



Are the Reformed Creeds worth keeping in schools?

For many years now, voices in the Christian school movement have supported the formulation and adoption of "educational creeds" to replace the historic church creeds as the basis for Christian education. N. H. Beversluis (in *The Banner*, July 20, 1981) reports that "*In the 1920's Clarence Bouma made an eloquent appeal to the schools to base themselves not on church creeds but on a reformed educational creed*" (p. 14). Ten years ago, the National Union of Christian Schools (now Christian Schools International) discussed the adoption of a new "basis article" for its constitution. The original proposal eliminated reference to any church creeds and put in their place a rather skeletal formulation of reformed educational philosophy. The NUCS found this formulation quite inadequate. It was pointed out that this educational creed did not even include a clear statement of biblical authority, but instead referred vaguely to a threefold word of God in creation, Christ and Scripture, with no indication as to how these three "words" related to one another. The NUCS convention meeting in Langley, B.C. decisively rejected this plan. The following year, the NUCS adopted another statement which made clear the continued allegiance of the organization both to Scripture and to the historic Reformed confessions.

But the issue will not go away. It has been raised again by the formation of a CSI task force to study "Strategies in Christian Education for the 1980's." The task force has produced a document called *Christian Educational Philosophy: A Creedal Summary*, a draft which may, after some revision, be proposed as a new basis for CSI schools. Beversluis, chairman of the task force, sees this sort of document as furnishing "an alternative to church-creed subscription" (above-cited *Banner* article, p. 15). As I see it, four important questions emerge from this project, questions which CSI (and all of us who are concerned about Christian education) must ponder very seriously:

1. How should this issue be resolved?

In 1971, the proposal to revise the NUCS basis was prepared so quietly that much of the membership of the organization scarcely knew what was happening. There had been very little discussion of the document in NUCS or Christian Reformed publications — certainly no comprehensive exposition and analysis of it, certainly no critical discussion pro and con. Members of my own local school board found it difficult even to obtain copies of the document prior to the convention. At the convention itself, I discovered that many of the delegates had not read the proposal at all and were taking its soundness for granted. Most were extremely surprised to discover, during the floor debate, the serious, tragic weaknesses of the new proposed Basis.

One would think that the NUCS (CSI) had learned a lesson in 1971-72. Sadly, however, I read that "*meanwhile, our schools are about to begin writing a new chapter and they are going about it in their usual quiet way*" (editorial by A. K. in *The Banner*, Sept. 21, 1981, "Christian Day Schools and Evangelism"). Mr. Myron Rau ("An Ecumenical Christian School Creed," *The Outlook*, Nov., 1981) reports that this project has been "*quietly done through the school administrators with total disregard to boards and school societies.*" Rau says, "*I received a copy of the material in question by making inquiry to CSI as a result of The Banner article ... and not because I happened to be a member of the school board.*"

I find it utterly incomprehensible that such a major issue could be treated in secrecy. Imagine what would happen if the Christian Reformed Church were to consider elimination of the Heidelberg Catechism from its constitution. The issue would be so momentous that every classis, every congregation, every family, every publication, every college or seminary professor would be deeply

preoccupied with the question. Opinions would be expressed at great length, and doubtless action on the proposal would be postponed again and again until everyone was convinced that the issue had been fully discussed. Now I don't want to press too far the parallel between CSI and the CRC. But anyone with a grain of sense can understand that creedal revision in any Christian body is a matter of utmost importance, at least for that body. *Nothing* can be more crucial. This matter must *not* be voted on until there have been intense discussions both in local school boards and in the annual meeting. There must be thorough analyses presented, both orally and in print. There must be discussion pro and con in all periodicals of the churches and of the Christian education movement.

Brothers and sisters, we are children of the *light*. Suppression of debate, or restriction of it to an elite, has no place in the body of Christ. All of us have a stake in these matters. If a new idea will not survive close examination by the boards and school societies, then it *ought* to be defeated. It is our right to demand full information; and we *dare* not adopt a new proposal without it.

2. Do we need an educational creed?

Let us now look, in a preliminary way, at some of the matters in question. For many, the chief issue seems to be, simply, the desirability of an educational creed. Scripture, after all, says much that is relevant to education, and it stands to reason that a concise summary of this biblical material would be extremely useful. God certainly has not stopped teaching his people since the seventeenth century. The great work of Kuyper and his followers has taught us much about the educational imperatives of Scripture. Thus we cannot remain satisfied with the old creeds; we must press on. We must *confess* what God has taught us recently in this area; and it is appropriate that such a confession be found in the constitution of a Christian school system.

Do I agree with this argument? Of course! It is Scriptural, Reformed, cogent. Do we need an educational creed? Certainly we do.

You see, there is this misconception around that when people oppose the sort of package proposed by Beversluis they are necessarily opposing the idea of an educational creed as such. Thus we (we opponents) are accused of being traditionalists, opposed to progress in understanding, uninterested in the *relevance* of our confession to the work of education in the 1980's. Granted, some such reactionary attitudes exist in our circles; but please, do not accuse *all* of us of harboring such ideas. If someone writes a really Scriptural and helpful educational creed, he will have my enthusiastic support.

3. Must we eliminate the church creeds?

But the real issue here is *not* the desirability of an educational creed as such. The real issue is whether such a creed ought to *replace* the church creeds in the Christian schools' constitution, or only to *supplement* them. Granted that an educational creed is desirable, should we therefore seek to eliminate the church creeds? Remember, the two issues are distinct. One can, in perfect consistency, advocate educational creeds while also wanting to keep the church creeds. And that, I think, is the best position to take. Let me examine three common arguments against the use of church creeds in Christian schools:

- a) Some have argued that the church creeds are too narrow in their scope to be suitable for use in educational institutions. Cf., e.g., articles by Hendrik Hart and Paul Schrottenboer in the *International Reformed Bulletin* (Spring-Summer, 1972). The argument goes that "institutional churches" such as the Christian Reformed Church address human life from only one of its "aspects": these institutional churches deal with us in the area of "confession" or "faith" or "worship". The churches, therefore, are "worship-organizations", not educational or labor or political organizations. Therefore the church creeds are relevant to worship or confession, but not to education, labor or politics.

There is some truth in this argument. Certainly a church is not a school, a labor union or a political party. But I think it is unscriptural to represent the church as only one of many "organizations" which equally represent the body of Christ. In Scripture, the church has a

special, focal position. The church is the body of Christ. Its apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers are officers of the body, not merely officers of one "organization." And the purpose of the church is not narrowly limited to "worship." Its purpose may be described in terms of "confession" or "faith," but only if those terms be understood broadly. It is the job of the church to provide motivation and direction for believers in *all* areas of life, and to bring unbelievers to a knowledge of the Christian life in its fullness.

Thus the historic confessions are *not* limited to "worship," or even to "faith" or "confession" if those terms are understood in some narrow sense. Read them! Reformed denominations have generally adopted "directories of worship," indeed, because their basic confessions (such as the Westminster Confession or the Belgic Confession) said *very little* about worship. Reformed confessions present the basic biblical gospel of salvation — a gospel which bears equally upon all aspects of life. They (especially the catechisms) present elaborate discussions of the law of God, of Christian ethics — commandments which we must keep in view all the time. The creeds are not as exhaustive as Scripture itself is, but *their scope is just as broad as Scripture*. They seek to do nothing less than to summarize that gospel which Scripture itself identifies as its chief content. Every Christian organization needs to hear the message of the creeds, for it is the same as the message of Scripture.

- b) A second argument one hears is that, granting the *general* relevance of church creeds to education, many of the *details* of the creeds are irrelevant. Two observations: First, it is interesting that no one ever says this about the Scriptures, though *prima facie* there would seem to be large stretches of Scripture, too, that are of relatively little interest to education. The reason is that, of course, we all know that you can't pick and choose within Scripture. The gospel message is defined by the whole Bible, not by some red-letter sections. To apply the argument to the creeds seems to me a bit more plausible, but equally silly. Second, what doctrines of the creeds are "irrelevant to education?" Christology? Divine sovereignty? The doctrine of the church? It is easy enough to make broad, sweeping claims about the irrelevance of church creeds to education, but it is very difficult to single out specifically which doctrines can be omitted. We shall see below how the task force draft seeks in vain to bypass the Calvinist/Arminian issues. If we seriously intend to base our educational program upon the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, and if we sincerely accept our creeds as statements of the gospel, how can anything in those creeds be set aside?
- c) The third argument is that church creeds hinder ecumenicity in education. Beversluis comments (in the above-cited article):

... we cannot in good conscience continue to accept the children (in some instances one-third to one half of the school population) and the money of non-Reformed parents, cannot claim to be living in Christian fellowship with them, and then continue to treat them as second-class participants. What alternative to church-creed subscription could there be? (p. 15)

I have some sympathy for this argument. I'm happy to see CSI "reaching out." As a non-Dutchman and a non-member of the CRC, I have long felt that CSI was rather too provincial both ethnically and ecclesiastically. And I applaud the desire to reach out even beyond the Reformed community. However, I really doubt that the theological differences between Reformed and non-Reformed traditions can be avoided in the educational context (see #4 for a case study). Further, I think that to compromise the Reformed doctrines is to deprive ourselves of the highest *quality* contact with non-Reformed evangelicals. The fact is that many evangelicals today are attracted to Reformed schools precisely because of our *distinctives*. My friend Jim Veldkamp is a Reformed scholar in the field of education who has had much contact with non-Reformed evangelicals over the last few years. He tells me that at one fundamentalist college there is a faculty study group going through Norman de Jong's *Education in the Truth*. He says that he has had many opportunities to discuss Reformed philosophy of education with such brethren. And neither de Jong nor Veldkamp seeks to play down the doctrines of the creeds. The pervasiveness of secular humanism in our time has led many evangelicals to seek out the one branch of Protestantism with a carefully thought-out theology of education — the

Reformed branch. Will we so dilute our own commitment that we will have nothing unique to offer our evangelical brethren? The possibility is disconcerting.

It seems to me, therefore, that it would be unwise to drop the church creeds from our school constitution unless an alternative can be found which states as comprehensively as the Reformed creeds the biblical gospel. So far as I know, none of the proposed "educational creeds" states, as clearly, and fully as the historic creeds, the gospel we believe. Thus we ought to maintain the church creeds, *supplemented* by statements of educational philosophy which apply the gospel to specifically educational matters.

4. Is the proposed educational creed adequate?

We must now look at the specific proposal contained in the draft of the task force. Is this particular educational creed adequate to replace the church creeds? To supplement them? (These are, we must recall, two different questions.)

It might seem unfair to criticize a document which is not yet in final form. Surely we must keep in mind that the proposal is still subject to revision. And we must appreciate the difficulty involved in doing this task well. The job of setting the basic direction for the whole Christian school movement is an enormous responsibility, one which opens the writer to criticism from many sides. On the other hand, it is precisely the difficulty of the task (as well as its importance) which necessitates extensive public discussion. We must make use of as many gifts in the church as we can in working toward the proper formulations. And it is important to have public discussion at an *early* point in the development of our creed, before partisanship develops, before people's positions get locked in cement, while they can still change without losing face. Thus I propose to make a preliminary evaluation of the task force's preliminary draft. And of course, my evaluations are just as tentative as the draft itself. They will surely be revised, and I trust for the better.

Let me begin by summarizing the draft. The document begins with an introduction indicating the general character of Reformed Christian education and the purpose to be served by an educational creed. The creed itself is divided into two parts, the first titled "Religious Vision in Education: Biblical Perspective," the second "Religious Vision in Education: Classroom Application." Part I is about four pages, Part II about nine. Part I includes three sections, one on creation, one on the Fall, one on redemption. Each of these deals with the covenant relation. The document understands "covenant" as *"a relationship, a fellowship, a communion of life"* (p. 3). It involves commandments concerning piety (Genesis 2:17), community (Genesis 1:28) and cultural obedience (Genesis 1:28, 2:15). Keeping these commandments requires education (p. 5) through which *"personal wholeness would be nurtured"* (p. 5). The Fall leads to disobedience and estrangement, both from God and from fellowmen. This process is restrained by common grace so that *"many of (God's) fallen image-bearers display remarkable traces of truthfulness and goodness in their search after God, in their human associations, and in doing the world's work."* Redemption, however, is necessary to restore the covenant. Faith in Christ involves believing in Him as Mediator of both creation and redemption; He is the Word of creation, the Savior of the world, the Lord of glory. It involves a renewed life, a life of keeping the three covenant commandments. Teaching the young in this new life is the work of Christian education.

Part II offers some "classroom applications" of the above principles. The first section, "Schools and Cultural Obedience," argues that schools must take account of culture both as human activity and as human theories or programs. Cultural products must be evaluated as good or bad, not simply avoided (as in pietism) or accepted (as in "accommodationism"). Christians must both affirm and transform culture. Section 2 deals with "The Nature and Needs of Children": It says that we need to learn both from Scripture and from the sciences as to what children are and what they are like. Scripture also gives important information about what, the children *ought* to be. Section 3 discusses "Aims" of school education (which are partly shared with the home and church): growth in intellectual insight, moral awareness and choosing, creative freedom and participation. Intellectual growth is "understanding," not mere mastery of facts and data. Moral growth *"includes far more than learning and observing rules, and it is the opposite of moralism"* (p. 10). It *"has to do with internalizing God's law"* in all areas of life. Creative growth is openness to disciplined change.

Section 4 presents a "Priority Curriculum for Christian Education." The goals of the curriculum are to encourage students both to "affirm" and to "transform" culture. "Priority" is given to those courses which most fully expose students to the richness of human life in the world and which best encourage their intellectual, moral and creative responses to that richness. A number of paragraphs follow, relating these goals to the fields of "Basic skills and development studies" (reading, etc.), natural sciences and mathematics, social sciences, history studies, literature, languages and the arts, religious studies. Section 5, "Teaching and Learning in a Christian School" discusses criteria for a good Christian school teacher: he is well-educated, godly, open to change, understanding of children (realizing that *"not the teacher nor the curriculum, but the children are the dramatic focal point for all that goes on in the school"*) (p. 14). A good teacher aims at *"closure between teaching and learning."* His work involves not only tactics and techniques, but also art and faith. The document concludes by emphasizing the "affirmational" character of a CSI school.

I am happy to say that from my point of view this document is far superior to the document which was placed before the NUCS in 1971. The present document states clearly (as the earlier one did not) that the *"foundation on which Christian education rests is the Bible..."* (p. 3). Further, there is nothing in the document that I could simply disagree with. And it does include some very helpful formulations.

But there are, of course, problems. The style of the document strikes me as rather wordy, and yet at crucial points I found myself asking for more explanation of important concepts. In seeking, for instance, to distinguish education in the school from that in the home and church, the author uses an extremely vague formulation: But in a division of responsibility, the school does this in the manner of a *school*. The school is a community of *formal* teaching and learning. It uses school subject matter and school methods. As a school, it emphasizes especially the Christian's responsibility in the domain of culture and cultural obedience (p. 7). But it is by no means clear what "formal" education is and why "formal" methods cannot be used in home or church; nor is it clear why home or church cannot emphasize cultural obedience. And it surely doesn't help us much to learn that a school is distinguished by "the manner of a school," "school subject matter" and "school methods." If you don't know what is distinctive to a school, you probably won't know what is distinctive to "school methods," etc. I wish someone, somewhere, would produce a coherent formulation of sphere sovereignty which avoids this sort of muddle.

Similarly, when the document speaks of moral growth as *"the opposite of moralism"* (10) I wish it had provided a definition of "moralism." That term is used in a vast number of confusing ways; it has a bad "feel" to it, but doesn't communicate anything definite. And when the document speaks of *"closure between teaching and learning"* as in some sense the final goal of the whole process, one wishes either for more explanation or for more simplicity. Is the idea simply that we want our students to learn the things we try to teach? That seems obvious, hardly worth the rhetorical effort. Or is there some more esoteric concept in view here? If so, the author failed to communicate it to me; better try harder to achieve "closure"!

One rather strong emphasis of the document is on the need to encourage both "affirmation" and "transformation" of culture. But that emphasis, too, is rather unclearly formulated. At times the "affirmation" theme seems to be carried to rather extreme lengths. The Introduction declares that Christian education

...is not negative but affirmative. It is not a protest movement, not an aberration on the fringes of society, not an other-worldly refuge...

(p. 2, cf. p. 15)

The statement goes on to cite other terrible things that Christian education is not, expressed in terminology that is more emotive than clearly descriptive, things that no one in his right mind would dream of praising. It is a bit amusing to read all these negations in a paragraph dedicated to showing how affirmative we are. Surely the paragraph itself shows that we are both positive *and* negative! Further, is there no sense in which our movement is a "protest movement"? Are we not, indeed, protesting secularism and unbelief, along with all our affirmations? Then on p. 12, the

discussion of literature and the arts, the document speaks of the "*delight and celebration these studies provoke*" without any counterbalancing reference to the disgust and renunciation which the believer should rightly experience when exposed to the effects of sin in these disciplines. On p. 14, then, much emphasis is put upon a "child centered" kind of teaching which is defined (insofar as it is defined) in terms of response to each child's "private curriculum." Again, I miss counterbalancing statements as to the need of *correcting* the child's idea of what school should be, the need of teaching the child that he is not the center of the universe, that he must conform to the reality of the world outside of himself. On p. 10, so much is said about the importance of encouraging freedom, exploration, innovation, etc. that I felt the need of some statement to the effect that the child must also learn to subordinate his freedom to the rights of others and the commands of God.

It's not that the counterbalancing statements are entirely missing. Much is said about moral training, about bringing norms to bear, about judging elements of culture as good or bad. Thus the document is not "affirmative" without qualification. But the qualifications should have been taken seriously enough to modify the rhetoric of the document as a whole. It is wrong to use a rhetoric which suggests we "affirm" everything in the sinful creation, when in another place we introduce qualifications which deny that suggestion.

But the most serious questions have to do with the *theology* of the document. In brief, we want to know whether this creed is Reformed or not. On this question, Beversluis' article in *The Banner* (cited earlier) is terribly confusing:

*By **reformed** here I do not mean Reformed in a creedal or denominational sense. I mean **reformed** as a way of thinking and a way of life; as a way of interpreting history and the Bible; as a way of accepting the Christian's vocation in the world under the kingship of Jesus Christ* (p. 14).

What are we to make out of this? What is this "creedal or denominational sense" which Beversluis declines to use? Does the word "reformed," when applied to a creed or a denomination, have nothing to do with a way of thinking or of life? Does it have nothing to do with interpreting history and the Bible with accepting one's vocation under Christ? I confess I can't make much sense out of this. But it does alert us to one thing: Beversluis is using "reformed" in a rather odd way. Thus we should not automatically take comfort in his assurances that his creedal project is distinctively Reformed. Further, recall that this project has an ecumenical purpose. Beversluis explicitly wishes to develop a creed which Arminians can sign in good conscience. So the whole project seems seriously confused theologically.

Maybe we can get a clearer picture by going back to the document itself. Is it Reformed in the *normal* meaning, the *creedal* sense, of the term (which, frankly, is the only sense I care about)? Well, as I mentioned earlier, it does acknowledge the authority of Scripture, but it says nothing about inerrancy or sufficiency. (One would think that nothing would be more relevant to modern education than the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture.) The document affirms the Apostles' Creed (p. 3), so it does implicitly endorse the doctrines of creation, the Sonship of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the second coming, etc., though these doctrines play little role in the exposition of educational philosophy. The document says nothing about miracle or about the catastrophism/uniformitarianism issue, which is much under discussion among Christian educators and about which many Christian parents are concerned. It says nothing about the two natures of Christ (is it not important to education that the Redeemer is divine?). It says nothing about the relation of Jesus' death to us (even the Apostles' Creed does not help us here). (But is it not important to education that Jesus' death was a sacrifice? Certainly at least it is important to the Bible curriculum.)

What about the sovereignty of God? We recall that Beversluis seeks to produce a document that a non-Reformed person can sign in good conscience. But he also wants a document that is distinctively Reformed, in some odd sense of "reformed." Could an Arminian sign the present draft? That's hard to say. In speaking of "history studies" (p. 12), the document says that "*Students learn that although God is sovereign over all, human choices matter.*" Does this mean that God controls everything that comes to pass, that His decree ordains all the events of nature and history? If not, I would say that it is surely inadequate as a statement of the Reformed view of

history. But if it *does* express a Reformed view, then I don't see how an Arminian could sign the document.

And on page 5, we read that God's special gift of *redemptive* revelation and *particular* grace offered and today offers his fallen image-bearers the forgiveness of sins and the re-sanctification of their lives...

Does redemptive grace do no more than *offer* forgiveness and sanctification? Look: if it is important to discuss soteriology in this educational creed, then it is important to present it *right*. If it is important to speak of grace "offering" forgiveness and sanctification, then it is surely important to speak of grace *conferring, effecting* these. It is utterly implausible to argue that the former is "important to education" while the latter is not. So why does this document avoid the latter expressions and adopt the former ones? Unless it was sheer oversight, the only explanation would seem to be a flat-out concession to Arminian doctrine.

The moral of all this is that it is not so easy, after all, to avoid discussions of "church" doctrines in the "educational" context. The two spheres cannot be neatly separated. This fact corroborates what I said earlier about the need even for educational institutions to subscribe to "church" creeds. I think it is quite impossible to formulate a creed which is Reformed (in some meaningful sense) but which can be signed by an Arminian. I honestly *wish* it were possible to transcend this ecclesiastical division in the educational sphere but I just don't see how it can be done. Surely we must not try to achieve this result through ambiguous language, or by avoiding crucial issues.

Thus, on balance, it seems to me that much work needs to be done before this educational creed will be ready to do service. Its ambiguities and doctrinal weakness render the present draft inadequate even to *supplement* the church creeds, let alone replace them. Not only are the formulations inadequate, but it is devised to accomplish an impossible, wrongheaded goal, the goal of a "reformed" confession which an Arminian can sign.

Conclusion

To review, then:

1. This issue must be submitted immediately to an intensive public discussion at all levels of the Christian school movement.
2. A Scriptural educational creed is a good idea.
3. Eliminating the church creeds is *not* a good idea.
4. The current draft of the CSI task force needs to be carefully rewritten to achieve more clarity and doctrinal accuracy, and the whole project needs to be rethought as to the goal in view.

John M Frame

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