

The CRC and Christian Day Schools: Principles and Practice

Preface

I originally researched and wrote on this topic for another class. That paper lacked much of the early history of the CRC, not least because many of the records were in Dutch. I chose to expand that document in order to tie the more recent discussions to their historical roots. It's my hope that this paper might somehow serve in other venues beyond class requirements. Thus, I submit particularly the first main section or so of this paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for CRC History 332, and include the two latter sections for the sake of completeness.

Introduction

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has long had a commitment to Christian education, both in day schools and higher education. This commitment reaches deep into our history. It was forged in our deliberations on the necessity, content, structure, scope, and value of the church's role in the education of its children. This paper seeks to survey briefly the historical record¹ in order to reveal the principles we hold regarding Christian education, the tensions of living those principles in a practical way, and the difficulty of keeping principles and practices separate.

Two Current Articles

The current Church Order (CO) contains two articles directly concerning the church's commitment to Christian education. **Article 71**² states in prescriptive terms the duty of each congregation to support such efforts.

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 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.**^{3,4}

Article 41 restates the duty in terms of **accountability**. Local congregations are accountable to each other in their support of Christian education.⁵ The article lists education alongside the major tasks of discipline, stewardship, and evangelism, asking, "Does the council diligently promote the cause of Christian education from elementary school through institutions of higher learning?"⁶

¹ Especially the official church documents, e.g., the Church Order, Acts of Synod, and their progenitors.

² All bolded emphasis is the author's, even in quotes, offered for clarity of argument.

³ Christian Reformed Church., *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2003). 19

⁴ Article 71 was revised in 2003 and has yet to be ratified by a future synod. The older form mentioned Christian day schools in particular, and was revised to include the home-schooling movement.

⁵ Christian Reformed Church., David H. Engelhard, and Leonard J. Hofman, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church government*, 2001 revision. ed. (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 2001). Article 41

⁶ Christian Reformed Church., *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2003). 13

Evident Principles

The very presence of these articles stakes a claim that the church indeed has a role in the academic formation of its children beyond basic catechesis. As stated in article 71, the necessity for this role is rooted in a **covenantal understanding** of children of believers as members of God's church. Explicitly expressed in the promises of baptism, the church and especially parents are committed to discipling youth to fully-formed faith. The *content* of that discipleship is expressed as the **Lordship of Christ** over all things. Christ is Lord not only of religion, but all areas, including science, art, literature, business, and domestic life.

Yet this understanding was not always clear. As the CRC has sought throughout its history to articulate and enact these principles, it has struggled with the tensions of structure and scope. It is rooted in covenantal baptism, but who bears the responsibility—**parents or the congregation**? It expresses the Lordship of Christ in all of life, but do separate schools promote elitism and **separation from society**? It is important, but **how important** in relation to other duties of the church? Moreover, these tensions are felt most pointedly when expressed in **financial terms**. Questions of **who pays for what** has often driven the discernment of what is a formational principle and what is merely pragmatic structure.

Early Period: Necessity and Establishment

The religious traditions that gave rise to the CRC already valued Christian education centuries before the CRC organized. When the CRC took form the late 19th century, it struggled first to formulate its understanding of Christian education, particularly in an American context, and then to establish appropriate school structures.

Before the CRC

While the Reformation was in full swing across Europe in the sixteenth century, several synods in the Netherlands addressed Christian education in some way, and generally understood it to be a task of the Church.⁷ The synod at the Hague (1586) and particularly the Synod of Dort (1618-19) included church provisions for school administration.⁸ In a context without church-state separation, there was understanding that “the [state] government maintained and supported the schools, but established and supervised them through the Church of the realm.”⁹ Our current CO Article 71 traces its history to Article 21 of the 17th century Church Order of Dort.

Everywhere consistories shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters, who not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages and the liberal arts, but likewise godliness and in the Catechism.

From the very roots of the Reformation, this church order (which the CRC adopted wholesale in its early years) articulated that (1) **education is a necessary component** of Christian nurturing of children, (2) **the church has a structural responsibility** in education, particularly in administration issues, and (3) the educational **content includes all elements of intellect and piety**.

⁷ John H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: a study in orthodoxy* (Baker Book House, 1949). 134, citing an article in *De Gereformeerde Amerikaan*, Vol 1 (May 1897), pp149f.

⁸ Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary: a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967). 272

⁹ George Stob, "The Christian Reformed Church and her schools" (1955).

Two hundred years later, the Dutch leaders who had left the liberal state church in 1834 and would eventually lead the immigration to America in 1847 clearly had schools in mind as an **important component of the religious society** they hoped to construct. Just as they had rejected the state Church, they rejected the Dutch public schools. State schools were supposed to have been Christian, but were in fact neglectful, if not hostile, to religion.¹⁰ Since these school structures were inadequate in content, these leaders sought to **establish “free” schools**, established by the Church without support or control from the state.¹¹ The chance to educate their children in free Christian schools became “an important consideration in inducing the settlers of 1847 to emigrate from the Netherlands.”¹² In contemplating potential territories for immigration, they rejected settling in the East Dutch Indies, for example, because they could not guarantee freedom in both Church and School matters for their people from the Dutch governors.¹³

In 1846, Brummelkamp and Van Raalte wrote a letter to “The Believers in the United States of North America” sketching their vision for their immigrants to “form village communities of their own, so that they could be in a position to found Christian schools.” These schools would **not necessarily be church-owned**, but would present “Christian Instruction according to the interpretation of the Dutch Calvinists.” As a motivation for immigration, quality schools were second only to the continued mental and physical hardships they suffered under persecution.¹⁴

In short, as suggested by the principles of Dort, the immigrants affirmed Christian Education as a **major and necessary component of the Christian life** they hoped to live. They saw the

¹⁰ Albert Hyma, *Albertus C. Van Raalte and his Dutch settlements in the United States* (W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1947). 49

¹¹ George Stob, "The Christian Reformed Church and her schools" (1955). 11

¹² John H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: a study in orthodoxy* (Baker Book House, 1949). 134..

¹³ Albert Hyma, *Albertus C. Van Raalte and his Dutch settlements in the United States* (W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1947). 46

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 54f.

church and school as intimately related. Furthermore, the key motivation was the Christian *content* of education, prompting innovation in *structure*. Free schools and even immigration became useful structures to achieve the goal of proper nurturing content.

Birth of the CRC

In the earliest years of the CRC, as the immigrants sought to carve an existence out of the Michigan wilderness, practical concerns were more pressing than general principles of Christian Education. In the minutes of the General Classis that met between 1857 and 1870, issues such as raising teachers,¹⁵ teaching Dutch,¹⁶ teaching English,¹⁷ and printing schoolbooks¹⁸ were most pressing. Notably, in 1861 the assembly agreed that, along with ministers, elders, and deacons, **schoolteachers must unconditionally sign the formula** for doctrinal unity, suggesting the assembly viewed teachers as officers of the church. In general, schools were not so much discussed but simply run as extensions of the church.

In 1870, the CRC for the first time directly discussed the exact relationship between school and church.¹⁹ The General Assembly declared that **the school is the nursery of and for the Church**. Therefore, each congregation is **duty-bound to establish a free school**. If free schools are not possible, they must do everything in their power to **achieve education that is both Reformed and in the Dutch language** in the public schools.²⁰ Again, we see the principle that the church has a fundamental link to the necessity of nurturing her youth. In practice, a free

¹⁵ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of General Classis, The General Classis of the Christian Reformed Church* (1857-1870). 1861-Apr-5: Art 13

¹⁶ Ibid. 1861-Feb-6: Art 10

¹⁷ Ibid. 1864-Feb-3: Art 7

¹⁸ Ibid. 1862-Feb-5: Art 13, 1864-Feb-3: Art 7, and 1866-Sep-5: Art 18

¹⁹ Ibid. 1870-Jan-20 Art 21. The first time the issue was raised, the Classis was simply directed to the Church Order and to the Catechism.

²⁰ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of General Assembly, The General Assembly of the Christian Reformed Church* (1867-1879). 1870-Jun-15: Art 36

school is the preferred *structure*, but not crucial as long as the *content* of education is fully Reformed.

Following 1870, calls for the establishment of free schools became increasingly strong.²¹ In 1873, the assembly agreed to **strongly recommend free Reformed schools** to the congregations, and to encourage congregations to take steps to bring such schools into being.²² A year later, the assembly was so convinced of the need, it **insisted “in the strongest possible way” that free schools be established.**²³ Reports were collected from the churches the following year, showing only modest progress. Notably, most of these free schools were under direct consistorial control.²⁴ In 1876, the **first financial advice** from the assembly to the churches regarding education suggested that congregations set up penny jars for open donations.²⁵

Though the assembly increasingly called for the establishment of church-controlled free schools, it did not articulate additional theological or philosophical principles on why such schools should be established. And despite these calls for action, free schools did not entirely flourish. The stridency of the calls was somewhat in response to an unresponsive populace. Synod 1881 complained that **parents on the whole did not see the need** for such education, so synod called for an awareness campaign to prepare parents and establish schools.²⁶ Synod 1882 likewise felt convicted that **“our people” have too little conception of the need and profit of Christian Education**, and the education campaign must continue.

²¹ Ibid. Calls for Free schools came even while the assembly sought to train teachers for work in public schools “from our own Reformed group.” 1871-Jun-7: Art 21 and 1872-Jun-12 Art 10

²² Ibid. 1873-Jun-11 Art 8. Sunday Schools were also to be organized in all the Churches

²³ Ibid. 1874-Jun-4: Art 10

²⁴ Ibid. 1875-Jun-2: Art 4

²⁵ Ibid. 1876-Feb-2: Art 47

²⁶ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids: 1880-1914). 1881 Art. 56

A significant component of this campaign included a series of articles appearing in the church periodical *De Wachter*.²⁷ It was here (and not the assemblies) that the philosophical debate occurred. The authors articulated several principles for Christian Education.

- The **religious welfare of the children** is the central motive and obligation.
- A school was “not just a place for education and training; it was also a place for nurture.” Children cannot be equipped for life without **faith and life integrated** at all levels.
- **The parents are primarily responsible**; school instruction is **an extension of home** instruction as promised at **baptism**.
- But *at the same time*, the **church is also responsible**, providing institutional origin and supervision for all its youth. The Church Order itself demonstrates the church has an obligation in education.
- Both a **positive education** in a Reformed worldview and a **negative protection** from other worldviews were goals.²⁸
- The teaching of Dutch and English were high priorities, though there was specifically **a desire to avoid the isolationism of a “little Netherlands”** in America. Since Dutch was the discourse of daily life and worship, instruction in the language seemed essential to proper training. Furthermore, if instruction was not in Dutch, parents

²⁷ Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed thought and experience in a new world; a study of the Christian Reformed Church and its American environment, 1890-1918* (J. H. Kok, 1973). 133-134

²⁸ A bit later, in 1892, Classis Holland overtured synod to create a college from the seminary so that more students could receive higher education under our own Reformed influences rather than secular influences. Calvin Theological Seminary., *Semi-centennial volume : Theological School and Calvin College, 1876-1926* (Published for the Semi-Centennial Committee by Tradesman Co., 1926). 128 Cf. *Acta Synodi 1892* Art 72 b.

would be unable to monitor the education of their children as they had promised at baptism.²⁹

These principles were not strongly opposed, but neither were public schools strongly criticized before 1890. The common understanding was that “with Reformed men serving on the school board, a school could be considered under churchly supervision.”³⁰

The 1890s saw a decade of extended debate on whether **free schools** or **locally-controlled public** schools were the best *structure* to nurture Reformed children specifically and build American society generally. Beginning in 1889, the arguments that had been presented earlier in *De Wachter* were vigorously reiterated by editor Boer and recent immigrant K. Kuiper. Kuper’s key thesis was that “**God commissioned the parents** to educate their children and that they themselves should discharge this duty, and not the state or the church.”³¹ Kuiper did allow to some extent the idea of church-owned parochial schools,³² but excluded the idea of state schools. He thought that state schools would invariably become either vaguely Christian or outright secular in a pluralistic society. Kuiper’s key principle was the **covenant responsibility** of parents.³³

Opponents countered that **pubic schools controlled by Reformed parents** were the best form for not only nurturing Reformed children but engaging American society at large. Through such schools, beginning in Holland, the Reformed could transform America, while free schools would merely result in cultural isolation and poor citizenship.³⁴

²⁹ Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed thought and experience in a new world; a study of the Christian Reformed Church and its American environment, 1890-1918* (J. H. Kok, 1973). 135

³⁰ Ibid. 134

³¹ Ibid. 138

³² Ibid. 139

³³ Ibid. 139

³⁴ Ibid. 145 Opponents included Joost and the anonymous “Americus”

Overall, these arguments in favor of public schools were rejected by the church. Synod 1892, responding to a proposal to form a society for parent-controlled free schools, again urged the support of churches “with all their strength and their gifts” for the formation of **free schools**. Furthermore, Synod specifically recommended “the **organization of Christian School Societies** for the purpose of fostering Christian Education.”³⁵ A society was formed and met a month later. The report of this meeting specifically stated Christian education was a **task of the parents, not the Church** or the State, though the latter institutions could aid in the task.³⁶

Following the Synod of 1892, another debate emerged in the pages of *De Wachter*. Public schools had been rejected in favor of free schools, but the issue now become the relationship between parents and the church in school governance. One side, represented by Holtman, argued that given parental primacy, the **church had no right to exercise any authority** over the school. There could be only “ecclesial contact.” Furthermore, the schools should not even be specifically Reformed, so as not to exclude other Christians. The other side, represented by Robbert (and earlier by K. Kuiper), argued that synod in no way meant to abandon its role in schools. Synod affirmed parents as primary, “but it did not sacrifice or abrogate the appropriate authority of the church over the schools.”³⁷ Neither did it allow a specifically Reformed content be diluted. As the church order suggests, consistories must still supervise and support the education its children receive.

Underlying these arguments, there are two similar yet disjointed justifications for parental primacy at work. The first is a **theological justification based on covenant**. A covenantal

³⁵ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids: 1880-1914). 1892 Art 23

³⁶ John H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: a study in orthodoxy* (Baker Book House, 1949). 134, citing *De Wachter* Vol XXV no. 21 (July 27, 1892) pp 2f. While K. Kuiper cites an Old Testament covenantal understanding as the root for parental primacy, Kromminga attributes Holtman’s position it to the contemporary influence of Dr. A. Kuyper’s ideas of Sphere Sovereignty.

³⁷ Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed thought and experience in a new world; a study of the Christian Reformed Church and its American environment, 1890-1918* (J. H. Kok, 1973). 142

understanding proposes that children of believers are called by God and entrusted to *parents and the church* for nurturing. Thus, infants are baptized and parents promise to raise children in the fear of the Lord. The second is a **philosophical justification of Sphere Sovereignty**. Proposed by A. Kuyper, this understanding is rooted in the 19th century idea of organic progress. As society matures, institutions differentiate and move into independent spheres. Thus, society moves from a mingling of church, state, school, and family to differentiated spheres in which each institution is sovereign.³⁸ Kuyper's ideas were becoming particularly popular during this time in the Netherlands. Though Holtman does not cite Kuyper, his assertion that the church has no role in parental education seems to fit Kuyper's thought. It violates, however, a covenantal understanding of children and family within the larger church. Baptism is not a family event, but a family-of-God event.³⁹ Likewise education, seen as an extension of baptismal promises, is both a family and family-of-God endeavor. Parents and church share responsibility in the covenant. A Kuyperian view would seem to favor parent-run schools that exclude state or church involvement, while a covenantal view would seem to favor a parent-run but church-supported school. Furthermore, it may be that Kuyper's idea of spheres shaded the covenantal understanding during these discussions in the late 19th century. Though K. Kuiper argued for parental primacy on the basis of covenant, the covenant argument had earlier been used only to argue for the need for Christian content and the structure of Free schools if necessary. Kuyper's philosophical emphasis on parents may have influenced Kuiper's covenant theology to emphasize parents as well.

³⁸ For these ideas applied to the church, see Henry Zwaanstra, "Abraham Kuyper's Conception of the Church," *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974).

³⁹ This is one of Henry DeMoor's favorite sayings regarding the polity of baptism

1898: Definition

Synod 1898 followed this debate with an extensive and vigorous statement regarding Christian education. It not only reiterated the *necessity* of Christian education, but also specified the *content* and *principles* behind it.

Not a general, but a **specifically Reformed instruction is the requirement for our children**. Indeed no other educational system is satisfactory, but the acknowledgement of the **necessity of regeneration**, and additionally the acknowledgment of the **covenant relationship** in which God has placed our children, are the principles from which education must proceed.

Christian education according to Reformed principles is the **incontrovertible duty of Reformed Christians**. All ministers and elders must labor to the utmost of their power in the promotion of Christian education wherever and whenever possible.⁴⁰

The 1898 statement continues, reiterating basic *principles*.

The grounds for these declarations are: (1) God's word requires that children be trained in the fear and admonition of the Lord. (2) Parents at the time of the baptism of the children have promised before the Lord and the congregation to do this. (3) There may be no separation between civil, social, and religious life education, and nurture. (4) Christian education promotes the honor of our King who has been given all dominion in heaven and on earth, including the realms of education and nurture.⁴¹

Several aspects should be noted here.

In terms of *necessity*, education must serve the religious welfare of children. Our children, who share the human need for regeneration, must be nurtured as demanded by God. This is the **duty of all Reformed Christians**. This is arguably the strongest call for Christian Education to this point,⁴² going past calls to councils and congregations directly to the church members themselves.

In terms of *content*, education must be **specifically Reformed**. A secular or even generally Christian education is not acceptable. This is **rooted in the Lordship of Christ**, as expressed in grounds 3 and 4.

⁴⁰ as translated in Christian Reformed Church., *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2003). 391

⁴¹ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1898* (Grand Rapids: 1898). 38

⁴² Synod repeatedly urged congregations to promote and establish Christian schools, issuing such calls in 1881, 1882, 1892, 1898, 1908, 1932, 1934, 1936, 1947, and beyond. Christian Reformed Church., *Index of Synodical decisions, 1857-2000* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 2001).

In terms of *structure*, the declaration says very little about institutions. As long as the content is Reformed, institutions may vary. The declaration addresses all Reformed *Christians*, not all Reformed *parents*. The grounds, however, **point specifically to the parents** as the primary agent to enact the education. Furthermore, this is **justified in a covenant understanding**, which Kuiper had used to promote parent society-run schools. It may be simplest to say that all Christians are duty bound to support Christian education, but parents have significantly more responsibility than the church generally. Church officers have a supporting role of promoting the cause. The exact difference between the two roles in concrete terms is left ambiguous.

Eighteen years later, when the Dort CO was updated in 1914, the language regarding parental and congregational roles was left ambiguous in order to preserve the Dort wording as closely as possible. “The **consistories shall see to it** that there are good Christian schools in which the **parents have their children instructed** according to the demands of the covenant.”⁴³ Van Dellen and Monsma argue, along Kuyperian lines, that despite appearances, the Synodical intention was not to make consistories responsible for schools, but to recognize parents as primary in education rather than the consistories or the state. The church’s role was limited to vigorous facilitation.⁴⁴ Churches were accountable to classis in their support, but these were to be parent-run schools, not church-run, with the function of fulfilling the parental covenantal duty.⁴⁵

⁴³ Christian Reformed Church in North America. and Richard De Ridder, *A collation of the church orders of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1857-1982* (1982).

⁴⁴ Van Dellen & Monsma insist that article 71 means consistories are required to organize and preach the importance of Christian schools (but give no mention of financial support). Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary: a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967).

⁴⁵ That duty itself also reiterates the principle of Lordship. “to train the child to recognize the wisdom and glory of God in all things” Ibid. 274

Despite parent-church ambiguity, the principles embodied in the 1898 statement and in the updated 1914 CO became the baseline for the development of the Christian school system in the CRC. Increasing dissatisfaction with the public schools,⁴⁶ the formation of parent-run societies, and relative clarity of principle after decades of debate fueled the growth of the CRC schools. In time the schools joined together in what is now Christian Schools International (Formerly the National Union of Christian Schools). CSI was accredited for support from the denomination in 1926,⁴⁷ molding the parent-run structure into an affiliated system of schools.⁴⁸

Summary

In short, in the history and first decades of the CRC demonstrated a deep commitment to Christian education and established several principles and practices. First, the absolute *necessity* of a Christian education was established as the duty of all Reformed Christians. Second, the *content* of education must be specifically Reformed and include all areas of learning as fits the Lordship of Christ. Third, the *structure* for such education is variable. Since covenantal duty points particularly to the parents and the generally to the church, in practice the schools might best be parent-run. These principles were put into practice through the establishment of **private, parent-run Christian schools** and rejection of secular ones. Yet the borders between the principles and practices were not comprehensively clear, particularly in the relative roles between parents and church, and would continue to be discussed in the years to come.

⁴⁶ Even in 1941, Van Dellen & Monsma reiterate the lack of alternatives, saying, “Not all of our people and churches are fully aware of the dangers of humanistic, man-centered, Godless, Christless schools. Some churches and consistories are apt to be lukewarm and unfaithful. Consequently this supervisory question is asked at every classical gathering.” Ibid.

⁴⁷ Christian Reformed Church., *Index of Synodical decisions, 1857-2000* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 2001). 130

⁴⁸ 1926 also saw the 50th anniversary of Calvin Seminary, which was established for the sake of Calvinism in that “it is maintained for the honour of God in every sphere of life,” Calvin Theological Seminary., *Semi-centennial volume : Theological School and Calvin College, 1876-1926* (Published for the Semi-Centennial Committee by Tradesman Co., 1926). 116

Second Period: Scope and relative importance

Once the school system was somewhat established, questions of *scope* emerged. Christian schools are important, but just how important? Are **all schools** called Christian worthy of support? Does *support* imply **financial aid or simply moral enthusiasm**? How much support is required **relative to other church tasks** such as missions or benevolence? Are those who reject Christian schools open to discipline?

Though moral support was a given requirement in the early years, whether or not the church should also supply direct **financial support** became a question in the 1930s. Prior to 1930, the question in article 41 was phrased “whether the poor and Christian schools are cared for.” An overture from Classis Illinois wished to separate the questions, saying in part that the **poor belong to the church** as an institution, but the **schools do not**. They proposed that the question regarding the schools be phrased “whether the consistories grant needy Christian schools sufficient support.” But “needy” and “sufficient” were deemed to vague, so the question was then formulated as “Does the Consistory support the cause of the Christian Schools?”⁴⁹ This wording still left the financial issue obscure.

Two years later, in 1932, the Principals’ Club of Christian Schools sent an urgent, formal request for synod to “stimulate our leaders and people by any means it may deem fit to greater devotion to, and enlarged united effort in behalf of our Christian Schools.” This was on the grounds that the schools “in recent years found it practically impossible to maintain themselves,” and “the future and welfare of the Christian Reformed Church is so closely linked to the existence and influence of our Christian Schools.”⁵⁰ Synod agreed and urged “all leaders and

⁴⁹ From an English translation of Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1930* (Grand Rapids: 1930). 48

⁵⁰ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1932* (Grand Rapids: 1932). 26

people to lend this cause their wholehearted **moral and financial support.**⁵¹ Financial support was explicitly called for, but leaders and parents were equally called.

In 1934, the relative importance of Christian education was addressed in terms of **qualification for office.** In a specific dispute over office nominees who were removed from nomination due to opposition to Christian schools, Synod declared that **supporting Xian school does not automatically qualify one for office,** but “this element should be given very weighty consideration” in selecting officers.⁵² Van Dellen & Monsma (1941) echo this in their commentary. Lack of personal support for Christian education from an individual may call for correction or a barring from office, but probably not for formal discipline unless it is part of a pattern of gross neglect of baptismal vows.⁵³

In 1936, Synod attempted to clarify the questions of *scope* in a specific dispute over **which schools** churches would be accountable for support. The term “schools” in article 41 was defined as Christian primary, grammar, and high schools as distinguished from technical and professional schools. Institutions of higher learning were also supported insofar as they continue that general education.⁵⁴ Support then, is for schools that express the wide-ranging Lordship of Christ rather than those that simply claim to be Christian. Furthermore, Synod 1936 also **clarified “support”** of Christian schools as meaning

it is the duty of the council to use every proper means to the end that a Christian school may be established where it does not exist and to give whole-hearted and unreserved moral backing to existing Christian schools and **a measure of financial help** in case of need.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid. 42

⁵² Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1934* (Grand Rapids: 1934). 167-168

⁵³ Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary: a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967). 276

⁵⁴ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1936* (Grand Rapids: 1936). 35

⁵⁵ Ibid. 36-37

In cases of failure in such duty, classes are called to “admonish such a consistory publicly in its classical meeting and privately through the church visitors until it duly repents.”⁵⁶ Thus financial support was again explicitly included and set in relation to need. Two questions remained unaddressed in this statement. First, are those finances given to the schools directly or to parents? Second, should those finances come from free-will offerings or a formal line-item in the church budget? These clarifications were pursued in later years.

Ten years later, in 1946, Synod supported auxiliary organizations of the school system as worthy of support, somewhat broadening the scope of what counts as a “school.” The Christian School Pension Fund was recommended to the churches for moral and financial support, as was the National Union of Christian Schools and the Teachers’ Emergency Relief Fund.⁵⁷ **Free-will offerings** were specifically mentioned as a means of raising financial support.

Also in the post-war period, the issue of Jr. Colleges⁵⁸ brought up challenges to the parent-run system. A study committee, commissioned in 1947,⁵⁹ submitted two reports.⁶⁰ The majority report urged the speedy formation of regional Junior colleges. The minority report argued the church has no business running schools,⁶¹ saying that to establish Junior colleges implied a call for church control of all K-12 schools. This report called on Synod to take a stand and rule once and for all that **the church should not own schools**.⁶² The parent-run model, adopted as a practical expression of covenantal commitments, should be fixed as denominational policy.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 36

⁵⁷ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1946* (Grand Rapids: 1946). 89

⁵⁸ A movement promoting Junior Colleges, which would allow for small local colleges to eliminate the first two years of study at Calvin, first appeared in 1934. Synod specifically decided that “Our efforts should be in the direction of further centralization, i.e., of one strong, central, Reformed College, rather than in the direction of decentralization. No particular theological arguments were employed in this discussion, merely pragmatic ones. Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1934* (Grand Rapids: 1934). 17

⁵⁹ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1947* (Grand Rapids: 1947). 22

⁶⁰ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1948* (Grand Rapids: 1948). 48

⁶¹ Calvin College was a historic accident borne out of the need for pre-seminary preparation.

⁶² Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1948* (Grand Rapids: 1948). 278-293

Synod, however, found that the “arguments presented re ecclesiastical or society control are inconclusive,”⁶³ thus keeping principle and practice separate.

In 1955, a major report on Christian education was received by synod. Titled “Basic Commitments in Christian Education,” it largely reiterated the basic principles noted above, including the necessity of Christian education (particularly in the face of secularism), the covenantal commitment, the Lordship of Christ, and the primacy of parents.⁶⁴ Further, unlike the family or church, it noted **the school is not an entity called into existence by God, though neither is it secular.** It is a social institution to enact covenantal commitments, one to which the CRC stands wholly committed.

Since the Christian school is **the only agency that can provide a Christian education** for the youth of the church, the church is duty bound to encourage and assist in the establishment and maintenance of Christian schools.”⁶⁵

Other youth agencies, such as boys or girls clubs, may also be locally utilized if examined by council. In other words, the **schools themselves are not sacred, but the education is.** The school occupies a place separate from the church but very intimate to it. The principles behind

⁶³ Ibid. 48

⁶⁴ The Reformed Ecumenical Synod had published principles of education in 1949, but they were deemed inadequate, so a CRC study committee was formed in 1953. This report cited the growing secularism of modern educational philosophy as a key motivator. The true goal of education is “the forming of personality as the image of God” The basic principles underlying this goal are summarized as follows:

- **Christian education has its foundation in the Creator-creature relationship taught in Scripture.**
- The Creator-creature relationship continued though people fell in sin, but people lost true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.
- God gathers from a ruined human race that is groping in the darkness of sin a chosen people so that they as sons and daughters by adoption may show forth “the praise of the glory of his grace.” Christian education is education of the person in Christ.
- People are religious beings; our deepest needs are spiritual in character. Only Christian education can address this.
- **Education is the nurture the whole person,** in all facets of life.
- Children of Christian parents are members of the church
- **Responsibility lies with the parents,** who should avail themselves of institutions who can further their God-given task.

Christian Reformed Church., Acts of Synod 1955 (Grand Rapids: 1955). 195

⁶⁵ Ibid. 199

Christian education belong to the church, but the school and other ministry structures are pragmatic.

In this second period, then, the establishing principles of Lordship and Covenant are reiterated, though pragmatic issues of scope push the CRC's understanding of Christian education into deeper nuance. We support Christian schools, but only those that promote general education are fitting with the wide Lordship of Christ. That support must be vigorous and accountable, and it explicitly includes an element of financial support. The covenant demands Christian education, but the structure of that education is a pragmatic matter.

Third Period: Money

In the second half of the 20th century, the question of finances took center stage. This period again saw a reaffirmation of the basic principles⁶⁶ and minor changes to the CO,^{67 68} yet the questions of who pays for Christian education, in what way, and why, drove the discussion.

Although financial support had been previously articulated, in a specific dispute regarding a **church budget** in 1959 Synod somewhat limited financial support for school causes. A local church had included in its budget support for the “Teacher Recruitment Scholarship.” While Synod acknowledged that the church as an organism should support such a cause, the church as an organization should not. Congregations can expect members to financially support organizational needs, but this fund was deemed too extraneous to the church to demand member support.⁶⁹ This decision, a surprisingly specific and local one, emphasized the distance between school structures and the church. The decision, however, could have used more clarification of its principles. Which factor made this fund too extraneous for financial support? That it was a line-item of the church budget instead of a free-will offering? That it was for a scholarship fund and not the school’s operating budget? That it was for teachers and not students? In any case, some limit was declared on financial support due to the distinction between church and school.

⁶⁶ A resolution drafted by Synod 1982 affirmed that Christian schools have been and continue to be vital to the life and ministry of the CRC. This was in response to proposed Canadian legislation that threatened the accreditation of some of our affiliated schools. We also affirmed the right of citizens to establish fully accredited schools that are religiously oriented. Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1982* (Grand Rapids: 1982).

⁶⁷ The Church Order itself was slightly modified to clarify the principles of earlier decades. Article 71 was updated in 1965 and made clear that the church supported parents in the establishment of schools.

Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1965* (Grand Rapids: 1965). 79
and Christian Reformed Church in North America. and Richard De Ridder, *A collation of the church orders of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1857-1982* (1982). 139

The article became Article 72 for a time, but was article 71 by 1980, and did not change in content.

⁶⁸ Article 41 was adjusted in 1971 to explicitly include higher education as part of the call to Christian education. Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1971* (Grand Rapids: 1971). 126

⁶⁹ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1959* (Grand Rapids: 1959). 58

However, another specific case in 1970 grounded financial support for schools deeply into the church's evangelistic mission. The Board of Home Missions had earlier been asked to provide financial assistance to a particular inner-city school, but BHM refused, saying that local initiative, CSI leadership, and the mercy ministry from CRWRC would be more appropriate. Synod now ordered BHM to pay, recognizing that **Christian education is evangelism**, particularly in an inner-city setting. Furthermore, Synod rejected the notion that support for Christian education is a form of benevolence. In this decision, financial **Christian school support is a function of preaching and evangelism, not mercy and charity**. This is the first time support was discussed in terms of being either charity or mission. The 1955 report and the 1959 case had determined that schools are not organic to the church and not everything school-related, even for liberal arts day schools, is worthy of direct church support. Yet this 1970 decision holds that schools are not entirely external agencies but are intimately related to the mission of the church. Schools are not churches, yet they are not entirely a third party either. The education remains sacred, though the school is not.

The relationship between church, school, and state was further explored in 1975 in terms of using tax revenues for Christian education. Synod declared that since education is compulsory, and is by nature a religious/philosophical activity, it is unjust for the state to support only one approach to education. For the sake of pluralism, it is essential that non-state schools exist. Synod encouraged the church "to pray and work in every possible way to see to it that taxes for education be distributed for the education of all children, including those in non-state schools, without regard to race, sex, religion, or creed."⁷⁰ Schools, while closely related to churches, are

⁷⁰ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1975* (Grand Rapids: 1975). 70

distinct and pragmatic enough to accept money from the state. This declaration, citing pluralism as a goal, is also surprisingly conciliatory given earlier rhetoric of the evils of secularism.

While Synod had made clear in prior years that schools are distinct from churches, Synod 1986 again made clear that churches and schools were intimately related. In a specific case of a church assuming ownership and operation of a failing Christian school, an appeal argued that only parents, not churches, may run schools, and “financial concerns of schools should not be part of the congregational budget.” School matters are extraneous to the organization of a church.⁷¹ In response, Synod noted that while Article 71 suggests parentally controlled schools as the norm, parochial schools also serve as a **mission of the church**, particularly in these circumstances.⁷² Again Christian education was defined not only as distinct but intimate, but also as part of the evangelistic mission of the church. This may be simply a rephrasing in evangelistic terms the covenantal commitment to the faith-formation of our youth. In that sense this principle is less innovative and more deeply historical than it might first appear.

In this third period then, financial issues crystallized the relationship between church and school as it is called for in the Church Order. The school is not so close to the church that each of its causes is justifiably funded by the church, nor is the state denied a role in school matters. Yet the school is intimate enough so as to be a vital part of the church’s function. The education called for in the church order is in fact a primary mission of the church, even to the point at which whole school structures may be assumed by the church directly as a form of evangelism. Even when schools remain distinct from churches, the financial support given is not a function of mercy or charity, but of missions.

⁷¹ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 1986* (Grand Rapids: 1986). 495

⁷² *Ibid.* 729

Current discussion

In recent years, financial matters are still at the fore, though they test not only pragmatic matters of structure but also the underlying principles of education as a mission of the church and the overall necessity of a specifically Christian education.

Nearly fifty years after the last comprehensive statement regarding Christian education, in 2001 three identical overtures requested a study on Christian day schools. Support for Christian education had been so strong for so long, they argued, it was now feared to be taken for granted and to be **weakening**, particularly in the face of financial challenges.⁷³ John Bolt provided a survey of historical Synodical decisions as an attachment to these overtures concluding,

The Christian Reformed Church from the beginning has clearly and consistently endorsed and supported the cause of Christian day school education. On several occasions it has even voiced support for broad denominational financial support as well as congregational financial support for the cause. There is clear precedent for similar endorsement today.⁷⁴

A committee was appointed to report in 2003.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Synod appeared to affirm Bolt's conclusion in another case in 2001. A personal appeal objected to a local church's adoption of a **"covenant" financial model**⁷⁶ as a violation of Article 71. Synod, however, noted that the church was merely supporting parents comprehensively, not attempting to establish a school (and Article 71 didn't even prohibit that). In fact, Synod noted, through ministry-shares, Christian education was already part of every

⁷³ Overtures were from Classes Wisconsin, Heartland and Illiana, repeated word-for-word except for the names. Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 2001* (Grand Rapids: 2001). 317

⁷⁴ This present study is inadvertently similar to the work done by John Bolt as it appears in an overture attachment in *Acts of Synod 2001* 319. His conclusions are also similar.

⁷⁵ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 2001* (Grand Rapids: 2001). 447

⁷⁶ This is a financing model in which the church assumes full responsibility for paying all tuition for its member students. Parents in turn contribute what they can to the church. This is a demonstration of the church's wider covenantal commitment to student formation.

congregational budget.⁷⁷ Thus both the necessity of support and its financial aspect as part of a church budget were affirmed.⁷⁸

The issues raised the following year suggested that those who had requested the study had reason for concern over the changing context around education. In one case in 2002, Synod pointed out that although public schools do not provide adequate education regarding the Lordship of Christ, we must support them as part of our civic duty. Establishing **private schools is merely pragmatic necessity**, not a goal, and our isolation from other schools is a problem, not a benefit. ‘Though Christian schools sometimes have isolated the Christian school community from its broader community, such isolation is not the goal and in fact must be resisted at every turn.’⁷⁹ Though this is not a change in policy and the language is worthily constructive, the tone highlights the lack of antagonism against secular institutions as compared to the fear of “Godless” and “Christ-less” secularism noted in previous decades.⁸⁰ Another case proposed to add a classical question about youth ministry to article 41, saying that supporting Christian education alone does not fulfill the church’s responsibility to youth.⁸¹ The implication is that Christian schools are just one program of youth ministry, one that has not entirely succeeded in its task of faith formation. 2002 also saw an appeal against Calvin College’s policy of requiring Christian day school for faulty children as an expression of commitment to such education.⁸²

Taken together, the rhetoric of these discussions suggested some dissatisfaction with the

⁷⁷ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 2001* (Grand Rapids: 2001). 491

⁷⁸ Another personal appeal in 2001 protested the nomination for office of someone who did not send his children to Christian schools, Sunday school, or attend worship regularly enough. This appeal was not sustained largely because it was deemed the local congregation is the best judge of a nominee, not broader assemblies.

⁷⁹ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 2002* (Grand Rapids: 2002). 88

⁸⁰ See for instance the rhetoric of Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary: a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967).

⁸¹ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 2002* (Grand Rapids: 2002). 211

⁸² *Ibid.* 430-431

historical prominence of Christian day schools and the rejection of other forms of education. Rather than emphasize the necessity principle of Christian education for all Christians, the structure of Christian day schools was somewhat dismissed as simply one optional form of education.

Given the tone of 2002, it was no surprise the study committee report filed in 2003 was quickly controversial. The report articulated a vision for Christian education based on the historical grounds of covenant and kingdom, and explicitly claimed that Christian education proceeds from the **evangelist mission** of the church and has importance on par with missions. The report renewed the call for the necessity of Christian education for covenant children, noting that a commitment to Christian education can no longer be taken for granted in the face of aggressive secularism and a diversifying denomination. Not only is such education necessary, financial support for it is the obligation for the full covenant community, not just parents.⁸³ The report also proposed a revision of article 71 to include home-schooling as a legitimate option.⁸⁴

Before Synod even met, an overture criticized the report for its elitism in its call for the necessity of Christian day schools and the primacy of the Kuyperian worldview, suggesting that Christians should be free to make conscientious choices regarding education.⁸⁵ Synod overall received the report with some discomfort as well. Synod adopted most of the recommendations regarding traditional positions, such as reaffirming the necessity of moral support, and also approved the rewording of Article 71. But **synod defeated the deeper commitments** that (1) financial responsibility is communal and not just parental and that (2) education is related to

⁸³ Christian Reformed Church., *Acts of Synod 2003* (Grand Rapids: 2003). 314-397

⁸⁴ “The council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools where the Reformed vision of Christ’s lordship over all creation is clearly taught. The council shall urge parents to have their children educated in accord with this vision according to the demands of the covenant.” Ibid. 360

⁸⁵ Ibid. 438-439

missions and evangelism.⁸⁶ The report was sent back to the committee for further work, due to report in 2005, particularly studying how Christian education relates to evangelism and mission.⁸⁷ Hopefully, further reflection how Christian education is related to missions and evangelism will give guidance on how financial priorities may be set in local church budgets without negating the underlying principles. It may very well be that in the contemporary evangelical context, the necessity of Christian education is better phrased in terms of “evangelizing our youth” rather than “our covenant commitment.” Such language more clearly captures the importance of education as comparative to such church duties as missions and discipline, just as Article 41 suggested back in the Dort CO.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, and currently in just two articles, the Church Order of the CRC and accompanying Synodical decisions affirmed the principles of Christian education. Such education is necessary and comprehensive, rooted in our covenantal commitments and the Lordship of Christ. Christian education, as opposed to secular education, has historically not been a negotiable principle. The parent-run Christian day school structure, however, while being the preferred structure of a Christ-centered education, has never been set in stone by the CRC. The tensions in this structure, such as the relative primacy of parents, elitism of separate schools, have often been crystallized in terms of the financial obligations of churches. The challenge has always been to use money to enact the principles rather than be bound to mere structures. The current controversy revolves around the necessity of Christian schools as we have structured them. The challenge before us is to discern the options at the pragmatic level without losing the principles underlying the importance and character of Christian education.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 620

⁸⁷ Ibid. 630

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