

On “The Evils of Public Education”

A Response to Aaron Lim

When parents of the Covenant place their children in public schools, they subject their children to an environment of rampant ungodliness and worldliness. This spiritually hostile environment tempts their children to live in spiritual harmony with their ungodly peers. [Aaron Lim, "Our Children's Education: A Covenant Necessity (III): The Evils of Public Education," *Salt Shakers*33 (Jul 2015), 15]

The doctrine of "common grace" is one topic that certain conservative segments within Dutch Reformed circles reject. According to groups like the PRCA (Protestant Reformed Churches of America), the doctrine of "common grace" implies that God is gracious towards the reprobates, and that He in some sense desires and works towards their salvation. Of course, that assumes that there are only the Arminian and Amyraldian interpretations of "common grace" available, but I digress. Coupled with the rejection of any notion of "common grace" is a radicalization of Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of the antithesis. Not only is the Christian faith and other religions and philosophies seen to be antithetical to each other, but the antithesis divides even between institutions and societies. The strong Dutch Calvinist tradition of Christian schooling stems from this particular strain of the antithesis as applied to schooling, and thus there is a strong promotion of Christian schools within the Dutch Reformed tradition. Now, I do not think that there is anything wrong with Christian schools; in fact I think that is a good educational path if one is available. But the issue of contention is not the goodness of Christian schools, but rather that some people would not stop at promoting good Christian schools, but that they continue on to demonize alternative ways of education as being essentially unChristian.

In an article for the latest *Salt Shakers* issue (a magazine of the youth of Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore), Aaron Lim, a member of the congregation who was sent to the PRC seminary for theological studies, wrote an article decrying the "evils of public education." Lim is arguing against public education, seeing it as being full of evils and thus not something Christians should be in. Lim lists down a few reasons for why public education is evil. First, public education is an "environment of rampant ungodliness and worldliness." (15). Second, due to peer pressure, Christians are very much tempted to become wicked and ungodly. Third, there is the danger of "blurring the spiritual distinction" between Christian students and the children of the world. Fourth, if they resist ungodliness, they will be persecuted and ostracized, but children need friends to share their lives with. Fifth, the goal of public education is worldly and earthly-minded, which is contrary to Christianity (16), and results in children being worldly and treating the world as "a playground."

I must say that these reasons are all singularly unconvincing, and this presentation struck me as being isolationist and Anabaptist. Jesus prayed for Christians to be in the world, but not of the world (Jn. 17:14-15), but it seems to me that Aaron is arguing that we should be neither in the world nor of the world.

One main thread throughout the various reasons is the idea of the world's temptations. The theme of keeping Christian children away from public education is to keep oneself away from the world's temptations towards ungodliness. But such is to strongly associate wickedness with a particular institution ("public education"), and gives rise to a view of sin as being "something out there," instead of the biblical picture of sin as being pervasive even within Christians. According to the Scriptures, sin and wickedness pervades all mankind and the line between good and evil is NOT between "good institutions" and "worldly institutions," but through the hearts of every man. Sin is internal, not just in external institutions which we can conveniently demonize. After all, one of the most wicked institution, the Medieval Inquisition, originated not from the world but from within the Church. And if one continues to want to demonize institutions and thus condemn all of medieval Christianity, those who claim a Reformed heritage may want to consider the Salem witch trials in Puritan New England, or the massacres the Puritan armies led by Oliver Cromwell inflicted on the Irish.

We now look at the reasons one by one. The first two reasons speak of the world's temptations. Now, there is a difference between willingly putting oneself in the path of temptation, and having temptations that are part of the natural course of life. If a seductress attempts to seduce you into sexual sin, it is well and proper and mandated to flee from that temptation, as Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife. But if you see someone drop his wallet, the temptation to just take the money is to be resisted. It makes sense in the former example to flee from temptation and NOT put yourself willingly into the path of such temptations. But is entirely impossible to flee from temptations of the latter variety. Is there any way one can ensure that one will not ever be in a scenario where someone dropped his wallet in front of him? It is impossible to escape such temptations, unless one leaves the world entirely!

The presence of temptations towards worldliness therefore is no sufficient reason for separation from public schools. After all, is Aaron claiming that sin and the world does not follow us the fallen seed of Adam into Christian schools? You might not have overt worldliness, but worldliness will just assume a different guise. The Anabaptists experimented with their holy societies in the 16th century, and it did not make them any more holier than the rest who did not separate themselves from the societies of their time! The opposite sins of lawlessness and licentiousness are moralism, pride and self-righteousness, and look how the Pharisees fared before Jesus in His day. And since we are on the topic of Christian schools, do we need to talk about Calvin College and how it has managed to "redeem" science into an embrace of theistic evolution? You can take a person "out" of the world, but you can never take the world out of the person (not in this life), for we are all sinners and sin still works its iniquity even in the best of us.

Aaron says that "sin always appears attractive," and yes it does. But it is an underestimation of sin's ubiquity as if sin is just "out there" and one can easily avoid it by avoiding public education! It is the nature of things for Christians to struggle with sin, and that struggle does not cease just because one is spared the "worldly environment" of public education! Worldliness will just as quickly creep into "holy" and "spiritual" Christian education if you let it!

On the antithesis and the common sphere

In Reformed theology, what exactly does the antithesis pertain to? According to both Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark (despite their disagreement on other matters), the antithesis exists at the level of one's philosophy. In other words, there is a fundamental disagreement between the *systems* of Christianity, and that of other belief systems. Christianity is unique and contends against all other philosophies and religions. The antithesis lies at the level of thought, of philosophy, and maintaining the antithesis is done by way of vigilance in constantly renewing our minds after God's Word (Rom. 12:2), thinking God's thoughts after him.

It will be noticed that the antithesis exists at the level of systems, not persons. Contrast this with the Neo-Kuyperian view that is expressed by Aaron Lim and his professor David Engelsma:

Describing the antithesis between Covenant children and unbelievers, Prof. Engelsma writes:

“First, the life of the believer is subject to the Word of God, whereas the unbeliever’s life is independent of the Word and in rebellion against it. Second, the goal of life is different. The believer directs his life towards God. His life is God-centered. The unbeliever leaves God out. His life is man-centered” (pg 57, Reformed Education).

[Aaron Lim, "Evils", 15]

Now it is true that theology is to be worked out in life. But when one applies the doctrine of the antithesis, one has to actually deal with *how* Scripture speaks about the world before applying one doctrine to the exclusion of others. Here is where the problem begins for those who are radically pushing a total antithesis, for Scripture teaches that there is not just a category of "good" and a category of "evil," but also a category called "common."

The notion of "common" is associated with the Noahic Covenant, which focuses on preservation of this world, not on salvation and special grace. It is concerned with this age, which in Latin "age" is *saeculum*, from which we get the word "secular." Reformed theology does not just speak about the ultimate in the coming age, but also has practical teaching and application for [the penultimate] things of this world. For example, marriage is a common or secular institution, for there is no marriage in heaven (Mt. 22:30). But just because marriage is not of ultimate value does not mean that it should be denigrated (as in Monasticism), or that Scripture has little concern for it! Imagine if we were just to focus on ultimate things, then marriage should be seen as unimportant, and working in secular jobs also. We will then go back to the medieval notion that some jobs, the "spiritual callings of ministers," are really vocations from God. Or we can take the Neo-Kuyperian route and attempt to make all jobs "special" and thus baptize one's secular job into a ministry, which tends to subvert what one is actually employed to do.

The PRCA's rejection of common grace is certainly at the root of this radicalization of Kuyper's view of the antithesis. But what the PRCA fails to do is to distinguish the (Neo)-Amyraldian and Neo-Kuyperian view of "common grace" with the Calvinist view of "common grace." The Calvinist notion of "common grace" has to do with penultimate reality, not ultimate reality. It is formally instituted in the Noahic Covenant, and treats creation (though penultimate) as important. Over against the Amyraldian view of "common grace" as being in some sense salvific, the consistent Calvinist denies the salvific value of common grace. Common Grace is nothing more and nothing less than a creational (non salvific) good. It pertains to the common kingdom, not the spiritual kingdom of the church and the kingdom.

It is because there is a legitimate category called "common" or "secular" (*saeculum*) that we do not have to pigeon-hole everything into "good" and "evil" categories. We see this radical antithesizing tendency at work in Engelsma's shocking words concerning the topic of friendship:

Friendship with the unbeliever is both impossible and forbidden. Friendship demands oneness in Jesus Christ. My friend and I must have God as our God together. Whoever is an enemy of God is my enemy" (pg 70, Common Grace Revisited, RFPA, 2003; as cited by Aaron Lim, "Evils," 15)

According to Engelsma, friendship MUST always be based upon oneness in Jesus Christ. That axiom is of course totally unsubstantiated, and makes sense only if we are pressed with the false dichotomy between "good" and "evil." If one reads Scripture, one can see Abraham developing friendships with people like Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-33), who is an unregenerate Canaanite ruler. King David, the man after God's heart, developed a friendship with the pagan king of Tyre Hiram (1 Chron. 14:1, 1 Ki. 5:1). Friendship therefore is a "common sphere" blessing, which can be infused with spiritual benefits to be sure (among believers) but it is not exclusively Christian. Engelsma's definition of "friendship" is one example of such radicalization of the Kuyperian doctrine of the antithesis, such that now we have a distinction between "friendship" and "Christian friendship." That is why the third stated reason is ridiculous. There is no "antithesis" between the *persons* of unbelievers and the *persons* of believers, but between their faiths. Or to use philosophical language, antithesis applies to the area of epistemology not ontology. We all still remain humans and sinners in need of salvation. Only if we refuse to acknowledge the penultimate and focus just on the ultimate can we have such antithesis being placed between believers and unbelievers! At least we do not (as yet) have a difference between air and "Christian" air, although I wouldn't be surprised if someone has thought about that already.

We will go back to the issue of "Christian friendship" later, but for now it suffices to show how radical and unbiblical Engelsma's position is concerning friendship, and Engelsma arrives at this position because of an *a priori* rejection of the "common" category, putting systematic theological concerns ahead of the plain teaching of Scripture.

Christians and trials

The antithesis is between Christianity on the one side and other philosophies and religions on the other. It is epistemological not ontological. Living in this valley of tears, Christians share many things in common with unbelievers, with struggles for meaning and provision being things we have in common.

It is here that we move on to Aaron Lim's fourth point, that Christian students face persecution in public schools but they need friends. Now, it is true to some extent Christians will struggle in this world. Yet persecution is one thing, how we should respond to it another. The fact of persecution does not necessarily mean we should avoid situations where persecution is present. After all, Jesus prayed for our protection not that we would not have persecution. Our Lord after all said that he is sending his followers as sheep among wolves (Mt. 10:16). We are not called to separate from the world, but to keep ourselves pure *in the midst* of the world.

Aaron shared his own personal struggle in his school years, but what relevance does that have? This writer also struggled with ostracism in his school years, but feelings are not a valid argument for anything. In fact, it is through struggles that we grow. Those who are too sheltered are severely disadvantaged when they are finally exposed to the perils of the world. An emerging butterfly will emerge weak and unable to do much if the struggle to get out of its cocoon is cut short by "help" given by someone snipping through the cocoon instead of letting the butterfly emerge naturally by itself. Pain and suffering is part and parcel of living in this cursed fallen world, and children need to learn that. Even God does not spare us from trials, but He disciplines those He loves (Heb. 12:7-11). Trials in this life are given by God, who did not promise us the absence of trials, but that He will bring us through trials (1 Cor. 10:13; Jas. 1:2-4). Are we trying to argue that just because we struggle greatly in the past, so we want to make things easier for subsequent generations by eradicating the struggles we ourselves have to face? What exactly is growing up supposed to be for in this modern era, but for comfort and self-esteem even to the creation of "safe spaces"? Have we become so pampered and soft that we need to extend kindergarten into adult years?

Yes, children need friends. Christians friends do need to be made so we can encourage each other in the Lord (Heb. 10:25). But since friendship is a creational thing, so we can and should make friends with others regardless of religion and philosophy. After all, friendship is a good thing, and friendship can function as a portal for Gospel witness too. Now, I am not advocating for making friends with wicked people and joining them in sinning. But not all unregenerate people are sinful to that extent, and some of them might even be occasions for God to work in His people.

Living the antithesis IN the world

Christians are called to be pilgrims (Heb. 11:13). Pilgrims are those who are in the land and participate in the happenings in the land, yet do so as one who feels they belong to another. They are foreigners in the land, and as such they do not feel they belong. The

archetypal pilgrim is Abraham, who sojourned in the promised land, and engaged in economic activity and made covenants with the locals, yet he knew his identity as being someone belonging to another country, the City of God. Abraham did not separate himself in doing only "Christian businesses," or eating only "Christian food" or engage in other such spiritualization of common realities. The differences between him and the unregenerate are spiritual, not on things of the common sphere which he shared with the unbelieving pagans around him.

Likewise, the early Christians lived the antithetical life without denying the legitimacy of the common sphere. As an early church writing describes,

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. [*Ad Diognetus*, 5]

The early Christians do not separate themselves from the common realm in things of "clothing, food and the rest of their ordinary conduct," or "customs which they observe." In common affairs, they participate as other peoples. The difference is spiritual, not with regards to the common creational things. The antithetical life is to live virtuously *in the midst* of a wicked generation, not to separate oneself to create Christian sub-cultures. That is the way God has ordained for us. We are to be leaven in the midst of a dying world (Mt. 13:33), and bear witness in this world of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not separate ourselves from it!

Aaron's fifth reason thus fall flat in light of this reality. Yes, in terms of purpose and goals, public education has contrary goals to that of Christian values. But that is irrelevant, for unless they are actually mandating indoctrination into SecularISM, one does not have to accept their principles. After all, what do you expect from unregenerate people: that they think and teach in a Christian manner? The responsibility for bringing children up in the faith belongs to the parents, and schools are educating *in loco parentis* (in the place of a parent). Parents are responsible for bringing children up in the faith, but why does that have to be done in schools (especially in Christian schools) instead of the home? In the exact manner of how parents are to bring their children up in the faith, the Bible only mandates the witnessing of the Gospel of salvation (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25) and says nothing else more specific, so there should be Christian liberty where Scripture is silent. Some Christians might opt to do their duty by going through the public education system, while having catechisms and devotions in their family time, so who is to condemn them?

Conclusion

As I think I have proved, this attack on the "evils of public education" is utterly misguided and contrary to Scripture. No doubt there are bad public schools, but then they are bad Christian schools too. The fundamental issue is whether public education is in itself inherently evil, and to that I say NO. The PRCA's erroneous misconstruction and denial of "common grace," its radicalization of the Kuyperian doctrine of the antithesis, has led to a toxic stew of separatism and uncalled for over-the-top polemics against those who disagree with them on something we all should have Christian liberty over. Such actions such as separating from all public schools is contrary to the biblical view of being pilgrims in the land, and resemble the Anaaptists more than the Reformers.