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The Churches' Care for the Schools: The Relation between Church and School in Historical Perspective

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Introduction

Readers familiar with the Church Order know that it deals almost exclusively with matters pertaining to the orderly function of the congregations. Divided into four parts, the Order treats offices in the church and supervision, the assembly of consistory and broader meetings, the worship services (including the sacraments and ceremonies), and the process of Christian discipline: Even a quick reading of the Order, which appears on pages 656-676 in the *Book of Praise*, reveals that there is only a brief statement on the role of government, while nothing is said about politics, citizenship, legal matters, or society generally. The reader may be surprised, therefore, when he reaches Article 58, which is entitled "Schools:" The Church Order is based on the premise that it should deal with the good order and decent conduct of the churches only; on what grounds does it give the right, even the duty, to the consistories to ensure that parents send their children to a Christian school? In other words, how do we define the relation between church and school?

Church Order, Article 58: The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions.

One way to appreciate the relation between church and school is to trace the development of this article from the time of the early Reformed churches until today. In what follows we shall consider the circumstances in which the article was first drafted, and what the original intention of it was. Next we shall consider the interpretation of the article at selected points in the history of the Dutch Reformed Churches, noting especially the changes it has experienced. We shall observe

that over time the churches redefined the roles of the parents, the congregation, and the consistory regarding the education of the youth. Despite the changes, however, the article has always expressed the importance of the care the churches must bestow upon the schools.

Church and school in the early Dutch Reformed Churches

For much of the sixteenth century, Roman Catholicism was the official religion in The Netherlands. Consequently, all schools were operated by the Roman Catholic Church, which provided the oversight and instruction of the children. However, as the Reformation spread in the Lowlands during the 1560s, governments first tolerated and then promoted Protestantism. The authorities increasingly turned to the Reformed churches to replace the monks and nuns

who taught in the day-schools. Nearly all teachers had been raised in the Romanist faith; many knew or cared little about the Reformation. Moreover, there were many parents who did not see the need of sending their children to school, preferring instead to benefit from their labour. By means of co-operation between church and state, however, good and Reformed education could be promoted. Thus in the last decades of the sixteenth century, a relationship developed between the government and the Reformed churches regarding the appointment and remuneration of school teachers. Consequently, the early synods encouraged local consistories to be vigilant about the beliefs of the teachers and the substance of their instruction.

*Article 21 Order of Dort:
“Everywhere consistories shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters, who shall not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and in the catechism.”*

When the government throughout The Netherlands changed from Romanist to Protestant, the Synod of Dordrecht (1578) decided that “effort shall be made that everywhere schools be established in which children learn not only eloquence and the arts, but are taught also and especially the Christian Catechism and be led towards the preaching (Chapter 3)” This statement may appear to suggest that it became the duty of local consistories to establish and operate day-schools.

Given the social and political climate as depicted above, however, it is clear that this decision encourages consistories to appeal to the governing authorities to effect the changes, and to collaborate with them in this matter. The churches wished that the government would appoint teachers who professed the Protestant faith, were members in a Reformed church, demonstrated an ability to teach the Heidelberg Catechism in the classroom, and who were under the supervision of local consistories. While the churches would recommend suitable teachers, the government would provide salaries and other resources.

The churches’ desire for involvement in the schools via the government is perhaps understandable in the circumstances, but it was based on the unbiblical principle that the state is responsible for the instruction of the youth. On the other hand, the early churches rightly saw that learning (expressed by Dordrecht as “eloquence and the arts”) cannot be divorced from faith, which is summarized in the catechism and conveyed by means of preaching. The Reformed faith holds that what is taught during the week must accord with what is taught on Sunday.

The Church Order of Dort

Article 58 in our Church Order began its career as Article 21 in the order composed by the Synod of Dort (1618-19), as follows: “Everywhere consistories shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters, who shall not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and in the Catechism.”

First a point about the location of Article 21 in the context of this Church Order. It occurs in the section that treats the offices in the church, in particular the task of the elders. From the wording of this Article, too, one may be led to think that consistories were deemed directly responsible for the appointment and supervision of schoolteachers. However, at the time societies were still unknown, and schools were controlled by municipal governments assisted by local consistories. Thus the article encourages consistories to influence civic authorities, causing them to appoint teachers who are both good and Reformed. The phrase “reading,

writing, languages, and the liberal arts” which can be traced back to the order of Calvin’s Geneva, refers to the subjects that were to be taught in the schools. The synod desired that the curriculum of the schools be well-suited to meet the needs of society. Yet as intellectual and vocational training involves developing moral behaviour that is grounded in an understanding and acceptance of the Christian faith, the article enjoins teachers to promote godliness and knowledge of the Catechism.

Readers may find the explicit and repeated reference to the Heidelberg Catechism in the official statements of the early Dutch Reformed Churches surprising, but it reflects both the purposes for which the catechism was composed and the role it played in the homes, churches, and schools of the Reformation era. In fact, the Synod of Dort planned there to be a domestic and an educational version of the Catechism. This latter version for use in schools was to exist of the following three editions:

1) a booklet of six chapters for younger pupils; 2) an anthology of key questions and answers from the Heidelberg Catechism; and 3) a complete edition of the Catechism for the senior students. We shall have occasion to return to the topic of the link between the catechism and day-schools in the second instalment of this article; it will suffice for now to state that the early churches viewed the catechism as a key link in the chain that binds church and school.

Article 235, Synod of Dordrecht (1893):

“The Synod expresses the desire that schools, because they are to be established not by the churches but by the parents, be acknowledged by the government as Associations.”

School visitation

When dealing with particular questions posed to it, the Synod of Dort determined that the local minister, together with an elder or a member of the town council, should visit the schools regularly in order to supervise the teaching of the Christian faith by means of the Catechism; they were to encourage both teachers and students, and to reprimand slothful or impious teachers, reporting them to the authorities if necessary. In many places it became customary for ministers to teach catechism at school. This narrow bond between church and school was expressed also by Article 54 of the Dort Order, which required that school-masters, much like elders and deacons, sign a form of subscription, promising to uphold the doctrine of the church in their teaching and conduct. Later generations would realize that instructors of day-schools do not hold biblically ordained offices in the church, and this article - which also has its roots in Calvin’s Geneva - was later dropped from Reformed church orders.

At the time of Dort, however, this close collaboration of teachers and ministers was encouraged further in Article 41, which treats the duties of the church visitors regarding all who had signed subscription forms: “The task of the church visitors is to ascertain whether the instructors, consistories, and schoolmasters faithfully perform their duties, remain true to the doctrine, maintain the accepted church order in every respect, and promote the edification of the congregation, including the children, as required ... and by their advice and action direct everything to the benefit of the churches and schools:”

The exclusion of parents, however, is the underlying error in this configuration of church, state and school in the early seventeenth century.

The exclusion of parents, however, is the underlying error in this configuration of church, state and school in the early seventeenth century. Given the social and political customs of the time, it is perhaps understandable that government and church collaborated; but according to Scripture and the confessions, under normal circumstances the church should not involve itself in the operation of a school system. This relationship suppressed the responsibilities of parents towards their children. Fortunately this parental duty was realized later in the history of the Dutch Reformed Churches, as we shall see below. And in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the error did not have serious consequences, since nearly all participants in government belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, professed their faith, and sought to live holy lives.

However, as time passed, and as worldly philosophies and secular thinking (such as humanism) infiltrated society and the educational system, it became clear that the state could not be relied upon to oversee the schools. More importantly, during the eighteenth century the secularization of government increased, as did the notion that children are under guardianship of the state. Thus believers realized that the Bible does not give the responsibility of raising children to the state, but to the parents and the community of God's covenant. Moreover, they perceived from Scripture that church and state have separate jurisdictions in the kingdom of God. The task of the government is to maintain good order in civil affairs, to promote peace, and to punish those who break the law; the church is to preach the gospel, to show mercy, and to govern the elect in God's name. And instruction in the faith is not to be equated with education generally.

Nineteenth century developments

It took some time for this correction to take place, as one can imagine, and it was not until the nineteenth century that the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands changed the definition of the relation between church and school. A synod held in 1891 determined that normally it is inadvisable for churches to establish schools. Article 235 of the Acts of the Synod held at Dordrecht in 1893 also reveals the change in thinking: "The Synod expresses the desire that schools, because they are to be established not by the churches but by the parents, be acknowledged by the government as Associations."

The reader will have grasped that the Synod was concerned about the official recognition of school-societies by the government. Besides this expression of desired accreditation, however, this article states explicitly that supervision of the schools is the mandate of Christian parents, not the church. Despite this shift from governmental to parental support of education, the churches rightly maintained that the care of the elders extends to the education of the youth. Their concern in this matter, however, is to be impressed not upon the state, but upon the parents. Briefly stated, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands perceived the duties of the elders towards the schools to be as follows: 1) They must encourage parents to fulfil their covenant obligations towards God for the children He entrusts to them; 2) they must exercise supervision over the children, whose membership in the covenant is signed and sealed by their baptism, and must promote nurture and training that accords with God's Word. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century the churches' definition of their relation to the schools had been improved in light of the Bible's teaching about the upbringing and education of the children of believers. In the next instalment we shall pursue the development in this relationship further, tracing the interpretation of the Article concerning the churches' care for the schools to the modern era.

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Introduction

In the first instalment of this article we examined the changing relationship between church and school from the beginning of the Dutch Reformed Churches until the end of 1800s. It was noted that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the churches sought to influence the state, which was deemed to be responsible for the education of the youth. Cooperating with various levels of government, the consistories exercised supervision over schools by recommending the appointment of teachers, and by supervising instruction. Article 58 of the Church Order, which states that the consistory shall ensure that parents have their children attend a school where instruction is in harmony with the Word of God, was first assigned to the duties of the elders. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the Dutch Reformed Churches realized that the responsibility for education lies not with the state but with the parents of the children. By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, the relationship between consistories and schools was expressed in the biblical terms of God's covenant with his people and their offspring.

In what follows, we shall trace the history of the relationship between church and school from the late nineteenth century until the present time, observing that the Canadian Reformed Churches have maintained the emphasis on the churches' care for the schools. Although the article pertaining to the schools has been moved from the section in the Order dealing with the offices in the church to the one about the sacraments, the expression of the elders' duty in encouraging parents to provide Christian education for their children remains. As we shall see, the parents' responsibility rests especially upon the vows performed at the baptism of their children. The nurture in the home, the instruction at school, and the indoctrination of the church work together in effecting a life that in its entirety is devoted to the service and worship of God. This harmony is expressed by the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 38, in the phrase, "the ministry of the gospel and the schools". We shall conclude that the harmony of school and church rests in the basic teaching of the Christian faith that every aspect of life is governed by the teaching of God's Word, the Bible.

The twentieth century

The reconsideration of the relation between church and school that developed since the Reformation culminated in the early twentieth century with a report about Article 21 to the General Synod held in Leeuwarden (1920). This report defined the responsibilities of the elders regarding the schooling of the youth as follows:

1. Schooling is the responsibility of the parents, not of the state or the church. The Bible teaches that instruction of the children is, in the first place, the task of the parents (Gen 17:7, Deut 4:9- 10; 6:7,24; Eph 6:4; Col 3:20-21 , etc.). The consistory supervises the doctrine in church and home, and the latter by extension also in school.
2. The calling of the consistory is to encourage parents to establish schools in places where such do not exist. The ongoing reformation of the church extends to the ongoing reformation of schools.
3. Supervision of consistory over instruction is desirable, for three reasons. As the foundation of parental school-societies is the Bible (and the Confessions), the elders must see to it that nothing is taught contrary to this foundation. Elders also should encourage parents to keep their baptismal promise to have their child instructed in the faith. Parents and teachers, as confessing members in the congregation, are subject to the oversight and discipline of the church; also their conduct and teaching in the service of the schools falls under this supervision.

4. The consistories' supervision does not concern the curriculum, hours of instruction, and other features of the schools' operation, but the biblical and confessional substance in the instruction. All subjects are to be taught in accordance with the Word of God.
5. The manner in which supervision is exercised is determined by mutual input of school board and consistory: the former should acknowledge the role of the consistory, and determine whether it is best that elders serve on the school board, or whether the consistory should appoint a committee for such supervision.
6. If there are concerns of a religious or spiritual nature at school, the advice of consistory should be received.

The General Synod of Leeuwarden approved the recommendations in this report and decided moreover that a change in the wording of Article 21 (CO Dort) was not required. It may have struck the reader that while the report expresses a formal distinction between the roles of the church and the school, it recommends considerable direct involvement of the consistory in the education of the youth, thereby playing down the autonomy of the schoolteachers. It is clear that the weight of the interpretation of Article 21 in the history of the churches, and especially the long-standing participation of consistory in the operation of schools, was felt even at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet one may note also that whereas this report grants too much involvement to the consistory, it correctly expresses the duties of the church towards the school in biblical terms.

Relocation of the article concerning schools

As the twentieth century progressed, the churches perceived that Article 21, located in the section on the offices in the church and the duties of elders in particular, was in the wrong place. Schooling is not the mandate of the church, but of the parents. First in The Netherlands, and then in Canada - following a report requested by General Synod at Coaldale (1977) - Article 21 was moved to a different section of the Church Order, namely the part dealing with the sacraments. The wording of the article remained largely unchanged, and the statement that consistories shall ensure that parents send their children to a Christian school was left unaltered. But what about the new location of the article?

Form for Baptism:

“do you promise, as father and mother, to instruct your child in this doctrine ... and to have her instructed therein to the utmost of your power?”

Why, one may ask, is it found among the articles on the two sacraments? From the reports and recorded decisions of the relevant meetings, one may gather that the change occurred for the following reasons.

Article 58 now appears between the articles on Baptism and Lord's Supper. This new placement suggests (and the 1978 report states so explicitly) that education of children is to be regarded in the context of the parents' vows at baptism to instruct the child in the Christian doctrine. Following Article 58 is a treatment of the Lord's Supper; with God's grace, the parents' instruction in doctrine and godliness will lead the child to her profession of faith and consequent participation in the sacrament. Although the parents' care for the child does not cease entirely when she professes her faith, the principle purpose for their vow to instruct their child has been achieved. (For this reason, too, the elders' care for the education of the youth pertains primarily to elementary and secondary education) One will recall the words in the Form for Baptism: “do you promise, as father and mother, to instruct your child in this doctrine ... and to have her instructed therein to the utmost of your power?”

Here “doctrine” refers especially to the teaching of the Christian faith, that is of the Old and New Testament, summarized in the confessions, and taught in the church. This second baptismal vow means that parents instruct their child in the home, encourage her to read the Bible for herself, bring her to church where she will receive indoctrination from the pulpit, and send her to catechism classes, while also encouraging her to attend the young people’s society and similar functions.

Now the question may arise, “if the baptismal promise pertains to the doctrine taught in the church, why does the Church Order place the article on schooling next to the one on infant baptism?” The answer is that instruction is the common denominator linking church, home, and school. Insofar as the promise affects schooling, it would be inadvisable for parents to execute the vow by sending their child for five days of the week to a non-Christian school, where instruction is secular, while bringing the child to church on Sunday in order to have her taught from the Word of God. To express this inter-relation of church and school in theological terms: the Reformed faith assumes that all of life is a unity. John Calvin, and especially Abraham Kuyper after him, stressed that one cannot divide life into spiritual and secular, as though what one does during the week need not be permeated by God’s grace so evident on Sunday. Christ has laid claim over every aspect of life. In the context of education this means that the instruction by the teachers must accord with the instruction by the minister. Thus the baptismal vow to instruct the child and have her instructed pertains to the doctrine of Scripture as it pervades all nurture and education of the child. From the perspective of the consistory: the elders are concerned about the spiritual welfare of the congregation not on the Sunday only, but also during the entire week.

The ministry of the gospel and the schools

The harmony between what is taught in church and what is taught during the week, is expressed by the Heidelberg Catechism. This is not surprising, for as we observed in the first instalment of this article, the Heidelberg Catechism is a manual of instruction intended for use at school, home, and church. In Lord’s Day 38, which deals with the fourth commandment (regarding the Sunday), the question “what does God require in the fourth commandment?” is answered thus: “first that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained.”¹ One interpretation is that the schools referred to are only theological colleges, where men are trained in order to proclaim the Gospel that is so central to the Sunday. Of course, establishing and supporting theological schools serves the ministry of the gospel. In his brief commentary on this phrase in the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus focuses on this aspect, noting that for the preservation of the ecclesiastical ministry the arts and sciences must be taught properly; schooling is important for future ministers who must be qualified to teach and to refute heresy.

The intent of the catechism

Whereas it is clear that the phrase “ministry of the schools” refers to theological colleges, there are three reasons why it may be concluded that Christian day-schools are included also: 1) the original text and context of the words; 2) the interpretation of it by the early Dutch Reformed Churches; and 3) the explanation of it in this two-fold sense by Abraham Kuyper. The Heidelberg Catechism was included in the Church Order of the Palatinate in Germany (1563). The original title of this order was “Catechism, or Christian instruction, which shall be provided in the Churches and Schools of the Palatinate”² In the first edition of the catechism, included in the list of professions addressed by this Order are schoolmasters (“*Schuldienern*,” p 138); moreover in the received text of the fourth edition, the address includes the following: “all and every one of our Superintendents, Pastors, Preachers, Churches, and Schoolmasters ...”³

³ What is more, in the section of the Palatinate Church Order that introduces the Catechism,

one reads that “all believers from the beginning of the Christian church onwards strove to instruct their children in the fear of the Lord in School and Church.”⁴ Thus when the first readers of Lord’s Day 38 encountered the phrase “ministry of the gospel and the schools,” they perceived that day schools for the youth as well as other institutions of learning were meant.

Interpretation in the early Dutch churches

Also the early Dutch Reformed churches perceived that schools as well as theological colleges are included in the phrase “ministry of the gospel and the schools.” For example, the Synod of Dordrecht (1578), in a chapter entitled “Concerning Schools” (Chapter 3), in one breath treats instruction in elementary schools, the encouragement of young men to study for the ministry, and theological colleges.⁵ This progression from education at the elementary, secondary, and theological levels, was understood as normal and appropriate. Similarly, the Synod of Middelburg (1581) links general education with theological training in Act 12, which determines that there should be “professors and schoolmasters, who teach not only the liberal arts and eloquence, but also theology and the catechism; the professors instil theology, the latter catechism, and altogether their students in piety.” In other words, the link between elementary and higher education, which was generally less distinguished during the sixteenth century than it is today, was common and natural. In the German reformation (which had considerable impact upon the composition of the Catechism), it was the norm that a close relationship between church and school be effected by the teacher, who questioned students about the sermon they had heard on Sunday, and instructed them in the Catechism. In fact, the wording of the answer in Lord’s Day 38 reflects that of several earlier school-constitutions. The reformation of church and ministry was combined with the reformation of school. So when the phrase “support of the schools” occurs in Lord’s Day 38, it was understood at the time to mean elementary day-schools as well as schools of higher education.

We have dedicated some space to a discussion of the phrase “ministry ... of the schools” in Lord’s Day 38 because we wished to show that the Catechism expresses the importance of not separating instruction in the schools from that in the church. We may deduce from the Catechism that it is the duty of the elders to supervise what is taught in the church and to care for what is taught in school.

Abraham Kuyper

Of the several modern leaders in the Reformed churches who stress the link between church and school on the basis of Lord’s Day 38, we select only one. Abraham Kuyper, in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, dedicates a chapter to the phrase, “maintaining the ministry... of the schools,” explaining it as referring to training for ecclesiastical ministry as well as at Christian day schools.”⁶ First Kuyper explains the phrase in light of its historical context: the Catechism reveals the error of the spiritualist or Anabaptist position, prevalent in the sixteenth century, which devalues intellectual learning and champions the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the only requirement for the preacher. However, those who are to become ministers must receive rigorous training at all levels. Kuyper goes on to argue that not only he who speaks, but also those who listen to the preaching must be properly educated, so that all the riches of the gospel may be received. In fact, the phrase in the Catechism applies to every kind of education and to the preparation for every vocation to which God calls each child. So that what is preached on the Sunday (i.e., the fourth commandment of Lord’s Day 38) and what is taught during the week may work towards the common goal, the “ministry of the gospel and the schools” must be maintained.

Instruction in harmony with the Word

We have dwelt upon Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism in order to appreciate that the confession expresses the nature of the relationship between church and school in terms of the distinct but co-ordinated functions of preaching and teaching. Now we return to Article 58 of the Church Order and consider lastly the final clause, "where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions".

In light of the link which the Catechism draws between church and school, this clause may be interpreted as expressing the point at which these institutions join. The article instructs elders to see to it that what is taught during the week does not contradict or undermine what is proclaimed from the pulpit on Sundays and taught in Catechism classes. The responsibilities of the parents (in fulfilling their baptismal vows), of the consistory (in supervising doctrine), and of the school (in providing an education in accordance with the Bible) must be executed in harmony. Kuyper rightly points to the significance of the antithesis in the link between church and school: if the latter provides education that opposes the Word of God, it is an instrument of Satan and not of God. To put it positively, when church, home and school collaborate in the nurture of the children, we may be confident that the child receives the best possible training for a life of service that brings glory to God in every respect.

Conclusion

In tracing the fortunes of Article 58 of the Church Order, we have seen that in the early history of the Dutch Reformed Churches there existed the notion that the state, with the assistance of the church, is responsible for education. Over time, it was realized in light of Scripture that the primary responsibility for upbringing lies with the parents; the churches relinquished their direct control over the schools. Lest we regard this history with the arrogance of the modern, however, I would suggest that we are living in a time when many Reformed believers underestimate the importance of the link between church and school, and of the significance of collaboration between home, church and school in the nurture and education of children. Throughout history, and despite the changing social and political circumstances, the churches have rightly insisted that parents send their children to schools where instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God; for the spiritual and earthly realms are one. This unity of life is proclaimed from the pulpit, explained in the home, and taught in the school.

¹ Readers of German will wish to note the original text, taken from the edition of W Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen* (Munich, 1938): "Gott will erstlich dasz das Predigamt und Schulen erhalten werden" (p 175). Future references to the original text of the Catechism derive from this edition.

² In German: "Catechismus oder Christlicher Unterricht, wie der in der Kirchen und Schulen der Churfurstlichen Pfaltz getrieben wird" (Niesel, 136). The title of the Latin translation likewise included schools: "Catechesis ... quae traditur in ecclesiis et scholis Palatinatus" (Niesel, 137).

³ "... allen und jeden unseren Superintendenten Pfarherren Predigem Kirchen und Schuldienern unsers Churfurstenthumbs der Pfaltzgrauffschaft bey Rheyn." (Niesel, 140).

⁴ "Dann es haben alle Gottseligen von anbeginn der Christlichen kirchen sich beflissen ihre kinder daheim in Schulen und Kirchen in der forcht des Herrn zu underweisen one zweifel ausz nachfolgenden ursachen welche uns auch billig darzu bewegen sollen." (Niesel, 148).

⁵ J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Documenta Reformatoria*, vol. I (Kampen Kok, 19060), p. 198.

⁶ A Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno. Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*. Vol. 4 (Kampen, 4th edition, n.d.), p. 32-39.