

Mandate or Warrant? The Biblical Grounds for Christian Education & Schooling

By Zachary Groff

Concerns of hearth and home are matters of incalculable importance and considerable controversy. What man would willfully discard the individual blessings of liberty that allow him the leverage to protect, provide for, and delight in his family? This concern for all things personal and domestic is no more emphatically expressed than in discussions of child-rearing. Topping the list of important and controversial domestic interests is the instruction of children to which the Apostle Paul refers in Ephesians 6:4 as “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (KJV).¹ In homes committed to a biblical covenantal understanding of the family, the instruction of children involves the encouragement of “holy and happy”² spiritual development and discipleship from infancy.

The children of believers are not only a heritage from the Lord and a special gift to parents, but also members of God’s covenant community. Thus, Reformed and Presbyterian Christians frequently refer to their children as “covenant children.” They are to be students of the Christian Faith—even baptized disciples—from infancy, and thus are not to be excluded from the assembling together of the saints in corporate worship, religious instruction, and family devotion. Regular practices of prayer, Bible reading, and singing in the context of the Christian home lay the foundation for lifelong discipleship in the Faith. Consistent, firm, and tender-hearted parental discipline attuned to God’s Word is second in importance only to regularly attending upon “public and private exercises of God’s worship” (WLC 117; WSC 60; see also, WCF 21.8) for the promotion of a child’s overall welfare and maturity. A close third in order of importance for consideration is the matter of education. It is here—at the nexus of devotion, discipline, and education—that a child’s spiritual formation takes place, that his soul is shaped.

Just how important to parents is the instruction of

their children? As American Presbyterian theologian and educator R. L. Dabney (1820–1898) has rightly observed, “No parent can fail to resent, with a righteous indignation, the intrusion of any authority between his conscience and convictions and the soul of his child.”³ To repeat the opening words of this article, the instruction of one’s children is a concern of hearth and home, a concern of incalculable importance and considerable controversy. Thus, discussions of Christian education and schooling are especially weighty, being both important in their own right and fraught with familial emotion.

What direction does God give to those who desire to glorify Him and secure the good of their children in the matter of Christian “nurture and admonition” (i.e., instruction)? Specifically, is there a biblical mandate for schooling (and specifically Christian schooling) designed as an alternative or supplement to parental instruction? If there is no mandate for such schooling, is there a biblical argument to be made in favor of forming, employing, and supporting Christian schools? It is the purpose of this article to explore the divine mandate for Christian education by delineating the Bible’s directions to parents and church leaders in the instruction

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB1995).

2. This phrase is taken from Joseph P. Engles, *Catechism for Young Children* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1840), p. 10.

3. R.L. Dabney, *Discussions, Volume 4: Secular* (Mexico, MO: Crescent Book House, 1897), p. 244.

of children, particularly as these directions pertain to the matter of formal schooling. Along the way, various approaches to the education of covenant children will be outlined and considered. The conclusion of this article is that while there is no biblical mandate as such for Christian schools, there is a biblically informed prudential warrant for Christian schools.

This article proceeds with three main parts and a brief conclusion to present the Bible's teaching about Christian education and schools set in the context of the history of American Presbyterianism. The first section presents definitions of "biblical mandate," "prudential warrant," and a variety of options presently extant in the modern West for the education of children. Having established the vocabulary in the first section, the second section describes several influential opinions which have shaped the Christian education movement in the English-speaking world, with particular focus on significant American Reformed and Presbyterian figures. With recent historical trends in the background, the third section sets forth the biblical understanding of the Christian education of children. The final brief section brings the article to a conclusion with a carefully articulated answer to the question "is there a biblical mandate for Christian schools?" Included in the conclusion are summary evaluations of options available to parents.

DEFINITIONS

In the consideration of any potentially controversial issue, it is crucially important to lay out acceptable and clear terms for discussion. The terms "biblical mandate," "prudential warrant," "Christian education," "Christian school," "private school," "public school," and

"homeschool" are all especially relevant to the matter at-hand in this article. As such, the above terms require careful definition. What immediately follows is a treatment of these terms as they relate to biblical teaching regarding the education of children. For each term, it is the author's aim to be precise without being pedantic.

First in the list of terms for discussion is "biblical mandate," which must be defined according to its constituent parts. For something to be considered "biblical," it must faithfully and coherently relate to or be explicitly expressed in the Bible.⁴ For example, the biblical account of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is recorded primarily in the Gospels, and to a lesser extent in the biblical book of Acts. A faithful summary of Jesus's life and ministry as recorded in the Gospels and Acts would likewise be biblical. Such biblical accounts or summaries are opposed to non-biblical accounts found in the so-called Gnostic Gospels or other contradictory materials published centuries later (e.g. the Quran, the Book of Mormon, etc.).

A "mandate" is simply an authoritative order, directive, or command that must be obeyed by the subordinates to whom it is issued.⁵ In matters of applied Christian ethics, the subordinates in question are ethical agents seeking to be obedient to God, who has plainly revealed Himself and His will to man (see WCF 1.1; WLC 2; WSC 2, 3). Thus, a "biblical mandate" is an order or command explicitly stated in, or necessarily inferred from, the teaching of the Bible as God's Word. For example, the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:28, the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the summary of the moral Law found in Matthew 22:37–40 (where Christ references Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, respectively), and the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 are biblical mandates. In these passages, God by His Word mandates human fruitfulness, mankind's rule over nature, the love of God and neighbor, and the evangelization and discipleship of the nations in the upbuilding of Christ's church to the glory of God.

Restatements or necessary implications of the Bible's explicit precepts or approved examples are rightly to be considered "biblical mandates."⁶ For example, nowhere does the Bible teach explicitly that men must believe in the doctrine of the Trinity to be saved. However, the Bible teaches that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and that it is God the Father, Son, and Spirit to whom sinners must repent in faith for eternal life. Such faith and repentance necessitate true knowledge, and thus men must believe in the doctrine of the Trinity in order to be saved. Thus, the command to believe in the

4. It is possible to speak of someone's speech or writing being "biblical" because of stylistic resemblance or imitation of the language of the Bible. This sense of "biblical" is not what is being employed here in this paper.

5. Historically, Presbyterians have referred to the divine right or *jure divino* of some biblical directive, such as the divine right of a particular form of church government (i.e., Presbyterianism). Part One of the famous work by the London Provincial Assembly in defense of Presbyterianism as advocated by the Westminster Assembly, *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*, spells out the various ways a divine right may be determined from Scripture. For a recent critical edition of this significant work, see *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici or The Divine Right of Church Government By Sundry Ministers Within the City of London*, ed. Chris Coldwell (Dallas, TX; Grand Rapids, MI: Naphtali Press; Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), pp. 53–84.

6. See the fine exploration of Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6 by Ryan M. McGraw, *By Good and Necessary Consequence*, Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), especially pp. 3ff.

doctrine of the Trinity in order to be saved is a “biblical mandate.”

In contrast, non-biblical mandates are of two kinds. There are non-biblical mandates that contradict or go beyond Scripture by requiring something which the Bible does not require or otherwise prohibits, such as “popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience” (WCF 22.7). Furthermore, there are non-biblical mandates that obscure or fall short of the full scope of the Bible’s counsel on a certain matter, such as the teaching that as long as a Christian worships God on a weekly basis, the day of the week is of no importance. The Westminster Standards directly address this erroneous position at three points (WCF 21.7, WLC 116, WSC 59), each of which may be consulted for confessional development of the observance of the Christian Sabbath on the first day of the week. For the protection of Christian liberty, the proper instruction of the conscience, and the prosecution of acceptable service to God, individual Christians—and especially church leaders—must be able to distinguish “biblical mandates” from non-biblical mandates. For the purposes of this article, it is important to recognize that not all things good or useful for the Christian life should be enforced in terms of a biblical mandate; some matters are better to be recommended under the parameters of the next term.

Second in the list of terms is “prudential warrant,” which likewise must be defined according to its parts. For something to be considered “prudential,” it must be characterized by practical wisdom, that intangible personal asset that helps men to live well. For example, while it may be equally healthy for someone to order a side of asparagus or a side of onions with his lunch, the prudentially wise man would choose to order asparagus rather than onions before an important job interview to avoid offending the interviewer. The basis of his choice is practical wisdom, or prudence, motivated by principles of conduct derived from Scripture (e.g., do not needlessly offend your neighbor and/or superiors) and informed by knowledge learned from experience (e.g., the scent of onions on a person’s breath is offensive to most people). Thus, the man’s choice of asparagus over onions is a *prudential* choice. As defined here, the modifier “prudential” is not in any way opposed to “biblical.” The two terms are complementary, with the latter shaping and informing the former.

The technical definition of the Latin term *prudentia* as used historically in theological prolegomena likewise describes practical wisdom for life. Richard Muller defines *prudentia* as “the form of knowledge that guides

practical judgment by means of universal principles of conduct and action.”⁷ This practical aspect of theology enjoys a central place in the historical development of the discipline. For example, Genevan Reformed Scholastic theologian Francis Turretin (1623–87) contended that theology “is more practical than theoretical.”⁸ He continued,

That theology is more practical than speculative is evident from the ultimate end, which is practice. For although all mysteries are not regulative of operation, they are impulsive to operation. For there is none so theoretical (*theōrēton*) and removed from practice that it does not incite to the love and worship of God. Nor is any theory saving which does not lead to practice (Jn. 13:17; 1 Cor. 13:2; Tit. 1:1; 1 Jn. 2:3, 4; Tit. 2:12).⁹

In Turretin’s estimation, theology is theoretical-practical, or a blended discipline of theoretical and practical matters. Dutch theologian Petrus Van Mastricht (1630–1706) likewise wrote, “This theoretical-practical Christian theology is nothing less than the doctrine of living for God through Christ,”¹⁰ an understanding of theology which he sought to develop comprehensively¹¹ and has been recognized by eminent theologians as both sound and useful.¹²

God’s Word does not minimize the value of prudence. In fact, the Bible emphasizes the importance and utility of sanctified practical wisdom without at all denying its spirituality. Several Hebrew and Greek terms found in Scripture refer favorably to prudence. In the Old Testament, the word עָרַם (to be prudent, shrewd, cunning, or sensible) and its cognates describe a range of characters and character traits. Though the term

7. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), p. 252. The author is indebted to Dr. Ryan M. McGraw (Morton H. Smith Professor of Systematic Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary) for this citation, which is drawn from the course outlines for his Prolegomena & Theology course.

8. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume 1: First Through Tenth Topics*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992), p. 21.

9. Turretin, 1.23.

10. Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), p. 98.

11. See Van Mastricht, especially pp. 98–112.

12. For but one example, consider Jonathan Edwards’ oft-quoted words in a letter to Joseph Bellamy dated January 15, 1747, that Mastricht’s work “is much better than Turretin or any other book in the world, excepting the Bible, in my opinion.”

sometimes refers to or describes those who are crafty in their scheming against God and His people,¹³ it is most frequently employed in the Hebrew scriptures to describe those who are commended for their wisdom. One of the explicit themes of the Proverbs is “to give prudence to the naïve” (Prov. 1:4; cf. 8:5; 14:15, 18).¹⁴ David is twice described with this word as “prudent” in juxtaposition to the foolishness of Saul (1 Sam. 16:18; 23:22), and God speaking through Jeremiah laments the failure of Edom’s historic wisdom and “prudence” in Jeremiah 49:7. A more frequently occurring Hebrew term is לָצִי (to be prudent), which generally connotes practical wisdom, circumspection, consideration, and insight leading to prosperity. With the possible (and notable) exception of Gen. 3:6, every use of this term in the Old Testament refers to a commendable person or act, either by direct characterization¹⁵ or by contrast.¹⁶ In the New Testament, the terms φρόνιμος, σώφρων, συνετός, σοφός and their cognates refer to prudence and its direct corollaries.¹⁷ The adjective φρόνιμος (shrewd, wise, prudent) is Christ’s term of choice for describing the wisdom of the five young women who were prepared for the appearance of the bridegroom in His parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25, and His recorded sayings using this term elsewhere in both Matthew’s Gospel¹⁸ and Luke’s Gospel¹⁹ are positive. Paul uses the same term in an ironic sense to admonish those who are “wise” in their own estimation when writing to the churches in Rome²⁰ and Corinth.²¹ The word σώφρων is Paul’s preferred term

for describing the prudence or sensibility required of overseers in the church,²² as well as for the wisdom expected of older saints.²³ The complementary terms συνετός and σοφός are paired in Matthew 11:25 to describe those who are regarded as advanced in learning and understanding. The term σοφός in Ephesians 5:15 and James 3:13 describes one who lives wisely. It is precisely this sort of person that Paul calls for when he writes to the Church in Corinth, “I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man (σοφός) who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?” (1 Cor. 6:5f). Defined as practical wisdom, prudence—or perhaps, prudential aptitude—is an indispensable asset for the Christian who wishes to live well. Prudential considerations are certainly not opposed to biblical considerations, and frequently they are identical. Prudential considerations are not only expressed in Scripture, but also shaped by the Holy Spirit’s application of God’s revealed will to the heart and life of the believer.

While the word “warrant” possesses a technical meaning in the academic discipline of Philosophy in connection with philosophical epistemology,²⁴ its use here with “prudential” is in a non-technical sense for applied Christian ethics. In this latter sense, “warrant” is simply an authorization, sanction, or justification for pursuing a particular course of action. A warrant differs from a mandate in that the latter is authoritatively commanded and therefore required of an ethical agent whereas the former is merely justified and therefore authorized. Thus, a “prudential warrant” is a sanction derived from practical wisdom informed by Scripture interacting with reason, nature, and experience under the superintending influence of the Holy Spirit.

The remaining terms under consideration in this article are related to each other insofar as they touch on the matter (and manner) of the instruction of children. “Christian education” refers specifically to character formation, nurture, and instruction that is distinctively Christian, being derived from and based upon the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. Dabney’s remarks on education in contrast to mere training (i.e., “dexterity in any art”) are helpful at this point. He observed, “It is properly the whole man or person that is educated; but the main subject of the work is the spirit. Education is the nurture and development of the whole man for his proper end.”²⁵ Christians recognize that “man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever” (WLC 1; see also WSC 1). Therefore, Christian education is intended explicitly to nurture

13. See Gen. 3:1; Exod. 21:14; Josh. 9:4; Job 5:12, 15:5; Ps. 83:3.

14. See also, Prov. 8:12; 12:16, 23; 13:16; 14:8; 15:5; 19:14; 22:3; 27:12.

15. See Gen. 48:14; Deut. 29:9; 32:29; Josh. 1:7, 8; 1 Sam. 18:5, 14, 15, 30; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 18:7; 1 Chron. 28:19; 2 Chron. 30:22; Neh. 8:13; 9:20; Job 22:2; Pss. 2:10; 32:8; 41:1; 47:7; 64:9; 101:2; 119:99; Prov. 1:3; 10:5, 19; 14:35; 15:24; 16: 20, 23; 17:2, 8; 19:14; 21:11, 12; Isa. 41:20; 52:13; Jer. 3:15; 9:24; 23:5; 50:9; Dan. 1:4, 17; 9:22, 25; 11:33, 35; 12:3, 10; Amos 5:13.

16. See Job 34:27, 35; Pss. 14:2; 36:3; 94:8; 106:7; Prov. 21:16; Isa. 44:18; Jer. 10:2; 20:11; Dan. 9:13.

17. Note that the Septuagint sometimes supplies πανουργία as a translation word for prudence (e.g., Prov. 1:4; 8:5), but New Testament usage of this term reserves it for the more negative concept of skilled craftiness or shrewd trickery (see Luke 20:23; 1 Cor. 3:19; 2 Cor. 4:2; 11:3; Eph. 4:14).

18. See Matt. 7:24; 10:16; 24:45.

19. See Luke 12:42; 16:8, 18.

20. See Rom. 11:25; 12:16.

21. See 1 Cor. 4:10; 10:15; 2 Cor. 11:19.

22. See 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8.

23. See Tit. 2:2, 5, 12.

24. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

25. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.230.

and develop the hearts and souls of students in serving and delighting in the Triune God.

A “Christian school” is a formal and institutional society of students, teachers, and administrators established for the sake of delivering Christian education to enrollees; its oversight model must be confessionally Christian. A “private school” is a formal and institutional society of students, teachers, and administrators established for the sake of delivering education to enrollees; its oversight model must be privately constituted (but not necessarily sectarian, parochial, or explicitly religious). A “public school”²⁶ is a formal and institutional society of students, teachers, and administrators established for the sake of delivering socially and publicly beneficial education (however defined) to enrollees; its funding and oversight model must be constituted and guaranteed by the government. A “homeschool” is a formal and institutional society of at least one parent or guardian and at least one child established for the sake of providing education to the child(ren) in their home; its oversight model must be determined privately by the parent(s) or guardian(s).

Though these terms as defined are helpful and the distinctions they highlight are important, it is worth noting that significant overlap between categories is possible. For example, the categories of “private school” and “public school” are obviously distinguishable, but private schools usually must secure government approval in order to operate under privately constituted oversight for day-to-day education and administrative operations. Such governmental requirements differ from one jurisdiction to the next, and some “private schools” (e.g., charter schools) are appreciably more beholden than others to public directives and government oversight. Another categorical overlap occurs when there is an established church or some other settlement between the government and religious communities in a jurisdiction. Current and historical examples abound of both “private schools” and “public schools” that are also “Christian schools.” Consider, for example, the arrangements that presently exist in both Switzerland and the Netherlands, where there exist publicly funded and overseen (either by the State Church or in cooperation with a recognized Free Church) sectarian schools (e.g., Roman Catholic and Protestant) operating concurrently alongside non-sectarian public schools. Though “Christian schools” in these settings may not maintain a commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture or to the Word of God as determinative of the nature and quality of education, they likely once did.

In most (if not all) industrialized nations, all schools

(including homeschools) must conform to certain basic regulations to comply with applicable laws (i.e., for physical safety, the prevention of truancy, and age-appropriate tracking of academic progress). Notwithstanding government reporting requirements for “private schools” and “homeschools,” there is no meaningful overlap between the categories of “private school” and “homeschool” on the one hand and of “public school” on the other. There is considerable overlap between “homeschools” and “private schools” when the “homeschool co-op” phenomenon is taken into consideration. Homeschooling families frequently form cooperative associations, or co-ops, to work together by leveraging common efforts, shared resources, and complementary specialties among parents for the purpose of more effectively and efficiently educating their children in extrafamilial groups. Some homeschool co-ops develop into private “Christian schools” (as defined above) over time. Despite the possibility for overlap between categories, the distinctions drawn in this section are helpful for setting the terms of discussion for what follows.

INFLUENTIAL OPINIONS SHAPING THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION MOVEMENT

Since at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, a variety of approaches to Christian education have shaped public opinion in the English-speaking world.²⁷ The widespread expansion of taxpayer-funded day schools for children as young as six years of age during the nineteenth century was without meaningful (i.e., in terms of sheer scale of penetration into society) historic precedent. Though early American experiments in wedding together church and state for the purpose of government and the education of children are interesting insofar as they illustrate local approaches and attendant developments in education, such efforts had collapsed by the early nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, the introduction of compulsory public education in the form of tax-funded public schools in both the American North and (to a lesser extent) the American South ignited an open and vigorous conversation about education which has continued without abatement.

One early and formative champion of compulsory public schooling was Massachusetts politician Horace Mann (1796–1859), who served as the first Secretary of

26. Alternatively, the terms “state school” or “government school” occur frequently in historical and recent literature about schooling. The term “public school” will be employed in this article.

27. For a helpful, if somewhat dated, history of Christian education, see C.B. Eavey, *History of Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964).

the Massachusetts Board of Education (1837–48). In this role, Mann opened “normal schools” for the training of teachers in Massachusetts, argued against sectarian education, and introduced the Prussian-derived “factory school model” to American educators. Mann is widely regarded today as the “father” of modern public education, which is significant considering his determined resistance to any Christian education that included in its curriculum a straightforward exposition of the doctrines of total depravity and the eternal conscious torment of hell for unrepentant sinners.²⁸ He vigorously campaigned for his policies, oftentimes at great personal expense. His herculean investment of time, energy, and money paid off for his cause.

State governments in the American North enthusiastically adopted many of Mann’s policies for the widespread reform of education in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, vastly (twelve times) more American schoolchildren were enrolled in public schools than in private schools,²⁹ with over 50% of all school-aged children enrolled in a formal school program of some kind.³⁰ It was in this environment of the increasing prevalence and popularity of non-sectarian public schools that Christian educators, pastors, and intellectuals began to articulate and advocate for an approach to Christian education that could withstand what looked like a secular takeover of schooling.

At the heart of the burgeoning interest in Christian education was explicit support for parental oversight and involvement in the upbringing of children.³¹ R. L. Dabney’s direct approach to the issue is representative

28. For a biographical sketch of Horace Mann, sympathetically detailing his emphatic rejection of his Calvinist Christian upbringing, see Barbara Finkelstein, “Perfecting Childhood: Horace Mann and the Origins of Public Education in the United States,” *Biography* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1990): pp. 6–20.

29. Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Washington D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), p. 36.

30. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education*, p. 14.

31. One notable exception to this rule was the position of Southern Presbyterian luminary James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) who argued in favor of public schooling, believing that secular education was the responsibility of the state and outside the spiritual mission of the church. For Thornwell’s argument, see Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, Ex-President of the South Carolina College, Late Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Richmond, VA: Whittet and Shepperson, 1875), pp. 325–38.

32. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.244.

33. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.197.

34. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.194.

35. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.189f.

of scholarly advocates for Christian education in late nineteenth-century America. He explicitly identified the locus of oversight and control of education as being in the home. Dabney asserted, “God has provided for the parents social and moral influences so unique, so extensive, that no other earthly power, or all others together, can substitute them in fashioning the child’s character.”³² In another place, he wrote forcefully, “The home education is [*sic*] so much more potential than that of the school, that the little *modicum* of training which a “common-school” system can give to the average masses is utterly trivial and impotent as a means of reversing the child’s tendency.”³³ In other words, the education and resultant character formation of children depend more on parental influence than on any other influence, considered either independent of or in conjunction with all other influences.

Elsewhere, Dabney multiplied arguments from Scripture and reason for the institutional primacy of the family in the Christian education of children. Arguing against the implementation of taxpayer-funded compulsory public schools in Virginia during the period known as Reconstruction following the American Civil War, he risked offending sensitive readers in writing, “It is the teaching of the Bible and of sound political ethics that the education of children belongs to the sphere of the family and is the duty of the parents. The theory that the children of the Commonwealth are the charge of the Commonwealth is a pagan one, derived from heathen Sparta and Plato’s heathen republic, and connected by regular, logical sequence with legalized prostitution and the dissolution of the conjugal tie.”³⁴ In yet another essay on education, he expanded on the practical and political benefits of parental oversight in education.

This old system evinced its wisdom by avoiding the pagan, Spartan theory, which makes the State the parent. It left the parent supreme in his God-given sphere, as the responsible party for providing and directing the education of his own offspring. This old plan, instead of usurping, encouraged and assisted, where assistance was needed. It was wise again, in that it avoided creating salaried offices to eat up the people’s money, and yet do no actual teaching. It was supremely wise, in that it cut the Gordian knot, “Religion in the State school,” which now baffles British and Yankee wit. It set that insuperable difficulty clear on one side, by leaving the school as the creature of the parents, and not of the State. It was wise in its exceeding economy, a trait so essential to the State now.³⁵

Thus, Dabney reasoned, the state as-such may properly assist the family as-such in the education of children through subsidizing the erection of parent-supervised schools, but it must avoid the tendency to inflate an administrative bureaucracy that unavoidably burdens the taxpayer. In Dabney's argument, protecting the prerogative of parents to direct the education of their children has the practical benefit of eliminating the need for administrative bloat. Tragically, Dabney's insightful critique of the introduction of "common-schools" in Virginia was stained by his racially charged—and thus sinfully embittered—critique of attempts to extend equal rights in terms of both suffrage and formal day school education access to Freedmen and their children (respectively) after the American Civil War. Despite Dabney's unmistakable disapprobation for the education of black Americans during Reconstruction, his main concern was to condemn government control of the education and character formation of children.

In his longest single article against "secularized education," Dabney posed the question, "Is the direction of education of children either a civic or an ecclesiastical function? Is it not properly a domestic and parental function?"³⁶ The answer he furnished to his readers involves four considerations. First, Scripture teaches that God created marriage (and thus, the family) for the propagation of a godly seed by which the earth would be filled with a blessed humanity. Furthermore, both the Fifth Commandment and the sequence of redemptive history relate children directly to parents, and only by inference and extension to all other lawful authorities. That is, Scripture teaches that parental authority is fundamentally prior to the authority of either church or state, presbyter or magistrate. Second, Dabney argued that the providence of God as operative in nature shows that education is a parental right and obligation because children inevitably inherit their social status (e.g., wealth, position, responsibilities, reputation) from their parents. Third, as stated above, parental influence far eclipses and surpasses that of any other influence on the formation of a child's character. Thus, education is fundamentally a home enterprise. Fourth, and most significantly for Dabney, "the heart's own instinct" is decisively in favor of regarding the parent's place as first in right and importance in the education of children. Dabney wrote,

But the best argument here is the heart's own instinct. No parent can fail to resent, with a righteous indignation, the intrusion of any authority between his conscience and convictions and the soul of his child. If

the father conscientiously believes that his own creed is true and righteous and obligatory before God, then he must intuitively regard the intrusion of any other power between him and his minor child, to cause the rejection of that creed, as a usurpation. The freedom of mind of the child alone, when become an adult, and his father's equal can justly interpose. If this usurpation is made by the visible church, it is felt to be in the direction of popery, if by the magistrate, in the direction of depotism [sic].³⁷

Far from being an assertion of mere sentiment between parents and their children, Dabney's elaboration on this point is an argument from the father's deliberate and conscientious concern for his child's mental and spiritual development. Dabney contended that not only can neither state nor church rival the father's concern, but they must not attempt to usurp it, lest they transgress the divinely decreed bounds of their activity. Defining the church, the state, and the family as circles or spheres³⁸ of jurisdiction, Dabney argued, "God has immediately and authoritatively instituted three organisms for man on earth, the State, the visible Church, and the Family, and these are co-ordinate in rights and mutual independence. The State or Church has no more right to invade the parental sphere than the parent to invade theirs."³⁹ Among those functions belonging to the sphere of the family is the direction of the education of children. While Dabney did recognize important roles for both the state and the church in the education of children—in the support of faithful parents and in the punishment of wrongdoers—the essence of his argument against state control of education is that education and its oversight is fundamentally a function of

36. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.243.

37. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.244.

38. Dabney's formulation on this point resembles the "sphere sovereignty" doctrine attributed to Dutch Reformed theologian, pastor, publisher, and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Kuyper's influence on the development of the global Christian education movement cannot be overstated, though his influence in the American context is mediated primarily through twentieth-century authors and educators in the Dutch Reformed tradition, some of whom receive limited interaction in this article. For more on Kuyper's views on education newly translated into English and published in authoritative scholarly editions, see the relevant portions of Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, ed. Harry Van Dyke, *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015); Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ the King*, ed. John H. Kok, 3 vols., *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016–2019); Abraham Kuyper, *On Education*, ed. Melvin Fliikkema and Jordan J. Ballor, *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

39. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.245.

the home and the prerogative of parents. He wrote in conclusion,

Let us suppose, then, that both State and Church recognize the parent as the educating power; that they assume towards him an ancillary instead of a dominating attitude; that the State shall encourage individual and voluntary efforts by holding the impartial shield of legal protection over all property which may be devoted to education; that it shall encourage all private efforts; and that in its eleemosynary character it shall aid those whose poverty and misfortunes disable them from properly rearing their own children. Thus the insoluble problems touching religion in State schools would be solved, because the State was not the responsible creator of the schools, but the parents. Our educational system might present less mechanical symmetry, but it would be more flexible, more practical, and more useful.⁴⁰

Several decades later, Presbyterian theologian and educator J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) articulated similar sentiments in calling for a renewal of vital spirituality in America. “Whatever be the causes for the growth of ignorance in the Church, the evil must be remedied. It must be remedied primarily by the renewal of Christian education in the family, but also by the use of whatever other educational agencies the Church can find.”⁴¹ More explicitly and emphatically than Dabney, Machen identified a complementary role

for the Christian (or church) school in what he believed to be primarily the work of the family. In a 1933 address originally delivered before the Educational Convention of the National Union of Christian Schools in Chicago, Machen argued strenuously against State-controlled education and in favor of Christian schools, “Against this monopoly of education by the State, the Christian school brings a salutary protest.”⁴² The basis of Machen’s argument for ‘The Necessity of the Christian School’ (the title of his address) is that it complements and protects the parental prerogative to oversee the education of children. Immediately following his commendation of the Christian school, Machen observed that “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.”⁴³ Machen championed the Christian school for its usefulness to the Christian family as a helping institution.

In considering the development of modern civilization and its attendant complexity, certain other early twentieth-century authors took a different approach and attenuated the role of the home in the instruction of children. For example, Mainline Presbyterian Christian educator and theologian Lewis Joseph Sherrill (1892–1957)⁴⁴ wrote, “But an efficient piece of teaching work in the home grows more difficult with every year of our developing civilization.”⁴⁵ To address problems stemming from societal complexity, Sherrill advocated for stronger cooperation between church and the family⁴⁶ while suggesting an expanded cooperative role for the state.⁴⁷ Sherrill’s openness to cooperation between the church and family on one hand and the state on the other stands in contrast to theologically more conservative and socially less progressive American Presbyterian voices (e.g., Machen and Dabney) which had decisively denied any legitimacy to the state’s claim to provide non-sectarian education to children on behalf of parents.

Likewise rejecting a totalitarian role for the atheistic state in the education of children, certain American Reformed theologians in the Dutch tradition⁴⁸ recognized the historical and biblical claims of the family in the education of children. However, these same theologians granted weightier emphasis to the church as a partner in the education of children through the establishment of Christian schools. Philosopher and professor W. H. Jellema (1893–1982) wrote, “No argument is needed, I take it, to show that such a world and life view rooted in the Christian faith will issue in Christian education. That it must necessarily issue in what we today mean

40. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4.247.

41. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923), p. 177.

42. J. Gresham Machen, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), p. 162.

43. Machen, *Selected Shorter Writings*, p. 162.

44. For a thorough biographical sketch of Lewis Joseph Sherrill available freely online from Talbot School of Theology’s “Christian Educators of the 20th Century” database, consult Susan Schriver and C. Ellis Nelson, “Lewis Joseph Sherrill,” accessed September 20, 2022, <https://biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/lewis-joseph-sherrill>; for a sympathetic analysis of Sherrill’s contribution to the development of Christian education in the early twentieth century, see Roy W. Fairchild, “The Contribution of Lewis J. Sherrill to Christian Education,” *Religious Education* 53, no. 5 (1958): pp. 403–11.

45. Lewis Joseph Sherrill, *Presbyterian Parochial Schools, 1846–1870*, *Yales Studies in Religious Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932), p. 195.

46. Sherrill, *Presbyterian Parochial Schools*, pp. 193–200.

47. Sherrill, *Presbyterian Parochial Schools*, pp. 199–204.

48. For a brief historical account and analysis of nineteenth-century Dutch debates surrounding the so-called “School Question,” see John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 332–39.

by the Christian school is not so obvious.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Jellema sought to argue on the basis of worldview theory the theological necessity of Christian schools.

Though Jellema sought to prove that the creation of Christian schools is a necessary “outgrowth” of a Reformed world-and-life-view, his arguments tending toward that conclusion do not flow necessarily from Scripture. For example, Jellema remarked in reference to content derived from advanced grade-school education, “obviously if the parent or the minister is somehow to provide this element he will not only have to be constantly present in the classroom and have the knowledge which the teacher possesses but will himself have to do the teaching.”⁵⁰ Just as Jellema argued that it cannot be expected that public schools can adequately provide all that is needful for a Christian education, so too he argued that the family and the church fall short of imparting a fully orbéd world and life view. These supposed shortcomings necessitate the erection of an independent institution, namely the Christian school.

Another example of this line of argumentation is seen in the sole publication of Dutch-Canadian Christian educator and advocate D. L. Kranendonk, who put forward a biblical mandate for Christian schools in his book *Christian Day Schools: Why and How*. After establishing the biblical basis for home-based instruction in the things of the Lord, Kranendonk opined, “The family, however, is not able to satisfy all the educational needs of the child in today’s complex society.”⁵¹ To address this deficiency, the family—which has “particular accountability” for the education of children—must, according to Kranendonk, resort to cooperative efforts with the church—which has “general supportive responsibility” for helping the family to fulfill its responsibility.⁵² While dealing in abstract theological concepts (i.e., worldview theory, and relationships of responsibility), neither Jellema nor Kranendonk brought Scripture to bear directly on their respective discussions of the necessity of Christian schools. Nevertheless, they argued for a theological—if not biblical—mandate for Christian day schools.

Far from proving a biblical mandate for Christian schools, Jellema’s and Kranendonk’s arguments instead suggest a prudential warrant for such schools. This is the precise point of popular Classical Christian School educator Doug Wilson when he wrote about forty years after Jellema, “I believe that a Christian school provides Christian parents with the most efficient way to take responsibility for the education of their children, while at the same time ensuring that true education actually happens. In other words, because there is a division of

labor a thorough education can be provided.”⁵³ Wilson here suggests that a thorough education is not possible apart from some kind of division of labor in the educational enterprise, with the Christian school representing the most efficient and effective means of dividing said labor. Ultimately, this statement proves—if anything—only a prudential warrant for the establishment of the Christian school as an alternative to the purportedly less efficient and effective option of homeschooling. Though the arguments from Jellema and Kranendonk—and the suggestion from Wilson—do not ultimately prove a biblical mandate for the creation, utilization, and sustentation of Christian schools, there does exist a line of argumentation for grounding and promoting the creation of Christian schools in something more compelling than mere prudential warrant.

Christian educator and psychologist Arnold H. DeGraaff developed a more thoroughly theological argument to establish the need for Christian schools. In doing so, he sought to derive a distinctively theological mandate for Christian schools from the pairing together of God’s Word in Scripture and the revelation of God’s will in creation. Allowing for a certain limited open-endedness in Scripture’s directions to parents in the matter of child-rearing and education, DeGraaff wrote provocatively,

The in-scripturated Word of God alone, therefore, is not sufficient to determine the specific structure of educational activities and relationships. . . . We believe that all of creation, mankind included, is subject to God’s law and that He reveals His will not only in the Scriptures but also in the order of creation. If we are to gain an insight into the peculiar features of child-rearing and other forms of education, we must turn to the educational process itself and seek to discover the *norms* that govern this process.⁵⁴

Far from being an argument against Scripture, DeGraaff’s approach synthesizes scriptural principles and

49. W. Harry Jellema, “The Christian School a Prerequisite for and an Outgrowth of the Calvinistic World and Life View,” in *Fundamentals in Christian Education: Theory and Practice*, ed. Cornelius Jaarsma (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 70.

50. Jellema, “The Christian School,” p. 72.

51. D.L. Kranendonk, *Christian Day Schools: Why and How* (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1978), p. 58.

52. Kranendonk, *Christian Day Schools*, p. 59.

53. Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education*, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), p. 127.

54. Arnold H. DeGraaff, *The Educational Ministry of the Church: A Perspective* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1968), p. 114.

creational insights to put forward what he believed to be a thoroughly biblical mandate. Ultimately, however, the heart of his argument rests on the perceived—as observed from “the order of creation”—deficiency of parents in the education of their children. DeGraaff argued that parents could not adequately prepare their children on their own ability, “since they themselves are dependent upon others for their understanding of God’s law.”⁵⁵ This dynamic is evident from the author’s understanding of Matthew 28:16–20, in which the disciples—and by extension, the churches they will plant—are commissioned collectively (or *covenantally*) to disciple the nations. For DeGraaff, this dependence upon others is proven not only by experience and common sense, but also by the covenantal nature of reality as described by God in His Word. In developing his appeal to the covenantal nature of reality and revelation for his argument in favor of Christian schools, DeGraaff contended first that the covenantal bond between God and man is not limited to or even primarily mediated through the family. On the contrary, “all of life and all relationships seem to be encompassed and determined by this religious bond.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, DeGraaff contested the claim—articulated in one instance by R. L. Dabney cited above—that God established parental authority as utterly unique. He concluded,

If, as we have maintained, there is no essential difference in the nature of the various types of authority, if other persons as well as parents are under divine obligation to lead and to instruct, and if all such relationships must first of all be looked at in the light of the covenant

55. DeGraaff, *The Educational Ministry of the Church*, p. 117.

56. DeGraaff, *The Educational Ministry of the Church*, p. 96.

57. DeGraaff, *The Educational Ministry of the Church*, p. 98.

58. R.L. Dabney, *Discussions, Volume 1: Theological and Evangelical* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), pp. 692f.

59. Samuel Davies, “Sermon XXIX: The Necessity and Excellence of Family Religion,” in *The Sermons of Samuel Davies in Three Volumes*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1854), p. 82.

60. Davies, “Sermon XXIX,” p. 84.

61. For several worthwhile examples, see Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946); Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1974); H.W. Byrne, *A Christian Approach to Education: Educational Theory and Application*, Second Edition (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1977); Louis Berkhof and Cornelius Van Til, *Foundations of Christian Education: Addresses to Christian Teachers*, ed. Dennis E. Johnson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1990); George R. Knight, *Philosophy & Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*, 4th Edition (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2006).

between God and man, that is, if all such nurture must be seen as religiously directed education, then it is impossible to find the normative structure and the most characteristic features of child-rearing (only) in the direct command of God, the nature of parental authority, and the covenant relation as it comes to expression in the family.⁵⁷

This line of argument allows for the extension, replication, and even substitution of filial nurture and instruction as defined in Scripture into other contexts (e.g., the Christian school), thus dismantling the uniqueness of the family as a covenantal community instituted by God for the “nurture and admonition” of children (among other purposes).

However, neither the conclusion nor the logic of DeGraaff’s argument are demanded by Scripture. On the contrary, DeGraaff’s argument seems to transgress the delicate balance that exists between the church and the family at the domain level. Each society—the church and the family—has within its purview a certain jurisdiction, field, domain, or sphere of function and authority. However, the family is the root out of which the church (and the state) grows. Right was Dabney when he preached, “The Christian family is the constituent integer of the church—the kingdom of redemption.”⁵⁸ Colonial American Presbyterian pastor, preacher, and evangelist Samuel Davies (1723–61) similarly characterized the family, or household, as “a radical society from which all others are derived,”⁵⁹ with Christian families being designed by God as “nurseries for heaven.”⁶⁰ Collapsing the distinctions that exist between church, state, school, and family is not only unnecessary when reasoning from Scripture, but even opposed to clear Scriptural teaching on this point as expressed by Dabney, Davies, and countless others.

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION & SCHOOLING

Though volumes have been written on a Christian philosophy of education,⁶¹ a brief consideration of three commonly cited passages of Scripture will suffice for the purposes of this article as an examination of the Bible’s teaching on education in connection with the formation and use of Christian schools. Each of the three following passages includes explicit precepts for framing a biblical vision for Christian education. Notably, nowhere do these passages (or any other passages, to the author’s knowledge) demand the formation and use of Christian schools. However, they do establish a prudential warrant for Christian schools for those parents

who wish to have recourse to such institutions for the Christian education of their children. The three passages under consideration here are Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Psalm 78:1–8, and Ephesians 6:4.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9 is a foundational text in the Torah, or Law of Moses. The passage reads,

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Moses—speaking as *the* authorized prophet of God and on behalf of God—in this passage commanded the people of Israel to instruct their children in the Word of God (i.e., the narrative of God’s mighty acts of deliverance and the book of His authoritative Law), much as he did in Deuteronomy 4:9, at which point he directed the people of Israel, “Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons.” In Deuteronomy 6:7, Moses described the arena for such instruction as the home when he directed the people to teach their children “when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.” Furthermore in verse nine, the people are to inscribe the instruction of God “on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” References to domestic life are abundant in these few verses, and the picture is one of homes saturated with the Word of God. Morning and evening, mealtimes, at-home conversations, even entrance and exit into the home, were signally marked and covered by God’s Word. In this comprehensive picture of daily life in God’s Word, there is no direct mention of formal schooling or tutoring outside the parent-child relationship.

In Psalm 78:1–8, the Psalmist (Asaph, according to the superscription) prefaced a memorial of God’s mighty deeds of redemption in the history of Israel with a commitment to fulfill the duties of parents as outlined in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. The Psalm reads,

Listen, O my people, to my instruction; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not conceal them from their children, but tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that they should teach them to their children, that the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children, that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments, and not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The Psalmist committed to “tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.” Familial language characterizes this poetic description of the prophetic commission to proclaim the excellencies of God to the rising generation. The prophet positioned himself and his task as complementary in relation to fathers in the covenant community, or nation of Israel (i.e., the Old Testament church). Referencing the message he had been entrusted to speak in verses two and three, he resolved, “I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.” But in the opening clause of the following verse, he characterized his audience as “their children,” with the possessive pronoun (the third-person masculine plural pronominal possessive suffix in Hebrew) referring to the fathers of Israel. He was not supplanting the role of the fathers but complementing it as he addressed “their children.” While the manner of transmitting the inherited narrative of God’s salvation in verses five through seven is not specified, neither are schools as-such mandated for the purpose of fulfilling this covenant obligation. In fact, any argument in favor of a biblical mandate for Christian schools must acknowledge from verse eight that it seems as though the prophet’s task insofar as it takes up and fulfills the responsibility of parents to instruct their children is necessitated by the sinfulness (and probably neglect) of the fathers, who are characterized as “a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God.” There may be prudential warrant for Christian schooling in an environment that resembles the desperate spiritual

situation described in Psalm 78:8, but it does not necessarily follow that there is a biblical mandate for extrafamilial Christian schools. Furthermore, the function of the prophet as described in Psalm 78 is more properly that which belongs to the church and its ordained ministry than that which must be performed by an institutional school distinct from the worshipping community.

Finally, Ephesians 6:4 presents direct instruction to fathers in the rearing of their children. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul directed, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the phrase “discipline and instruction” is famously rendered in the King James Version as “nurture and admonition.” From this verse, fathers—and by extension, all parents—are to be immediately invested in the lives of their children. Taken together with the texts from Deuteronomy and the Psalms cited and reproduced above, there is clear continuity between the Old and New Testaments on the matter of Christian education. The education of children is the concern of parents. That is not to say that Christian parents cannot take advantage of, institute, or promote extrafamilial means of educating their children. Rather, Christians parents—and arguably, fathers in particular—are ultimately responsible to ensure their children receive and profit from explicitly Christian education under the Lordship of Christ, who according to Matthew 28:18 has received from His Father all authority in heaven and on earth and is indeed the Lord described in Ephesians 6:4.⁶² At this point, schools are not introduced or mandated in any way, though certainly they are neither disallowed nor discouraged. The Bible’s teaching on the daily and ongoing instruction of children is emphatically familial and ecclesiastical rather than scholastic without abnegating the permissibility and usefulness of schools. Such being the case, there are two potential examples of schools in Scripture.

The first potential example of a school society (as opposed to a possible tutoring arrangement) in Scripture is described in 1 Samuel 19:18–24, which reports on David’s flight from Saul and arrival first at Ramah, and then at Naioth. The passage reads,

62. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2.447ff.

63. cf., Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*, pp. 199f.

64. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., “Seminary Education,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): 223.

65. For a presentation of the relationship between the church as such and the Kingdom of God more broadly conceived of as Christian society, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (New York: American Tract Society, 1903), pp. 161ff.

Now David fled and escaped and came to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and stayed in Naioth. It was told Saul, saying, “Behold, David is at Naioth in Ramah.” Then Saul sent messengers to take David, but when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing and presiding over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul; and they also prophesied. When it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they also prophesied. So Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they also prophesied. Then he himself went to Ramah and came as far as the large well that is in Secu; and he asked and said, “Where are Samuel and David?” And someone said, “Behold, they are at Naioth in Ramah.” He proceeded there to Naioth in Ramah; and the Spirit of God came upon him also, so that he went along prophesying continually until he came to Naioth in Ramah. He also stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Therefore they say, “Is Saul also among the prophets?”

At Naioth, Samuel was presiding over a company, or school, of the prophets. This gathering was not a precedent for today’s Christian schools, though it would be appropriate to draw a parallel to modern-day theological seminaries.⁶³ Longtime seminary professor and first President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. writes,

Apparently theological training schools were begun under Samuel with those who were called the “sons of the prophets.” We find the first mention of the group of the company of the prophets in 1 Samuel 10:5, 10 (see also 1 Samuel 19:19, 20; 1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1). The prophetic office developed in Israel under the tutelage of Samuel. Men studied in these schools as they prepared to serve as prophets.⁶⁴

While the historical existence of the schools of the prophets sanctions the formation of schools for specialized training of men for service in the covenant community or Kingdom of God (i.e., Christian society),⁶⁵ it does not necessarily demand the employment of Christian schools for the delivery of Christian education to child members of the covenant community. A second potential example of a school program in Scripture is found in Acts 22:3 where Paul testified before the Sanhedrin that he was “educated under Gamaliel, strictly

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nature of the Repertory's disparagement of Thornwell's view. Over against the Repertory, Dabney invokes a Thornwellian defense, incorporating both the ruling elder and the preaching elder as both members of the same office: "Well, then, let us state it thus: 'There is one class of presbyters embracing two orders, the preaching elder and the ruling elder.' Where, now, is the objection? This supposition shows that, even if it had any correctness, it would be merely a verbal quibble."⁹⁵ To this author, Dabney seems firmly within the camp of the two-office proponents. If he is, as Brown intimates, actually advocating a three-office view, he would seem to be doing so unintentionally or non-consciously.

In any event, Brown's argument is a line of thought in Dabney scholarship that is relevant and warrants the attention of readers and those with more than a passing interest in Dabney, Presbyterian church polity, and the distinctives of Southern Presbyterianism.

CONCLUSION

There can be little doubt that Dabney is widely regarded for his towering intellect, incisive analysis, and thorough-going loyalty to confessional Reformed and Presbyterian theological commitments. He is admired for his contributions to nineteenth century dogmatics. His *Systematic Theology*, while being largely the work of transcription thanks to the efforts of diligent students, is still widely read, its insights availed by many. His works on education (and theological education in particular) continue to enjoy extensive readership and appreciation. But his tenure as a professor of dogmatics reflects only the latter portion of his service at Union Seminary. His earlier years in service as a professor of Church History and Polity were not unremarkable, and his published writings on these subjects continue to serve the church with their tightly-reasoned arguments, biblical rationale, and thoughtful analysis. Surely this is why many of his writings continue to enjoy widespread consultation and have ongoing relevance to the church some 125 years after his death. Dabney's view that ecclesiastical history is the "crown jewel" of theological studies and in a seminary's curriculum is a view not likely shared by many in our day, but one which is worth serious consideration. And in the ongoing debates regarding the nature of church office and the way churchly office is expressed in the life of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, Dabney's thought continues to be relevant. It is not ground-breaking scholarship or fresh new theological insights which make Dabney's writings in these two subjects so useful, but rather his prowess of mind and pen: the thorough nature of his consideration (including the views of his opponents), the logic of his reasoning, and the unexpectedly succinct manner by which he

is able to give treatment to such a vast topic in a way that is surprisingly accessible, comprehensive, and, at the same time, intellectually formidable.

One can hope that Dabney's writings on church history and polity will continue to inspire future generations to take up the noble cause of serious attention to biblical church government, and, perhaps not a few might come to see the great dividends that are rendered when one views historical theology as that "crown jewel" of theological studies!■

Mandate or Warrant? Continued from Page 156.

according to the law of our fathers." Under the famous Jewish rabbinical doctor Gamaliel, Paul studied, learned, practiced, and championed the teaching of the sect of the Pharisees and their scribes. In the following chapter, recording the next day's proceedings of Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin, he proclaimed, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6b). Likewise, he wrote to the Church in Philippi, "If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil. 3:4b-6). The profile of himself that Paul reported is characterized by fervent zeal for his "school." Prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus recorded in Acts 9, Paul was a model student and alumnus of the school of Gamaliel. However, like the many relationships which existed within the band of disciples who followed Jesus, the example of Paul's relationship to Gamaliel is a far cry from modern-day grade schools, being more akin to seminaries, internship experiences, apprenticeships, or perhaps certain types of undergraduate education.⁶⁶ As intimated above in the observations of Dabney, Machen, and others, the home is the only setting biblically mandated for the education of children. However, the absence of a biblical mandate for extrafamilial schools does not entail a prohibition against Christian schools. On the contrary, prudential considerations may warrant the family's enlistment of assistance from Christian schools to fulfill the biblical mandate for Christian education.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the outset of this essay, there is no explicit or inferential biblical mandate for Christian schooling. However, there is a clear biblical mandate for Christian education ensured by and radiating out from the Christian home. Parents have the option of taking on the challenging—but rewarding—task of providing formal education to their children in the setting of the home. There are more resources and "helps"

95. Dabney, "Theories of the Eldership," *Discussions*, 2:133.

66. See Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*, p. 200.

today than ever before for the homeschooling father or mother. Alternatively, there is a prudential warrant for the creation and employment of Christian schools as defined above, in collaboration with the church and other Christian families. This prudential warrant is informed by biblical wisdom and established on the grounds of what might rightly be termed “natural theology” or “the light of nature” in connection with concerns of educational efficiency and effectiveness. Though there may be no biblical mandate as such for Christian schools, it is foolhardy to deny the prudential warrant that exists for taking advantage of Christian schools in many situations.

One option that parents seeking to be faithful to Scripture must avoid at all costs is the relinquishing of children to any school—public or private—that seeks to be non-sectarian (i.e., non-Christian) except under the most extenuating of circumstances.⁶⁷ The counsel of God is clear. The central concern of a covenant child’s education is the cultivation of Christian character and spirituality through loving discipline, instruction, and nurture. The family is God’s appointed society for the nurture of children, and the church is God’s appointed society for the guidance and assistance of the family in said nurture. The family may receive help from extrafamilial educational societies (i.e., Christian schools). However, pastors and other leaders in the church must be careful not to suggest that there is a biblical mandate for Christian schooling. To do so would be to infringe upon Christian liberty and to insinuate that home-based private education is somehow sub-Christian. On the other hand, proponents of homeschooling must recognize that faithful Christian schools provide an allowable and desirable alternative to public schools, especially when homeschooling is not an option for one reason or another. To echo the language of a document with which all American schoolchildren should be familiar, prudence, indeed, may dictate that Christian parents should not reject Christian schooling “for light and transient causes.”■

Our Visionary Architecture for Foreign Missions Continued from Page 170.

We believe that fulfillment of this mission is based on harmony, mutual trust and effective, creative cooperation between the MTW committee and the churches and presbyteries of our denomination.

If our missions work is not well-aligned, how can we expect to build orderly Presbyterian churches? Clearly, the intent of the Manual is that a well-coordinated missions effort (internally)

67. In the context of twenty-first century America, such circumstances may include a child having severe handicaps or disabilities for which there is no possibility of accommodation in either the home or available Christian schools.

is necessary for orderly relationships with other churches (externally), including those we participate in planting. Hence the leader of MTW is not a “director” but a “coordinator.” Biblically-ordered mission work is objectively the most effective and the most efficient. Many of the most critical missiological issues that we face today are resolved in this form of “government we humbly believe to be according to the pattern shown in the Mount.”

The Manual ended with an even stronger and broader affirmation of alignment:

This program can maintain the peace and purity of our church and it can unite us in the great work of world missions.²⁶

I would take this a giant step further to say that presbyterian missions will perfect the peace and purity of the churches we plant and strengthen, uniting the PCA with them in “the great work of world missions.”

SUMMARY

To close, I will summarize the principal points of the Manual’s philosophy of ministry and relate them to issues that many PCA churches and presbyteries are facing today. The Manual:

1. Establishes MTW’s identity in the PCA’s Constitution and history (over against para-church models and current “best practices”). The missions program of every PCA church would benefit from articulating similar connections to our Constitution and history to provide a unifying grounding.
2. Fosters a zealous commitment to a deeply theological approach to missions (over against prevailing pragmatism, ecumenism, and doctrinal casualness). This is a useful reference for the missions programs of local churches.
3. Promotes a strong emphasis on what is completely unique about MTW—the authority by which its missions work is done (the church rather than agencies). Recognizing that the church is an organic whole with Christ as head, leads to a distinct view of power and accountability for ministry. Presbyterian goals can only be accomplished by this Presbyterian means. Organism cannot be produced by machinery. This is the operational core of any missions program. Surely a greater awareness that the whole church “is inherently the missionary community” would stoke the missionary fire of every local church and presbytery.

26. This sentence is not in the current version of the Manual.