



Mid-America and Christian Education: A Shared Vision

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This insert to Mid-America Reformed Seminary's newsletter, the Messenger, is the second in a series of "Reformed Pathways" inserts in which Mid-America faculty members share insights regarding various areas of Reformed thought.

From its beginning, Mid-America Reformed Seminary has been committed to equipping preacher-pastors with the best classical theological education integrating this calling within every curriculum course. Historically this commitment has included a strong defense of Christian education—commonly, though not exclusively, understood and practiced as Christian day school education. Members of the Board of Trustees and of the faculty gladly acknowledge their allegiance to this application of the gospel beyond the walls of the institutional church. In fact, the Seminary is the grateful beneficiary of students, staff, and supporters who have been nurtured and equipped by an entire system of Christian schools and Christian education at every level.

More than that, as we approach the end of this century's first decade, the Seminary community is becoming more conscious of the positive contribution it can make to the cause of Christian educators around the world.

This, then, is the first purpose for writing this essay, namely, to encourage Christian educators by acknowledging that God's people need your labors, and by offering you our formal, theological, instructional assistance that integrates biblical Reformed theology with its outworking in your field of expertise. Although space will not permit further explanation, it is surely no exaggeration to claim that every discipline of the theological curriculum has implications for a robust theory and healthy practice of Christian education. Solid theological education then, can serve to sustain a vision for Christian education and to strengthen multi-generational commitment to its effectiveness.

This mention of vision explains the second purpose for this essay, namely, to reflect briefly on the contours of a sustainable vision for Christian education that can serve God's people well in the coming decades. The inspired wise teacher said, "Where there is no

prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps in the law" (Prov. 29:18, ESV). Readers may be more familiar with the Authorized Version: "Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he."

If Christian education is going to survive for future generations, it will require a vision, a God-given *raison d'être*, a Bible-fed, Spirit-enlivened worldview along which the fuel of grace may be converted by God Himself into the energy of obedience. Vision and obedience are joined like food and growth, like fuel and motion.

From Proverbs 29:18 we also learn of the divinely appointed connection between vision and morality, between blessing and obedience. This connection reflects the Bible's emphasis on the essential unity between full-orbed doctrine and full-orbed living, also in the arena of education. If the goal of all education is living, then surely Christians must acknowledge that imparting consistent life-directed teaching requires that it be rooted in sound biblical doctrine.

If these two motives for this essay seem insufficient, add to them the purposes of apologetics and ministerial assistance.

We need no statistical charts to show that today's Christian parents seem in desperate need, once again, of hearing a fresh defense of Christian education. Declining enrollment cannot be fully explained in terms of declining birth rate, though we must acknowledge the undisputed blessing to Christian schools of previously higher numbers of children. Difficult economic circumstances coupled with certain lifestyle choices are enough to explain why the cost of Christian schools has become the greatest impediment for some families. What would it take, then, to change lifestyle choices and to rise above economic circumstances with a view to sacrificing legitimate present enjoyments for the sake of equipping the next generation for full-orbed



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Christian living? Minimally this requires freshly stated convictions that arise from a clear understanding of the promises and the requirements of God's covenant with His people, principally as these affect parents and their children. Add to this the obvious implications for Christian education of a biblically balanced understanding of Christ's kingly sovereignty in our present history. When Christian educators integrate both covenant and kingdom with the goal of preparing students to serve God as holy people in the hostile world, then Christian schools will bless the church with a biblically literate membership, a communal identity, and a service-oriented lifestyle.

Finally, this essay is sponsored by a Seminary faculty deeply interested in rendering, through its theological instruction, assistance to the Christian school community. Although the Seminary's course instruction focuses on preparing pastor-preachers, much of the material is useful for Christian educators in every discipline, on both elementary and secondary levels. There is a real and certain primacy to the pulpit—to the preaching of the gospel as God's ordained means of grace unto salvation—but the pulpit, and preparation for it, can and must enhance the fundamental and crucial service rendered by Christian educators. Christian education that cultivates contemporary citizens of Christ's kingdom for living out the gospel of grace, mercy, and peace in today's world is needed for the church's faithful evangelism, for the church's intelligent worship, and for the church's own nurturing of God's people in love and holiness.

Christian Education: For Turning Faith into Living

In order to survive and thrive, Christian education needs a theologically healthy vision accessible to teachers, parents, and Board members—not to mention the students themselves! The source of such a vision is a clear defense of the biblical necessity of Christian education; the goal of such a vision is the serviceability of Christian education to Christian holiness. To this agenda we now turn.

The Christian faith for the Christian mind

No more suitable combination of terms relevant to our subject can be found than the combination between “faith” and “mind.” Each Lord’s Day anew we are summoned and empowered by the gospel to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, *mind*, and strength (Matt. 22:37). Paul reminds us of the powerful connection between faith, mind, and life: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2, ESV). Personal transformation through the mind’s renewal is the route toward moral discernment. The transformed heart must guide the renewed head directing obedient hands. The heart without the head and hands yields a spiritual enthusiasm that is all fire with no heat. The head disconnected from the heart and hands yields a religious intellectualism that is hotly committed to an orthodoxy severed from personal spirituality and informed morality. And hands not moved by the renewed mind guided by the transformed heart tend always to self-redemption.

It is not superfluous to pause in defense of the twofold use of the article in the heading above: “the” Christian faith for “the” Christian mind.

For purposes of cultivating a vision for Christian education, we confess “the” Christian faith—not a particular variety of generic “Christianity” available in today’s religious marketplace, not some subcultural version of the Christian religion, not even some sectarian reduction saturated with comfortable jargon that helps us mark those who are not on “our side.” Far from it, “the” Christian faith is one unified, whole, integrated, genuinely catholic and ecumenical faith, antithetical to every other faith.

But the second use of the article is equally essential: “the” Christian mind. It is precisely the biblical doctrines of creation, fall,

redemption, and consummation that form the foundation governing the theory and practice of Christian education. Rather than claiming agnosticism, we need to confess that “the” biblical doctrine of creation *exists*, that “the” biblical doctrine of sin (its origin, scope, nature, and divine response) *exists*, and so forth.

Nothing cripples the theory and practice of Christian education like heterodoxy. Nothing enervates Christian education so thoroughly and quickly as doctrinal and intellectual ambiguity, confusion, and pluralism.



Having argued that genuine biblical (i.e., Reformed) catholic doctrine is fundamental to healthy Christian education, fairness requires the warning that sectarianism subverts Christian education at its core. Sectarianism means reducing the breadth of the Christian gospel, isolating features of its truth and giving them imbalanced emphasis. Perhaps this has led some to dismiss Christian education as a desperate attempt to protect a subculture from encountering realities of life. To be sure, students of various ages and experiences have differing capacities for applying Christian education to life. But that this should be among the ultimate goals of Christian education seems incontrovertible. If that is so, how can genuine Christian education avoid such encounters, when appropriate, in the context of accompanied engagement and evaluation?

Presupposed in our apologetic for Christian education is the capacity for the Christian mind to be formed by a faith-directed study of the arts and sciences. The disciplines of the educational enterprise pose no threat to such

formation; covenant parents, teachers, and students need not fear *the activity of the mind rooted in Scripture and open to God’s creation*.

We should be alert to a possible anti-intellectualism among God’s people. This warning must be stated with caution, for we do not wish to be misunderstood. Often those who oppose the tenets of liberalism are labeled as anti-intellectual. In the debates about the relationship between Scripture, science, and culture, Christians can find challenges to the Bible’s teaching intellectually wearying, and such exhaustion can lead to either fear or hostility toward rigorous Christian intellectual effort—as if education itself will necessarily mislead us. This false cause-and-effect must be exposed and rejected; for if the Lord calls us to love him *with all our mind*, then it is not the *use* of intellect, but the *misuse* of intellect that needs to be challenged.

In an essay on Christianity and culture, J. Gresham Machen eloquently discussed a number of unacceptable relationships between these two. After rejecting the alternatives of “culture over Christianity” and “Christianity separated from culture,” he championed a third view.

A third solution, fortunately, is possible—namely consecration. Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist, but at the same time consecrate them to the service of our God. . . . Instead of obliterating the distinction between the Kingdom and the world, or on the other hand withdrawing from the world into a sort of modernized intellectual monasticism, let us go forth joyfully, enthusiastically to make the world subject to God.

Several lines later, Machen added these visionary words:

Furthermore, the field of Christianity is the world. The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into *some* relation to the gospel. . . . The Church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man (cited from *Education, Christianity, and the State: Essays by J.*

Gresham Machen [Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1987], pp. 49-50).

The Christian mind for the Christian walk

What, then, should be the goal of Christian education? Why have Christian education at all?

We again appeal to Paul, who combines the nature, authority, and function of Scripture: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, ESV).

This goal speaks of Scripture-based personal competence for living as God's servant in every area of life. The goal is holiness shown in good works, an integrated lifestyle aiming at the glory of God, rooted in true faith, and comporting with God's precepts. This was humanity's created purpose—to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, to live all of life before God's face in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. To this creational design and purpose those who believe in Christ have been restored and recommissioned. As Herman Bavinck put it, this consists of "true piety in organic relation with thorough knowledge and genuine culture" (*Paedagogische Beginselen*). Another Reformed Christian education theorist stated the aim of Christian education as "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" (J. Waterink, *Basic Concepts in Christian Pedagogy*, p. 41).

Once again, however, the realities of contemporary life compel us to acknowledge



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education represented by diversity of opinion among Christians concerning the Christian life. May we, in fact, even speak of "the" Christian walk? If Christians disagree among themselves regarding important moral issues, does this not jeopardize the goal and the practice of Christian education?

A number of responses are appropriate. First, we must be clear and cautious when describing alleged "Christian diversity" in our modern time. Such rhetoric can easily camouflage what in fact is untruth espoused by people calling themselves "Christian." North American religion features innumerable examples of people advocating as "Christian" one or another eccentricity, one or another evolving package of truths and values. Christian educators need to equip students with a humble certitude of the truth that flows from personal engagement with the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.



Second, in light of our first consideration, Christian schools will be more effective in bringing the Christian mind to expression in the Christian walk if they fortify every discipline with doctrinal precision saturated with historical consciousness. In this context, "doctrine" does not mean simply theological truths, but truths of any kind. Precise formulation pays attention to definitions, linguistic nuances, and logical coherence. Here again, in contrast to prevailing sentiments in our time, Christian educators and Christian students need not view as something narrow and provincial either propositional truth, or the testimony of Scripture and the church throughout history to that truth as lived in the world. All of which is to say that if "the" Christian faith exists, it necessarily comes to expression in "the" Christian walk. There are such things as Christian marriage, Christian political activity, Christian compassion, Christian justice, Christian stewardship, and the like. In submission to the enduring teachings of Scripture, yet aware of the particularities of their own time and culture, believers throughout history have given concrete Christian expression in various

cultures to the saturation of every area of life with the gospel of King Jesus.

Christian education as Kingdom education

Space does not permit us to rehearse here examples of misleading rhetoric and misdirected ambitions pertaining to the "kingdom of God." Despite such flaws, we seek enthusiastically to strengthen the bond connecting—the essential serviceability of—Christian education to the kingdom of God.

It would be an irony of immense proportion if we were to abandon our robust covenant perspective at the baptismal font or quarantine it to the church parking lot. The font must bear the fruit of faithful discipleship in the world. The classic Reformed liturgical Form for the Baptism of Infants joins the font to the fruit of distinctive obedience in all of life, especially in the baptismal prayer, where the congregation implores that our baptized children will "live in all righteousness under our only Teacher, King, and High Priest, Jesus Christ; and manfully fight against and overcome sin, the devil, and his whole dominion, to the end that they may eternally praise and magnify" our Triune God. Every baptized child is called to—and therefore must be readied for—the full-time kingdom service of obeying the Lord in every activity of life, with heart, head, and hands!

So it is that robust, classic, biblical covenant theology leads inevitably and necessarily to providing baptized children with the kind of education in the arts and sciences, in language and philosophy, in every discipline of thought, that equips them to live out their baptism in the world, in all of life, with their entire being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. The promises provided by God and sealed in baptism provide the child with an identity that must be nurtured, analyzed, and challenged with a view to life aspirations. Thereby the student receiving Christian education is equipped to undertake the obligations entailed in baptism, which entail nothing less than full-orbed, whole-life, world-wide service in sacrifice and submission to King Jesus.



Christian Education: Partners with Purpose

The Three-Legged Stool

Farmers used to milk cows by hand, sitting on a three-legged stool, which enabled them to get close to their work and maintain stability. This image well demonstrates the partnership of the home, church, and school in the Christian education of covenant children.

There is an undeniable biblical basis for the priority of the home in Christian education. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 20-25, the Lord assigns to fathers (parents) the task of teaching (nurturing) children in the precepts of the Lord. The rest of Scripture confirms that such nurture is at the heart of paternal (or parental) duty. Proverbs reminds children to heed their parents' instruction, to learn wisdom from their lips, and to honor them by maintaining a holy and blameless life (Prov. 1:8-9, 3:1-2, 4:10).

Few would argue that Paul limits to fathers his exhortation not to provoke children to anger, but to bring them up in the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Mothers nurture children in partnership with fathers—a legitimate extension of the biblical exhortation. The *task* of educating children is not limited to parents alone, but the *responsibility* for overseeing this task remains with parents. We read of guardians and governesses who brought up children (Num. 11:12, Isa. 49:23, 2 Kings 10:1,5, Est. 2:7). Priests and Levites also supplied instruction from the Scriptures. We may legitimately view education by people other than parents as an extension of parental authority. Christian schools at every level function *in loco parentis*, in place of parents.

The institutional church and the Christian school

More unclear in our generation is the relationship of the institutional church to the Christian school. We may identify two prominent models: parochial and parental. Parochial Christian schools are owned, governed, and funded by the church—such as Catholic and Lutheran schools, and any church that incorporates a Christian school into its ministry. Parental Christian schools are owned and governed by a group of parents sharing a common faith commitment; schools that receive from the church encouragement, prayer support, and in some cases, funding.

Funding may present today's greatest challenge among those whose Christian schooling practice has been shaped by a certain understanding of the spheres of cultural activity. This "sphere sovereignty" viewpoint,

perhaps better called "sphere differentiation," indicates that no human activity is an authority unto itself; each arena possesses its own competence, domain, and calling.

As many Reformed Christian schools face enrollment decline, rising costs, and increasing educational alternatives, the search for survival is underway. The 2005 Christian Reformed Church synod received a study report that articulated a biblical, theological, and confessional basis for Christian day schools, and explained the responsibility of a congregation in relation to its promise made at baptism (see *Agenda for Synod 2005* [Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 2005], pp. 352-481). Many would find this material informative, instructive, and thought-provoking.

This component of congregational financial responsibility reflects in part a recent invention of the congregation promising, at baptism, to help care for the child's instruction in the faith. This liturgical novelty has become very effective in weakening the historic distinction between church and school in terms of organization and funding, since the congregational vow has become part of the warrant for including Christian school tuition costs within a congregation's annual budget.

Another part of the justification for the congregation's budgetary support of Christian schools is the new conviction that Christian schools belong to the institutional church's mission. Rather than viewing evangelism and discipleship as separate goals, the study report claims that Christian schools have served "as the agency that the church uses to teach its children what discipleship means, what faith in Christ has to do with the world, and what following the Lord to extend his rule in the world means" (p. 413). Here is a clear shift in perspective; the school is now viewed as part of the church's ministry to the world.

Food for thought

First, we must consider how easily the amalgamation of church and school can jeopardize the function of the home as anchor and of the parents as authority. It is easy to anticipate continuing erosion, in the context of church-based communitarian funding of Christian schools, of personal sacrifice for and parental commitment to institutions of Christian education at every level.

Second, we must admit how easily the amalgamation of church and school can compromise the unique calling of the church

to administer the means of grace for discipling the nations. Christian parents disciple their children as they nurture them in the Lord, and this discipling is extended to Christian schools by believing parents who authorize educators to disciple covenant students. So the institutional church is not the sole agent engaged in discipling. It is also true that the health and effectiveness of Christian schools directly affect the institutional church. Nevertheless, the school constitutes a domain distinct from the organized church, and any institutional blending jeopardizes the church's attention to her unique responsibility in the world. We must avoid identifying life's *organic* interrelationships with life's *organizational* relationships, so that the responsibilities of those called to lead in differing arenas may be properly protected and cultivated.

Finally, we must be alert to how easily the amalgamation of church and school can reduce the institutional role of the school called to serve the kingdom beyond church boundaries. Some restrict the kingdom of Christ's rule to the institutional church. Incorporating the Christian school within the church's ministry would allow this institution to be viewed as part of Christ's kingdom, with the unintended consequence of expanding involvement of the church to articulating curricular philosophy, academic standards, and educational policy. Far better to recognize a biblically distributed function of Christ's authority over His disciples in every sphere. In the final analysis, only in this way can the home be home, the church be church, and the school be school.

Conclusion

Mid-America offers an accredited Master of Theological Studies degree for those unsure about where the Lord would have them serve. A number of Christian educators have been equipped by this degree program to enter Christian day school education. The course content is in many ways identical to that for the Master of Divinity degree, but M.T.S. students may specialize in either biblical studies or doctrinal studies. In addition, the course of study can be useful for continuing education purposes, providing biblical and theological studies to supplement graduate work already completed.

For the sake of the church of Christ, Christian education must prosper through the support of God's people in maintaining its calling to equip covenant youth for godly living in today's world. To that end, Mid-America offers whatever assistance possible, as partners in service to the Lord Jesus Christ and his church.