

Goals of Protestant Reformed Education

by Fred Hanko, Sr.

If Protestant Reformed education is going to be effective, we need to know where we want to go, that is, we need a statement of our goals. Those of us who are teachers have been talking about goals for years, only we usually call them objectives. In fact we have talked so much about goals that it seems a little bit ridiculous to spend time writing about them. Nevertheless, I think there are indications that we need to review our statement of goals and perhaps refine it a bit so that we understand clearly what they ought to be and which goals are unworthy.

The ultimate goal of all things, of course, is the honor and glory of God. This is a statement that we all agree upon, but one that does not have much content unless we describe more exactly what that means and give it some content by translating it into more specific goals. It is important to keep this ultimate goal in mind always because education becomes so easily a means of promoting the individual or humanity in general. Here, too, we let the ideas of the world intrude upon our schools.

The ultimate goal: the "perfect man"

In this world God honors Himself by making a certain kind of person who will honor Him. His people will honor Him in their particular callings, in their homes, in the church where they contribute to the welfare of their fellow saints, and in the world where their lives demonstrate the work of God in them. Church, home, and school each have an appointed part to play in the development of this kind of person. Such a person is, perhaps, best described in Ephesians 4:13: "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Although we strive to achieve this goal, its full accomplishment is possible only in the new creation. Our education is for pilgrims who will pass through this world on their way to the heavenly city.

Goal one: the love of God

The first and most important characteristic of this "perfect" man is that he loves God. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37). We must be aware that the school cannot implant the love of God in any child that is the work of the Holy Spirit. The love of God has already been implanted in children of the covenant. The goal of education is to promote and to encourage such love of God in these children. Notice several things about the love of God as the goal of education. First, that pursuit of such a goal excludes personal pride. In this pursuit we will teach the child to suppress his natural tendencies toward self-love, self-promotion, and self-centeredness. Our educational practices will not promote any of these, but will promote the Christian virtues that proceed from the love of God.

Second, we observe that the education of the world promotes scientism, secularism, and humanism all of which have goals that are antithetical to those of Christians. All of these find the goals of education in the glory of man and his abilities, promotion of knowledge for its own sake or for the greater glory of man, or for some concept such as freedom, or self-realization, or unity that is supposed to advance man's condition in the earth. These goals permeate the textbooks of the world today. We need to recognize how these goals shape the contents of

the textbooks and oppose them in our teaching.

Goal two: obedience

The second important goal of Christian education is obedience. Notice that obedience is closely related to the love of God. In fact, Jesus, in [Matthew 22:37](#), tells us the love of God is also obedience to the first and greatest commandment. Love of God and obedience to His commandment go together inseparably. Obedience to God's commands also requires obedience to parents and all those in authority over us. "What doth God require in the fifth commandment? That I show all honor, love, and fidelity, to my father and mother, and all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand" (Heidelberg Catechism, [Lord's Day 39](#), Q & A, 104).

This is a primary goal of our education, to teach obedience. This is especially true today when the concept of obedience for God's sake is under attack everywhere. We must work hard to teach children to obey not because the law is reasonable not because obedience will have results satisfying to them or will carry a reward but simply because this is what God requires. Having true obedience as a primary goal of our education has important implications for discipline as well as for teaching subjects.

Goal three: knowledge

The third goal of education and the one which receives the most emphasis is knowledge. Although no one questions knowledge as a goal of education, there is much disagreement about the nature of that knowledge and its purpose. This is an important matter because our understanding of this goal affects decisions about curriculum and methods as well as the answer to the question so often posed by students: "Why do we have to learn all this stuff?"

So often, when children ask why they have to learn that stuff, we reply, "Because that's the only way you can get a good job when you get out of school." (Note that when we speak of a "good" job, we nearly always mean a job that pays a lot of money. This is a measure of our own vanity.) It is true that our children usually need a job when they get out of school, and a job does indeed require a certain amount of knowledge. This is, however, a very poor answer to a child's question. In the first place, if getting a job is the main reason for gaining knowledge, our children could better attend a vocational school as soon as they have gained the basic skills. Such an answer also minimizes the importance of an education for those girls who will be married soon after graduation and will care for a family at home. Knowledge is important in every aspect of the Christian life in the home as well as for active participation in the life of the church. We need knowledge in order to live the antithetical life required of the Christian in the world.

Because our goal is "a perfect man," something that the Christian attains only after this life in the life eternal, we understand that the most important knowledge is the knowledge of God. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." This knowledge is, first of all, the knowledge of faith and experience, knowing Him as our God. For those who are children of the covenant and who are regenerated by the Spirit of God the knowledge of God comes from the study of the Word of God and of the revelation of God through His creation and through His works.

The importance of the knowledge of God and obedience to His commandments is beautifully described in [Psalm](#)

78:4-7, "We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."

This knowledge is essential for the attainment of the other goals. In order to learn to love God and to obey Him we must know the law of God. The famous words of Deuteronomy 6 make that very point: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children..."

We should not make the mistake of believing that the Bible is all we need to know. We need to know the material of many subjects math, geography, science, language, history, and many others but we need to learn and understand them in the light of our knowledge of the Bible. In fact, the main business of the Christian school is to teach these subjects in the light of Scripture.

We need to remember also that there are no neutral facts. The public schools would have us believe that they can be neutral in their teaching, teaching only objective facts. If we do not teach the truth, we are teaching the lie. Teaching about the creation is not the truth unless the fact of the Creator is a part of the lesson. The public schools teach religion as well as we, only their religion is humanism.

Remember also that knowledge is not only the memorization of facts and the ability to recite them, but it is also the understanding of facts, the acceptance of those facts as the truth, and the relating of these facts to all of our knowledge of the revelation of God and their use in our lives as servants of God.

Knowledge, then, is a goal of education, not as an end in itself but as means of promoting the praise of God. We sometimes make the mistake of considering the acquisition of knowledge as an end in itself. So often we see the student who has acquired great knowledge becoming puffed up with pride so that he turns away from the church and seeks further advancement and honors in the world. We teachers ought to evaluate carefully how we promote the acquisition of knowledge and the kind of knowledge that we teach. True knowledge ought to make the learner more humble.

Goal four: reverence

A fourth goal of Protestant Reformed education is reverence for God and His works. There must be in our love for God elements of awe, wonder, worship, and fear that I am here calling reverence. Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," expresses their relation between these two goals. This reverence is important in order to make the student understand the relationship between God and His creatures. This goal assumes greater importance in the society of today because so many even among Christians are trying to remake God in human terms, making him a friend only and not our King. The goal of reverence for God also is the strongest justification for teaching appreciation-type subjects: literature, music, art, etc.

The pursuit of these goals in our Protestant Reformed Schools should make our education different from that of other schools. It should also influence our view of the trends in secular education today. I had a professor who prefaced many of her ideas with the words, "The research shows...." It did not seem to bother her that what the research shows this year is different from what the research showed last year and is probably different from what

the research will show next year. We need to be very careful of what is being promoted as truth in education today. It is too easy for many teachers to accept whatever is popular in education and to introduce it into the Christian schools.

False goals in American education today

American public education has in recent years reduced the importance of knowledge as a goal of education. Some have said that since a person in the world today needs far more knowledge than the school can possibly provide, the goal of the school ought to be rather the teaching of methods for acquiring knowledge rather than the knowledge itself. The assumption here is that if the child has mastered the methods for acquiring knowledge he will acquire the knowledge that he needs. The idea seems to assume that all knowledge is only information and is all equally valuable and equally valid. The fact is that in the Protestant Reformed schools we want our children to gain the true knowledge which is the knowledge of God. They are not going to come by this naturally; they have to be taught. The skills needed to acquire more facts are also a goal of the school but are a secondary goal.

Some years ago "problem solving" was promoted as the great goal of education. More recently, it has become "critical thinking." These may be very fine goals, but they are secondary goals and cannot substitute for knowledge. Some of the schools seem to have forgotten that one cannot solve problems or think critically without a large amount of knowledge to work with. Truth does not lie in methods but in knowledge of God and of His Word.

It is interesting that when the public schools go on one of these periodic binges in which they promote a new goal which promises to be the panacea for all educational ills, they are always eventually brought up short by the public, which insists on knowledge. Our children know less than the Russians or the Japanese. The scores on our SAT tests are declining. Leaders of business and industry complain that those graduating from school do not know enough. And so the schools are forced back into teaching knowledge with a materialistic, self-serving goal.

Traditionally, knowledge of God and obedience to His commandments as manifestations of the love of God have been, I think, the primary goals of Protestant Reformed schools. This means that our schools have placed much emphasis upon the importance of reading as a means of acquiring knowledge. The textbooks we have chosen have usually been those that emphasized knowledge over experience, intellectual skills over social skills, artistic skills, or manual skills, the cognitive over the affective. Part of the reason for the preference of knowledge and obedience as educational goals is that we consider them to be goals of a higher order than the other. The other part of the reason is that our schools have followed the belief that the school is an extension of the home and should be responsible for educating children only in those areas in which the parents are not qualified to teach their children.

In these times when many schools have supplanted the parents almost entirely, it is important that we define clearly the goals of the school and limit them carefully. There has been a tendency in recent years for parents to place more and more responsibility upon the schools perhaps because the parents have been more interested in other pursuits and have less time than they are able or willing to spend upon teaching their children. In addition, many schools have felt compelled to take more responsibility for the children's education because many homes were neglecting their responsibilities. Finally, many schools have actively added to the work of the school partly because they feel that as professionals they can do the job better and partly on grounds that the school must teach "the whole child."

There has been a lot of fuzzy thinking in connection with the concept of teaching the whole child. The child, they say, consists of many different aspects: psychological, social, moral, intellectual, physical, etc. One of these aspects cannot be treated without involving all the others. So far, so good. They say that because you cannot separate one of these aspects from the others, we must of necessity teach the "whole child," and this means that the school has to include everyone of these aspects into its curriculum. The school has to be concerned with the development of every quality in the child. To supply this supposed need, many new goals were added and units added to achieve those goals: social adaptation, social skills, psychological adjustment, family living, sex education, and many others. The results of this idea were that the schools were overwhelmed with the number of things that had to be taught, they often became bogged down in teaching trivia, and they lost a clear understanding of their purpose and goals and became unable to do anything well.

The idea of teaching "the whole child" ought rather to be limited to the fact that a teacher, in teaching a particular subject, must be aware of the fact that other qualities of the child may help or hinder learning in a particular way. A simple example: a child who has a social problem that results in difficulties with his classmates may have difficulty learning his math because of this problem. The teacher, obviously, has to be aware that he is not programming a computer but is teaching a child with many characteristics that will affect the learning process. The teacher will concern himself with the social problem to the extent that it interferes with the learning of math, but should not be expected to solve social problems of the child anymore than he should try to correct physical problems.

Correcting the problems that may interfere with the learning of the students is not so much a matter of implementing a new program in the school as it is a matter of communicating with the parents so they may address the problem. Some problems that affect the education of the children are spiritual problems. We should not be reluctant to apply to the pastors and consistories for help in dealing with spiritual problems.

Some false goals in "Christian" education

One goal that we reject but that is held by many Christian schools is that of converting the students. Such a goal will certainly affect teaching methods. Also, schools that have such a goal often welcome the unconverted. We maintain that our schools are not mission stations but are designed for covenant children. Conversion is a function of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word. We seek, rather, to nurture spiritual growth among the children of the covenant.

We do not believe in a postmillennial return of Christ to rule the earth. We do not, therefore, train our children to "redeem" the world for Christ. We view ourselves and our children as pilgrims and strangers in the earth. We see redemption of the earth only in the new creation. We train our children to seek a better country, that is, a heavenly one. This influences our treatment of all of the subjects.

It seems to me important that the school strictly limit its objectives to those areas for which the parents are not qualified or for some other reason are unable to perform. One reason for strict limitation is completely practical: we do not have the time to teach all things the child needs to be taught. If we try to do everything, we end up doing nothing well. It is also important for the parents to perform as much of the educational function as they can. The scriptural injunctions concerning education are addressed to parents. This does not mean that they are required by Scripture to do all the education of the children, but it does mean that they are first of all responsible for that education, and when they delegate some of that responsibility to the school, they are still responsible to see that the school does it well.

There are some few people who seem to believe that the main purpose of having Protestant Reformed Schools is to protect children from wicked influences. They expect that their children will associate with Christian children and will thus be more certain to grow up as Christians. It is true that this is one of the purposes of our schools. We want to keep our children from evil companions and the temptation of the world while we are trying to teach them the way of the Lord. One goal of our schools is to shelter the children while we nurture them until they are strong enough to function as Christians in the world.

Those who believe strongly in the sheltering function of PR education are gravely disappointed when they discover sins in the children attending the school. Their children come home and tell about the bad language and behavior of some of the students, and they become disillusioned with the school and critical of PR education. Even now, after many years of teaching PR students, I am still sometimes shocked at the language some children use and at their propensity for evil. What bothers even more is the fact that they so often show little remorse. "So you caught me this time. I'll pay the penalty, and I'll be careful not to be caught again," they seem to be saying.

We need to remember a couple of facts: Sin does not come from outside; it comes from within from our own hearts. The old idea that we can escape from sin by separating ourselves from the world is just as attractive now as when many people entered monasteries and just as false. Confessing as we do the doctrine of total depravity, we really should not be surprised that our children sin. That does not deny the value of separating our children. We can reduce outside influences that will encourage them to sin. We may even be able to develop an atmosphere in which they will be encouraged to do right.

Even though we know that our children, like us, are prone to all evil, that does not mean that we should be complacent about it or accepting of their sins. Parents and teachers are responsible for teaching them to know what is right, and to try to get them to behave righteously. The children, too, are responsible before God for their actions. Another important goal of PR education is that parents and teachers together teach the children the same things about sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Where sin is treated as an aberration or a disease or a variation in lifestyle or a consequence of mishandling by others, children will not learn truly about the wonder of salvation.

There is another difficulty of sheltering children of which, I'm afraid, we are not sufficiently aware or concerned. In our schools we create a kind of closed society. When sins appear in such a society there is a serious danger that they will become accepted. It seems that when a fellow member of the church does it or my friend does it then it cannot really be so bad. I have found it often with a sin like cheating in school. All would agree that cheating is a sin. Nevertheless, when a couple of my friends do it, it cannot be so bad. After awhile we can find many excuses for cheating and can find others to blame for it. Finally cheating becomes accepted and is really not considered a real sin, or, if it is a sin, an understandable and acceptable one. When sin appears in a closed society, there is a serious danger that it will become acceptable and will lose its sinful character.

In conclusion

We often say that one of the goals of Protestant Reformed education is to teach our children to live as Christians in the world. I think this is, perhaps, the goal that summarizes all others.

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