

A Protestant Reformed Liberal Arts College: Our Next Goal?

By Pastor Carl Haak

"When schools flourish, things go well and the church is secure. Let us make more doctors and masters. The youth is the church's nursery and fountainhead. When we are dead, where are others to take our place if there are no schools? They are the preservers of the church." Martin Luther

"The great task to which the college is expected to address itself, is to apply these principles in every field of study, as the nature of the case may demand, and to exhibit their bearing on life in all its phases. Only a consistent application of our Reformed principles to every branch of study, making instruction at our school thoroughly distinctive, can satisfy." Louis Berkhof, 1926, address to the first graduating class from Calvin College.

"In this spiritual - ethical sense of the word he lives his own life, antithetically over against the life of sin and of the flesh, and he condemns the world. He strives for a Christian family, a Christian home, a Christian life in society, a Christian School, a Christian University, a Christian State, and is a living member of the Christian Church. In a word, his calling is, not to wed Jerusalem to Athens, but to represent the cause of God's covenant, the cause of the Son of God in the midst of the world. The antithesis is that of sin and grace." Herman Hoeksema, 1946, The Christian and Culture

The intent of this paper is to inspire a vision and thus create a burden.

The vision is for the establishment of Protestant Reformed Education on a college level. The burden is that God has called our generation to pursue such a goal with all our heart and strength.

Since visions and burdens are alone worked by the Holy Spirit, I look to Him to inspire among Protestant Reformed believers the vision and burden for our own Liberal Arts College. We need only to ask whether the goals we set as God's people are right, indeed mandated by the Scriptures and consistent with our Reformed Principles. If they are right, our part in the covenant is to faithfully and persistently pursue them. Mere knowledge of the right goals has never yet been the force by which they are accomplished. It is the Holy Spirit Who inspires vision for great good and who places upon the heart the burden to be busy in attaining this great good "to the utmost of our ability".

So let me attempt to convince you that the goal for a Protestant Reformed Liberal Arts College is not merely a noble goal, something interesting to talk about, a dream; but it is placed before our generation as an urgent need that cries out for doing. Then, I look with excitement for the Holy Spirit to flame the vision and lay the burden on the heart of the denomination. And finally I look for the day when young people of the covenant enter the doors of such an institution.

Are We Finished?

Early in the history of our denomination the cause of Christian Education became an earmark of our churches. The Protestant Reformed Churches, by grace alone, have from their beginning trumpeted the cause of Christian Education as the inevitable and necessary consequence of the doctrine of the gracious covenant. We are all aware of Herman Hoeksema's sermon on Deuteronomy 6, given originally in 1920 while pastor in Holland Michigan. The sermon is a classic on the Biblical truth of parental responsibility for the entire education of their children. Hoeksema went on to emphasize that this responsibility produces the calling and force behind the establishment of Christian schools. The development of the truth of the Covenant in our circles has born the sweet fruit of Christian Day Schools. We have seen our individual congregations prosper where these schools have been established through much sacrifice, tears, disappointments, struggles, and finally ... overwhelming joy. And we have learned from some of the sad controversies the denomination has undergone in connection with these schools that the promotion of this cause must be done in wisdom, conviction, unity, patience, and humble persistence.

As a result, members of the Protestant Reformed Churches are committed to the cause of Christian Education for the covenant children and youth of the church. It goes without saying that we believe parents are given this calling by God and are to pursue it in love and unity to the best of their ability. The late Professor Homer Hoeksema gives what is now an axiom among us when he wrote:

"Education is primarily the calling and obligation of Christian parents. This is true even when this education is and must be in part accomplished by means of schools. Education is not the task of the state or of the church. This is the reason why for years and years Reformed people have established and maintained Christian schools."

But are we finished in this task unless we seek to establish our own college? An important, exciting, and crucial part of Education is as yet undone and unattempted by us, namely the founding of a College. As past generations held the goal of Christian Day Schools and then High Schools before them and sought to establish such schools, ought not our generation also have the goal of establishing a denominational College? As we see the commitment to Covenant Education among us in the formation of High Schools, and in the ongoing prayer for grade schools in those congregations which do not yet have them, is it not entirely consistent with that commitment to begin serious work toward a College? Education provided at a College level is the legitimate and necessary consequence of our principles concerning education. We believe the truth given to our churches provides the key for all true knowledge. Is it not time for us to shine the light of the truth upon those areas of study involved in a College Education? Is not this the work that God has given to our generation? Do not our Fathers, who carried the cause nobly so far, call upon us their sons to undertake such a task?

A generation that has no goals flounders. A generation which does not press on to complete causes held dear by their Fathers and for which they sacrificed is a generation that soon drifts from the convictions of their Fathers. A generation that is content merely to maintain what was so dearly bought by their Fathers, but does not seek to improve upon it and develop it in all its implications, is a generation that loses their vision. The failure to attempt to advance the cause of Covenant education into levels not yet attained is to threaten that which we have. God's causes are to be advanced by each succeeding generation. Yes, they are to be lovingly and faithfully maintained, but each age is called to go on, to see further, to work harder, to believe God will open the way for things the last generation could only dream about.

What I am saying is that love for the cause of Covenant Reformed Education cannot rest satisfied among us without strenuous, serious, and persistent attempts to establish a Christian College.

Examples from the Bible are abundant for the truth that each generation is called not only to maintain but progress in the way of their Fathers. From a negative point of view the book of Judges shows what happens when the causes of God are left uncompleted and succeeding generations do not press up on the advantageous position gained through the faith of their forbearers. Positively, David's commission to Solomon to build the temple contains the principle that each new generation receives the profound obligation and sacred calling to bring the goals of the former generation to fruition. (1 Chronicles 28: 20)

Our goals, to a large measure, define who we are. Worthy goals unite the denomination. Worthy goals answer our youth's questions concerning what Reformed believers hold precious and what Reformed believers think about this present life and their calling in it. The goals of a denomination provide leadership to the youth of the denomination. What we set down as important guides them in what they ought to be doing.

Looking at the denomination as a whole, can you think of a more worthy goal than establishing a denominational college, beginning perhaps with teacher training, and in God's goodness expanding in to a full fledged, degree granting (the Lord willing) institution of higher learning?

In the early 80s an article appeared in the Standard Bearer under the title: An Open Letter Concerning Reformed Higher Education. While the entire article deserves reading, I quote only one paragraph in which the goal of such an endeavor is elucidated.

"Our desire is college training that is excellent, both academically and spiritually. Qualified professors, themselves trained and competent in their own fields, would not merely pay lip service to the great doctrines of the Reformed Faith, much less busy themselves to call these doctrines into question and to undermine them, but would teach their subjects in the light of these doctrines – the inerrant inspiration of Holy Scripture; creation and providence; the fall of the human race in a real Adam; God's curse upon fallen man and his world, outside of Christ; the Divine judgment of a universal flood; the antithesis between the elect Church and reprobate world; the Lordship of the risen Son of God; the binding Law of God in Holy Scripture for marriage, family, labor, economy, government, and personal behavior, and the end of the world. Surely, this a worthy, and a thrilling, concern."

But, can it be done?

Perhaps up to this point there is little disagreement. None would dispute that such a College would, at least in theory, be nice, especially as it would serve to prepare prospective Protestant Reformed teachers for our existing schools.

But can it be done? To be blunt, isn't it a pipe dream? In the face of what it would take, who really among us is willing to seriously consider expending any kind of energy in its service? Who wants to even let the vision get in their heart, afraid that it would only meet frustration and disappointment? It is best, perhaps, to leave it as an idea.

Objections are not hard to find.

It is simply not realistic. We can't do it. Governmental regulations for accreditation for Academic institutions probably already make it impossible. Satan is a grand strategist. The current legislations aimed at religious tolerance are not promoted by him for the limited objective of keeping prayer out of public schools and the commandments out of public courts. He strikes for the heart. He has in mind the hated cause of the covenant, and insuring that it will not advance into sphere of education. His sole objective, of which he never loses sight, is the destruction of the Covenant seed and all spiritual resources set for their survival. (see Rev. 12:17) How many hurdles would have to be jumped, doors opened, and ravines bridged before we could hope to receive official standing with the State? It would be like asking the Red Sea to be opened again.

Still more, we have few (if any) qualified to teach at the college level. It may even be true that percentage wise few college graduates among us desire to pursue higher learning for any reason at all. We might well ask how seriously higher learning in fields of science, medicine, history, and economics is taken by us a whole. Simply attempting to gather a staff of teachers is at best a daunting if not impossible task at the present. And our sight of the future does not see any substantial change in this trend.

And besides, it is an indisputable fact that Colleges have become the occasion for troubles and hot beds for heresy and ungodliness in denominations. The frequency in which this has taken place is frightening. History records that such institutions seldom attained the goals for which they were established, but soon became a source for apostasy, unbelief, and worldliness in the denomination that established them. Behind the guise of academic freedom, the enemy has stole in and sown the seeds of relativism and secularism.

I am sure that any serious pursuit of establishing a college will uncover a host more of obstacles and objections, enough I am sure to take the wind out of the sails of the most avid.

Ask the right question.

Yes, count the cost. Never begin a project among God's covenant people without an objective consideration of the obstacles in the way and the resources required. Zeal must be guided by Godly wisdom or it becomes fanaticism.

But in answer, first of all, we must be reminded of how goals are set among the people of God. The question with which to begin is: Is it right? Is it needed? Is it part of the expression of thankfulness we want to show to our Covenant keeping God? Does it glorify God? Is it a great good for the people of God? The question whether a goal is attainable may not and must not determine whether it should be made a goal. Do we work only for what we see as being realistic? Does God call us to pursue what appears practicable, and dismiss what we consider is not? It must be clear to us that the principles and convictions we hold govern the goals we are to have. In short the question is not: Can it be done? , but rather: *Should it be done?* The day our goals are set solely by feasibility is the day we better look into our souls to see whether the love which "*hopeth all things, believeth all things*" beats there.

It is not pragmatism, but principle that determines the goals Covenant believers place before themselves. Love and hope determine the pursuits of God's people. And let us not forget *faith* in God's faithfulness to open the way. We need to take the history and example of Nehemiah to heart. Was there any task more hopeless, more frustrating, more beyond the scope of possibility than for the feeble Jews of the post captivity to build the walls of Zion which had been in ruins for over a hundred years, and for which they themselves despaired? The crucial element in Nehemiah's day was not, could it be done? but this: "*the God of heaven, He will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build... the people had a mind to work ... Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands*" . Nehemiah 2:20: 4:6: 6:9

Yet, it is undeniable that we have few if any qualified to teach. Yes, and we never will if we don't start to encourage young men and women to prepare. God fills needs. Are we serious about education? Or, is education, at least at higher levels, something we consider evil in itself? Would a young man who is seeking to pursue a masters or doctorate in a certain field of learning be considered among us odd, or even dabbling in unbelief? Make no mistake, I see a minefield of temptations and a labyrinth of errors before anyone who will engage in academia toward obtaining degrees of higher learning. But God, in answer to prayer and through the preaching of the Reformed truth, will give us youth who are valiant for truth, faithful, humble, able by grace to heed the injunction of the Apostle: "*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.*" II Corinthians 10: 4,5

But what about the reality that Christian Colleges have almost unanimously failed to attain the high purpose behind their establishment and become the springboard for departure from the Reformed Faith and Life? Our answer is simply this, the misuse of a good thing does not make the thing itself bad or intrinsically defective. It's bad reasoning to think that since heresy arises out of institutions of higher learning, institutions of higher learning are by their very nature suspect. Run that reasoning once past the Scriptures. Heresy is sin. Heresy arises out of pride and unbelief. False teaching is not the product of legitimate knowledge and science, but is the result of rejecting the authoritative rule of Holy Scripture that regulates all knowledge and science. Scripture is true light. Darkness finds its source in sinful pride of man that exalts itself over God. Academic freedom is teaching, learning, researching, and reading, in light of the absolute truth of God's Word. To reject God's Word as the arbiter of truth is not freedom, but leads to the bondage of unbelief and ignorance.

College Education does not belong to the enemy's territory. One has not chosen the path of departure because they desire to obtain a degree. The problem of heresy and ungodliness arising out of Colleges originally founded on the truth is not found in the nature of College Education, but in the sin of man's heart. Resist the sin, but don't flee from legitimate, and in fact crucial, institutions of learning.

Besides, if Christian Colleges have been the center of the enemies' assaults, may we not conclude that demonstrates their importance? If the Devil works hard to corrupt something, you may be sure it's not just

for glee, but because he sees the good purpose grace will work through it. Let us not withdraw from the battle where the fighting rages hottest and the enemy seeks to sow his damnable confusions.

All these hindrances are really no different than the ones confronting us in establishing grade schools and high schools. On the college level the questions become perhaps more intense, but in reality they are the same. We have the truth, by God's grace, which will guide and defend. The obstacles are not greater than the truth. The cause is right. God's grace is sufficient, and the need is present.

Why is this goal so important?

A number of reasons might be given for the importance of establishing a denominational college. There is the one you might be thinking, the most pragmatic; in order that we might prepare teachers for our existing grade schools and high schools. Calvin College began with such a purpose and from there developed into a full-fledged college. Another reason, as I see it, is the failure of many Christian Colleges to give what I consider to be a solid college education. Take a look at the subjects (fluff) being presented for interim classes at various colleges. Look closely at the quality of education being presented in various core subjects. One wonders at times if a substantive Liberal Arts Education is being presented.

But there is one reason that stands out. It is this: the truth of the Antithesis as taught by the Protestant Reformed Churches not only enables us to establish a College, but calls for one.

The truth of the antithesis calls the church to confess the light of God over against the darkness of the world. The antithesis, we have taught, is not to be construed as world flight, but rather is the calling of the believer to confess the truth over against the lie. Herman Hoeksema in his tract, *The Christian and Culture*, writes: *"The Christian separates himself from no department of life. According to the gifts bestowed on him he is also busy with the science and art, in commerce and industry, and makes use of all the means and institutions of this present world in the home, in society, in the State, as well as in the Church."*

Further, our confession of the antithesis declares that faith in God's own truth is the only foundation for all learning. Only when one stands before the light of God can they understand anything at all. It is exactly in the faith of God's Word that we can truly come to know something. When every sphere of learning is subjected to the infallible truth of the Scriptures, the Christian comes to see all things as they relate to God's glory. He comes to true knowledge. Again Hoeksema writes: *"In every department of life the Christian lives from the principle of regeneration by faith ... and according to the Word of God, revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. It means that his calling in this present world is to represent the cause of the Son of God always and everywhere, in the family and in the school, in society and in the state, in the laboratory and in the shop. Concretely it means that in all things he seeks not the glory of man, but the glory of God in Christ. His glory he seeks in the sciences and arts, in industry and agriculture."*

These lofty and inspiring words must be put to practice in the hard, but rewarding work, of a College Curriculum that truly teaches all subjects in light of the glorious Reformed Faith. The battle between the church and the world is ultimately a battle fought in ideas and thoughts. It is the battle for the mind and heart. Satan is committed that the lie shall permeate all and man be exalted as the arbiter of truth. The church cries out: "not so, but God is God and must be confessed in all things". Man is called to think the thoughts of God after Him, and thus confess the glory of God in all things. This is the work of a Reformed College.

In short, only those who believe the Reformed and Biblical truth of the Antithesis are truly equipped to provide an education in the truth.

What can we do?

I offer the following suggestions to elders, pastors and consistories here represented today, as well as to all who share this vision and feel its burden.

First, we can begin by encouraging classes to be held for prospective teachers in which the principles of Reformed education are taught. I believe some classes have already been given by Mr. John Huisken, the

registrar of Hope College. Such efforts are to be applauded. Included is providing a forum for our college students to discuss issues confronting them and helping them form a proper world and life view. Silence is dangerous at this point. College students need a place to air out their questions.

Second, our ministers should be encouraged to write on the subject of the antithesis as it relates to education and culture. Sound, wholesome, and practical instruction should be given on the questions of the Christians involvement in the world. We should seek the development of the truth of the antithesis as it relates to today's world and thought.

Third, we can encourage men and women to pursue degrees in fields of learning. I have already expressed my thoughts on this need. Let me add, this must be done within the confines of the church; that is, by maintaining close contact with such young people and discussing with them the questions they will confront. Elders can do this. The questions are not over your head. You are able to guide young men who are called to construction work as well as young men pursuing a degree in medicine, business management, etc. We have the Word. We have the Creeds. We have the love of God.

Fourth, Promote a culture of Education. By culture for education I mean an atmosphere in our churches in which education is highly esteemed and encouraged. The future of our children should not be seen in simply pragmatic ends of getting a job, but we must stress the need of the church at the end of the world to be thoroughly prepared to engage in the battle for the truth by being well educated. I am not saying that one can't be faithful without a good education, or that every child should be pushed into academic pursuits after high school. I am saying that learning, governed by faith, is a blessing to the church; a blessing for elders, fathers and mothers in their calling in this world. Let not a false antithesis slowly develop which sees learning as an enemy. But let us maintain the spiritual antithesis between light and darkness and be brave to equip our youth in every sphere of learning to hold forth the word of truth as the darkness of the end draws nigh.

Developing a culture of education would include the willingness to encourage young couples to seriously consider moving to churches where no PR School has yet been established for the purpose of helping in the formation of a grade school. Are there spiritual pioneers among us? I believe we need a spirit which commits ourselves toward the expansion of the cause of Christian education through our very presence in a congregation where that presence can make a real difference. We ought not be reticent to call families in congregations that are well established and where schools are now solidly established to consider the need of small congregations struggling to have schools of their own. Two or three committed families can make a huge contribution in some of our smaller congregations in helping them get over the hump of starting their own school.

Fifth, Consistories can encourage the organization of a society of committed men to begin the work and hold it before the denomination. They can remind their pastors to include this need in the preaching when appropriate. They can discuss this at family visits among men who would serve well in organizational work. This society could promote the cause and do the groundwork. It would be a beginning, a placing of our stake in the ground.

It is my prayer that our generation will take up this work and pursue it with serious intent. If we do not make an attempt it will never be done. If we wait for assurance that the result will be success, we will never try. If, by God's grace, we have a vision for the great good such a college would be, we will make humble, sincere, wise efforts toward this worthy goal.

I conclude by quoting the closing paragraph from A Open Letter Concerning Reformed Higher Education: *"The task is large; the cost is high; our resources are small. But the need is also great; and the benefits are precious - the welfare of the children of the Covenant and the glory of God's name in the knowledge of His truth. Let us make a beginning, trusting in the Lord, whose we are and Whom we serve, to bless the small beginning as He has done before."*