

Christian Herald

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THE SEPARATION OF GOD AND STATE

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ALMIGHTY God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country."

This prayer, prepared by the Regents of New York State's public schools for voluntary use in classrooms, was last June declared unconstitutional by the U. S. Supreme Court.

Perhaps by now the Court will also have ruled on the use of the Lord's Prayer in Maryland schools and Scripture reading in Pennsylvania schools. Those rulings, however they go, are likely to stir up additional controversy.

At stake is a larger question: the place of religion in the public schools and, indeed, in our national life. That the Supreme Court itself is not of one mind is evident from the divergent opinions delivered last June. Justice Hugo L. Black, in the majority opinion, objected to the prayer on the ground that "it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of American people to recite." Superficially at least, this would seem to infer that *unofficial* prayers and other non-compulsory religious exercises would not be affected by the ruling. But Justice William O. Douglas, in a concurring opinion, read far more into the interpretation. The audience for a prayer in a school, court or legislature, he declared, is a "captive audience." Justice Potter Stewart, the Court's lone dissenter, said that he could not see how "an official religion" would be established by permitting the use of a non-sectarian prayer. He

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reminded his fellow jurists that the Supreme Court decreed ten years ago: "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."

Perhaps much of the furor could have been averted had the Court been more explicit in setting forth the implications of its decision. If the extreme position advocated by Justice Douglas ultimately is adopted, the logical outcome will be the removal of "In God We Trust" from our coins, the cessation of prayers at sessions of Congress, the withdrawal of chaplains from the Armed Forces and the deletion of all references to America as a nation "under God" from our official documents.

Is this what our founding fathers intended? It has been well stated that, to the contrary, their concern was that the American people enjoy freedom of religion, not freedom *from* it. Benjamin Franklin told the delegates to the Constitutional Convention, "We have been assured . . . that except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this, and I also believe that without His concurring aid, we shall succeed no better in this political building than the builders of Babel."

The First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In their zeal to safeguard minorities against *establishment*, civil-liberties groups and others would deny the majority *free exercise*. Surely it was not the purpose of the framers of the Constitution to discriminate against religious faith, but rather to protect minorities from diverse indoctrination by *particular* sects. Dr. Louis Evans has aptly observed, "The Constitution provides for free *exercise* of religion, not free *extermination* of it."

Yet in at least one school a plaque bearing the Ten Commandments was ordered removed from a classroom wall. In other communities the singing of Christmas carols by school choruses is forbidden. "Frosty the Snowman" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" are acceptable, but "Silent Night" and "Joy to the World" are not. A few years ago a state university barred church-sponsored groups from holding campus religious meetings.

This turn of events is ironic in view of the fact that it was the Christian churches which gave education its first impetus in colonial America. Eight of the first nine colleges in this country were founded by churches. The motto of Harvard University, established in 1636, expressed the philosophy of them all—"For Christ and the Church." The primary consideration in the minds of the founders of these institutions was that there might be an educated ministry for the church.

THE New England Primer, the Mc-
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Guffey readers and other early textbooks abounded in quotations from the Bible and other religious material. The elimination of such content from public-school textbooks undoubtedly has had a great deal to do with the condition of religious illiteracy which prevails in America today.

Daily Bible reading is required in the public schools of 12 states, optional in 24 states, and prohibited in 11 others. The remaining three have no official policy. George W. Cornell, Associated Press religion writer, has reported that "prayers of some kind are used regularly in public schools in about 33 per cent of the nation's communities, and occasionally in another 17 per cent. Prayers evidently are used sometimes in about half the country's 117,855 public schools — or about 58,927 of them. . . . Schools in about 41 per cent of the nation's communities also have regular Bible reading."

Pennsylvania's law requiring the reading of ten verses of Scripture without comment at the beginning of each school day was ruled unconstitutional in 1959 by a three-judge Federal Court in Philadelphia. The law was thereupon amended to provide that children may be excused from this exercise upon the request of their parents. But even with this "escape clause," the law was again ruled unconstitutional by the Philadelphia court on grounds that it constituted "the promotion of religiousness"! An appeal to the U. S. Supreme Court is now awaiting a ruling.

THE Reverend Robert E. Merry, in a letter to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, has noted, "The only thing we can't teach our kids in public school is the only thing which can defeat Communism." To which the editors replied by saying that the proper place for religious instruction is "in the home and in the church or synagogue." This was substantially President Kennedy's response to the Supreme Court decision.

The difficulty with this widely held viewpoint is that it gives the child the impression that religion is something people do only on Sunday, that God and spiritual values are of secondary or peripheral importance. The effect, as William Ernest Hocking has put it, is to teach "atheism by omission," or if not atheism, then the blasphemy of isolating God from day-by-day living and learning. In the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy Moses stressed that God is to be talked about and thought about *not* only on a certain day of the week—or during one or two hours of that certain day—but many times *every* day.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy chil-

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dren, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house and on thy gates (Deut. 6:4-9).

Does it not seem logical that one of the reasons we *don't* love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might is that we *don't* keep Him constantly in our minds and hearts—and in the minds and hearts of our children—as Moses admonished us to do? I recall that during my public-school years I used to wonder if what I learned of God and the Bible at home and in Sunday school were really true, or if true, important. For these things were never discussed or so much as mentioned in school. Do not most children, even those solidly grounded in their faith, raise similar doubts? And what of those not solidly grounded? Is it any wonder that they come to think of reading, writing, arithmetic, history and science as being more important than religion? And when these children grow up to be parents, is it any wonder that they fail to make religion relevant to their children, in view of the fact it was never made relevant to them?

Thus have the sins of the fathers been visited upon the children. This helps to explain the paradox of a nation which has become increasingly religious outwardly while decreasingly so inwardly. By relegating God to the fringes of life, by failing to make Him central, we have reaped exactly what we have sown. In protecting the agnostic's right to bring up his child in an agnostic environment, we have sacrificed the believer's right to rear his child in an atmosphere conducive to reverent faith in God. The accommodation of the vast majority to this tiny minority has resulted in the paganizing of our culture—so that the separation of Church and State has degenerated into the separation of *God* and State.

Even Christian leaders have been so indoctrinated with the secular mind that many have lent their support to the segregation of God from the public schools. Witness the fact that the United Church of Christ voted to uphold the Philadelphia court in ruling Pennsylvania's Bible-reading law unconstitutional. A prominent educator and church leader told me recently that she is opposed to released-time Christian education in principle because it encroaches upon public-school time. "We need all the time we have and more for the regular curriculum," she said. "Let the home and the church take care of the child's religious training, but not during school hours." To which I replied, "The trouble is that in the mind of the child, the school day is over at 3:30. True, some churches and synagogues conduct effective programs of after-school and weekend instruction. But they must fight the tendency of the child—and his parents—to look

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upon such programs as extra-curricular." Parents who see to it that their children attend public school regularly and do their homework faithfully, do not see to it that they attend church school regularly and study their Sunday-school lessons faithfully.

EVEN released time can be considered only a partial solution for this reason. In our community, for example, parents of some of the leading church families haven't enrolled their children in released-time Bible classes. And in some instances, when children have complained about work assigned or poor grades received, parents have requested their removal from the program. Can you imagine a parent's writing the principal asking to have Junior withdrawn from arithmetic because he found the work difficult or received poor grades in it?

Already we have paid dearly for the abdication of our responsibility toward the younger generation. Widespread ignorance of the Word of God and absence of spiritual motivation have resulted in a tragic deterioration of the moral fabric of our society. This is hardly surprising. How can we expect fruit unless first of all seed is sown? Philip E. Jacob, discussing the fact that more than 40 per cent of college students admit to cheating, has observed, "American students tend to value self-interest first, then social acceptance, friendship, and moral principles in that order, when they are in conflict." In other words, our values and habits are socially rather than morally determined. We Americans don't give primary place to God's will in selecting our attitudes and practices. We follow the crowd and do as the Romans do. Our conduct is influenced more by social pressure from without than by inner moral pressure.

But what about the cure? A cure *must* be found; our survival as a nation depends on it. Unless we strengthen the moral and spiritual foundations of our country, we are doomed to defeat and oblivion at the hands of godless Communism.

First, we must realize that the major responsibility for the religious upbringing of our children devolves upon us, the parents. This would appear obvious; yet there are many parents who refuse to recognize this duty, such as the Texas father who argued against censorship of obscene literature, stating, "I am opposed to censorship because I am the father of four children and I want no arbitrary restrictions placed on the development of their minds." Paradoxically, we insist that our children brush their teeth, take their baths, eat their meals, get their sleep, go to school—but when it comes to the most important aspect of their development, we do *not* insist.

The inconsistency of this sin of omission is accentuated by the fact that millions of negligent parents take

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holy vows to bring up their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." If all of us who profess to be Christian would strive conscientiously to fulfill the covenant obligations we have taken on behalf of our children, a giant step would be taken in the direction of offsetting the paganizing influence of the secular society.

Specifically, what can parents do?

1. Do you have grace before meals?
2. Do you set aside a time each day for family Bible reading and prayer?
3. Do you read Bible stories to your children?
4. Do you play Bible games with your children?
5. Do you teach your children to commit to memory precious Bible verses and passages—and help them to understand the meaning and value of these selections?
6. Do you see that your children study their Sunday-school lessons?
7. Do you teach your children to pray? Do you pray with them and for them?
8. Do you speak of God reverently and naturally each day in talking with your children? ("Look at that beautiful sunset! Doesn't God paint lovely pictures in the sky?")
9. Do you set your children an example of Christian character and service?

SECOND, our churches must do a better job with the time and facilities at their disposal. If the Sabbath is the Lord's Day, there simply isn't any excuse for devoting a scant half hour on this special day to the study of God's Word. A public-school educator told me recently, "Why should we go along with a released-time program when the churches are not making the most of the time they have?"

And of course quality is even more important than quantity. Most of us who are parents would rebel if our children's secular education in the public schools were as slipshod and haphazard as is their religious education in many of our Sunday schools. We must constantly improve the quality of our curriculum materials, the quality of our teachers, the quality of our facilities—to the end that the quality of both teaching and learning may be elevated.

Louis Evans suggests that the churches of a community arrange with public-school officials to keep one evening each week free for church activities. Many congregations operate successful youth clubs which meet at the church for recreation, Bible study, choir practice and supper one afternoon and evening each week. As Dr. Evans reminds, "They're *our* children, not the state's." We have every right to request that one night in the week be turned over to the church, especially in view of the seemingly endless demands being made on our children's time by numerous school functions and programs.

In addition to doing a better job of Christian education in the home and in the church, we can do more in the schools than is now being done. There

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is no reason why, with common sense and forbearance, teachers cannot present God and our great religious heritage to our children without sectarian divisiveness. If an atheist or agnostic is offended now and then, is not this better than offending the religious majority by pretending, for example, that God had no part in the Creation; that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are not sufficiently important historically as to deserve so much as a mention; that the Bible and the great religious art, music and literature which it has inspired are of little consequence to human culture?

Should the Protestant churches try to develop an elaborate system of parochial schools? There are two major objections to this. One is financial; the other is that such schools would tend to segregate our children into religious and social cliques, contrary to the democratic ideal. But certainly the latter danger, which is by no means insurmountable, is not as menacing as that of divorcing God from education. If the Supreme Court outlaws classroom religious exercises, many churches will feel driven to this expedient.

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Psalm 33:12).

The path of history is strewn with the wreckage of nations which have ignored this principle. Will America be added to the list? The answer depends upon each of us. What have *you* done to stem the tide of godless secularism? ✚

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