

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:  
A Third Way (17)**

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

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[Published in *Christian Renewal*, vol. 27, no. 19 (July 15, 2009), pages 30-32.]

Before moving forward with our positive agenda of describing a third way to understand the relationship between the Bible, the church, and the world, we take this opportunity to acknowledge and respond to published criticisms of what we've written, notably, that of Dr. Darryl Hart (*Christian Renewal*, 27:17 [May 27, 2009], 5, 9).

Careful readers will want to compare Hart's response with the specific analysis and evaluations of his views that we have provided during the last nine months. (You can find them gathered efficiently at either *Christian Renewal's* website (<http://www.crmag.com/ebox/?p=242>) or the author's website ([http://auxesis.net/kloosterman/third\\_way.php](http://auxesis.net/kloosterman/third_way.php)); the relevant issues are 27:6 [Nov 26, 2008], 36-38; 27:8 [Jan 14, 2009], 24-26; 27:9 [Jan 28, 2009], 36-38; 27:10 [Feb 11, 2009], 16-18; and 27:12 [Mar 11, 2009], 24-27).

We have articulated three basic criticisms of Dr. Hart's proposal of a kind of two-kingdom hyphenated-Christian living in the world. First, this proposal reduces Christian spirituality and identity in the world. Second, this proposal restricts Christ's sovereignty in the world. And third, this solution yields a dual ethic for the Christian in the world. Specifically with respect to Christian education, we objected to his claim that questions of faith need not be viewed as relevant to teaching literature or chemistry or sociology, but are relevant only in teaching Bible and theology.

***The heart of the matter***

Space will not permit us to identify Dr. Hart's loud silence toward crucial criticisms of his views that you will find in our previous articles. But we must express hearty appreciation for significant points of agreement, including the following:

- We agree about the reality of “general revelation” and “special revelation”—although it is not clear that we both agree with John Calvin on the need for the “spectacles” of Scripture in order rightly to read, interpret, and apply the creation revelation.
- We agree about the value of the notion of “sphere sovereignty” for explaining and protecting the exercise of authority and competence in various spheres of activity like church, home, and school—although it is doubtful that Dr. Hart agrees that Scripture is normative in some way for Christian life and practice beyond the church, since he insists that each of these spheres “appl[ies] different parts of God's revealed will” (9).
- Both of us agree with John Calvin and the Reformed tradition that there is a difference between “heavenly” and “earthly” things, but disagree about whether we may and must characterize things, activities, and values belonging to life in this here world as “spiritual.”

The heart of my disagreement with religious secularism appears most clearly, I think, with this claim of Dr. Hart: “To suggest that Christian norms must be dominant in public life raises the threat of the very sort of religious warfare in which Protestants and Roman Catholics engaged in hopes of maintaining a uniform society” (9).

A number of possible responses come to mind, but two will suffice.

First, if the worldly kingdom (public life) is to be governed by that natural law revealed in creation, and if the Decalogue is nothing less than the republication of that natural law, then why would Christians not want the civil magistrate to proscribe what the Decalogue proscribes? Dr. Hart's caution against having “Christian norms be dominant in public life” sounds very much like the warnings against “Christians legislating morality” and against “Christians forcing their religious convictions on others” that have become such common media mottoes in our highly secularized generation. What, in fact, is a “Christian norm”? Are the prohibitions “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and “Thou shalt not steal” peculiarly Christian norms? Why is it illicit for Christians to appeal to the civil magistrate in the context of public policy relating to abortion, for example, using as only one among several arguments that the magistrate is called by God to honor the Sixth Commandment? If the magistrate's authority

comes from God, then why is it improper for Christians, as but one component of their public political testimony, to point the magistrate to God's will revealed in Scripture (Ps. 2, Ps. 110, Rom. 13) for exercising that authority?

Second, we are being encouraged to believe that this version of a two-kingdom approach, which separates the heavenly realm and mode of living (the gospel, faith, grace, the church) from the earthly realm of living (the law, works, justice, everything beyond the church), “is actually biblical, honors Christ, preserves the integrity of the gospel, and does not confuse man's good works and the benefits of this life with the spiritual blessings that Christ purchased for believers” (9). Please read the next sentence carefully. We agree with the concern that we must not *confuse* the two (e.g., our obedience and Christ's achievements; faith and works; heaven and earth); our fundamental complaint is that Hart and others refuse to *integrate* the two in a robust biblical spirituality created by heaven's gospel designed for earth's blessing.

### ***Christian education as the test-case***

Don't be misled by Dr. Hart's response to my criticisms of his undermining Christian education. He would reduce the disagreement to my supposed insistence that parents or elders quote the Bible or the Three Forms of Unity in correcting the pedagogical mistakes of Johnny's Christian school teacher, and to my imagined belief that the Bible teaches multiplication tables. Because Christian education is strictly a parental matter, Hart argues that the church has no authority to teach that the Bible requires Christian parents to nurture and educate their children for living in a way consistent with their covenant identity. “Church officers cannot tell parents how to rear their children beyond what Scripture clearly reveals.” Scripture reveals no divine mandate for parent-governed Christian education. Therefore, the church may not insist on the need for Christian education.

But as a historian, he is well acquainted with the Christian Reformed history (and thus, with URC history) of Christian education where both parental responsibility and ecclesiastical teaching for Christian education travel(ed) hand in hand. Remember the threefold cord: church, home, and school! He simply dislikes that history. Dr. Hart bristles at the claim that Christian education is a mandate for believing parents, and prefers to see it as good, wise, and beneficial, but not required.

En route to registering this preference, as an OPC member and elder, Dr. Hart invoked the name of OPC stalwart and statesman, J. Gresham Machen—the purpose of which is not altogether clear.

Be that as it may, let's compare Dr. Hart's proposal with the claims that Machen himself advanced regarding the necessity of Christian education, in his 1933 essay that appeared in edited and abridged form in the preceding two issues of *Christian Renewal*.

In his own day, Machen exposed a number of wrong reasons for introducing Christianity into public education. These include using the Bible as a kind of literature, using biblical morality for character building, and introducing prayer into public education. The fundamental flaw in these and similar rationales, according to Machen, is the mistaken notion that religion embraces only one particular part of human life. These reasons for seeking to insert Christianity into public education ignore the truth that the believer's new relationship with God in Jesus Christ concerns not merely one part of life, but all of life. “It is this profound Christian permeation of every human activity, no matter how secular the world may regard it as being, which is brought about by the Christian school and the Christian school alone.” With almost prescient eavesdropping on contemporary suggestions that “math is math” and “there's no such thing as Christian math,” Machen insisted, with specific reference to mathematics, that “while truth is truth however learned, the bearings of truth, the meaning of truth, the purpose of truth, even in the sphere of mathematics, seem entirely different to the Christian from that which they seem to the non-Christian; and that is why a truly Christian education is possible only when Christian conviction underlies not a part, but all, of the curriculum of the school. True learning and true piety go hand in hand, and Christianity embraces the whole of life—those are great and central convictions that underlie the Christian school.”

In light of that last sentence, it (32) should be no surprise that Christian education serves so well as a test-case for clarifying the defects and the implications of the new version of two-kingdom Christianity being packaged for purchase and consumption today among Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

Do we need still more testimony from Machen? “I can see little consistency in a type of Christian activity which preaches the gospel on the street corners and at the ends of the earth, but neglects the children of the covenant by abandoning them to a cold and unbelieving secularism.”

Applying every skill of oratory and rhetoric at his disposal, Machen closed his 1933 address to Christian educators with this resounding paean of praise for their sacrificial commitment and blessed labors: “You have set an example for the whole Christian world; you have done a thing which has elsewhere been neglected, and the neglect of which is everywhere bringing disaster. You are set like a city set on a hill; and may that city never be hid! May the example of your Christian schools be heeded everywhere in the Church! Above all, may our God richly bless you, and of His grace give you a reward with which all the rewards of earth are not for one moment worthy to be compared!”

***Once more: J. Gresham Machen on Christian education***

Three years later, in 1936, the same venerable Dr. Machen wrote in “The Presbyterian Guardian,” with tears of joy flowing from pen to page, about his newly born, fledgling denomination (that would later be the OPC) receiving official greetings from the synod of the CRC. With high praise for the CRC he identified five pillars that once held its noble roof aloft and fortified its walls within, among them, its commitment to Christian education.

If you go into a city where there are many people of the Christian Reformed Church, you will see scattered here and there throughout the city certain school buildings which are not public schools and are not parochial schools of the Roman Catholic Church. These are the “Christian Schools” in which an integral part of the instruction given is instruction in that system of truth that the Bible contains. These schools are not under ecclesiastical control, but are conducted by associations of parents. In an overwhelmingly predominant way, however, they are conducted and supported by the people of the Christian Reformed Church. Those people pay their taxes like other citizens, but in addition to that part of their taxes which goes to the support of the public schools they give – voluntarily and out of love to God and to the children of His covenant – what is needed for the maintenance of the Christian Schools. They love God and love their children too much to allow Christian instruction to be tagged one day in seven as a kind of excrescence upon an education fundamentally non-Christian. They have tried to make the education of their children Christian throughout. God has wonderfully blessed them in that effort.

Machen's laudatory assessment of this component of the life-blood and identity of the CRC, now of the URC, is hardly compatible with the derogatory suggestion that today's URC Church Order stipulation requiring elders to promote God-centered schooling does not fit with "planting churches outside of the Dutch diaspora." Dr. Machen never sneered at those communities where by divine providence Reformed Christians who happened to be of Dutch descent had once sacrificed together to build and maintain faithful Christian schools (places like Grand Rapids, Chicago, Orange City, St. Catharines, Chino, London, Lynden, Hanford, Sanborn, Kalamazoo, . . .). The very same commitment that today is held up for ridicule as narrowminded and outdated, the tradition of an ethnic tribal ghetto, Dr. Machen held up for praise and thanksgiving, precisely because of the Bible-nurtured, church-taught, life-embracing, theological convictions undergirding that commitment to Christian education.

That was 1936, and this is 2009. The cultural and ecclesiastical landscapes have undergone dramatic changes.

But this I declare to you, dear reader: If the J. Gresham Machen of 1933 and 1936, with his warm appreciation for Christian schools among the Dutch Christian Reformed, is to be dubbed a paleo-Calvinist, then surely those who today for the very same reasons defend the Lordship of Jesus Christ within the sphere of education are Machen's true spiritual children!