

“Christian” Threats to Christian Education

Introduction

The title of this chapter requires some explanation. In the previous two chapters we considered the condition of and external threats to North American education in general. We examined the cultural context and the various competing forces, including spiritual ones, that have turned education into a battleground. Since Christian education is an enterprise of faith, it is vulnerable to the external spiritual threats faced by all ventures of faith in contemporary society. The pressures of modernity, the fragmentation of postmodernity, the process of secularization, and the hostility of a secular culture to Christian civilizational claims are threats to the Christian school as well as to the church. Furthermore, the relativization of public moral values is not only a threat to the Christian family. An increasingly pagan civilization profoundly influences the cultural sensitivities and appetites of all members of our Christian school communities.

In addition, the Christian school faces some distinct threats of its own. Externally, the rising cost of Christian school education threatens its universality; a Christian education that is available only people who are well-to-do is

not deserving of its name. And if financial assistance from the government were forthcoming in the United States—as is the case in all Canadian provinces except Ontario—the involvement of government in matters of accreditation and curriculum supervision potentially threatens the independence and integrity of Christian education. Internally, as Christian schools have improved in quality and become an accepted part of the North American educational landscape, the danger is that there will be a loss of commitment to the basic vision that gave birth to the Christian school movement. Spiritual and educational complacency may set in. This problem of a loss of vision is exacerbated because Christian schools are not isolated from the debates, fads, and reform movements of the education industry in North America. Christian school teachers and Christian professors of education must come to terms with and critically evaluate the latest in contemporary educational philosophy, psychology, or pedagogy. And parents are not immune to the vocational pressures that come from business and industry to place marketable skills at the head of a list of educational objectives for the Christian school. In sum, Christian education exists in the world of the North American educational enterprise and must face the threats posed by contemporary culture.

Our concern in this chapter, however, is with a different set of threats to the Christian schools, ones we have labeled “Christian” threats. These are tendencies that on the surface reflect deeply held and appropriate Christian convictions yet, through distortion or isolation from other beliefs and practices, unwittingly undermine either the Christian or the education component of Christian education. For example, devotional exercises—Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer—are important aspects of the Christian life of discipleship and valid also within the school setting. Yet,

as former Calvin College English professor Henry Zylstra pointed out more than forty years ago, devotions are not what make the school distinctively a *Christian school*. Although devotions are important, Zylstra argues that "they do not constitute the school a school: for this precious devotional element is just as proper to the home, to Christian industry, Christian recreation, places of Christian mercy, and the like." While the teacher who interrupts a geography lesson to remind her class of the gospel has her priorities in the right order, Zylstra continues: "But we ought not to go on to infer from this that a Christian school is a Christian school because it offers such wonderful opportunities for church or mission work. It is a precious by-product. Our schools must be schools."¹ A valid Christian practice can become a threat to the Christian school as school when it is mistakenly seen as the *raison d'être* of the school or as the hallmark of distinctively Christian education. Similarly, the Christian character of the school is threatened when through overemphasis or distortion a valid belief or practice is no longer recognizably or distinctively Christian. Although seeing the school as a place for indoctrination, evangelism, or prophetic social critique undermines the school as school, indoctrination and a disproportionate emphasis on excellence also threaten the Christian character of the school.

Before we examine each of these points in greater detail, we need to make an additional observation of a more general nature. Parents who sacrifice for Christian education are concerned that it be distinctively Christian, but this ideal is notoriously elusive. One of the major obstacles to distinctively Christian education is the phenomenon of identification and accommodation—the tendency to identify a specific educational philosophy, curriculum, or pedagogy as the Christian approach to education. Thus one

encounters, for example, the contradictory claims that phonics or whole language is the Christian approach to teaching reading at the primary school level. Some have put forth arguments that the classical medieval model is the way to structure a Christ-centered curriculum.² Similar claims have been made for open education and cooperative, or first-step, learning.³ Also, to repeat an observation from our first chapter, it is possible to find supporters of cultural or critical literacy as the Christian approach to school. Our response to this phenomenon of identification and accommodation is not to argue that choices should be avoided in matters of educational philosophy, psychology, or pedagogy, nor that such choices should not be warranted by Christian beliefs and commitments. On the contrary! Rather, we must take great care that we do not too quickly identify specific philosophies or pedagogies as the Christian approach and thereby close down needed conversation. Excessive claims and positions usually need to be modified or even abandoned. When this is repeated too often, as has happened in the cycle of reforms in public education during this century, the stability and health of Christian education as a whole is threatened.

Threat Number One: Indoctrination

We now move on to examine four different but related sets of threats to Christian education. The first one is the threat of indoctrination.

The charge of indoctrination is the favorite of secular critics of Christian education.⁴ The ideals of human autonomy and free, open inquiry seem to many people to be diametrically at odds with the deliberate, self-conscious attempt to nurture children in a specific religious tradition. An obvious rejoinder to this is that the ideals of human

autonomy and free, open inquiry are as much a dogma as the doctrine of original sin and human need for salvation by grace in Jesus Christ. The Christian simply judges one to be true and the other false. Furthermore, it seems incomprehensible that parents would desire an education for their children that deliberately avoided all standards, rules, values, and commitments. Christian parents who desire that their children acquire a Christian worldview may have different goals from those of secularly oriented humanistic parents, but then the debate is about which doctrine, not doctrine versus no doctrine at all.

Yet, there are two levels at which the charge of indoctrination must be taken seriously as a threat. Indoctrination, in its positive sense as teaching the specific confessions of the Christian church, is the task of the institutional church, not the school. On this score the Reformed tradition's approach to Christian education⁵ differs from that of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and parochial schools, those that are operated by a church for the purpose of raising children in the tenets of that church's specific faith.⁶ Although teaching Bible and Christian theology is appropriate and necessary in every Christian school curriculum, it is not the primary task of the school as school to catechize.

There is, however, a second and perhaps more troubling level at which the issue of indoctrination must be faced. The ultimate goal of Christian parents is that their children willingly and joyfully embrace the Christian faith. Passing on the Christian faith from generation to generation, however, is a complex process and fraught with potential pitfalls as well as pain, especially for parents of children who repudiate the faith. The tradition can be passed on and appropriated in a thoughtless and wooden fashion. Then tradition stops being the living faith of the dead and

becomes traditionalism—the dead faith of the living.⁷ In evangelical communities, where personal commitment to the Christian faith is considered a matter of one's eternal salvation, children may feel intimidated by fear of judgment or even simple peer pressure to conform to the religious expectations of parents, other Christian adults, or the community as a whole. As Christian psychologist Donald Sloat has observed, since "Christian values cannot be easily or automatically transferred from one generation to the next. . . . parents (and the church as well) may instill so much fear and guilt along with values that youngsters are afraid to sort out their beliefs in order to stand on their own."⁸ The practice of encouraging testimonies in evangelistic meetings, school assemblies, and youth retreats, often pressures young people to conform to expectations of the community. Furthermore, faith produced under such pressure is often fragile because the individuals have not seriously wrestled with difficult questions and personal doubts. Sloat asserts that "A . . . problem exists when youngsters accept what their parents have taught them without questioning or evaluating it. They are then simply following hollow beliefs that can crumble easily under pressure. This is especially true when Christian parents either do not teach children to think for themselves or do not even allow them to do so. It is easy for succeeding generations to go along with their parents' teachings, and as a result they live out traditions that have little or no personal meaning."⁹ Such indoctrination fails to meet the test of proper Christian education—namely, that the truth of the Christian faith must become meaningful and experientially real for each generation anew. The only way to avoid indoctrination in this negative sense is to give children the space to test their own faith in the crucible of human experience. Parents, therefore, need to allow their children "to have

experiences from which they can learn, not overly sheltering them. . . . [E]ach of us is different and has to come to grips with his own faith and make it real through personal experience. . . . Personalizing our faith and value system is necessary for us as Christians to be strong, positive, fruitful people."¹⁰

Sloat points out that good intentions on the part of parents and church leaders are not enough to provide an environment in which healthy spiritual growth and maturation take place. Some of his comments about churches and families are also applicable to the Christian school, where there is a self-conscious effort to pass on a religious tradition and inculcate in children a specific worldview rooted in that tradition. Christian education does run the risk of becoming mere indoctrination, a mindless repetition of stale and dead doctrines for their own sake, without any genuine, living, experiential relation to those doctrines.

Some critics of Christian education believe that all committed education is indoctrination. In the words of one such critic, "No school governed by ideology—any ideology whatsoever—can afford to educate its students; it can only indoctrinate and train them."¹¹ Education, in this understanding, must be utterly free and open inquiry. This common assumption and accusation against Christian education is one that must be answered. Two points need to be made. In the first place, as Douglas Wilson notes, "[T]eaching students to think in terms of a fixed reference point is not the same thing as indoctrination. It is more than devout propaganda. . . . A fixed reference point does not blind Christians to the existence of objections; it enables Christians to answer them. . . . It is not propagandizing when teachers give their students a place to stand. Relativism has only the appearance of openness; in the end, it always frustrates the one who wants to acquire

knowledge."¹² In a secular world, a Christian worldview opens up new vistas for students by providing a coherent framework in which the reality of the world can be examined and understood. Good Christian education is not only a matter of standing in the truth, it must also be a matter of seeking out and testing the truth. This is what Christian discernment is all about. A recent manifesto on Christian education affirms the following: "Trusting the Holy Spirit's guidance in the students' lives, the Christian school community offers opportunities and fosters responsibilities to exercise discernment—the making of informed Christian choices based on God's Word."¹³

It must be frankly acknowledged that not all Christian education meets these criteria. Douglas Wilson puts it forthrightly: "Now it is true that some who claim to hold to Christian truth are unreasoning ideologues."¹⁴ Wilson also devotes an entire chapter of his book on Christian education to "the problem of 'pious' ignorance," a euphemism for "the strong anti-intellectual sentiment that exists among some conservative Christians."¹⁵ His conclusion is clear. He disparages the loss of what Harry Blamires has called "the Christian mind," the loss of Christian thinking by reducing it to "spiritual things" and the Sunday School curriculum:

Wisdom is not confined or imprisoned. Although many conservative Christians have withdrawn into an evangelical ghetto, the wisdom of God has not gone with them. Rather, wisdom stands at the gates of the city and cries out to the sons of men (Proverbs 8). What she offers is more than spiritual insight about spiritual things; it is spiritual insight about *all* things. She speaks about political science (v. 15) and economics (vv. 18, 20-21). She knows all about the origin of the universe because she was there (vv. 22-31). All who hate her love death (v. 36). Those who build any school without her build on a poor foundation.¹⁶

In *The Closing of the American Heart: What's Really Wrong with America's Schools* Ronald Nash makes a similar observation about the anti-intellectualism pervasive in many Christian school communities, particularly in the fundamentalist and charismatic subcultures of North American evangelical Christianity.

If there is one major weakness in some elements of the Christian school movement, it is related to the seemingly unlimited evangelical propensity for superspirituality and anti-intellectualism. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a proper emphasis on spirituality. But what must be abandoned is a thoughtless, mindless type of otherworldliness that denigrates the importance of truth.

Too many Christian schools still offer a curriculum that stresses simple memorization of information presented in less than adequate teaching material. The Christian church needs young people who have been exposed to the best of Western culture and who are able to interact thoughtfully and reflectively with the literature, history, philosophy, and science of that culture. In short, we need Christians who have broad minds that have been sharpened to the point of usefulness.¹⁷

One of the ways in which this matter of anti-intellectualist indoctrination comes to expression is in the use of standardized curricula, such as those offered by the Accelerated Christian Education (A.C.E.) program. Susan Rose, in her critical assessment of one of these schools, concludes:

The education offered at the Baptist Academy appears to anticipate the future of efficient, corporate-oriented instruction. The emphasis on orderliness and discipline at the "office" learning station realistically mirrors the working stations of many present and future jobs. The increasingly automated and computerized clerical or office job requires someone who is willing and able to sit at a word processor or computer terminal for an entire day with little or no interaction with fellow workers. Progress in the factory means more automated or robotized machinery operated or watched by soli-

tary people who are attentive to sporadic requests from the control board.

The A.C.E. program stresses the extreme self-discipline and isolation required of each student at his or her "work-station." The pre-packaged learning program of A.C.E. creates a monologue of instructions rather than a dialogue; no longer is the teacher needed to communicate knowledge to or engage in joint activities with students. Thus, A.C.E. is keeping up with the times. It uses a system of transmitting information through manuals under the direction of adults who are more like supervisors than teachers, who are not as well educated or well paid as public-school teachers. This correlates nicely with the standardization of production and procedures now practiced by many large corporations in the service, manufacturing, insurance, and banking fields.¹⁸

The results, according to Rose, are graduates who will compliantly fit into the automated, routinized world of corporate America.

If we consider the Baptist school as a corporate franchise, the minister is the educational entrepreneur in the modern corporate sense; he brings A.C.E. to his community the way someone else brings a McDonald's or Wendy's fast food franchise. The minister may get some financial rewards for his efforts, but his major gain is his increased control over the spiritual and educational lives of his congregation. The owner of a McDonald's can feel like an independent businessman at the same time he is purveying the same low quality food that thousands of others are feeding to millions of Americans on behalf the same corporation. So too, the independent Christian school can feel as if it is breaking free from the "secular humanist" stranglehold on education—only to buy a repetitive, programmed meal of knowledge which fits the needs of corporate society (or the military-industrial complex) much more efficiently than do the public schools.¹⁹

According to Ronald Nash, "while the parents may think the schools are helping to keep their children out of the hands of 'Satan' (the godless humanism that presumably

controls public education), the children are really being delivered into the hands of another 'Satan,' which for Rose is the materialistic god of corporate America and the military-industrial complex."²⁰

The anti-business ideology and rhetorical flourishes aside, it must be granted that what Rose describes is the sort of indoctrination that could happen in certain kinds of educational settings.²¹ It is also clear that what she describes is not what Reformed Christian educators want. Rose describes a charismatic Christian school ("Covenant") in terms that Reformed Christians would be much happier with:

In contrast, the middle-class charismatic parents and educators challenge their students to think more critically. Like all parents, they want to instill their values and beliefs but the process of instruction is more important than the specific content. Group work, discussions that examine a spectrum of values and beliefs, and various strategies for formulating and resolving problems characterize school life. Challenge and interpretation rather than conformity and security are stressed.

Covenant people are communicating their view of the world as a place in which individuals are actors who, in cooperation with one another, can transform the world. In contrast to the Baptist emphasis on individual discipline, the middle-class charismatics stress self-directed and cooperative work in their children's education. The charismatics anticipate their children entering roles that will enable them to act on the world.²²

By now our point should be clear. Passing on the Christian faith, tradition, ethos, and worldview from one generation to the next should never degenerate to mere indoctrination. Unthinking, unexamined, and uncritical traditionalism is always a danger in religiously committed and intentional education, but it is most decidedly not the goal of a good Christian education. There must be room in

Christian education for thoughtful examination of the Christian tradition, an examination that must take seriously the objections raised against the Christian faith and worldview as well as alternatives to it. However, some critics claim that Christian education shelters children from the real world. Are Christian schools greenhouses that protect and isolate children from broader society and culture? Susan Rose quotes a Baptist mother:

“Some people say we are protecting them from the world, sheltering them. Well, that’s right. I don’t want them in the world. I want them to go into Christian service. It’s like tomatoes in a greenhouse; you have to protect them and nourish them until they grow strong before you put them in the garden.”²³

This parent has a valid point. Taking the developmental levels of children seriously does mean that Christian parents want to shelter young children from the moral decadence and sinful, secularist, or pagan values of our cultures. What is the real world? In the judgment of Christians, the world of violence, sexual immorality, and general hedonism is an unreal world, and it is the desire of Christian parents that children learn to live in the real world of peace, justice, monogamy, and loving service as they grow into their involvement with the so-called real world. Christians acknowledge, however, that sheltering is both a strategic move and a temporary one. Permanent sheltering or withdrawal from the world is impossible, primarily because we all carry the world in our hearts. No wall is high enough to keep the world completely outside.

In another sense, too, sheltering is an ill-advised strategy. We live in God’s world; this is his creation. Good Christian education explores the entire range of human experience in order to equip children to a life of full, trinitarian discipleship. This exploration of all dimensions of creation also

means exploring the cultural products of those who are not Christians and those whose culture differs significantly from white, North American culture. To ignore this wider range of human experience is to miss opportunities to acknowledge and praise the Spirit of the Creator God in his lavish giving of gifts to humanity. As John Calvin says,

Meanwhile, we ought not to forget those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which he distributes to whomever he wills, for the common good of mankind.

If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. . . . Those men whom Scripture [1 Cor. 2:14] calls "natural men" were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.²⁴

A Christian school in the Reformed tradition does not shelter students from the full range of human experience or from the cultural products of non-Christians. The desire is to have students critically interact with the best of Western and other civilizations. Nor should the Reformed Christian school shelter students from the challenges to the Christian faith presented by such issues as evolution and atheism and such thinkers as Marx, Darwin, and Freud. The goal is not indoctrination but an examined, thoughtful, mature Christian faith and worldview.

Threat Number Two: Evangelism

From the outset I wish to reiterate a point I have made elsewhere, namely that the Christian school has an evangelical role to play in the life of the Christian community

as a whole. It is true that Christian education “is designed to promote Christian *cultural* or *creational obedience*” and “is not in the first place designed to evangelize students or to prepare them for evangelism and missionary service.”²⁵ However, to overlook the concern of the home and church that students become full-orbed living disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ would be a failure to live up to the name Christian. Since, as Henry Zylstra states, “Christian education must be both education and Christian if it is to justify itself and successfully meet the secular challenge,”²⁶ a school cannot ignore the missionary command of our Lord and still be considered Christian. In a nutshell,

Christian day school education also takes place in the New Testament age which is dominated by the missionary mandate. For this reason it should not be considered a violation of the school’s proper sphere or jurisdiction of Christian day school teachers also press the *missionary* claim of the gospel. In Christian day schools, too, students must be confronted with the call to Christian discipleship and need to have the urgency of world evangelism placed before them. Failure to do either or both will have (or already may have had) an adverse effect on Reformed Christian day school education in North America. Reformed Christian day schools do not exist exclusively or even chiefly for purposes of evangelism and mission, but they ignore their evangelistic role at the peril of being less than truly Christian schools.²⁷

And again:

The school cannot leave the mission mandate to the church alone. Not in *our* day. Not only do teachers when teaching subjects such as geography and history have an obligation to point out the importance of Christian missionary activity, but the schools must themselves serve in a mission capacity. Students who pass through Christian schools ought to be confronted with the call to Christian commitment.²⁸

This, it should be noted, is also the conclusion of Professor

Henry Zylstra:

I think that devotional exercises, Bible reading, prayer, meditation, the service of song, and Biblical study seriously pursued, pursued also with evangelical emphases, and not merely as so much scientific data—I think that these are very precious. Without them a school could hardly be designated Christian.²⁹

Taking an evangelical role seriously means that a vibrant and open Christian testimony is one of the most important requisites for a teacher in the Christian school. Modeling evangelical enthusiasm is perhaps even more important than explicitly including an evangelical objective in a geography lesson plan. It is also worth considering at this point whether the Christian school should permit the enrollment of a restricted number of children from non-Christian homes as an evangelistic strategy. This opens up a host of questions, not to mention difficulties, but if schools in mission situations on foreign soils can be used in such a way, there should be no principled reason why North American schools, now also increasingly in a "mission situation," could not do the same. Safeguards must be adopted, of course, that will ensure the integrity of the school as a Christian school. Non-Christian parents would have to indicate a willingness and desire to have their children instructed within a Christian worldview.³⁰

Having emphasized one part of the equation (Christian schools that want to be Christian do have an evangelical role), we must now stress the other side. When evangelism is the primary reason for the Christian school, it becomes a threat to the school as school. In addition to the fact that indoctrination, understood as explicitly teaching the confessions or doctrines of a particular church, is not the task of the school, three other observations must be made here.

In the first place, evangelism as the rationale for Christ-

ian education runs contrary to a Reformed understanding of children as members of the covenant community. Reformed people do not regard their children as lost pagans, outside the family of God. On the contrary—they believe that their children, “though sinful by nature, are received by God in Christ as members of his covenant.”³¹ This covenantal presumption has often been misunderstood by Reformed and non-Reformed Christians alike. It does not mean that baptism regenerates or that covenant membership makes calls to committed Christian discipleship irrelevant and unnecessary. It does mean that our children are considered in Christ as members of God’s family, that their spirituality is taken seriously, and that the integrity of their faith is treated with respect. Not only does this free the school to be fully a school, but it also frees the Christian community at large from the guilt manipulations and pressure tactics often used in evangelistic settings. Treating our children out of a presumption that they are lost and spiritually crippled does them a disservice and disregards God’s covenantal promises to his people.

Secondly, life is more than evangelism. Being saved is not all that there is to Christian discipleship. Here a trinitarian vision or perspective is helpful and needed. God is our Redeemer in Jesus Christ. Yet redemption is in some sense the means to a greater end. Salvation is the restoration of humanity and creation to the ordered purpose intended by the Creator God. For Reformed people in particular, the most important question in life is not What must I do to be saved? but How can I glorify God? As the Westminster Catechism so beautifully puts it: “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” To be sure, fallen, sinful human beings need to be saved from their lostness before they can truly glorify God and enjoy him forever. Yet salvation in this sense is a means not the

end. Abraham Kuyper, in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, put it this way: the dominating principle of Calvinism "was not, soteriologically, justification by faith, but in the widest sense cosmologically, *the sovereignty of the triune God over the whole cosmos*, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible."³²

This distinction is crucially important for the Christian school. It is this trinitarian, catholic vision that is the heart of the rationale for Reformed Christian education. It is the conviction that our world belongs to God, that Christians are called to vocations in God's world where they are to be humanly and culturally active as saved disciples of Jesus Christ. And it is the specific task of the school to make that connection between vocation and discipleship a real and living one. Schools prepare students for citizenship in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, a kingdom that is more than the church. To be saved is to be called to serve in God's world. When schools thus take evangelism in the narrow sense as the reason for their existence, they endanger their own identity and calling as schools. Once again, Henry Zylstra makes the point eloquently:

I repeat: the schools must be schools. It is the very strength of the Reformed profession of Christianity not solely in the isolatedly religious but in the religious commanding the naturally and culturally human. It is as human beings that we are Christians, in our human nature expressing itself in a natural environment, expressing itself also in cultural activity of all kinds, and, further, in a particular historical situation here on earth. Our being called to be saints does not exempt us from being human, nor exempt us from cultural activity, nor exempt us from social and political obligation, nor render reason superfluous, nor permit an indifference to art and literature, nor lift us out of history. On the contrary, it is in and through these things that our moral and religious choice for the spiritual kingdom of Christ becomes concrete, real, and

meaningful. And that is why our schools must be schools, our education education.³³

Finally, it is necessary to reflect on the consequences of the school taking on roles and tasks traditionally served by other social institutions such as the family or church. If evangelism is indeed the real task of the church, what happens, when the school simply becomes an arm of the church? We have already noted that when this happens, the school tends to lose its distinct identity as school. But the reverse process also may take place. When the school increasingly takes on the tasks of the church, it may also undermine the integrity of the church's distinct mission. This is perhaps the key thesis of Neal Postman's book *Teaching As a Conserving Activity*. Postman contends that "schools should not, except under the most extreme provocation, try to accomplish goals which other social institutions traditionally serve." Postman points to the limited competence and resources of teachers. They cannot do the work of priest, psychologist, therapist, political reformer, social worker, sex advisor, and parent. He also notes the institutional consequence: "The more one social institution encroaches upon the functions of another, the more it weakens it. This idea . . . comes from the field of ecology, where it is understood that as one system begins to preempt the purposes of another, the functional capacity of both is undermined." Postman concludes: "[A]s the school blurs the lines of authority between itself and other institutions, it tends to weaken not only its own capability but the capabilities of other institutions as well."³⁴

While the sensitive Christian teacher cannot overlook an evangelical dimension to all teaching, he or she must be foremost a teacher and not an evangelist. While the school should be open to evangelical opportunities, it must be a

school and not a church.

How the Christian school can play a legitimate evangelical role as school will become more apparent when we consider a narrative approach to Christian education in Chapter Six.

Threat Number Three: Prophecy

I have labeled the third threat to Christian education prophecy. The word *prophetic* has in recent years been used especially for vocal criticism of alleged sinful deformations in North American social, economic, and political life. To be prophetic is to be critical of capitalism, militarism, racism, and sexism. Hence, *prophetic* is simply another term for what I referred to as critical literacy in the first chapter. I prefer *prophetic* in this context because we are considering Christian threats to Christian education, and it is especially in religious or ecclesiastical circles that such social and cultural criticism is referred to as prophecy.

We begin by noting that prophecy, even when understood narrowly as social and cultural critique, is a valued activity and a necessary dimension of Christian discipleship in the world. Christians are indeed called to an anti-theological relationship to what the New Testament calls the world. They are called to be countercultural agents of God's kingdom. This seems even more urgent today in light of our cultural analysis in the previous chapter. As our society and culture become increasingly hostile to the Christian religion and its truth claims, Christians will increasingly be regarded as "resident aliens,"³⁵ and the prophetic countercultural attitude will seem increasingly to be an imperative.

To put it into more biblical categories, true prophecy exposes and challenges idolatry. As we noted in Chapter Two, idolatry and judgment are essential categories for

interpreting the crisis of our society and culture. We noted the contention of Herbert Schlossberg that "idolatry and its associated concepts provide a better framework for us to understand our own society than do any of the alternatives."³⁶ Schlossberg identifies idolatry as "any substitution of what is created for the creator. People may worship nature, money, mankind, power, history or social and political systems instead of the God who created them all."³⁷ Prophecy is thus clearly an essential ingredient of Christian discipleship, and the Old Testament prophets have much to teach us in our idolatrous and destructive age.

But what about prophecy in the school? One author who pleads for "Christian schooling as prophetic witness" also takes note of the threat involved.

Righteousness can be advanced in society through schooling only as we both recognise and respect the distinctive educational structure of the school. Its use, for example, as a political instrument or as an ecclesiastical instrument is an abuse of the structural identity of the school. The inevitable result is a blunting of the school's educational effectiveness. Pursued consistently it will destroy the school, transforming it into a political or ecclesiastical agency.

Again it is to be stressed that it is proper, indeed essential, that the school address political and ecclesiastical questions. In doing so it will have political and ecclesiastical input. However, the faithful practice of Christian schooling will be careful to ensure that this is done in a way that respects the distinctive educational identity of the school.³⁸

We need, therefore, to ask some tough questions at this point. Should the school curriculum be shaped by prophetic categories? Should the school itself be an instrument of social change? Should Christian teachers think of themselves as prophets who consider social-cultural criticism to be their chief task? Has the Christian school failed in its task if its students don't picket nuclear power plants, attend

anti-abortion rallies, protest against war, write letters for Amnesty International, and join marches on Earth Day? The authors of a famous 1960s tract asked if teaching should be a subversive activity. Their answer was clear and unequivocal: "We believe that the schools must serve as the principal medium for developing in youth the attitudes and skills of social, political, and cultural criticism."³⁹ Should Christian schools join in here? Is this the necessary next stage in the evolution of Christian education in North America?

One Christian educator who has eloquently pleaded for greater prophetic activity is Nicholas Wolterstorff. In an address to the Ontario Christian School Teachers Convention in the fall of 1984, Wolterstorff insisted that Reformed Christian education must go beyond traditional and classic neo-Calvinist models of developing a Christian mind to a more holistic goal of equipping the student for active discipleship in Christ's kingdom, for discipleship that goes beyond the cultural mandate to include a concern for justice.⁴⁰ Society as well as culture must be taken seriously. Wolterstorff asks whether classic neo-Calvinism in its concern to legitimate vocations in culture and society has in fact been indifferent to the concerns of the suffering and oppressed because it has been an ideology of the powerful and comfortable or "perhaps because the neo-Calvinist has given insufficient recognition to the *fallenness* of our world." Whatever the reasons, Wolterstorff is convinced "that the life for which we educate must be a life seeking justice and showing mercy as well as a life of wresting culture from nature." Acknowledging his own change of heart, Wolterstorff states his case eloquently:

Once I did not know, but now I do know, that a program of Christian education which grounds itself only on the command to have dominion and not also on the command to

free the people cannot be an acceptable program of Christian education. Once I did not know, but now I do know, that a program of Christian learning which seeks only to develop abstract science in Christian perspective and not also to develop praxis-oriented science of service to Christian social action can be of only limited use in Christian education.

According to Wolterstorff, the neo-Calvinist vision must be expanded to a view that includes the struggle against sin and oppression as well as “celebrative delight in all that is good.” All of this, he judges, can be brought together in the biblical notion of shalom:

I have come to think that the most promising concept for capturing God’s and our mission in the world is the biblical concept of shalom. Shalom is the content of that Kingdom which Jesus said was breaking in and whose ultimate presence his death and resurrection have secured. We now are to delight in the shalom we experience and to share in God’s cause of advancing its presence. There is no shalom without justice. But beyond that, shalom is delight in all one’s relationships: with God, neighbor, nature, and self. Shalom unites the fulfillment of culture with the liberation of justice. Life in the City of God is a life committed to struggling for shalom and to appreciating the flickers of shalom that already brighten our existence. Christian education is education for shalom.

How does one teach for shalom? How does one shape the actions of students into prophetic directions? Beyond awareness raising and thinking, Wolterstorff suggests discipline that will increase the tendency of a person to act in appropriate ways by reward and punishment, modeling and giving reasons.⁴¹

On the face of it, it is hard to quarrel against shalom. What Christian wants to be on record as being for militarism, racism, and sexism, and against peace, justice, equality, and earthkeeping. Refusing to join the prophetic

chorus seems an act of bad faith, if not bad taste. Yet Wolterstorff's vision does arouse opposition. To begin with, there is the objection that reforming society is an improper goal for Christian education because society is irreformable. David Engelsma puts it this way: "The Christian school does not evangelize—only the church does. Christian schools do not exist to reform society, because, as is the A, B, C, of the Reformed religion, society is irreformably depraved, reserved for fiery destruction."⁴² Actually, in fairness to Wolterstorff, he is more concerned with obedience and alleviation of pain and misery than he is optimistic or triumphalistic about reforming society.⁴³ Nonetheless, other questions also surface.

Part of the difficulty with Wolterstorff's plea is that it is not always concrete and specific, especially with respect to the Christian elementary or high school. Indeed most of his suggestions—internationalization of the curriculum and programs in peace and war, nationalism, poverty, urban ugliness, ecology, crime and punishment—appear more suited to curricular discussions at the university or college level than to the elementary school or even the high school.⁴⁴ A second general difficulty arises from the present preoccupation with political correctness in North American education, as well as in the churches. Although shalom is a wonderful Old Testament concept, the peace and justice agenda of some mainline churches has been so captured by leftist political ideas that the currency is thoroughly debased. Much of it is shallow, one-sided, anti-business, anti-Western ideology that reduces very complex issues to slogans and simplistic categories: us/them, peacemakers/militarists, those for the poor/those who oppress the poor, earth keepers/despoilers, equalitarians/racists. Consequently, when this ideology is pushed into education, the school is politicized. True education ought to prepare a student for

serious, engaged reflection on these complex issues. A highly politicized school merely indoctrinates.

While this is problematic at all levels of education and in all schools, the problem is even more acute in Christian elementary and high schools, particularly since younger children are highly vulnerable to political manipulation. Not only does the politicizing of the school threaten the school as school (where students should be taught good socio-political analytic skills and not merely acquire political habits by indoctrination), but the Christian dimension of the school is also threatened. What passes as prophetic in Christian social justice circles often turns out to be little more than proof-text frosting on secular humanitarianism.⁴⁵ The social teaching of most mainline liberal churches in North America today usually differs little from the policy of the left-wing in the Democratic party in the United States or the socialist New Democratic Party in Canada. Resentment and altruism are confused with Christian justice and love. What claims to be radically Christian is often trendy, simple accommodation to conventional, secular socio-political criticism. What is called prophecy, therefore, often not only impedes good education; it is not always even all that distinctively Christian.

To the degree that such prophecy is utopian or apocalyptic in its tone it presents additional problems. Utopian thinking is opposed by Christian orthodoxy because it is presumptuous of God's timetable and counterproductive to the social good. Utopianism is the conviction that the final shalom of God's kingdom is achievable today. All that stands in its way is ignorance and bad faith. Thus utopians are perpetually in the position of complaining about the status quo, whatever it happens to be.⁴⁶ Utopians are all-or-nothing thinkers. They consider penultimate judgments and affirmations to be a capitulation, a moral lapse. Either

North America is the kingdom of God or it is Babylon. Clearly it is short of the new heaven, so it must be Babylon. No careful discrimination between ultimate good and a relatively good society is possible. Since good Christian education should teach the skill of discriminating between what is relatively good and what is relatively evil in a given culture or society, what is improvable and what may be the best we can do short of the kingdom of God, utopian-prophetic thinking stands in the way of good education. More than that, however, it also stands in the way of a good society. By failing to acknowledge that there is much that is good in Western civilization and in North American society, utopian thinking undermines the good that is there. Traditions of freedom, political stability, equality before the law, opportunity to profit from one's labors and be a responsible, productive participant in society—all these and more are, we now know with stark certainty, fragile and not to be taken for granted. Unless prophecy is accompanied by affirmation and conservation of that which is good, much of what we take for granted can and will be lost in revolutionary change. Socially and politically, the perfect is in fact the enemy of the good.

When prophecy becomes apocalyptic in its tone, it creates a climate that is educationally *and* socio-politically counterproductive. Herbert London, in an analysis of social studies textbooks published in recent years, has documented this one-sided apocalyptic tendency.⁴⁷ When children and adolescents are bombarded with this apocalyptic material, what happens to their worldview? Is it any wonder that suicide rate among teenagers is as high as it is? Is it any wonder that many have little or no hope about the future? The opposite all-is-wonderful mentality is not suitable, either. Real problems should not be ignored. However, an overemphasis upon the apocalyptic-prophetic often

ignores the developmental levels and capacities of children to absorb crisis thinking. Frightened children neither learn nor develop a framework that encourages them to gain skills which could help ameliorate the very real ills of our world.

The use of prophecy to politicize the school also betrays a fundamental lack of trust in adult institutions to reform society. It also runs the danger of exploiting children by enlisting them in adult crusades. This is to turn a Reformed covenantal emphasis on the proper responsibility of young persons on its head. The school should not intrude upon the social function of the family, the church, the medical profession, and community and political organizations. In the Christian community, politicizing the school intrudes particularly upon the responsibility and sensitivities of parents. Those who favor politicizing the school do so only when their political views are promoted.

Finally, when education becomes prophetic in its actual practice, the distinctive calling of a student is lost. Education is not life; it is preparation for life. Education allows for a certain detachment from life, a time for reflective and analytic distance. When education itself becomes immersed in socio-political activism or when education is solely seen as developing marketable job skills, then the comprehensive education that opens up many different dimensions of experience for the whole person is lost. The calling of a student is to be a student, not an evangelist or social activist.

Raising these objections to prophecy is a somewhat uncomfortable responsibility. Themes such as justice, peace, and earthkeeping are biblically appropriate and even necessary in Christian education. Their debasement in our day does not invalidate their true importance. Nicholas Wolterstorff is quite correct when he observes that "the Christian college cannot neglect the suffering of humanity. . . . It

cannot burrow into culture while neglecting society."⁴⁸ What is true for the Christian college is no less true for the Christian elementary and high school.

Threat Number Four: Excellence

Perhaps it seems odd to consider excellence a threat to Christian education at a time when the universal complaint about education is that standards are declining and quality is eroding. Recently *The Atlantic Monthly* published an article on "the other crisis in American education," the failure to educate the gifted among us, which the author contends is as serious a challenge to education as is the poor quality of education received by those who are disadvantaged.⁴⁹ If excellence is a problem in public education, how can it be a threat to Christian education?

In part, the question itself hints at the answer. In a large measure, Christian schools have not suffered the same kind of erosion of quality that some public schools have because they do not live with the same social trauma and disadvantage. Most children attending Christian schools come from relatively stable, middle-class family settings in which disciplined habits of study and reading are encouraged and even modeled. There are exceptions, of course, and even children who do come from such homes are still subject to social and cultural pressures that discourage excellence. Nonetheless, home and community involvement in and support for the work of the school and its teachers are significantly higher in Christian education than in public education as a whole. Consequently, Christian schools often develop a reputation for excellence. I would judge that the quality of Christian schools affiliated with Christian Schools International (CSI) matches or surpasses that of most public schools. Professional qualifications and devel-

opment of teachers in these schools at all levels is at a high level. These are good schools, even excellent schools.

Here is precisely the problem. At face value, excellence in learning is a good thing; it is even a Christian value. Various slogans reflect this thought: "God deserves our best;" "Christ is Lord, also of education;" "As image bearers of God himself we glorify him by using our talents fully." Even excessive athletic competition is often connected to such biblical notions as "Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit." It should be said from the outset that merit and competition are not intrinsically evil. Yet, the danger is real that Christian schools begin to define their *raison d'être* in terms of quality, excellence, and the general success of their graduates. When excellence and success are defined in worldly rather than truly Christian terms, the foundational vision of the Christian school is threatened. For Christians, excellence is pursued because God's work is underway,⁵⁰ success is measured in terms of the good done in and for Christ's kingdom. Applying these standards, Mother Teresa is a success; Donald Trump is not. It ought to be a matter of concern to practitioners and supporters of Christian education that this is not always clear in Christian school communities.

In short, excellence is a threat to the Christian character of the school when it is defined in worldly terms of achievement rather than in terms of discipleship to Jesus Christ. Clearly, achievement and discipleship must not be seen as mutually exclusive. The Reformed doctrine of vocation, a sense of calling from God and a desire to glorify him in whatever he calls us to do, makes that abundantly clear. The Christian lawyer or investment banker, no less than the Christian missionary, is called to discipleship. Yet there is something wrong with a Christian education that produces many successful lawyers, engineers, doctors, and

businessmen but relatively few missionaries, inner-city pastors, or long-term service volunteers. We must always be on the alert that we define excellence in a Christian way, in terms of valuable service to Christ's kingdom. Otherwise, excellence is a threat to the integrity of Christian education.

An emphasis on excellence or competence can also become a form of unchristian elitism. Excellence, when defined in terms of intellectual dexterity, can result in the marginalizing of slower learners. Excellence must not neglect the joy of the cross. It must be nurtured in a climate of care and compassion for the suffering world, a care that is directed toward the world beyond our affluent North American society but also to the suffering that takes place within the school itself. Christian schools need not apologize for striving for academic excellence, provided they also show care and compassion for those who find learning more difficult. If Christian schools only salute the academic and athletic achievements of the highly accomplished and are unable to rejoice with the accomplishments of the less talented or differently gifted, then excellence has become an idol and Christian education has lost its soul. For this reason competition in Christian schools should be focused less on external competition between students and more on the internal competition that the student experiences with his or her own personal mastery of a subject or activity.⁵¹

Conclusion

In the first half of this volume we have looked at the problems facing Christian education, problems arising out of our social and cultural context as well as those more endemic to the Christian school itself. We are now in a

position to consider an answer to the question, Why should we have Christian schools, and what should they be like?