

# ***THE INDEPENDENT THINKER:*** **THE END-PRODUCT OF** **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

by Jon Huiskens

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The title of this paper as given in the course prospectus is to be "The Independent Thinker: The End-Product of Christian Education." It is apparent that I am being asked to speak about one of the central purposes, if not the most important objective, of Christian education. The title suggests that what we want out of our educational process are students who are able to make decisions and judgments by themselves. We want, in a word, responsible people making responsible decisions. And, let me state from the outset that I for one believe that this is an important—if not the most important—objective of our Protestant Reformed Christian schools. We need to impress upon our students that they need to be responsible Christians. They must be people of God who are able to make correct judgments and decisions on their own.

But, as I began to think and read in preparation for this paper the thought struck me: independent thinkers? responsible people making responsible decisions? isn't that the goal and purpose of practically every educational system extant? What is so distinctive and unique about having the production of independent thinkers as a central purpose of our educational system? This thought came home especially to me as I read a short essay produced by the National

Education Association entitled "The Central Purpose of American Education." There it was: The central purpose, the objective, of American public education was to produce people who could think for themselves.

It became obvious, then, that if the end-product of Christian education is to be independent thinkers—people who can make correct judgments and decisions by themselves—we had best carefully define what we mean by that concept of an independent thinker. Who is he? What are to be his characteristics? And, how do we get him to be what we want him to be? We had best carefully define our end-product and the means we use to produce him so that it is clear for all to see that both end and means are indeed distinctive and unique.

To show, then, that that is indeed the case—that our products and the means we use to produce those products—will be the burden of this paper. What we hope to show is that while we may agree with many, at first glance anyway, that the end-product of the school is people who think, people who are able to make decisions and judgments by themselves, we must nevertheless insist that our end-product is uniquely different from the end-product of any other educational system. The paper will be developed along three lines. First, we will attempt to define the person we call the independent thinker, next, we will consider what the means should be to reach the objective of producing such a product, and finally, we will consider what this all will require of us.

What do we mean, then, when we say that we want to produce independent thinkers? What does he look like to us in our mind's eye? What will be his characteristics? What will his profile be?

First, let us consider that term **independent**. When we talk about independence and independent thinkers, we must conceive of someone and must produce someone who is independent in the sense of being on his own. We want, I believe, to produce people who can make decisions and judgments by themselves. And, we believe and strive for that for good reason. In the final analysis, the child of God as an **individual** is responsible for what he does. In the day of judgment we will be individually judged and individually sentenced. We will not be able to say to our Lord God that we are not responsible for the things of which we are accused because, really, I did not make those decisions and judgments at all; it was that other guy who did my thinking for me. Further, I think that we as teachers and educators realize that there is some lack here. We wonder sometimes whether we do, in fact, produce such people. We find many of the people in our community unable to do exactly that. They are far too reliant upon the minister or the teacher or the "leaders" to do their thinking for them. When confronted with problems, when confronted with decisions that must be made, they escape the responsibility (so they believe) of making those decisions by appealing to someone else. Now you must realize that I do not by any means suggest that ministers and elders and teachers and leaders should not be listened to, but, in the final analysis, what we hope to produce in our schools is people who are able to make decisions for themselves. We want responsible Christians. When it comes to the practical problems of life, when it comes to ideological considerations, we hope to produce people who can critically analyze what is before them and having done that,

reach the proper conclusions.

We must, however, add a word of caution here. We must be careful not to extend this concept of independence any further. Independence does not mean that we want the end-product of our schools to be subjectivistic and relativistic in their thinking; we do not want our students to be free thinkers disassociating themselves from our community and our theological bases. To be independent is not to be as one who is unattached to any theological apriori or propositions of faith. Rather, we ought to conclude that our end-products are not to be independent in that sense at all. They must certainly be dependent upon the Word of God, they must be dominated and always led by the mind of Christ.

I think it safe though to say that, understood as outlined above, we do want independent people, we want capable people, people who are able to make decisions and judgments by themselves. To be independent, then, in the sense of this paper, means to be able to do exactly that—by oneself.

We come now to the second part. What do we mean when we say that the end-product of Christian education ought to be a **thinker**? We ought to recognize immediately that while we do not intend in any way to belittle the need to develop the intellect, the rational power of man—we certainly do want our students to be able to think in the rational sense of that word—the concept of **thinker**, the concept of what it is to **think** must include much more than that. What we must see is that when one "thinks" and when we talk about producing independent "thinkers" the sense in which I view that concept—as alluded to above—is that of decision making and judgment making. Included in that process is man's entire being. Included must be the total process of making decisions and judgments, everything that is used to make decisions and judgments. We must include, therefore,

not only man's rational faculties—his mind, his intellect, his reasoning powers—but included as well must be the will and heart. Man's thinking, you see, is also directed by his heart. "Out of the heart," says the Scriptures, "are the issues of life" and, we take that to mean all the issues, including man's mind. And, I think that it is well to emphasize here that we can never escape that fact nor should we ever try to. Man's rational faculties, man's intellect must never be disassociated from his entire being. Always we must consider man as an organic whole. To dissect him and to elevate certain parts of him lands us squarely in the isms of the history of philosophy.

We must needs elaborate a bit more, however. To say that thinking, as understood in the sense of deciding and judging, involves man's whole being is to say quite a bit. Included in this concept, first of all, is the idea that one's decisions and judgments must have a basis and a foundation. That foundation we confess to be the Word of God. Our judgments and decisions are either good or bad insofar as they are made according to the objective standards of God's Word. The Word, we confess, with the Westminster Catechism, is the only guide to faith and life. So, too then, in our decisions and judgments.

Secondly, we must clearly understand that our judgments and decisions are always of a moral-ethical creature. Created as such by his Creator, Man can do nothing else. All of his decisions and judgments, try as he might to deny it, are of a moral-ethical, spiritual nature because of his very own nature. He is either for God or against God in everything that he does.

Furthermore, in the third place, this idea of "to think" includes the idea that we make decisions and judgments within a context, a framework of truth. The Word is our foundation not only, but the Word also gives us a basis upon which to form a perspective, a world-and-life view. We

have developed a perspective from which we view all of culture and all of history, and all of reality. When we come, then, to analyze a problem or a product or an historical event or a natural phenomenon, our subsequent judgments and decisions are made within the context of this perspective. We must have nothing to do with the relativistic and subjectivistic notions abounding in our day. Rather, we must approach our educational task as those who are predisposed to a theological point of view. We very definitely have a theological bias.

Implied necessarily also in this idea of "to think" is the idea of a value system, an ordering of priorities. This value system, too, as was our world-and-life view, must have its basis in the Word of God. When we do decide and when we do judge, we do so knowing where our values and priorities lie. But again, we must emphasize that our value system is based upon an absolute standard. There must be nothing relative about it.

Finally, certainly included in this idea of "to think" is the ability of one to use his rational faculties. Man is a rational creature, he has been given the powers to reason, and we must certainly include this in our definition.

I think it is now clear, however, that our end-products must be far more than finely honed, acutely tuned intellects. (That, by the way, is the avowed purpose of the American public schools according to the essay referred to above. The primary purpose of American public schools, according to this NEA statement, is to develop the rationality of each student. Rationality, to them, is the key that will unlock all the doors to this world's problems.) Finely honed and acutely tuned intellects they certainly must be—there is nothing wrong and everything right with developing sharp minds and the powers of reasoning—but when we state our objective to be the production of "thinkers," what we mean

to say is that we wish to produce people who are able, on the basis of the Word of God, to make good moral-ethical judgments and decisions. In the final analysis, we want to produce people who are profoundly spiritual. We wish to produce students who are able to use their rational faculties to the fullest extent possible. But, most importantly, we wish to produce students who clearly understand and, therefore, clearly demonstrate in their "thinking," that the simple exercise of their rational powers will not lead them to good moral-ethical judgments and decisions. Rather, these rational faculties must be subservient to the will of God, one's mind must be dominated by the regenerated heart. Faith seeking understanding, reason in the captivity of faith, is what we look for and what we strive for when we say that our goal is to produce a "thinker."

The independent thinker, then, as described above is to be our end-product. But, what we have given so far is a shell, a skeleton outline of his characteristics. That skeleton must, of course, be fleshed out. We have talked about values and perspectives and bases and foundations, but we have as yet not given content to them. Until we do, then, we still have not gained for our end-products any distinctiveness. But I must needs be brief especially since this is not at all the burden of this paper but could well be the subject of many papers and perhaps many books. But nonetheless, I must say something about this point—at least make it. That perspective and that value system, those principles of education all have one thing in common: they have as their basis the truth of God's Word as it has been developed in and is understood in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Our perspective, you see, is unique and distinctive because our theology is distinctive. That is to be the content, the flesh on the skeleton.

That brings us to the second main

part of this paper, viz, How do we get our students to be as we have described above? What processes do we use?

I would point out from the outset that if we want to produce people who are able to "think" for themselves, we certainly ought to give some attention in our curricula to courses that develop the reasoning powers of our students. In a sense, one could argue that all courses do that, but I have in mind particularly the development of one's ability to think logically, the ability to reason. Often we hear of our students' inability to think clearly and to write expositively. I am sure that all of us could use some work in this regard. But, I do believe that we need continued, if not stepped-up, emphasis here. To my knowledge, there is at present no logic taught at all and it seems that we continually get caught up in creative writing rather than expository writing. Perhaps we should consider teaching a logic course. Further, our students must be intellectually challenged. Our tendency is, I think, to accept mediocrity. We must insist upon excellence, we must insist that every student use and develop his rational gifts to the fullest.

But, while the developing of the intellect is a very important function of the school, I believe that if we wish to have as end-products students as those outlined above, it is equally important, if not more so, that we use as our primary method a deductive approach. We must train our students to move from the general to the particular. What we know—and I use that term now in its biblical, spiritual sense—must influence our conclusions and interpretations of what we perceive. Faith also interprets experience. To put it in philosophical language, the metaphysical must precede the empirical. It must be, as Calvin puts it, the viewing of the natural through the spectacles of the spiritual. "In thy light we see light." This is not to say that we may never use the inductive

approach but the point is that we must emphasize the deductive. We must be very careful how we present and how we use the so-called scientific method. A study of the natural scientists and the social scientists at work today using the scientific method will reveal and substantiate the dangers of this method. We wish, then, to be known as those who approach the entire field of education in a deductive way. We come with a priori propositions, statements of belief, principles of education, which we apply to our experience.

To say, however, that we wish to be deductive in our approach requires that we immediately state that such an approach necessitates our insistence that our entire educational process is a principled one. Our process, as stated above, begins with statements of belief, with a priori propositions. We begin, for example, with the proposition that God exists, with the proposition that God is sovereign, with the proposition that God created the world—we could state so many more, almost ad infinitum. We begin our educational process with this. We begin, in short, with our theology, with our theological principles, and work out from there. To do anything else would be catastrophic. The Belgic Confession puts it well in Article 2 that creation is a most elegant book but a book that can be read only through the eyes of faith.

To have as our primary objective the production of such students is quite an order for you teachers to carry out. You must develop students who are spiritually alert and spiritually sensitive, students who can make good judgments and decisions. That is quite an order, I say. That requires a lot of us all.

That requires, first of all, that teachers themselves be deeply spiritual. Teachers themselves must be able to demonstrate to their students that they, too, strive to make decisions and judgments in the same way that they are

training their students. We can theorize and conceptualize all we want about how it ought to be and we can tell our students how it ought to be with them, but the proof of our sincerity and commitment to such an approach lies in our own actions. That means that our thinking, too, must be principled and theologically founded. That means that we especially know our value systems and can articulate our world-and-life view. That means that if we wish our students to apply these principles of scripture to reality and culture and history, we must also be able to do the same. In short, the teachers must be examples to their students.

But, there are more than teachers involved in this educational process. Parents, too, must be considered and requirements must be made of them, too. Parents must also exhibit to their children that their lives and their thinking are based upon the principles of God's Word. They must show to their children that the school is not the reflection of the teachers' philosophy of education but is a manifestation of their own. We often hear the sad commentary that parents do not understand what is happening in the school. Now, I can understand that a parent may not understand, to use a favorite example, modern mathematics but we ought never to hear that about the basic philosophy of education in the school. It is, in fact, not the duty of the teachers to articulate that philosophy but it is specifically the duty of the parents.

The church, too, fits here. The church gives the theological principles which are to be applied to the field of knowledge; the church guides the parent in his thinking and that thinking is then passed to the school. It can and must be no other way. The strength of the school, then, depends upon the strength of its parents, the parents must see to it that the teachers hired maintain the educational philosophy of the school, and the church, if the church does not keep its theology

pure, will do irreparable damage to both.

As we reflect upon our obligations, however, as we size ourselves up, both as parents and teachers, as to our ability to perform these tasks, we conclude that we are so inadequate. We deal with profound and serious matters, we deal, in our contact with students, with creations of God "wonderfully and fearfully made."

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One thought comes back time and time again: God's grace underlies it all else it would all be a horrible flop and an exercise in futility. Thanks be to Him for His truth, for the rich heritage given us, and thanks be to Him for the ability and the desire to remain faithful, as covenant people, to that truth and heritage and the callings He has given us.

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## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

by Rev. H. Hoeksema

This article by the late Rev. Herman Hoeksema is reprinted from the *Standard Bearer*, Volume 3, number 22.

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In Sept., 1916, we delivered before the congregation of Holland Fourteenth St. which we were then serving, a sermon on the subject of the Christian Education of the children of God's covenant. As the time is again approaching, when Catechism-classes and schools are reopened; and as, moreover, the question of a covenant-education remains principally the same, only, perhaps, becoming more serious and urgent as the years go by, we thought it not unsuitable to publish the entire sermon, as we preached it at that time. It is on the text from Deut. 6:7: "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."

The sermon here follows:

That education of the child is one of the most important subjects that can possibly demand our consideration, is a truth, that is clearly realized, not only by the Christian, but still more so by the children of the world. Especially is this true of our own age. Witness the many books that are published on the subject, the many magazines that see the light and

that are devoted particularly to educational problems, the large sums of money that are spent, the laws that are enacted, the edifices that are raised — all in the interest of education. On the importance of education in general, therefore, we are entirely agreed.

But there is more, and I may safely limit this statement. For I am entirely safe in saying that we also agree that our children ought to have a Christian education. There is no one that would deny this, apart now from the question as to the character this Christian education ought to assume. For as Christians we all agree that we are not satisfied to know that our children receive an education of the world and for this world, but we confess that we are pilgrims, and we are travelers to another city, and that, somehow, the education of our children must be related to that other city that is in heaven. I repeat, therefore, that as Christian parents we cannot be indifferent with regard to the religious instruction of our children. Religious instruction they certainly must have, and they must be brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord, our covenant God in Christ Jesus.

Once more I will limit this statement and maintain, that as Reformed Christians we will also insist that our children must receive a religious education of a very