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**REFORMED**

*Education*

# The Protestant Reformed Teacher

**Chapter**


*Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old. Buy the truth, and sell it not...*

—Proverbs 23:22, 23

In this chapter, we come to the heart of our subject. For we treat here, not only what the Protestant Reformed teacher is to be, but also what the position of the Protestant Reformed teacher is, and what he or she does. We will take up the truth that the teacher stands in place of the parents and that this necessarily implies that the work of the teacher is essentially the work of rearing covenant children. From this follow important practical considerations concerning the credentials of a teacher, as well as certain considerations pertinent to parents.

It is fitting that we treat the heart of the subject of Reformed Christian education in connection with the teacher. Although it is a slight exaggeration to say that the school is its teachers (for God has blessed and used schools that suffered for a time with poor teachers), the thrust of the exaggeration is correct: Christian education is Christian teachers teaching covenant children.

After the building is up, the principles printed, and the teacher training completed, Christian education begins—the



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mystery of teaching. It is a mystery. It is more than a good lesson plan. It is more than a brilliant scholar before children. It is a gift. A good Christian teacher and good Christian instruction are great gifts of the Holy Spirit. There was good reason why the original 21st Article of the Church Order of Dordt called for good schoolmasters: "The consistories shall everywhere see to it that there are good schoolmasters . . ."

### ***The Teacher Stands "in the Place of the Parents"***

It is an integral part of the covenantal conception of the school to view the teacher as standing in the place of the parents. The day school is a demand of the covenant, an aspect of the parents' calling in the covenant. Therefore, the school is an extension of the home, a parental school, and the teacher's status is that he stands in the parents' place, or office.

This defines the authority of the teacher with regard to the students: it is nothing less than the authority of the parent, nothing less than God's authority given to parents, nothing less than the authority referred to in the fifth commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother . . ." (Exod. 20:12). This must be preached to the children by the pastor in sermons on the fifth commandment. It must be inculcated upon the children by the parents. It must be insisted on by the teacher himself.

For parents to connive at their children's disrespect for any teacher, much more to foster disrespect, is for parents to assist in making rebels whom God will cut off from the land, and is for parents to cut their own throats. It is the parents' own authority in the teacher that they are undermining. There may no more be disparagement of teachers in the presence of the children than a disparagement of each other by parents. As regards the teacher's weaknesses and faults, parents and students alike must always keep in mind the instruction of the Heidelberg Catechism as to how God requires

us to respond to the "infirmities" of those in authority: "patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand" (Q. 104).

That the teacher stands in place of the parents is the historic Reformed conception of Christian education. Dr. H. Bouwman wrote:

The rule ought to be, that the school originate with the parents. According to the ordinance of God, the full task of rearing rests first of all upon the parents. To the many aids which serve to assist the parents in this rearing belongs especially the school. The school takes over a part of the task of the parents. It follows from this, that the school must stand on the same foundation as the Christian family, that is to say, on the ground of the covenant . . .

When Bouwman sums up what he has said about Christian schools, his first point is this: "That according to Reformed principle, the schools must originate from the parents." As biblical basis for this position, he appeals to Deuteronomy 4:9, 10; Deuteronomy 6:7, 20; Ephesians 6:4; and Colossians 3:20, 21.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch educator, T. van der Kooy, wrote:

Considering the Christian school in its nature, we find as its distinctive feature that it pretends to be nothing further than a school; that is to say, an institution auxiliary to the family in the education of the children for their position in life. It is content with this supplementary function.<sup>2</sup>

It is necessary for us to maintain this view of the school over against a challenge to it. The challenge is that the school must be viewed as an independent, sovereign sphere, so that the teacher is independent of the parents. The school then becomes a teachers' school instead of a parental school, and the students become the pupils of the teacher rather than the children of the parents.

This challenge is raised by the ICS. This becomes apparent

1. Bouwman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, 520, 521. The translation of the Dutch is mine.  
2. van der Kooy, *Distinctive Features*, 30.

in the educational creed of Olthuis and Zylstra. It speaks of a free, sovereign teaching office, apart from parents.<sup>3</sup>

But this is always an incipient threat within the Reformed setup. It was a threat in the Netherlands in the 1800s, so much so that the watchword of many Reformed believers became, "The school belongs to the parents." The implication was: not to the teachers!<sup>4</sup> A sovereign school with independent teachers was suggested in discussion at the convention of the National Union of Christian Schools in 1930. After a lecture on "The Relationship between Parent and Teacher," there was a discussion that centered on the speaker's assertion that the relationship between teacher and parent was that of employer and employee. Someone suggested that the teacher's position is "something like sovereignty within a certain, particular sphere of action."<sup>5</sup>

Where this notion creeps in, the teachers regard themselves and their work as independent, resent parental "intrusion," and fail to view themselves as servants of the parents.

The justification for this view is that the teachers are competent in the field of education, whereas generally the parents are not. In fact, in many cases, the parents are not even well-educated. It is supposed that sovereign educators, unhindered by blundering parents, will make for a better school and better education.

It is essential that we turn down the challenge and retain parental schools, both in theory and in practice. An educator's school will not be better but will spell the doom of the

3. See James H. Olthuis and Bernard Zylstra, "An Educational Creed," in *To Prod*, 167-170, especially articles 6, 9, and 10.

4. van der Kooy, *Distinctive Features*, 34.

5. National Union of Christian Schools, "The Distinctive Character of the Christian School Movement," book for convention held in Chicago in 1930 (N.p.: National Union of Christian Schools, 1930), 74ff.

Christian school, because it cuts itself off from the root of Christian education, from its own life source: the covenant of God with parents and the Word of God to parents. It will either lose support—the zeal of the parents and then inevitably their money—or it will lose its Reformed covenantal character. The Christian school must fully and wholeheartedly show itself—to the parents, too—as the home's extension. There is something seriously wrong when teachers and parents begin to think of each other as "us and them." The fact is that "we are they, and they are we."

Since teachers stand in the place of the parents, they are servants. We must avoid the endless wrangling whether teachers are professionals, or sovereigns, or employees. Christian teachers are servants. They are servants of spot-nosed children, of uneducated parents, and of God; and they are servants of God by being servants of parents and children. Therefore, teachers are lowly, very lowly. But according to the law of the kingdom, exactly in this lowliness they are very great, so great that sufficient honor cannot be given them. He who would be great in the kingdom, let him be the servant; not the lord, but the servant of all, according to the example of Him who washes our feet and died for us.

The Christian teacher must be humble, not puffed up over his degrees, knowledge, and abilities, but lowly on account of his sins. He lives in this consciousness: What do I have that I have not received? As a minister, I am not unaware of what may be a sore temptation for the teacher: exposure to the constant scrutiny and criticism of everybody, including those who are less qualified in the field in which they offer criticism. One reason why so many men avoid or leave the pastorate is that in the pastorate a man is subject to the judgment and criticism of every member of the congregation. Sunday after Sunday, schoolboys, housewives, and ditchdiggers weigh his sermons and do not hesitate to find them wanting. This is a

blow to pride. It is similar with the teacher. The answer for the teacher is humility.

That the teacher is a servant does not mean that every whim of every parent is simply carried out by the teacher. This is impossible anyway. There is a school board and an association. But it does mean that the teacher is to *listen* to every whim of every parent and to listen in such a spirit as indicates that he knows the parent's right to speak on the matter of his child's education and as indicates that he is ready to give account of his teaching or discipline.

The servant position of the teacher does not mean that the teacher is allowed no liberty in the sphere of his labor, that he becomes a mere puppet of the parents. This is a warning to parents to let the teachers teach and not to be looking over the teacher's shoulder at every move he makes, as I look over the shoulder of the mechanic working on my car—to his great harassment and absolutely no advantage to myself. Within the framework of parental authority there is ample room for the free, unhampered labor of the teacher. It is impossible to spell this out in exact detail, to formulate a codebook. Love, trust, and responsibility always run the risk of meddling on the one hand and overstepping bounds on the other hand.

The general relationship between parent and teacher has been pointed out. Abraham Kuyper wrote:

The father decides in what spirit his child will be educated. The church decides concerning the principle by which that spirit can be purely preserved in the instruction. The state decides the educational standards and requirements. But the way now in which the child shall meet those standards and requirements in that spirit and according to the demand of that principle is for the instructors to decide, the teachers and professors themselves.<sup>6</sup>

6. Abraham Kuyper, "Ons Program" (Amsterdam: Hóveker and Wormser, 1860), 231. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

According to Dr. Bouwman, "As to the manner of instruction, the school itself decides, but the parents prescribe what must be taught and in what spirit."<sup>7</sup>

But the servant position of the teacher does mean, as van der Kooy said, that "the Christian school . . . is content with its relation to the home. It respects the rights of the family. It does not usurp any prerogatives of the home . . . It never undermines the home."<sup>8</sup>

7. Bouwman, *Gerereformeerd Kerktrecht*, 520. The translation of the Dutch is mine.  
8. van der Kooy, *Distinctive Features*, 31.