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Telling the Next Generation: Educational Development in North American Calvinist Christian Schools (Book Review)

Martin Dekkenga
Dordt College

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Book Reviews

Telling the Next Generation: Educational Development in North American Calvinist Christian Schools. Harro W. Van Brummelen. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1986. 332 pages. \$14.75, paper. Reviewed by Martin Dekkenga, Associate Professor of Communication.

As is stated in the preface to the book, Dr. Van Brummelen sets out to do two things in the writing of this work:

First, it intends to shed new light on the interaction of religion, ethnicity, and education as this came to unique expression in the North American Dutch Calvinist community. Secondly, it holds up a mirror to the Christian school movement rooted in Dutch Calvinism. (xi)

Both objectives are clearly reached. Van Brummelen does a superb job of the first by tracing the religious, ethnic, and educational roots of our school systems and aptly demonstrating how each has made an impact (and continues to do so) on the development of Christian schools in North America. And secondly, the work indeed holds up a mirror for any serious advocate of Christian education. It is up to us—readers and advocates—to accept the challenge to critically look at ourselves, to learn from where we have come, and to chart more accurately where we are going.

This work is an historical study and as such does not present Van Brummelen's own views about the role and structure of Christian schooling in North America, but he professes to be a "Kuyperian Calvinist" (xi) and the book resonates with that point of view. In tracing the history of Calvinist Christian Schools, Van Brummelen identifies two strains of Calvinism that affected North American schools. First there were the "nineteenth century pietistic and individualistic supporters" who placed emphasis on some doctrines and "personal moral uprightness" (3). The other group were followers of Abraham Kuyper. This group was more concerned with children learning that all of life is to be lived out of an obedient response to God's calling, whatever and wherever that calling may lead.

One recurring theme throughout the book is how the

beliefs of Calvinist Christians affected, or failed to affect, the development of a curriculum which adequately reflected those beliefs. "Pietists" and Kuyperians within the National Union of Christian Schools (The National Union of Christian Schools has since been renamed Christian Schools International to reflect the international membership.) had different ideas of how their principles should be worked out in the curricular materials prepared for member schools.

The NUCS wanted students to learn "to put their faith to work in all areas of life," but its goal statements indicated that this referred to living a personal moral life within the existing (and acceptable) social and academic milieux and structures. (186)

Another theme which is treated is the on-going search for excellence in education. For some people this meant beating the public schools on scholastic achievement tests. For others it meant preparing the students to use their minds more fully upon graduation to bring about social and cultural changes within society.

Van Brummelen successfully demonstrates how national identities often got in the way of developing distinctive Christian schools. He shows how religious and moral thoughts often sidetracked the real issue of education. He also demonstrates how social and economic issues affected the establishment of Christian schools as well as the curricula used in those schools.

The majority of the work is historical in nature dealing with such topics as the Christian schools in the Netherlands, Calvinist schools in America, maintaining one's own distinctiveness while trying to assimilate the culture of North America, and characteristics of Canadian and "American" Christian schools. For the reader/scholar/

student who is especially interested in curriculum development, chapters seven and eight present some challenging reading. Chapter seven, "Quests for Purpose: Divergent Curriculum Orientations (1945-1977)" deals with some of the problems schools faced in trying to develop distinctive curricula, particularly within the National Union of Christian Schools. Chapter eight, "Dealing with Curriculum Issues: Some Examples (1945-1977)" identifies quite clearly the direction Canadian schools took in curricular development and its impact on "American" schools and the National Union of Christian Schools (Christian Schools International).

The writing style was not always as clear as I would have liked. Several times I found myself going back to catch the

The Christian and Alcoholic Beverages: A Biblical Perspective. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986. 113 pages. \$4.95. Reviewed by Glenda Droogsmas, Director of Personal Counseling.

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., begins his discussion of a proper Christian attitude regarding alcoholic beverages by establishing the Bible as his starting point and supreme standard for defining Christian ethics. He introduces his topic by outlining three commonly held Christian views: (1) Prohibitionist—alcohol consumption is forbidden in Scripture as a matter of law. (2) Abstentionist—though alcohol is not forbidden, the Christian should abstain as a matter of love. (3) Moderationist—consumption is permissible if moderate and circumspect. Gentry states that his purpose is not to change the reader's consumption, but to study what Scripture teaches about alcoholic beverages and to develop a Christian ethical standard. It is obvious in this first chapter that Gentry's own research concluded with the moderationist's view as a proper Christian perspective.

In the remaining two chapters Gentry develops his arguments against the prohibitionist and abstentionist views. He first summarizes the prohibitionist's view of Scripture's complete condemnation of alcohol abuse. Following this he discusses Old and New Testament references to wine and analyzes various Hebrew and Greek terms. Demonstrating that the wine used in Biblical time did contain alcohol, Gentry refutes the prohibitionist's arguments that all positive Biblical statements about "wine" refer to non-alcoholic grape juice. This discussion opposing the prohibitionist's view is convincing and biblically supported.

In his argument against the abstentionist view, Gentry studies the Bible's teaching on Christian liberty with a verse-by-verse analysis of Romans 14. Gentry's most valuable point in this section is his summary of Paul's teaching to the "weak" and "strong" believer. To the weak:

meaning of the line.

The book is very well organized. Each chapter begins with an overview of the chapter and frequent references are made within each chapter to material covered before as well as to ideas which will be presented later. The material in the book is extremely well documented. Notes at the end of each chapter and ample bibliographic information at the end of the book provide the reader with all the resource material necessary.

Van Brummelen has done the Christian schools of North America a distinct service. Education departments in our Christian colleges would do well to include the book on their recommended reading list if not on the required list.

"If the weak one does so (criticizes or judges the strong), he is censoring one who is fully accepted by God in the matter." To the strong: "Paul expresses strong emphasis, as if to say 'You must truly and fully receive the weak into your fellowship!' The openness of their reception is further seen in that the strong are not to receive them 'for the purpose of passing judgment' on their weak opinions" (74-75). Gentry emphasizes that the Christian response, no matter what position one holds, should be mutual concern and edification. Gentry's conclusions regarding Christian liberty are less conclusive against the abstentionist position and left me with questions.

The weakest section of Gentry's book is his discussion of the "potential alcoholic" in the first appendix. I found it too brief and superficial for the importance of the topic to Christians. His knowledge of alcoholism is limited and ignores significant current research on chemical addiction.

After reading Gentry's introductory chapter, I was eager to read a book that addressed the topic by beginning from Scripture rather than by beginning with a position and using Scripture to prove it. Even though I was pleased with his extensive use of Scripture, I felt he did not always live up to his promise to begin with Scripture. Many statements seem directed at counteracting previous alternative interpretations of the Scripture passages. Gentry repeatedly refers to other writers, and without a minimal knowledge of the literature, readers will find his discussion at times confusing.

However, in spite of its weaknesses, this book works from a biblical foundation to defend the moderationist's position and would be valuable to Christians evaluating their own attitudes on alcoholic beverages.

The Subversion of Christianity. Jacques Ellul. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986. 212 pages. \$9.95. Reviewed by Nick R. Van Til, Professor of Philosophy Emeritus.

This is the fortieth book by Jacques Ellul, recently retired from his position as Professor of Law and the Sociology

and History of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux, France. More than half are available in English with his *The*