

Excused Absence

Should Christian Kids Leave Public
Schools?

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Foreword by Marvin Olasky

canonpress 
MOSCOW, IDAHO

Excused Absence: Should Christian Kids Leave Public Schools?

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Published by Canon Press

P. O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843

800-488-2034 | www.canonpress.com

Cover design by James Engerbretson. Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost.

Printed in the United States of America

Second edition: 2022. First published in 2001 by Crux Press.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data forthcoming

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	1
FOREWORD	2
1 The True Starting Point	4
2 How We Got Here	12
3 Getting to the Root	22
4 Nothing But the Truth	30
5 For Goodness' Sake	35
6 A Real Beauty	41
7 Nurture and Admonition	49
8 With All Your Mind	54
9 Every Thought Captive	59
10 Be Careful What You Ask	64
11 Where Judgment Must Begin	72
12 Objections Overruled	82
13 Teach Your Children Well	95
14 Pitfalls to Avoid	106
15 Can Do	117
16 The Covenantal Context	122
17 Our All in All	132

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to David Hagopian for his friendship, editing, commitment, and humor. I also thank Crux Press for giving me this opportunity, as well as Joette Whims and Lynn Copeland for their editorial assistance, and Terri Oesterreich for her typesetting.¹

1. This is for the first edition.

Foreword

U.S. senators, eat your hearts out! You'd salivate at the opportunity to grill Doug Wilson upon the occasion of his nomination to be Secretary of Education. But that won't happen, because Doug is terrific at producing the zingers that make him unappointable.

Just imagine what a Ted Kennedy would do with Doug's observation that "we find a jihad against racism, pollution, or global warming in the government schools at one moment, then seconds later, we find the same absolutist zealots insisting that there is no such thing as absolute good or evil when it comes to homosexuality or other 'alternative lifestyles.'"

Doug produces light as well as heat. Here's a point every Christian needs to understand: "When God is excluded from the classroom, we are not merely remaining silent about God. We are teaching children that they may safely disregard Him. Whether or not God exists, the lesson goes, His existence is irrelevant to what we are doing here. So when God is omitted, we are not silent about Him; rather, we are teaching the children in the most convincing way possible that God is irrelevant. They can safely omit Him when it is convenient to do so."

I do think Doug overdoes it at times. For example, regarding Christians teaching at government schools, he writes, "Put simply, the teacher can make a difference or not. If he makes a difference,

his case will probably appear before the Supreme Court. If he is not making a difference, then why not go where he can?” That is put too simply: teachers make a difference in many different ways, some legally actionable, some not. Doug would want readers of this book to think through his points themselves and object at times.

Still, *Excused Absence* is stimulating reading, and parents—“particularly those fathers who do the opposite of what the Bible commands and leave educational decisions to their wives”—need to think through its counsel. Doug does not shy from uncomfortable truths. He points out, for instance, that Protestants during the nineteenth century larded it over Catholics, and writes that “part of our problem today” having a foreign worldview imposed on us “is that we did not have a problem when we were doing it to others.”

It’s time to stop the new imposition: we should repent for past sins and try, with God’s grace, not to start a new sequence of wrongs. Doug Wilson teaches us to think through biblical ways of starting anew.

Marvin Olasky

Senior fellow, Acton Institute, and editor, *World*

CHAPTER 1

The True Starting Point

“I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not increasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt.... I am much afraid that schools will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth.”

-MARTIN LUTHER

When it comes to government schools, we are all too familiar with some of the recent battlegrounds. What do we do about drug deals and guns? What about Outcome-Based Education? Should we teach right from wrong? Can we pray in the classroom? Should creationism be taught? Add to this list another item—a question recently asked by two legal scholars: Can we teach sexual abstinence in government schools without somehow violating the separation between church and state?

When confronted with new issues like this abstinence argument, Christians usually respond by trying to reform government schools in some fashion—writing letters to the editor, seeking the floor at the next school board meeting, or running for a vacancy

on the PTA. Each of these responses, however, misses the point that “reforming” government schools will never solve their fundamental problem: they are based on institutional agnosticism, if not outright hostility to the Christian faith. In light of this undeniable reality, Christian parents really face one of two choices: either educate their children with Christ or educate them against Him. No other alternatives exist. In the end, Christian parents are called by God to educate their children not only about abstinence, but also about everything else under the sun He created. The alternative to the unhealthy secular fare regularly served up to our children today is not a dash of religious seasoning, but a whole new recipe.

That’s where this book comes in. It aims to persuade Christian parents to act wisely in their children’s education by giving them the kind of education the Bible requires: a distinctively Christian education, which their children cannot receive at government schools.

To establish this point, we will not cite studies on the general state of government education in our country, because we are awash in such studies. In fact, the only thing we learn from these studies is that they don’t make any difference—just like our schools. If they were what we really needed, all our educational problems would have been solved long ago.

Is and Ought

The issue is not statistics, but morality. The issue ultimately is not what the situation is but what we should do as parents. Consequently, this book will focus on the reasons Christian children need to receive a distinctively Christian education, either in a traditional Christian school setting or at home. And I will be blunt in the process. The unbelieving state of government schools and the covenant responsibilities of Christian parents combine to create a need for some straight talk and concerted action.

CHAPTER 2

How We Got Here

“The United States stem of national popular education will be the most efficient and wide instrument for the propagation of Atheism which the world has ever seen.”

-A. A. HODGE

The American character is a fascinating study, and we cannot understand it apart from the process of education that we have adopted. We can trace the degeneration of the American character by looking at the change in our education from Christian education to a secular agenda.

The Older Order

When our colonies were first established, we were a European people, particularly characterized by the flavor of the British Isles with an overwhelming Scottish and Scotch-Irish influence. Compared to the rest of Europe, the British Isles had a longer and more deeply entrenched tradition of liberty under law. We inherited this tradition from the very first and exhibited this character very clearly. In the middle colonies and in the South, this influence was greatest from Scottish and Scotch-Irish immigrants. In the

early eighteenth century, these Calvinistic Presbyterians came to the colonies by the hundreds of thousands. They brought the mentality of the older order. When the common schools were first established on a widespread basis, their model was a “new and scientific” import from Prussia.

“Progressive” education—education that was more modern and scientific—already had deep roots on the Continent, going back to the time of an educational reformer named Jan Amos Comenius, who was born in 1592. He became a bishop in the Union of Bohemian Brethren, which was the most biblical branch of the Moravians. He was a man of exemplary personal piety, but this piety was unfortunately employed in the propagation of a host of progressive and utopian ideas in education. These ideas afflict us to this day. To use Jean-Marc Berthoud’s memorable summary, Comenius was the “forerunner of all the most lethal errors which we associate with the totalitarian utopias and revolutionary messianic political orders which have ravaged the modern world.”

As the population of Europe grew, the thoughts of more and more intellectuals turned to progressive education as an important element of social engineering. Of course, the same ideological tendencies were at work in the British Isles, but with greater conflict. Many of those most hostile to the rising tide of humanistic rationalism decided to come to our shores.

Two Great Impulses

Up through the eighteenth century, our nation was a part of the older order of Christendom. But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, this old order began to collapse.

This collapse of the old orthodoxies in America stemmed from two great impulses. The first was simply the *force of gravity*. The “natural man,” no matter where or when he lives, does not love the

CHAPTER 3

Getting to the Root

“Therefore it is apparent, that the ordinary appointed means for the first actual grace, is parents’ godly instruction and education of their children.”

-RICHARD BAXTER

Because sin is the great destroyer, we should not be surprised that it lies behind the great abdication that established our government school system. But, as always, great sins come from little ones, and the established school system would have been impossible apart from countless acts of disobedience in the living room and around the dinner table.

Below the Surface of Garden-Variety Sins

While addressing common sins in the household, it would be too easy to focus on those garden-variety sins everyone knows and acknowledges to be sins, such as complaining and fighting. But we must take a step or two back to address some of the problems that set up the temptations for these sins. Long ago, Malachi prophesied:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse (Mal. 4:5-6).

The New Testament teaches us that Malachi's prophecy was fulfilled in Christ. John the Baptist came before the Lord, and the point of John the Baptist's ministry (a ministry of *preparation*) was to turn the hearts of fathers and children to each other. Note also the alternative—a curse upon the earth. When fathers and mothers are honored and the atmosphere is spiritually healthy in the home, the result is blessing in the land. When the family breaks down, everything breaks down.

The Root Problem

But simply having traditional family values on paper does not prevent such breakdowns. How we educate and rear our children is a matter of central concern because millions of souls are at stake. Whatever the issue, we have to think biblically.

We often deal with sins only when they bear fruit at the branch's extremities. A lot of spiritual energy could be spared if we were willing to consider some of the root problems. So what are some of the root problems in the home?

Spiritual Neglect. The first root problem in the home is spiritual neglect; those who do not know the condition of their own souls are in no position to shepherd the souls of others. Our Lord pinpointed this problem in His parable of the sower: "Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard,

CHAPTER 4

Nothing But the Truth

“The school system that ignores God teaches its pupils to ignore God; and this is not neutrality. It is the worst form of antagonism, for it judges God to be unimportant and irrelevant in human affairs. This is atheism.”

-GORDON H. CLARK

Education is one of the most religious things we do. Consequently, any pretense of religious neutrality in the process of educating children in some plain-vanilla fashion is a myth that will lead to enormous confusion. The myth distorts the nature of knowledge, which is the last thing an educator should do.

As we reject the myth of neutrality, we must remember that we are not rejecting neutrality as a bad thing, but rather as an *impossible* thing. The problem with the government schools is that they cannot be neutral, even if the people running them try their level best. Government schools cannot be neutral any more than they can fly to the moon or walk on water. But although they cannot be neutral, they can be confused about neutrality in education—and so can we.

When we consider the good life under Christ, we must always remember three great questions. *What is true? What is good? What*

is beautiful? These questions involve the realms of epistemology (knowledge), ethics, and aesthetics, respectively. The myth of neutrality is a myth in *each* of these realms.

Ultimately, there is only one realm, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. These areas are simply three aspects of Christ's kingdom. He is Lord of them all. And if He is Lord of them all, there can be no neutrality in any of them.

For or Against Him

The Lord Himself teaches that neutrality is impossible: "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad" (Matt. 12:30, κJV). We either are going His direction, or we are not. We either are saying what He says, or we contradict it.

Because He is the very Word of God, He is silent about nothing. This means that *everything* we say will be either an *amen* or a disagreement. There is never an instance where we are speaking and He is not. We know this from the very nature of the case. Whenever someone makes all-encompassing claims, then anyone who rejects those claims opposes him.

If Jesus had simply claimed to be the Lord of Palestine, then we could live *here* without regard to Him and not be in opposition to Him. Similarly, we are not in rebellion against the leader of Zimbabwe because we do not even know his name. If our God were simply the god of the hills, no sin would be involved if we worshiped the god of the plains.

But our Lord is Lord of all and says that in every endeavor of life, we either are for Him or against Him. Every word we speak, every thought we think, and every act we commit that is not for Him is against Him.