning could not be easily accomplished at home. Often parents were not qualified to teach certain academic subjects or did not have the resources to teach practical skills. The resultant pooling of resources has led to the formation of Christian Schools.

In itself such a development is to be praised - brothers and sisters helping one another do tasks that they could not do as well individually. Yet, several dangers may soon hamper such an endeavour. While a Christian school, based on the correct world view [serving God in obedience to all that He has taught us out of thankfulness], may enhance the academic achievement of students, it also increases the danger of parents considering themselves less responsible for education.

This distancing of parents from education creates two major areas of concern. First there is the danger that parents no longer place the teaching of their children as one of their highest priorities. After all, the teachers at school have been doing it all day. Let's give the children a bit of a break. In the second place there is the danger that the content and direction of the education receives less attention by the parents because it is left to experts, who are, after all, brother and sisters in the faith. The result can be that parents no longer live up to the Scriptural instruction to teach their children, and that the instruction that is given to the children no longer lives up to the Biblical standard that Christian education must have.

We must remember that a Christian school is not a public school with a Christian flavour, but an extension of the Christian home. It is collective home-schooling. That means that the home should not abdicate its God-given task of education, but must include the Christian school in the parental curriculum. As accountants, speech-writers and mechanics are hired to perform a specific task while the responsibility for the tax-return, speech, or automobile remains with the procurer, so education remains the responsibility of the parents even though part of it may be given at a Christian school. Just as we will not hire an accountant with questionable ethics, so we may not employ teachers with unscriptural views.

It is for this reason that many school associations have deemed it necessary to confirm that all their teachers wholeheartedly subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity. Even though the teachers have made public profession of their faith, just like elders and deacons, they are asked to publicly affirm their continued commitment to the Reformed faith by signing a subscription form. Such a practice is consistent with the basis upon which these schools are founded.*

Now that the new school year has begun, let us remind ourselves that education is the responsibility of the parents, fully and totally. At the same time, let us rejoice in the blessing of Reformed Christian "collective home-schooling". And let us do everything we can to ensure that the

education at home, including the “collective home-schooling,” remains faithful to the mandate of our God as He has revealed it in His holy Word.

* In this way the school association will also be protected from hiring persons with reservations about the Reformed doctrine. Further, this may help avoid future legal problem if a teacher strays from the basis of Christian education. As far back as 1619, ministers, teachers and others with previously Remonstrant sympathies were compelled to subscribe to the Reformed confession of Scripture or be censured.

My Son, Listen...*

By Rev. C. Bouwman

I understand well that youth by nature ask critical questions. Still, of late, I detect a spirit that does more than ask critical questions; I detect a spirit that doesn't accept the answers we've heard over the years.

The culture that pervades the western world today is very much a culture of youth. Try to recall the last time you saw an advertisement to sell food, drink, cars, clothes; you name it, pitched to the age bracket of your parents. It's not without significance that President Clinton at his first inauguration (himself at the time one of the youngest presidents the United States ever had) appointed to his inner circle a man who was at the time a mere 29 years old (George Stephanopolus). The fact is that being young is in. The emphasis on youth instills in young people the idea that they're important in the sense of having to be listened to. They have something to say which ought to make everybody else sit up and take notice.

Our cultural fascination with youth is encouraged further by the failures of the older generation to make the world worth-while for the younger. I mean this: today's older generation – raised as it is in the 50's and 60's – has largely thrown out any perspective concerning life that makes it meaningful. Whereas today's grandparents were brought up in the 30's and 40's with a sense of the God-ness of God, were taught to fear the Lord, the generation of the 50's and 60's –it's the era of Elvis Presley and the Beatles– discarded the old-time religion in favour of man-centered me-ism. These are the people who today are parents, but see no purpose in living beyond the here and now. So notions such as eternal youth are encouraged, including facial operations, hair loss treatment, excessive emphasis on sport, etc. Life is for the now, and now you have to be young. The youth pick up on this perspective and recognize envy from the older. It all adds up to a great feeling of importance.

Connected with the worldliness of the older generation is the fact that they have raised their children in a vacuum. That is: there is no reason for the youth to look up to the older generation, for that older generation has nothing substantial to offer. All the older generation can offer is a massive foreign debt which will require years of labour for the next generation to pay off; pollution of the environment which the next generation will need to clean up; rape of rain forests with so many countless species of floral and fauna extinct for good. Add to that the disintegration of family structures as society has known it over the years, and it all leads to the conclusion that the older generations haven't anything to offer the youth - have no answers. So the responsibility for the future lies squarely on the shoulders of the youth; if they're wanting society to be acceptable in

days to come, the youth are going to have to start thinking, analyzing, coming up with the answers the older generation failed to find.

I put it to you then, that it's no accident that your profs at university don't give you answers as the profs of old used to do; the profs at university prefer to show you how to ask the right questions, they encourage you to think through an answer true for yourself and maybe, hopefully, helpful to those around you. The world is at a loss, and is looking to the youth for the answers.

This is the society in which you live, and through such a society you are encouraged to think for yourself, express yourself, and in the meantime take nothing for granted. This is the spirit, I submit, that moves the younger generation – in the church too – to write articles that lack appreciation for the answers of the past. But this is a spirit, I'm sure, that's not of God. It's not the way the Lord would have things be. That brings me to the meat of the material I wish to lay before you this evening: what does the Lord say about these matters in His Word?

I'm going to start with what, to our minds, sounds like a very negative presentation of youth. I refer to the statement of Solomon: "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him" (Prov 22:15).

The reference in our translation is to a "child". This will lead us to think of an 8, 10 or 12 year old. We feel vindicated that the reference is to an actual child by the reference in the second half of the verse to a rod; rods, we're sure, are for children, not for teenagers – let alone a person who's reached his 21st. It's important for us to note, then, that the word translated as "child" is used in Scripture to cover anything from infancy to, say, age 30 or 40. Absalom, for example, at the time when he drove his father David out of Jerusalem and ascended the throne himself, is described with the same word that's used in Prov 22 (cf. II Sam 14:21; 18:5). Solomon the king, when God appeared to him in that dream, described himself as a little child, and he uses the same word (I Kings 3:7). Rehoboam was 41 years old when he became king, and in his first year as king is described with the same word as appears in Prov 22 (cf. II Chron 13:7). The point I want to make is that Scriptures do not present folly as being characteristic of the very young alone; the term describes also persons of your age (and mine).

As to what is meant by "folly", the term captures the notion of being "morally deficient". The point here is that each person by nature is depraved, and therefore by nature inclined to evil. It is through the Holy Spirit working in depraved hearts through the preaching (and that preaching occurs in the midst of the hard knocks of the school of life and is digested through these hard knocks) that one learns to curb folly and becomes wise. So it is that the Scriptures also present the elderly as people to look up to; these are they who have been through the school of life, have learned much through the working of the Holy Spirit, are wise. The contrast to the child of Prov 22 is, then, not the 22 year old; the contrast is instead the person with the white hair. So it is that leadership in the Bible is not set aside for the young, not even for the 20 or the 30 year olds. Leadership in the bible is set aside for the seniors, the white haired.

That's not to say that there were no young leaders in the Bible. Joash became king at the tender age of 7 years. Josiah was a mere 8. Solomon was around 20. Timothy was but a young man. The fact that God was pleased to call such young men to positions of leadership does not take away from the fact that this is not in accordance with the norm God has set for people's conduct.

Leadership is for the seniors, because by nature the heart of every person leans contrary to God. Says Eccl 10: “Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child” (vs. 16) – and there’s the same word again as in Prov 22.

What, then, is the place God would give to the young? We hear the fifth commandment week by week, and understand it to mean that children are to obey their parents. I remind you, though, that the fifth commandment itself does not tell children to obey their parents; that they are to “obey” is Paul’s inspired exegesis of the fifth commandment (Eph 6:1). The commandment itself instructs one generation to “honour” father and mother. The word “honour” describes the notion of considering someone as weighty, important (cf. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*; pg. 171). Whether that other person is senior or not, wise or not, educated or not, correct or not (to the judgment of the child) makes no difference. It is the Lord’s will that one consider weighty and important, the persons whom God has made your father and your mother, and they are to be shown honour. We understand, then, that age in no way ever alters the instruction of the fifth commandment; even the sixty year old son is to consider weighty, important, and honourable the parents to whom God still gives life.

As to the reason why the younger are to show honour to father and mother, an indication is given in Lev 19:3. God’s instruction here is: “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father....”. The word used here is “revere”, “fear”. This word is used in the Bible exclusively in relation to God, though sometimes a person is mentioned besides the Lord. I Sam 12 gives us an example: we read that “all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel” (vs. 18). Samuel is feared because he represents God. So, too, the mother and the father of Lev.19 are to be revered - feared because they represent God. That also explains why the person who strikes or curses his father or mother is, says Ex 21, to be killed (vs. 15, 17). For by striking or cursing a parent, one strikes or curses the God behind the parent.

The apostle Paul interpreted the fifth commandment in terms of obedience. Children are to obey their parents (Eph 6:1). Paul could offer this interpretation because of the reason why God gave parents to children. Children, God knew (foolish as they by nature are), have need of instruction and correction. Children were, then, to appreciate the instruction of the parents; were not to think that they themselves knew what was right. The book of Deuteronomy binds on the hearts of the fathers (and mothers) the need to teach the children the way of the Lord. Scarcely has Moses repeated the 10 Commandments in Deut. 5, when he adds in chap 6 this instruction to the parents of Israel: “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” (vs. 6f; cf. 11:19). And the son who was unwilling to abide by this instruction was, Moses adds later in the book, to be brought to the elders for stoning (21:18ff). It’s all tied together in the words of Solomon in Prov 3, “My son, do not forget my law.... Do not be wise in your own eyes” (1, 7).

Proverbs repeatedly lays before the younger the instruction to listen to the teaching of the older. Why did Solomon write this book? “To give prudence to the simple. To the young man knowledge and discretion” (1:4). [There’s that same word we had before, elsewhere translated as “child”; Solomon wrote his book so that the young man, the child, might learn knowledge, discretion.] In

1:8 we read, “My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother.” In 2:1, “My son, if you receive my words...” 3:1, “My son, do not forget my law.”; 4:1, “Hear, my children, the instruction of a father...,” etc, etc. It’s a refrain recurring time and again throughout the book: “My son, listen!” And of course we understand the implication of this instruction. If the younger were already wise, if they had the answers themselves, they would not need to listen, would not need to heed the instruction of a father. But as it is, youth don’t know the answers; they may think they do, but God in His word of life says they don’t. Hence the word of Prov 13:1, “a wise son heeds his father’s instruction”, and Prov 17:21, “the father of a fool has no joy.”

I refer yet to Paul’s words to Timothy. He tells youthful Timothy – a minister of the Word – that “in the last days...men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemous, disobedient to parents,” etc (II Tim 3:1ff). It’s most noteworthy that the apostle juxtaposes pride with disobedience to parents. For that’s what it is: going one’s own way, working with the assumption that you yourself know best, is nothing else than pride, arrogance.

From texts as these (and there are more), I conclude that it is not for the younger to think or speak or act as if they have the answers. I know it’s typical of youth to think in those terms, and I was myself possibly a rather apt example of such a youth. I hope I’ve learned a bit in the decade or two since I was at university. In this regard, it’s for the youth who take God’s Word seriously to be rather different from the people of our society.

At the same time I want to add that you ought not to think either that your parents or grandparents have all the answers. Their hearts, too, remain too full of sin for them to chart life’s course and specify solutions to all the problems that there are. That prerogative belongs to the Creator of life alone. And the thing is that He has said that it’s for the younger to listen to their elders. Why? Not because the elderly know better, but rather because it pleases the Lord to teach and mould the one generation through the experiences and wisdom He has granted to the previous. In agreement with the way God has ordained the structures of society, it is for us as younger people – never mind how many years of education we have – to cultivate in ourselves an attitude of humility. Very fitting are the words of James, “be quick to hear and slow to speak.”

In the course of hundreds of years of church history, the Lord God has led His Church through many and various trials and difficulties, be it persecution or heresy or apathy or whatever. The result of these persecutions and heresies and apathies, etc, has been that God’s people have had to be busy with His Word and so were granted particular insights into His Word, and have developed particular traditions. It is true that these particular insights – let us think of those in our Confessions – are the insights of men, and hence theoretically open for correction and improvement. It is equally true that these particular traditions – let us think of praying before and after the meal, reading the Bible together as family around the table – are the insights of men and hence can be improved upon. Still, these insights and traditions are the result of centuries of battle against the attacks of the devil. In the words of Edmund Burke: tradition is the accumulated wisdom of the fathers. For a new generation, then, to belittle these traditions, for a new generation to challenge these confessional insights, is nothing short of arrogance. The whole attitude of youth, according to the revealed will of God, is to be one of humility, one of being eager to be shown the way. The

doctrine of sin demands this attitude. If your parents, then, have taught you certain habits or certain doctrines, it's not for you to toss them out lightly; it's for you to treasure them on the understanding that there is a reason why they have done things the way they did and thought things as they did – and that reason could be embodied in decades and centuries of church history and church struggle.

No, I'm not saying that youth may never ask questions, may never challenge what you've inherited from the generation that's gone before you. But you understand the point - there's a way to ask questions, and there's a way to challenge. It is all to be done in humility, it's all to be done on the understanding that fathers are probably right, that you will assume them to be right, that in your mind you want them to be right – until the evidence lies thick and solid that there's a better way.

It's for neither young people nor old people to build God's church, to make His kingdom come. That's only for God to do. It's for us to labour on the foundations God has laid in Scripture, foundations upon which previous generations have already built. Keep building, by all means. But don't start all over new on any part of the building unless you can convince the grey headed, by thorough search of both Scripture and history, that they've been building wrongly.

God's kingdom hasn't started with this generation!

** This is part of a speech delivered on August 14, 1995 to the Tertiary Students Club of the Free Reformed Churches in Perth, Western Australia. With permission of the author we have deleted some of the local and time-bound aspects of his speech. Nevertheless, the principles articulated in it are hereby passed on.*

Parent-Controlled or Church Schools?

In an Internet discussion group a Canadian-Australian was trying to explain the difference between the Reformed Schools within our churches in Australia and those within the sister churches in Canada. The Australian schools he said are “church schools” whilst the Canadian schools are “parent controlled schools.” This remark was quickly corrected, for “church schools” are normally seen as those owned and controlled by a denomination e.g. the Catholic parochial schools and their was no suggestion that the control of our schools in Australia was other than by an elected Board.

Although the establishment of schools by our forefathers in Canada and Australia had a common basis, the conclusions drawn in each country has led to differing views of the place of the school in the church community and therefore a profound effect on several aspects of the schools operation. Yet, it is clear that the Canadian Reformed and Australian Free Reformed schools differ not so much from each other but rather differ more from the mainstream Christian parent-controlled school movement. The confessional basis of our schools as opposed to the Creedal basis of most Christian schools, could indeed lead some to argue that our schools are “church schools.”

The Basis of the School

It is usually, but not universally, accepted that the basis of the Reformed school lies in the promises given at baptism. This is not just in the answers that parents give, but also in the covenant promises made by our God.

Prof. Deddens wrote a series of articles in *Clarion* in 1988 (1) where he drew heavily from Prof. Holwerda's book "De betekenis van verbond en kerk voor huwelijk, gezin en jeugd" (The meaning of covenant and church for marriage, family, and youth). Holwerda writes: "For there is the reality of God's covenant. There is the immovable

firmness of God's promise, that our children are washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. If we lose sight of this even for one moment, then our children have become baptized heathens, maybe, with somewhat greater chance for salvation because they are more in contact with God's grace. However then our schools with the Bible have lost their significance because we would have erased the radical difference between our children and the children of unbelievers...Therefore as Reformed people we are called to establish Reformed Schools, being parents of covenant children. This is not a right of ours but it is the consequence of the rightful claim of God the Holy Spirit on the children of the Covenant"

Prof. J. Geertsema on this topic wrote (2): "we confess that the youth of the church belongs to the covenant. They belong to the Lord who also says to them: I claim you for my own. I put my seal on you. That is why we have a Reformed School, set up for covenant children"

The late Rev. Bruning wrote an article on the purpose of the school in "Una Sancta" in May, 1963 (recently reprinted)(3) . He notes that a strong bond between church and school is evident from history. The Synods of Dordt 1618/1619 required all teachers to promise faithfulness to the Church and her Confessions. The Church Order devotes a whole article to Education and after both the Secession and Liberation education received attention in the Churches. Rev. Bruning concludes: "the lesson is clear: the church and school are totally interwoven. From Lords Day 21 we are taught that through and from within the church spring communion and cooperation of the children of God...through the church we can develop a truly Christian school."

These statements should not be misunderstood. Nowhere does Rev. Bruning imply that the school usurps the task of the church. He would not have agreed with for example, Dr van Brummelen, who sees discipleship as a task of the school. Rev. Bruning taught that the school does not lead children to Christ - it receives children that already belong to Jesus Christ.

Who can Attend?

The above goes a long way to explain why stipulations are made in many of our school associations that only members of the church can send their children to our schools. Children from outside the church have no place. A choice for the school means a choice for the church. Conversely a choice against the church by leaving it, means a choice against the school. On this point, one begins to hear a different sound in both Holland and Canada. Reformanda (4 Feb, 1998) reports that 7% of the school population in the sister churches in Holland are comprised of children who belong to a different church.

Despite his comments that Reformed Schools are set up for covenantal children, Prof. Geertsema writes "when non-Canadian Reformed parents agree with the Reformed Standards and precisely because of the Reformed foundation seek such education for their children, we should not refuse them, but on the contrary, gladly receive them". Prof. Geertsema quoted Matthew 5:42 "give to him who asks you (for something) and do not refuse him who wants to borrow from you". Rev.

Bruning on the other hand pointed to Matthew 6:33 “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you”. When parents from outside the church are allowed to receive the benefits of sending their children to our Reformed school, the seriousness of making a choice for the Church is taken away.

Sharing the Burden

The covenantal basis of our schools should also mean a sharing of the burdens of educating the children of the church. Prof Geertsema certainly makes that conclusion: “when we say covenant we mean family, brothers and sisters who are there to support each other”. He considers it only right that those who do not have children at school maintain their membership, gladly contributing to the cause of covenant children. Rev. Schouten in a recent editorial (4) writes, “it cannot be denied that education of covenant youth is a corporate responsibility. In the Christian community with its covenantal bonds, this collective responsibility must be felt very keenly”. Expressing his disappointment that parents opt out when their last child graduates, he notes that universal support of the Reformed Schools would go a long way to keeping tuition fees at a reasonable level. In practice in many Canadian schools the financial burdens on parents are great, fees being many hundreds of dollars a month. Rev. Schouten complains that the loss of consensus about Reformed education arises in part from economic factors. Actually it is the other way round: the lack of consensus leads to the adverse economic factors.

Australian Experience

The unity of Church and School as understood by Rev. Bruning has meant a quite different approach in sharing the burdens of Christian education within the churches in Australia. That the greater financial burden in Canada compared with Australia is due in varying degree to different government support cannot be denied, but it is not the major reason for the lower costs for parents in the Australian churches. If it is agreed that the school is for the covenant children of the church then all members of the church should accept responsibility. Then all members of the church who receive a full income can be expected to be members of the School Association whilst younger people just starting work are encouraged to be donors.

In Australia a variable membership fee, or a school fee scale according to whether and how many children attend school, is resisted (5). Such a multi-tiered structure or user-pays principle gives the wrong impression. The parents have the primary responsibility to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord also at home, but that does not mean they have to bear the greatest financial burden. All members pay the same weekly fee, regardless if they have children attending the primary of senior schools or if they have no children at school at all or any at home. This puts into practice what we confess in Lord’s Day 27: the children belong to the church and their spiritual welfare is the concern of the whole church.

We cannot but agree with Rev. Schouten when he warns against the absolutising of the family and the need to emphasize the legitimate concerns and interests of the whole community in each and every covenant child. The children belong in the first place to God and His covenant, which is to say, also to His church and congregation - His covenantal family.

Also in Australia there are indications the universal support for the schools is showing signs of strain. We would do well to find that consensus again that our forefathers had: A school for the children of the church, therefore a school that belongs to all of us, made possible by the rich blessings our Heavenly Father entrusts to us.

L. van Burgel

1. K. Deddens, "Confession and School" parts 1, 2 &3. Clarion: Vol. 37; No. 23, 24, 25.
2. J. Geertsema: "Covenant and School Education" Clarion: Vol. 40, No. 10.
3. K. Bruning: "Character, Aim and Purpose of the School." Una Sancta; Vol. 45; No. 20.
4. R. Schouten, "Shattered Consensus?" Clarion: Vol. 45, no 19.
5. A single membership fee, which also entitles parents to send their children to the Association schools, has been the norm since the first school was established in 1957. Circumstances have resulted in one Association (Launceston) adopting a multi-tiered membership structure.

CHURCH NEWS

Mr. Richard Bultje has accepted an appointment to serve as mission worker in the Greater Hamilton area. This work is supervised by Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church. The Canadian Reformed Church at Burlington South is also supporting this project.