

A Reformed Philosophy of Education

A Brief Statement of a Reformed Philosophy of Education

(With a Statement on a Social Program Appended)

Prepared by J.R. Miller, Former Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS

It is never possible to adopt a proper psychology of education unless there is a proper philosophy of education. The philosophy deals with "What we are endeavoring" and the psychology relates to "how we propose to do it." Methods of education are only pertinent when we have first determined upon an adequate philosophy. Failure to proceed in this order issues in more or less confusion, for we must always see clearly what it is that we are endeavoring to do before we even consider a methodology.

When we set forth the "reformed" concept of education, we should have in mind that the whole system of doctrine (of truth) which is held by the Presbyterian Church is called Reformed. We are Presbyterian in government (or order) and we are Reformed in the system of belief which we hold. Also, it should be remembered that the philosophy of education set forth in brief in this paper is the concept which has been held by the Presbyterian Church over the period of many generations. The development of the public school system in this country goes back only about 150 years. In this period which has intervened the introduction of many other concepts relating to the aim of education has put the Reformed concept into the background, but ours is actually much older and it was articulated by our forefathers many generations ago.

In this brief presentation we shall first look at the philosophy of education which underlies most of the public school training in our country today. We shall set forth some of the features which contrast it with the Reformed (Presbyterian) philosophy. Finally, we shall endeavor to point up the main emphasis of an education in the Reformed pattern. The paper cannot spell out in detail a Reformed philosophy of education, because that would be too lengthy and it is unnecessary here. What we have attempted to present to you is the heart or essence of this philosophy.

The most prevalent philosophy underlying modern American education is that which was advocated by John Dewey and is perpetuated by John L. Childs. It is the philosophy of experimentalism or pragmatism and roots back in a naturalistic or humanistic view of life. This philosophy holds that truths are the opinions or beliefs which have been verified by experience; and since experience is an ongoing thing, and since everything is subject to change, there is no such thing as absolute finality. Observation, experiment, trial and error are the only roads by which we arrive at truth, according to the philosophy of experimentalism.

This philosophy-part of which is that something is true "if it works"-has infected the public educational theory of American schools. One of its most dangerous phases is the idea that the

standards, moral principles and mores of society are developed out of the interaction between the individual and society. There are no sanctions, and there is no authority or standard, except that which comes through ordinary human experience. The best "experience" of a given society dictates its moral standards and beliefs. This is a philosophy of democracy where the individual must seek the common welfare. And in this theory the aim of education is the enrichment and improvement of the individual in such a way that he will be a useful member of the democracy.

It is very clear that much educational theory and practice in our time is man-centered. It ranges all the way from the very materialistic to the highly humanitarian and idealistic. To make the student "a good citizen" or "socially efficient" is a common of education.

Over against this man-centered purpose is the biblical and Reformed concept of a God-centered purpose in education. We start with a sovereign God, and from this we derive both the purpose of man's existence and his education. Man, made in the image of God, is responsible to God at every point. He is, therefore, to study and utilize the created universe and to live by all of the laws which God has imposed on this universe. The Christian's purpose is to exhibit the glory of God. Man is put here to "subdue the earth"-to bring to light the majesty of God which lies concealed in His universe-but he does this as a creature who is himself subject to the Creator and Controller of all. Because man is responsible to God, he is to develop all the Powers of his being so as to fit him to serve his God. Although man is by nature a fallen creature and sin has darkened his mind; yet regeneration makes possible the restoration of his understanding, and the special, supernatural revelation in the Word give him the key to the nature of reality and the clue to the purpose of his life on earth. Through a genuinely Christian education the child is to move toward an adulthood where he disciplines himself, learns to adjust to his social environment, and fulfills his Christian calling in every area of life. The Reformed view conceives the aim of education to be "the forming of man into an independent personality serving God according to his Word, able and willing to employ all his God-given talents to the honor of God and for the well-being of his fellow-creatures, in every area of life in which man is placed by God." The curriculum in such an education would include Bible study, church history, doctrine, and all classes would be carried on in an atmosphere of reverence for God.

Yet it should be a true school. It is an educational enterprise. Culture is our interest; for the Christian is not opposed to learning, reason, science, history. The Reformed conviction is that the spiritual does not exist in isolation from the common life. Science, nature, culture, literature, are all things which a Christian must judge and appropriate. We should express our Christian conviction in and through them. We do not leave the world to the Devil; for the "earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." We are human beings living on this earth; and we seek to live out the biblical teaching that the whole range of life-science, art, society, government, etc., should be infused with Christian principles and purpose. Therefore, the aim of a Christian school is to make the student aware of the application of biblical truth and principle to every facet of human culture. It is in and through our human culture and activity that our allegiance to Christ

becomes real and meaningful. A Christian school after the Reformed pattern is a real "school" and the educational work is really education.

But the education as education must be Christian also. There must be a discernment of the God behind the culture. This is made possible by the fact that the living and true God has revealed Himself. In nature, in the Holy Scriptures, and supremely in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, He has made Himself known. A Christian philosophy of education is, therefore, to be elaborated against the background of this revelation. Since the Lord of creation and of on-going history is also the God who has been pleased to reveal Himself and His purpose, this revelation (the focus of which is in the Bible) should control the instruction which is given in every area of study. Nothing should be taught which is at variance with this special, supernatural revelation.

It is the Christian and Reformed view that there is a unity to truth. God is a "God of truth," and He does not contradict Himself. Our Christian belief leads us to the conviction that "the supreme value in the life of man is to be sought in the activity of the intellect as it grasps the truth." The purpose of thinking is knowledge of truth; and the object of education is transmission of the truth. We hold that the only true view of the world is God's view. This is "ultimate truth." Therefore, a Presbyterian school (according to the biblical and Reformed concept) should make evident, to those who are being instructed, that they are to know and apply God's truth as it comes to them through natural and special revelation.

The Bible presents a total life-system. It defends a God-given moral order. It relates a Christian to the world and forms the basis for appreciation of the arts and sciences.

Man was created to understand God's creation; and although sin has worked terrible effects upon man he is still a child of creation who is given the privilege of studying the natural world. Since one of the effects of original sin is the "darkening" of the mind (Romans 1:21,22; Ephesians 4:17,18), man can properly understand his own life and the world in which he lives only when his mind is illumined in the knowledge of God's truth, yet, God's "common grace," his mercy towards all men, so "retards sin and strengthens man's powers that he is able to carry out to some degree of success the original creation purposes of God." This truth is both scriptural and Reformed.

So man is to seek to know God "in all His works." And God's common grace enables the Christian to appreciate art, culture, history, education and every facet of human life as beings the creation of God. The Christian educator discerns and articulates the principles and teachings of God's supernatural revelation as it relates to science, history, social organization and every other area of learning and experience. The student, then, is taught all the aspects of culture and is trained in all the disciplines of study in all fields; but it is done in a way that the student is directed to see the relationship of the parts to the whole and to appreciate the phases of our culture as the gift of God.

The study of science may furnish us an example of this philosophy in practice. The Christian believes that God created and upholds the universe. With this conviction he holds also that He has set certain laws into operation in this universe. The purpose of science, then, is to discover these laws, interpret them and utilize them. The Christian sees God in His creation; yet this is not the same as saying that he sees God there simply because he can explain the data there in no other way. God is imminent (in His world), but God is also transcendent (above His world). And the Reformed view of education leads us to make the reality of God and truth of His Word our point of departure, our starting point-and not simply a conclusion which we draw when no other conclusion seems possible. The biblical approach is not that we go from science to God, but that we go from God to science. The scriptural warrant for this is in such words as we find in the opening chapter of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word (Christ)...and the Word was God. All things were made through Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made...He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world knew Him not."

This implies that the study of science does not end in the discovery of God; rather, the Christian starts with faith in God and relates this belief to the data which science reveals. We affirm then that the purpose of science is to study God's general revelation-in nature-in the light of His special revelation in scripture.

We do not deny that most of the data of science is discoverable (and, indeed, is discovered) by non-Christians. This is due to God's "common grace." Yet, a Christian approach to science interprets the data of science in the light of the whole structure of reality which has come to us by special revelation (in scripture) and relates these facts to the God who created them.

We have seen in substance the purpose and aim of a Christian education; and it is evident that a school after the Reformed (Presbyterian) pattern comes to its educational task with a distinctive philosophy. It is biblically oriented. The philosophy of education derives from the disclosure which God has made of the nature of man, the nature of the created universe, and it pursues knowledge and culture as a means of helping man to achieve his high purpose to glorify God. This is the justification for schools directed and supported by the church. And to simply add courses in Bible and doctrine (sound and thorough though they may be) to a curriculum which is based upon a utilitarian or experimental philosophy can hardly be justified in this day of mounting educational costs. Furthermore, it fails to give the student an integrated understanding of reality. It fragmentalizes education. It goes in many directions instead of in one direction. It divides into compartments so that the student never sees the relationship of the parts to the whole.

On the other hand, the education of a child in the biblical and Reformed pattern can organize his knowledge toward a purpose, can give him the riches of our human culture, and can fit him for useful, full life that honors God and uplifts his fellow-men.

Appendix: The Social Program of a Church Sponsored School

It is of cardinal importance that the social program of a Christian, church-sponsored school be consistent with the teachings of the Word of God and with our Subordinate Standards-the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms. Any other type of program would prove self-defeating for the church. Types of recreation, assembly programs, plays and all other expressions of the social life should be in keeping with what the church teaches as acceptable to God and in keeping with Bible-directed conduct. Failure to do this will bring the church into a position where it holds a "double standard"-one for its more strictly spiritual teaching and another for its education at the level of the common life of every day.

Although there are large areas where Christian liberty must be operative as regards individual Christians-any institution which is an arm of the Church must evaluate and direct all of its programs so as to give evidence that in practice it is seeking to express the will of the Lord in all areas of conduct. It must constantly keep before the individual student the importance of keeping every area of life under the Lordship of Christ.

This does not involve a Christian school in a mistaken "legalism" but it insures that the total impact of the school's life shall be directed towards making the common life acceptable to God and a witness to the validity of Christian principles.

The Christian does not consider this a limiting principle which hampers happiness and true satisfaction; rather he sees this as a liberating law which enable him to show that Christ is "Lord of All." The Christian therefore-both the educator and the one being educated-aspires to live by the principle held before him by the Word of God: "Let the enriching message of Christ have ample room in your lives...And whatsoever you may do by word or deed, do it all in the name (as representative) of the Lord Jesus." (Colossians 3:16,17 Berkeley Version)