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8/2/93

Christian Schools

Scripture makes plain that parents have the obligation to raise their children in an environment which is not only Christ-centered, but even Christ-saturated. Just read Deut. 6:4-9. I do not agree with certain home school purists who say that Scripture forbids any delegation of this task; I think that most likely children would often be apprenticed to practitioners of various trades. But clearly parents have the ultimate responsibility for the education of their children, both religious and secular, and they should not allow their children at a young age to go to a school which violates their own fundamental values or which permits no substantial parental oversight.

I find it hard to imagine any situation where parents could justify sending young children to an American public school. Perhaps utter financial destitution might be one justification, for a family that is totally unable to teach their children at home. But the public schools exclude all Christian influences; indeed, they often even falsify world history so as to deny the immense influence of Christianity upon civilization. Yet they realize (as they did not thirty years ago) that they must communicate *some* values. Those values tend to be secular humanist, New Age, relativist, occultist, etc. And, of course, there are the problems always mentioned in the media: violence, drugs, relativist sex education, rampant teenage pregnancies, etc., etc.

How, under such conditions, can parents provide the Word-saturated environment of Deut. 6? Further, the schools tend to grab more and more of a child's time. After-school sports, "enrichment" activities and the like leave very little time for church and home teaching. Yet a Christian parent will need time, not only to teach the Scriptures, but also to *unteach* the values learned from teachers and peers at public school. This task can be formidable, and I have seen very few parents who have had any success at all with it.

I grant that there are Christian teachers in the public school system, and I am grateful for them. They are front-line missionaries. Their lips must often be closed; that is also true in Muslim countries! But they do have occasional opportunities to speak to their colleagues and students about Jesus, and these are not to be despised. Such people should understand their role. Their work is not to educate Christian kids. They should be honest and direct their Christian friends to send their children elsewhere. In the public school setting they can never hope to teach Christian young people as it should be done, while keeping their jobs. Their job is to perform a service for their government employer and in that situation to present, as much as possible, a witness of word and life. There are subtle ways, too, in which they can present a witness, even in class. They can, for example, present internal critiques of secular philosophies, showing that they degenerate into nonsense under analysis. As such, they will be providing a good intellectual service for their students, while calling the whole secularist ideology into question. And imagine the student discovering outside of class that this teacher, a skeptic in the classroom, is really a Christian! Blows the mind!

But Christian families should educate young children in Christian schools or home schools, if at all possible. I say "young" children, because I believe that Christian children should be educated *for* life in the world, not to spend the rest of their lives in a Christian ghetto. They should be taught in such a way, in other words, that they will be able to go to secular schools eventually, without being damaged, but rather as salt and light in that situation. Indeed, more advanced levels of education in most fields will require first-hand interaction with non-Christian approaches.

Students differ as to when they are ready for secular study, or for employment in "the world." Some will be able to handle it in high school, others in college, still others not until graduate school. But one should not go to a non-Christian institution until he is well enough

grounded in Scripture and the Reformed world-and-life view to discern what is true and false in non-Christian teaching; and he should not go to such a school until his Christian character is well formed, until he is able to say "no" to the temptations of non-Christian society.

There are special problems, too, with colleges and seminaries that profess biblical convictions but in practice support destructive biblical criticism, women's ordination, gay rights and the like. Students are impressionable, even at college and graduate levels. I have known very few college and seminary alumni, if any, who have not been profoundly influenced by the schools they have attended. Many young people of my acquaintance have been sent to such schools by parents who expected their Christian values to be reinforced, only to experience the heartbreak of watching their children be led into spiritual shipwreck by teachers and peers. Denominational or confessional loyalty often leads such parents to ignore problems which they would easily perceive in secular schools or schools of other denominations and traditions. Pastors and elders who encourage this kind of blind denominationalism to the detriment of children's faith will have much to answer for (Matt. 18:6!).

But we must return to the education of younger children. Between Christian institutional schools (CSI, ACSI, etc.) and Christian home schools, I'm inclined to favor the latter, though there are certainly legitimate roles for each. It depends to a great extent on the parents' ability and time to do the teaching adequately themselves. Financial considerations may also influence decisions in this area. My preference for home schools is based on the fact that in home schools students can proceed at their own rate, and teaching methods can be personalized for each student. With an excellent teacher-student ratio, student weaknesses can be quickly observed and corrected. At their best, home schools teach children at a very rapid rate, and with enrichments that cannot be matched in institutions. In home schooling, academic subjects and Christian values can be integrated with real life projects: children can participate in family businesses, agriculture, ministries of various sorts, family social relationships.

The common criticism of home schools is that they do not provide adequate socialization for the children. However, a Christian home school support group (there is an excellent one in Escondido) can provide many group activities to meet that need. Further, one has to be very careful about *how* children are socialized. Our goal for children is for them to become godly adults. Proverbs (13:20) tells us that companions of fools will be destroyed, and that foolishness is bound into the heart of a child (22:15). These biblical principles would seem to imply that the best companions for growing children are adults, not other children. We know how much damage peer pressure does to children, even in Christian environments. Occasionally it can be beneficial, but on the whole it is detrimental, as Proverbs leads us to expect. This comment is not intended to justify some policy of absolute isolation; that would be cruel and educationally counter-productive. If children are to be prepared *for the world*, they need to be exposed to the world, even to the foolishness of other kids. But sending them to a school where their *chief* mentors are other kids (that is what happens at schools) can very well be a mistake, even though that school is Christian.

Further, many Christian institutional schools have very little idea how to integrate the children's studies with biblical teachings. And even when they know how to do this in theory, often they will negate these insights by the spiritual and ethical atmosphere of the school. I have known Christian schools (professing the Reformed faith!) in which Christian kids are bored with the Bible, in which they take their faith for granted, in which kids are hurt by others and by teachers for being of the wrong nationality or denomination. One Christian school I know has a reputation among its athletic rivals for the filthy language used by its students on the playing field. And I have seen parents trying to bring such problems to a school's attention only to be dismissed without any serious consideration of the issue. The school refused to take any responsibility for the children's character development, blaming all the children's problems on their families and churches. One should not presume that a school will be adequate simply because it boasts the name "Christian."

Christian schools are a "sleeping giant," potentially one of the greatest Christian weapons in the present spiritual battle. Many people are concerned about the failings of the public schools and are looking for something better. If Christians can show that they can do better at teaching facts and values, people with no Christian background will run to their door. This could be the greatest evangelistic opportunity ever. But I fear that Christian schools have largely neglected this opportunity. This is one of the worst failings of the modern church; and the Reformed, who have led the Protestant churches in the field of Christian education, must take a large part of the blame.

Church elders have the responsibility to make these facts known to their members and to make a cogent case for Christian schools and home schools. Diaconates should go out of their way to make sure that the children of poor families have opportunities for adequate Christian education. It is hard to imagine any task of the church which has higher priority in our time. Covenant theology and the Great Commission both require a heavy investment in the Christian education of children._