

School Reflections and Psalm 78

Years ago, before there was a John Calvin School in Albany, at an Association meeting, the late Gerrit Olde laughed out aloud about our pitiful school contributions, stating that if we ever got a school off the ground, it would still take ages with the then current donations. I cannot remember how many years he had calculated but he demonstrated it to be a fruitless exercise. Consequently, fees went up substantially at that meeting, to the point where we could already have church services and Bible study meetings in the new school building before we came to Armadale in 1961.

It did mean lots of penny-pinching – yes, we had pennies in those days, plus some other now strange denominations. Many of the congregation earned only a basic wage. As migrants with lots of language difficulties we were at the bottom of the employment heap taking whatever jobs were available. Plus, there were the ‘union difficulties.’ Several church members were sacked because they would not join a trade union, for this reason my dad was fired twice and mum, as public-school cleaner was dismissed for the same reason. When we moved to Armadale the school there had advanced further than Albany’s, opening its doors to students in late 1957, although the building was not yet big enough for church services, we still had those in the Armadale Town Hall.

How did these buildings come about? It was by the Lord’s blessing and a concerted effort by the whole congregation. As youths we considered it quite normal to hand our wages to mum and to receive some pocket money back plus enough to contribute to ‘school and church,’ only small donations but there was a principle involved. I started off earning £3.2.6, that is three pounds, two shillings and six pence. In today’s money equal to \$6.25, but its buying power was considerably greater. For instance, at the garage where I worked petrol cost 36 cents per imperial gallon, roughly 4.5 litres, converted into our values.

You might ask yourself why, if money was so tight, why establish schools at all. Was the public system so bad. And no, it was not, yet it was unacceptable in light of parental promises at the children’s baptisms. Most public-school assemblies were opened with prayer while blasphemy was seldom heard. Quite a percentage of the

population still attended various churches and ‘God save the Queen’ was played or sung at virtually every official meeting. Society was also different in other ways. Law and order was far superior to today’s lack of control. Car thefts were virtually unheard of and you could leave your pushbike anywhere without it being stolen. In the early days Armadale had only one policeman and he managed quite fine.

Don’t forget it was soon after WWII, where many service personnel had lost their lives or been wounded and specially the threat of invasion by the Japanese had caused people to go to church. Perhaps a ‘when all else fails’ attitude? This turning to God lasted for some years. But back to that question, why establish own schools. Besides having experienced WWII our early migrants had also undergone a church ‘war,’ leading to the Liberation of 1944. Our people were well versed in God’s promises to His people, including their young children. These two events coloured their reasoning. They wanted to become Australians, but they also wanted to avoid worldly influences in their children’s education. They realised that neutrality in education was not possible. It was either for God or against Him. The tolerance of worldly ideas such as Social Darwinism and Marxism were increasingly influential, and such concepts permeated various secular school subjects.

In our own schools, Bible study, church history the singing of Psalms and prayer before and after lessons held significant places in the daily order, while teachers also showed God’s hand in virtually all subjects, especially in the humanities, the study of history, religion, cultures, and communities around the world and in geography.

So, with the above in mind our early settlers brought sacrifices to establish our own schools, in Armadale, Albany and Launceston. By sacrifices I mean that other financial wants and wishes were put aside or on hold for the sake of the schools. And, it was not only the parents who made such commitments, most other adult communicant members were also members of school associations, whether they were married and had children or not. One set fee was established for all. We had some large families in our midst, most with only one bread winner, and our own schooling would have been impos-

sible for them if they had faced the full cost of education without the help of others. This system was seen as a Christian duty and members were repeatedly reminded



of this from all three pulpits.

Compared to today, classroom conditions were quite primitive and often overcrowded. For teachers who had been taught and trained in the Netherlands it took a lot of effort to effectively teach in English as well as instructing students in Australian geography and history and imperial measurements; all according to the mandatory Australian curriculum. As the number of students grew, the need for additional classrooms, and extra staff was urgent for several years.

We now have abundant government funding; in fact, a very large percentage of the schools' income comes from subsidies. But, the early schools were financed from own pockets, and sometimes this led to humorous situations. At one Armadale School Association meeting while the treasurer presented the budget, a voice piped up asking why the planned cost of stationary was higher than that of the year past. All the same, it also led to uninformed and unwarranted criticism by some regarding the running of the school and the people involved. For instance, when some subjects were not taught due to staff shortages or other constraints some people went so far as to send their children to other schools. Future career prospects were obviously more important for such people than an education based on Scripture.

Let me include a short meditation on Psalm 78:1-4.

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
2 I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
3 things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
4 We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.*

These verses express the reason for, as well as the purpose of educating our children and our calling to

pass on to them, what we have learned from previous generations. Speaking about God and His mighty deeds to His covenant children is both a privilege and a duty. Together we are included in His covenant of grace. God has allowed us to become acquainted with His might, His majesty, His love as well as His demands. He has favoured us above all who live in the darkness of ignorance, by the simple fact that we are His, and there is more and more of this gloom in today's Australia. While we live in this country, we have an enormous blessing that sets us apart; Christ has died for us. As members of His church, we may refer to one another as brothers and sisters and as a communion of saints. We are set apart, meaning holy.

This implies that we have a clear biblical calling to pass our knowledge and insights on to our offspring. Doing so clearly amounts to Christian education. It starts at home, usually with the mother as early childhood teacher and with the father to facilitate instructions and to support his wife. However, there is also a devil out there whose main purpose is to capture as many of God's children as he can. All the same, God is mightier than Satan and He uses humble parents and teachers for His purpose.

The author of Psalm 78 continues: *"We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done."* What are we to teach? In brief, we are to instruct our children about the kingdom of God. About His all-encompassing reign over the whole universe. This is dealt in all of Scripture. Psalm 103:19 says, *"The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."*

The state, especially our Labor government, does not regard and treat children as the parents' responsibility, but as a resource for the common good, as a commodity, and it wants them to be educated accordingly. From early childhood right through to the end of their schooling their education philosophy is diametrically opposed to covenantal education where God sees our children as His children. Already before their baptism God lays His claim on them and expresses this clearly in that sacrament. In keeping with the verses 3 and 4, parents make promises regarding their son or daughter's inclusion in the covenant. God's kingdom, not the world's, sets the agenda for Christian education. Everything taught in the Christian school is to be imparted from the perspective that God's Name is upon it.

Therefore, it is critical that teachers are both committed to and knowledgeable about God's demands in His Word.

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