

Excellence in Education

by Rev. David Engelsma

We welcome to the pages of our journal once again the writings of a man who is no stranger to us. Once again he stimulates us with a timely article in which he urges us to the kind of excellence for which we must strive in Christian education. We are happy that a stress of the Reformed faith and true Christian piety does not exclude from such education an opportunity to be truly excellent. Rev. Engelsma is the pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in South Holland, Illinois. Recently he traveled to Ireland and England and has been helpful there in stimulating the struggling Christian School movement to continue.

There is sometimes among us an argument over the question, whether the Christian school should stress the Reformed faith, or whether it should stress excellence in the education. This is a false dilemma; it is not either-or, but both-and. Christian education that is true to its genius will be characterized by both truth and excellence.

The world itself recognizes the woeful weaknesses of the education of the State schools of our land. 23 million adult Americans are functionally illiterate — unable to read newspapers or fill out job-application forms. A high percentage of high-school students in the big cities cannot read or write. Many parents are abandoning the State schools, not because of any religious conviction, but because the schools do not educate. The problem is not only due to a lack of discipline in the schools, but also to incompetent, or lazy, teachers; bad teaching methods; and a “soft” curriculum. (I read recently of a school whose staff included a professor of recreation and outdoor education.)

Remarkably, there are some who see that the decline in the quality of education in our country is due to the forsaking of the Word of God. This came out in an interesting article that appeared on the editorial page of the *Chicago Tribune*, under the title, “We’ve lost reverence for values of literacy” (August 27, 1980). Anthony Brandt takes note of what he calls “the literacy crisis.” He points out the failures of the schools. Then he observes that the problem may have its cause in the changes in public values in our country. In the early days of our country, there was a very high level of literacy. John Adams wrote in

1765 that "a native of America who cannot read or write is as rare an appearance as . . . a comet or an earthquake." "This was due," says Brandt, to "Puritan ideology. The Puritans believed strongly in the value of access to the Bible, to the Word of God, and to that end went to great lengths to make sure that their children were literate." He goes on to say that "families were examined regularly by Puritan divines to see whether parents were teaching their children to read and write." There was a zeal for literacy in New England; and "historians attribute this zeal for literacy almost entirely to Puritanism; a Puritan had to be able to read to gain direct access to the Word. . . ."

The article concludes with the observation that "preserving literacy is not and never has been a function that belongs solely to the schools. A highly literate society evolves out of deeply held values, values that cannot be isolated in a school system but must permeate the whole society. Unless we recover those values, we put ourselves in serious danger."

Mr. Brandt is correct. The Puritans of New England insisted on good education for all their children, because they wanted their children to be able to read the Bible. In his significant study, *The Puritan Family*, Edmund S. Morgan writes:

the Puritan insisted upon education in order to insure the religious welfare of their children. . . . It might be contended that the reading requirement arose from a pure love of knowledge in itself, but the reasons which the Puritans offered elsewhere in defense of reading make it plain that here again a religious motive was present. In 1647 the General Court of Massachusetts provided for the establishment of reading schools, because it was "*one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures.*" Children were taught to read in order that they might gain a first-hand knowledge of the Bible. When John Cotton was urging parents to educate their children, he did not say, "Learn them to read," but "Learn them to read the Scriptures" (cf. chapter IV, "The Education of a Saint").

In this, the Puritans were taking the position of Martin Luther. Early on in the Reformation, Luther called for good Christian schools for all the children, girls as well as boys. His reason was that all the children of the church must be able to read the Bible, understand the preaching, and, in time, teach their own children. With reference to the Reformation's concern for education, J. D. Douglas writes, in the recent *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*:

The seeds of an intellectual revolution were sown with the Reformers' zeal for education. They regarded education as vital, not

only because the young are most susceptible to learning, but also because the new system demanded literacy for the reading of the Word of God (cf. chapter 10, "Calvinism's Contribution to Scotland," p. 226).

This is also our position. We do not need a government to require us to educate our children; we do this because the Word of God commands us to do so.

The author of the article quoted above is also correct when he finds the cause of the breakdown of present American education in the loss of certain values in society at large. It is a mistake to blame only the teachers and schools for the "literacy crisis." The deterioration of the schools is a symptom of the decay of society.

The importance of words depends upon the importance of the Word, Holy Scripture. When men reject the Word of God, there will be disastrous consequences in education.

Reformed people who believe the Bible to be the Word of God will seek excellence in the education of their children.

It is wrong for anyone of us to say, "I want high academic standards in our school; and it is of no great concern to me that the instruction is thoroughly Reformed." It is equally in error that someone says, "I want the children taught Reformed truths; and it is not important to me what the academic standards are, whether the teachers are competent in their fields, or that the children are required to be good students — the very best that they can be."

Reformed, covenantal schools stand for faithful instruction in the truth of Scripture and for excellence in education. This is simply what it means to be a Reformed school.

Let us be sure that we are not confused as to what makes for excellence in education. Excellence in education is not produced by vast amounts of money. If this were so, the State schools of our land would be extraordinarily excellent. Excellence in education is not to be equated with large buildings, fine facilities, and a beautiful campus. It is certainly not the high-powered sports program and glorious athletic achievements of a school. The wilful disregard of even minimal educational standards by major colleges in the interest of the brutes representing the schools in the arenas is scandalous.

Excellence in education is, first and chiefly, instruction that is true to Holy Scripture, the Word of God. Scripture is the basis of all the teaching. The ultimate purpose of the teaching, therefore, is the glory of the God of Scripture, in that the children and young people are taught to fear Him and keep His commandments. Or, is that education excellent which teaches the children to deny God, to worship the State,

and to participate in the monstrous tyranny that is Communism, as is the case in the schools of Russia and China? Or, can we call education excellent that teaches the children to deny God, to worship Man, and to participate in the service of self and pleasure, as is the case in the State schools of our own country? Every school that sets aside, or departs from, the inspired Scriptures; every school that aims at something other than God, the Father of Jesus Christ; every school that is indifferent to the children's service of God, in obedience to His Law, has lost the right to claim excellence in education.

This is the excellence of our schools, by the covenant grace of God: they are true and faithful to Holy Scripture in their teaching.

Just because the foundation of the schools is Scripture, excellence is demanded in all the studies. The creation now is seen as God's world, showing forth the power, wisdom, beauty, and order of its Creator. We ought to know the creation; and we ought to know it truthfully and well. "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth" (Psalm 8:1). John Calvin wrote: "Because God has manifested Himself to us in His works, we must search for Him in them. . . . The world is like a mirror for us in which we can contemplate Him insofar as it is expedient for us to know Him." We Reformed Christians confess this in Article II of the Belgic Confession:

We know Him by two means: first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God. . . .

An important aspect of this excellence in education that consists of knowing God from His handiwork in creation is the instruction of the children, that nature praises God. Calvin wrote of this, as though he were speaking to little children:

The little singing birds are singing of God; the beasts cry unto Him; the elements are in awe of Him; the mountains echo His name; waves and fountains glance at Him; grass and flowers laugh out to Him.

We sing this in a version of Psalm 65: "The hills and vales, with verdure clad/Are girt with joy, the earth is glad,/New life is all abroad;/With feeding flocks the pastures teem,/With golden grain the valleys gleam;/All nature praises God."

The history of the world is the unfolding of the eternal counsel of God, adapted to the elect church and having its goal in Jesus Christ. "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according

to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance" (Deut. 32:8, 9). "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will. . . that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ. . ." (Eph. 1:9, 10). History, therefore, has meaning; and, apart from this, it is meaningless — a sheer absurdity. It is rich in meaning. It should be taught. It may not be falsified, including pious fictions intended to enhance the reputation of a church, or even the Church. As the French Calvinist historian, Theodore d'Agrippa d'Aubigne, strikingly put it, "When truth puts its dagger to our throat, we must kiss its white hand though it be stained with our blood." The children should know history well.

Communication by words is the God-ordained way of human praise to Him and fellowship with each other. Our children must respect words and language; they ought to be capable in reading, writing, speaking, and hearing. They must read the Bible and books that explain the Bible; they are to hear sermons; they must speak the Word of God, clearly and truthfully, to others. They are to read many other books, profitably, in the light of the Bible. Whenever they speak, they are to speak *reality*. Have you listened to the young people of the world, lately? Many of them cannot talk reality. Because of bad education — poor schools, parental neglect, television, rock music, and the drug culture, they talk like this: "Hey man, like, you know, like my old lady, man, like, she made me go, uh, like to the store." Only, the sentence is liberally sprinkled with profanity and obscenities, besides.

As children of the covenant, created and redeemed by God, our children are required to serve God by using all their faculties and abilities. Excellence in education is this, that the children learn, that they develop intellectually, that they exercise their personal abilities and talents. They are not animals that managed to crawl out of the slime and to stand erect, so that their highest purpose is to enjoy themselves and, perhaps, avoid hurting others. They are men and women, created originally in God's image. They are men and women, by covenant grace, restored to the image of God, so that they are servants of God in the covenant. As servants of God, they are to know and serve God with body and soul in this life on earth, as well as in the life to come. I ask you, "Does God deserve the best that we can give? Should the life of service to God be excellent?" Then there must be excellence in education. All laziness, all sloppiness, all mediocrity (i.e., settling for less than any student is capable of) is forbidden.

With such an education, our children are equipped for life and work in our society, all the while resisting the ungodliness and unrighteousness of society.

So far, we have spoken of the teaching at school. Excellence in education also demands good discipline, if for no other reason than that instruction is impossible without discipline and order. (There is, of course, another reason for discipline in the Christian school; and that is that, in the Christian school as in the Christian home, love for God takes the form of love for the children, which love cares enough to chasten, discipline, and bring order into the children's lives.) One, important reason for the breakdown of education today in our land is the loss of discipline. But discipline goes out the window, wherever the authority of the Word of God is rejected. The reason for the appalling disorder and violence in the State schools is the rejection of the sovereign God by school and home alike.

Our schools, grounded as they are in the Word, must have discipline and order — good discipline and order. It cannot be otherwise. It is the discipline and order of obedience required of the children for the sake of God Who redeemed them in Christ, and of obedience given by the children for the sake of God Whom they love. This is excellence in education. This is excellence in education, not alongside the Reformed nature of the school, but inherent in the Reformed nature of the school.

Much depends on the teachers. How can there be excellence in education in the school, if the teachers are unbelieving, immoral, incompetent, and unmotivated louts? What a telling commentary on the State schools, that the teachers strike! It is not so much that they thus teach the students to be greedy and rebellious, although this is the lesson that the pupils learn (what an example teachers on the picket-line set for their students!), as it is that they show that teaching is no calling for them, but merely a way to get a paycheck. They are perfectly willing to sacrifice education, students, parents, and country alike on the altar of their greed.

The teachers in our Reformed, covenantal schools regard teaching as a calling, as vital work in the Kingdom of Christ. They stand squarely on Holy Scripture. They see the children as baptized members of the covenant and church of God. They view themselves as occupying the place of parents for the rearing of the children unto men and women of God, thoroughly fitted to every good work (II Tim. 3:17). They must be faithful; they must be competent; they must be prepared; they must be zealous. This is the “must” of the impelling necessity that they themselves feel.

Basic to all of the excellence in education is the home. The school cannot rise higher than the homes of the students. Though there may be many incompetent or lazy teachers in the State schools, the main cause of all the educational problems there is the home. The home does not discipline; the home is not interested in the education of the child; the home does not see to it that the child does his homework and does it well; the home allows the child to watch 30 hours of television, i.e., 30 hours of spiritual and intellectual garbage, a week; the home does not fear God or reverence His Holy Word.

Excellence in education comes out of the home. The very structure of the school is parental — parents establish the school; parents support the school; parents govern the school. The importance of this structure becomes evident in the tottering and collapse of the State schools, despite the backing and resources of the State. In large part, this is due to the simple fact that the State tries to operate the schools, instead of the parents. Keep in mind that the parental structure of our schools is an aspect of the Reformed, covenantal nature of the schools.

The homes that run the schools have “values,” values that are deeply held, values that the homes demand shall be passed on to the children. For our homes are covenant homes — homes founded on the Word of God, homes living in communion with God, homes consecrated to the glory of God. Indeed, such homes have values: “My children, reverence the Word of God; the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge; fear the Lord and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man; honor the laws of God in all of earthly life, whether in labor, economics, government, marriage, or any other area of human life; and whatever you do, do it heartily as to the Lord.” These values of the home create excellence in education.

To this excellence, all of us are exhorted, who may be busy in the great work of education. Teachers, the task is worthy of your best efforts and your finest abilities. Children and young people, learning at school is your work, your work from God your Maker and Savior; listen! study! learn! Parents, let us carry out the work. It is our work. Scripture tells us to do it with diligence. We are privileged also to do it with confidence, for we do it in the Lord Jesus; and we know that our work is not in vain in the risen Lord. We expect good results: children trained up to fear and serve God.

What shall we have then, a school thoroughly Reformed, or a school with high academic standards? We may be thankful that we need not choose between the two. What we must have is a school soundly Reformed and, therefore, academically excellent. ■■■