The Threat Of AACS Ideology To Reformed Education

by Agatha Lubbers

Several times during the last few years I have had the opportunity to address groups on aspects of the general topic that serves as the title for this article and an article which will, the Lord willing, appear in the next issue of *Perspectives*. The most recent opportunity was October 18, 1979, when I addressed the Convention of the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute.

The purpose of this address was to describe briefly but accurately the historical development of the AACS (Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship). Secondly, I intended to show what I believe is the errant influence of the AACS upon the basic ideas and foundation of the official statements of purpose in the Christian Schools in the Reformed community of North America.

Although much of the early activism caused by the AACS seems to have diminished, the AACS is alive. Controlled by a basic commitment to the philosophic position of Dooyeweerd, books, pamphlets, and articles are produced by a group of scholars located in Toronto, Canada. These men are held together by a common commitment and serve an organization called the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS).

Although this essay will be based upon my speech, the purpose of the article will be to demonstrate how AACS ideology can adversely affect the philosophic direction of Christian schools in the Reformed community.

Early History and Purpose of the AACS (or ARSS)

The AACS began May 28, 1956, with the meeting of seven men in the home of Rev. Henry A. Venema in Redale, Ontario, Canada. It was first called the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies (ARSS). The original resolution stated that the Association is based upon the Word of God as interpreted by the historic Reformed Confessions (i.e. Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic or Netherlands Confession, and the Canons of Dordrecht). During the next decade this organization went through several constitutional changes including the change of the name in 1967 from ARSS to AACS. The acronymn ARSS did seem to fit the real purpose of the organization and ideas of the new leadership.

The chief leaders of the AACS have been and continue to be Dr. Bernard Zylstra, Dr. Arnold De Graaf, Dr. James Olthuis, Dr. Hendrick Hart, Dr. Calvin Seerveld, etc. These men, controlled by their commitment to the philosophic ideas of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven of the Free University of Amsterdam, control the ideology and the thought structure of the AACS. They work to influence young people and others too, and they develop their ideas through the ICS in Toronto.

The AACS was organized originally for "the promotion of Scripturally directed higher learning," and "particularly to establish, control, and develop a Christian university; and in these ways to equip men and women to bring the Word of God in all its power to bear upon the whole life." (The ICS is the closest the AACS has come to its original purpose of developing a Christian university.) In February, 1957, a constitution was adopted and the Association (ARSS at that time) was officially established. In its constitution the Association declared that "the basis of the Society (ARSS) in all its activities is the infallible, all sufficient, and only authoritative Word of God, according to the interpretation of the Reformed Confessions." (Notice this last phrase particularly, "according to the Reformed Confessions.")

Most of those who were members of this association were post Second World War II immigrants from the Netherlands. They were members of the rapidly expanding Christian Reformed Churches in Canada. Rev. Peter De Jong in the *Outlook*, February, 1974, page 4, says:

> Accustomed as many of these people were to the variety of Christian organizations that had arisen out of Abraham Kuyper's

movement, they were surprised by the comparative lack of such developments in Canada. Ought not acknowledging Christ as King produce the same variety of Christian action here as in the land from which they had come?"

It was this kind of stimulus and the seeming lack of Reformed emphasis in the instruction given the youth of church in all the schools in the U.S. and Canada both Christian and public that caused interested people to organize an association which has become as influential, as powerful, and as deceptive as the AACS is now.

The AACS is to be criticized. The AACS claims to be "reformational" but this term is false and misleading. Professor H. Hanko correctly states in an article that appeared in *Standard Bearer*, September 1, 1974, as follows:

> "...we must be sure that we understand what the movement means by the term 'reformational,' for it is used by them ambiguously. When most people hear that the movement is 'reformational', their thoughts almost automatically go back to the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, and they form the idea in their minds that AACS claims for itself a position according to which it defends the great principles of the Protestant Reformation. Such, however, is not the case. When the AACS speaks of being 'reformational', it does not have, at least in the first place, reference to the Protestant Reformation. But it rather has reference to the fact that through its labors it intends and hopes **to reform all the present structures of society so that this present life and its present society may be brought under the rule of Christ.**" (A.L. - bold.)

This is post-millenialism pure and simple.

The AACS and the Word of God

In the second place the AACS is to be criticized because we see the AACS writings and activities doing the opposite of what they were supposed to do. They are leading people away from "scripturally directed higher learning."

The reason for this change in direction can be traced to a revised definition of the "Word of God." No longer does the AACS mean by the phrase the "Word of God" the Holy Scriptures or the Bible. The Word of God includes the opinions of modern scientists, philosophers, and whatever AACS leaders think can be called the law word or the Word of God.

I wish to elaborate on this just a little because this is in a sense the real crux of the matter. This was my main concern when I wrote a series of articles about this problem and the affect of the AACS on the problems that arose in Dordt College in 1974.

Although the ARSS was organized so that the basis of the organization would be the Word of God as it was interpreted by the historic Reformed Confessions, the turning point in the activities and development of this organization came in October, 1958, when the Board of the Association met with Professor Herman Dooyeweerd of the Free University of Amsterdam. A little brochure produced by the ARSS (now AACS) relates that Herman Dooyeweerd "urged the Board to seek for a basis for the Association which would not bind it to the creeds of the church, but would set forth clearly the Scriptural demands for a reformation of theoretical thought."

The Board heeded this counsel of Dr. Dooyeweerd and some months later asked Dr. E.H. Runner, philosophy professor at Calvin College to prepare a statement. The idea of this statement would be that it would express a commitment to the Scriptures and eliminate any reference to the Reformed Creeds. The Amsterdam, Toronto, or Dooyeweerd dogma holds that no "ecclesiastical creed" may ever be used as the basis for a Christian educational institution. This position of the Toronto men is based upon the Dooyeweerdian system of modalities or modes of existence. In this system the church is categorized as a faith-institution and the creeds that have been written regulate life in the church. However, the school is, according to this system of thought, an analytic institution and the creeds of the church cannot form the basis for instruction nor can they help to enlighten or direct the task of the school.

That is a radical approach. It is "re-formational" but it is not historically Reformed!

The emphasis of Dooyeweerd was on academic freedom. This meant freedom from the Reformed Creeds. It meant freedom to adopt the Cosmonomic Philosophy of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven as the structuring influence for any creeds that would be written.

The AACS promoters and thinkers speak of the Word of God in a four-fold sense. The Word of God is Christ. This is the Word Incarnate. In the second place the Word of God is in the Scriptures. This is the Inscripturated Word. In the third place the Word of God is in creation. This is the well-known Cosmonomic Law-Word. It is Word of God in creation as it is revealed in the

law spheres or the modalities which is the essence of Dooyeweerdian ideology. The Word of God can also be called the Kerygmatic Word. This is the Word of God that is preached.

Because the AACS ideology believes that the Bible is only one of several forms of the Word of God, they can say as De Graaf and Sierveld said in the book *Understanding the Scriptures*:

> "What we have to avoid at all costs if Biblical living is to be meaningful living is, on the one hand, to undermine the full authority of the Bible, and, on the other hand, to reduce the Word of God to a set of truths, a collection of infallible propositions. The Bible is not to be read as a collection of propositional statements about God and man that we can memorize and master. Neither does it contain general truths that we could possibly consider apart from their meaning for our lives.."

All this sounds good and does not seem to be a devastating denunciation of the authority and infallibility of the Word of God. However, the statement does not clearly and unequivocally cling to the full authority and power of the Word of God which effects by the operation of the Holy Spirit godly living. The statement cautions against reading the Bible as a collection of infallible propositions. However, it is Reformed to believe that the Word of God is the only infallible guide containing propositional statements for our life of gratitude in the midst of the world of sin.

The AACS ideology becomes more manifestly clear in the *International Reformed Bulletin*, January-April, 1968. Dr. Paul Schrotenboer writes as follows:

> "Scripture is only one form of the Word of God, only one link in a living chain of revelation, the middle connecting link. Unless we see that it is the only means there is to connect us with the revelation of God in Christ Scripture is only so many human words. The Bible in isolation is not the Word of God. Scripture is only a form of revelation and may not be identified with revelation for it does not exhaust revelation. Unless we recognize that it is only a form of the Word of God, we shall exalt the Bible above its due and do despite to Christ."

The idea that there are several other "forms" of the Word of God beside the Bible permits one to put what he believes scientists have discovered in the place of, or above the Bible. The AACS proponents believe that the "Creation-Word" is basic and prior to all other "forms" of the Word of God and therefore the

Bible cannot answer scientific questions. The Bible is therefore downgraded. Such thinking can have devastating results upon the Christian School.

In the *Presbyterian Guardian*, March, 1973, Zylstra writes as follows:

> In numerous passages the Bible, infallibly and with divine authority teaches us that the Word is God's calling creation into being for service. The Bible teaches us that the Word is God's calling sinners to repentance, to restoration, and **to service**. Through the Word of power the creation is born, upheld, and is being redeemed. That is the meaning of John 1. In a nutshell it says everything there is to be said about the Word. And it need not even refer to the Scriptures, except with reference to Moses, through whom the law, or the Word came prior to Christ...."

Although this may sound Reformed and orthodox, Zylstra is in reality denigrating the Bible by making the Bible to be secondary to the "Creation Word."

Another AACS proponent, Arnold De Graaf in *Understanding the Scriptures*, p. 12 says,

> "To try to establish the exact nature (scientifically) of the coming into existence of the world on the basis of Genesis 1 and 2, therefore, would be to distort the nature and purpose of the Word of God...the references to God's creating do not answer our scientific, biological or geological questions, just as little as the Bible answers the questions of the historian or the anthropologist. The Bible is just not that kind of book. It is not a textbook for any science, not even theology!"

Notice well!!—not even theology! One would be tempted to say, "Blasphemy."

It is certainly true that the Bible cannot be equated with a textbook written by man, but it is the source of our knowledge of God concerning all things. It explains and makes clear that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. This is the meaning of history. It does answer the questions of the historian, the anthropologist, and therefore of the scientist too!

Hear the Belgic Confession on this matter!

> "We know Him by two means: first by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe;...Secondly, He makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word,... Article 2."

The AACS ideologists place their philosophy and the idea of

the "creation-word" above the Bible as the Word of God. The modalities of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven are more basic than the Bible as the blue print for Christian philosophy. De Graaf said that Abraham Kuyper, who was one of the chief leaders in the organization of the Free University of Amsterdam, made a mistake by leaning on the Bible for his theology. Kuyper made a mistake for leaning on the Bible for writing theology, whereas theology is the Knowledge of God! Where can we get the knowledge of God except from the Holy Scriptures? Any other kind of knowledge will be sensual, devilish. It will be humanism.

The result of putting the Creation-Word in a superior position to the Bible, and making the Bible merely a "republication" of that discoverable Creation-Word destroys the very Bible that it claims to support. In the second place this ideology elevates what Creation cannot teach and goes in the direction of natural theology, which is mere rationalism and human imagination. In the third place it does not recognize the character and devastating effect of sin. In the fourth place this ideology destroys the redeeming and saving work of Christ, who is the Word made flesh. In the fifth place it does not teach positively the need for regeneration and conversion before one can even see the Kingdom of God. These are the fundamentals of the Reformed faith as they apply to all areas of life. These truths the Holy Scriptures teach and they are contained in the Reformed Creeds.

I agree with Rev. David Engelsma, who writing in a little book entitled *Reformed Education*, says concerning the AACS proponents the following:

> "Although they (the AACS proponents, AL) cry, 'Word of God, Word of God,' they are only (as Barth said concerning the liberals of the 19th century, who did the same thing) saying, Word of Man, very loudly."

The AACS, The Kingdom, and Its Spheres

The Kingdom idea of the AACS thinkers is Post-millenialism. It is not the evolutionistic Post-millenialism of Liberalism and Modernism found in mainline churches of American and Europe. The Modernistic Postmillenialism confesses the universal fatherhood of God and universal brotherhood of man. Modernistic Postmillenialism denies the five fundamentals of Christian

religion such as the infallible Scriptures, the virgin birth, miracles, etc. The Modernistic Postmillenialist envisions the realization of the kingdom of Christ as something that will naturally evolve through economic, social and political betterment. This Modernistic Postmillenialism calls men to get out of the pews in the church and into the market places. Never mind preaching and the sacraments. Get with it in society, race relationships, poverty, etc.

The Post-millenialism of the AACS is a more conservative brand which is equally heterodox and is much more dangerous and deceitful. It does not deny the fundamentals of the Reformed faith but is sometimes Fundamentalistic. This brand of Postmillenialism teaches that gradually this world will become Christianized to the extent that the Christians will be in the majority. To the extent that Christians will have taken over society's structures and institutions they will be enabled to realize the kingdom of Christ here upon earth. This is the essence of the "Dream" and "A Course of Action" proposed by James Olthuis in *Out of Concern for the Church*, p. 20-24.

When the kingdom of Christ is realized upon earth and after it endures for a bit, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will come back from heaven to take the kingdom unto Himself. Whatever may be the doctrinal differences between liberal and conservative post-millenialism they share this in common—that the kingdom of Christ is an earthly kingdom and that the kingdom of Christ will be realized in this present earth.

In this they are dead wrong. When the church of Jesus Christ prays with all of the saints of the New Dispensation "Thy kingdom come," she does not pray for an earthly kingdom. She prays that we may be more and more ruled by the Word and Spirit of Christ so that the members of the church may more and more submit themselves to God. The Church prays a prayer which coincides with the promise of Christ that the gates of hell will never prevail against the church. She does not pray for an earthly kingdom.

Dr. Carl McIntyre, son of the radio minister by the same name, teaches at Toronto based ICS. He writes in a speech entitled "The Forgotten Art of World Shaking" as follows:

> "Our association works for nothing less than the reformation of learning. As the Lord grants, the ARSS (i.e. AACS) advanced education will send throughout all of North America the world-shakers and history-makers in every facet of life. Christian

men and women will turn the world upside down for the Lord God."

We wish to anticipate here a few more detailed comments that we want to make in the next article about what the faculty of Dordt College sees as *The Educational Task of Dordt College.* "...He (i.e. Christ) summons the redeemed members of the new humanity to work for the expression of His Kingdom everywhere. As agents of reconciliation, they are called to labor together as one body in fulfilling the original mandate according to the claims of Christ."

This is tantamount to saying that Christian men and women will "turn the world upside down for the Lord God."

This is the essence of Postmillenialism and is a very wrong conception of the nature of the Kingdom of Christ that comes to expression now before the second and final coming of Christ.

The ideology makers have a wrong conception of the Kingdom of Christ because they fall into the error of identifying the Kingdom of Christ with this present world. It is an earthly conception of the Kingdom. But this is contrary to the Bible which says concerning the Kingdom of Christ that it is not of this world." (cf. John 18:36) The Kingdom is spiritual and is heavenly and does not come with observation. Luke 17:20-21.

And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo.there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

A wrong conception of the Kingdom and particularly one such as this can cause one to fall into the very real danger of identifying the Kingdom of Christ with the Kingdom of Antichrist. This is possible because the Kingdom of Antichrist from a worldly point of view will be a very beautiful and delightful kingdom for those who worship the beast. It will be a Kingdom in which Christianity is promulgated for Paul says in II Thessalonians that Antichrist will set himself up in the temple of God claiming that he is God. If it were possible even the elect would be deceived. (Cf. II Thess. 2:3-4 and Matt. 24:22)

The Word of God as this is contained in the Scriptures is not directly applicable to any of these spheres except the Church. The Word of God as it is in the Scriptures may be indirectly applicable to the other spheres but not directly. Therefore the Word of God as found in the Scriptures and interpreted in the Christian creeds are relevant solely for the Church. The Word of

God which is applicable in these other spheres is the Creational Word, that is, the Word of God which is in the creation about us. This is the Cosmonomic Law Idea of Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, and the AACS thinkers. That Word must be discovered independently from the Scriptures. The Scriptures can no longer be a guide nor are they the spectacles through which we understand and discover all things.

We conclude this section in which we have discussed the truth of the kingdom and the related question of the "sphere sovereignty" by observing the following:

In the first place we distinguish between the responsibilities of church and government by obeying the church in all things that relate to our life of holiness. We give, as Jesus taught us, those things to Caesar that belong to Caesar, and those things that are God's we give to God. We do not believe, however, that spheres of life can be divided into sovereign spheres. God is sovereign but men are not.

In the second place we observe that the Bible does not teach that man's life is divided into many different spheres each of which is independent and that each must jealously guard its rights against pressure from every other. To advance the notion of "sphere sovereignty" results in "sphere conflict."

Believers are taught to serve Christ in every area of their life. This change in a direction of their heart causes them to live differently from the world, but the life of a Christian does not result in turning the world upside down for Jesus. Man must be a new creature. He lives differently within every institution of society but he does not restructure all the institutions of society.

(Next issue: The Results of These AACS Views Upon Reformed Education.)

"By Christian education is meant education of which the basis and unifying principle is the historic Christian view of God, man and the universe in their mutual relations. This historic Christian philosophy finds its most comprehensive and consistent expression in Calvinism, or the Reformed Faith; therefore the most comprehensive and consistent Christian education must be based on, and unified by, the Reformed or Calvinistic view of God, man and the universe, and their mutual relations."

Dr. J.G. Vos
Blue Banner Faith and Life