

Christian Education Today

The Christian Reformed Church and its 2005 synodical Report

"The Committee to Study Christian Day School Education" presented the 2005 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) with a lengthy and thorough report. This commendable report should be read not only by the CRC leadership but by all Reformed church leaders. The concern expressed in this report is the seeming decline in full support of Christian day school education within CRC congregations. And there are concerns about the strength of CRC's Reformed identity, its understanding of it, and its commitment to it.

From the beginning of its nearly 150-year history, the CRC has been identified with a strong and enthusiastic commitment to Christian day school education. The CRC has not only consistently supported the cause of Christian day schools in principle but has also repeatedly reaffirmed active church involvement and support by requiring office-bearers to promote the cause as well as assist with various means of financial support for parents. This active support is expected from office-bearers in Church Order Article 71, which has been regularly confirmed by synodical statements and decisions.

Times have changed since the 1950s when school support was still strong. An increasingly secular society and culture, the growing availability of educational choice by parents, and the push for the CRC to become more outward directed and evangelistically minded led to some erosion of awareness of Reformed identity.

Secularism presents a major threat to Christian education at all levels. Great changes have also taken place in the public school system. Secularism has banned religion from the public schools. The report points out that today "by law and design public school may not and cannot provide a Christian interpretation of God's world to children nor should we expect them to do so." But the report also shows that Christians are not immune from the negative, anti-Christian spirit of our times. When the vision for the Reformed worldview fades within our communities, we, too, are vulnerable to the seductions of secularism and are tempted to privatize our faith. The report notes: "We must honestly face that our churches and schools may have been subtly influenced and transformed by the idols of our culture into their deforming images. To the extent that contemporary idols such as materialism, consumerism, and hedonism gain footholds in our faith communities, we may see declining commitment to and support for Reformed Christian day schools."

The secular spirit, which is so pervasive in the public schools, has inspired an increasing number of evangelical Christians to take up the cause of Christian education and start alternative schools. The report states that at a time when evangelicals in North America are establishing a remarkable number of Christian alternatives to public school education, often without adequate theological or philosophical foundations, Reformed Christians have a solemn obligation to the kingdom of Christ to share the insights of this rich history of practice and reflection. "We would not be wrong in considering Christian

education as the CRC's great gift to North American Christianity. We who are the legatees of that rich heritage have a divine calling to be its responsible stewards."

The report faces head-on the tensions in the CRC between evangelism and supporting Christian day schools. It shows there is no conflict between the two. In the Reformed understanding of Christian discipleship, following Jesus is not restricted to a personal and private matter of one's soul. Jesus is Lord and it is as Lord that he calls the church to disciple the nations. North America is a mission field. The obligation to reach out to the lost in our near midst has always been with us, but the imperative to do so becomes even more clear in our day when the growth of secularism, renewed paganism, and the active presence of all the world's major world religions is on our doorstep. In that context, the report notes that the mere presence of Christian day schools in our public square is by itself an evangelistic witness to the power of the gospel of the kingdom of God. CRC churches have a responsibility to be active in support of Christian day school education and to engage in the work of evangelism. It is a serious error to posit one of these responsibilities over against the other in order to diminish its importance or discourage participation by members of the congregation. The report notes: "Support for Christian education should never be used to undermine the work of evangelism, and evangelistic outreach should never be given as a ground for failing to support Christian day school education." In response to the report the CRC Synod declared: "CRC mission activity around the world is to be guided by an integral vision of Christian discipleship with a view toward establishing solid families and communities and Christian day schools as well as worshipping congregations."

The report observes that Reformed churches need well-educated leaders, leaders who have a good grasp of the Reformed worldview in its many applications to life in today's complex society. Church leaders who are ignorant of or hostile to the Reformed worldview will not be effective leaders of Reformed churches. But of special concern to the authors of the report is the high percentage of CRC councils who disagree that the baptismal vows require parents to send their children to Christian schools and also disagree that the baptismal vow implies congregational financial support for parents of school age children. This means, in effect, that Church Order Article 71 is effectively disregarded by 75% of CRC churches. The report challenges CRC pastors to wholeheartedly support Christian education from the pulpit. It states that the CRC pulpit is too often silent or muted in support for Christian education. "If so, then it is even more urgent that CRC preaching be powerfully directed at proclaiming the lordship of Jesus Christ and releasing us from our captivity to the age's fashions and idols." Pastors and church members should not be led by fear of running the risk of offending new members who have no experience with Christian education. In fact, this is not the time for the CRC to mute its voice in support of Christian education but to raise the volume.

The report also points to the ever-rising cost of Christian day school education as one of the biggest challenges facing Christian schools, especially in jurisdictions where Christian schools receive no government funding. But the CRC also needs to remind itself that sacrificial giving for Christian education has been a hallmark of the CRC tradition. Furthermore, Christian day school education is both a communal responsibility

and a parental commitment. As the CRC looks to the future to fulfill the congregation's vows at baptism, it must consider specific means of financial help so that all the church's children may learn a Reformed Christian pattern of discipleship in the home, church, and Christian day school.

The CRC synod overwhelmingly accepted the report and reaffirmed its support of Reformed day-school education. Synod demonstrated its reaffirmation of this support by adopting a change to Church Order Article 71: "The council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools in which the biblical, Reformed vision of Christ's lordship over all of creation is clearly taught. The council shall also urge parents to have their children educated in harmony with this vision according to the demands of the covenant."

What impact will the report have on the CRC and Christian day schools? Although school administrators warmly welcomed it, some expressed doubt whether it will make any difference in the long run. Bill Lodewyk, president of Elim Christian Services in Palos Heights, Ill., questioned whether synod's actions will have much effect. ' He said: "Announcements from synod aren't taking precedence, especially in seeker churches. Pastors are going to think twice about pushing Christian education." I believe that his fear is justified. For example, Rev. Hogendoorn, when he accepted an invitation from Christian Reformed Missions to begin a new church, made a decision not to send his children to a Christian school. He said, "We soon realized that all our new neighbors were involved in the local public school. They spent time and built relationships in the school community. We realized that if we were going to build relationships and establish credibility with them, we need to be part of that setting as well. Our decision was essentially missiological." Ron DeBoer, superintendent of Central Minnesota Christian Schools in Prinsburg, said that it was very important that synod passed the report. He observed: "Now let's see if the ministers support it in their preaching. Will the ministers dare to preach it where there are people involved with public schools, Christian schools, and home schooling? That's always been the challenge."

The report observes that if Reformed Christian education is to flourish, the church must repay the favour and support Reformed day schools. The CRC and Reformed Christian education need each other and should support each other in their common commitment to Christ's rule over all things, including culture and society. The CRC needs now more than ever Reformed day school education.

Johan D. Tangelder
September, 2005