

THE COVENANT: The basis for Christian Schools?

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You will remember that we discussed in an earlier issue of BEACON LIGHTS the articles of Rev. Koops and Rev. Heerema. We also promised after Rev. Heerema had stated his position in the Torch and Trumpet. In the November issue of the above stated periodical Rev. Heerema further delineates his position.

We should remind ourselves that Rev. Heerema is opposing the views of Rev. Hugh A. Koops who writes on this same subject in the Reformed Journal. Rev. Koops takes the position that the doctrine of the covenant is the basis for evangelism but that it is not nor should it be considered the basis for Christian education. He believes that the basis for Christian education is the doctrine of parental responsibility. We also noticed in our last article that Rev. Heerema takes particular exception to the distinctions by Rev. Koops that there should be educational reasons for the existence of Christian Schools and not theological reasons. The doctrine of the covenant is the theological basis that Koops opposes. Rev. Heerema in this connection warns against the creeping secularism* which he believes to be inherent in the views propounded by Rev. Koops. (cf. Oct. issue of Torch and Trumpet and Beacon Lights, December).

In the November issue of Torch and Trumpet, Rev. Heerema attempts to define more positively the reasons for covenant education, referring specifically to the covenant of grace. He first of all inquires concerning the necessity of the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace for Christian education. His approach is to explain away several seeming problems that confront supporter of Christian Schools. There are some Christian Schools that are not based on the Covenant, and this may seem to undercut the fundamental importance of this doctrine. Rev. Heerema cites four types of Christian schools that are not based on the doctrine of the Covenant. You can check these for yourself. He also cites the fact that those who oppose Christian Schools based on the Doctrine of the Covenant state that "The precise educational significance of the Covenant of Grace is often claimed but rarely demonstrated." Rev. Heerema admits that there may be some truth to this charge but he argues that: "Those who make this charge should temper their criticism at this point with an appreciation for two things. In the first place, the matter is complex, more so than is commonly realized. And in the second place, we are dealing with something that can never be wholly encased in a nice "doctrinal statement". He further says; "It is for this reason that many humble Christian school supporter, with his heart and mind governed by the Word of God, can speak earnestly of the Covenant of Grace in it important relation to home, family, school, church and the whole of life, without being able to supply an adequate intellectual statement of that important conception."

Rev. Heerema also says that the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace is not the only doctrine basic to our Christian schools. He says: "Most basic is our doctrine of God. Always in our Christian thinking and living we come back to God, the living and sovereign God, Creator of heaven and earth, Creator of man in his own image... It is in God that "we live, and move, and have our being... Apart from God the educational enterprise is a sometimes fascinating and exciting journey into meaninglessness and vanity..."

Rev. Heerema comes to the heart of his problem when he develops his conception of the covenant and the implications this covenant idea has for education. He refers to his

conception as the “simple covenant idea,” and defines it as follows: “It refers to the arrangement made by God for his image-bearing creature to have fellowship with him, the Lord of life and truth. When God created man with capacity for such meaningful communion with his Creator, God did not in deistic fashion turn man loose in the wide reaches of creation to work out a manner of life for himself. No God immediately laid down certain terms for his life.” (Heerema refers to these terms as the cultural mandate.)

The author then states that because of the fall a new aspect is introduced – this is the aspect of grace as it is revealed and manifested in Jesus Christ. It is because of this original sin that Rev. Heerema maintains that: “The complex and strategic business of molding a human soul for vital covenant life requires that men be trained from the very start in this distinctive way of life and for the struggle to maintain it. This surely is an important aspect of covenantal education.”

It seems, however, that Rev. Heerema ought to remember that covenant education per se cannot make a Christian. Christian teachers can water and sometimes plant, but only God can give the increase through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Heerema maintains that the responsible party in education is the parent. He says: “It is he who must see to it that this total program shall always have God in Christ at the center of it. This is plain from the covenant structure as such. The parent stands under the love and discipline of God’s covenant. It is in the parent-child interaction; day by day that the pattern of life and character is formed. Childhood is the seedtime of life. In this seedtime the person must be brought under the love and discipline of God in Christ.”

Rev. Heerema does not deny the principle of parental responsibility which Rev. Koops wants to maintain, but Rev. Heerema wants his readers to understand that this principle of parental responsibility is guided by the principles inherent in the doctrine of the covenant.

Rev. Heerema is exactly so afraid that Christian education will end in the “wastelands of secularism” if education is only going to be based on parental responsibility because this broad undefined concept of parental responsibility is so relative. There is no final authority of right and wrong. In this context we can quote Rev. Heerema’s last statement: “With secularism threatening to engulf us, this is not a time to place a question mark behind the importance of the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace for our Christian schools. Rather this is a time to place an exclamation point behind this blessed gift of God by exploring with fresh insight and enthusiasm the educational riches inherent in it.”

We can appreciate many of the arguments forwarded by Rev. Heerema. The church is definitely in danger of being swept along with the secularism of our day, but we know that God gathers, defends and preserves his church and therefore the church shall never fail.

It ought to be underscored at this point, however, that the Christian Reformed Church of which Rev. Heerema is a pastor has these problems today, and they are so acute, it seems to me, partly because as a church they have confessionally left the Reformed position. Their adoption of Common Grace as a doctrine of the church has plunged them into the very difficulty that they are experiencing today; a difficulty the Rev. Heerema defines as creeping secularism. It is exactly because of the “doctrine” that makes God assume a favorable attitude of grace toward the reprobate that the Christian Reformed leaders find themselves in this present dilemma. The foundations are sure and rock bound on a doctrine of sovereign love only for God’s elect people.

We, as young people must recognize this problem because we are the church of tomorrow. I do not believe that I am being trite when I say, Rise up young people, church of tomorrow and see what your fathers have maintained because they wanted the foundations to stand. They wanted God to be God. We do too.

Heerema is correct in his position concerning covenant education, but his dilemma will only be eradicated completely, it seems to me when the Common Grace theory is abrogated and annulled.

- The term secular is derived from the Latin (saeculum) which refers to race, generation, age, or the people of any time: it refers to the spirit of the age which finds its starting point and goal in the things which are natural and temporal and not the things which are spiritual and eternal.

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