
The Reformed Churches and Christian Higher Learning

(PART I)

In his articles for *Trowel & Sword* (Oct, Nov, Dec, 1981) Ben Aldridge has extensively surveyed the variegated relationship between the church and "para-church" organizations. He has raised some important issues of principle concerning the relationship between the Reformed Churches and such organizations. In this article I wish to extend the range of the discussion by focusing upon the special relationship which exists between the Reformed Churches of Australia and its own "para-church" organization: the Association for a Christian University. I wish to argue that the Reformed Churches have, in fact, become a para-church organization in this one important respect.

I full well realize that my analysis will bring to mind attempts to reform and pronouncements about reform that have emerged in reformed churches at other times and in other places. But I must confess that my aim is not to demand the reform of the Reformed Churches of Australia, even though I have had contacts with reformed churches and organizations for some time. As a christian outside the Reformed Churches, I recognize that the ongoing reform of the church is a calling within the province of the loyal sons and daughters of this not-yet-thirty-years-old denomination.

... the Reformed Churches of Australia have hitherto played an important formative role in the promotion of christian scholarship, ...

I write this as a supporter of the development of truly christian scholarship, and I believe that the Reformed Churches of Australia have hitherto played an important formative role in the promotion of christian scholarship, and, I also believe, they will continue to do so. The question is not *whether* she will contribute but rather *how* she will contribute according to her particular responsibility. Though there may well be criticisms of what I write here in terms of its style and content, I would proffer this analysis as that of a christian social scientist, and I hope that it will be considered on that basis.

My proposal for reforming the contribution made by the Reformed Churches of Australia to promoting christian scholarship is this:

Overturn, in love, the Synodical Decision made at Ulverstone, 1954, which prepared the way for the establishment of the Association for Christian Higher Education on a Calvinistic Basis, which has since given sessions the power to commit entire congregations to corporate support of, and membership in, the association and instead conduct your church affairs, in relation to higher education, in accordance with the sound principles of the Church Order:

"PART II Section A. Art.27.a

Each assembly shall exercise its ecclesiastical authority in keeping with its own character and domain, in obedience to Christ, the only Head of His church.

Art.28.a

An assembly shall deal with ecclesiastical matters in an ecclesiastical manner."

Let the sessions give active and ongoing attention to the christian training required for all church office-bearers, including pastors, and make provision at sessional, classical and synodical levels for the ongoing viability of such courses of training without exceeding the limits laid out in the Church Order and without committing entire congregations to membership in the Association for a Christian University. Thereby let the Reformed Churches of Australia unambiguously encourage its people from the scriptures to see with eyes of faith that recognize that a truly free christian university enterprise gains its scholarly office from Christ and not through any churchly association, influence or control.

... for Kuyper the various, social spheres have their own legitimate office granted them by Christ, ...

From a reading of the above mentioned Synodical Decisions of 1954, it is now very hard to see how the Reformed Churches of Australia were then actually seeking to promote Kuyper's vision of sphere sovereignty; for Kuyper the various social spheres have their own legitimate office granted them by Christ, without the mediation of any institution like the church.

But I believe that this is the vision which, to a large extent, guided the Synod, even though the long run effect of their solution has been to conflict with any consistent public assertion of "sphere sovereignty". In this sense the Reformed Churches Synod of 1954 is to be given the honour which is its due. By this decision the Synod actually introduced an organized response to Kuyperian principles on Australian soil. But lest we romantically lapse into giving honour where it is not due, we should note that the manner in which Synod chose to act in regard to higher education has led to the situation today where:

- (1) the Reformed Churches of Australia by their involvement at a congregational level in, what is now, the Association for a Christian University, is in conflict with the idea that christian scholarship should be able to unfold, under Christ, "sovereign in its own sphere".
- (2) as far as the status of the Reformed Churches as a Church of Christ is concerned, this involvement in ACU is in conflict with its own Church Order.

Moreover, Kuyper had fashioned his view of "sphere sovereignty" in such a way as to bring christian social principles into the public discussion of his time. Whilst the Synod of 1954 may well have considered that their actions would have helped to bring about a change in christian thinking about "higher education" in this land, actually "sphere sovereignty" has remained a private issue within the Reformed Churches. In fact Reformed Church members have, by this decision, been encouraged to think that they can discharge their responsibilities to "higher learning" via the church.

The desire of Synod was to avoid future possible conflict. Conflict would arise, they decided, if, after establishing a denominational training college they were confronted by the establishment of an association to promote a christian university. But this good intention has not become reality. And in my opinion this good intention has fallen to the ground precisely because the church has been allowed to overstep its lawful limits and use its controlling power in "higher learning".

The Ulverstone Synod wrestled with the question of training for ministry. It rejected the idea that such training should take place in a "denominational college". However we must ask whether a church-controlled programme for the training of its office-bearers is identical with the concept of a denominational college? And is not such training within the sphere of the task of the church?

In effect the Synod then rejected the historical example of Calvin College and Seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in the United States of America (a denominational college) and sought to be guided in their programme by the special relationship which had pertained between the Gereformeerde Kerken and the Theological Faculty of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

This historical discussion of what the Ulverstone Synod originally intended might tempt some to observe that current trends in the Reformed Churches have ensured that the original intention of the Ulverstone Synod has already been overturned and the Reformed Churches and the Association for a Christian University are now committed to the North American model. That is not my point.

What I am arguing for is a closer commitment of the church to the church order so that membership in a congregation does not get confused with membership in any voluntary association. That is why I argue that the Reformed Churches of Australia via its Association for a Christian University connection has itself become a para-church body, and if this means that I am being critical of reformed church traditions on both sides of the North Atlantic, then so be it.

In a second article I intend to relate the above matter to our current situation in "higher learning", teacher training and the schools.

Bruce C. Wearne.

Did you know that ... ?

In an average fifth-grade classroom of 30 children there will be an eight year spread between the best and the poorest readers.

In a typical year-seven classroom students read from third to eleventh grade levels.

What do you do with the two non-readers in your grade?

How do you cope with those children who are bored with the reading pace in your classroom?

These and other questions are answered for you by attending a workshop entitled **HOW TO DEAL WITH READING DIFFERENCES**.

Get your Education committee, Session or your Sunday school superintendent to get further information and to book some teacher training workshops for the teachers in your congregation.

For further information write to E.M.I.T. TEACHER TRAINING ... 159 York Road, Mt. Evelyn, 3796. Phone: (03) 736 1380.

The Reformed Churches and Christian Higher Learning

(PART II)

In my previous article I have discussed the relationship which pertains between the Reformed Churches and christian scholarship. I have argued my case by referring to Kuyper's view of "sphere sovereignty", but also, most importantly, by citing the Church Order. The Reformed Churches of Australia in setting up, and linking themselves with, the Association for a Christian University, have done something which is contrary to the church order. Now, correcting this will have to come after careful action and open discussion within the Reformed Churches. But if my argument concerning the Church Order still leaves some people wavering, I would now like to turn to the world of education and scholarship, which lies just outside the confines of the ACU, and show how the Reformed Churches, via their ACU connection, have in actual fact shaped christian scholarship and christian education in an unhelpful manner.

... "reformational scholarship", ... should no longer be viewed as a scholarly trend limited to Reformed Circles only.

But I wish to emphasize at the outset that I do not imply that tensions and controversies within what I call neo-Calvinism are the only significant, nor even the most significant, tensions and controversies for the development of radically christian scholarly enterprise in this land. Anyone aware of the leading journals in philosophy and social science will now realize that "reformational scholarship", whilst still a small movement, academically speaking, should no longer be viewed as a scholarly trend limited to Reformed Circles only. What started out as neo-calvinistic philosophy is now clearly something far more significant and wide-ranging than a mere sub-cultural attempt to reform a tradition of Reformed thought. In its outreach, christian scholarship, to the degree that it retains its biblical basis, will make a strong claim to being truly ecumenical. In fact it may well be able to throw a strong light upon previous attempts to develop a christian ecumenicity which have failed to meet the biblical requirements.

And coming to today's situation, there are the tensions and controversies that have arisen in what I have termed neo-calvinism. I am not only referring here to the Reformed Churches but also the christian

school movement, the Institute for Christian Education and another organization whose relationship to all these others has not always been made clear: the Foundation for Christian Scholarship. The Foundation for Christian Scholarship, the Association for a Christian University and representatives of the schools participate together on the Commission which oversees the work of the Institute for Christian Education.

With a complex inter-weaving at the "managerial" and "directorship" level, it would be patently simplistic to assert that the Reformed Churches illegitimate involvement in higher learning, via its ACU connections, is the sole cause for the tensions we are currently facing in the christian school movement. Nor will these tensions and controversies simply evaporate tomorrow if the Reformed Churches decided to dis-establish itself from ACU in a principal manner.

... clear the ground for an open and frank exchange of opinions ...

... concerning the kind of christian scholarship that christians should be promoting.

But I do think that it has got something to do with the perplexing problems and tensions we face. And it is to the Reformed Churches' structural contribution to this controversy that I wish to draw attention. Some might think that my motive in writing this is to put the case for a free christian university organization in the forefront. That is not my intention. The reason I write this is to contribute to a discussion which is *internal* to the Reformed Churches concerning how the church order should function in its life, and by so doing clear the ground for an open and frank exchange of opinions in our midst concerning the kind of christian scholarship that christians should be promoting.

In the christian school movement it has long been an established principle that the schools are parent-controlled — meaning *neither* state-controlled *nor* church-controlled — since it is to parents that Christ gives the authority to direct the education of their children. This has gained a wide acceptance throughout the christian school community, not least because Reformed Church people have con-

tributed to the development of these schools in a Christ-centred, rather than church-centred, manner.

But what has happened in the area of "higher learning"? Since sessions have, via their "congregational membership" in ACU, committed entire congregations to corporate support of ACU, according to the provisions of the ACU constitution, congregations have been taught, by example if not by precept, that their responsibility to contribute to christian higher learning can be fulfilled by this churchly link.

The ambiguity deepens when it is considered that, whereas schooling can develop as parent-controlled, the ACU form of higher-learning is subject to church control in a fundamental sense. Moreover, through ACU's participation in ICE and in its own plans to develop a teacher training facility, we see that the Reformed Churches, whilst paying lip-service to "parent-controlled schools" on the basis of "sphere sovereignty", are actually exercising ecclesiastical control over the direction of this aspect of christian schooling, namely where higher education is concerned with the teaching of the teachers.

There is indeed a lot of energetic good intentions involved in the Reformed Churches' attempts to contribute. But good intentions, as we all know, cannot be an effective substitute for lack of perception as to the formative consequences of these initiatives. The fact that Reformed Church sessions are members of ACU must imply to the church members that a church-controlled teacher's college is preferable to a "free" christian teacher training institution. In this way the sessions membership of ACU leads to a situation in the Reformed Churches where ICE is considered to be somehow suspect because it is not "ours", in the way that "our college" is.

When christians act not knowing in which capacity they are discharging their responsibilities, then something is wrong

By ways such as these the effective church polity of the Reformed Churches with regard to "higher learning" gives the clear impression that it is the Church's involvement in these areas which keeps them from going "off course". But this mode of involvement gives great and powerful support to christians, both in her own denomination and elsewhere, that they should participate in these non-church activities on the basis of their church allegiance. When christians make such assertions, or even imply such an approach, then we must ask whether in fact they are being led by the right christian vision. When christians act not knowing in which capacity they are discharging their responsibilities, then something is wrong structurally, if not motivationally, with the way we have organized our social responsibilities.

But obviously not all members of the Reformed Churches go along with their church's polity concerning church involvement in "higher learning". Well over half the membership of FCS, which has been set up as a voluntary association with no special established relationship with any church or group of churches, are also members of the Reformed Churches. They also have to be, as I have pointed out, participants in, if not individual members of, the Association for a Christian University. As a voluntary association FCS does not, indeed need not, assume that all involved in developing and promoting christian scholarship will necessarily join. But for those members of FCS, who are also members of the Reformed Churches, a rather strained and difficult situation emerges in the midst of our current tensions. In FCS they are in fact tied via their membership declaration to a non-church-centred mode of christian scholarship. By their Reformed Church membership they are tied to a church-controlled mode of christian scholarship.

Now lest anyone think that the situation can be simply resolved, or that the current situation can continue, without tensions, let them reflect upon the fact that a significant number of ministers of the Reformed Churches of Australia are also members of FCS, two of whom are also Synodical deputies to the Reformed Theological College and others intimately involved in ACU affairs. Moreover, office bearers in FCS have also been known to have held "individual" membership in the Association for a Christian University.

It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that such people involved in both organizations are operating with a very heavy burden on their shoulders. As far as fulfilling their responsibilities for promoting christian scholarship is concerned they have to come to terms, sooner or later, with the fact that they are promoting conflicting views as to the nature of the promotion of christian scholarship. I would suggest that this burden might be lessened considerably if the sessions kept to their God-given ecclesiastical authority, as this is most clearly spelt out in the church order, and on a point of principle refused to commit entire congregations to "congregational membership" in the Association for a Christian University.

I know that what I write here is contentious. I am fully aware that I am implying that the Reformed Churches illegitimate commitment to ACU is part of the de-formed context which has allowed the disputation in the schools to grow. And as long as such a context is provided by the church polity, the Reformed Churches are helping to fuel the fires of contention.

For instance the imputed "Dooyeweerdianism" of leaders of ICE has been in the firing line for some time. The serious charges and counter-charges have not all been emanating from the ranks of Reformed Church members. But substantial

allegations have been levelled by some who are members of the Reformed Churches against others who are also members of the Reformed Churches. And as long as sessions are committing their congregations to corporate support of the Association for a Christian University they will find it difficult to adjudicate with the requisite christian impartiality. This is a clear reason why the Reformed Churches must give active consideration to their own reformation in this area.

**... the church, the servant of the gospel,
... has her task limited and defined by
the gospel itself, ...**

"Congregational membership" in the ACU maintains the churches in the ambiguous position of exceeding its proper limited authority. And when the church, the servant of the gospel, no longer has her task limited and defined by the gospel itself, and thinks she can ensure the christianization of non-churchly life by disregarding her God-given limits, then there is no guarantee against a great havoc being wrought in congregations, in individuals and in all spheres of life.

To those who support the promotion of christian scholarship on grounds of principle and who find themselves in this ambiguous position, I can only suggest that they should, with christian circumspection, take such steps as are necessary to ensure an open and constructive petitioning of sessions, classes and synods on this matter. Church membership in the Reformed Churches should not entail membership in the Association for a Christian University. But the issue must be stressed with genuine concern to find a solution; not by way of

compromise which sweeps principles under the carpet for short-term gains, but with a humble, submission to the requirements of the church order and a deep love for their church.

Congregations as such cannot properly belong to any body other than to the wider institutional church. If the device of "congregational membership" is valid then there is no barrier to congregational membership in Political Parties, workers organizations, etc.

My suggestions above may be helpful for some wrestling with the perplexing issues of our current contentions. Apart from the fact that no one group or person can claim that they have not contributed to our highly charged situation, there still remains serious charges and counter-charges alleging departure from the faith. These matters must be dealt with in the proper place in an open, charitable and forgiving spirit. Moreover, there are always the scholarly journals in which academics can confront philosophical adversaries with the chivalrous and even hard-hitting critique we have come to associate with reformational scholarship. And if, as some seem to imply, association with the philosophical movement of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven constitutes heresy, a deviation from the teaching of Reformed Confessions, then there has been plenty of opportunity for charges to be laid, clearly and unambiguously, in the courts of the church.

Meanwhile, as a scholar involved in christian social science, a supporter of christian schools with a reformational view of the church's place in society, I take my place as a friend of, and alongside other "dolerenden" within, the Reformed Churches of Australia who seek her good.

Bruce C. Wearne.



The original Free University building, Keizersgracht, Amsterdam.