

The Necessity of the Christian School

J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

THE Christian school is to be favored for two reasons. In the first place, it is important for American liberty; in the second place, it is important for the propagation of the Christian religion. These two reasons are not equally important; indeed, the latter includes the former as it includes every other legitimate human interest. But I want to speak of these two reasons in turn.

In the first place, then, the Christian school is important for the maintenance of American liberty.

We are witnessing in our day a world-wide attack upon the fundamental principles of civil and religious freedom. In some countries, such as Italy, the attack has been blatant and unashamed; Mussolini despises democracy and does not mind saying so. A similar despotism now prevails in Germany; and in Russia freedom is being crushed out by what is perhaps the most complete and systematic tyranny that the world has ever seen.

But exactly the same tendency that is manifested in extreme form in those countries is also being manifested, more slowly but none the less surely, in America. It has been given an enormous impetus first by the war and now by the economic depression; but aside from these external stimuli it has its roots in a fundamental deterioration of the American people. Gradually the people has come to value principle less and creature comfort more; increasingly it has come to prefer prosperity to freedom; and even in the field of prosperity it cannot be said that the effect is satisfactory.

The result of this decadence in the American people is seen in the rapid growth of a centralized bureaucracy which is the thing against which the Constitution of the United States was most clearly intended to guard.

In the presence of this apparent collapse of free democracy, any descendant of the liberty-loving races of mankind may well stand dismayed; and to those liberty-loving races no doubt most of my hearers tonight belong. I am of the Anglo-Saxon race; many of you belong to a race whose part in the history of human freedom is if anything still more glorious; and as we all contemplate the struggle of our fathers in the winning of that freedom which their descendants seem now to be so willing to give up, we are impressed anew with the fact that it is far easier to destroy than to create. It took many centuries of struggle -- much blood and many tears -- to establish the fundamental principles of our civil and religious liberty; but one made generation is sufficient to throw them all away.

It is true, the attack upon liberty is nothing new. Always there have been tyrants in the world; almost always tyranny has begun by being superficially beneficent, and always it has ended by being both superficially and radically cruel.

But while tyranny itself is nothing new, the technique of tyranny has been enormously improved in our day; the tyranny of the scientific expert is the most crushing tyranny of all. That tyranny is being exercised most effectively in the field of education. A monopolistic system of education controlled by the State is far more efficient in crushing our liberty than the cruder weapons of fire and sword. Against this monopoly of education by the State the Christian school brings a salutary protest; it contends for the right of parents to bring up their children in accordance with the dictates of their conscience and not in the manner prescribed by the State.

That right has been attacked in America in recent years in the most blatant possible ways. In Oregon, a law was actually passed some years ago requiring all children to attend the public schools -- thus taking the children from the control of their parents and placing them under the despotic control of whatever superintendent of education might happen to be in office in the district in which they resided. In Nebraska, a law was passed forbidding the study of languages other than English, even in private schools, until the child was too old to learn them well. That was really a law making literary education a crime. In New York, one of the abominable Lusk Laws placed even private tutors under state supervision and control.

It is true that no one of these measures is in force at the present time. The Lusk Laws were repealed, largely through the efforts of Governor Alfred E. Smith. The Oregon School Law and the Nebraska Language Law were declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court, and Justice McReynolds in the decision in the latter case gave expression to the great principle that in America the child is not the mere creature of the State.

Even such salutary decisions as that are not to be contemplated with unmixed feelings by the lover of American institutions. They are based, I suppose, upon the great "Bill-of-Rights" provisions of the Constitution of the United States. But the original intent of those provisions was that they should be a check upon Congress, not that they should be a check upon the states. The fundamental rights of man were to be guaranteed, it was assumed, by the constitutions of the individual states, so far as the powers reserved to the states are concerned. It is a sign of appalling deterioration when the Federal Supreme Court steps in to do what the state courts ought to do. Nevertheless we cannot help rejoicing at the result. For the present at least, such an excess of tyranny as was put into effect in Oregon and has been seriously advocated in Michigan and other states is postponed.

Yet the forces inimical to liberty have not been discouraged by these temporary checks. They are at work with great persistency just at the present time, busying

themselves particularly in the advocacy of two vicious measures, both of which concern childhood and youth.

One of these is the mis-named "child labor amendment" to the Constitution of the United States. That amendment masquerades under the cloak of humanitarianism; it is supposed to be intended to prevent sweat-shop conditions or the like. As a matter of fact, it is just about as heartless a piece of proposed legislation as could possibly be conceived. Many persons who glibly favor this amendment seem never to have read it for themselves. They have a vague notion that it merely gives power to regulate the gainful employment of children. Not at all. The word "labor" was expressly insisted on in the wording of the amendment as over against the word "employment". The amendment gives power to Congress to enter right into your home and regulate or control or prevent altogether the helpful work of your children without which there can be no normal development of human character and no ordinary possibility of true happiness for mankind.

But someone will say, Congress will never in the world be so foolish as that; the amendment does give Congress that power, but the power will never be exercised. Now, my friends, I will just say this: when I listen to an argument like that, I sometimes wonder whether the person who advances it can possibly be convinced by it himself. If these stupendous powers are never to be exercised, why should they be granted? The zeal for the granting of them, the refusal of the framers of the amendment to word the amendment in any reasonably guarded way, show plainly that the powers are intended to be exercised; and certainly they will be exercised, whatever the intention of the framers of the amendment may be. I will tell you exactly what will happen if this amendment is adopted by the states. Congress will pass legislation which, in accordance with the plain meaning of the language, will be quite unenforceable. The exact degree of enforcement will be left to Washington bureaus, and the individual family will be left to the arbitrary decision of officials. It would be difficult to imagine anything more hostile to the decency of family life and to all the traditions of our people. If there ever was a measure that looked as though it were made in Russia, it is this falsely so-called "child-labor amendment" to the Constitution of the United States. In reality, it can hardly be called an amendment to the Constitution. Rather is it the complete destruction of the Constitution; for if human life in its formative period -- up to eighteen years in the life of every youth - - is to be given to Federal bureaucrats, we do not see what else of very great value can remain. The old principles of individual liberty and local self-government will simply have been wiped out.

This so-called child labor amendment was originally submitted to the states a number of years ago. It was in process of being rushed right through without any more examination than other amendments received. But then fortunately some patriotic citizens in Massachusetts, especially in the organization called "the Sentinels of the Republic", informed the people of the state what was really involved in this vicious measure. Massachusetts had a strict child labor law; it might have been expected,

therefore, in accordance with the customary specious argument, to need protection against states where the child labor laws are less strict. Yet in a referendum the amendment was rejected by an overwhelming vote. Other states followed suit, and it looked as though this attack upon American institutions and the decencies of the American home had been repelled.

But we are living now in another period of hysteria, a period even worse than that which was found at the time of the war. So the so-called child labor amendment has been revived. State after state has adopted it, to a total number, I believe, of fourteen. It looks as though the enemies of American institutions might soon have their will, and as though the childhood and youth of our country might be turned over after all to the tender mercies of Washington bureaus. That disastrous result can only be prevented if there is an earnest effort of those who still think the preservation of the American home to be worthwhile.

Another line of attack upon liberty has appeared in the advocacy of a Federal department of education. Repeatedly this vicious proposal has been introduced in Congress. It has been consistently favored by that powerful organization, the National Education Association. Now without being familiar with the internal workings of that Association I venture to doubt whether its unfortunate political activities really represent in any adequate way the rank and file of its members or the rank and file of the public-school teachers of this country. When I appeared at a joint hearing before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor and the House Committee on Education in 1926, Mr. Lowrey of the House Committee asked me how it was that the resolution favoring the Federal department of education was passed unanimously by the National Education Association although he had discovered that many members of that Association were saying that they were opposed to it. Neither Mr. Lowrey nor I seemed to be able to give any very good explanation of this fact. At any rate, I desire to pay the warmest possible tribute to many thousands of conscientious men and women who are teachers in the public schools in this country. I do not believe that in the entire government aspect of education these teachers have any really effective representation.

The commission on the subject which President Hoover appointed, for example, was composed hardly at all of teachers, but almost exclusively of "educators". It had within its membership professors of "education", superintendents of schools and the like; but in the entire roll of its membership there was found, if I remember aright, hardly a single man eminent in any branch of literary studies or of natural science. The composition of that commission was typical of one of the fundamental vices in education in America at the present time -- namely, the absurd over-emphasis upon methodology in the sphere of education at the expense of content. When a man fits himself in America to teach history or chemistry, it scarcely seems to occur to him, or rather it scarcely seems to occur to those who prescribe his studies for him, that he ought to study history or chemistry. Instead, he studies merely "education". The study of education seems to be regarded as absolving a teacher from obtaining any knowledge of the subjects that he is

undertaking to teach. And the pupils are being told, in effect, that the simple storing up in the mind of facts concerning the universe and human life is a drudgery from which they have now been emancipated; they are being told, in other words, that the great discovery has been made in modern times that it is possible to learn how to "think" with a completely empty mind. It cannot be said that the result is impressive. In fact the untrammelled operation of the effects of this great American pedagogic discovery is placing American schools far behind the schools of the rest of the civilized world.

But that is perhaps something like a digression. Let us return to the "educators" and their general demand either for a Federal department of education or for Federal aid to the states. Such demands are in the interests of uniformity in the sphere of education. There should be, it is said, a powerful coordinating agency in education, to set up standards and encourage the production of something like a system. But what shall we say of such an aim? I have no hesitation, for my part, in saying that I am dead opposed to it. Uniformity in education, it seems to me, is one of the worst calamities into which any people can fall.

There are, it is true, some spheres in which uniformity is a good thing. It is a good thing, for example, in the making of Ford cars. In the making of a Ford car, uniformity is the great end of the activity. That end is, indeed, not always fully attained. Sometimes a Ford car possesses entirely too much individuality. My observation was, in the heroic days before the invention of self-starters, when a Ford was still a Ford, that sometimes a Ford car would start and sometimes it would not start; and if it would not start there was no use whatever in giving it any encouraging advice. But although uniformity was not always perfectly attained, the aim, at least, was to attain it; the purpose of the whole activity was that one Ford car should be just as much like every other Ford car as it could possibly be made.

But what is good for a Ford car is not always good for a human being, for the simple reason that a Ford car is a machine while a human being is a person. Our modern pedagogic experts seem to deny the distinction, and that is one place where our quarrel with them comes in. When you are dealing with human beings, standardization is the last thing you ought to seek. Uniformity of education under one central governmental department would be a very great calamity indeed.

We are constantly told, it is true, that there ought to be an equal opportunity for all the children in the United States; therefore, it is said, Federal aid ought to be given to backward states. But what shall we say about this business of "equal opportunity?" I will tell you what I say about it; I am entirely opposed to it. One thing is perfectly clear -- if all the children in the United States have equal opportunity, no child will have an opportunity that is worth very much. If parents cannot have the great incentives of providing high and special educational advantages for their own children, then we shall in this country a drab and soul-killing uniformity, and there will be scarcely any opportunity for anyone to get out of the miserable rut.

The thing is really quite clear. Every lover of human freedom ought to oppose with all his might the giving of Federal aid to the schools of this country; for Federal aid in the long run inevitably means Federal control, and Federal control means control by a centralized and irresponsible bureaucracy, and control by such a bureaucracy means the death of everything that might make this country great.

Against this soul-killing collectivism in education, the Christian school, like the private school, stands as an emphatic protest. In doing so, it is no real enemy of the public schools. On the contrary, the only way in which a state-controlled school can be kept even relatively healthy is through the absolutely free possibility of competition by private schools and church schools; if it once becomes monopolistic, it is the most effective engine of tyranny and intellectual stagnation that has yet been devised.

That is one reason why I favor the Christian school. I favor it in the interests of American liberty. But the other reason is vastly more important. I favor it, in the second place, because it is necessary to the propagation of the Christian Faith.

Thoughtful people, even many who are not Christians, have become impressed with the shortcomings of our secularized schools. We have provided technical education, which may make the youth of our country better able to make use of the advances of natural science; but natural science, with its command over the physical world, is not all that there is in human life. There are also the moral interests of mankind; and without cultivation of these moral interests a technically trained man is only given more power to do harm. By this purely secular, non-moral and non-religious, training we produce not a real human being but a horrible Frankenstein, and we are beginning to shrink back from the product of our own hands.

The educational experts, in their conduct of their state-controlled schools, are trying to repair this defect and in doing so are seeking the cooperation of Christian people. I want to show you -- and I do not think I shall have much difficulty in showing this particular audience -- why such cooperation cannot be given.

In the first place, we find proposed to us today what is called "character education" or "character-building". Character, we are told, is one thing about which men of all faiths are agreed. Let us, therefore, build character in common, as good citizens, and then welcome from the various religious faiths whatever additional aid they can severally bring. Let us first appeal to the children on a "civilization basis" -- to use what I believe is the most recent terminology -- and then let the various faiths appeal to whatever additional motives they may be able to adduce.

What surprises me about this program is not that its advocates propose it; for it is only too well in accord with the spirit of the age. But what really surprises me about it is that the advocates of it seem to think that a Christian can support it without ceasing at that point to be Christian.

In the first place, when this program of character-education is examined, it will be found, I think, to base character upon human experience; it will be found to represent maxims of conduct as being based upon the collective experience of the race. But how can they be based upon the collective experience of the race and at the same time, as the Christian must hold, be based upon the law of God? By this experiential morality the reverence for the law of God is being broken down. It cannot be said that the results -- even judged by "civilization" standards (if I may borrow the terminology of my opponents for a moment) -- is impressive. The raging tides of passion cannot successfully be kept back by the flimsy mud-embankments of an appeal to human experience. It is a feeble morality that can say nothing better for itself than that it works well.

For that reason, character-building, as practiced in our public schools, may well prove to be character-destruction. But suppose it were free from the defect that I have just mentioned. I do not see how it can possibly be free from it, if it remains, as it must necessarily remain, secular; but just suppose it were free from it. Just suppose we could have moral instruction in our public schools that should be based not upon human experience but upon something that might be conceived of as a law of God. Could a Christian consistently support even such a program as that?

We answer that question in the negative, but we do not want to answer it in the negative in any hasty way. It is perfectly true that the law of God is over all. There is not one law of God for the Christian and another law of God for the non-Christian. May not, therefore the law be proclaimed to men of all faiths; and may it not, if it is so proclaimed, serve as a restraint against the most blatant forms of evil through the common grace of God; may it not even become a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ?

The answer is that if the law of God is proclaimed in public schools, to people of different faiths, it is bound, in the very nature of the case, to be proclaimed with optimism; and if it is proclaimed with optimism it is proclaimed in a way radically opposed to the Christian doctrine of sin. By hypothesis it is regarded as all that good citizens imperatively need to know; they may perhaps profitably know other things, but the fundamental notion is that if they know this they know all that is absolutely essential. But is not a law that is proclaimed to unredeemed persons with such optimism at best only an imperfect, garbled law? Is it not very different from the true and majestic law of God with its awful pronouncements of eternal death upon sinful man?

The answer to these questions is only too plain. A proclamation of morality which regards itself as all that is necessary -- which regards itself as being capable at the most of non-essential supplementation by additional motives to be provided by Christianity or other faiths -- is very different from that true proclamation of the law of God which may be a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ. It is not merely insufficient, but it is false; and I do not see how a consistent Christian can possibly regard it as providing any part of that nurture and admonition of the Lord which it is the duty of every Christian parent to give to his children.

What other solution, then, has the public school to offer for the problem which we are considering just now? Well, many people tell us that the reading of the Bible can be put into the public schools. Every educated man, we are told, ought to know something about the Bible; and no intelligent, broad-minded person, whether a Christian or not, ought to object to the bare reading of this great religious classic. So in many places we find the Bible being read in public schools. What shall we say about that?

For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that I am strongly opposed to it. I think I am just about as strongly opposed to the reading of the Bible in state-controlled schools as any atheist could be.

For one thing, the reading of the Bible is very difficult to separate from propaganda about the Bible. I remember, for example, a book of selections from the Bible for school reading, which was placed in my hands some time ago. Whether it is used now I do not know, but it is typical of what will inevitably occur if the Bible is read in public schools. Under the guise of being a book of selections for Bible-reading, it really presupposed the current naturalistic view of the Old Testament Scriptures.

But even where such errors are avoided, even where the Bible itself is read, and not in one of the mistranslations but in the Authorized Version, the Bible still may be so read as to obscure and even contradict its true message. When, for example, the great and glorious promises of the Bible to the redeemed children of God are read as though they belonged of right to man as man, have we not an attack upon the very heart and core of the Bible's teaching? What could be more terrible, for example, from the Christian point of view, than the reading of the Lord's Prayer to non-Christian children, as though they could use it without becoming Christians, as though persons who have never been purchased by the blood of Christ could possibly say to God, "Our Father, which art in Heaven"? The truth is that a garbled Bible may be a falsified Bible; and when any hope is held out to lost humanity from the so-called ethical portions of the Bible apart from its great redemptive core, then the Bible is represented as saying the direct opposite of what it really says.

So I am opposed to the reading of the Bible in public schools. As for any presentation of general principles of what is called "religion", supposed to be exemplified in various positive religions, including Christianity, it is quite unnecessary for me to say in this company that such presentation is opposed to the Christian religion at its very heart. The relation between the Christian way of salvation and other ways is not a relation between the adequate and the inadequate or between the perfect and the imperfect, but it is a relation between the true and the false. The minute a professing Christian admits that he can find neutral ground with non-Christians in the study of "religion" in general, he has given up the battle, and has really, if he knows what he is doing, made common cause with that syncretism which is today, as it was in the first century of our era, the deadliest enemy of the Christian Faith.

What, then, should the Christian do in communities where there are no Christian schools? What policy should be advocated for the public schools?

I think there is no harm in advocating the release of public-school children at convenient hours during the week for any religious instruction which their parents may provide. Even at this point, indeed, danger lurks at the door. If the State undertakes to exercise any control whatever over the use by the children of this time which is left vacant, even by way of barely requiring them to attend upon some kind of instruction in these hours, and still more clearly if it undertakes to give public-school credits for such religious instruction, then it violates fundamental principles and will inevitably in the long run seek to control the content of the instruction in the interests of the current syncretism. But if -- as is, it must be admitted, very difficult -- it can be kept free from these evils, then the arrangement of the public-school schedule in such manner that convenient hours shall be left free for such religious instruction as the parents, entirely at their individual discretion, shall provide, is, I think, unobjectionable, and it may under certain circumstances be productive of some relative good.

But what miserable makeshifts all such measures, even at the best, are! Underlying them is the notion that religion embraces only one particular part of human life. Let the public schools take care of the rest of life -- such seems to be the notion -- and one or two hours during the week will be sufficient to fill the gap which they leave. But as a matter of fact the religion of the Christian man embraces the whole of his life. Without Christ he was dead in trespasses and sins, but he has now been made alive by the Spirit of God; he was formerly alien from the household of God, but has now been made a member of God's covenant people. Can this new relationship to God be regarded as concerning only one part, and apparently a small part, of his life? No, it concerns all his life; and everything that he does he should do now as a child of God.

It is this profound Christian permeation of every human activity, no matter how secular the world may regard it as being, which is brought about by the Christian school and the Christian school alone. I do not want to be guilty of exaggerations at this point. A Christian boy or girl can learn mathematics, for example, from a teacher who is not a Christian; and truth is truth however learned. But while truth is truth however learned, the bearings of truth, the meaning of truth, the purpose of truth, even in the sphere of mathematics, seem entirely different to the Christian from that which they seem to the non-Christian; and that is why a truly Christian education is possible only when Christian conviction underlies not a part, but all, of the curriculum of the school. True learning and true piety go hand in hand, and Christianity embraces the whole of life -- those are great central convictions that underlie the Christian school.

I believe that the Christian school deserves to have a good report from those who are without; I believe that even those of our fellow citizens who are not Christians may, if they really love human freedom and the noble traditions of our people, be induced to defend the Christian school against the assaults of its adversaries and to cherish it as a true bulwark of the State. But for Christian people its appeal is far deeper. I can see little

consistency in a type of Christian activity which preaches the gospel on the street corners and at the ends of the earth, but neglects the children of the covenant by abandoning them to a cold and unbelieving secularism. If, indeed, the Christian school were in any sort of competition with the Christian family, if it were trying to do what the home ought to do, then I could never favor it. But one of its marked characteristics, in sharp distinction from the secular education of today, is that it exalts the family as a blessed divine institution and treats the scholars in its classes as children of the covenant to be brought up above all things in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

I cannot bring this little address to a close without trying to pay some sort of tribute to you who have so wonderfully maintained the Christian schools. Some of you, no doubt, are serving as teachers on salaries necessarily small. What words can I possibly find to celebrate the heroism and unselfishness of such service? Others of you are maintaining the schools by your gifts, in the midst of many burdens and despite the present poverty and distress. When I think of such true Christian heroism as yours, I count everything that I ever tried to do in my life to be pitifully unworthy. I can only say that I stand reverently in your presence as in the presence of brethren to whom God has given richly of His grace.

You deserve the gratitude of your country. In a time of spiritual and intellectual and political decadence, you have given us in America something that is truly healthy; you are to our country something like a precious salt that may check the ravages of decay. May that salt never lose its savor! May the distinctiveness of your Christian schools never be lost; may it never give place, by a false "Americanization", to a drab uniformity which is the most un-American thing that could possibly be conceived!

But if you deserve the gratitude of every American patriot, how much more do you deserve the gratitude of Christian men and women! You have set an example for the whole Christian world; you have done a thing which has elsewhere been neglected, and the neglect of which is everywhere bringing disaster. You are set like a city set on a hill; and may that city never be hid! May the example of your Christian schools be heeded everywhere in the Church! Above all, may our God richly bless you, and of His grace give you a reward with which all the rewards of earth are not for one moment worthy to be compared!

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