

The Place of Doctrine in the Christian School

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A Word of Explanation

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Noteworthy in this piece are the distinguishing of the teaching of the school from that of the home and the church; the insistence on the inseparable connection of the natural and the spiritual in the life of the child of God; the emphasis upon the necessity of Reformed doctrine in the Christian School (a thing openly and unashamedly repudiated today, even to the extent that the Reformed Creeds are elided from the basis of the Christian School); the recognition of the benefit of experienced, Reformed teachers; and the assertion that the essential requirement for Christian education is a people truly Reformed.

— Rev. David Engelsma

The home, the school, and the Church have sometimes been called the triple alliance for the purpose of instructing and training the children of the covenant. And not improperly so. For, it cannot be denied that all three are of great importance in the education of our children. None of them can be missed, none of them can afford to be negligent in performing its part in this significant task, without causing a gap in the training of the child. Nor can it be gainsaid that there should be unity and co-operation between these different agencies as each accomplishes its own part in this work. The training of the child should be systematic, must be one in principle, especially from a religious viewpoint. And as each of the different agencies accomplishes its part the instruction of the child should be one whole, preparing him for life in all its different departments in a general and elementary way. For this reason it is not improper to designate home, school, and church as a triple alliance with a view to the education of the covenant children.

The question arises: in this important work of instructing our children what particular part must be assigned to each? It may be admitted that to a certain extent, their several callings are quite similar. All three aim, not only at instructing but also at training the child. The principle of instruction is the same, whether the home, the school, or the church is the agency; it must always be the fear of the Lord. Yet, it can easily be seen that although their calling is in general the same and the several parts, the home, the school, and the church perform similar tasks, yet they are also distinct. They are related, but they are not identical. They may inevitably overlap somewhat, but they are not mere repetitions and reduplications of one another. Hence, the question: what is the calling of each of these agencies to educate the covenant-child?

It is not the purpose of this present lecture to answer this question in all its implications. Yet, my subject is related to it. In order to answer the question what may be the proper place of doctrine in the Christian School we must needs deal somewhat with the relation of the school to the Church as agencies for the training of our children. And I will try to develop especially three aspects of my subject.

1. THE SCHOOL AND ITS CALLING

The school is, no doubt, to be considered as an extension of the home as an agency for the training of its child. We are all agreed that the duty of bringing up the children rests primarily and principally upon the shoulders of the parents. To them, Scripture assigns the task. They are the most natural educators of their own children. They are in a position to know them in their different characters and dispositions better than anyone else. They, especially the mother, are with their children from their very entrance into the world. And they love them as no others can possibly love them. They are the exclusive instructors of their children during the first few years of their life, and long before they go to school they have laid the foundation for their future training. And if we make a distinction between the task of the home and that of the school and the church, we may probably say, that the part of training the children, of bringing them up, of doing what is called in the Holland, very suggestive term, "opvoeding," belongs especially to the home, while both school and church emphasize rather the part of instruction. The two cannot be separated, to be sure. All instruction must needs also be training. And training cannot be divorced from instruction. But if a distinction is made, we may surely say that the home is especially the institution for training; the school

and the church are agencies for instructing the children of the covenant.

The school is, undoubtedly, born out of practical necessity. It is not an institution that is given with creation as is the home; neither is it a specially instituted body as is the church; it is man-made. Yet, although this is true, it cannot be said that it was quite mechanically imposed on life. It rather arose quite spontaneously from the development of life in general. Time was, especially among Israel, when the parents shouldered the task of instructing and training their children alone. Life was still simple. And because of this fact few demands were made of the instruction of the young. And these demands could readily be met by the parents. But as life developed, became more complicated in its various departments, more was demanded of that training that was supposed to prepare the child to take his place in life. And the parents had neither the time nor the ability to finish the task of educating their children. It is out of such conditions that the school arose. Parents banded together, employed someone of ability and character to educate their children in the knowledge of those subjects which they could not possibly teach themselves, and which must nevertheless be taught to prepare the child for its place in society.

From which it follows, in the first place, that the school is an extension of the home, an institution properly controlled by the parents. The state may be interested that its citizens do not remain illiterate but are properly instructed; the church may have the calling to watch that her children receive such instruction as is in harmony with the pledge made by the parents at the occasion of baptism; both may, therefore, have a certain interest in the school; but they do not control the school. The school is not an institution of the church, nor of the state, but of the parents. And the latter are primarily responsible before God for the instruction they receive even though it is not given by them personally. And, in the second place, it follows that the purpose of school-instruction is chiefly to instruct the children in those subjects the knowledge of which is essential to prepare them for their place in society in general. In this respect the calling and purpose of the school differs from those of the Church. The Church has its origin in grace, the school in nature; the Church is heavenly, the school is earthly; the Church is the guardian of spiritual things, the school is the custodian of temporal matters; the Church aims at the growth in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the school at the development in the knowledge of earthly relations; the Church purposes to prepare its seed for their place in the Kingdom of God, the school has the calling to prepare its pupils for their place in this present world.

If this distinction is correct, we will also be ready to define what is really a Christian School in the true, Reformed sense of the word. Indeed, the proper conception of the idea of the Christian School depends upon our view of life in general. If it is our view that things natural and spiritual, things heavenly and earthly, things of the kingdom of heaven and the affairs of this present world have nothing to do with each other, if we separate them, it is quite impossible to see the necessity of Christian instruction in the school; and if we still prefer the Christian School to the Public School it must be from the practical principle that our children can never receive too much instruction in the Scriptures and that the time which the Church is able to devote to the education of its seed is necessarily limited. In that case we will look upon the school, if not as an institution of the Church, nevertheless as an institution that can be very helpful to the Church in indoctrinating the children of the covenant. And the school will naturally be an institution which is in every respect like the school of the State, except for the Christian atmosphere that is created by the opening and closing with prayer, the singing of a Christian hymn and the instruction in Biblical History, perhaps, even in the catechism. The Christian School in that case is a school that has assumed part of the task that properly belongs to the Church.

Quite different, however, will be our conception of what a Christian School ought to be if we understand that the natural and the spiritual cannot and may never be separated, but that in every department of his life in the world the Christian has the calling of living from the subjective standard of the Word of God. Religion, the Christian religion, is not something that is added to life; but it is a power, a living power, a living power that purposes to permeate all of life. The Christian is called to be a Christian always and everywhere. It is his confession that with body and soul and in life and in death he is not his own, but belongs to his faithful Savior Jesus Christ. And, therefore, with body and soul, with mind and will, in society and the state, as well as in the Church, He serves the Lord. Personally and in the home, in the relation of parent and child, of man and wife, in business and industry, as servant or as master, as magistrate or as subject, it is his calling to serve the Lord Christ. But if this be true, it must also be evident that a Christian School is not merely a copy of the public school except for the addition of some Biblical instruction, and religious exercises, but that it purposes to be Christian throughout, Christian in all its instruction and training of the child. The principle of the fear of the Lord must permeate all the instruction and discipline and life of the school

that is really Christian. A Christian School must be Christian as a School!

2. THE PROPER PLACE OF DOCTRINE IN IT

If this view of the Christian School is correct, it should not be difficult to arrive at a correct conception of the proper place of doctrine in such a school. When I speak of doctrine I mean Reformed Doctrine, because I am speaking of our own Christian Schools. It is sometimes emphatically advocated that the Christian character of our schools must be made as general as possible. We should not really speak of Reformed Schools, but rather emphasize that our schools purpose to be generally Christian. But this is a mistake. It is quite impossible to be generally Christian, without sacrificing all the salient doctrines of Christianity. One cannot be an Arminian and a Reformed believer at the same time. He cannot be Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, and Methodist all at once. If he would, nevertheless, be generally Christian in his teaching in the sense that he would avoid all such points of doctrine that causes the different branches of the Christian Church to differ from one-another, so that his Christian instruction would be the largest common denominator of all Christian beliefs, education would necessarily become quite vague and colorless. And, therefore, I cannot conceive of Christian doctrine that is not specific. And in the concrete, a Christian School must be Christian in the specific sense of the word. Its Christian character must be representative of the specific belief of the parents that support and sponsor the school, that is, in our case, Reformed. When, therefore, I speak of doctrine in this connection I mean specifically Reformed doctrine.

And, then, I wish to say, first of all, that it cannot be conceived of as the proper task of the school, even of the Christian School, to teach Reformed doctrine, to include Reformed doctrine as one of the branches of its curriculum. This certainly is the task of the Church. To watch over the flock, to preserve soundness of doctrine, to develop the truth as it is revealed in Scripture, to establish what is to be considered as accepted truth, to express this in her confessions, to maintain it in opposition to all error, and to instruct all her members, believers and their children, in the truth as it is in Jesus — that is the proper task of the Church as instituted, that is, through her officebearers, particularly through the ministry of the Word. For this purpose Christ instituted the offices, for the well-being of the Church, for the upbuilding of the saints, for their growth in the knowledge of the truth, that they might not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. This calling,

therefore, is inseparably connected with the office. It cannot be delegated to the school, for our Christian School is no Church-school. The teacher is no officebearer, nor does he labor under the direct supervision of and as appointee of the Consistory. And not only is this calling connected with the office and, therefore, with the Church institute, but the latter is also the proper agency for instruction in doctrine from the viewpoint of ability to teach it. We believe in a thoroughly trained ministry, in order that our ministers may be able to instruct in all the counsel of God. Instruction in doctrine is the proper domain of the ministers of the Word. For they are specifically prepared. This is not true of the teacher in the school.

And, therefore, I maintain that the place of doctrine in the Christian School cannot be that of a subject in the curriculum. This, the Church does in preaching and teaching, from the pulpit and in Catechism. And never can the Christian School take the place of Catechetical instruction. There may be no objection to the subject of Biblical History; there is surely no objection to the direct reading of Scripture in the Christian School. But its task cannot be, and should never be delegated to it, to instruct in doctrine directly. And if the Church offers proper catechetical instruction and the coming generation is nevertheless ignorant of the Reformed truth, the blame ought not to be laid at the door of the Christian School, but the accusing finger must be pointed at children or parents, at young men and women that have been negligent in attendance and in properly preparing for catechism-work.

However, this does not mean that doctrine, Reformed doctrine, has no place in the Christian School. On the contrary, it has properly a very important place. Its place is basic to all its instruction and training, to all its school-life and discipline. The school must not teach Reformed doctrine, but it must apply the principles of Reformed doctrine to all its teaching. All its instruction must be Reformed instruction. The school, therefore, receives its doctrinal principles, upon which all its instruction must be based, in harmony with which all its teaching must be offered, from the Church. It applies them. It stands to reason that there is a difference of degree in which these principles can be applied to different subjects. But in the greater or smaller degree these principles must be manifest in all the instruction given. How important this place of doctrine is will be evident if I only draw a few general lines and show with respect to some of the subjects taught what this application of Reformed principles would mean.

Let us take the subject of history. In the first place it will be very

evident that it will make a world of difference whether this subject is taught according to the philosophy of evolution or in harmony with the Biblical doctrines of creation and the fall of man. The same historic facts appear in each instance in a wholly different light. But further it will also be evident that there is a wide difference between the Arminian view that man is the maker of his own destiny and the Reformed view that all things are but the unfolding of the eternal counsel of God, and that all creatures, even the rational moral beings, must certainly execute that counsel. It will make a world of difference whether the one or the other principle is applied to and permeates all the teaching of history.

Take another example, the subject of civics. It will be seen, that it makes an important difference, whether the subject of magistrates, the state and its power and calling, is taught from the viewpoint of revolutionary unbelief or from the Christian viewpoint of authority and obedience for God's sake. But even apart from this general difference, it can easily be discerned that it is by no means indifferent, whether the subject is taught from the viewpoint of common grace or from the viewpoint of the antithesis. In the one case, one would consider a government consisting of godless magistrates Christian because they rule by the common grace of God; in the other, one would maintain that we must strive for Christian rule over us.

Take the subject, social science. What a difference the application of Reformed doctrine makes for such important subjects as the relation of man and wife; parent and child; authority and obedience; divorce; birth control; employer and employee; labor conditions and relations; strikes and uprisings; and similar subjects. And thus it is with every subject taught in the school, physiology and geography, yea, even reading and writing and arithmetic.

And not only is this true of the subjects that are being taught in the Christian School, it is equally true of the life and discipline in the schoolroom. The opening and closing prayers certainly must be Reformed. The songs that are sung and learned by heart may never be in conflict with the principles of the Reformed faith, but ought to be expressive of it. The teacher must certainly consider his children as covenant children and in all his instruction, attitude, and discipline it must become evident that he bears this in mind and that he aims at the development of the perfect man of God, thoroughly furnished unto all good works as far as his life in this world is concerned. And even in its programs, given outside of the schoolroom proper, the school must become manifest as based upon the Reformed truth. In one word, the

place of doctrine, of Reformed doctrine, in the Christian School is basic. It determines the religious character of all the instruction and life and discipline in the school!

3. THE WAY TO AFFORD DOCTRINE ITS PROPER PLACE

If such is the ideal of Christian School, if that should be the place of doctrine in it, it is very evident that we have not reached the ideal as yet. Yet, that is not the saddest aspect of the whole situation. It is far worse, that it cannot be said that there is a serious strife after the realization of that ideal. The present situation is that we have schools that offer some Biblical instruction, instruction in Biblical history that is largely doctrinal and belongs to the task of the Church. Special textbooks in mimeographed form have recently seen the light, guides for teachers and pupils that are based upon the common grace conception throughout. We have schools that open and close with prayer and that are given to the singing of hymns, by no means always Reformed in contents. But we do not have schools that are based upon Reformed principles. There is room for the question: what ought to be done, what is necessary in order to strive for the ideal?

I will begin with the people that sponsor and control and support the school. They must first of all be Reformed, not only in name, but according to their deepest conviction. After all, the school is the institution of the parents. Its standard can hardly be expected to be higher than that of the parents themselves. If we do not remain a Reformed people, we shall not attain to the ideal of truly Christian Schools in which Reformed doctrine lies at the basis of all instruction. In that case the cause of Christian instruction is a hopeless one. And, therefore, we must have a truly Reformed people that support and control the school, a people that clearly understand what a Christian School ought to be and that want it, and wanting it, will not rest until the ideal is attained. This truly Reformed people must form the school society and must elect from its midst a school board that is in harmony with the principles and ideals of the society. This I consider the strength of the Christian School, its very backbone.

In the second place, we must have thoroughly Reformed teachers. The teacher is the heart of the school. It is he, not only, that must give the instruction, it is also he that must chiefly be instrumental in making the school what it ought to be, in causing us to reach the ideal. He must not merely be an able scholar and an accomplished teacher, so that he is thoroughly acquainted with the subjects he is required to

In the third place, we are in need of teachers that will make it their life's task not only to teach, but to bring the Christian School to its proper level. Teaching has too often been looked upon as a stepping stone. Comparatively few have given their life to their profession thus far. Yet this is necessary. In the first place, because the experienced teacher is certainly the best. Experience trains him for the task and all the while makes him more fit for the work. In the second place, because experience will cause him to become more thoroughly acquainted with the real needs of a truly Christian School. In the third place, because it is not merely the work of a Christian School teacher to teach, but also to supply the school gradually with textbooks that can be used in the schoolroom, in which the principles of Reformed truth are applied to the subjects to be taught. One who gives himself to teaching for a few years has neither the experience nor the ambition to accomplish this work. We are in need of men and women that will make teaching their life's work.

But once more, we must have a thoroughly Reformed people to strive for this ideal. Without them all the other factors cannot be had. And the doctrinal level of the school will not be higher than that of the people that support it. If, then, we are a truly Reformed people, it is possible to strive in the direction of the ideal Christian School; if not, the cause of Christian instruction is utterly hopeless!

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A child is a person. He can be hurt or he can be inspired. He can have his spirit broken or his spirit can soar. He or she is an impressionable, pliable creation of God entrusted to parents for love, nurture, and training. Our children are our most prized possessions. They are the only possessions in this world that we can have with us in Heaven. . . . taken from *Christian School Comment*

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by Dr. Paul A. Kienel