

The School System and the Bible: Its Religious Roots

Although the Calvinistic school in America has tried to live up to its Kuyperian tradition as a school free to seek its own ends and not those of any denomination, it has nevertheless always pledged allegiance to the Bible. It has always unashamedly declared that its educational program and policies are rooted in and justified by Biblical concepts concerning man and society. The specific interpretation of these concepts has, of course, been given from the point of view of Calvinism, and more specifically the Calvinism of the Netherlands, sometimes called neo-Calvinism. It is the Bible as interpreted by this religious and intellectual tradition that shapes the contours and provides the intellectual roots for the Calvinistic school system.

This rootage in the Bible through a given tradition is clearly expressed in the constitution of the National Union of Christian Schools. Article 11 states:

The basis of the National Union of Christian Schools is the Word of God as interpreted by Reformed [i.e., Calvinistic] standards . . . [The Union] is committed to the Reformed world and life view. Its educational principles must therefore be distinctively Reformed in emphasis and character.

To some these "Reformed standards" are simply the doctrinal statements expressed in the great Reformed church creeds: The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. These are taken to be an adequate and relevant basis for educational theory and practice.

Others have held that these creeds are neither adequate nor automatically relevant. An early expression of this view was cited earlier. A similar view has been more recently suggested by the Public Relations Secretary of the National Union. At the convention of 1951, he noted that some schools still used the Canons of Dort as one of the creedal statements basic to the school. He wondered what this document had to do with educational theory and practice, since it deals exclusively with such matters as total depravity, limited atonement, etc. He acknowledged that these were certainly proper subjects for catechisms and confession of faith, but doubted that they could furnish a dynamic for the field of education. (See *NUCS Yearbook*, 1951, pp. 131ff.)

THE BIBLE AND SCHOOL "CREEDS"

If it is true that "Reformed standards" or "Reformed principles" do not mean the creeds of any one church or group of churches, what then can these expressions refer to in education? A possible answer and one only hinted at in the literature on the school movement, is that concepts of man, God, and society are taken from the Bible and translated into educational terminology expressive of a position taken on educational issues. Whereas the church creeds embody doctrinal questions, the school "creeds" embody educational questions. For example, just as a given Calvinistic church might in its creed speak against Arminianism on the issue of the role of man in salvation, so a Calvinistic school might speak against progressive education on the issue of the proper organization of subject matter. Both institutions would have creeds rooted in the Bible, and neither would necessarily rest its case on the creeds of the other. In sum, both institutions would be rooted in and based upon the Bible, but the school and the church would

have different creeds because they are meeting different issues and speaking on different controversies.

The tendency to identify the creeds of the church with the creeds of the school is perhaps understandable. The creeds of the church have been codified and are easily accessible to all. They are stated in specific documents, and a body of literature that interprets them is part of the tradition. There are no such documents and no such body of literature for the school. Even most school constitutions fail to state the position of the school on the major issues in educational theory. However, the absence of school creeds in some codified form does not necessarily indicate that no positions on educational issues have been taken by the school system. School creeds are not imbedded in documents as much as they are imbedded in practices pursued and principles applied. The actual school system with its concrete embodiment in a given curriculum and supported by a given organizational structure is expressive of beliefs about education and of sides taken on educational issues.

The Calvinistic school system may be said to have spoken on educational issues fully as much as any church synod has spoken on specifically theological and soteriological issues. Its rootage in the Bible as interpreted by the Reformed standards has led the school to take a position on such theoretical questions as (1) the proper locus of control of education and the school, (2) the proper relation between religion and education, (3) the proper sources for and the nature of truth, (4) the source of a principle of integration for education, and (5) the source of authority in the discipline of the learner.¹⁷ An adequate statement of these, let alone an adequate defense of them, would require a book, and therefore cannot be given here. The areas are listed here simply to indicate that the school system does have a creed, but that it is the creed of no church, and that although the creed of a school system may not be drawn up and stated in any set of documents, it nevertheless has one in the form of practices and procedures which come to expression in that system.

The confusion and partial contradiction in the Calvinistic school system on the matter of the proper basis for its theory and the proper source of educational authority is natural. Both the church and the school do eventually find a common root, the Bible. While it is an easy step it is still a step of dubious logic to move from acknowledging a common source to declaring that therefore the creeds of the church are identical with the creeds of the school.

It must be admitted that this alternative position is not so much a completed and definitive one as it is an emerging one. The literature connected with the school movement is singularly weak in developing this interpretation of the meaning of Reformed standards for education. The scarcity of literature which addresses itself to this problem is an indication that the implications of this approach have not really captured the loyalties of all those who support these schools. The presence of the alternative position (i.e., that the church creeds are the theoretical basis for education in the day school) has discouraged the attempt to look deeply into the problem.

The reader need not be reminded that this failure to root the school consistently in either church creeds or "educational creeds" based on the Bible is just another instance of the ambiguous relationship between the Christian Reformed Church and the Calvinistic school movement which was described previously. It can also be easily seen that this difference of opinion concerning the proper source of theory for the Christian school reaches back to the conflicting movements of another culture and country which were discussed earlier. This

particular instance of confusion over the way in which the Bible affects educational theory is but one instance of the broader confusion within the system in regard to its theoretical foundations.

THE BIBLE AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

There is another question within the school movement concerning the role of the Bible in the formulation of educational theory. It is the question of whether or not the Bible and theology are the only source upon which an educator can draw for the determination of theory and practice in the school. In the literature much tribute is paid to the Bible as the single source of authority and the sole ground of educational theory. In this view specific texts from the Bible are used to justify the Christian school, and certain aims of the school are established by reference to specific passages.¹⁸ Since many of these tributes to the Bible as the sole source of educational principles occur in the context of inspirational speeches and hortatory articles about Christian education, they perhaps cannot be considered to be the best and most accurate statement on the matter of the role of the Bible in determining theory.

There are more perceptive and analytical statements that appear in the literature, and these indicate that often in the mind of the educator himself the Bible is seen as providing a general scheme of values about man and society, but that for the rest other sources of human knowledge are utilized.

A very early acknowledgment of the role of child psychology in education is indicated in a book translated from the Dutch. In the context of a discussion about methodology in teaching, the author says that the proper basis for method is the investigation and study of the child with a view to "discovery of the divine laws that control the development of the soul of the child."¹⁹ A more recent and careful statement of the role of the Bible in the determination of educational principles is contained in the following statement:

Calvinism can provide for educational theory and practice a sound anthropology, Scripturally oriented, and because of a Scriptural orientation, a coherent appraisal of insights in human development accruing to us from psychology, sociology, and psychotherapy.²⁰

Thus, the Bible gives a definition of man in the light of which discoveries in other fields can be utilized in education to solve the problems of method, of curriculum organization, of the role of the school in a given society, and others. This use of intellectual disciplines other than theology in the formulation of theory in education is regarded by some as a departure from a strict reliance on the Bible as the only infallible rule for faith and practice. However, it apparently has a solid defender in the person of Herman Bavinck, the Dutch theologian-educator, who said:

Religion and ethics, philosophy, and psychology contain the principles from which the theory of education is inferred.²¹

He is also quoted as saying that psychology and sociology constitute the chief determiners of method.²² Thus, the Calvinistic school system is basically rooted in the Bible, but it utilizes insights from other disciplines which are either established by fact or which seem to be consistent with Biblical insights.

THE BIBLE AS ACADEMIC SUBJECT

There are also other ways in which this school system has shown that it is rooted in the Bible. The curriculum of the typical school in this system has in it systematic training in Bible knowledge and the implications of Scriptural teachings for life. The precise way in which the Bible should be treated in the day school has not always been clearly enough defined to distinguish the day school from the Sunday school or from the catechism class. This is not surprising, because it is simply another illustration of the larger unsettled question of the relation of the school to the church.

There is in the tradition a serious attempt to deal with the problem of the proper content and approach for the teaching of the Bible as an academic subject in the day school. Just a few years after the formal organization of the NUCS, a yearly convention was devoted to the theme of "The Bible and Christian Education." An article prepared by the Executive Committee of the Board of the Union set forth a suggested plan for correlating the activities of the various agencies in the teaching of the Bible. Deploring the tendency to duplicate activity and content in the Sunday school, the catechism class, and the Christian day school, the committee suggested a "proper division of labor." Basing its contention on the "diversified characters of the institutions themselves," it held that insofar as the Bible narrative is used in catechetical instruction, those Biblical passages should be selected which "lend themselves for indoctrinating the youth and which tend to prepare them for intelligent church membership" (*NUCS Yearbook, 1925, p. 16*).

They continued by suggesting "that the Sunday School . . . seek to develop the devotional phase of life." Thus "those passages of the Bible should be selected which particularly bring out this phase of life." In distinction from Sunday school and the catechism class the day school "finds its chief objective in preparing the pupils for Christian participation in life in its most general aspects . . . ; it should be the task of the Christian day school to cover the Bible in a systematic way with special emphasis upon its application to the practical phases of life."²³

At the same convention a minister held that chief use of the Bible in the day school was simply inspirational. After giving an extensive survey of all the great writers, painters, artists, and statesmen who had been inspired to do great things by the Bible, he advocated that this aspect of the Bible be what the day school emphasize.²⁴

Since that time no clearcut position on the matter of the nature and content of Bible as an academic subject has been expressed. Actual practices vary considerably. Materials published by the National Union suggest something of the following pattern of content: single Bible stories in the early grades; Bible history, perhaps including the life of Christ, in the middle grades; and church history and Reformed doctrine courses in the upper grades. There is little written evidence that recent supporters of the school have been greatly concerned over the "proper division of labor" between the home, the school, and the church on this matter. The failure of the school system to make clear how it differs from the church in its objectives in teaching Bible is but a further instance of the school's dependence upon the churches for its theory. While there have been in the traditions of the school lines of demarcation laid down, they have not been followed with any consistency.

THE BIBLE AND OTHER SUBJECTS

Much more could be said about the role of the Bible in the curriculum of this school, as well as about its role in the construction of educational theory, but in a limited paper such as this,

space permits discussion of only one more concept. In any school system which attempts to incorporate the Bible into its curriculum, there arise at least two dangers, and each of these is a real threat to the distinctiveness of the Calvinistic school movement. One danger is that when Bible is included as a course in the curriculum, it remains solely an *addition* without being integrated with any of the rest of the curriculum. This results in a dualism between religion and the rest of life, between Bible and the rest of the curriculum. Such a dualism may be said to obtain in the public school, where religion must be taken up as a separate social phenomenon which affects only the personal emotional life of the student. There has been a fear that this could be the fate of Bible studies in the Calvinistic school. One Christian educator pointed up the problem of integration when he said:

I can conceive of a school being not a Christian school at all with a strong Bible Department in it, and I can conceive of a Christian school, being a very good one, too, without a Bible Department in it . . . So my suggestion is that we try the program of integration, but that we integrate not around the Bible department or a Bible course, but around a philosophy that is thoroughly God-like, God-permeated in character."²⁵

This emphasizes the point that it is not simply Bible study alongside study of other areas, but Bible study integrated with study of other areas that makes education Christian.

The second danger, fully as great, is that the Bible will dominate the curriculum in the sense that study in all areas of human knowledge is engaged in primarily for the purpose of illustrating and reinforcing the validity of Biblical truths rather than for seeking out new truths. This may be said to be the case in some Fundamentalist schools. Then literature become a series of illustrations of God's love, or man's sin, or the disastrous consequences of man's rejection of religion, and so forth. Scientific findings then are utilized for their ability to exhibit that the Bible after all does have accurate facts about the physical universe. In its extreme form this view of education holds that the Bible alone contains all the truth that man needs to know, and that the Christian engages in study only to reinforce this conviction.

The Calvinistic school system can succumb to neither of these temptations without losing its distinctiveness. It is firmly rooted in the Bible, but the kind of educational theory derived from the Bible and the kind of integration achieved between it and other areas of study will determine whether or not the school system remains consistent with its desire to be different not only from public education and parochial education, but also from Fundamentalist education. The proper integration of the Bible with the curriculum is not an easy matter, but the Calvinistic tradition of a general and special revelation as exemplified in the writings of Herman Bavinck offers a theoretical basis for such integration.²⁶ In this dual conception of revelation God is said to speak not only through His Word but also through the world, and each of these is a legitimate and valid source of truth about God and man.²⁷ The single voice with which both are held to speak prevents the dualism between religion and other areas of study so typical of public education, and the distinction between them prevents the complete domination of the one over the other so typical of some Fundamentalist education. This view holds with John Henry Newman, the British educator of the last century, that "religious truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge," and that science and religion in fruitful interaction produce that truth.

If space permitted, evidence could be gathered from the literature to show that both these dangers exist in the Calvinistic school system. Here I have given only what seemed to be the

middle course demanded by at least one aspect of the tradition. While illustration of other ideas about the role of the Bible in the curriculum, as well as its general role in the formulation of educational theory, would be interesting, it would only serve to re-illustrate those cross-currents of thought in the school system which have been outlined in previous sections.

In summarizing this section it might be said that over the years there has been no lessening of the desire that the school be firmly rooted in the Bible. Although the influence of the church has fluctuated, and although the influence of the Netherlands has decreased, there is every indication that the Word remains as strong as ever in its influence on the movement. In spite of differing interpretations as to its best shape and form, this root of the school has remained sturdy and strong. The real job remaining here, it seems to this writer, is the translation of biblical principles into positions taken on educational questions. This series of positions, along with their biblical support, would then be the "creed" of the Calvinistic school.

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I have pointed out that the Calvinistic school system of today cannot be rightly understood except in terms of its unique religious and intellectual tradition. I have attempted to give a brief sketch of each of the major influences that have played upon and affected the school system. I have suggested that it has its roots in an intellectual tradition, namely Calvinism, a cultural tradition, namely, that of the Netherlands, an ecclesiastical tradition, namely, the Christian Reformed Church, and a religious tradition, namely, the Bible. It is important to remember that these traditions have not operated independently of each other, but have interacted with each other and blended their influences on the school. While the most underlying and all-pervasive influence on its theory has probably been that of Calvinism, this has been filtered through other traditions and movements, producing a system built on a composite of both complementary and conflicting foundations.

In these articles the emphasis has been placed upon the conflicts and confusions in the theoretical undergirding of the school. The reasons for this emphasis are twofold. One reason is that space forbids a treatment of all facets of the educational thought of this school; one must always be selective in discussing any movement such as this. The other, and more important, reason is that it is the confusion and conflicts in the realm of theory that keep the school from being as effective, and from being as strong a witness as it could be. It is this area that now calls for the closest attention of parents and educators if the school is to grow and mature.

A discussion of the theoretical foundations of this school movement would not be complete without some attention to still another influence in the life and thought of the school. I turn to a consideration of the final root to be examined.

The School System and American Democracy: Its New Cultural Roots

The Calvinistic school system in America has now existed for over a century. It was begun and maintained by people who were essentially immigrants, newcomers to America with its democratic social patterns. The first generation of supporters of this school resisted Americanization and looked to the Netherlands for guidance and leadership in education. Since then, the Netherlands influence has inevitably waned and has been lost on the second and third