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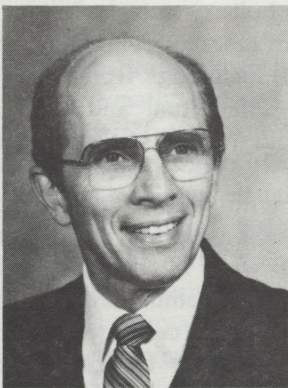
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The Christian School Movement: Suffering from Old Age?

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Introduction

When I was a student at Calvin College during the late 1940s and the early 1950s, one of the requirements of the pre-seminary program was a course in the Philosophy of Education. The professor was Dr. Lambert J. Flokstra, and the textbook was *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, by Michael J. Demiashkevich.

I remembered this course and its professor when recently I came upon a pamphlet by Flokstra, titled *Christian Education—Tradition or Conviction?*¹ The pamphlet was published in 1958—the year following the 1957 centennial celebration of the Christian Reformed Church—and it was intended to evaluate the Christian school system, which “is so intimately bound up with that of our Church that we view the two as organically related.”²

Three Stages of Development

In reviewing the history of the Christian school movement,* Flokstra described three stages of development. The first stage is that of *infancy and childhood*, a time of struggle and humble beginnings. At that time pulpits were proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and calling upon church members to live in all of life’s relationships as citizens of the kingdom

* When Flokstra wrote about “our Christian schools” he had in mind the Calvinistic day school movement, described by Donald Oppewal: “Although it is religious in orientation and aim, it is not maintained and operated by any religious denomination. It is a system of parentally controlled schools...in the United States and Canada.” (*The Roots of the Calvinistic Day School Movement*, Calvin College Monograph Series 1963, p. 7.)

of God. In response to this preaching the Christian community sensed the need for a system of education which would prepare its youth for responsible kingdom citizenship. The result was a system of education which promoted a Christian view of culture and which, by the time of World War I, extended from coast to coast.

The second stage is that of *adolescence*, a period of growth and expansion. During this time enrollments increased, teaching staffs grew, and new schools were established. There was also a concerted effort to raise the academic standards of the schools and to elevate the professional standards of the teachers. Teachers were encouraged to further their education in the colleges and universities of the land, even though this often resulted in their being exposed to philosophies which were antithetical to Christianity.

The third stage described by Flokstra is that of *adulthood and maturity*. In the 1950s the Christian school system came of age. Most of the schools were accredited and their graduates made a good showing as they sought to advance their education in institutions of higher learning.

In writing about this third stage, Flokstra noted two things which he felt were a cause for concern. First, he warned against an attitude of complacency in which "a sizeable proportion of our constituency send their children to our schools because it is the accepted and proper thing to do...."³ Second, he observed that "there are also those, a small minority to be sure, who are calling into question the separate existence of our Christian schools."⁴

Those who call into question the separate existence of our Christian schools are still with us—in fact, their numbers seem to be growing. All of which makes us wonder if our Christian school system has moved to the stage of *old age*.

The Stage of Old Age?

Recently I was invited to a meeting to consider ways and means to promote the cause of Christian education—on all levels, i.e. grade school, high school, and college. In the discus-

sion which took place it was clear that everyone at the meeting agreed about the importance of *Christian education*. There was and is no doubt about it, our children need Christian education to prepare them to live the Christian, the kingdom life.

But does providing our children with Christian education require the *Christian school*? Is it not possible to have Christian education without the Christian school? Establishing and maintaining a Christian school places heavy demands on the Christian community. The Christian school requires so much in terms of time, effort, and money. Can we not, as a Christian community, get along without the Christian school and spend that time, effort, and money elsewhere?

When I hear these questions concerning the separate existence of our Christian schools, I wonder—returning to Flokstra's "stages of development"—if our Christian schools are being brought into the stage of old age. As Flokstra observed, this questioning attitude could greatly weaken and eventually lead to the death or the "abolition" of the Christian school movement.⁵

I assume that those who ask these questions are convinced that it is possible to provide our children with Christian education without or apart from the agency of the Christian school. I am convinced, however, that this is a mistaken position and that it fails to take into consideration some very important truths. Therefore, in the rest of this article I will endeavor to point out what some of these important truths are and, in the process, indicate why I believe the Christian school is essential in providing our children with Christian education.

The Institution of the School

The first mistake of those who question the separate existence of our Christian schools is that they do not sufficiently recognize that education is a distinct sphere in society—a sphere which has been given institutional form or expression by means of the school.

Initially human society was undifferentiated. Many of the social spheres which we now

recognize were subsumed under the family. But in the course of history different associations of society split off and became independent according to their respective natures. Thus there is today

...a wide variety of distinct, though related spheres which arise out of the complex life of mankind, each having its own task to perform, its own mandate entrusted to it by God.⁶

It must not be supposed that these spheres are purely human creations. They are based upon and are reflections of the ordinances of God; but they receive historical formation as the human community goes about the performance of its various social tasks.

One such social sphere is that of education. Education was, at one time, one of the spheres subsumed under the family. But as social life became more complex, the functions performed within the family differentiated into various distinct spheres. Thus it is that the sphere of education emerged alongside the family and other spheres within society.⁷

Today education is a distinct sphere with its own identity and its own God-given structure in terms of which it is to function. Education takes place in other spheres, e.g., the family and the church. But it is only the sphere of education which has as its God-given task the development, unfolding, and opening up of all the students' human functions by means of formal academic activity.⁸

Further, it must be noted that it is through the agency or the institution of the school that the sphere of education comes to visible expression and that its task is performed. Again, there is an educational aspect to the activity of the home and the church. But it is through the school that the primary task of the sphere of education is carried out.

Thus education is a distinct sphere and the school as an institution occupies a distinct place in society—distinct in relationship to the home, the church, or the state.

This means, of course, that the education of our children is going to take place primarily in

the school. I acknowledge the educational work of the home and the church. I am also aware of the "home school" movement. Nevertheless it seems that the education of our children does and will continue to take place primarily in the school, which is the institutional manifestation of the sphere of education.

But if we acknowledge that education is a distinct sphere within society, which is given institutional expression by means of the school, is it not equally obvious that our children must attend a school which is Christian if they are to receive a Christian education?

The Importance of the School

If it is true, as is being suggested, that it is possible to have Christian education without the Christian school, the implication must be that the Christian education of our children is to be provided by the Christian home and the Christian church. But that points out the second mistake in the position of those who question the separate existence of our Christian schools, i.e., they fail to acknowledge the importance of the school.

Many years ago the Rev. G.W. Hylkema, then pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of Prairie City, Iowa, wrote a booklet titled *The Free Christian School*, "to give an exposition...of the position which we take with our schools...."⁹ (This exposition was written shortly after one of the Iowa Christian school buildings was burned down.) In the introduction to the booklet Professor L. Berkhof pointed out the importance of the school and stated that the home, church, and Sunday School "cannot fill existing needs" required for the Christian education of our children.¹⁰

That statement was true when Professor Berkhof made it; but it is even more true today—for several reasons.

Today parents in the home and pastors or elders in the church do not have the *time* to provide children with the necessary instruction. In many homes both parents are working; social activities are drawing family members out of the home; and when the family is home other things, such as television, occupy much of their

time. The church also seeks time to teach our children; but most pastors and elders will agree that the church seems to be losing out to other agencies—oftentimes to the school. The Christian education of our children requires time which neither the home nor the church possess.

Further, parents and pastors are not *qualified* to provide children with the education required for life in contemporary society. Because of the present-day emphasis on quality in education, colleges with teacher education programs—such as Dordt College—are being required to evaluate and improve their standards. This being the case, it is becoming increasingly clear that most parents, who may be experts in other fields, and pastors, who have been trained for work in the church, are not capable of making available to our children the quality of education which the contemporary situation demands.

Finally, it should be clear from the above that it is not the *task* of the home or the church to provide the formal education of our children. It is the task of the parents in the home to oversee the nurture of their children. It is the task of the church, by preaching and teaching the Word, to lead children to confession of faith and responsible membership in the congregation. But it is the task of the school to provide children with formal education—a God-given task which the school must be free to fulfill.¹¹

In this light it is both interesting and important to note that the school has indeed become the most important educational agency in contemporary society. We have already observed the fact that the home and the church have less and less time to spend with children and young people. Meanwhile school programs are expanding and the schools are demanding more and more of the time of our children. This is happening, in large part, because the school is assuming or being given an increasingly important place and responsibility in the education of our children.

There are several reasons why the school is increasingly important in our society. The explosion of knowledge means that there is more to learn, more to know. More knowledge and greater skills are required for entrance into

careers. And, as our civilization advances, more and more insight is needed to live in our complex culture.¹²

Now we may question or even resist this trend. But it should be clear from the above that this is certainly no time to ignore the importance of the school by suggesting that we can have Christian education without the Christian school.

The Religion of the School

If we accept the position that we can provide our children with a Christian education without the Christian school, then we must assume that it is proper to send our children to the public school. And this indicates the third mistake of those who doubt the necessity of our separate Christian schools, i.e., they do not sense the religious nature of the school.

When in 1962 and 1963 the United States Supreme Court ruled against Bible reading and prayer in the public schools, by implication it proclaimed the principle of neutrality as the guiding principle in public education. Religion must be limited to private areas, such as the church. But in public areas, such as the school, the principle of neutrality must be observed. According to the laws of the land, there is no place in the school for religion.

Now it would seem that those who question the separate existence of the Christian school are opting for what amounts to a similar position. We must provide our children with Christian education. But we can do this without the Christian school. We will see to it that their training in the church and also in the home is Christian. But when it comes to formal education the public school will suffice, for public education is neutral. It certainly cannot be characterized as being anti-Christian.

This position, which is basically dualistic, fails to understand or acknowledge that not just part, but all of life is religious in nature. The liberal humanist insists that it is rationality which is the distinguishing feature of the human person. The Marxist confesses that the relations of production are determinative for all other aspects of human life. But the Christian believes

that our relation to God, which is religion, is the most important context of human life.

This belief is based upon the biblical teaching that we, made in the image of God, are to serve Him in unfolding the creation to His glory and for the benefit of our fellows. This cultural assignment is all-encompassing. There is no part of life which is more religious than another part. Everything we do is by way of service to the God of heaven and earth or to another god.

Therefore, the Christian believes not only that life is religious, but also that life itself is religion. Every aspect of life is in service to God or in service to a substitute, an idol. The whole of human existence is shaped by a religious commitment.

Religion is not an individual, but a communal matter. Because of the fall into sin and God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ, there are now basically two religious communities—those who are yet in Adam and those who are members of the body of Christ. And these religious communities come to expression through the many institutions by means of which society organizes itself for the performance of particular tasks.

Therefore, not only churches, but also families, states, businesses, and schools are religious in nature—revealing an orientation to God or to an idol.

The institution of the school, in its basis, direction, and structure, is ultimately religious in nature, an expression of a vision of life, a view of what things are most meaningful, and in what this meaning originates. The manner in which the teaching-learning relation is organized, the content of the courses, the emphasis that is placed on certain sorts of activities rather than others: these are but a few of the ways in which the ruling view of the world and of man's place in the world will be expressed.¹³

The religious nature of the school means three things relative to our present discussion.

First, there is no such thing as a neutral

school, neutral education. In a presentation to the 1930 Convention of the National Union of Christian Schools (the NUCS is known today as Christian Schools International), Professor L. Berkhof stated that the education we give to our children "must be fundamentally religious."¹⁴ Berkhof's statement did not go far enough. The education we give our children not only *must be* religious, but it also *is* religious. The direction of a school will vary with the religious vision which motivates the school. But every school is motivated by a religious vision. Again, there is no such thing as a neutral school.

Second, as Christians, we cannot be satisfied with the public school. The public school today is governed by the principle of neutrality. In terms of this principle it is illegal to express any bias which favors Christianity. But, as Dr. Joel Nederhood has pointed out,

Since education naturally involves many matters in which the Christian position has extreme relevance, the denial of the right of the teacher to present the Christian position as truth, means that public education today must be considered, in principle, anti-Christian. In principle, a Christian cannot express his approval of any institution in which men may not confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Christians cannot consider the public school as the proper, legitimate agency for the education of their children.

Third, our children must have and attend the Christian school if they are to receive a Christian education. If the school is a religious institution, and it is; and if the public school is not satisfactory, and it is not; then it must be clear that only the Christian school provides the education which our children require.

It cannot be denied, of course, that some of our Christian schools fail to provide education which is thoroughly and consistently Christian.

Much is being said and written these days about the deplorable state of af-

fairs in the field of education. Christian education has not escaped its share of criticism. Some of the most prominent weaknesses in Christian education include the problem of subject integration, where the individual teacher fails to unify his special field of knowledge with the Christian faith, the lack of a clear-cut philosophy to which we can give complete commitment, the compartmentalization of subject matter, and the failure to capitalize on the rich resources of the Christian faith for education.¹⁶

But the failure of a number of the Christian schools does not make it legitimate, as some would suggest, to take our children out of the Christian school and send them to a "good" public school. Instead, acknowledging that our children need the Christian school, we must put forth every effort to correct the weaknesses and to make sure that the education provided is Christian indeed.

In 1938 Mr. A.S. De Jong, a well-known Christian school principal, gave an address to the Convention of the National Union of Christian Schools titled "Save Our Schools." In his presentation he noted that there were voices calling for "breaking up our school system"¹⁷ because

- it reflects a non-cooperative spirit.
- it is so very expensive.
- Christian education is the task of the church.
- the prospects for success are so very dim.

De Jong charged that these voices reflect a spirit of compromise which is "the most dangerous enemy of our Christian schools."¹⁸ He then went on to declare that the Christian school is required if we are going to respond obediently to the command "to witness to Christ in every sphere of human activity."¹⁹

De Jong gave his address when the Christian school movement was in what Flokstra termed the stage of adolescence. De Jong's declaration that the Christian school is "required" no doubt reflected a commitment which enabled the Christian school movement to proceed to the

stage of maturity. And it is that same commitment which is needed to save our system of Christian education from what I have called the stage of old age.

Do our children need Christian education to prepare them for living the Christian life? Indeed they do. And in order to receive such education our children "must have Christian schools."²⁰

Endnotes

¹Lambert J. Flokstra, *Christian Education—Tradition or Conviction?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Calvin College, 1958).

²Flokstra, p. 5.

³Flokstra, p. 8.

⁴Flokstra, p. 8.

⁵Flokstra, p. 9.

⁶H. Henry Meeter, *Calvinism: An Interpretation of its Basic Ideas* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 159.

⁷H. Evan Runner, *The Bible and the Life of the Christian* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), p. 109.

⁸Runner, p. 109.

⁹G.W. Hylkema, *The Free Christian School* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Sevensma Co., n.d.), p. 3.

¹⁰Hylkema, p. 4.

¹¹R.B. Kuiper, *To Be or Not to Be Reformed* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 96.

¹²*The Educational Task of Dordt College*, by the Dordt College Faculty (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College, 1979), p. 8.

¹³D.G. Glomberg, *The Development of Curriculum in Relation to the Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea* (A thesis submitted to the University of Sydney in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1978), p. 408.

¹⁴Louis Berkhof, "Being Reformed in our Attitude to the Christian School," *Educational Convention Papers*, The Educational Convention of the National Union of Christian Schools, 1930 (Chicago, Illinois: The National Union of Christian Schools, 1930), p. 13.

¹⁵Joel Nederhood, "Salesmen Needed," *Christian School Directory, 1963-1964* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: The National Union of Christian Schools, 1964), p. 187.

¹⁶H.W. Byrne, *A Christian Approach to Education* (Milford, Michigan: Mott Media, 1981), p. 10.

¹⁷A.S. De Jong, "Save Our Schools," *Educational Convention Papers*, The Educational Convention of the National Union of Christian Schools, 1938 (Chicago, Illinois: The National Union of Christian Schools, 1938), p. 4.

¹⁸De Jong, p. 4.

¹⁹De Jong, p. 6.

²⁰Nederhood, p. 188.