

Education in the Post-Christian Era

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In His Fear

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I am aware of the fact that many of you may argue with my title. You may well say, "The period now ended was not a Christian era." I agree in a sense with such an objection, but I am sticking to my title anyway because I want to make a point that I consider extremely important: the times have so changed that any similarity between current moral standards and Christian moral standards is superficial at best.

We are living in a world that has changed rapidly; the old standards of morality are gone. This is obvious, of course, in the standards of sexual behavior. What used to be sin that was not even to be named among saints is now "alternate life style." When God sends upon the people judgment for their sins, they try to eradicate the judgment rather than eliminate the sins. Society has become so involved with its own pleasure, convenience, and comfort that they make it acceptable to kill an unwanted fetus rather than endure inconvenience or discomfort. Nearly any kind of behavior is acceptable if the payment is high enough. "Materialistic, fl "hedonistic" are words that fit our society exactly. We have the enormous task of training our children to live as children of God in such an environment. We have to teach them to derive their values from the Word of God when the values of the world tempt them nearly everywhere, often including their own homes. We have to teach our children self-sacrifice in a self-indulgent world. We have to teach them humility in a self-promoting world. We have to teach them not to strive to be number one but to strive to be number last. Not "self-esteem" but "Let each esteem other better than themselves." How are we going to do that?

One of the first things we have to agree upon is the part that our schools have in the whole educational enterprise. Many schools have become all things to all the people. They concern themselves with the physical welfare of children by promoting physical education, and even by making sure that the children have proper meals. Schools have to a greater or a lesser degree assumed responsibility for the social development of the children by providing classes that are designed to teach social skills, and by arranging social activities for the students. Knowledge and skills that used to be learned at home are now commonly taught in school: cooking, family living, drivers training, and many others. For a number of years now, whenever a group of parents, a group of teachers, or a group of lawmakers perceived a problem, the school was given the responsibility of solving it by developing anew educational program.

This is not to say that all of these programs ought to be thrown out of the schools. Some of these may well be important duties that the schools can do more effectively and more efficiently than anyone else. But it does mean that many new programs have been inserted into school days and school years that have not been made any longer. It ought to be perfectly obvious, then, that the schools are going to teach much less math and science and all of the other subjects which students in foreign countries learn so well. We have to be aware of the fact that for every additional duty we place upon the school there will be a price to pay in some other part of the school program. This refers also to extracurricular activities to the extent that they consume part of the school day.

We must be agreed upon what the function of the school is in the Protestant Reformed community, and upon which programs are necessary to carry out those functions. We have to resist the temptation to add new programs to our school curricula just in order to "keep them up to date." This is not to say that the old subjects and the old materials are the only proper ones. We need to make changes because the world is changing and because the needs of the constituency are changing. But any changes we make must be consistent with and promote what we have agreed is the proper function of the school.

What is that proper function of the school? It is to complement the work of the parents so that together they may help students live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and prepare to continue as such citizens throughout their lives. For that they need knowledge and skills that will enable them to earn a living for themselves and their families, train their own children in the fear of the Lord, contribute to the church of God and the welfare of the people of God, and be themselves through their words and their actions living witnesses of the marvelous work of God.

It would seem at first that these things are so obvious that they really do not need to be mentioned. Yet I think we have to be reminded from time to time. There is a growing divergence between the world and the church in the principles they teach, in their definitions of right and wrong, in the values they hold. It would seem then that the differences between the church and the world ought to be becoming more and more noticeable. Yet that difference seems to be less than one would expect. I think that the reason that Christians are not as conspicuous as they ought to be is that many have adopted the values and the behavior of the world.

It is very important, then, that the parents and the schools define those values that we want our children to adopt and that we work together to teach them. What are these values? Happiness? Fame? Leisure? Social position? Large income? Although we would all hasten to reject these as values that are more important than spiritual values, too often we act as though these are the most important values of all. In the teaching of values by our actions I'm afraid that our schools and our homes give, at best, very mixed signals to the children. At worst we often promote by our actions the values that we condemn. In today's world we can't afford to do that.

Whenever I become a bit complacent and think I'm doing a pretty good job, I just listen to the students talking casually to each other. That's a pretty good indication of their values. I hear them talking about the shows they've watched on television. They talk about their heroes, the basketball stars of the NBA; whose exceptional wickedness has become widely known recently. When they talk about the future, they most often talk about expensive cars they will have. I know a number of students whose values are those of Christians. These rarely speak of their values publicly because they are afraid of being mocked by others. There are a couple other things we have to work on: the fact that our children sometimes mock those that behave in a Christian way

and that many of our children, like us, conceal our Christianity out of fear of being mocked.

These are no new things that I am promoting; they are as old as our schools - as old as organized education. But I sense a growing lack of agreement among us just at a time when there is a growing urgency about the business of defining the function of our schools and the methods of carrying out that function.

We must have agreement on these things if we are going to be successful. The school may well be doing those things that the parents cannot do themselves, but the schools cannot accomplish much at all without the support of the parents.

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