

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:  
A Third Way (13)**

**Interlude:  
Mandate or Millstone?  
The United Reformed Churches and Christian Education (ii)**

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For some months now we have been explaining and evaluating a new version, gaining circulation among Reformed and Presbyterian folk, regarding the relationship between the Bible, the church, and the world. It consists of a peculiar combination of doctrines, namely, those of so-called “common grace” and of a so-called “two kingdom” theory of divided reality. We are being told that this version supposedly has its roots in Augustine, was refined by the Reformers, and can even be found in neo-Calvinist thinkers like Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.

The attentive inquirer wanting to know the pay-off of this new view will look—and listen—in vain for an explicit, outright denial of the validity of Christian education as one of its implications. Yet, the discerning reader—and listener—will encounter sceptical disdain among its defenders for such activities as “Christian farming” or “Christian plumbing” or “Christian statecraft,” and will understandably be led to ask: What, then, of “Christian schooling”?

Recall the basic argument: the Christian ethic obligates only the believer and governs only the church; all of life outside the church, where Christians necessarily participate with non-Christians, belongs to the realm of “common grace,” that arena governed by shared rationality and commonly accessible moral rules. This realm supposedly includes every non-spiritual activity, including education. After all, math is math, geography is geography, and science is science. “Christian” math and “Christian” geography and “Christian” science do not exist. Implication: public school education is not merely one option, but it becomes the most consistent option for “two-kingdom” Christians.

*Legitimate criticisms*

These contemporary critics of Christian schooling are raising at least two legitimate criticisms of Christian schools as part of their case for “two-kingdom” Christianity. It is important, however, to recognize that it is possible to agree with these criticisms without abandoning our historic commitment to Christian education.

These two criticisms involve (1) the compromised character of Christian education in some of our communities, and (2) the transformational Calvinism undergirding especially higher education provided by several Christian colleges.

### *As goes the church, so goes the school?*

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Christian Reformed Church underwent a series of controversies whose cumulative result was a weakened grasp of, and compromised commitment to, the Scripture as the authoritative Word of God. We need not rehearse the details of the denomination's choices that led to its expulsion from NAPARC and the exclusion of thousands of its members, and to the loss of its reputation for biblical and confessional integrity.

Throughout its history, in many communities where the CRC had been planted and took root, a local Christian school soon came into existence. With a sacrificial commitment as legendary as it was enduring, parents and grandparents built these schools with the goal of educating generations of children and young people to serve God in all of life as his people. These parents and grandparents believed and confessed—putting their money where their mouth was—that these children, properly educated, would grow up to serve God as Christian accountants, Christian businessmen, Christian doctors, Christian lawyers, and the like.

Sadly, the weakening of the CRC has often been accompanied by the weakening of the Christian schools established and governed by CRC parents. Today, in communities where URC parents continue to make use of these schools, they are compelled to teach and to remind their children to examine carefully everything they are being taught, to be prudent in making friends and forming relationships, and to take seriously also in the Christian school the antithesis supplied by the gospel.

But here is the point: no matter how weakened these Christian schools may have become, the justification and warrant for their existence has never been doubted or questioned by URC parents—not even by those who have felt compelled to remove their children from these schools because of such weakness and compromise on the part of the school. Advocates of “two-

kingdom” Christianity who discredit Christian schooling with the argument that “the local Christian school is not all that different from the local public school” may have a point—but their point is valid only in terms of a particular school, while entirely missing the fundamental justification for Christian schooling in general.

### ***The illusion of transformational Calvinism***

A second criticism whose validity we may acknowledge without thereby surrendering the enterprise of Christian education involves the illusion of transformational Calvinism.

Transformational Calvinism is marked by its tone of triumph that tends to identify Christians as cultural redeemers and renewal agents, those who help Christ establish his kingdom on earth. The illusion consists in its misguided identification of our sin-stained and inherently flawed efforts and the perfect redemption initiated and being completed by God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Nowhere does the Bible teach that our cultural obedience either redeems nature (or culture) or establishes God's kingdom.

In past articles for this column, we have written about the presence and pervasiveness of this rationale for Christian higher education among Reformed and evangelical colleges. Honesty requires the grateful observation that this rhetoric seems to be on the wane—a review of the online mission statements of a number of Reformed colleges indicates a more sober assessment of the relationship between Christian cultural obedience and the divine program of redemption. (Readers might be encouraged, for example, by studying the online statements of educational mission or philosophy published by Providence Christian College, Covenant College, and Dordt College.)

Once again, our point simply is this: rejecting, for biblical, confessional, or historical reasons, transformational Calvinism as a valid basis for Christian education does not obligate us to reject the validity of understanding and promoting Christian education as part of worldview Calvinism as we have come to know that through Groen van Prinsterer, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Cornelius Van Til, and a number of their intellectual descendants. To be sure, worldview Calvinism did not exist as such in the seventeenth century, although its components have always belonged to the catholic confessions honored among the Reformed churches. But even if one should reject worldview Calvinism as a valid basis for Christian education, even then

the history of Christian schooling cannot—indeed, may not—be disdained among us as an impossible dream, or worse: an impermissible enterprise.