

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (15)**

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

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It had been our intention to turn at this point to an exposition of a third way of relating the Bible, the church, and the world. But it appears that the matter of Christian education and the URCNA seems to require further analysis.

More than seventy-five years ago, in August 1933, Dr. J. Gresham Machen delivered an address to the National Union of Christian Schools, entitled "The Necessity of the Christian School." (It can be found on pages 66-83 in the volume *Education, Christianity, and the State*, edited by John W. Robbins, published in 1987 by The Trinity Foundation. It can be accessed online at <http://pcahistory.org/documents/necessity.html>.) Dr. Machen was Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, and a leading figure in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

We offer in two installments the following edited and abbreviated abridgement of his essay for a number of reasons that will become obvious in our subsequent columns, where we will seek to relate the emphases of Machen to our larger discussion about Christian living in the world. (So after reading the Machen essay carefully, you may wish to keep it nearby for future reference.) But now, as you read this historic essay (in two installments), reflect on the arguments that Dr. Machen employed in appealing for the necessity of the Christian school. Lord willing, we will be coming back to them.

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The Necessity of the Christian School (1)

Two Reasons for the Christian School

The Christian school is to be favored for two reasons. In the first place, it is important for liberty; in the second place, it is important for the propagation of the Christian religion. These two reasons are not equally important; indeed, the latter includes the former as it includes every other legitimate human interest. But I want to speak of these two reasons in turn.

In the first place, then, the Christian school is important for the maintenance of liberty.

We are witnessing in our day a world-wide attack upon the fundamental principles of civil and religious freedom. Gradually people have come to value principle less and creature comfort more; increasingly they have come to prefer prosperity to freedom.

The Attack Upon Liberty

The attack upon liberty is nothing new. Always there have been tyrants in the world; almost always tyranny has begun by being superficially beneficent, and always it has ended by being both superficially and radically cruel.

But while tyranny itself is nothing new, the technique of tyranny has been enormously improved in our day; the tyranny of the scientific expert is the most crushing tyranny of all. That tyranny is being exercised most effectively in the field of education. A monopolistic system of education controlled by the State is far more efficient in crushing our liberty than the cruder weapons of fire and sword. Against this monopoly of education by the State the Christian school brings a salutary protest; it contends for the right of parents to bring up their children in accordance with the dictates of their conscience and not in the manner prescribed by the State.

The Propagation of the Faith

That is one reason why I favor the Christian school. I favor it in the interests of liberty. But the other reason is vastly more important. I favor it, in the second place, because it is necessary to the propagation of the Christian Faith.

Thoughtful people, even many who are not Christians, have become impressed with the shortcomings of our secularized schools. We have provided technical education, which may make the youth of our country better able to make use of the advances of natural science; but natural science, with its command over the physical world, is not all that there is in human life. There are also the moral interests of mankind; and without cultivation of these moral interests a technically trained man is only given more power to do harm. By this purely secular, non-moral

and non-religious, training we produce not a real human being but a horrible Frankenstein, and we are beginning to shrink back from the product of our own hands.

The educational experts, in their conduct of their state-controlled schools, are trying to repair this defect and in doing so are seeking the cooperation of Christian people. I want to show you—and I do not think I shall have much difficulty in showing this particular audience—why such cooperation cannot be given.

“Character Education”

In the first place, we find proposed to us today what is called “character education” or “character-building.” Character, we are told, is one thing about which men of all faiths are agreed. Let us, therefore, build character in common, as good citizens, and then welcome from the various religious faiths whatever additional aid they can severally bring. Let us first appeal to the children on a “civilization basis”—to use what I believe is the most recent terminology—and then let the various faiths appeal to whatever additional motives they may be able to adduce. What surprises me about this program is not that its advocates propose it; for it is only too well in accord with the spirit of the age. But what really surprises me about it is that the advocates of it seem to think that a Christian can support it without ceasing at that point to be Christian. In the first place, when this program of character-education is examined, it will be found, I think, to base character upon human experience; it will be found to represent maxims of conduct as being based upon the collective experience of the race. But how can they be based upon the collective experience of the race and at the same time, as the Christian must hold, be based upon the law of God? By this experiential morality the reverence for the law of God is being broken down. It cannot be said that the results—even judged by “civilization” standards (if I may borrow the terminology of my opponents for a moment)—is impressive. The raging tides of passion cannot successfully be kept back by the flimsy mud-embankments of an appeal to human experience. It is a feeble morality that can say nothing better for itself than that it works well.

Non-Christian Morality

For that reason, character-building, as practiced in our public schools, may well prove to be character-destruction. But suppose it were free from the defect that I have just mentioned. I do not see how it can possibly be free from it, if it remains, as it must necessarily remain, secular;

but just suppose it were free from it. Just suppose we could have moral instruction in our public schools that should be based not upon human experience but upon something that might be conceived of as a law of God. Could a Christian consistently support even such a program as that?

We answer that question in the negative, but we do not want to answer it in the negative in any hasty way. It is perfectly true that the law of God is over all. There is not one law of God for the Christian and another law of God for the non-Christian. May not, therefore, the law be proclaimed to men of all faiths; and may it not, if it is so proclaimed, serve as a restraint against the most blatant forms of evil through the common grace of God; may it not even become a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ?

The answer is that if the law of God is proclaimed in public schools, to people of different faiths, it is bound, in the very nature of the case, to be proclaimed with optimism; and if it is proclaimed with optimism it is proclaimed in a way radically opposed to the Christian doctrine of sin. By hypothesis it is regarded as all that good citizens imperatively need to know; they may perhaps profitably know other things, but the fundamental notion is that if they know this they know all that is absolutely essential. But is not a law that is proclaimed to unredeemed persons with such optimism at best only an imperfect, garbled law? Is it not very different from the true and majestic law of God with its awful pronouncements of eternal death upon sinful man?

The answer to these questions is only too plain. A proclamation of morality which regards itself as all that is necessary—which regards itself as being capable at the most of non-essential supplementation by additional motives to be provided by Christianity or other faiths—is very different from that true proclamation of the law of God which may be a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ. It is not merely insufficient, but it is false; and I do not see how a consistent Christian can possibly regard it as providing any part of that nurture and admonition of the Lord which it is the duty of every Christian parent to give to his children.

(To be continued)