

Presuppositionalism in Education

By William N. Blake

The Christian Philosophy of Education, by Stephen C. Perks (Whitby, England: AVANT Books, 1992) 169 pages.

Contra Mundum, No. 5, Fall 1992

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Stephen C. Perks, pastor and editor, has written an important and lucid work showing how central and crucial Van Til's presuppositionalism is for a Christian education. It is, accordingly, a useful guidebook for those developing curricula or who teach in a Christian school. This narrow but fundamental focus of his book speaks to one of the most basic issues in teaching today, but it does not qualify as an integrated and full philosophy of education. It does explain a necessary ingredient to be incorporated into Christian education if it is to avoid compromise with—and consequent inadvertent promotion of—humanism at the expense and honor of our Lord.

Perks hits the nail on the head when he brings to the foreground how carefully those who teach must handle the ideas that compete in the classroom. Do teachers, in fairness, throw all these ideas before the immature and allow them to decide which best suits them, or do they first settle in their own mind what is Christian truth and then proceed to instruct their students in this? This is not a question directly dealt with in Perks's book, but it is an issue implicit in his insistence upon a consistently Biblical view of reality in handling all the many competing words that force themselves upon teachers today. Perks does not permit open schooling, but asserts that only instruction that is faithful to the reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* can be called Christian. In this way he rightfully narrows the options open to teachers who desire a God-honoring education for their students. To depart from this stance is to miss the mark and engage in idolatrous education, even though the Bible is read daily and set as the standard for the school. Perks allows no comfort for teachers who deviate from this Biblical vision. Education that lacks this essential principle is mis-education even though it may be performed within the walls of a Christian school.

This strong challenge by Perks is much needed in Christian schools today. We have become lax in determining what constitutes a truly Christian education. Perks does the Christian school movement a great favor by arguing for Van Til's presuppositional approach and analysis of whatever alleged knowledge seeks an audience. In our day when humanism dominates the academic world, our only hope of ever creating a truly Christian

school lies in our adopting and applying the epistemological principles taught by Cornelius Van Til.

In view of the heavy but important emphasis on Van Til's outlook, the book could have been titled, *The Central Role of Presuppositionalism in Education*. For example, Perks does not tell us what should be taught in a school but only how to handle the truth issue in any given subject. He only informs us, should we decide on a given curriculum, how to handle the information found in that curriculum. I would gather from the overall thrust of Perks's book that he would be concerned that all handling of facts as well as every aspect of education be governed by Scripture, but he does not take this in depth. This critique is not intended to minimize the importance of Perks's writing for our day, but is simply to say that there is much more to building a Christian school of philosophy of education than appears even in outline in this book.

Epistemological considerations are not easy for many teachers, even for those at the college level. However, the school that desires to make an impact for Christ and His kingdom in our day must come to grips with the issues raised by Perks if the school wishes to claim honorably the name of Christ. Perks provides in his book an understandable and fruitful avenue for teachers to handle these difficult issues everywhere present in any literature on the market. Whether you teach in the classroom, from the pulpit or across the kitchen table these issues confront you. If this challenge speaks to you, consider it your solemn duty to make your teaching more God-honoring by filling it out with Perks's fine treatment of issues essential to your success.

Creation, the fall of man and man's restoration are prominent Christian truths to which Perks refers time and again. The same fundamental doctrines were central to Hugh of St. Victor whose book, *Didascalicon*, is also reviewed in this issue. The cry is the same whether it comes from Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, John Calvin or Cornelius Van Til: our starting point is in the simple and plain teaching of Scripture. These great men and others, writing to keep education sound, must be read carefully if Christian education today is to fulfill the great commission, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19) God will spew us out of His mouth if we are neither hot nor cold. May God mercifully grant a true revival among Christian schools by a return in full force to basic principles. Perks points to one of many needed reforms in education, whether at home, at church or at school. The burden of much of the reform spoken by Perks rests upon the schools which must continue to fulfill their Levitical role as leaders and servants in education.

Perks's emphasis upon the importance of the teaching of the covenant in establishing human responsibility and divine interest in education must be given weighty consideration. Christian schools cannot 'baptize' common education of the day, but they must reckon with what interest God has in this activity. Perks does us a favor by directing our attention to the covenant. However, Perks has apparently not considered how God's interest in education was underscored by His call to the Levites. The Levites were called to teach with only one family (Aaron's) responsible for the sacraments. They did teach Israel in their forty-eight designated cities and likely in many villages wherever people sought a synagogue. This teaching institution, the synagogue, ministered to people of all

ages. The return of Israel from Babylon witnessed a revival and restoration of this teaching ministry that eventually resulted in a Christian day school. It was the calling and commission of the teachers that provided the foundation for the teaching that occurred in the synagogue. With this order in mind, we need to focus more on God's calling and commission than on whether God established an institution. After all, what do we have in the New Testament? An institution established? No, we have gifts, callings and commissions. By putting these first in our thinking we may avoid over institutionalizing both our churches and our schools.

Perks rightly gives importance to Adam's naming of the animals as an important insight for education. He identifies the naming as a "process of learning that leads to dominion". Could this "learning" also mean wisdom? To leave this fact of history as simply a "learning" process may communicate the importance of intellectual attainment as a fruitful end in itself. Our mediæval fathers, truly giants in education, placed their emphasis upon wisdom and holiness as the necessary antecedent to fulfill our dominion responsibility.

Perks advances sound arguments for the role of education in bringing us our civilization and in rebuilding what has been lost due to our failure to maintain this same posture. The stakes for the future of Christendom are high and from a human viewpoint favor a humanist victory. Perks might well have pointed to the role of Christian education to prepare the way for the coming of the kingdom of God through Christ. For example, the prophet Malachi makes it clear that godly Christian education was an imperative to prepare the way for Christ's appearance. The prophet put it this way, "'Elijah' will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." (Malachi 4:5,6) This restoring of the hearts of the fathers is nothing more than training children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Perks could also have strengthened his arguments by citing the role of Christian schools in preparing the way for the sudden outburst of the Protestant Reformation. (See Albert Hyma *The Brethren of the Common Life* Eerdmans, 1950) We are repeatedly told that this movement of God's Spirit arose in the pulpits and that these pulpits sustained it. Men today must consider the role of the Brethren of the Common Life and their schools in preparing the world for the phenomena of the Reformation. These schools had their beginnings in Deventer, Holland during the last two decades of the fourteenth century, and spread throughout northern Europe. Luther attended one of these secondary schools and was later taught the doctrines of grace through a book published by one of their disciples at Paris. John Calvin was apparently brought to saving faith through the witness of one of their disciples and later copied their educational system when forming one at Geneva. Perks's arguments are good as far as they go, but they could have been strengthened by an appeal to God's dealings in history.

In his last chapter, Perks wrestles with the role of the church in Christian education. He rightly removes the church from the responsibility to establish and to operate schools under normal circumstances. The prime emphasis cited for the church is the ministry of the Word. The church thus acts as a catalyst urging and exhorting Christian men to fulfill their duty to God as clearly taught in Scripture. Perks does us a favor here by showing elders and pastors what their duties are in this respect. If this concept were clearly in the hearts of American Christians, we would not have nearly 80% of the Christian children in

this land taught by the godless, humanistic government schools.

Teachers, parents, pastors and elders are duty bound to come to grips with the issues so well treated by Perks. May God bless the circulation of this book among many Christians.