



Our children — future kings and queens in God's Kingdom

Parents and the education of their children

1. Education and change

Education across the world seems to be in a state of constant change. Western Australia knows its Beazley Report (1984); Ontario has already moved away from the general thrust of its Hall-Denis Report of the sixties; the colleagues in Holland are right in the middle of the implementation of the renewal of both kindergarten and elementary school systems (de basis-school). There is not always an understanding of the reasons for such changes. In our own circles we tend to hear voices that warn for fads and fashions in education, as well as against dangerously humanistic influences that creep in with changes.

S.J. Sietsma wrote his *Spoorwijzer: Wat ik u raden mag...*¹ precisely to inform parents about the proposed changes to the Dutch educational system. Not only does he attempt to provide factual information to undo confusion and misunderstanding, he also provides a sound basis, founded in the Scriptural principles, for the evaluation of those proposed changes. He argues strongly that Reformed people who wish to take their Scripturally-given mandate to educate their children in the fear of the Lord seriously, do concern themselves also with the schooling that their children will receive outside the home, from kindergarten to secondary school and beyond. The education received at home, as well as the education and instruction received at school, must be seen in the light of the baptismal vow to instruct the children in the fear and nurture of the Lord. Therefore, the organizational form and the curricular content of the 22 education received at school becomes of interest and concern to the parent as well.

2. Reformed education

It is instructive to read Sietsma's discussion of those educational changes. He does not want merely to listen to advocates and opponents of those new ideas in education. On the basis of our Reformed convictions he wants to answer the question: What should be the form and content of secondary education (in particular) for our children?

First of all, Sietsma considers (again) the Reformed, Biblical purpose of education and instruction.

The formulation of the aim of and basis for education is based on various Bible passages such as Ephesians 6, which describes the spiritual armor of God to withstand the attacks of the evil spirits in the air; also Psalm 78... "We will tell to the following generation the glorious deeds of the LORD..."

Further, we may point at:

- *the promise in Joshua 24:15: "...but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*
- *the mandate in Micah 6:8: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*
- *the norm, given in Matthew 6:33: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."*

The child, then, must be guided towards faithful, obedient service in his office as child of God, as demanded by God. As an adult, placed by God at the end of the twentieth century, he must confess and make true his faith in his God, his covenant Father. He must show the image of God in his relation with God, with his neighbor, and with the whole creation of God. That behavior in faith will manifest that the believing Christian is indeed totally different (Ephesians 4:20) from the unbeliever.

Such guidance can only be given responsibly and reliably if it is given in obedience to the Word of God, if it is supported by the faithful preaching of that Word in the house of the Lord. In other words, also here will — indeed must — the antithesis become evident:

- *the choice of Church and Kingdom of God rather than materialism;*
- *behavior according to the norm, of what is required, rather than behaving as one pleases;*
- *no striving for egotistic self-development and emphasis on the child as advocated by humanistic psychology, but rather a striving for obedience to God's mandate.*

This demands a great deal of struggle and self-denial because:

- *also a covenant child is conceived and born in sin and inclined to all evil:*
- *the spiritual battle of the 1980s is very hard indeed; spiritual nihilism and false prophecy have greater influence than ever before.*

Education at home and at school shall not only have to indicate (in the appropriate language) lofty ideals and goals, but it shall also have to match its practice to its ideals. We mention the family on purpose in this connection. It is essential that school and family in this respect form a unity. The family must stand around the child as a bulwark of protection and safety, and at the same time it must be the base from which its members participate in the activities of the society. The same applies to the school, because also there the children are being prepared for the unprotected, future life in society.

3. Education and the Kingdom of God

Education and instruction are governed by the Scriptural command to seek the Kingdom of God...

Firstly, we point to the absolute, all-encompassing character of God's Kingdom. It is so absolute and all-encompassing that no one has significance except as servant in that Kingdom. And as servant man is great, he truly exists, that is his name, his title, and his place. As citizens of God's Kingdom — and also as future kings together with our Lord Jesus Christ — we receive everything (The Kingdom does not receive its greatness from its citizens, but the citizens from the Kingdom!). But it also demands all of man in all his relations. And that certainly has consequences for education, for teaching and learning as well as for the curriculum. No one who seeks God's Kingdom can rightly consider those "other" matters to be unimportant.

Sietsma points to the urgency of this in the light of Revelation 12:12. The evil one has little time left and urges the whole of creation on, faster and faster, to total godlessness. The great boycott of Revelation 13:7 becomes more and more evident as we move to the end of the twentieth century.

Of course, we know all this. Yet is it not high time to draw consequences from this, especially for Reformed education? I mention only one example. The timetable of our schools (especially our secondary schools) is rather similar to that of the public school with limited time available for Bible and Church History. Is that sufficient, considering the time we live in? The demand is: seek first the Kingdom of God. That is the first and the last goal of our lives, and then all things will be given to us as a gift. It is our task to work hard in all sorts of cultural activities, but such work must be subject to, as well as helpful in, that searching for God's Kingdom.

Secondly, Sietsma points to the relation between God's Kingdom and the Church. God's Kingdom comes in and by means of the work of the Church.

The Church is the gathering of the people of God's Kingdom, and the citizens of that Kingdom belong in the Church. The work of the Church is: preaching the Word; Mother (Galatians 4:26) feeds with the Word of Father. And also that WORD is absolute and total.

All science, all study, all human activity is subject to that Word. We can only work in that Kingdom as its citizens if we honor the whole of Scripture with the Confession of the Church: The fear of the LORD is the basis of all wisdom (e.g. Psalm 111:10).

In various parables our highest Prophet and Teacher has taught us about God's Kingdom, and compared it, among other things, with yeast. This expansive and penetrating character of God's Kingdom is the third point we wish to emphasize. We certainly will not hide in a corner. In all of life's relations — in politics, in cultural activities, in social activities — those future kings must again show the image of God [Cf. Lord's Day 3(6), 12(32)]. We must seek God's Kingdom, that is, with full effort. And then all things will be given to us. That is our final point.

For education this means that all subjects must foster and promote that searching for God's Kingdom. After all, the goal of education is to bring our life in the service of the LORD to full development.

Sietsma then continues to comment on the practices of the (secondary, in particular) school in the light of his comments about the central place of God's Kingdom. He laments the emphasis on accredited subjects, often at the cost of other areas of study which are of equal, if not greater, importance. In addition, the demands placed on the young people in those accredited subjects are often such that only minimal time and attention can be given to the work of catechism instruction, to the work at youth societies, and to the weekly sermons.

He rejects the claim that Reformed education is too protective of its students. He does not want to add confrontation with non-Biblical ideologies to the educational programme (as suggested by some), but pleads for much greater attempts to make all subjects of the curriculum part of the preparation of the students as soldiers in God's army and as citizens of God's Kingdom. Both elementary and secondary schools should provide a basic education which in the first place provides the essentials necessary in the service in God's Kingdom. This provides a challenge to Reformed schools to ensure that all subjects indeed work together towards this goal. Let not the need for examinations and diplomas (however good in themselves) stand in the way of the full and holistic development of the students. Also for them it must be true that they learn to love with their mind and learn to know with their heart. Knowledge without a faith commitment is empty and vain. There is a great deal of preparation required to become well-equipped confessors and skilled fellow-workers of God in His Kingdom. And this challenge force: not only elementary, but also in particular, secondary schools continuously to consider whether their priorities are still in the right order. If there is undesirable dead weight in the curriculum, prune it. If there is not enough time, lengthen the school day.

I recognize that Sietsma addresses the Dutch situation, where apparently the pressure of examinations is keenly felt. Yet also in the English-speaking world there is the danger that we allow our curricula to be influenced by accreditation requirements at the cost of the original purpose of the school. The danger that our schools turn out to be semi-public schools because of government regulations and other demands is not to be ignored. Both parents and teachers have much work to do, especially for our teenagers. Our children need a truly Biblical, Christian programme, and not a copy of that of a secular school with some Religion added. Indeed, here lies a tremendous challenge for home and school.

4. The vision of education

The vision of Sietsma is echoed by other Reformed educators in the Netherlands. J. Messelink (Educational consultant)² also emphasizes such an integrative approach which reckons with the whole of life and is task-oriented rather than subject-oriented.

He writes,

The aims of the school, of instruction, are not limited ... to those of knowledge and understanding, but they include the full range of equipment necessary in the service of God and the neighbor. The role of the school, the role of the teacher thus has four dimensions:

- 1. The religious dimension: a life with God in obedience to the covenantal demands.*
- 2. The social dimension: cooperation with the neighbor in the task of service.*
- 3. The Umwelt dimension: the relation with the creation as stewards with a cultural mandate.*
- 4. The internal dimension: The relationship of man with himself in self-control and responsibility.*

These categories do not imply separation. Here we must recognize true integration of the various dimensions in such a way that the relationship with God is determinative. It is in these aspects that man can function holistically, as a cognitive, affective, and psychomotor being.

Also G.J. Van Middelkoop (Principal of the Reformed secondary school [Scholengemeenschap] in Amersfoort)³ emphasizes that our children must be seen as unique, whole persons, and not as collections of separate abilities and skills:

The aim of education is to equip students for their manifold tasks in life. This equipment must be as broad and as varied as possible, and should not be limited to the students' future occupations or to the demands of tomorrow's society only (although such demands should be considered)

Such a broad view of the task of education demands that the students are treated in varying ways according to the individual differences which become more and more obvious. During their school period we see an increasing "branching out" of students who are on their way to unequal tasks in life. It is precisely during their years at school that just what capacities the students have or do not have, becomes increasingly obvious. Slowly but surely they themselves discover their specific possibilities, interests, and capacities. And these talents are indicators for the direction which their lives might take.

We and they may consider this as God's providence over their lives: their Lord leads them to specific tasks which He determines for them; tasks which are not equal. Adequate schooling for all these tasks will, therefore, become more and more individualized...

Here is the second challenge for our secondary schools: How can adequate schooling be provided which fosters and promotes the equipment of the unique individual for service in God's Kingdom? Is today's school system adequate for this great goal? Are we making effective use of the opportunities given to us?

We, parents and teachers, must know our children well to enable us to be instrumental in guiding them individually towards that station in life which seems appropriate in terms of the talents, aptitudes, and gifts that our children have received. It is our mandate and responsibility to guide our children towards accepting God's will in their lives; we must guide them to accept their responsibility; we must guide them towards a positive response to their culture task; we must guide them towards maturity as *"future kings in God's Kingdom."*

TMP VanderVen

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¹ I continue the reading and discussion of sections of S.J. Sietsma's *Spoorwijzer: Wat ik u raden mag...* (Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1983) in which the author provides information and advice to parents about the educational system in the Netherlands. The quotations are taken from Chapter 8.

² Messelink, J., "Vorming, opvoeding en onderwijs," *In dienst van de Scholen* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1982) p.77.

³ Van Middelkoop, G.J., "Onderwijsvisies," *Woord en School*, 1983, 15(6):308-309.