

The Protestant Reformed Seminary and the “Good Christian Schools” (1)

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Convocation Address

Convocation exercises of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary were held on September 5, 2012 at Southwest Protestant Reformed Church of Grandville. The text of Prof. Cammenga’s address on that occasion begins here.

Reformed churches have always shown a keen interest in the cause of Christian education. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the Reformation itself was concerned for the education of the children of believers. The Reformers had harsh things to say about education in the existing schools, which education was largely under the control of the corrupt Roman Catholic Church and was shot through with the humanism of the Renaissance. The Reformers called for new schools in which children and young people would be taught in harmony with the truth of the Word of God.

Luther was outspoken in his call for the establishment of sound Christian schools. In 1524 he wrote a tract entitled “To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools.” In 1530 he preached a sermon entitled, “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School.” He criticized as “a masterpiece of Satanic art” the delusion of parents who supposed that the Christian education of their children was unnecessary. Addressing himself to pastors and preachers, he said:

My Very Dear Sirs and Friends: You see plainly how Satan is now attacking us on all sides, both with power and cunning, and brings about every misery, that he may destroy the holy Gospel and the kingdom of God, or, if he cannot destroy it, that he may at least hinder it in every way, and prevent its progress and success. Among the various crafty devices, one of the greatest, if not the greatest, is to delude the common people into withholding their children from school and instruction, while he suggests to them such hurtful thoughts as these: “Since there is no hope for the cloisters and priesthood as formerly, we do not need learned men and study, but must consider how we may obtain food and wealth.”¹

In “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,” written already in 1520, Luther criticized the state of education in his day:

The universities also need a good, thorough reformation—I must say it no matter whom it vexes—for everything which the papacy has instituted and ordered is directed only towards the increasing of sin and error. What else are the universities, if their present condition remains unchanged, than . . . places for training youth in Greek glory, in which loose living prevails, the Holy Scriptures and the Christian faith are little taught, and the blind, heathen master Aristotle rules alone, even more than Christ.²

Luther somewhere says, “When the schools flourish, all flourishes.”

The Geneva Academy was a monument to John Calvin’s zeal for Christian education. Begun in 1558, it provided a Christian education from the primary grades through university and seminary level courses. The persecution of Protestants in different places, as in England during the reign of “Bloody Mary,” caused many to seek refuge in Geneva and to enroll in the Academy. The Geneva Academy sent its graduates all over Europe, convicted of the truths of the Reformation and prepared to apply the education they had received in Calvin’s school to a wide variety of vocations. By the time of Calvin’s death in 1564, there were more than 1,200 students in the college and more than 300 students in the seminary.

The concern for Christian education showed itself in the Presbyterian branch of the Reformation. John Knox, one who himself had studied in Geneva during the time of Calvin, in *The Book of Discipline* that he authored, called for the establishment of good Christian schools.

The Necessity of Schools. Seeing that God hath determined that His Church here on earth, shall be taught not by angels but by men; and seeing that men are born ignorant of all godliness; and seeing, also, how God ceaseth to illuminate men miraculously, suddenly changing them, as that he did His Apostles and others in the Primitive Church: of necessity it is that your Honors be most careful for the virtuous education, and godly upbringing of the youth of this Realm, if ye now thirst unfeignedly for the advancement of Christ’s glory, or yet desire the continuance of His benefits to the generation following. For as the youth must succeed, so aught we to be careful that they have the knowledge and erudition, to profit and comfort that which aught to be most dear to us, to wit, the Church and Spouse of the Lord Jesus.³

The General Assembly of the Scottish Presbyterian Church already in 1560 directed the presbyteries to establish “a church school in every parish, and to see that the teacher employed in each was a pious, orthodox, well-qualified man . . .” (Samuel Miller, *Baptism and Christian Education*, p. 141). By an act of the General Assembly of 1642, it was decided that a grammar school should be established in every presbytery. The General Assembly of 1700 enjoined all presbyteries to “take special, particular, and exact notice” of all school masters, governors, and instructors of youth within their jurisdiction and oblige them to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Further, it called for the dismissal of all those who showed negligence, error, or immorality.

The Reformed churches of the Netherlands shared this concern for Christian education. Early on, the government entrusted the church with the reform of the existing Roman Catholic schools. The Synod of Dordt, 1618-’19, ruled that: “All consistories shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters who not only teach the children reading, writing, language, and the liberal arts, but

also train them in godliness and in the catechism.” Every schoolteacher was required to subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity, and no one was to be hired as a teacher who was not a member in good standing in the Reformed church. To ensure that faithful instruction was being given, it was made the duty of the ministers and elders periodically to visit the schools.

The Protestant Reformed Churches share this interest in and concern for Christian education. This can be demonstrated. Our concern for Christian education comes out in our official creed, the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 38. Lord’s Day 38 contains the Heidelberg Catechism’s explanation of the Fourth Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy.” Question 103 asks: “What doth God require in the fourth commandment?” The answer begins: “First, that the ministry of the gospel *and the schools* be maintained” Clearly, these schools are the Christian day-schools, the schools established and maintained by the parents of the congregations. One of the prescribed questions put to each consistory at the annual church visitation is: “Does the consistory see to it that the parents send their children to the Christian school?” Article 41 of the Church Order prescribes that one of the questions asked of the delegates from each church at the conclusion of the classis meetings shall be: “Are the poor and the Christian schools cared for?”

Article 21 of the Church Order reads: “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.” Recently, our churches were involved in controversy, painful controversy, over the meaning and application of Article 21. We may hope that that controversy has sharpened our understanding of our calling, especially our calling as officebearers, and strengthened our resolve to carry it out.

Article 21 concerns the duty of consistories and officebearers in promoting the “good Christian schools.” Although Article 21 concerns the duty of the denomination’s consistories and officebearers, it has important implications for the denomination’s seminary. That ought to be obvious, if from nothing else, from the fact that the seminary is called to train future officebearers, ministers of the gospel, whose calling will be one day as members and presidents of consistories to promote the “good Christian schools.”

The “Good Christian Schools”

The “good Christian schools” of Church Order, Article 21 are, first of all, *schools*. Article 21 calls for the promotion of schools in the classic and historic sense of the word. This is simply the only kind of school that Article 21 could possibly have been referring to at the time at which it was written, no alternative to the traditional school being then available. This does justice to the language of Article 21, for these are schools in which parents *have* their children instructed, have them instructed by others, by the schoolmasters to whom reference was made in the earlier versions of the article. Besides, reference is made in the article to schools in which “parents” have their children instructed, parents in the plural, parents who have banded together in order jointly to establish and maintain these schools.

That Article 21 refers to schools in the traditional sense of the word is confirmed by the questions of Article 41 of the Church Order: “Are the poor and Christian schools cared for?” And this is confirmed by the questions for church visitation: “Does the consistory see to it that the parents *send* their children to the Christian school?” The parents send their children away to attend these schools. Clearly, the “good Christian schools” of Article 21 are the schools established by the community of believers, inasmuch as the children of believing parents belong to the covenant and church of God.

In the second place, these schools are *parental* schools. Article 21 calls upon consistories to see to it “that there are good Christian schools in which *parents* have their children instructed” The government does not have, neither ought it to assume, the duty of educating the children. The church as institute does not have the duty to educate the children. To catechize, yes, as part of its calling to preach the gospel. But not to educate more broadly with a view to preparation for earthly vocation. That calling belongs to the parents. Parents carry out this calling by hiring teachers who stand in their place, *in loco parentis*.

That it is the calling of parents to instruct their children is plain from Deuteronomy 6:6-9:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

And this parental calling comes out in Deuteronomy 6:20ff.: “And when thy son asketh thee in time to come . . . then thou shalt say unto thy son”

. . . to be continued.

¹ Frederick Eby, *Early Protestant Educators: The Educational Writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Other Leaders of Protestant Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1931), 105.

² Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), 92.

³ Eby, *Early Protestant Educators*, 277.