

The church, for its spiritual wellbeing, has a vested interest in the daily instruction of the children of the church. Although parents are responsible to instruct their children in God's word and to bring them up in the discipline and admonition of the Lord, yet the church for its own welfare needs the support of the school. Martin Luther wrote: "For the sake of the church, one must have Christian schools and maintain them for God maintains the church through the schools. Schools maintain the church. Indeed they have no outstanding external appearance but they are very useful and necessary. In schools the small boys learn the Lord's Prayer and the faith. And the churches are wonderfully maintained through the small schools." (Luther's Table Talk, XXII, 2249)

Historically the Dutch Reformed Churches embraced Christian education as important and necessary for their covenant children. Robert Swierenga writes in his book, The Dutch in Chicago: "The growth of our church is to a great extent due to two causes, to the Christian school for its intensive (growth) and to the home mission work for its extensive growth.' Thus wrote the Reverend J.R. Brink in the Banner. Christian school advocates used a number of metaphors to make the point; they spoke of Christian schools as the 'feeder of the church,' the 'nursery of and for the church,' and a crucial link in a 'chain.' Parent-run Christian schools were equal partners with the church. The church nurtured 'children of the covenant'- a cardinal Calvinist doctrine- in the community of faith, while the school prepared them for a life in society. One immigrant complained of the financial drain of the Christian schools; 'De school vreet de kerk op' ('The school will devour the church'), he declared. The fit rejoinder was: 'Hoe meer de school vreet, hoe meer de kerk groeit.' ('The more the school eats, the better the church will grow'). This exactly captures the spirit of Christian School advocates." (The Dutch in Chicago Feeders of the Church: Christian Schools, p. 350)

God has been pleased to use Christian schools for the preservation of the church. We see that blessing in our Protestant Reformed circles. The RCA historian, Robert Swierenga, acknowledges this with respect to the Chicago West Side at the conclusion of his chapter on Christian schools: "One hundred years ago, at the inception of the Christian schools, both denominations on the West Side were equal in strength. But today Reformed Church membership in the western suburbs is less than one-fifth that of the Christian Reformed Church. The success of the junior body in gathering in most of the new immigrants is certainly a factor. But even in the past fifty years, long after immigration ceased, the Reformed congregations continued to lose members at a rate five times greater than that of Christian Reformed congregations. From 1950 to 1999, Reformed Church membership declined by 48 percent (from 957 to 499), while Christian Reformed Church membership fell less than 10 percent (from 2,959 to 2,675). Could it be that Christian day school education made the difference in maintaining a Christian presence on the West Side? This conclusion seems warranted." (The Dutch in Chicago Feeders of the Church: Christian Schools, p. 449)

While the Dutch Reformed realized the need for parental schools, there was often a struggle concerning the relation of the church to the school and the place of the consistory in encouraging the establishment of Christian schools. In 1873 the Christian Reformed Synod "obliged" consistories to establish 'Free Christian Reformed schools.' Only one consistory took action. The Synod of 1898, concerned about the fact that so many were content with public education, declared: "A positive Christian education with Reformed principles is a duty for Reformed Christians.' It then warned 'all ministers and elders to work for the cause of Christian education in every place where such is at all possible.' The synod gave four reasons in support of its stand: 1. God's Word demands that our children be trained in the fear and admonition of the Lord. 2. The promises of the parents at the time of baptism. 3. There may be no separation between our civic, social, or

religious life, education and training. 4. The honor of our King demands it, since all power is given him in heaven and earth, also in the realm of education and all other knowledge.” The Dutch in Chicago, p. 356

By 1920 the majority of the Christian Reformed denomination had committed itself to Christian schools and wholehearted support for Christian schools was a requisite for office bearers. The few parents who objected had to answer to the consistory. The synod of 1934 made support of Christian education a necessary consideration for holding office: “Although such as heartily support Christian instruction do not thereby automatically qualify for nomination as office bearers, this element should be given very weighty consideration and (the synod) advises consistories to do so.” p. 357 Two years later in 1936 the synod was even more direct: “It is the duty of the consistory to use every proper means to the end that a Christian School may be established where it does not exist, and to give wholehearted and unreserved moral backing to existing Christian Schools and a measure of financial help in case of need. . . If, in the judgment of Classis, a Consistory does not support the cause of Christian Schools, Classis should continue earnestly to admonish such a consistory publicly in its classical meeting and privately through the church visitors until it truly repents.” The Dutch in Chicago, p. 357

That the consistory has a role in promoting Christian schools is clearly established from the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Article 21 reads: “The Consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools where the parents may have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.” Article 41 requires that the question be asked at Classis of each consistory: “Does the consistory support the cause of Christian schools?” At church visitation the church visitors pose this question to the full council: “Does the consistory see to it that the parents send their children to the Christian school?”

The manner of carrying out this role has been the subject of dispute. The question is: How is the consistory to view this calling? Throughout the years there have been a number of cases that came to Classis West for consideration and explanation. These cases provide us with direction.

First, the consistory’s general duty is set forth in a decision of Classis West meeting September 21-23, 1982 when a consistory brought a request to Classis under Article 41 that Classis give an interpretation of Article 21. Classis responded with the following advice:

1. Because God’s covenant is with believers and their children, our children must be instructed according to the ‘demands of the covenant’. These demands are not conditions unto salvation, but are a matter of faithfulness to our calling and thankfulness to God for redemption. Genesis 17:7, Acts 2:39, Baptism Form.
2. Christian parents have the calling to train up their children in the way they should go according to the Word of God. That parents have this calling is clear from Deut. 6:6-8, Psalm 78:4-6, Genesis 18:19, Ephesians 6:4, and the third question of the Baptism Form.
3. This covenant instruction is accomplished not only in the home and church, but also in the day school. Therefore, Reformed believers establish Christian day schools to meet this educational demand of the covenant. These Christian schools are extensions of the home, and not of the church. Whether our own school is immediately possible or not in a given area does not effect our calling to have our schools. Our calling is to the utmost of our power, this requires our own schools when possible.
 - a. The school should teach in full harmony with the Word of God as well as the Church. That will make, by God’s grace, for strong and well informed Christians. The Church cannot afford, and before God cannot tolerate, to see much of her precious teachings contradicted and silenced five days a week, year after year, before our children, and that while they are in their most formative years. Godless and Christless instruction clearly runs counter to the best interests of the Church, the Kingdom of God in general, the welfare of the child, and the

solemn obligation of Christian parents.” p. 95 Van Dellen and Monsma, The Church Order Commentary.

- b. “Why does the Church Order speak of GOOD Christian schools? Because not all schools which are Christian day schools are necessarily good. The ideals after which our Christian schools must strive lie very high, so high, indeed, that we shall never reach them. And yet we must bring our schools as near to those ideals as we possibly can.” p. 96 Van Dellen and Monsma.
4. The consistory is called to encourage the organization of our schools by the members of the congregation.
 - a. “The consistory, our article says, shall see to it that there are good Christian schools. This is to make the Consistory responsible for it when the children of the congregation cannot receive Christian instruction. If the parents are slow in beginning to work for the establishment of a Christian school, the consistory must be up and doing. It must do all that is in its power, not to found a “church school”, but to persuade the parents of their duty in this respect, and to exhort them to lay hold on the matter.” P. 121, Heyns, Handbook for Elders and Deacons.
 - b. “Consequently, it becomes the plain duty of the Church to promote good Christian schools, and to urge parents to use these schools if at all possible.” p. 95 Van Dellen and Monsma
 - c. “How to Promote Christian Schools- in a place where there is as yet no Christian school, consistory members can comply with Article 21 by urging the pastor to promote it in his preaching, by urging it in personal contacts with the members and especially in family visitation, by distributing Christian school literature, and by holding meetings for parents wherein the cause is promoted by speakers, and by way of discussion. Where a Christian school exists, the consistory must, of course, continue to help in every possible way. And it should intervene in the event that the instruction is no longer according to the demands of the covenant.” p. 215 J.L. Schaver, The Polity of the Churches.
 5. The consistory has the duty to admonish and exhort those parents who fail to carry out their covenant obligations.
 - a. “Still another part of the duties of the Consistory with respect to this matter is to see to it that parents, who belong to the congregation, send their children to the Christian school. Those who fail to do so, without having sufficient reasons therefore, must be seriously exhorted and be reminded of their promise at the baptism of their children. Questions, however, as whether such members when they refuse to listen to the exhortation, are to be made objects of discipline, or whether such members are eligible for Elders or Deacons, can not be answered in a general way. Cases which are justifiable are possible. But when the cause of such conduct appears to be indifference towards having their children brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, then application of discipline is necessary.” p. 122, Heyns, Handbook for Elders and Deacons.
 - b. See Van Dellen and Monsma for similar ideas, p. 98-99.
 6. Consistory members themselves ought to support our own Christian schools. (See quotes above under 5) (Classis West September 21-23, 1982)

Second, as the above makes clear, the consistory must labor patiently and in a longsuffering manner with both those who are supportive of Christian education and those who display a weakness in regard to Christian education. The peace and unity of the church must be preserved as that which is based on the truth of salvation by grace alone. The saints must be instructed to live together in peace with those with whom they share serious disagreements, including in the realm of

Christian education. The consistory must do what they can to keep school disputes and issues out of the church and encourage the saints to communicate and talk together in brotherly love. It is easy for the saints to rise up against each other and for the consistory to contribute to this division. "The mere failure to send a child to a Christian school may never constitute a basis for censure and excommunication, but persistent indifference toward Christian duty, including proper child training, may. For by such indifference we clearly testify that we are either temporarily wandering away from God, or that our Christianity is only a sham, without reality, and that we are Godless at heart." Van Dellen and Monsma p. 98

Classis West in its decision of September 21-23, 1982 refused to sustain a consistory's charge of sin against a member who took his son out of a Christian school and sent him to a public school.

Grounds:

- 1. The way in which a consistory should work with a member who displays a weakness in regard to Christian education is with long and patient labors of instruction.**
- 2. A consistory has the burden to show past precedent in our churches if they would decide that placing one's child in a public school is ground for censure.**

Classis West, in its meeting of September 7-10, 1983, called the following positions of a consistory "radical" because proof was not given from Scripture, the creeds, the church order, nor from our tradition as churches.

- 1. The position that in general it is a sin for parents not to have their children in our own Christian school.**
- 2. Withholding the sacrament of baptism from parents who do not promise, regardless of circumstances, to educate their children in our own Christian school.**
- 3. The position that regardless of circumstances the brother who does not have his children in our own school cannot serve in the offices of Jesus Christ.**
- 4. The position that unity and peace in the church are dependant upon all the parents of the church placing their children in our own school.**

Classis gave this interpretation of Article 21:

- 1. "It is the duty of the church to PROMOTE good Christians schools' not to FORCE them, and to 'URGE parents to use these schools if at all possible', not to coerce them regardless of circumstances; also that the demands of the covenant 'should be preached WISELY and TIMELY,' as well as persistently in places where parents are neglectful." Van Dellen and Monsma The Church Order Commentary p. 95, 96**
- 2. Radicalism regarding this article will divide believer and believer, oppress some saints and scatter and divide the sheep.**

Third, the consistory promotes the cause of Christian education through the nominations presented to the congregation for office bearers. The council does this in two ways. First, men should be nominated to office who are supportive of the Christian schools. Secondly, depending on the size of the congregation and the workload of the men, the council should not nominate men who are currently serving on the school boards. While general rules in these situations would not be wise, the council must do all in its power to promote and preserve Christian education through its nominations. The bare fact that one does not support Christian education does not automatically disqualify him from office, but his reasons are the issue. If a council knowingly nominates a man who does not support Christian education to office they must be willing to stand behind their nomination and answer potential charges from the congregation. Once a man is nominated in such a case, the consistory can not use that ground to remove him from nomination.

Can one who is opposed to Christian schools serve as a Consistory member? Not very well. Those who serve in Consistory pledge to uphold the doctrine and government of the Churches. Now the Church Order, according to which they help to govern the Church, requires that they promote and sponsor Christian schools. Therefore one who is opposed to

these schools cannot serve in the Consistory. He cannot do what is expected of him. Even those who assume a lukewarm attitude toward the Christian school movement are not desirable candidates, for the Consistory. We should, of course remember that every case must be judged on its own merits. A general rule in this matter should never be made. Van Dellen and Monsma p. 99.

It should be understood that service in the church comes first. The schools cannot exist without faithful, committed churches. When God calls a man to serve as an elder or deacon, that calling supersedes any other requirements he might have on his time. Our churches acknowledge this by taking nomination seriously and refusing to remove men from nomination for simply any reason they might submit. At the same time, when there are two men equally qualified and one is currently serving on the school board, the council must respect this and choose the other for nomination. The promotion of the Christian schools requires that the council promote not only qualified and supportive elders and deacons, but also a qualified staff and board as necessary for the good of the school.

Finally, communication is very important in the calling of the consistory to promote Christian education. There will be disagreements over Christian education. The consistory should maintain open communication with the congregation; especially with those who have concerns. Practical ways in which the consistory must be busy in the congregation involve timely and wise sermons in which the cause is set before the congregation, the congregational prayers for the children of the church and the schools, taking offerings for Christian education, encouraging young people to pursue teaching professions, and using the subject of Christian education as a family visitation topic.

Where there is no Christian school or no Protestant Reformed Christian school, the consistory can sponsor discussions and meetings for the purpose of organizing a society and promoting the cause. Each individual consistory must evaluate the circumstances in their congregation to determine the viability of a society and the possibility of establishing a school. Much wisdom is necessary to determine the proper timing of both and the manner of promoting the cause. God's sheep need to be led carefully to see the necessity, viability, and possibility of their own schools.

Where there are existing Christian schools, the consistories ought support those which are Protestant Reformed and encourage parents to support the schools. The consistory should visit each of the families who are not sending their children to these schools. The visits must be motivated by a love for God and His church and a desire to see the covenant of God preserved in our generations. We visit in order to try to understand the decision of the parents, open to the possibility that there may be a valid, biblical reason for the parent's decision. We do not come to condemn nor to discipline the parents, but to talk with them and impress upon them the seriousness of their covenant obligation and the concern of the consistory for the spiritual wellbeing of our children. We do not enter into a debate but must do more listening than talking at first. We inform them that the pastor will be praying for our schools and will be addressing the importance of godly education in the preaching. We are not trying to create a division between those who send their children to the school and those who do not. We do not want to see them estranged from the fellowship of the church. We want our people to see the importance of their covenant obligation and the need for godly, distinctive education in the evil days in which we live. Our prayer is that all the families of the church join together so that we can enjoy not only unity in the church, but also unity in the work of training our children.

This is God's work. He alone is able to work convictions in the hearts of His children. As servants of Christ we instruct and teach the Word in the confidence that the instruction will bear fruit in His good time.