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A Statement on Parents' Rights and the School Question

By A. C. MUELLER

The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the National Lutheran Council invited educators and theologians of the United States, Germany, and other European countries to a study conference (June 1—10 at Bad Boll, Germany) on parents' rights and the school in the modern state. This was the first of four study conferences, and when the Germans set apart the entire conference for the study of Christian education and its current problems, they indicated how vital this problem is in Germany today. The findings of this seminar were summarized in the statement which is herewith submitted.

The Statement should be of interest to us for two reasons: 1) It brings to the fore some of the primary problems with which the Evangelical (Lutheran) leaders of Germany are wrestling; 2) it suggests areas in which the Christian educators of America should do some critical thinking. Anyone who attempts to translate modern German may sometimes leave the reader guessing, despite his effort to be accurate and simple. The translator has annotated the Statement in the hope that his observations will clear up obscurities.

I

1. In the Word, which has been entrusted to the Church, the living God places the whole world under His Law and under His promise. It is the will of the Lord God that all men should order their lives according to His Commandments. Therefore the Church has the commission to proclaim this to all men in and outside the Church.¹ The Word of God does not allow the Evangelical Church to derive its defense of the rights of parents from the doctrine of natural rights, as is done in Catholic theology and in the philosophy of the enlightenment, which base their doctrine on natural rights.²

2. In obedience to the Holy Scriptures we teach with the Lutheran Confessions: The Word of God became flesh in Jesus Christ. He is present among us in Word and Sacrament. We can hear this Word only in its historical form. In listening to the Word,

Luther calls for the school, and the school in turn serves the hearing of the Word.³

God created human beings not only as living biological entities, but also in His image. It is His will that they should, through His Word, become truly human beings after His image, who fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.⁴

It is the task of all education, in the spirit of service and obedience, to co-operate in the realization of the final end and purpose of man.

3. To this service all are called to whom the care of children has been committed; first of all, therefore, the parents and the Christian congregation. Within certain limitations, also the civil government has a responsibility for the education of its citizens.⁵

According to God's ordinance, human life can achieve its purpose only in these estates, if it is not to disintegrate and perish. These estates have their divine commission, and therewith their authority, only when they recognize their mutual duties and rights. Parents, therefore, cannot surrender their responsibility to educate to another party without becoming guilty of neglecting their God-given office. Just as little can the Christian congregation surrender its responsibility to another party without denying its very nature. Nor may the State renounce its responsibility in this matter. Therefore parents, the Christian congregation, and the State are obligated before God to assume their proportionate and peculiar responsibility for the schools.⁶

4. When all of these parties involved properly carry out their tasks, peace prevails among them. When, however, one of them acts contrary to the command of God, the others are in duty bound to perform their duty and service with so much greater faithfulness and counteract the destruction and perversion.⁷

It belongs to the duties of the Church to warn parents and the State against regarding their rights and their demands as absolute, and thereby yielding to the dangerous delusion that man is able and free to develop himself according to his own image. The Church has, at the same time, the duty to warn the school not to consider itself an autonomous authority in education, and thus sin against the creatures of God.⁸

The Christian Church must in every instance direct its members

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to the fulfillment of their duties and call them to obedience to God's command.

In instances where the State has the intention of educating the children according to a non-Christian or anti-Christian world view, it is, first of all, the responsibility of the parents as citizens and as Christians to employ all means permitted by the Christian conscience to have the children educated as Christians, even in opposition to the will of the government. This is the evangelical meaning of parental duties and parental rights.⁹

II

1. The Church has a treasure to offer the school, a treasure that is entrusted to her alone: the Gospel of redemption through Christ. The Church must demand that the school have an open ear for this message. It is the obligation of the Church to prevent the school from being misused for non-Christian propaganda. Moreover, the Gospel may not be falsified in the interest of a specious Christian religiosity. Christian instruction can be given only by a teacher who, with the children, is willing to listen to the Gospel and be an active member of the Christian congregation.¹⁰

2. It would be an illusion to think that the school meets the requirements of the Christian congregation by the mere fact that "religious instruction" is given as a "branch of knowledge." On the contrary, the Christian congregation demands a school in which, indeed, a correct pedagogy is maintained, but in which also the total life of the school as well as the instruction in all the subjects is determined by the Gospel (Confessional School). The Confessional School presupposes that it is sustained by a living congregation and a corps of Christian teachers. Where the prerequisites for the Confessional School are absent, the Church must search for other forms of schools.¹¹

3. It is the task of the Church under all circumstances to gather the parents about the Word and to help them recognize and fulfill the responsibility which they assumed at the Baptism of their children. Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Christ receives the children into membership with His congregation. As a result of this fact parents have the duty to bring up their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."¹²

4. The Church must invite the teachers to place themselves under the Gospel, and in fellowship with other Christians to give free expression to their cares, difficulties, and doubts, and to receive fresh strength. In this way the teachers come in contact with the living congregation and gain new insights into the Biblical message.¹³

5. The young people's work of the congregation has a special significance for the school.

III

In the current endeavor to arrive at an understanding relative to school problems, it is the duty of parents and officials of the Church to make use of their citizenship rights to the fullest extent. For this reason we expect of a truly democratic government that it will relinquish all striving toward a monopoly in education — which would simply be evidence of a retrogression into a totalitarian system — and, instead, allow Christian parents and teachers the necessary range of freedom to educate the children in harmony with their faith. The Church, in thus carrying on its struggle for the form and spirit of the school, serves not only the proclamation of the Gospel, but also the preservation and peace of the world.

ANNOTATIONS

¹ This affirmation is based on the testimony of Scripture that the God of creation is the Lord of all His creatures, and on the Great Commission. The Church is to endeavor to reach all men with the saving message of the Gospel, that they may be led to faith in Christ and order their lives according to the commandments of God. The State, or civil, authorities may not by legislation or in any other way restrict the freedom of the Church in its work. Civil government sins grievously against God when it lays hindrances in the way of the Church.

² The Catholic Church teaches that prior to the Fall, man was endowed with supernatural gifts. In the Fall he lost something which had been "superadded," not something that was an essential part of human nature. Man's nature was *deprived*, not *depraved*; man was badly wounded, not utterly ruined by the Fall. Through his own efforts, aided by supernatural grace, man can save himself. This semi-Pelagian doctrine plays a prominent role in the Catholic philosophy of education.

The Enlightenment rejected revelation with its doctrine of the divine institution of civil government, appealing solely to the so-called "natural

rights." Government is nothing but a "social compact," and in the field of education men are at liberty to plan their program independently of revelation and the Church. They are to determine the ends and means of education "autonomously" as nature dictates or reason suggests. The German representatives considered both the Catholic and the philosophical ideology of natural rights an inadequate basis on which to build the doctrine of parents' rights.

³ There is an allusion here to Luther's conception of the spiritual realm (Church) as a *Hoerreich*, i. e., listening to the Word, in contrast to the worldly realm (government), which Luther calls a "kingdom of action," e. g., magistrates "protecting the righteous, preserving their rights and peace, and punishing the rude and wicked." In this *Hoerreich* Christ rules and the Holy Spirit performs His blessed work of grace through Word and Sacrament. In the kingdom of the Church the chief thing is hearing. An autonomous pedagogy would exclude the Church from all participation in general education. Luther, on the other hand, advocated Christian schools. He considered the hearing and learning of God's Word the very heart of general education. The Lutheran Church cannot be satisfied with a secularized school; it insists that religious instruction is an essential factor in general education.

⁴ The advocates of naturalism say man has evolved from lower forms of life. He has no spiritual soul. Mind is the manifestation of matter. Man is a wholly material being. In keeping with this view of the nature of man, non-Christian educators set up a humanistic or idealistic aim for the schools. Clinging to the Biblical doctrine of creation and the Fall, the German educators reject all idealistic aims and say the purpose of education is the restoration of the image of God. In order to receive a complete education, children must be taught the Law and the Gospel; they must hear about God's pardoning mercy in Christ and thus be led to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

⁵ Parents have a commission from God to educate. The Church, likewise, has a commission from God to educate. Nowhere in the Scriptures does God give the State an educational commission. This does not mean that the State is to be denied the right to participate in the education of its citizens. It is admitted that the State is one of the three parties that may legitimately engage in education. "Within certain limitations," i. e., to the extent that the government does not invade the rights of parents and the Church. It is taken for granted that the training of men who are to serve in an official capacity falls within the purview of the State and that the State has the duty to provide educational facilities for those whose education would otherwise be neglected.

⁶ The well-being of the people in a nation depends on the proper regulation of human life within the three divinely instituted estates: *Home, Church, and Civil Government*. Each of the three estates has its own peculiar sphere of responsibility in education, a responsibility which cannot be transferred or neglected without causing harm.

⁷ Any one of the three estates may be guilty of action that is contrary to the will of God. Parents, for example, may grossly neglect the education of their children, in which case the Church and the government must be particularly faithful in the discharge of their obligation. Or the government may violate the rights of the parents or curtail the activity of the Church, in which case parents and the Church must take measures to insure the proper education of the children and youth.

⁸ In so far as the Lutheran Church has submitted passively to civil government, it has acted inconsistently with the position taken by Luther. Luther boldly told civil rulers what their duties were according to the Word of God and courageously rebuked them when they abused their power. It is the duty of the Church today to warn parents, civil authorities and educators, when there has been or may be a violation of the will of God. The Church is to warn parents that their rights are not absolute, but that God has clearly revealed His will respecting the manner in which children are to be brought up. The Church is to warn civil authorities when they assume that their rights are absolute and claim a monopoly in education. The Church is to warn school authorities against the presumption that they are an "autonomous authority" and may for that reason deny parents or the Church the right to share in determining the program of education. If the school plans the program independently of the Church, that program will be secular in nature and hence will be inconsistent with the nature of the child and contrary to the will of God.

⁹ This paragraph was dictated by the experience the Christians of Germany had during the Nazi regime. Youth organizations were dissolved; Christian religious instruction was banished from the schools and the Nazi ideology substituted; and the Nazis sought by intimidation to deter parents from sending their children to religious instruction classes. Attempts have been made in the past and will be made in the future to introduce a non-Christian or anti-Christian world view into the schools. At such times it becomes the duty of parents to use every rightful means to have their children instructed in the saving truths of the Word. They are even to act contrary to government orders, if necessary, for "we ought to obey God rather than men."

¹⁰ This paragraph can be understood only against the background of conditions as they exist in Germany. a) Prior to the rise of National Socialism the Church was permitted to bring the message of the Gospel to the children in the school. This right has been largely restored in western Germany; however, there is strong opposition on the part of radicals against the teaching of religion in the schools. b) The Nazi ideology was one form of non-Christian propaganda for which the German schools had been misused. Other forms of non-Christian propaganda will seek to enter the schools. Even before the rise of National Socialism the Gospel had been falsified by teachers who substituted for it a specious brand of religious instruction from which Christian fundamentals were omitted. The Church considers it its duty to keep such propaganda out of the schools. c) The Germans demand that religious instruction be given by persons who believe the Gospel and are active members of the Church.

¹¹ This paragraph envisions the ideal school. The Christians cannot be satisfied with religious instruction which, like history or geography, is just another branch of knowledge. The only satisfactory type of school is the *Confessional School*, that is, one in which Christianity is central, religion undergirding the school, and permeating the whole of instruction. Our Lutheran elementary schools and high schools are of this type. Under present circumstances the Christians of Germany must make the most of what they have, but plan for more adequate school types.

¹² As in America, so also in Germany, one of the major problems of the Church is the weak home with its delinquent parents. The Church is keenly aware of its task and is to put forth a special effort to instruct parents regarding the responsibility they assumed when they brought their children to the font of Holy Baptism.

¹³ To a large extent the teachers of Germany have been alienated from the Church. Being outside the Christian fellowship, they have had to labor without the counsel and comfort of the Gospel. The Church is endeavoring by various means to bring the teachers back into its fellowship, where they will receive strength and courage from the Word for the fulfillment of their calling, and will be an asset rather than a liability to the school and to the Church. In seeking to regain the teacher the Church reveals its concern for the souls of the teachers, first of all; then, for the welfare of the school, the Church, and the children and youth of the nation.

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