

CHURCH AND SCHOOL

As we know by now, the Church Order is an agreement among churches to regulate how we run our federation. By joining the federation, churches with their consistories sign on to the Church Order as the document that governs the relationship by spelling out some of the practical implications of our spiritual unity of faith. Within that framework it may seem that Article 58 is somewhat out of place: “The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions.”

What kind of responsibility, if any, do the elders of the church have when it comes to the education parents choose for their children?

INSIGHTS CHANGE

What we have today in Article 58 is a new version of what we had in Article 21 before the Church Order revision at General Synod 1983. There is a difference in wording: the old Article 21 stipulated that “consistories shall see to it that there are good teachers. . . .” And there is also a difference in location within the Church Order: old Article 21 is in the section on “the offices,” whereas the current Article 58 is in the section on “worship, sacraments and ceremonies.” This place links it in particular to infant baptism, which is mentioned in Article 57. The place of old Article 21 views the matter of Christian school education more from the perspective of the task of the elders. This is not lost in our Article 58, but here the connection with the promises of the parents at the baptism of their children is more visible.

Is that a good thing? That depends on who you ask. There are different opinions regarding the relationship between the baptismal vows and the need for establishing Reformed Christian schools.

What used to be stipulated in Article 21 goes back to the sixteenth century, and the wording came straight from the Church Order adopted by the Synod of Dort 1618/19. In the time of the Reformation, parental Christian schools were unknown. Schools were established and supported by the government, but the

churches were directly involved in supervising the education of the children in those schools. That was because the government of the day in the Netherlands was committed to promoting the Reformed faith. This pattern changed in the nineteenth century. With the separation of church and state, the insight was growing that the Bible charges the parents with the instruction of their children—not the church, and not the state either.

The church does have direct responsibility for teaching the doctrine of the church, as is explicitly confirmed in Article 16, and also reflected in Articles 22 and 27. This is what the parents agree to in the third promise at the baptism of their children.

However, when it comes to further and more general education of the children, the church has at best an indirect responsibility. Why is that?

AN ECCLESIASTICAL MATTER?

Let’s think back (again) at one of the goals of the Church Order, as stated in one of the first columns in this series. As churches that are spiritually one, united in the Reformed faith, we accept mutual accountability when it comes to safeguarding the faithful teaching of the true doctrine of Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions. For children this happens in settings like Sunday school and catechism classes but is not restricted to that. Life is one. Worldviews and moral values, whatever convictions those are based on, Christian or other, will permeate all education our children and youth are exposed to.

Ministers and elders are charged with the task to warn against and refute all ideas and views that are not in harmony with God’s Word (Art 27). Therefore, the church does have a vested interest in the education of the children of the congregation. This is expressed in Article 58, but in such a way that it does not take away the responsibility God has first of all given to the parents. The emphasis is on the task of the consistory towards the parental responsibilities of fathers and mothers.

Our Christian schools are not run by consistories, but by Christian school societies, made up of parents and other

supporters, under the leadership of a school board. Consistories do not supervise educational organizations, nor social and political organizations for that matter, as they “shall deal with no other than ecclesiastical matters,” as agreed on in Article 30. A consistory does not have the authority to overrule a decision of a school society or schoolboard, and so determine what should be done in the school.

This may sound obvious to most of us. However, the view that a school society or school board should be under direct ecclesiastical supervision has also been defended. The argument is that the vows parents make at the baptism of their children were made in the church. One author says: “parents, children, teachers and school board members are always, everywhere and in whatever capacity they function, under the supervision of their consistory.” This is correct, of course. But it does not require or justify a consistory’s organizational involvement in the Christian school. The duty of elders is restricted to supervision over the congregation. This includes comforting, encouraging, and admonishing with God’s Word all the sheep of the flock, whether those are teachers, parents, students, school board members, or none of the above.

SCHOOLBOARD MATTERS ≠ CONSISTORY MATTERS

All of this sounds pretty clear cut. Nevertheless, sometimes it requires much wisdom and careful discernment to prevent school board matters from becoming consistory matters. Especially when it involves the same people, things can get complicated and even messy.

What if elders have become convinced that there are good reasons to suspect that a teacher promotes views contrary to Scripture in the local Christian school? Elders can address the teacher personally, or the principal and eventually the school board. Can the consistory do that? Perhaps. But that’s where it ends. If the board defends and supports the teacher involved, no consistory has the authority to overrule the board’s decision.

Or imagine a parent who complains about an issue to the schoolboard, but the board turns a deaf ear. Where does the parent go, especially when all involved are members in the same church? Should he bring the matter to the consistory?

And what if a school board member accuses the rest of the board of lying to the membership of the school society? Or a school board suspends a board member, whom they accuse of slandering a teacher, but the person denies it, and takes the matter of what he calls “false accusations” to the consistory?

In all those scenarios there is no easy solution. But history and experience teach that when school board matters become consistory matters, it usually means trouble for the whole church community and school community. And sometimes the trouble falls out on an even larger scale, when one school serves multiple church communities. Think of the potential consequences: it would be quite inappropriate if a major ecclesiastical assembly were called to resolve a conflict between a school board and a consistory (or even more than one consistory).

WHAT ABOUT HOMESCHOOLING?

The expression in Article 58 “have their children attend a school . . .” triggers the question: what about homeschooling? This column is about the Church Order, and so it is not the place to get into the debate about the pros and cons of homeschooling compared to Christian school education. Here it is sufficient to observe that, also in the Canadian Reformed Churches, homeschooling has become much more “main stream,” so to speak, than it was twenty-five or thirty years ago. Let’s remind ourselves of what I wrote above: In his Word God gives parents the responsibility for the education of their children. And those who are committed to giving their children a Christian education can choose different avenues to reach that goal. More recently we also hear about collaboration between homeschooling and traditional schooling that leads to the development of new formats, like “hybrid schools” and “micro schools.”¹

In light of this it might be good to consider amending the current wording of Article 58. I think it is important to maintain the aspect that “the consistory shall ensure that the parents . . .” But the words “have their children attend schools” sound perhaps too restrictive. This was the obvious way of putting it forty years ago, when homeschooling was not heard of among us, but it’s fair to acknowledge that this has changed. I would suggest the following: “The consistory shall see to it that the parents to the utmost of their power make sure that their children receive instruction that is in harmony with the Word of God, as the church has summarized it in her confessions.” 



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¹ <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/perspectives-paper/charting-new-horizons-for-independent-education-in-canada/>