An Open Letter Concerning
Reformed Higher Education

by David Engelsma, James Lanting, Lamm Lubbers

This open letter is addressed to all members of the Protestant Reformed Churches and to all others who have a concern for the instruction of the children of the covenant in all aspects of earthly science on the basis of the truth of the Reformed Faith as set forth in the Reformed Creeds.

It concerns Reformed higher education, i.e., college-level instruction.

It is sent on behalf of a group of Protestant Reformed men that calls itself the "Conference on Reformed Higher Education." At a meeting held in South Holland, Illinois on March 4, 1983, the group decided "to have a committee of Rev. D. Engelsma, J. Lanting, and L. Lubbers draft...an article for publication in The Standard Bearer and other periodicals." It was stipulated that, among other things, the article should outline "the purpose and provisional structure of our Conference group."

The history of the "Conference" is quickly told. The immediate cause was conversation among men who were gathered for a meeting of Classis West, mostly laymen. Contact was made with other laymen who shared the concern for Reformed higher education and who would be able to attend meetings, for a day or two, to explore the idea and its possibilities. The result was that a number of Protestant Reformed men from the eastern and western sections of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the U.S. and from Canada met in South Holland, Illinois on January 12 - 13, 1982. A second meeting was held in Grand Rapids on June 8, 1982. The third, and most recent meeting, was held in South Holland on March 4, 1983. The Conference has recently distributed a "Newsletter" in all the Protestant Reformed Churches.

These meetings reflect a longstanding concern of Protestant Reformed people for Reformed higher education, especially the training of prospective Protestant Reformed school teachers. Oddly enough, in the light of our traditional opposition to church-schools, this concern surfaced at the Protestant Reformed Synods of 1948, 1949, and 1950. The Theological School Committee brought to the Synod of 1948 a letter from "The Society for Protestant Reformed Education," asking "to what extent the facilities of the Theological School can be made
available to prepare persons interested in the teaching profession to qualify them for teaching in schools of our own” (Acts, p. 63). Synod advised the Society “that we have no facilities for a complete normal course. However, that we can supply, we hope, the very necessary Protestant Reformed point of view by having prospective teachers take Principles of Education and read specified outside literature upon educational subjects, as produced by our men and others” (Acts, pp. 65, 68).

The T.S.C. returned to the Synod of 1949 with another letter from the Society for Protestant Reformed Education. This letter asked that “a normal course be added to the curriculum of our Theological School this coming year.” The motivation was the need for “teachers, able and equipped, to teach our children the required subjects permeated by the Protestant Reformed life view” (Acts, pp. 64, 65). Also at the Synod of 1949 was an overture from the Consistory of Randolph, Wisconsin, that Synod “consider ways and means of establishing our own Normal Training School to train prospective teachers in our own Christian Schools” (Acts, pp. 67, 68). Synod decided to place this matter before the faculty and the T.S.C. for study and possible execution (Acts, p. 68).

The Synod of 1950 received for information a report from the T.S.C. that Rev. H. Hoeksema had drawn up an outline of “Principles of Education” and that Rev. G. Ophoff was teaching a course along these lines, under the auspices of a Teachers’ Club in Grand Rapids (Acts, pp. 29, 30). Here, apparently, the matter rested.

The Conference has no official standing, whether ecclesiastical, educational, or otherwise. Nor does it seek this. It has been a free association of some who thought that the possibility of giving Reformed instruction at the college level, especially to prospective Protestant Reformed teachers, was worth looking into. As part of its investigation, the Conference has studied the history of Reformed higher education; curriculum; accreditation; organization; finances; and other areas. We have conferred with our teachers. It is this purpose, this cause, and some of the fruit of our study that we now lay before you and ask you to consider.

The purpose of the Conference is indicated in the brief, working “Statement” which the participants drew up and signed at their first meeting: “We believe that higher education based on Reformed principles as set forth in the Reformed Creeds is a legitimate concern for Reformed people. We...resolve that in order to preserve Reformed higher education in our age, especially as it relates to teacher training,
we will promote the cause of a Reformed teacher-education program. We agree to form committees to study the possibility, and the ways and means, of reaching these goals."

The agenda for the first meeting ambitiously called for an investigation of the possibility of a Protestant Reformed Teachers' College. The difficulties of establishing a full college were seen to be so great as to daunt even the most hopeful. Therefore, without losing sight of the ultimate goal, the Conference has concentrated on realistic beginnings. An able, interested Protestant Reformed teacher could be called, full-time, to give instruction to college students in certain, fundamental subjects. These courses, although of special value for the would-be teacher, would also be beneficial for other college students. Investigation has shown that such courses could be accredited through existing Christian colleges. While giving these courses, the teacher could also work at developing a more complete program. In time, yet another teacher could be added to the staff.

To enable such a teacher to give this instruction, it was thought desirable, if not necessary, to send him, or her, to a graduate school for advanced study and a degree. A Christian college has expressed its willingness to set up a summer course, taught by qualified professors, which interested Protestant Reformed teachers, and others, could take for credit towards a master's degree.

It is our conviction that college-level instruction of prospective Protestant Reformed Christian school teachers in the truth set forth in the Reformed Creeds, as maintained by the Protestant Reformed Churches, is part of our calling in the covenant, to the extent that God enables us to provide it. This faith is God's own truth that must be the foundation of all teaching.

The education of our teachers in State universities and colleges is unsatisfactory, since the Word of God is not the light in which these schools teach the students to see light. The teaching of existing Christian colleges is widely and seriously weakened by the errors of the doubt and denial of the infallible inspiration and full authority of Scripture ("higher criticism"); of theistic evolution; of the philosophy of the A.A.C.S.; of common grace; of socialism, if not Marxism; of the current "liberal" dogmas of revolution, feminism, pacifism, and sexual permissiveness; and of the lack of zeal for godliness of life.

Our desire is college-training that is excellent, both academically and spiritually. Qualified professors, themselves trained and competent in their own fields, would not merely pay lip-service to the great doctrines of the Reformed Faith, much less busy themselves to call
these doctrines into question and to undermine them, as they teach future teachers, but would teach their subjects in the light of these doctrines — the inerrant inspiration of Holy Scripture; creation and providence; the fall of the human race in a real Adam; God's curse upon fallen man and his world, outside of Christ; the Divine judgment of a universal flood; the antithesis between elect church and reprobate world; the Lordship of the risen Son of God; the binding Law of God in Holy Scripture for marriage, family, labor, economy, government, and personal behavior; and the end of the world. Surely, this is a worthy and a thrilling concern.

No one ought to dismiss the matter out of hand as no concern of his, on the ground that it is a matter of college-training and his children do not attend college. Since it is training of those who will be teaching Protestant Reformed children in the grade schools and the high schools, it is a concern of us all. Those without children as well as those with children can embrace and support this cause, as a cause of God's covenant and truth. Nor do we see even the first courses that might be offered as limited to prospective teachers. Other college students would benefit as well. Indeed, students from churches other than the Protestant Reformed might well enroll, if they are desirous of the perspective of the Reformed Faith.

All of this, we repeat, is only the thinking of the Conference and is, of course, not binding on any future organization.

It is the intention, now, of the Conference to hold public meetings in various areas of the U.S. and Canada, where there are Protestant Reformed Churches, in order to present this cause to our people, and to others who may be interested, so that they may take steps, if they are so inclined, to organize as an association, to carry out this work. Already, men in various locations are advised to speak to school and church groups. A public meeting was scheduled in the N.W. Iowa-Minnesota area on September 6, 1983, in connection with the meeting of Classis West. We ask that you attend the meeting that may be held in your area and give the matter a careful hearing. Our hope is that Consistories, School Boards, and others will promote the cause, as they have opportunity. All who desire more information, have suggestions, care to comment, or desire a meeting in their area can write the Conference in care of our secretary:

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The task is large; the cost is high; our resources are small. But the need is also great; and the benefits are precious — the welfare of the children of the covenant and the glory of God’s Name in the knowledge of His truth. Let us make a beginning, trusting in the Lord, Whose we are and Whom we serve, to bless the small beginning, as He has done before.

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... look at the mediaeval scheme of education — the syllabus of the Schools. It does not matter, for the moment, whether it was devised for small children or for older students, or how long people were supposed to take over it. What matters is the light it throws upon what the men of the Middle Ages supposed to be the object and the right order of the educative process.

The syllabus was divided into two parts: The trivium and Quadrivium. The second part — the Quadrivium — consisted of “subjects,” and need not for the moment concern us. The interesting thing for us is the composition of the Trivium, which preceded the Quadrivium and was the preliminary discipline for it. It consisted of three parts: Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric, in that order.

Now the first thing we notice is that two at any rate of these “subjects” are not what we should call “subjects” at all: they are only methods of dealing with subjects. Grammar, indeed, is a “subject,” in the sense that it does mean definitely learning a language — at that period it meant learning Latin. But language itself is simply the medium in which thought is expressed. The whole of the Trivium was, in fact, intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning, before he began to apply them to “subjects” at all. First, he learned a language; not just how to order a meal in a foreign language, but the structure of a language, and hence language itself — what it was, how it was put together, and how it worked. Secondly, he learned how to use language: how to define his terms and make accurate statements; how to construct an argument and how to detect fallacies in argument. Dialectic, that is to say, embraced Logic and Disputation. Thirdly, he learned to express himself in language — how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively.

from “The Lost Tools of Learning” by Dorothy Sayers