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That They May Teach Them to Their Children

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The first article in this series initiated an endeavor by this writer to uncover and review the background for the development of the Protestant Reformed Christian Schools. (Cf. *Standard Bearer*, November 15, 1998.)

During the first twenty-five years of the existence of the Protestant Reformed Churches, most of the parents in the PRC enrolled their children in schools which had been established primarily by parents who were members of the Christian Reformed Church. When I began school in the 1930s, my PR friends and I attended the Pella, Iowa Christian School. Later I attended the Christian school of Randolph, Wisconsin, located at that time in a diminutive farm village called East Friesland, Wisconsin. At that time only one school established by members of the Protestant Reformed Churches existed—the First Reformed Christian School of Redlands, California. We will have more to say about the history of the Redlands school and the rest of the PR schools in future articles.

It should be noted that Herman Hoeksema was not in favor of withdrawing children from the Christian schools and sending them to the public schools. Even though the Christian schools were not as Reformed in fundamental principles and basis as Hoeksema and others wanted them to be, he was in favor of using the schools that existed and also advised working for improvement in these schools. He realized, however, that because of ideological and theological differences that came to expression in the 1920s during the debates concerning Abraham Kuyper's common grace ideology and theory and his world-view, resulting in the formation of the PRC, this was an impossibility. Therefore, during the very early years of the existence of the PRC he began to write about the necessity for Protestant Reformed Christian Schools.

In this article and subsequent articles I continue a review and summary of several early articles that appeared in the Standard Bearer concerning education. I contend that the articles by our early leaders were a significant and effective means employed by God to convict and convince our people that the development of Protestant Reformed Christian schools was a necessity and that this was the calling of the parents and grandparents. This began as early as the 1930s and continued in the 1940s and early 1950s. That this calling and desire has not changed is obvious when we observe PR parents continuing to develop our schools and make plans to establish additional schools, particularly high schools, in which efforts will be expended to provide the best instruction and education possible for children and young people.

It will also become very apparent that the fundamental issues regarding the establishing and maintaining of the Christian school, i.e., the Protestant Reformed Christian school, have not changed or disappeared. For this reason those who are responsible for the planning and establishing of these schools should study the writings of the past, particularly some of those written during the early days of the PRC.

We stated in the previous article, published November 15, 1998, that the first of more than 300 articles published in the Standard Bearer regarding Christian education was the text of a sermon by the late Herman Hoeksema when he was still a pastor in the CRC in Holland, Michigan. More careful research indicates that the number is nearly 400 articles and that this article was not the first. This sermon, published September 1, 1927, Volume 3, pages 532-536, was preceded by three articles by Rev. G.M. Ophoff concerning schools. These articles, entitled "Dr. Clarence Bouma's New Platform," were published in the same volume (Nov. 1, 1926, pp. 62-67; Nov. 15, 1926, pp. 80-85; Dec. 1, 1926, pp. 117-119). They are a painstakingly thorough, thoughtful, and lengthy series of articles analyzing and critiquing a speech by Dr. Clarence Bouma at a meeting of the National Union of Christian Schools Convention in Chicago, Illinois, August, 1926. Dr. Bouma was one of several speakers at the Convention, and his speech was one of ten lectures that were published in a booklet bearing the title Educational Convention Papers. The speech by Professor Bouma was entitled "Can the Distinctive Character of the Christian School be Maintained if we Solicit and Obtain the Cooperation of all Orthodox Christians?" Bouma contends that schools should reach out beyond the Reformed and CRC community and include all "orthodox" Christians.

I intend to quote extensively from the three articles by Rev. George M. Ophoff. It is worthy of note that the speech was given only two years after the deposition of Herman Hoeksema, George M. Ophoff, and others from office in the CRC and that Dr. Bouma was one of those who recommended that these men be deposed from office in the church.

Although the articles of Rev. Ophoff and others writing in these early days are unfamiliar to many of us, they are part of that legacy with which we should become familiar. We should know how important the cause of distinctive Reformed education was to the men who were cast out of the CRC. What they wrote was not the result of mere contentious feelings, but they were sincere arguments that were important for the cause of good Christian education and are therefore still significant for an understanding of the purpose and goal of Reformed schools.

Some readers will certainly recognize that the question of interdenominational schools continues to be an issue in many communities and schools.

Rev. Ophoff begins his critique (confer SB Nov. 1, 1926, pp. 62-67) by stating that a better title for the speech would have been "How can the Distinctive Character of the Christian School be Maintained if we Solicit and Obtain the Cooperation of all Orthodox Christians?" Implicit in this suggested change is the belief and opinion of Rev. Ophoff that the distinctive character of the Christian school movement cannot be maintained if the cooperation of all Christians, even those denominated "orthodox," is solicited.

Dr. Bouma's description of the difference between those who do and those who do not wish to widen and generalize the platform of our schools hinges on the question: "Just what does each consider essential and accidental in the platform upon which our school system stands?"

In his critique Ophoff quotes a paragraph from Bouma which Ophoff describes as wordplay but which quote at the same time illustrates the basic belief and contention of Clarence Bouma.

Our platform must be distinctive, but it must in no sense be ecclesiastical. The doctrinal standards of this or that denomination are not to be taught in our schools. What should be taught is that specific world and life view, which we commonly call Calvinism, and Calvinism in this sense is bigger, more inclusive, and a differently articulated thing than the particular standards of any denomination. Calvinism in this sense is not one of many church creeds; it is fundamental Christianity come to its fullest and richest expression in present-day thought and life. To be sure, its theological implications are expressed in various creeds of the Reformed and the Presbyterian Churches, but Calvinism as a world and life view is not an ecclesiastical standard. Calvinism in its fundamental implications is nothing but Christian Theism come to its own. Taken in this sense Calvinism is not exclusive in relation to the standpoint of ecclesiastically non-reformed fellow Christians. It is inclusive.

To all of this Rev. Ophoff writes as follows:

...What is that Calvinism which is a bigger, a more inclusive, and differently articulated thing than the particular standards (creeds, AL) of any denomination? Define and exhibit, please, the content of this more inclusive Calvinism. Dr. Bouma avers that it is difficult to state in final form and in a definite complete set of propositions what that distinctive view of life really is. Great spiritual principles and realities, says the doctor, often elude our grasp.

Ophoff tellingly concludes:

That is true, and therefore I would recommend that we permit the Christian school to continue on its present distinctly Reformed platform until Dr. Bouma succeeds in grasping and defining these great spiritual principles and realities.

The expressed desire in the speech by Dr. Bouma was that a certain number of distinct groups of orthodox Christians should be enabled to cooperate in the matter of Christian instruction. Dr. Bouma also insisted that the groups must retain their distinctiveness.

Bouma is forced to ask,

Does this mean we are introducing ecclesiastical divisions into what ought to be a united Christian school movement? Does this mean that we say to all that do not belong to a Reformed or Christian Reformed church: "You cannot join hands with us"?

Does this mean that we demand of Christians not belonging to these denominations that they shall occupy with us the platform of the creed of our particular denominations? Far from it.... But if some err on the one side by failure to be distinctive, it cannot be denied that we are at times in danger of falling into the other extreme of making the Christian school movement ecclesiastical, denominational. This is likewise a mistake.... The Christian school is not a denominational affair.

Ophoff offers the following as the fundamental question proposed by Dr. Bouma to the audience of educators.

How can we maintain the distinctiveness of our Christian schools and obtain, in the matter of Chris

tian instruction, the cooperation of various non-reformed Christian groups, which groups shall, even though they cooperate, maintain their distinctiveness?"

Ophoff continues in his explication and analysis of the proposal by Bouma as follows:

Did the doctor actually succeed in solving the problem? He did not. The problem cannot be solved. Let us be thoroughly aware of the implications. The distinctive character of the platform upon which our Christian schools rest must be maintained. The non-reformed groups, whose cooperation is sought, shall also maintain their distinctiveness. Yet their cooperation must be obtained and that on the basis of a platform constituted of those essential elements expressive of our distinctiveness. Let me repeat: it cannot be done. It will never happen. It ought to be plain why it cannot be done. If certain non-reformed groups agree to cooperate with us on the basis of a platform constituted of these essential elements expressive of our distinctive character, it means that they have embraced those elements responsible for our distinctiveness. In other words, they will have become like unto us. For Dr. Bouma will have to concede that, in general, parents want their children taught only those things which they, the parents, themselves believe. I repeat, if parents of non-reformed faith agree to cooperate on the basis of our distinctive platform it is because such parents have changed their religious views and are now at one with our distinctive platform. In other words, they will have become like unto us. Yet, Bouma, it appears, insists that these non-reformed groups shall, even though they agree to cooperate, maintain their distinctive character.

Observing the humor and tragedy in the situation, GMO writes:

We now grasp the situation. Dr. Bouma appears before a group of educators for the purpose of telling them how a thing can become like unto something else from which it differs and yet remains what it is. In other words, Dr. Bouma will explain to the group of educators how the impossible can be done.

Ophoff provides an answer to the question by declaring:

...These non-reformed groups must become Reformed or we must cease to be Reformed relative the platform which is to serve as a basis for the Christian school.

Ophoff observes, however, that Dr. Bouma has another solution. He would place the Christian school upon a vague, neutral, indefinite, indistinct, colorless platform that expresses the doctrinal distinctiveness of no group. Bouma's paper clearly indicates that this is the very thing he wants.

To prove the point we are asked to attend to the following by Bouma:

Let us maintain unwaveringly whatever is really fundamental, essential, distinctive in the basis of our Christian school system as we have it. But, you immediately interpose, precisely what is essential, fundamental, and distinctive in our Christian school system? This is the crux of the matter. Ultimately the issue between those who do, and those who do not wish to widen, to generalize the platform of our schools hinges on the question, as to just what each considers essential and accidental in the platform upon which our school system stands today.

Ophoff notes that Dr. Bouma is a member of the group that wishes to widen and generalize the platform of our Christian schools; he guarantees that this is the case. In order to widen the platform, Bouma must attempt to make a distinction between what he calls the essential and non-essential. Ophoff contends that Bouma is referring to doctrine and that this becomes clear in the following quote from Bouma.

Now it seems to me the essential, the distinctive character of our Christian school system can be reduced to two propositions. The first pertains to the method, the "how" of this school training. The second pertains to the content, the "what" of this school training. And in reply to the "what" of this school training I would say: The Calvinistic outlook upon the world and attitude toward God and fellow man forms the warp and woof of all instruction and training. Does this mean that we are introducing ecclesiastical divisions into what ought to be a united Christian school movement? Far from it. The doctrinal standards of this or that denomination are not to be taught in our schools.

Concerning this Ophoff writes:

It is plain that Dr. Bouma is letting the terms essential and non-essential apply to the truth.... It is the Calvinistic outlook upon the world and attitude toward God and his fellow man that forms the warp and woof of all instruction and training. The pedagogue, laboring in the Christian school, shall teach Calvinism. Not that Calvinism of which our creed is an expression, but a bigger, more inclusive Calvinism — Calvinism in a sense in which it is not a church creed....

Bouma contends that although many understand that the school is to be neither a church school nor a denominational affair, many have the idea that the only basis that ought to be expressed in the constitution of our organizations must be the Three Forms of Unity of the Reformed churches. This Bouma declares to be a mistake. He writes as follows:

Now this is a mistaken conception. The Three Formulas of Unity are not an adequate platform for our Christian school movement.... In the propagation of the Christian school idea we should do all in our power to avoid and eliminate the ecclesiastical and denominational setting which seems to linger in the minds of many supporters of the movement. As ecclesiastical standards these formulas form the basis for all teaching and preaching in the Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches. But these Formulas of Unity of the Reformed churches are not to be looked upon as the Three Formulas of Unity of the Christian school movement. After all, the adoption of certain standards by a given denomination is a church matter, an ecclesiastical affair, and our schools are not church schools.

To all of this Ophoff finally adds the following:

Will Dr. Bouma be so kind as to define the various elements constituting the platform of that nature.... Such a platform must lack distinctiveness. It will have to be amazingly general and vague. A school standing on such a platform will also lack distinctiveness.

According to Ophoff, the child when born will be christened "Calvinism." "Not the Calvinism found in John Calvin's Institutes, but a Calvinism which is bigger, a more inclusive, and differently articulated thing than the particular standards of any denomination."

We have already stated that some readers will recognize that the matter of interdenominational Christian schools remains an issue in many communities. Related to this issue is the important concern debated seven decades ago concerning the relationship of the Reformed confessions and creeds to the basis and work of the school. Many current leaders in Christian education contend that we need an educational creed that does not rely upon the Reformed confessions and other creeds.

... to be continued.

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