

# **Impressions and Thoughts on Visiting Protestant Reformed Schools**

*by Marjorie Martin*

How faithful, how gracious is the Lord! He has said He will bless His people and that He will care for their children. This was a first thought on visiting Protestant Reformed Schools, for, in His provision of these schools, is seen His loving kindness to His people and the fulfilment of this covenant promise to them.

I was privileged to visit Protestant Reformed Schools for a short time in September 1977 and again briefly in May 1978. These visits were delightful to me. I was welcomed so graciously by faculty and students alike. Much interest and appreciation was shown in my talks about Australia. I felt conscious of the Lord's presence there and joyed in the lovely fellowship extended to me by young and older alike.

For many years, as part of my work, I have visited many schools. These have been public schools and a few so-called "Christian" schools in Australia.

My visits to Protestant Reformed Schools have been a unique and remarkable experience for me, for, never before have I been in schools where the glory of God is the chief aim of all that is planned and carried out. Here, the fear of Jehovah and love for Him is the basic motive, and so here the God-given purpose is the training of children to be loving, obedient servants of the Lord now and for eternity.

How wonderful it was to see God's Word, the Scriptures in evidence everywhere in these Protestant Reformed Schools! I will never forget the delight I felt when I entered a classroom for the first time and there, in large letters across the top of the blackboard was written, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the holy is understanding" Proverbs 9:10, for in my visits to large numbers of classrooms,

there was never the light of God's Word, only darkness. In the next room, the students were exhorted to diligence by a blackboard message: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not be ashamed...." II Timothy 2:15. A display board in the corridor carried colourful, attractive pictures of scenery, plants, and animals and among others, the words, "...stand still and consider the wondrous works of God." Job 37:14 A copy of a "Note to Parents" seen in one classroom further illustrated the all pervasiveness of Scripture:-Memory work for Friday is complete review and recitation of Isaiah 40:1-11. Spelling test. Music Ps. 305:1,4. Beginning Bible Questions 42,43.

Not only does one see God's Word written on boards, in notes, in books, etc., but also, and this is so important for a school, in reading lessons, in English, in history, math, science and other lessons. Again there is singing to the Lord in class, in choirs, singing praise to Him. Bibles and Psalters are seen in each classroom.

How distinctive and unique are these schools and how blest are those who learn within! Hardly anywhere else in the world, if anywhere, would there be schools where instruction is based entirely on the truth of God's Word and is covenant instruction. Practically all the children of mankind are instructed in darkness, are fed lies and perish in ignorance. Surely the Protestant Reformed folks have great cause for thankfulness!

With my background of association with public schools, my visit to Protestant Reformed Schools highlighted for me the complete contrast between these two types of schools, ie., the antithesis in education. From school visits, from reading Protestant Reformed and other literature related to Christian education, discussions with teachers and others, I have found that this antithesis covers the whole field of education including such aspects as the philosophy of education, the nature of the child, authority, the curriculum and others.

The Protestant Reformed schools are distinctive in that instruction is covenant-based with parents obeying God's command to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The educational philosophy of these schools is based on the Bible; that God is sovereign, an absolute authority and personality; and He is in immediate communion with His own, who bow before His sovereignty and live their lives

in His presence. The covenant is the relationship of friendship between God and His people in Christ Jesus. <sup>1</sup>

The antithetical view is that there is no personal God. In the public schools, education is godless, or if a "god" is considered, he is a god of man's devising, a finite god, created by the universe, not God, the Creator. Without God and the Bible nothing makes any sense. So there is darkness in these schools. Their philosophies of education are humanistic, man-centered, man-glorifying. The antithesis is God-centered, God-glorifying education. These public schools seek solutions to problems in dried up fountains and in the polluted streams of sin darkened human thought. The Reformed educator, as in Protestant Reformed schools, sees a well opened up and hears a voice from heaven, for in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". Col. 2:3.

The Reformed educator, knows that truth is absolute, not relative. <sup>2</sup> How great is his blessedness in knowing this! He knows the truth. How sure are His foundations! "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" John 8:32. The worldly educator believes truth is relative and varies from age to age, from circumstance to circumstance. Schools such as Protestant Reformed Schools are not carried away by contemporary relativism. They hold in the highest regard the truth of God's Word and the absolute sovereignty of God. Again, truth has objective authority <sup>2</sup> based on Scripture. In public schools, subjectivism controls the souls of men, the individual determining what he will recognize or accept, there being no objective truth or authority for them, man himself being the criterion of all things, whereas the principle of all truth is to be found in the Word of God. Nothing which is contrary to Scripture and only that which accords with Scripture is truth. Van Der Kooy states that "it is this high regard both for the absoluteness and objectivity of truth that gives the Christian school its character of tranquility by means of which it hews to the line of historical continuity and steadfastly perseveres in its task" <sup>2</sup>

The antithesis is apparent in conflicting views of the child. The unbelieving educator considers the child basically good or morally indifferent, neither good or bad. Give him a good environment, they say and all will be well. He removes all

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2. p. 22, p. 24, p. 27

restrictions and inhibitions and allows free rein to the child's wishes. Since the child by nature is evil, one sees the anticipated lawlessness increasing in these schools. This is also fostered by the fact that he has denied that the child has a soul and looks on the child as an animal. <sup>3</sup> In Protestant Reformed education, the child, by grace, is a covenant child and although born in sin, he has been redeemed by grace and embraced in a new relationship to God.

There is a contrast in authority. The authority in Protestant Reformed schools is the parents and their deputies, the teachers. They have been invested with this authority by God. In public schools the authority is the state, the teacher, but often really the child.

While speaking of authority, I wish to comment on the faithfulness and zeal of the Protestant Reformed parents with which they meet their responsibility in providing covenant instruction. How great is the sacrifice of many, giving liberally of their time and money, earned by strenuous and long hours of work! Such diligence and faithfulness is seen in the tireless efforts of school boards in the organization and implementation of this education.

Having denied the absolute and discarded Scripture as the truth, the public educator has difficulty expressing an aim of education. There is a lack of clear and definite aims. Words are used, but little said. All is really purposeless. The child must be left to develop without direction, i.e., in an aimless way, like a type of evolution. If there be a stated aim, it would be, in essence, the development of man unto the glory of man.

How different is the Protestant Reformed School, where from Scripture, the aim of education is known. The goal there is to train the child to love Jehovah, our God, to serve Him, to fear Him, to glorify Him. This means also to attempt to mold the child in the expression of his mind, heart and will, in order that, being perfectly equipped for every good work, he may serve God in the various spheres of human life, now and for eternity. The goal is holiness and he is to live to serve His Maker. <sup>1</sup>

Again discipline in the public schools is becoming hopeless, as "having sacrificed the fundamental principle of authority, the modern educator has no right to demand the obedience of the

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child".<sup>3</sup> Neither does he demand it. As the child is either good or morally indifferent, he does not believe in correcting the child. How different in Protestant Reformed Schools, where the teacher strives by example, prayer and admonition, to break down the evil tendencies remaining in the heart of the child and train him in the way he should go.

Again in Protestant Reformed Schools, teaching methods observed were more the formal type of instruction, as is scripturally based and educationally efficient. How awful are the methods of the so-called progressive education, which have become progressively worse, using democratic methods, with the child doing almost as he likes! In the "open classroom" where the child reads or does as he himself chooses, the teacher is merely an "observer", "senior partner" at best, "a facilitator of learning". What foolishness! What confusion, chaos and non-education! What a prime victory for Satan! It was seen in good lessons in the Protestant Reformed Schools, that the teacher though in full control, did not restrict, but spurred the pupils to the self-activity, which is necessary for learning. This pupil activity was channelled along well planned lines to achieve the desired learning.

Do we see an antithesis in the subject matter to be taught? Definitely so! Once again the Reformed Christian knows what this should be. Every branch or field of human study is to be taught in the light of Scripture. Not so in worldly schools, where the educator cannot distinguish between what is educative and what is not. In fact, modern educators because of relativism, care little for subject matter and less and less is being taught. Knowledge is coming to be despised, especially subjects like history, where the heritage of the past is transmitted. Darkness operates in the vacuum of ignorant minds! The content taught in Protestant Reformed Schools is the truth. "This truth contains the basic principles of every subject of knowledge... every fact of every subject must be based upon, incorporated in, permeated with, explained in the light of, the truth of God in Holy Writ. Scripture is the foundation, the basic structure, the pulse beat and life blood of all knowledge".<sup>4</sup> This principle also has been incorporated in the preparation of some very good manuals in several subject areas by Protestant Reformed secondary and

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elementary teachers.

Some time has been spent pointing out antitheses between the Protestant Reformed schools and public schools. May I say, how vital it is that Protestant Reformed authorities continue to strive, as they do now, to maintain these antitheses and keep their distinctiveness and superiority especially in these last days, as there is increasing influence of anti-christian philosophies and worldliness generally.

I did not see a large number of lessons, nor lessons to all grades, nor in all subjects; but I will write about aspects of some which I observed. Some schools were not in session.

I observed some splendid teaching of reading to first graders. In one school, I saw the introductory work on reading in September 1977. No effort had been spared to prepare teaching aids to stimulate and maintain interest and encourage learning. I saw the outstanding success of the year's program of reading in May 1978. Also some other very good lessons on English, and literature to elementary and senior grades were seen.

Of such interest were Bible study lessons in elementary and junior high. I saw an excellent Bible study lesson to first grade with a careful explanation of sin and the fall, in terms understandable to the first graders. A second grade lesson on Esther with a very good telling of the Bible story, and review questioning and among other things a careful consideration of how God uses all things for His purposes, including treatment of a text written on the board, "The Lord hath made all things for Himself-yea even the wicked." Prov. 16:4 So we see the most important knowledge being taught. In this case too, the writing practice lesson involved writing the text. In a junior high lesson, "*Behold He Cometh*", by H. Hoeksema, was being studied. What a privilege to have guided study of such a book!

I found it of special interest to observe a church history lesson to senior students. Here some of the history of Reformed Churches in Holland and Michigan area was being treated. How valuable can a study of church history be, as the student is further enlightened as to the significance of the Protestant Reformed Church and the vital nature of its covenant theology. Importantly also, he sees, that historically the true church of God is always under attack by the forces of evil; that there is the ever present threat and widespread incidence of apostasy, highlighting the need for constant watchfulness and prayer and the

need to maintain sound doctrine and discipline. As well, he will see that the Protestant Reformed Church is indeed blest and there is great room for thankfulness, when he learns how widespread has been error and false teaching throughout history. It is good that there is discussion of errors, such as Arminianism and common grace. How important it is that the teacher ensures that the outcome of such discussions upholds sound doctrine, that confusion is dispelled and that there is emphatic restatement and reinforcement of the truth.

History is seen as the unfolding of God's plan. "History is the temporal revelation of the counsel of God with respect to all things beginning with creation and ending with the realization of God's purpose in the new heavens and the new earth".<sup>4</sup> What a wealth of knowledge lies in this study of history. What a wonderful subject for study!

In the mathematics room at the high school near graphs on a notice board was seen, "A false balance is an abomination of the Lord, but a just weight is His delight." Prov. 11:1. So we see ethical values are taught in subjects, as well as concepts and skills. Of course, good knowledge and skills in mathematics, and other subjects are needed to equip the student to be able to serve the Lord. Some good history and mathematics lessons were observed.

In a Latin lesson, as well as good work in Latin, some interesting points were noted. Writings of the poet Seneca were being studied. The question of the remedy for sudden anger arose and the conclusion was that the Christian waits... "waits upon the Lord" and "is still". Also to the question of the abuse of things; that all should be used to the glory of God. Seneca spoke of art being an imitation of nature. The teacher pointed out the pagan and humanistic idea of nature as compared to the truth of Creation. This illustrates what was observed in several lessons, Scripture being taught and used to evaluate human thoughts and inventions, in appropriate places and as opportunity provided.

"Science is the study of God's created, physical world" was the definition of science given at one school. In a lesson on air, it was pointed out, at an appropriate place, that the constant composition of air was an amazing fact, considering the continual movement of gases into and out of the air. Such constancy is needed to maintain air suitable for life. And the omnipotence of

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God in His creation of air and the maintenance of its composition was stressed. So many are the wonders of creation and providence observed in a study of science. Science is indeed a study of the works of God. The universe, the world, the myriads of living things show the power and divinity of God. The more one learns of the handiwork of the Creator in studying science, the more one marvels at these works and praises His God. How important is the study of science at a Christian school!

It was noted that reference was made to evolution; that this was the lie, anti-scriptural; evil! With the widespread acceptance of this philosophy of the devil, including in Christian colleges, it is now even more important than ever that students know of the evil of evolution and the extent of its crippling of man's thinking and its effect on man, causing irresponsibility, lawlessness, violence and despair. The unscientific nature of evolution should be taught also and this may be done.

I enjoyed some exuberant psalm singing by first graders, and fine choir singing. Beautiful was the singing of choirs at graduation ceremonies! These ceremonies were impressive, and most inspiring were the speeches by Protestant Reformed ministers.

The teacher's role is of great significance. He is a co-worker of the Almighty in rearing His children. He is playing a part in God's foreordained purpose for His church, a purpose planned before the foundation of the world. What an awesome responsibility! The thought of assisting in the fashioning, upholding and development of the life of a child of God is indeed impressive and overwhelming and its work for eternity!

I observed some of the best teaching I have ever seen-if not the best. There were such dedicated, faithful teachers who spared no effort to instruct skillfully and were of outstanding competence. There were several I saw, who really joy in their work, teaching with much enthusiasm and inspiration. In their classes one recognized the mutual attitude of trust and sympathy that makes school work both gainful and enjoyable for teacher and pupil. I wish to comment on the diligence of those in the smaller schools where the teacher has pupils of several grades to teach, and though I did not have occasion to see much of this, I could appreciate what good planning and effort and skill were involved.

There were many attractive schoolrooms with interesting



charts, pictures, and other aids displayed to provide an environment conducive to happy learning.

Some teaching was disappointing. It is vital that all Protestant Reformed teachers, as agents of God, achieve a good standard of efficiency. A few teachers observed, need to make more effort to improve their teaching manner, so that it is more purposeful and stimulative of interest. A teacher must show enthusiasm even if it be in a quiet way. Enthusiasm is caught by pupils. More consideration needs be given to ways of arousing and maintaining the interested participation of pupils, in some cases; and to ways of motivating learning. Some need to be firmer in discipline, to ensure continued attention and educative activity of pupils.

Sometimes there seemed to be much use of textbook lessons, in secondary grades, with room for some more variety in method. Also, I suggest, more thought might be given to the appropriate use of the textbook and printed notes in a lesson in some cases. The textbook should not take the place of the teacher and a lesson involved just going through the book or notes with the pupils. There should normally be a good amount of direct teaching by the teacher himself, where he describes, explains and illustrates, often using the blackboard, and often summarizing the main points on the blackboard. In this part of the lesson good questioning should be used to keep the pupils involved, as well as clear telling by the teacher. Then the textbook might be used for consolidation, revision or expansion of subject matter.

I think that compared to the average high school student in Australia, a number of students do not study as hard; especially with homestudies, as well as they might. A difficulty involved here, may be the fact that, it seems quite a few students need to work after school hours, their education being expensive, whereas in the schools with which I was associated, education was free. Certainly, careful organization of time and energy is needed, where there is after school work, to allow a good amount of time for home studies. Of course, independent parent-controlled schools are essential and priceless and must be maintained at all cost.

In most classes observed, the pupils were participating well and one knows there are many good students who work well. Still, may I suggest, there be even more emphasis on diligence and study, so that a greater effort is made by some students.

Exertion is an excellent thing for the child of God. It strengthens his powers. Perhaps students might be exhorted even more, to make the fullest use of the talents they have received from God; to the glory of God, as God demands.

I was concerned to hear that several teachers needed to work at other jobs for most of their vacation and some do other work during the teaching year. In the school system with which I was associated teachers had 10 weeks' vacation; this time was used for vacation and, in the case of conscientious teachers, some time was used for planning and organizing school work for the semester ahead. This is a State system, where teachers are paid to cover their vacation. So the position is not really comparable. Of course, a teacher needs a good vacation, as all recognize, and I believe, also, some time for review, planning, adjustment and improvement of courses, general preparation and time for professional growth, outside of school semester time. Once the semester starts, teaching, with all the preparation and follow-up work, is surely a full time job.

Some teaching areas are especially demanding for the teacher. My own experience has been in the field of science education. The demands of science teaching in junior and senior high are considerable. The quantity of knowledge needed to teach in even one branch, such as chemistry at senior high is quite large, and there is much specialized knowledge and skills required in the handling of apparatus and laboratory techniques. In the school system with which I was associated, at senior level, the teacher was expected to be competent to teach only two areas of science eg. chemistry and physics or biology and geology. Many concepts and principles in science are difficult to clarify and explain, requiring much thought and planning by the teacher as to ways of making them understandable by the student. Science needs to involve much practical demonstration by the teacher, accompanying quite a few of his explanations and descriptions, but much time is needed in preparation of materials and equipment for this. In the schools I knew at high school level there was often, at least for part time, a trained laboratory assistant or aide, or there was a lower teaching load to enable adequate time for preparation of demonstrations. Practical work by pupils requires that the group not be large, so classes were often divided for practical classes.

I have just made some observations and one or two

suggestions, as I see it, for improvement and for ceaseless reformation. To put matters in a right perspective, I must say again, how greatly impressed I was, by the soundness of the covenant instruction given in the Protestant Reformed schools, by the very fine teaching, and the faithfulness of the boards, parents, teachers and students in working and praying for the cause of God's kingdom.

Indeed, I must repeat that these schools are so precious and the continued zeal, carefulness and faithfulness of all, will be needed to preserve and improve this covenant education, maintaining its distinctive godliness against increasing attack by the world and the devil. The children now attending these schools will face greater trials than their parents. To stand fast in a day of the trial they need to be strong in self-discipline, strong in faith and in their love for the Lord. They will need "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God", hidden in their hearts. Now more than ever is sound covenant instruction vital!

How comforting it is that the victory is assured, if all concerned are faithful to the utmost of their power. As all realize, prayer is indispensable. By incessant prayer, help must be invoked or all work will be in vain. But what joy to know, that with prayer and work, God's blessing will continue, as the cause is God's own, and it is God's work. And wondrous to contemplate, the glorious Lord Himself is interceding on behalf of His children. May His Name be highly praised!

1. Engelsma, David. *Reformed Education*; Federation of Protestant Reformed School Societies; 1977.

2. Van Der Kooy T. "The Distinctive Features of the Christian School" (tr. by three members of the Calvin College faculty) Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1924.

3. Hendriksen W. "Maintaining our Christian Schools on a Distinctive Basis" in *Educational Convention Papers*. N.U.C.S. 1932.

4. Hanko, Herman. *Principles of Education of Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School*; 1963.