Parents and Teachers: Allies or Adversaries

by Rev. Michael DeVries

This article is the text of an inspirational speech delivered for the Parent/Teachers Association of the Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School of Grand Rapids, Michigan, October 14, 1983. Rev. DeVries is the pastor of the Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, Wyoming, Michigan.

As is intimated by my theme I believe that at times, to one extent or another the godly attributes of humility, unity, brotherly love, and likemindedness do not characterize the parent-teacher relationship. Perhaps your first reaction is to think it rather silly to suggest that parents and teachers could be adversaries. But understand that it is indeed possible for that to be the case. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is to be found with regard to the public school system.

And I think it well that we remind ourselves of this that we may give thanks to God for the schools He has given us. A recent "Impact" article published by the Institute for Creation-Research entitled "How Can Our Children Know" emphasizes that if God is forbidden territory in the public education process, as He is, the children will be programmed in that no-God framework. Should Christian parents use the public school system, they and the teachers of their children are adversaries, opponents, those who have contrary purposes. The instruction by the parents would be and must needs be a continual contradiction of the teacher. And the only instance of parents and teachers truly being allies in such a system is that of ungodly carnal parents and ungodly carnal teachers joining hands to lead the children merrily down the road to hell!

But what about us, what about this parent-teacher relationship in our school? Are we allies or adversaries? As parents do we honor and respect the teachers as servants of God and as servants to us for God's sake? Do we as parents and teacher discuss together the mutual concerns regarding our children? Is our high regard for the teacher evident from our attitude toward the school, from our prayers? How do you react to the news that your son or daughter has been disciplined by the teacher? Do you stand behind the teacher or criticize? Would

you rather talk to other parents about the teacher than to the teacher himself or herself? Do you discuss a teacher's failure or short-comings with your children?

As we consider this question: Parents and Teachers: Allies or Adversaries?, I would submit to you three propositions:

I. Parents and teachers must be allies.
II. Adverse attitudes destroy the proper parent-teacher relationship.
III. Parent-teacher adversaries have an extremely detrimental effect upon our children.

I. Parents and teachers must be allies.

Allies are those joined together in a common enterprise. Allies stand together, shoulder to shoulder; allies cooperate in their endeavor. I hope there is no question as to what our one enterprise or endeavor is. As parents and teachers we are to work together toward the common goal of the proper instruction of the covenant seed. Proper instruction is that which rears children to become mature Christians.

As our own "Principles of Education for our School" emphasizes "Christian instruction means. . .essentially one thing. This one thing is instruction that is based entirely upon the truth of the Word of God." That is repeatedly the command of the Scriptures with regard to the children: "Train up a child in the way he should go. . . ." "Thou shalt teach them (that is, the commandments of Jehovah) diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." "Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." The prayer of our Baptism Form presents this so beautifully: "that they may be piously and religiously educated. . . that they may live in all righteousness, under our only Teacher, King, and High Priest, Jesus Christ. . .to the end that they may eternally praise and magnify thee. . . ."

In fulfilling this command of God, in attaining this goal parents and teachers must be allies. We have recognized the fact that as parents we are unable to fulfill this great task by ourselves. We are unable to devote our talents and time exclusively to rearing our children through all the years of their formal education. We have united as parents of like mind and common desire to rear our children in the fear of the Lord. Our schools are a demand of the covenant, an aspect of our calling as parents in the covenant.

Therefore, the school is an extension of our homes. And our godly, like-minded teachers stand in our place. That is the chief concern, not

simply that our teachers are academically qualified, but that our teachers have the spiritual qualifications to stand in our place. That is the historic Reformed conception of the Christian school. Dr. H. Bouwman wrote: "The rule ought to be, that the school originate with the parents. According to the ordinance of God, the full task of rearing rests first of all upon the parents. To the many aids which serve to assist the parents in this rearing belongs especially the school. The school takes over a part of the task of the parents. It follows from this, that the school must stand on the same foundation as the Christian family, that is to say, on the ground of the covenant. . ." (*Gereformeerd Kerkrecht,* Vol. 1, pp. 520-521). This means that the authority of our teachers with regard to the students is our authority as parents, that same authority which God has given to us.

Because of all this parents and teachers must be allies! There must be the closest intimacy and cooperation between parents and teachers. We must be involved in the school, in the obvious ways, of attending association meetings, P.T.A., and our Parent/Teacher conferences.

But we must also be involved in more personal contact with the teacher. As parents we should feel free to talk to the teachers about our children. We should give them insights into the child that may help them in their task. We should ask questions we may have regarding their instruction. We should discuss the mutual concerns we have for the child we are both rearing.

The same holds true for the teachers: they ought to inform us regarding problems. They ought to consult with us regarding their concerns. The teachers deal with many moral problems: laziness, irresponsibility, sullenness, anger, disrespect, pride, cruelty, and mob spirit. Together we must deal with these problems!

The Dutch educator T. Van DerKooy stresses: "It is my fervent hope that we may be spared the unfortunate conflict between parents and teachers which has sometimes been predicted. These ought by all means to stand shoulder to shoulder in the fulfilling of the sacred calling to educate" (*The Distinctive Features of the Christian School*).

Are we allies, standing shoulder to shoulder? The home and school, the parent and teacher must be one in mind and will, and above all in heart, as to who the child is, what the required instruction and discipline are, and who God is. In this consciousness we must labor together.

II. Why? Because adverse attitudes destroy the parent-teacher relationship.

There are several factors that we must consider that tend toward

making parents and teachers adversaries. On the one hand there is the extreme that parents turn over all responsibilities for education to the teacher. Parents then show little concern for or interest in the school or the teacher. Fathers do not bother with association meetings. Parents make no effort to attend P.T.A. or conferences with their child's teacher, or perhaps they go with obvious dread and reluctance. There is no consultation with the teacher regarding problems, concerns, questions.

Sometimes teachers can promote this attitude. If they regard themselves and their work as independent, and resent "parental intrusion" and fail to view themselves as servants of the parents, this can be the case. In pride teachers may suppose that they are competent in the field of education while generally parents are not, ergo, they will have success, as sovereign educators, unhindered by blundering parents.

But I'm afraid that more often it is our failing as parents. We abdicate our responsibility and authority to the teacher completely. Viewing the school as an advanced day-care center for our children, we allow or compel the teacher to take over the whole task of covenant instruction.

On the other hand, there is the extreme that each of us feels that as a parent, we should have the complete say-so concerning the child. We would like to control the instruction given, the teaching methods, the homework, the discipline within the school. We would like to have complete control over our children and have the teachers only carry out our specific instructions. This might work fine if only one parent and one teacher were involved, but when many parents with many children are involved this becomes an impossible situation. Teachers are not able neither should they attempt to carry out every whim that we may have as parents. Oh, teachers must be willing to listen to us and our concerns and our opinions regarding our children. But we must remember that we have extended to the teacher our God-given authority. They are not mere puppets of the parents. They must have liberty to teach without a parent looking over their shoulder and criticizing every move.

To find the proper balance in the parent-teacher relationship is not easy. But we must strive for that both as parents and teachers. As Prof. H. Hanko put it in a paper he delivered to mini-course participants funded by the Federation of Protestant Reformed Christian Schools: "On the one hand, we must not be independentistic in our conceptions of Reformed education, but remember that we work together and that this sometimes means that individual concerns must

sometimes be sacrificed for the good of the school as a whole. And yet we must also show a vital concern for the education of our children and parents must work with the teachers in all aspects of the training of their children" ("Principles of Counseling," Lecture I).

In addition, in the parent-teacher relation, we must constantly reckon with the reality of sin. Certainly this has been implied in what has been said regarding the two extremes that must be avoided, but we must consider some specifics. We must recognize that as parents we are sinners. To a considerable extent the proper involvement in the school and with the teacher on our part is a matter of priorities. Are we too busy with our own concerns and activities to be concerned with the person who is standing in our place for six hours five days a week? As much as we need to talk about our children as fathers and mothers, we must feel the need to talk with the teacher of our children.

But all too often, it seems we would rather talk to other parents and friends about the teachers. As Dr. D. Monsma writes in an article entitled "Parental Education": "We may praise the teacher to each other; we should cooperate as parents in assisting the teacher, we should express our united confidence in the teacher, but we may not discuss with others what we consider to be the failings of our teachers." That must be brought to the teacher himself or herself in a spirit of love and humility.

And certainly we may not criticize a teacher in the presence of the children! Understand, that undermines our authority as parents! We may not discuss our teacher's failures with our children! We must be very careful in this regard lest we become guilty of sin against the ninth commandment.

At the same time, we recognize that teachers are sinners too. They have weaknesses and faults. It is a struggle for them too to be a godly example both within and outside the classroom. Fairness does not always prevail in the teacher's handling of the children. Discipline is not always administered by the teacher in the proper way and spirit. Teachers do not always initiate contact with the parents when they should.

One of our high school teachers, and a fellow parent here at Hope School, Mr. Gerald Kuiper, confesses in a speech delivered to the teachers' convention a few years ago in Northwest Iowa: "We as teachers sometimes coast along. We don't show conviction when we fail to pray and study God's Word daily to hear what God says concerning that awesome responsibility we have to instruct children in the fear of the Lord. We sometimes forget that each day the Holy

Scriptures and the Confessions are to be the solid basis for all the instruction we give. . . . We should, as a matter of fact, grow, not only in our knowledge of the subject matter, but also in the ability to bring the Scriptures to bear on it. If we are stagnant, and are running on the gasses of stagnancy, then we have ourselves to blame when interest wanes in our schools" ("Protestant Reformed Education: Tradition or Conviction").

How do you react to the teacher's faults? Do you react by backbiting, speaking to others instead of the teacher? Do you react by taking the side of our children in opposition to the teacher? Do you react by rejecting any problem or criticism the teacher may present to us regarding our child, in an explosion of temper that causes teachers to dread parent-teacher conference time? As regards the teacher's weaknesses and faults, parents and students alike must always keep in mind the instruction of the Heidelberg Catechism as to how God requires us to respond to the "infirmities" of those in authority: "patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand" (Q. 104).

Finally, let us not forget that our children are sinners too! They are conceived and born in sin. They partake of original sin and guilt. They do not have to be taught to sin; it is the good that is foreign to the child. On the other hand, we believe our children are regenerated. And that of course, is a principle change! God saves His people in the line of continued generations. Hence, Jesus can even hold up children as models for adult conduct. But they remain sinners, and because of that we must expect the worst from our children.

They are sinners! And they need discipline, therefore! Scripture is perfectly clear on the necessity of discipline. God demands it: "Correct the child"; "bring him up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"; "Spare not the rod!" Standing in our place in the classroom the teacher must discipline, not according to whim or fancy but in obedience to the will of God. We must recognize this as parents, and insist upon it! We must require that of the teachers! Admonish, discipline, rear my child! As parents support the teacher in that discipline.

And remember that our children are astute. They see clearly when parents are not in agreement and they often begin to work on this fact and drive a few wedges of their own. They learn how to get their own way by setting one parent against the other. The same holds with regard to the parent-teacher relationship. If they detect disagreement with what the teacher has done, they will be sure to make the most of

it. How the story can be colored to make the child appear an innocent angel and the teacher a cruel ogre! A favorite tact is to pit teachers against parents and parents against teachers. Here again, communication between parents and teacher can quickly put an end to this.

Obviously, it is sin that works to destroy the parent-teacher relationship. Imperfect saints are involved in this business of Christian instruction. If only we can bear with each other's weaknesses and faults, if we can counsel with one another when problems arise, if we can forgive each other for Christ's sake, we shall as parents and teachers continue as allies. Rev. D. Engelsma writes: "The unity of our homes and schools in the truth is a rare thing today – pray God that we not lose it!"

III. Parent-teacher adversaries have an extremely detrimental effect upon our children.

Do you see the seriousness of this matter – the parent-teacher relationship? One could consider the bitter fruits which we should surely reap as far as the schools themselves are concerned. How long could our schools last if parents and teachers become adversaries? Or we could consider the sorry effect upon the communion of saints and unity of the body of Christ. But I wish to call your attention to what this means for our children, the heritage of Jehovah!

Rev. C. Hanko spoke for a teachers' mini-course in 1978 upon the subject "motivation." He stated: "Our Christian schools are also definitely suffering from the lethargy and tendency toward mediocrity so evident among the students." He summed up the problem of lack of motivation under four headings; the third was: "Parental interference with the instruction given and/or discipline administered, complaints against the grades the child receives, resulting in an attitude of complacency in the child."

Our children are not unaffected by our attitudes. Why respect the teacher? – Mom and Dad don't! Why study for my history test? Maybe the teacher thinks it's important, but Mom and Dad don't – they'll complain to the teacher if my grade's too low.

When we manifest ourselves as adversaries over against the teacher we sow seeds of rebellion in our children! Understand, we cut *our own* throats, for it is our own authority in the teacher that we are undermining! Rev. Ronald Cammenga drove this point home in a recent *Standard Bearer* article entitled: "Ten Rules for Producing Unspiritual Young People." Rule six reads as follows: "At every opportunity, be critical of the Christian school teachers, the elders, and the pastor.

Make your criticisms known to your children, and the ill will you feel toward these people. Don't hide your feelings toward them, and don't honor them at least for their office's and work's sake. This too, is most effective in producing unspiritual young people. It will encourage the same critical spirit in them. It will cultivate a low view of the church, and the members of the church, and make it easy for them to leave the church later on. And this is what usually happens. Once out of the church and separated from the means of grace and the preaching of the truth, they are fair game" (*Standard Bearer,* Vol. LX, No. 1, Oct. 1, 1983, p. 19). If dad and mother are critical of the Christian school and teacher, be assured that the children will be more critical still and will see no need for a Christian school education for their own children.

As parents and teachers let us labor together as allies in the cause of Christian instruction. Our children, the Lord's heritage, demand no less. Let us labor together in mutual honor and respect for one another. Let us labor together assisting one another in the rearing of our children. Let us labor together in a true spirit of humility, unity, brotherly love, and likemindedness. Let us together seek God's grace for that, confessing that it is God's work! By His grace alone can we fulfill the awesome responsibility He has placed upon us. May God be with us and help us as parents and teachers. May God save the covenant children and glorify His name through them.

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Preserving Our Heritage

by Rev. C. Hanko

This article is the text of the keynote speech given at the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute Convention held at the Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School, November, 1983. Rev. C. Hanko is a minister emeritus of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America.

First of all, I wish to express my appreciation to you for the privilege of being your keynote speaker at this convention. That in itself is a privilege. But what is even more of a privilege is the fact that we have here a cross-section of our churches. I am not merely addressing a local group, but representatives of many of our churches. Still more, you represent that very important element of our churches to whom is entrusted our covenant youth, to shape and to form them for their places and callings in our churches in the future.